

THE POLITICAL-MILITARY IMPACT OF THE SELF-PROCLAIMED STATEHOODS OF ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

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Abstract: The break-up of the Soviet Union not only changed the political-military reality on a global scale but also renewed many unsolved issues within the former Soviet Republics. Many ethnic holders of political entities, saw the historic chance to establish their statehood. The newly independent state of Georgia found itself in a very complicated hardly passable political-military position. Suffering from wide intra-Georgian political divergences, on the other hand facing Abkhaz and Ossetic aspirations, Georgia failed to consolidate its sovereignty throughout the territory. The recognition of new statehoods by the Russian Federation contributed to further complications.

Keywords: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Georgia, Russia, war.

Introduction

This research is focused on conflicts within Georgia's internationally recognized borders. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, since the late 1990s, have attracted attention, recognizing several times the eruptive stages of the conflict. The so-called "five-day war" of 2008 openly displayed the Russian policy toward Georgia. After this, a set of treaties and agreements was signed between the Russian Federation and the two self-proclaimed territories. While the signed acts speak of the Russian presence in the military plan as well as the political cooperation, again there is a small difference in this aspect between the two territories. South Ossetia's ambitions are more inclined toward full annexation by the Russian Federation and joining Republic of North Ossetia, while Abkhazia seems to want its "independence" more. The leader of the authorities in South Ossetia, clearly stated the goals for unification with the Russian Federation. In this regard, he pointed out the concrete steps that will be taken, possibly the organization of a referendum¹.

On the military ground, an active conflict remains but with many elements of a frozen conflict because both sides are not of the will to change the positions they have. Russian-backed aspirations are militarily achieved on the ground so far; on the other hand, the authorities of Georgia are aware of the lack of capabilities to confront the much superior army. In this regard,

the reasons why this situation continues today will be examined addressing the military balance of forces in the region and the wider impact on international relations.

Despite not being recognized by the international community, except a few countries such as Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and smaller states encouraged by Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia still function de facto as independent states, although each with its characteristics as derivatives of historical differences. But what is the real political aspiration of Abkhazians and Ossets? Is their strategic alliance with Russia just a current imposition influenced by their inability to act differently as a result of the forces, or does it have deeper roots?

Research methodology

The study is subject to the application of analysis and a comparative approach. The conclusions are based considering on recent historical developments and dynamics of recent political-military issues.

Results

On the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the aspiration for the restoration of independence was awakened not only in the Republics which were constituent units of the Soviet Union but also in some of the Autonomous ethnic territories. Within the Russian Federation, Tatarstan had a strong political commitment in this direction, which eventually forced Moscow to make a state-by-state agreement with it. Undoubtedly, the most prominent case, not only political but also military, was Chechnya, with two waged wars with Russian troops from 1994 to 1996, as well as after 1999, while insurgent activities continued almost for a decade later, albeit on a small scale.

Within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia, the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia declared independence, initially in 1990 as the Union-level Republic, or restoration of 1925 status². Then in 1992 Abkhazia was declared an independent state³. The situation will radically develop in 1992, when thousands of volunteers, members of other autochthonous peoples of the Caucasus, mainly Circassians and Chechens, come to the aid Abkhazian independence⁴. After a nearly year-long siege of Sukhumi, Georgian troops withdraw from most of Abkhazia, to stay only in a northeastern corner of it, in what is known as the Kodori Gorge. Along with Georgian troops, most of the ethnic Georgians, who had been a majority in Abkhazia, also withdrew⁵. Thus, the demographic composition changed and gradually the ethnic Abkhazians managed to regain the majority of the majority population after almost a century. One of the main commanders of the troops that helped the independence of Abkhazia was

the one who would later become the most wanted man in Moscow, of the Chechen commanders, Shamil Basayev. However, the complex geopolitical position clarifies in some way the chronology of events which may seem paradoxical in the foreground. The Abkhazians have their goal, the restoration of independence, in this regard they have accepted the help of two fierce opposing parties among themselves, volunteer troops among which there were also Chechen fighters and Russian troops. Traditionally, like all other Caucasian peoples, the Abkhazians vehemently opposed Russian occupation in the 19th century, but in the new political circumstances, they saw Russian aid support that could secure military superiority even on a day when Georgia will be able to build its military capabilities or even its hypothetical diplomatic superiority. Georgia's capacity was compromised in the early 90's, in the first place due to tragic internal Ethnic-Georgian divisions that escalated into a chaotic civil war between government troops and forces remained loyal to ousted President Gamsakhurdia.

