

რუსეთის შიდაპოლიტიკური დაპირისპირება და ურთიერთობა საქართველოსთან: აფხაზეთის კონფლიქტი და მის ირგვლივ განვითარებული პროცესები 1992-1993 THE INTERNAL POLITICAL STRUGGLES OF RUSSIA AND ITS ENGAGEMENTS WITH GEORGIA: THE ABKHAZIAN CONFLICT AND RELATED EVENTS (1992-1993)

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საკვანძო სიტყვები: რუსეთი, შიდაპოლიტიკური დაპირისპირება, აფხაზეთი, ომი, ედვინი, ხასბულატოვი, რუტსკოი
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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to explore the political developments in Russia during 1992-1993 and assess whether the domestic political crisis at that time influenced the war in Abkhazia. The article also examines the key turning points of the conflict in Abkhazia and delves into the details of Russia's involvement in the war. According to renowned American scholar Francis Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Humanity has not only reached the end of a distinct post-war historical period, but also an ideological and evolutionary culmination, wherein liberal democracy is envisioned as the ultimate form of human government. This was shared by the Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, who believed that the United States was a natural ally of democratic Russia and an enemy of the totalitarian Soviet empire. He characterized the Soviet Union as "wrongly" and "illegally" developed. Needless to say, all this contributed to the revival of the myth of two Russia both in the Western world and in Georgia. Unfortunately, the political elites did not realize that the existence of two Russia was an illusion, which was clearly confirmed by the processes that developed in Abkhazia in 1992-1993. The visions of Eduard Shevardnadze, who placed the responsibility for the situation created by Russia not on Boris Yeltsin and the democrats in the presidential apparatus, but on the head of the Supreme Council Ruslan Khasbulatov and the military, turned out to be completely wrong. Although Khasbulatov himself openly opposed Yeltsin on issues of power distribution and economic reforms, their strategy regarding the ongoing events in Abkhazia was openly anti-Georgian. This article reviews the internal political conflict in the Russian Federation in 1992-1993 and provides an analysis of the crucial turning points in the Abkhazian war

within this context. In general, President Boris Yeltsin's administration during this period was primarily focused on modernizing the Russian economy and liberalizing its foreign policy (integration into Western political structures). Understandably, the conservative and militaristic political factions expressed dissatisfaction with these developments. However, when considering the facts and outcomes, it becomes clear that the ongoing discontent and controversies had no effect on the final results of the conflict in Abkhazia. The course of events indicated that the prevailing imperial mindset remained steadfast throughout. Even Andrei Kozyrev, the most liberal and influential foreign minister at the time, shared the imperial ideology, advocating for the post-Soviet states to remain within Russia's economic and political sphere of influence. This viewpoint was clearly illustrated by Russia's involvement in the overthrow of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's government during the Georgian Civil War and its active support for separatists in the Abkhazian conflict. From a methodological perspective, this work falls within the realm of qualitative research. The content analysis method was used to review primary sources such as press articles and memoirs, and the discourse analysis method was applied to analyze secondary sources consisting of academic literature related to the research topic. In addition, the process tracing method was employed to elucidate the cause-and-effect relationships of historical events. During 1992-1993, Russian intervention was a pivotal factor in the conflict in Georgia, significantly influencing the hostilities and ultimately tipping the balance in favor of the Abkhaz separatists. For both President Yeltsin and Chairman Khasbulatov, securing international recognition of Russia as the guarantor of peace and stability in the former Soviet Union was crucial.

This objective aligned with the broader imperial strategy aimed at maintaining the Caucasus within Russia's sphere of influence. The strategy of fragmented imperialism, developed before the Soviet Union's collapse, significantly shaped the Russian Federation's objectives in the ongoing conflict in Georgia. This approach exploited that the separatist aspirations of the autonomies within the pro-independence union republics were to be used against the republic themselves. Despite public disagreements between Khasbulatov and Yeltsin on power-sharing and economic reform, their approach to the situation

in Abkhazia was distinctly anti-Georgian, reflecting a unified stance on this aspect of foreign policy. The analysis of these actions underscores the continuity of Russia's imperial mindset, with the ultimate objective not to acknowledge Georgia as an independent and sovereign state. In this context, the war in Abkhazia was utilized effectively as a means to punish and weaken Georgia. The consistency of this approach suggests that irrespective of which political faction controlled Russia during 1991-1993, the outcome would have likely remained the same.

