

RUSSIA'S RELATIONS WITH GEORGIA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS TOWARDS THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA: 1992-2005

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ABSTRACT

As far as the South Caucasus is concerned, the region represents a strategic region where Russia and the other countries, especially Turkey and the US have conflicting interests. The region is also of vital importance for the Russian Federation in terms of political, military and economic interests. In this sense, it is highly important and necessary to understand the Russian interests in the region in order to grasp the nature of the Russia's relations with Georgia in the post-Soviet era. The Russian approaches and policies towards ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are also essential in understanding the nature of Russian-Georgian relations in this period. Therefore, this article aims at not only explaining and analyzing Russian national interests towards the South Caucasus but also examining the Russian policies towards the Abkhazian and South Ossetian ethnic conflicts in Georgia in the post-Soviet era.

Key Words: *Russia, Russian National Interest, Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia*

Russia's National Interests in the South Caucasus

As far as the Southern Caucasus is concerned, Russia has many interests¹, ranging from social, political, cultural, economic to security ones. The most overriding Russian national interest is closely linked with security². The reason behind security concern is inherent unity of the Caucasian region, to which Southern Caucasus belongs. The North Caucasus, which is composed of largely mountainous non-Russian republics within the Federation, is closely linked, both culturally and eth-

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1 A.V Malashenko, *Postsovetkiye Goshudarstva Yuzha i Interesi Moskvi, Vneshnaya Politika i Bezoposnost Sovremennoi Rossii, 1991-2002*, Hrestomatiya v Chetireh Tomah, T.A. Shakleina (Ed.), T.III, Dokumenti., M.: Moskovskiy gashudarstvenniy institut mejdunarodnih otnoshenii (U) MID Rossii; Rossiaskaya assotsiatsiya mejdunarodnih issledovaniy, ANO, INO-Tsentr, Informatsiya, Nauka, Obrazovaniye; 12, MGU; "Rossiskaya Polithicheskaya Ensiklophedia, ROSSPEN, 2002, pp. 77-84.

2 For detailed Russian security concerns regarding the South Caucasus, see, Dimitri Trenin, "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Region", in Bruno Coppieters (Ed.), *Contested Border in the Caucasus*, (Brussels: VUB Press, 1996)

nically to their brethren in the South Caucasus. According to Russian political analysts, it means that any ethnic conflicts in the Southern Caucasus states can easily spill over or provoke conflict in another part of the North Caucasus and thus, put integrity of the Russian Federation in danger³. For example, the conflict in South Ossetia had dramatic repercussions in the Republic of North Ossetia, within Russian Federation. The Abkhazian conflict generated tensions in the ethnically related Adyge Republic as well.

As to security dimension of Russian national interests in the South Caucasus, most of the Russian analysts and officials believe that ethnic-rooted conflicts might result in migration to Russia from the Southern Caucasus countries and put inter-ethnic relations in danger in the North Caucasus. Such a situation may result in possible illicit arm transfers and illegal armed formations in the North Caucasus that is part of Russian Federation⁴.

Thus, for Russia preventing and settling the ethnic-based conflicts seemed to be of high concern. According to Russian officials the Caucasus can only become a security system by turning into a zone of peace and stability, which may be promoted by strengthening federalism and integration⁵. However, Russia and South Caucasus republics had different views on how to turn the region into a zone of security and stability.

The Russian minorities in the Southern Caucasus were also another concern regarding Russian national interests in the region⁶. The ethnic discomfort, interethnic tensions, direct threat to Russians' personal security and the prospect of loss of property encouraged Russia to make Russian minorities an important aspect and tool for exerting influence over South Caucasian countries. The security and maintenance of Russian population not only in the South Caucasus states but also in Central Asian republics became indispensable part of Russian foreign policy in the mid-1990s.

Regarding the South Caucasus, Russia had also other geopolitical key priorities. Crucial among these priorities was prevention of any large-scale strategic penetration of outside powers such as the US and Turkey, and also preventing them from supplying military assistance or arms to any South Caucasus power. In this respect, Russia firmly warned Turkey in 1993 on not to intervene in the conflict over

3 Ibid.

4 Roy Allison, "The Military and Political Security Landscape in Russia and the South", in Rajan Menon, Yuri E. Federov and Ghia Nodia (Ed.), *Russia, The Caucasus and Central Asia: 21st Security Environment*, (New York: EastWest Institute, 1999), pp. 27-28. See also, A. Zaitsev, "Russia and Transcaucasia", *International Affairs*, (Moscow), Vol: 43, No: 5, 1997.

5 Ibid.

6 Actually before the break-up of the USSR, Russians did not form an important minority in any of the South Caucasus republics. None of the South Caucasus republics pursued an anti-Russian policy: in fact, they would prefer "their" Russian to stay. They feared that an exodus would create massive problems for their national economies, especially in the industrial, scientific, information and health services, where Russians significantly outnumber the indigenous employees in real terms. This was especially the case in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and even Armenia.

Nagorno-Karabakh⁷. Secondly, in order to prevent the formation of a security vacuum in the South Caucasus, Russia tried to put South Caucasus states under its control and influence during 1990s and such a need kept Kremlin away from making a full withdrawal of military forces from the South Caucasus states⁸.

Secondary to Russia's geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus were its economic interests⁹. Russia's economic interests in the South Caucasus were closely linked with the existing oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Basin¹⁰. As 43-45 percent of Russia's hard currency earning generated from oil and gas export, a rise of the Caspian states as large-scale exporters of energy may cause considerable damage to Russian economic interests. In this respect, participation of world's major oil companies in the development of the energy resources of the Caspian region, and growing political presence of the United States, China, and European states there, as well as the striving of the Caspian countries for independence from Russian influence, were often perceived in Moscow as threats to Russian national economic interests¹¹. The genuine Russian interest in the Caspian Basin was to prevent the unilateral exploitation of the Caspian resources until the legal status of the Caspian was determined by the littoral states. As to this issue, however, Russia and the littoral states, especially Azerbaijan, has had conflicting positions during 1990s.

As to Russian national economic interests, for instance, one of the most important areas of competition between Russia and Turkey with regard to the Southern Caucasus, has been how to transport the region's oil and gas reserves to the world market. Russia and Turkey have developed competing pipeline projects in order to transport the Azeri and some of Kazak oil to the world markets. While Turkey proposed the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, Russia insisted on the existing Russian pipeline, running through Chechnya to Novorossiysk. Russian side argued the Baku-Ceyhan was not a viable solution since was an expensive and politically motivated project in order to decrease Russian influence over the South Caucasus states. Influential segments of the Russian political and intellectual elite consider any attempt to

7 To prevent any potential Turkish opportunism at the time of the Soviet Union's disintegration, Marshall Shaposhnikov, the Commander-in-Chief of Russia warned Turkey not to interfere militarily in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. In March 1993, General Grachev, Russia's Defense Minister, made Russia's own military cooperation with Turkey conditional on Ankara's discontinuing its military assistance to Baku. Dimitri Trenin,

8 Roy Allison, "The Military and Political Security Landscape in Russia and the South", p. 28.

9 Natalia V. Zubarevich & Yuri E. Federov, "Russian-Southern Economic Interaction: Partner and Competitors" in Rajan Menon, Yuri E. Federov and Ghia Nodia (Ed.), *Russia, The Caucasus and Central Asia: 21st Security Environment*, (New York: EastWest Institute, 1999), pp. 120-144.

10 For a detailed account of Russian approach, see the following publication; Malgin A.V., "Kaspiiskii Region: Mejdunarodno-Politicalicheskie i Energeticheskie Problemy", *Yujnii Flang SNG. Sentralnaia Azia-Kaspii-Kavkaz: Vozhmojnosti i Vzvovi dlya Rossi*, Pod. red. M.M. Narinskovo, A. V. Malgina; MGIMO (U) MID Rossii, INO-Tsentr. – M.: Logos, 2003, s.370.

11 Natalia V. Zubarevich. and Yuri E. Federov, "Russian-Southern Economic Interaction: Partner Partner and Competitors", p. 134. "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Region", pp. 94-97.

bypass Russia in the transport of oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan as squeezing Russia out of the region and encroaching on its legitimate rights and positions there¹².