The government in Sukhumi itself, although declaratively able to express pro-union with the Russian Federation, is taking steps that are increasing the Abkhazian ethnic presence, motivating ethnic Abkhazians who exiled during the "Muhajirism" era to return home⁶. According to estimates, about 10 thousand Abkhazians have returned so far, a number which has its impact on the total number of about 243 thousand inhabitants, while this process is always active and is one of the pillars, key to the separatist government strategy in Sukhumi.

In South Ossetia, interethnic conflicts between the Ossetians and the Georgians took place in 1989. This conflict was triggered on the one hand by the Ossetian aspirations to join North Ossetia within the Russian Federation, and on the other by the Georgian aspirations for a more centralized state. During this time, under new Georgian laws, ethnic and regional parties were barred from running in the elections, which excluded Ossetian parties from the electoral system, further aggravating relations, and the conflict escalated into an armed war that eventually destroyed traditionally friendly interethnic relations between Ossetians and Georgians up to that time. The armed clashes were followed by political acts of both sides, the Ossetians declared the Republic of Ossetia, while the government in Tbilisi after the declaration of the Ossetians, removed from South Ossetia all the attributes of autonomy it had until then, and degraded it as a territorial subject. Tbilisi officials refer to South Ossetia with "Tskhinvali Region". The front line of the clashes stabilized during 1993, Russian troops were stationed between the confronting parties, so by 2008, South Ossetia in most of its territory operated with a virtually unclear status, while part of the territory remained under the control of the Georgian government

troops. Over the years, the authorities in Tskhinvali have consolidated the constitutional aspects and it was clear that South Ossetia had now become a de facto independent state. Yet the main aspiration of the South Ossetians remains the unification into a republic with North Ossetia (Alania) within the Russian Federation.

The 2008 war, otherwise known as the “five days’ war”, began on August 7 and ended within a few days. Initially, the Georgian troops engaged to restore state authority in South Ossetia, undertook a rapid military offensive, managing to take control of the capital Tskhinvali within a few hours. But the Russian counter-reaction was swift, the same day the heavily armed military convoy crossed the Roksky tunnel which represents the only road junction between South Ossetia and North Ossetia. Russian troops, which until then had only a symbolic presence in South Ossetia under the guise of a peacekeeping mission, were openly sided with separatist troops. During the Russian counter-offensive, in the following days, Georgian troops were expelled together with the Georgian civilian population, from the areas that until then were under the authority of Tbilisi. But the 2008 Russian military incursion did not stop only within South Ossetia, soon under Russian occupation, other parts of Georgia were found, including the strategic city of Gori in central Georgia. Russian troops increased the presence of the “peacekeeping” mission in Abkhazia until then, expelling Georgian troops from the Kodori Gorge, and thus taking effective control of the entire territory of Abkhazia. Apart from the military aspects as well as the final departure of Georgian government troops from hitherto controlled parts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the five-day war brought out of political camouflage the intentions of official Moscow which until then claimed the role of peacekeepers deployed between Georgian and separatist troops. The Russian Federation made an open political decision regarding the conflicts in Georgia and recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to later encourage several other states to do the same.

The government in Tbilisi, on the other hand, may have counted on Russian restraint to intervene militarily, as it felt that Moscow did not want a political conflict with the West. However, apart from declaratory aid, no military aid was offered to Georgia. With the political mediation of the European Union and especially with the French diplomatic activity, on August 12, 2008, a ceasefire was signed between the parties, which sanctioned the situation in the situation that remains today. The government in Tbilisi itself in 2008 has not undertaken any military activity to regain control throughout the country. On the Georgian political scene, military action launched in South Ossetia will cost President Shallikashvili declining in popularity and later with replacing of him. He blamed a

reckless and hasty politico-military decision on the fact that until 2008, Georgian troops controlled Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia and about 1/3 of South Ossetia⁷, preventing separatist governments from exercising full control over the territories. After the 2008 war, the governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia now have a strong argument with which they can present themselves to relevant political factors, that of full and effective control over the territory within whose borders they had originally declared independence, but in reality did not control it completely until the five-day war of 2008.