This research is part of my Ph.D. dissertation, which examines political developments in post-Soviet Russia from 1991 to 1993, focusing on the internal political crisis and its influence on Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia, particularly the war in Abkhazia. During this period, Boris Yeltsin's government initiated significant economic reforms while pursuing closer ties with Western institutions like the EU and NATO. In January 1992, Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar outlined key reforms, including trade liberalization, the removal of price controls, and the privatization of wholesale trade. (Trenin, 2019:135-136) However, this pro-Western course pursued by Yeltsin and actively supported by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was sharply opposed by the conservative forces headed by Ruslan Khasbulatov and Alexander Rutskoy. What the leaders of these nationalists sought to do was nothing but the restoration of Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space, a course which stood in direct confrontation with the Westward course of the government headed by Yeltsin. In fact, the circle of Yeltsin, Kozyrev, and Gaidar resisted not just the inner governmental circle but a broader political landscape. Notably, their strategies were contested by the Russian Defense Ministry and the Presidential Security Council. Key ministers overseeing security, intelligence, and military affairs frequently aligned with a conservative-centrist perspective on Russian identity, with the military playing a particularly significant role. At times, these figures even ignored directives issued by the President of the Russian Federation. (Hopf, 2017:702). The stance of key military leaders gained support from prominent figures like writer Alexander Prokhanov, National Bolshevik Party founder Eduard Limonov, and Sergei Beburin, a leading Russian nationalist in the Supreme Soviet. They regarded the Soviet Union's collapse as a disaster and were staunchly opposed to Russia's alignment with Western institutions, including the IMF. Ruslan Khasbulatov, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, was a central voice in economic debates, warning that rapid privatization, industrial shutdowns, and reduced agricultural focus would cause significant economic instability (Хасбулатов, 2011:14). Although Yeltsin

ultimately quashed Khasbulatov and his supporters²⁶ during the 1993 constitutional crisis, his foreign policy direction shifted significantly afterward. Yeltsin, alongside Kozyrev—initially a strong advocate for Western integration—began to adopt elements of the imperialist visions of their conservative opposition, reshaping their foreign policy towards reasserting Russian influence over neighboring states. More moderate figures, such as academician Andranik Migranyan and Yevgeny Ambartsumov, shared these views. They argued that regions like South Ossetia, Karabakh, Crimea, and Transnistria—historically part of the Russian Empire—should remain under Russian influence. (Sagramoso, 2023:28). This was echoed by Sergei Stankevich, an advisor to President Yeltsin, who advocated for a Russian version of the 'Monroe Doctrine' to maintain control over the post-Soviet space (Stent, A 2007:418). Yeltsin officially supported this stance on February 23, 1993, asserting Russia's role as the guarantor of peace and stability in the region. (Human Rights Watch in 1995:9) This transformation marked a pivotal moment in Russia's international strategy, particularly in relation to the conflicts in the Caucasus. The study investigates how these domestic political struggles influenced Russia's approach to Georgia and shaped its involvement in the Abkhazian conflict. The war in Abkhazia became a key example of Russia's evolving strategy of supporting separatist movements to maintain influence over its immediate periphery. Backing the separatists offered a practical means to sustain and extend Russian imperial ambitions. The Russian 'Peacemaking' forces served as a geostrategic foothold, consistently avoiding any genuine effort towards a full resolution of the conflict. (Assays from the History of Georgia, 2011: 481) This research examines how Yeltsin's administration managed the intersection of domestic political pressures and foreign pol-

²⁶ At the congress, proceedings were heavily influenced by parliamentary chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov, who aligned with the opposition and supported by centrists. Initially, Khasbulatov had cautiously welcomed the Civic Union, believing it could serve as a mediator between the democrats and communists, aiding him in managing parliament. However, he soon realized that the 'center' lacked a distinct political agenda or power base, ultimately aligning more with the nationalist and communist opposition, offering no substantial alternative to these factions. (Kozyrev, 2019, p. 171)

icy, ultimately opting to back the Abkhazian separatists as part of a broader effort to secure Russia's interests in the region.