The Russian firm stance on this issue is also related with the fact that although Russian gas reserves are from 12 to 16 times larger than those of the Caspian region, Caspian counties possible future involvement in regional markets such as the Mediterranean, Turkey and Southern Europe may deprive Moscow of a large part of its export earnings from gas and oil¹³.

Russian Perception of Turkey in the Regional Context

The South Caucasus forms a buffer zone between the Russian North Caucasus and the Islamic world to its South and the region shares borders with Turkey and Iran, which have also conflicting national interests towards Southern Caucasus and many Russian officials saw Turkish and Iranian engagement in the region as challenging to Russian national interests. The pro-Western forces in Russian politics saw Turkey as a lesser evil when it was compared to radical Islam emanating from Iran. The Conservative and nationalists figures in Russian foreign politics viewed and noted that Iran's ambitions were limited and both Russia and Iran had interest in preventing the rise of Turkish and western influence in the region. The conservative forces saw Turkey as much larger threat than Iran for two reasons: first, Turkey in 1992 immediately after the disintegration of Soviet Union put emphasize on its linguistic and ethnic ties with the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus to boost its influence in the region at Russia's expense and second, Turkey had large and increasingly powerful military capabilities¹⁴.

Most of the Russian political analysts argue that the region's borders with unruly Northern Caucasus and regional powers namely Iran and Turkey means that the Southern Caucasus itself is a "barrier" or "bridge" not only in terms of any foreign engagement in the whole Caucasus region but also for Russia's relations with Middle East. The South Caucasus is also highly important in leading Western powers to Central Asia. For the Western powers including Turkey, the region is also highly important not only because of Caspian resources but also for transporting the Caspian oil and gas into the world markets. If controlled by Russia, it enables Moscow to control the amount of Western influence in the geopolitically important region between Russia and the volatile Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the opposite case, Russia could be exposed to security threats such as political Islam, of increasing political demands for independence within the country, especially in the North Caucasus. That's why it is highly crucial to maintain Russian control over the South Caucasus¹⁵.

12 Ibid., pp. 138-141.

13 Ibid., p. 136.

14 Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: a Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, (London.: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 341.

15 Ibid., pp. 342-343.

According to many Russian analysts, the gradual expansion of Turkey's sphere of influence into the South Caucasus and the Turkic republics of Central Asia in the very beginning of post-soviet order is one of the most serious challenges to Russia's national interests. The expansion of Turkey influence into the former Soviet republics regarded by the Russian political elites as reflecting 'offensive' and 'expansionist' Turkish aims with regard to post-Soviet space¹⁶. There were even concerns among the Russian nationalists that the expansion of Turkish influence might reach deep into the Russian Federation, to the numerous Turkic and Moslem nations living in the North Caucasus, along Volga River, in the southern Urals, and in Siberia. This would pose a challenge to Russia's territorial integrity by encouraging secessionist trends¹⁷.

The Russian military establishment has been highly suspicious of Turkey's intentions with regard to post-Soviet space. It has been primarily Turkey that was regarded in Russia as a potential military challenge¹⁸. The main concern in the Russian political elite and military establishment was Turkey's increasing military capabilities while Russia's military power was declining¹⁹. The decline and partial collapse of the former Soviet forces in the Caucasus shifted the regional balance of forces in favor of the Turkish 3rd Field Army and strong Turkish air forces based at Erzurum, just across the border in Turkey²⁰. The Turkish challenge was viewed as particularly serious because of Ankara's support from the West and its participation in NATO. Turkish alliances with Georgia and Azerbaijan, which were intended to counterbalance Russia, were viewed as a part of this strategic design. Actually, in the National Security Conception, drafted by the Security Council by a presidential decree of December 17, 1997, both Caucasus and Central Asia were explicitly mentioned as regions where Russia's influence was being challenged by regional and extra-regional actors. This challenge included political, economic, cultural, and even religious and linguistic activism, to some extent military-political activism by a number of countries, especially Turkey, Iran, the US, China, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The engagement of at least some of those countries may bring about an erosion of Russia's southern 'security buffer' in the South Caucasus and Central Asia²¹.

16 Zori Balayan, "Turtsiya Otkrivaet Kartı, Sadrujestva NG", *Prilojenije k Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, N.8, 1998. s. 11, Nadin Rayevskiy V., "Turtsiya i Rossiyskaya Avtonomii Rossiya i Turtsiya na Daroge 21 veka: na puti v Evropu ili Evraziyu?", Nauchniy doklad No: 14, Moskovskiy Tsentri Karnegi, 1997, s. 68-83.

17 Nadin-Rayevskiy, op.cit, s. 68-83

18 Gareth Winrow, *Turkey in the Post-Soviet Central Asia*, (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995), p. 43.

19 Andrei V. Zagorski, "Traditional Russian Security Interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Perceptions and Realities", in *Rajan Menon, Yuri E. Federov and Ghia Nodia (Ed.), Russia, The Caucasus and Central Asia: 21st Security Environment*, (New York: East West Institute, 1999), pp. 66-67.

20 Roy Allison, "The Military and Political Security Landscape in Russia and the South", pp. 35-36.

21 Zagorski, "Traditional Security Interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Perceptions and Realities", p. 63.

In sum, Russia has vital interests in the South Caucasus, starting with geopolitics and covering the economic, military and other spheres. In the regional context increasing Turkish engagement in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asian politics led Russian political leaders to be more determined over time to protect and defend their interest in the Southern Caucasus.

The Russian and Georgian Relations in the Post-Soviet Era

In the post-communist era, the relations between Russia and Georgia had a very tense and sensitive character due to many factors. Georgia's refusal to join Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and its demand from Russia to withdraw its military forces from Georgian territory have become burning issues in the bilateral relations in the initial years right after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Russia, however, adamantly resisted such a withdrawal of the Russian forces from Georgia.

From a strategic perspective, Georgia's border with Turkey and its location on the Black Sea made the country very significant in Russian eyes. As aforementioned, Russia has been more worried of Turkish than Iranian influence in the Caucasus, and perceived Turkey as threat to its dominant position in political, economical and military fields. Therefore, the Russian military bases, which were controlling the Georgian-Turkish border, were of vital concern to Moscow.

As far as Black Sea was concerned, Russia was in need of a control over the Georgian coastline²². When the Georgian officials managed to clinch a deal whereby Russian troops would withdraw from the Turkish border by 1994 and from Georgia totally by 1995, the Russian Defense Minister General Pavel Grachev stated that this deal would lead to loss of Russian control over the Black Sea. Therefore every measure to ensure that Russian troops remain there should be taken²³. As it would be seen, facing the military defeat in Abkhazia, the Georgian government agreed to lease its Black Sea ports to Russia in 1993.

The Russian military bases in Georgia have been a serious issue not only between Russia and Georgia but also between Russia and Turkey in the post-Soviet era. Under an agreement in 1994, Georgia allowed Russia to maintain four military bases near Tbilisi (Vaziani), in Akhalkalaki, Batumi, and in Abkhazia. The Georgian officials were highly uneasy with the existence of Russian troops in the country.

22 Ukraine's independence and resolute claims to the Crimean peninsula severely limited Russia's coastline on the Black Sea –one of its three points of access to warm-water seas, the other two being the Baltic (where the independence of the three Baltic states also formed a strategic setback), and the Arctic Ocean at Murmansk. In 1989, Moscow could in practice access to Black Sea from the Bulgarian-Turkish border to the Georgian-Turkish one; in other words Moscow controlled the western, northern, and eastern coast of the Black Sea. Barely, two years later, this access had shrunk dramatically to a little more than 300 kilometers, stretching from the Sea of Azov to the Georgian coastline. Naturally, the build up of the Turkish navy which today controls the Black Sea contributed to Moscow worries. Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: a Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, p. 345.

23 *Izvestia*, 23 February 1993.

They were afraid that Kremlin can make use of existing Russian troops in case the country fell into political turmoil. According to Alex Rondeli, an analyst in the Georgian Foreign Ministry, Russia does not respect Georgia's interests because they it does not feel that Georgia is a sovereign state²⁴. One another reason behind Georgian uneasiness towards Russian military troops is the possibility that Russia could make use of them as pressure in Georgia's dealings with its ethnic-rooted conflicts both in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Indeed, the Georgian officials have consistently blamed Russian military troops for providing the separatist Abkhaz forces with military equipment and support.