Unilateral declarations of independence from Abkhazia and South Ossetia until 2008 were not recognized by any other state, including Russia itself. Although Moscow has helped the separatists in various ways, including with active military assistance, it has not formalized this with their recognition, until the open military confrontation of 2008, when Russian troops entered Georgia openly to confront the troops. Georgians first in South Ossetia and then also in Abkhazia. By presidential decree signed by then-President Medvedev, Moscow recognized the two self-proclaimed states on August 26, 2008. Moscow-sponsored Abkhazian and Ossetian independence was later recognized by Nicaragua in September 2008, Venezuela and Nauru in 2009, and Tuvalu⁸. Vanuatu recognized the independence of Abkhazia (not South Ossetia) in 2011, but the same country later confirmed that it respects Georgia's territorial integrity with Abkhazia as part of it, and re-established diplomatic relations, and consular with the government in Tbilisi. It is necessary to mention that the issue of self-proclaimed independence has revived neo-Marxist sentiments as in the case of Nicaragua which did not hesitate to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Cuban leader Fidel Castro, meanwhile has said that Georgia's assertion of national sovereignty is false, accusing President Bush of encouraging Georgians and that Russian military intervention is a legitimate peacekeeping mission. Russia's incitement, as in the case of Venezuela, however, was not merely by political means, accorded with the process of recognition of questionable independence by President Hugo Chavez, the two states, the Russian Federation and Venezuela, have signed more agreements. Which Venezuela is equipped with modern weapons and for this purpose is provided with the Russian loan. Even these few diplomatic recognitions that Abkhazia and South Ossetia have achieved are clearly the result of Russian policy supported by financial seduction as in the case of Venezuela. The self-proclaimed republics have also been recognized by the separatist government in Transnistria, with which they have established a joint body called the "Community for the Protection of the Rights of Peoples". All member

territories of this organization are controlled or “protected” militarily by the Russian army.

In the plan to “legalize” the Russian military presence, official Moscow has taken care to “justify” its military presence through agreements with the two self-proclaimed states. Russia maintains military presence in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the basis of agreements concluded with local authorities without the consent of authorities of Georgia.

On September 17, 2008, Russia and Abkhazia signed a “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance” which provides for Russian military and political presence in the Republic⁹. The set of other agreements is more strengthened with “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia of Alliance and Strategic Partnership”. Similarly, is done with South Ossetia through separate agreements, through “Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia” signed in 2008, followed by other documents, and finally with “The Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on the Alliance and Integration”. The last one, formally incorporated the South Ossetian military into the Russian Army in March 2015. The creation of new self-proclaimed states in Ukraine produced another agreements with the signing of “The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance¹⁰”.

Under the “legal” umbrella of these agreements, Russia maintains 3,500 soldiers in Abkhazia with its headquarters in Gudauta, a former Soviet base on the Black Sea coast north of Sukhumi¹¹. In this regard the situation in South Ossetia is different, and the South Ossetian Forces are effectively integrated within the Russian army. Consequently, local troops are used as an integral part of other Russian armed forces, including their involvement in the Invasion of Ukraine¹².

A case parallel attempted?

Not infrequently, from various Russian high institutional instances, a parallel is drawn between the Republic of Kosovo and the cases that were the subject of this paper, but also other cases in Eurasia. According to Alexidze there is a clear intention of the Russian government to apply the Kosovo case as a precedent [1].

However, the case of the Republic of Kosovo differs in many respects. In the historical and political plane, starting from the circumstances of how the Albanian ethnic homeland was divided, as well as further with the continuous territorial and political subjectivity, the Republic of Kosovo has more consolidated arguments. Kosovo was a constituent element of the

Yugoslav Federation which disintegrated in the early 1990s. Viewed from the perspective of today's reality, the institutions of the Republic of Kosovo operate independently, including security agencies and the army. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the territories are effectively incorporated into the Russian economic and military system.

Added to this are also the demographic facts, Ethnic-Albanians are the absolute population in Kosovo. There is as well as the very important political fact, the severing of all institutional ties with Serbia since 1990. In the field of international law, with exercising violence with genocidal elements as well as with a continuous segregationist policy, Serbia has lost all right to govern Kosovo. The International Court of Justice itself spoke in favor of Kosovo's independence, which in its opinion was clear regarding the declaration of independence of the Republic of Kosovo. International intervention for Kosovo, ended the violence against the people of Kosovo, leading to a U.N. Security Council decision to suspend Serbia's governance. According to U.S. Secretary of State, it was the unusual combination of factors in the case of Kosovo – including the context of breakup of Yugoslavia, ethnic cleansing and crimes against civilians in Kosovo that were not found elsewhere and therefore make Kosovo a special case¹³.