The importance of this topic is that it will be in a position to shed light on foreign policy actions by Russia in a period of great turmoil within the country. While experiencing a worst-case home crisis with an ostensibly highly weakened leadership, it had still managed to destabilize Georgia in a successful manner, especially through the detente in the Abkhazian conflict. This now has particular relevance to current geopolitical challenges, not least of which was the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. The insight into how Russia first used separatist movements as proxy tools in the 1990s provides greater insight into how the Russian hybrid warfare strategy evolved. The conflict in Abkhazia was one of the first examples of what would later be termed the Gerasimov Doctrine, where through information war, separatist movements, and cyber attacks, unconventional methods of warfare achieve geopolitical aims. So-called Gerasimov Doctrine-authored by Russian General Valery Gerasimov in 2013-is focused on the theme of contemporary war as a combination of military and non-military measures. It promotes disinformation strategies, cyber attacks, political destabilization, and disruption to social structures with the aim of weakening adversaries without actually coming into conflict with them. Instead of adhering to the strict use of military force, this approach aims at sustaining a situation of continuous turmoil within hostile states, conditions under which effective resistance would be hard to organize. Russia has applied the same methods in the context of the conflict in Ukraine and to its information campaigns worldwide (McKew, 2017). In addition to direct military engagement, extensive propaganda campaigns were launched. For instance, several articles were featured in the Russian Defense Ministry's newspaper "Krasnaya Zvezda," where authors called for expanded military aid to the Abkhazians, advocating for more equipment and personnel. Furthermore, the Abkhazians made appeals to UNESCO and Russian Patriarch Alexy II, urging immediate support for the "victims" of Georgian aggression. ("Москва. Святейшему Патриарху всея Руси Алексию", 1992:31-32). In the 1990s, Russia's means were more straightforward yet no less effective: supporting separatist forces in Abkhazia allowed it to destabilize Georgia's territorial integrity while at the same time positioning itself as a peace mediator. This provided the foundation for the latest, more sophisticated hybrid war in Ukraine today, using cyber-attacks, information manipulation, and diplomatic pressure in addition to military force to achieve the goals of Russian foreign policy. The hybrid strategy borrowed from deep ideological roots within Russian

political thought. The Statists²⁷ envisioned Russia as a Derzhava-a holder of international equilibrium-and coupled this with a preoccupation with the protection of its status as a great power. They felt that Russia needed to balance power in world affairs and saw limited cooperation with the West as necessary but also had to preserve Russia's geopolitical distinctiveness. In that respect, this was the Statist vision of fragmented imperialism during the 1990s, whereby separatist aspirations within the pro-independence republics were manipulated in order to keep the influence of Russia, which has now evolved into the modern-day tactics of hybrid warfare executed in Ukraine. Looking at how Russia used separatists as proxies during the early 1990s will help in understanding the continuities of their foreign policy causing instability among neighboring states with the use of proxy conflicts as a core strategy. This is well-demonstrated even during the early 1990s period of domestic weakness: Russia's immediate neighboring countries found it capable of exerting a considerable amount of influence signification that their imperial ambitions were never abandoned. Events unfolding in Ukraine in 2014 are a demonstration of the importance that needs to be attached to revisiting these earlier happenings to recognize the consistencies in Russia's behavior.

This research displays scientific novelty in developing the internal political conflict in Russia and how it factored into the country's course of action in the Abkhazian war. While most earlier works either dealt with military and political aspects of the conflict or Russia's wider foreign policy, this work focuses on the domestic political scene and, above all, on the power struggle between Yeltsin and Khasbulatov. It had a big impact on the making of Russia's foreign policies because the leadership was torn between democratic reform and the resurgence of imperial dominance over its former Soviet republics. Besides, this work is based on less known sources of information instance, the Republic of Abkhazia, a newspaper issued in 1992-1993, contributes much to the novelty of the interpretation of that period and Russia's role in the conflict. The paper also discusses the role of Andrei Kozyrev, one of the most Western-oriented ministers at the time, and how his vision for a democratic Russia gave ground to the more imperialist policies later associated with Yevgeny Primakov. Such work has hardly ever been done, combining political science, in-

²⁷ In Andrei Tsygankov's book "Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity", he describes the Statists as primarily concerned with Russia's status as a great power, emphasizing the state's strength and geopolitical influence. The Statists viewed Russia as a Derzhava (a holder of international equilibrium), focusing on defending its status as a major power. They argued that Russia must balance power in world affairs and saw limited cooperation with the West as essential, while also maintaining Russia's distinct geopolitical identity, especially as a bridge between Western and non-Western civilizations. In contrast to statist, Kozyrev and his followers believed that Russia's identity, damaged by the Soviet legacy, should be restored not from an imperial standpoint but rather from a civic perspective (Plokhy, 2017:313).