The Russian military bases issue became an important diplomatic issue of Russian-Georgian officials during 1990s. At last, under an agreement signed at the OSCE Istanbul Summit in November 1999, Russia agreed to close its military bases in Vaziani, near Tbilisi and Gudauta, Abkhazia by July 2000. The Russian side also agreed to start negotiations with Georgian authorities in 2000 on withdrawing its remaining two military bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki. During negotiations with Georgian leadership, Russian insistence on the need for a lengthy of time to find new accommodations for departing Russian troops from Georgia became a source tension in 2000s.

As far as Russian-Georgian relations concerned, the ethnopolitical conflicts on the Georgian territory has been another burning issue in the relations. For Russia, the sociopolitical and economic stability in Georgia is very important since the country shares border with the Russian North Caucasus. As mentioned, the Russian side is afraid of spill over effects of the ethnic-based conflicts in the Southern Caucasus. Indigenous population in the Northern Caucasus and Southern Caucasus are closely linked both culturally and linguistically. Therefore, with regard to Georgia, stability in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia is of high concern for Russia²⁵.

Regarding Russian involvement in Georgia's ethno political conflicts, the case of Ossetia and Abkhazia is very important in terms of analyzing and understanding the post-communist era Russian-Georgian relations.

South Ossetia

South Ossetia is another autonomous region in Georgia which has become the scene of ethnopolitical struggle since the demise of the Soviet Union. The first tensions date back to 1988-89, when nationalist movements in Georgia were gaining strength and, consequently, straining relations between Georgia and its autonomies. In 1988, South Ossetia demanded to be upgraded from the status of

24 David Satter, "The Danger of Russia's Great Power Illusions", *Jamestown Prism*, Vol: 4, No: 5, 6 March 1998.

25 For a detailed account of Russian approach to ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus see.: Emil A. Pain, "Contagious Ethnic Conflicts and Border Disputes Along Russia's Southern Flank", in Rajan Menon, Yuri E. Federov and Ghia Nodia (Ed.), *Russia, The Caucasus and Central Asia: 21st Security Environment*, (New York: EastWest Institute, 1999), pp. 177-189.

Autonomous Region (Oblast) to Autonomous Republic (the status previously enjoyed by Abkhazia). A year later, South Ossetians sent a petition to Moscow asking for the unification of North and South Ossetians. Georgian nationalists led by Gamsakhurdia reacted harshly to the Ossetian demands and convinced the Communist government of the then Georgian Republic to organize a 'march on Tskhinvali' (the capital of South Ossetia) to 'defend the Georgian population'. The marchers were prevented from entering the city and the first clashes occurred. When Gamsakhurdia came to power, one of the first decisions he made was to abolish the autonomous status of Ossetia, thus triggering further escalation of the conflict. In retrospect, Shevardnadze would acknowledge that "the conflict in South Ossetia had been the grossest mistake of the former Georgian leadership"²⁶

Although the new Georgian government, led by Shevardnadze after March 1992, initially seemed to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards South Ossetia, he could not control the diffusion of paramilitary forces into South Ossetia in mid-1992. At this point, several external factors intervened, which threatened to regionalize the Ossetian-Georgian confrontation. These were the Russian, North Ossetian, and North Caucasian factors²⁷.

Specific problems for Russia's security played important role in Russia's involvement in Georgia's conflict with South Ossetia. In the case of South Ossetia, the patterns of Russian involvement were more evident due the numerous Russian interests in the conflict. The possibility that the conflict in South Ossetia could have serious repercussions in the Russian republics of North Ossetia has alarmed Russian policy-makers. The North Ossetian people were not happy with the political developments in the South Ossetia. They were in favor of unification with the South Ossetia. To this end, they were not only enthusiastic in involving in the conflict militarily but also lobbying for Russia's active involvement in the conflict in Moscow²⁸.

The conflict in South Ossetia had some influence on Russian politics. In particular, the influx of refugees from South Ossetia to the North aggravated social tensions there and inflamed antagonism in the Prigorodniy District²⁹. It was mainly immigrants from the south who comprised the major part of the Ossetian fighters that attacked Ingush groups in the area of the conflict³⁰. Russian policy on this conflict was at the center of debate in Moscow. The left-wing and nationalist opposition that dominated the Parliament insisted on an active anti-Georgian policy, right up to incorporation of South Ossetia into the Russian Federation and its unifica-

26 Bruno Coppieters (Ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. (Brussels: VUB Press, 1996), p.47.

27 Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: a Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, p. 169.

28 Emil A. Pain, "Contagious Ethnic Conflicts and Border Disputes Along Russia's Southern Flank", pp. 185-186.

29 Ibid., p. 186.

30 A.A.Tsutsiev, *Osetinsko-Ingushskiy Konflikt, 1992-..., predistoriya i faktori razvitiya*, (M.: Rosspen, 1997).

tion with North Ossetia, while the 'democrats' or 'pro-Western group' stood for respect for Georgia's integrity³¹.

Russian hardliners including the speaker of the Russian parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov (of Chechen origin) and Vice-president Alexander Rustkoi warned the Georgian government harshly and even described South Ossetians as Russian citizens, thereby implicitly meant South Ossetia's accession to Russia³². In a statement implying the South Ossetians as Russian citizens Khasbulatov said that "Russia prepared to take urgent measure to defend its citizens from criminal attempts on their lives"³³. Furthermore, he was reported to have threatened Shevardnadze with war over South Ossetia, mentioning even a possible bombing of Tbilisi³⁴. Khasbulatov on another occasion said that unless Georgia complied with Russian demands, Russia might find itself forced to annex South Ossetia. This Russian response was very much also dictated by North Ossetia³⁵. The North Ossetian government had cut off a pipeline carrying Russian natural gas to Georgia, and was applying strong lobbying efforts in Moscow. In addition, the Confederation of Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus in June brought a battalion of volunteer fighters to North Ossetia to fight in the South³⁶.

President Yeltsin under the influence of the pro-Western figures in Russian politics in Russia tried to settle the conflict in the South Ossetia on the basis of the inviolability of the post-Soviet borders and the territorial integrity of the newly independent states. With the aim of stabilizing the situation and preventing a renewed outbreak of war, Yeltsin and the new Georgian leader Shevardnadze signed the so-called Dagomy Treaty on 14 June 1992³⁷. The treaty envisioned the creation of trilateral peacekeeping and law enforcement forces with the aim of maintaining peace in the conflict zone³⁸.

On 22 June 1992, the two leaders Russia and Georgia signed the Sochi agreement and the ceasefire came into effect on 28 June 1992 and a peacekeeping force composed of Russian, Georgians, and Ossetians was set up in the South Ossetia³⁹.

31 Emil A. Pain, "Contagious Ethnic Conflicts and Border Disputes Along Russia's Southern Flank", p.185.

32 *Moscow News*, No: 51, 1992, p.6.

33 *International Herald Tribune*, 16 June 1992.

34 A. Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994" in Bruno Coppetiers (Ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, (Brussels: VUP Press, 1996), p. 46.

35 "Shevardnadze Says Russia Aids Rebels", *Washington Post*, 20 June 1992.

36 Although the North Ossetian leadership prevented it from actually traveling into South Ossetia, the gravity of the situation and possible escalation of the of this hitherto localized conflict into a Caucasian war posing against Russia was instrumental in engineering a rapprochement between Shevardnadze and Yeltsin.

37 It should noted that the Dagomy Treaty was in reality was never implemented. It did, however, establish the basis for peace-keeping activity in the region.

38 Alexander Sokolov, "Russian Peacekeeping Forces in the Post-Soviet Area", in Mary Kaldor and Basker Vashe, (Ed.), *Restructuring the Global Military Sector: New Wars*, (London: Cassell, 1997), p.9.

39 For a detailed account of the composition and supposed tasks of peace-keeping forces see: *ibid*.

On 14 July 1994, the first peacekeepers were deployed, and ceasefire has held ever since. Nevertheless, no political solution has been found to this conflict so far. Despite sporadic violence in South Ossetia, this arrangement has managed to implement the ceasefire quite successfully up until now. However, the conflict will remain merely frozen unless the negotiation process between the Georgian and Ossetian sides is revived⁴⁰.