The issue of self-determination of peoples in principle does not contradict international law, but when combined here with the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of a state, then the situation is further complicated. But question raised here how was this territorial integrity achieved? Kosovo was forcibly overrun by Serbian military in 1912. Again, although it was autonomous, indeed was a member of the Federation with most of the attributes similar to other federal units-republics.

According to Siddi (2011), the lack of a predominant way of behaving in the case of Kosovo hindered the formation of a customary norm in international law that upholds the right of secession according to some conditions [2].

It is often debated what constitutes the notion of people and to what extent autochthony plays a role here in a certain territory which is claimed. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there are substantial differences between them in this regard. The first does not question the autochthony of the Abkhazians in present-day Abkhazia. The second difference is that Abkhazians have no other homeland and that Abkhazia is their only homeland. Historical facts further show that the Abkhaz state has known periods of its existence before, including its short existence in 1921.

The long-standing dilemma of international law of what constitutes a people remains essential. The most present view is that international law does not provide for any unilateral right to secession for peoples, groups and minorities, except in cases of decolonization, constitutional procedures,

or to improve the injustice of the past violations of international law. In terms of civic affiliation in Abkhazia, regardless of the circumstances that led to it, Georgians were in the majority until 1993, when they were forcibly expelled. In this context, should also not forget the demographic management as a Soviet political tool, which deliberately arranged the demographic realities to bring a political act in many situations. South Ossetians, on the other hand, are only a small part of the ethnic-Ossetian population in general.

Conclusions/Discussion

The long presence of the unresolved problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has created domino effects in the territory of the former Soviet Union. The inability of international law to respond effectively has further motivated Russian military incursions into eastern Ukraine and the creation of new self-proclaimed pro-Russian states.

Conclusion

Viewed from a historical point of view, if one remembers the formerly occupied territories in Croatia, for the international spectator a situation on the ground was served allegedly to shoe the creation of an independent state named “Republic of Serbian Krajina”. Indeed, this self-proclaimed state relied heavily on the military, political, and financial assistance of Yugoslavia/Serbia. The entry of troops from Serbia and the clear identification of pre-military units with the Serbian Government leave little room for doubt. There is a very clear comparison with the events in the South Caucasus.

There is no dilemma who controls today the self-proclaimed states in the internationally recognized territory of Georgia. Russian military admission is no longer camouflaged, it is completely open. In one aspect, this was made known through the signing of agreements between the Russian Federation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The population of both territories are provided with Russian passports. The territories are effectively an inseparable custom, economic and monetary area of Russia.

Chronologically, the Russian Federation used the existence of such territories in Georgia and the impossibility of International Law in this regard as a motive to create other similar territories in eastern Ukraine. Abkhazia and South Ossetia today are just two of five territories controlled by the Russian military and local satellite “armies”, not counting here the annexed Crimea. Political plans of Moscow to repeat the scenario of referendum i Crimea are revealed as a possible option in the case of South Ossetia. This step would carry with it a great potential for escalating the

conflict and further for the fragility of the borders between the former Soviet Union republics.

The return of various territorial issues in the former Soviet Union is in itself the opening of the “Pandora’s box” with full domino effects. Violation of state borders in the former Soviet Union has seriously violated the international order. This is made even more questionable by the fact that many governments, especially those in Central Asia, depend on the support of official Moscow, as shown by the recent crisis of protests in Kazakhstan.

Notes

- ¹ **Aljazeera**. Georgia’s South Ossetia plans to take steps to join Russia. 31 03 2022
- ² **Saparov**, A. *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus*. London & New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 164.
- ³ **Shesterinina**, A.. *Mobilizing in uncertainty : Collective identities and war in Abkhazia*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2021, p. 69.
- ⁴ **Souleimanov**, E.. *Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia Wars Reconsidered*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 160
- ⁵ **Metzger**, B., et all. *Settling Self-determination Disputes: Complex Power-sharing in Theory and Practice*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008, p. 352.
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- ⁷ **Wilmshurst**, E., ed. *International Law and the Classification of Conflicts*. OUP Oxford, 2012, p. 319.
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- ¹⁰ **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPR**. LPR and South Ossetia signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. 19 10 2018.
- ¹¹ **RFE/RL**. Russia Gains Military Base In Abkhazia. 17 02 2010.
- ¹² **Civil.ge**. Reports: Russia’s Tskhinvali Base Units Sent to Ukraine. 16 03 2022.
- ¹³ **U.S. Department of State Archive**. U.S. Recognizes Kosovo as Independent State. 18 02 2008.

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