ternational relations, and history in an attempt to get closer to an integral understanding of both the domestic and foreign policy courses pursued by Russia during one of the most dramatic periods of its post-Soviet history. Precisely because the study focuses on the nexus between internal political processes and geopolitical strategic courses pursued from the outside, this research offers a more nuanced look at Russia's role in the Abkhazian conflict. A novel contribution of this research is the comparative analysis between Russia's actions in the 1991-1993 Abkhazian conflict and its strategies in the 2014-2015 Ukraine conflict. The use of separatist forces, military assistance, and coordinated psychological campaigns demonstrates a clear continuity between these two periods. In both cases, Russia employed similar tactics to destabilize neighboring states, combining military intervention with disinformation and economic restrictions to exert control (Shurgaia, 2023:8).

RESEARCH METHODS

The research will employ a qualitative approach toward an analysis of political and military strategies of Russia in the period from 1992 to 1993. The interdisciplinarity of the research will be presented by political science, international relations, and history. This will be able to provide an advanced level of understanding of the complex factors at play in the observed ways of acting by Russia. The content analysis was used in investigating the changing process of political-military strategies through the conflict by focusing on primary sources, such as press articles, government documents, and memoirs from authoritative individuals like Yeltsin, Khasbulatov, and Kozyrev. Process tracing was used in seeking cause-and-effect relationships in the case of Russia's decision-making process or to be more precise in establishing how an internal political struggle set an impact on foreign policy decisions concerning Georgia and Abkhazia. Discourse analysis: Academic literature and media coverage are analyzed as primary and secondary sources on how the involvement in the Abkhazian conflict was framed by the Russian leaders. That includes, among others, changes in public discourse over democratic versus imperial Russia. Comparative analysis: the paper situates the Abkhazian case in a broader context by comparing Russia's action against its later ones in Crimea and Ukraine, placing it within the realm of hybrid war and Russia's use of separatist movements as geopolitical tools.

RESULTS

This research has already revealed very important findings about how Russia approaches the Abkhazian conflict and its overall imperial strategy in post-Soviet space. The findings presented below suggest that Russia's intervention in Abkhazia in the years 1992-1993 was part of the broader policy of "fragmented imperialism," whereby separatist movements were used as enforcers of control over the former Soviet republics. The strategy of fragmented imperialism, formulated prior to the Soviet Union's dissolution, played a critical role in shaping the Russian Federation's goals in the ongoing Georgian conflict. This approach capitalized on the separatist ambitions of autonomous regions within the pro-independence union republics, using them as tools against the republics themselves (Бакатин, 1992: 23-24). The strategy for the first time took shape in the early 1990s—slowly evolved into what today is widely recognized as the Russian hybrid war, enshrined in the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine.²⁸ While this plan's first phase was clearly implemented in Russia's support for Abkhazian separatists, it has since grown more advanced including cyber-attacks and information war—as in the case of the conflicts in Ukraine. The research also underlines the contribution of internal political instability to the modeling of Russia's foreign policy. Even though highly weakened and almost in civil war status in Moscow, Russia succeeded in consolidating its influence in Abkhazia and defeating the Georgian pro-independence forces. This outcome proves that the concept of "two Russias" (one democratic and one imperial) was just a myth. Whatever the dominant faction, however, the goal of Russian foreign policy remained the same: to keep control over its near abroad in one form or another. The following paper reveals the linkage between the Abkhazian conflict and contemporary conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, to show how Russia's imperial ambitions have survived across centuries and how hybrid warfare strategies also survived, adapting to new geopolitical realities while their core objectives remained intact. Fragmented imperialism laid the groundwork for Russia's modern hybrid warfare strategies, combining military support for separatist movements with economic, political, and information-based tactics—elements now recognized as part of the Gerasimov Doctrine. Russia's use of 'divide and conquer' tactics during the Abkhazian conflict foreshadowed the complex integration of military, political, and informational strategies later enshrined in the Gerasimov Doctrine, emphasizing control through destabilization without direct military annexation.

²⁸ The involvement of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples in the conflict can be considered indirect Russian military intervention, which violated the September 3, 1992, agreement and undermined Georgia's sovereignty. While Russia could be seen as indifferent to the situation, its role in allowing CMPC forces to enter Abkhazia and fight against Georgian forces positioned Moscow as a tacit supporter of the separatist cause. (Matsaberidze, 2012: 225-226)

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