The effect of Russian influence on Georgia's decision for peace was very obvious since the peace agreement, which implied significant concessions for Georgia, was signed within three weeks after Khasbulatov's statements. In practice, it meant the loss of South Ossetia and its de facto independence, made Russian existence permanent through the deployment of a Russian peace-keeping force along the South Ossetian-Georgian border. According to many Georgian politicians and Western analysts, the Russian intervention in South Ossetia was very effective in achieving the weakening of Georgia, and the interposition of Russian troops in South Ossetia. Ever since, South Ossetia has remained outside the Georgian government's control. In the aftermath of the conflict, Russia continued to press on Georgia to resolve the question of South Ossetia in line with its demands⁴¹.

The talks on settling the conflict launched in 1995 under OSCE auspices and with Russian mediation helped bringing the sides closer on many issues. However, the main issue – the political status of South Ossetia remained unresolved. Georgia has offered South Ossetia broad autonomy and reconstruction of the region's infrastructure, while South Ossetia remains reluctant to relinquish its de facto independence. Talks in 2000 made significant steps towards final status talks, yet little has been done since. The moderate "President" of South Ossetia, Ludvig Chibirov, lost the 2001 elections to Russian citizen and Moscow-based businessman Eduard Kokoev. Kokoev has called for South Ossetia's merger with North Ossetia as a subject of the Russian Federation, and has actively negotiated with Russia on South Ossetia's accession to the Russian Federation.

Although Russia refrained to a large extent from direct intervention in South Ossetia, it soon became clear that Russia's aim in Georgia was not achieved. Georgia still was refusing to enter into the CIS and continued to demand the withdrawal of Russian troops. One another conflict, namely the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, however would play a key role in achieving the Russian aim of taking Georgia into CIS.

The Russian Involvement in the Abkhazian Ethnic Conflict

The so-called the Abkhazian-Georgian ethnic dispute played an important role in tense Russo-Georgian relations in the post-Communist period. The traditional rela-

40 Roy Allison, "Peacekeeping Forces in the Soviet Successor States", (<http://www.iss-eu.org/chailot/chai18e.html>)

41 Fiona Hill & Pamela Jewett, *Back in the USSR: Russia's Intervention in the International Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for the United States Policy toward Russia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994), p. 48.

tions between the Georgians and the Abkhazians had a very tense and sensitive character through the centuries⁴².

Although the Abkhazian leadership was looking for independence from Georgian rule, the Abkhaz leadership for some time attempted to negotiate a solution with Tbilisi. In June 1992, Abkhazia's President Vladislav Ardzinba sent a draft treaty to the Georgian State Council in which a federative or confederative solution to the problem was suggested, which would safeguard the territorial integrity. However, this conciliatory step was rejected by the new Georgian leadership. Meanwhile tensions rose up again. The Abkhazian leadership retaliated in July 1992 by reinstating its 1925 constitution which defined Abkhazia as independent but united with the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia on the basis of a special union treaty⁴³. Thus in practice Abkhazia declared its independence and Ardzinba declared Abkhazia would independently seek membership in the CIS as well⁴⁴.

On 14 August 1992, the armed conflict between Georgia and its autonomous republic Abkhazia started⁴⁵. The aim of the Georgian government was to establish control over this part of its territory and to guarantee its territorial integrity. The aim of the Abkhazian authorities was to extend the rights of the autonomous region and ultimately achieve its independence. Almost immediately, the Abkhazian forces found support from the North, as the North Caucasian Volunteers, mainly Circussians and Chechens, came to Abkhazia to support the Abkhazians in their struggle against the Georgian troops⁴⁶.

As Emil A. Pain pointed out, "the war in Abkhazia drew in some influential forces

42 Abkhazia is an autonomous republic in Georgia situated on the coast of the Black Sea. The Abkhaz are a people close in language and origin to the North Caucasian peoples of the Adyge group. Their territory was once part of Ancient Rome, Byzantium, Persia and later Turkey and Russia. According to Alexei Zverev, until Abkhazia's absorption into the Russian empire in 1810, Abkhazian rulers were in "nominal or effective union with various Georgian kingdoms and princedoms. Thus, the historical evidence is ambiguous: both unity with Georgia and autonomy can be argued on historical grounds". For a detailed account of discussions, see Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in Bruno Coppieters (Ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, (Brussels: VUB Press, 1996), p. 39.

43 G. Otyrba, "War in Abkhazia: the Regional Significance of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict", in Roman Szporluk (Ed.), *The International Relations of Eurasia: Vol 1: National Identity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1994), p.287.

44 "Georgia: Deputies at Abkhaz Parliament Annul Decree on Constitution", *BBC Monitoring Service*, 1 August 1992.

45 The conflict began for real in mid-August, with Kivotani's incursion into Abkhazia, ostensibly in the search for a government minister abducted by Zviadist forces. Kivotani apparently acted without Shevardnaze's explicit approval –the latter claiming not to have sanctioned. See, "Russia: Georgia Lurches towards Civil War with Rebel Region", Reuters, 14 August 1992. In any case Georgian forces advanced through Mingrelia, in the pretext of searching for a government minister kidnapped by the Zviadists whom the state council said had been taken to Abkhazia. Consequently, the forces advanced on Sukhumi and shelled the parliament, forcing the Abkhaz leadership to retreat to Gudauta in the Northwest of the Republic. Sukhumi was taken on 18 August. Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: a Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, p. 171.

46 Dejevsky, Mary, "Georgia: Caucasus Muslims Join Battle –Abkhazi Fighters Continue Armed Resistance", *Times*, 20 August 1998; *Izvestia*, 26 August 1992.

in the Northern Caucasus immediately after its beginning. Having a common border with Russia, Abkhazia developed diverse connections with local ethnic groups neighboring parts of the Northern Caucasus. The Abkhaz national or separatist movement that led the struggle for independence since the end of the 1980s was an active member of the Confederation of the Mountain People of the Caucasus (CMPC), which was essentially separatist and anti-Russian in character. Just after the beginning of the armed hostilities in Abkhazia, the CMPC declared war against Georgia and sent a few thousands volunteers to fight Georgian troops. Most were the Chechen fighters led by the famous warlord Shamil Basayev.⁴⁷

The Russian policy with regard to Abkhazia was confusing because of dichotomy between different power centers in Moscow. The war in Abkhazia provoked the political confrontation in 1992-93. President Yeltsin tried to settle the conflict in Abkhazia on the basis of the inviolability of the post-Soviet borders and the territorial integrity of the newly independent states. The left-wing and nationalist opposition that dominated the Parliament regarded the Abkhaz leaders as pro-Russian and even asked even for the annexation of Abkhazia to the Russian Federation⁴⁸.

The war continued until 1993, during which time the Abkhaz found significant support from the North Caucasian, in particular Chechen fighters as well as from Russian political and military actions⁴⁹. After breaking the ceasefire, which should have been guaranteed by the Russian forces, Abkhazians regained Sukhumi and forced the Georgian forces to retreat. The final Russian-brokered ceasefire came into effect in late October 1993, which has so far endured, albeit with several violations. CIS peacekeeping forces were deployed, consisting primarily of Russian units.

However, a resolution of the conflict has not been achieved yet. The two sides maintain conflicting positions, with Abkhazia insisting on full independence and Georgia proposing autonomous membership in the asymmetric federation. An additional problem is that of refugees. Georgia refuses to negotiate on Abkhazia's status without a prior return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia. The Abkhaz on the other hand, demand that the definition of their status be addressed before the return of refugees. The Abkhaz position is motivated by the inferior number of the Abkhaz themselves, who before the expulsion of Georgians comprised only 17 per cent of the total population. If all or most refugees return, they will outnumber the

47 Emil A. Pain, "Contagious Ethnic Conflicts and Border Disputes Along Russia's Southern Flank", p. 185.

48 Evgeny Kozhohin, "Rossiya i Gruzino-Abkhazskii Konflikt", Jeremy R Pani, *Kak Delaetsya Politika v SŞA i Rossii*, (Moskova, 1996), s.147-48.

49 On 19 March 1993, when the Georgian forces actually managed to shoot down an Su-27 fighter, whose pilot was identified as a major in the Russian air force, the Russian leadership was put in a difficult, embarrassing position. Grachev claimed that the Georgians were bombing themselves and that plane was a Su-25 painted with Russian markings. The UN observers, however, identified the plane as a Su-27, which Georgia does not possess, as well as the deceased pilot as Major Vazlav A. Shipko of the Russian air force. Thomas Goltz, "Letter from Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand", *Foreign Policy*, No: 92, Fall 1993), pp. 106-107.

Abkhaz again and the secessionist regime will have even less legitimacy to speak on behalf of the entire Abkhazia.

As for Russian efforts at bringing a solution to the conflict, in the active phase of this period the main mediator, and to some extent participant, was the Russian Federation. Georgians have repeatedly accused Russia of supporting the Abkhaz especially with heavy artillery and weapons⁵⁰, while Russian citizens from the North Caucasus were active fighters in the Abkhaz battalions. The first goal of Russian involvement was to force Georgia into the CIS and to guarantee long-term stationing of Russian bases in Georgia. After the humiliating defeat of the Georgian army near Sukhumi, both goals were achieved. Russia brokered a ceasefire in 1994, while Georgia entered the CIS and signed an agreement on military bases.

The Russian military involvement in the conflict worsened the already tense relations between the Moscow and Tbilisi. The Russian President Yeltsin's allowance to his defense minister to control Russian policy towards Georgia contributed to the escalation of the conflict between Kremlin and Tbilisi as well. This was exemplified as Grachev took over the leading role from Yeltsin in the Georgian-Russian talks over Abkhazia. In an attempt to counter balance this, Shevardnadze flew to Ukraine and tried to enlist Kiev's support by asserting that 'Ukraine understands full well this third force is interested in destabilizing not only Georgia.⁵¹' Following these events, Russia's attitude became more outspoken. As the UN became increasingly involved in trying to achieve a ceasefire, Kozyrev bluntly announced that Russia was not interested in UN involvement but desired to pursue its own efforts at mediation⁵².

During the conflict, Moscow officially maintained neutrality; the Russian government condemned human right violations and established sanctions on both sides. Russian forces situated in the conflict zone provided unofficial support for the Abkhazian formations. The aforementioned examples of the bombardment of Georgian forces by Russian aircraft and the use of Russian navy to transport Abkhazian fighters were clear indication of Russian military involvement in the conflict. Official statements by the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces were only acting in self-defense and were only returning fire when attacked⁵³.

50 The Russian factor became increasingly clear as unmarked Sukhoi fighter planes started bombarding Sukhumi, despite the fact that the Abkhaz possessed no air force at all. It is also important to mention that during the war a Georgian helicopter was also shoot down by heat seeking missile, which Abkhazians scarcely had access to. According to Georgia's vice-premier Alexander Kavsadze, Russian forces had also prevented the Georgian forces from transporting heavy equipment to the battlefield by preventing transport planes from taking off. *International Herald Tribune*, 7 October 1992. See the following for a detailed account of Russian military involvement in the conflict in Abkhazia. – *Izvestia*, 2 October 1992. Tengiz Ablodia, "Russia and Georgia in Armed Conflict", *The Independent*, 18 March 1993, A. Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", p. 49.

51 *Financial Times*, 13 April 1993.

52 Fiona Hill & Pamela Jewet, *Back in the USSR: Russia's Intervention in the International Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for the United States Policy toward Russia*, p. 53.

53 Sokolov Alexander, "Russian Peacekeeping Forces in the Post-Soviet Area", pp. 12-15.

On 23 October 1993, Shevardnadze decided take Georgia into the CIS. Tbilisi allowed Russian military bases to remain in Georgia. An agreement in principle was made to allow the implementation of a peace-keeping mission in Abkhazia and Russian peace-keepers entered Abkhazia on 26 July 1994⁵⁴.

One of the most important tasks of the Russia peace-keepers was securing the return of the refugees. The peace-keepers, however, did not succeed in carrying out the most important task from the Georgian point of view, which was securing the return of refugees. The Abkhazian forces prevented the return of refugees to the areas outside the region of Small Gali. Law and order in that region had to be secured by Abkhazian police, the members of which had participated in the armed conflict. This meant the return of refugees were subject to the danger of attacks from the numerous criminal groups, as well as persecution at the hands of the Abkhazian police⁵⁵.

The Russian peace-keeping mission had difficulties from the very beginning. While Georgians were not happy with Russian existence in Georgia, the Abkhazian authorities, on the other hand were striving to minimize the functions of the peace-keepers. Their opinion was that the population, including the returning of refugees, should be protected from thieves and bandits by the law enforcement organs of the Abkhazian republic⁵⁶. Although an interim agreement, which established general procedures for movement toward a political settlement, was reached, the situation in Abkhazia continued to deteriorate without a political settlement. In May 1998, conflicts erupted once more again between the conflicting parties.

The Russo-Georgian relations continued to maintain its tense character in the upcoming years. According to Georgian side, Russia was responsible for the ethnic and political conflicts in the country. Georgian officials also believed that Russian was responsible for the two assassinations attempts on Shevardnadze in August 1995 and February 1998. Shevardnadze's rhetoric against Russia has increased with every assassination attempt against him⁵⁷.

As far the CIS is concerned, Georgia has followed a policy of preventing the CIS from becoming a Russian-led tool of supranational reintegration of the states of the former Soviet Union. Now, Georgia is actively co-operating with Turkey, and the GUUAM group in opposition to Russian interests, sides with the west in the planned deployment of oil pipelines, and cultivates its relationship with NATO.

As for the ethnic conflicts in Georgia, the already tense relations between Russia and Georgia continued to deteriorate in the early years of 2000s. The Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts remained in the background as the two countries fell into

54 Ibid., p. 12.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 *The Georgian Times*, 12 February 1999.

conflict over Moscow's ongoing military presence in Georgia and the security of Pankisi Gorge⁵⁸.

In the early years of 2002, Russia imposed a visa regime against Georgia, but excluded Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In June 2002, Russia allowed the Abkhazians to receive Russian passports, which was considered by many to be a de-facto annexation of Abkhazia, thus creating grounds for legitimate interference in Abkhazia in defense of its own 'citizens'. Then, in December Moscow reopened a rail connection between the southern Russian city of Sochi and the Abkhaz capital Sokhumi – a move that prompted an outcry in Georgia. Shevardnadze characterized the unilateral Russian action as "unlawful"⁵⁹.

The Russian-Georgian Relations in the Aftermath of US-Led Global War against International Terrorism

As the global war to contain terrorism declared by the US President W. George Bush, Russia at official level maintained the rhetoric of partnership and cooperation with the US. However, many Moscow-based political analysts consider that the struggle against terrorism cannot serve as a solid basis for Russian-US strategic relations⁶⁰.

During the reign of Russia under the new President V. Putin, the Russian foreign policy regarding the Southern Caucasus started having a pragmatic character. The pragmatists, who became influential in Russian foreign politics with the new President Putin asserted that Russia has the right to reassert its will within its own sphere of influence. Russia's major political leverage should not be raw military force, but economic dependence of the CIS countries on Moscow, pragmatists argued. In this perspective, Russia energy companies made deals with the three Southern Caucasus countries, namely Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the very after the new Russian President came to power at Kremlin⁶¹.

Together with the pragmatist considerations, strategic considerations continued to exert increasing influence over the foreign policy-making establishment in Russia. In this context, the rapid increase in US strategic influence in the Caucasus

58 One another important source of tensions in Russo-Georgian relations in early 2000s was the presence of Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. According to Russian officials, the Chechen rebels regularly receive supplies and reinforcements from Pankisi in Georgia. For a detailed account of events, see, "Georgian-Russian Tension on the Rise". 21 August 2002. www.csis.org/ruseura/georgia/gaupdate_0208.htm.

59 "Despite Ongoing Russian Pressure, Time for Real Change in Georgia"; (www.csis.org/ruserua/georgia/gaupdate_0211.htm).

60 Igor Torbakov, "Disparate Interest Groups Grapple To Shape Russian Foreign Policy", *Eurasianet*, 09 Eylül 2002; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav090902.shtml).

61 Zeyno Baran, "Georgia under worst Pressure since Independence", *Georgia Update*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10 January 2001.

has alarmed the Russian policy makers⁶². The Russian strategists concerned that the US might indeed promote the resolution of the region's numerous conflicts –including Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia –and thus introduce stability and ensure security in the Southern Caucasus. Under such a scenario, the US would emerge as the principal guarantor of peace and prosperity in the Caucasus where as Russia would be out of the region⁶³.

In response to increasing US political military engagement in the Southern Caucasus countries, Moscow in line with the aforementioned pragmatist view, took some steps in order to stop its eroding position in the region⁶⁴. The vast Russian energy resources became an important tool in exerting Russian influence in the region. The South Caucasus has emerged as the proving ground for a new Kremlin strategy that seeks to utilize Russia's energy abundance to increase its leverage over countries in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia."⁶⁵

Russia's electricity giant-RAO Unified Energy Systems (UES) acquired large stakes in energy ventures in both Armenia and Georgia.⁶⁶ Now, a 50 percent stake in Armenia's electricity generation capacity is in Russian hands. In addition, the Armenian government formally approved a deal on 17 September 2003 that will allow Russia's UES to act as the "financial manager" of Medmazor nuclear power giant.⁶⁷

Russia has also made a high-profile push into Georgia. UES obtained a control-

62 The most prominent US moves in the Caucasus were the decisions to dispatch military advisors to Georgia and the US State Department announcement on 29 March 2002 to lift embargo imposed on Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1993 as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Both actions had the potential to tilt the military establishments of all three countries away from Russia and towards NATO. In late March, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Eurasian policy, Mira Richardel visited Baku to explore strategic cooperation options. Then the US and its NATO allies have rapidly moved to strengthen their strategic foothold. On 21 March 2002, a group of NATO exercises arrived in Tbilisi to inspect Vaziani military base, which would host alliance-sponsored military exercises in June 2002. The military exercises would deal, among other tasks such anti-terrorism, with the protection of energy transit networks in the South Caucasus such as the so-called Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. Now, Georgia has hosted

US military advisers who are training special forces and anti-terrorist units under the \$64 million Train and Equip Programme. The programme also provides weapons, ammunition, uniforms, and other equipment. Turkey is also active player in realization of this program. Turkey is not only supplied Georgia with two helicopter and but also Ankara is rebuilding Georgian airfields and other military facilities. Igor Torbakov, "Russia Struggles to Counterbalance US Influence in the Caucasus", *Eurasianet*, 04 Ağustos 2002; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav040802.shtml).

63 Ibid.

64 Frantz Douglas, "Russia's Firm Hand on Heating Gas Worries Its Neighbors", *New York Times*, 8 January 2001.

65 Igor Torbakov, "Russia Seeks to Use Energy Abundance To Increase Political Leverage", *Eurasianet*, 19 November 2003; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav0111903.shtml).

66 Ibid.

67 Harouiinin Khachatrin, "Russian Moves In Caucasus Energy and Po Sector Could Have Geopolitical Impact", *Eurasianet*, 02 May 2003; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav002503.shtml).

ling interest in the operation of Georgia's power grid in August 2003, while also purchasing a majority share in the power generating joint-venture AES Silk Road. These deals will provide Russian electricity giant virtual control over Georgia's domestic market. Additionally in May 2002, Gazprom, the Russian gas conglomerate established a dominant position in Georgia's energy distribution infrastructure by concluding a partnership agreement with the Georgian government. The UES chief Anatoly Chubais has also stated that his company aims to export energy to Turkey and Azerbaijan⁶⁸.

The recent UES economic involvement raised questions about the political impact of the deals⁶⁹. According to Russian political analysts Yevgenii Arsyukhin, "Moscow is set to gain control over key economic factors in Armenia and Georgia, and their overall existence in general."⁷⁰

The Russian-Georgian relations continued to keep its tense character in the recent years. Throughout 2002 and 2003 Russia continued to accuse Georgia of harboring terrorists in Russia's war with Chechnya and Georgia claimed that Russia violated its sovereignty under the guise of antiterrorist operations in Pankisi valley. The Abkhazian peace process and Moscow's decision to grant Russian citizenship to large numbers of Abkhaz people and the process of the Russian military's withdrawal from Georgia constituted the other sources of tensions in Russo-Georgian relations.

The political events in late 2003 which led to collapse of longstanding regime of Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, raised concerns in Russo-Georgian relations. Mikhail Saakashvili, who received over 97 percent of the vote in Georgia's special presidential elections January 2004, has repeatedly stated that repairing the Tbilisi-Moscow relationship is among his top priorities.

As to formulations its attitude towards new regime in Georgia, Russia went through enormous discussions. Georgia's possible future directions were in the centre of discussions. Liberal-minded experts, such as Sergei Karanov, who is the chairman of the influential Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, called Moscow to pursue a genuinely friendly policy toward Georgia. They believe that such kind of policy will allow Russia to best take advantage of its geographical proximity to Georgia, as well as Moscow historic ties to Tbilisi, as geopolitical rivalry between the US and Russia plays out in the Southern Caucasus⁷¹.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Washington was not happy with Shevardnadze's strategic deal with Russia's Gasprom. The Bush regime responded to this infringement of their dominance by announcing large cuts in aid to Georgia. Additionally Richard Miles, by now ambassador to Tbilisi, started work actively to make the US-trained lawyer Mikhail Saakashvili future leader of Georgia. Simon Wheelan, "Georgia: "Rose Revolution" Destabilizes Southern Caucasus", (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/dec2003/geord30.shtml>).

⁷⁰ Igor Torbakov, "Russia Seeks to Use Energy Abundance To Increase Political Leverage", *Eurasianet*, 19 November 2003; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav0111903.shtml).

⁷¹ Igor Torbakov, "Russian Policy Makers Struggle to Respond to Political Changes in Georgia", *Eurasianet*, 01 August 2004; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav010804.shtml).

Traditionalists in Russian foreign policy-making circles are reluctant to consider major changes. They ask Russia for continuing its traditional policy of developing relations with Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia as tool to keep Georgia under Russian influence. They also want Russia to put pressure on Tbilisi for the maintenance of Russian military bases in Georgia. Additionally, the traditionalists are also highly suspicious of Georgia's future direction. According to the director of the Institute of for the Studies of the CIS, Konstantin Zatulin, the new administration in Tbilisi wants finally take Georgia out of Russia's sphere of influence and turn it into a reliable US ally, a candidate member of NATO⁷².

Some other experts argued that the Russian government should develop a contingency plan that could prevent Georgia's shift into US sphere of influence. These observers argued Georgia's territorial integrity has to be restored by the help of Russia⁷³.

The newly elected Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili visited Moscow in February 2004 in order to enhance relations with Moscow. Two interconnected issues such as Tbilisi's geopolitical orientation and the military presence of the third countries in the Georgia constituted the major issues in Saakashvili's visit to Moscow. According to Deputy Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Trubnikov, the primary goal during Saakashvili's visit was to help bring clarity into the new Georgian leadership's foreign policy course –how they view their country in the context of the region and within a broader international picture⁷⁴.

According to a report published in the Kommersant daily, the Kremlin's main objective during Saakashvili visit was to get the Georgian leadership to sign an agreement to recognize Russian vital interests in Georgia⁷⁵. Despite considerable Kremlin pressure, Saakashvili resisted agreeing to a Russian-drafted document. Meanwhile, Saakashvili and Putin have indicated that a comprehensive pact should be ready for signing in the autumn, when Russian leader is expected to make a state visit to Georgia⁷⁶.

The Georgian leader pushed for the withdrawal of Russian military bases and the cancellation of Russia's visa regime for Georgian citizens as well as sought Moscow support in his efforts to negotiate a settlement with the separatist province of Abkhazia. To reassure Moscow, Saakashvili pledged that Georgia would never sanction the establishment of a US military base in its territory. He also suggested that Russian troops could monitor parts of the Russian-Georgian border from Georgian side. Saakashvili told that he would consider joint outposts and patrols with Russia along the border near the Pankisi Gorge in Northeast Georgia. Saakashvili also said

72 Ibid.

73 Igor Torbakov, "Russia Remains Wary of Georgia's Geopolitical Intentions", *Eurasianet*, 18 February 2004; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav021804.shtml).

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 *ibid.*

his government would endeavor to extradite all terrorists escaping into Georgia⁷⁷.

As to Russian military bases in Georgia, Tbilisi insisted that the two bases in Georgia be shut down in three years. The Russian generals, however, stated repeatedly that it would take at least seven years or longer to relocate men and military equipment. Prior to Saakashvili's arrival, Russian officials put forward the idea that the withdrawal period could be cut down to five years⁷⁸.

Concerning the Abkhazia question, the Georgian leader Saakashvili offered Russia to construct a pipeline through Georgia. For Saakashvili's administration, the Georgian-Russian pipeline (from the Russian port of Novorossiysk via Abkhazia) would be viewed in large as a conflict resolution instrument. Realizing and securing such a pipeline can help to determine Abkhazia's political status –according to the Saakashvili administration⁷⁹.

During a meeting, Putin and Saakashvili agreed to renew the work of intergovernmental groups on a wide range of issues, including energy supplies, the return of refugees, and the reopening of railroad transportation between two countries via Abkhazia⁸⁰.

Although Russian-Georgian relations went through some sort of positive development, the ongoing ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia prevented both countries from establishing good relations. For the new administration in Tbilisi, setting the integrity of Georgia up by establishing Georgian control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the first and foremost priority. However, as would be seen, Russia, Georgia and both Abkhazia and South Ossetia had different and conflicting views and policies on this sensitive issue.

As to South Ossetia, under the leadership of Mikhail Saakashvili, on 10-11 July 2005, the new Georgian government in a Conference that took place at Batumi declared a new peace plan in order to end the prolonged ethnic conflict. The plan offered South Ossetia a broad autonomy under a federation structure with Georgia. The new peace initiative was supported by the Council of Europe and USA. The South Ossetian representatives did not participate in the Conference since they found the Saakashvili administration insincere in resolving the conflict peacefully. Russian government officials did not also attend to the Conference. Thus the Georgian attempt at resolving the conflict was doomed to failure. Georgian leader Saakashvili blamed Moscow for blocking South Ossetia's attendance⁸¹. Under the new leader Saakashvili, Georgia went on accusing Moscow of secretly arming South Ossetia and claiming Russian peacekeepers were condoning activities of South Ossetian-based criminal gangs. As to the US and OSCE support behind such a

77 *Moscow Times*, 11 February 2004.

78 Sergiei Blagov, "Saakashvili "Makes Friends" with Putin During Georgian Leader's Moscow Visit", *Eurasianet*, 02 December 2004; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav021204.shtml).

79 George Anjaparidze, "A Georgian-Russian Pipeline: For Peace or Profit?", *Eurasianet*, 03 September 2004; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav030904.shtml).

80 *Moscow Times*, 12 February 2004.

81 Liz Fuller, "Tensions Again On the Rise in South Ossetia", *Eurasianet*, 27 September 2005; (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav072905.shtml>).

peace initiative, in a statement, the South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity said that they were not happy with Georgian attempts to draw international organizations and the US into the peace process⁸².

Meanwhile, the developments in Ajaria became another source of tension in Russian-Georgian relations. Although Russia stressed its commitment to the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity, Moscow has not hesitated to use Ajarian leader Aslan Abasidze's resistance to Tbilisi as a leverage in its politics towards Georgia. During turmoil, the Ajarian leader visited Moscow several times in order to receive attention for his struggle with Tbilisi. This situation and the Russian decision to introduce a new visa for residents of Adjara became one another source of tension in Russian-Georgian relations in the early 2004. The Tbilisi government has decried Russia for seeking to undermine its sovereignty by introducing new visa regime for residents of Ajaria. The events once more showed the incoherence and chaos in Russian policies towards Georgia. Georgian leader M. Saakashvili succeeded in regaining control in May 2004 and the Ajarian leader fled to Moscow.

As for Abkhazia, the presidential election that took place in October 2004 is very important in terms of understanding general atmosphere in Abkhazian internal politics. During the election process all the candidates said that they would pursue efforts to secede from Georgia and develop closer relations with Moscow. Although all the international organizations, including the Council of Europe and the OSCE did not recognize the validity of vote in this election, in a sharp contrast the Russian foreign Ministry characterized the election process as "calm" and "democratic". Some Russian political experts called Kremlin to consider a policy shift that could result in the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁸³ The main reason behind the Russian decision not to recognize the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been a belief that such recognition could constitute an example for other North Caucasus ethnic groups, especially for Chechnya. The Chechen case had prompted Russian leaders to express support for Georgia's territorial integrity in 1990s.

Russian efforts just after the election to make its candidate Raul Khajimba, who lost an election against Russian-backed Sergei Bagasp, responsible for coordinating defense and security issues in Abkhazia showed how much Russia is involved in Abkhazian politics and life. The Russian diplomacy during and after the election process in Abkhazia has complicated the tense Russian-Georgian relations and Georgian officials accused Russia of meddling Georgian internal affairs⁸⁴.

82 Jean Christophe Peuch, "CIS: Georgia Says Visa Dispute With Russia Affects South Ossetia Peace Plan", RFE/RL, 16 November 2005; (<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/11/7ce6733d-46eb-4a45-b161-6bddd53622.html>).

83 These calls by Russian political experts to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are important in terms of seeing the existence of the neo-imperialist trends in the Russian foreign policy. Although Russian foreign policy received a pragmatist approach in its dealings with foreign policy matters under V. Putin, the neo-imperialist approach never lost its strength in Russian foreign politics. *Izvestiya*, 17 September 2004.

84 Sergei Blagov, "Abkhazia's Crisis Adds to Russia's Headaches in the Caucasus", *Eurasianet*, 15 November 2004; (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav111504.shtml>).

The Georgian leader M. Saakashvili's new "peace initiative" or "plan" in January 2005 to restore Georgian control over Abkhazia was doomed to failure because of the same reasons as his peace plan for South Ossetia. The plan envisaged a broad autonomy for Abkhazia. The reaction from Abkhaz leader Sergei Bagasp was not enthusiastic and he stated that they would continue developing and deepening relations with Russian Federation in every field⁸⁵. The Abkhazian administration also emphasized that negotiations can be held with Georgia if the latter agrees to accept Abkhazia as a state on equal basis⁸⁶.

As to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian government is highly critical of the existing Russian peace-keeping forces and this issue is one another source of tension in the Russian-Georgian relations in the recent years. The existence of Russian peace-keepers in both separatist regions is perceived by the Georgian authorities as providing insurance policy for the regions' separatist leadership⁸⁷. That is why, Georgian authorities do not believe in the objectivity of Russia in the whole mediation process.

The Russian-Georgian relation went through positive developments in recent years. For example, as to the withdrawal of the Russian military bases from Georgia, the negotiations between Russia and Georgia made important progresses and finally, Russia and Georgia signed an agreement on 30 May 2005 on the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia by 2008. According to this agreement, Russia will pull out its military bases from Akhalkakalki by 2007 and from Batumi by 2008. While many Georgians viewed the agreement as a potential catalyst for the resolution of other bilateral issues such as the negotiated settlement of Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts, others viewed the agreement as an important deal that will increase Georgia's chances of joining NATO⁸⁸.

Although Russian-Georgian relations improved in 2004, the relations between these two countries are far from coherence or predictability. Russia remains wary of Georgia's geopolitical intentions. Many influential policy analysts in Moscow remain skeptical of Saakashvili, noting his close ties with Western nations, in particular the US⁸⁹. Specifically, there is strong doubt about Saakashvili's pledge that he would not permit the US to establish military bases in Georgia after Russian forces pull out from the country.

As to both the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts in Georgia, the future of

85 Fikret Ertan, Abhazya-Rusya-Gürcistan, *Zaman*, 25 Ağustos 2005.

86 Sergei Blagov & John Mackdeon, "Little Optimism for Georgia's Abkhazia Peace Plan", *Eurasianet*, 20 January 2005; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav012005.shtml).

87 *Interfax*, 19 January 2005.

88 Theresa Freese, "Russia's Troop Withdrawal from Georgia: The Start of a New Friendship?", *Eurasianet*, 08 October 2005; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav081005.shtml).

89 As to geopolitical competition between the Russia and the US in Georgia, see, Ariel Cohen, "Georgian Inauguration Complicates US-Russian Relations", *Eurasianet*, 23 January 2004; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav030904); Ariel Cohen, "Saakashvili Visits Washington Amid Heightening Geopolitical Tension in the Caucasus", *Eurasianet*; 24 February 2004; (www.eurasianet.org/departments/insights/articles/eav022404.shtml).

the peace process is not promising. On the one hand, the leaders of conflicting powers recognize the need for normalization of the relations, on the other hand, suspicion and mistrust prevails. The conflict is a hard and painful issue for each party and gave rise to the influence of hard-liners in their domestic and foreign politics. On the Abkhaz and South Ossetian side, this situation expressed itself in extreme nationalism and alienation from the peace process. As for the Georgian side, this situation led Georgian hard-liners to speak of military action as the only solution to the conflicts. Radical views in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are enjoying full support from local people and increasing their influence day -by- day in their domestic politics.

Although the Russian efforts and especially Kremlin's peacekeeping played an important role in freezing the conflict, it is an undeniable fact that Moscow has failed to achieve a political solution. As to Russian involvement, one can easily argue that Russia is not a trusted and objective mediator in the peace processes. The volume of Russian political, economic and military⁹⁰ involvement in both regions put Russia away from being an impartial mediator in the negotiations. While Georgia accepts the need for Russian participation as a necessary precondition for reducing the escalation of the conflict and reaching a political solution, they admit that Moscow should be an impartial and unbiased mediator in the peace talks. They also highlight the fact that other Western international organizations such as OSCE and Western powers such as the US should take part in the mediation efforts.

It should be emphasized that the Western involvement in the solution of these ethnic-rooted political conflicts in Georgia must have an economic character in order to bring a promising solution. It is very important in the sense that ethnic-rooted conflicts in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have an important economic character and the living conditions in both regions are worsening immensely. Both regions are economically highly dependant on Russia and Russia has not failed to exploit it. That is why Western economic assistance through some investment projects is highly essential in terms of offsetting Russian influence over both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

CONCLUSION

The Russian policies towards the Southern Caucasus in general and towards Georgia specifically have been far from coherence and consistency during the post-Soviet period. This inconsistency and incoherence can be explained by the turmoil in Russia's domestic politics, which affected the formulation of Russian policy towards South Caucasus. Therefore, Russia has not been able to develop and follow a consistent and coherent policy towards Georgia in the post-Soviet era.

⁹⁰ As an example, both Abkhaz Defense Minister Sultan Sosnaliyev and chief of staff Anatoly Zaytsev are Russian citizens and of course such situation put Russian objectivity under question.

Russia's relations with Georgia are closely linked with changes and developments in Russia's domestic politics in the post-Soviet era. In this period, Russia's national interests formulations and its approach to ethnic conflicts played an important role in Kremlin's relations with Tbilisi as well. Especially, ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia became a subject of heated debates in Moscow on how to deal with Georgia.

According to Emil A. Pain, three basic versions of a strategy have been developed by the various groups in Russian political and academic elites. The first stage, which was pursued in 1991-1992, can be identified with the policy named as "isolationism". The Russian policies towards post-Soviet space were confused and inconsistent. This was partly due to the identity crisis which highly affected the Russian political elite immediately after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The pro-Western government, which took the upper hand in Russia's foreign policy formulations with regard to the relations not only with the Western world but also with the post-Soviet space in 1992, saw the ex-Soviet republics as a burden in front of the Russian political and economic transformation. Therefore, they did not give priority to the relations with ex-Soviet republics including the South Caucasus states. In this period, Russian military establishment played an important role in South Caucasus. As seen before, for example, Russian Defense Minister, General Pavel Grachev, played the role of mediator in the Abkhazian ethnic conflict in Georgia.

Although Russia followed an "isolationist" policy towards the post-Soviet space including South Caucasus in the very initial year after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Moscow could not be able to remain totally apart from the post-Soviet space and its problems. The left wing, nationalist and centrist mainstream in Russian politics took upper hand in 1993 and insisted on more assertive and active foreign policies towards the post-Soviet space. Thus, the second stage, which can be called "domination", took its place in Russian foreign policy between 1993 and 1997. The Russian policies towards post-Soviet space aimed at building a Russian sphere of influence over all of the ex-Soviet republics in a traditional geopolitical sense. In many respects, this change in Russian foreign policy course was stimulated by domestic developments in Russia. The increasing influence of military, pro-imperialist and centrist groups in Russian foreign politics moved Russian policies towards the post-Soviet space to a more interventionist mode. At that time, Russian authorities began to speak of the CIS area as Russia's sphere of interest. The Presidential decree 'On Strategic Course of Russia with the CIS Member States' approved in September 1995, characterized the CIS as a zone of interest, described Russia as 'a leading force in the formation of a new system of inter-state political and economic relations on the territory of the post-Soviet space. These provisions, especially the description of Russia as a leading force of integration, were perceived in most of the newly independent states as signs of an imperialist strategy⁹¹.

91 Emil A. Pain, "Contagious Ethnic Conflicts and Border Disputes Along Russia's Southern Flank", pp. 189-193.

In this period, Russia made use of ethnic conflicts and domestic turmoil in ex-Soviet republics in the Southern Caucasus in order to enforce its will over these republics. As to South Caucasus, for example, according to many Western political figures, Russia made use of ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to put Russian military troops in both conflict areas under the frame of peacekeeping missions. Thus, the Kremlin received important leverage over Georgia in order to keep its control over Georgia. The Kremlin has also used the transportation and energy dependence of the newly independent states to exert political pressure over them. As for the South Caucasus, for example, the economic relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia were either restricted or reduced. Russian political pressure over Azerbaijan and Georgia on how to make use of Caspian oil and gas reserves and transport to the world markets became very obvious. Such Russian foreign policy course led South Caucasus states, namely, Azerbaijan and Georgia give priority to the relations with the West. The Russian policies towards both Georgia and Azerbaijan forced them to join the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

By the end of 1996, it was understood by the Russian policy makers that this course was also unrealistic and counterproductive for Moscow. The war in Chechnya, ineffectiveness to bring a solution to the ethnic conflicts in Georgia and increasing Western engagement in the post-Soviet space especially in the Southern Caucasus states led Russian policy-makers to develop a new mode in Russian foreign policy in general towards the ex-Soviet republics and specifically towards South Caucasus republics – especially Azerbaijan and Georgia. The third period can be termed as “cooperation” and is directed at the construction of a system of institutions that would undertake joint international actions in order to reach peaceful settlement of conflicts and controversies in the post-Soviet space. This strategy also aimed at bringing solutions to the other political, social and economic issues in the related ex-Soviet republics in order to set up a more stable security environment in the areas adjacent to Russia. The current and more cooperative stage of Russian policies in the post-Soviet space began in 1997. During this period Russia started to refrain from abusive efforts at applying economic pressures on South Caucasus republics.

As to ethnic conflicts in both Azerbaijan and Georgia, Russia acknowledged the impermissibility of support for separatist movements to destabilize the political and economic situation in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Regarding on how to bring a final solution to the ethnic conflicts, Russia started to support “direct dialogue” between conflicting parties. In this period, Russia has developed several specific “peace initiatives” in order to set up a regional security system and cooperation the South Caucasus. The Russian policy makers believed that “the Caucasian Four”, which consists of Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, would be the most effective mechanism in laying the foundation for a regional system of security and cooperation. As to outside powers, Russia keenly continued to avoid any foreign power engagement in the South Caucasus region in order not to let status quo

revised. In this respect, Russia still does not accept to let any other foreign or international military troops in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the framework of peacekeeping forces.

As mentioned before, Russian foreign policies towards the post-Soviet space acquired a pragmatist character during the reign of V. Putin and Russia started to pay attention to developing relations with ex-Soviet republics. As to the Southern Caucasus, together with pragmatist considerations, economic considerations and energy dependence of these republics became a tool for exerting influence over these republics. The Russian oil and gas companies such as LukOil and Gazprom made important economic deals in the South Caucasus republics Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. According to many Western political analysts, the recent Russian economic involvement in the South Caucasus is a new phase in Russian neo-imperialist tendencies towards region since it is laying down a base for Kremlin to meddle these countries' internal and external politics.

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