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**“FOREIGN RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA: FROM THE
INDEPENDENCE TO THE RUSSIAN INVASION”**

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ABSTRACT

Georgia, as one of the three states which make up the Caucasus region, consists part of Russia's 'near abroad', a wide region around the borders of the modern Russian Federation, which has been vital for Russian interests in different historical circumstances. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, Russian interests in Georgia, like the wider Caucasus region, started being shaped steadily and becoming all the more multifaceted.

Russia's conduct in Georgia, the last twenty years, can be predominantly analyzed via the lens of realism, as a theoretical framework of international relations. Despite the whatever fluctuations now and again in Russian foreign policy, the latter has remained firmly loyal to concrete fundamental principles, such as the continual interest for Russia's 'near abroad' and the consistent perception of the West as a threat.

This is not to say that Russia is isolated politically, economically and ideologically in a way reminiscent of the Cold War era; Russian foreign policy towards Georgia and its 'near abroad', in general, is directed not only by the Soviet legacies and the consistent perceptions of Russia as a traditional great power in the international system, but also by a multitude of other factors, such as external developments and pressures, internal political processes, the quality of the Russian democracy and the evolution of the increasingly complex Russia's national interests.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ASSR:** Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
- BTC:** Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline
- BTE:** Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline (or SCP)
- CIS:** Commonwealth of Independent States
- CSCE:** Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
- DWP:** Defence White Paper
- EU:** European Union
- FPC:** Foreign Policy Concept
- GUAM:** Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova (organization)
- GTEP:** Georgian Trade and Equip Programme
- IDPs:** Internally Displaced Persons
- KCTS:** Kazakhstan Caspian Transportation System
- JCC:** Joint Control Commission
- JPF:** Joint Peacekeeping Force
- KGB:** Committee for State Security
- MAP:** Membership Action Plan status of NATO
- MFA:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- MIA:** Ministry of Internal Affairs
- MoD:** Ministry of Defence
- NATO:** North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- NSC:** National Security Concept
- OSCE:** Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
- PfP:** Partnership for Peace
- SCO:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization
- SCP:** South Caucasus Pipeline (or BTE)
- TFC:** Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation
- UNOMIG:** United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia
- USA:** United States of America
- UN:** United Nations
- WTO:** World Trade Organization

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Georgia has suffered both internal disorder and external intervention. Shortly after the restoration of its independence on April 9, 1991, Georgia has been plagued by two serious civil wars and their adverse ramifications, and a coup in the capital Tbilisi, for control of the central power.

The troublesome course of Georgia's history can be partly explained by its geographical position. Georgia is located in the South Caucasus, a strategic location between the Black and Caspian Seas, dividing Russia from Turkey (a key NATO member state) and Iran –or bridging them, depending on the given context of analysis (see figure 1). The Caucasus consists part of several strategic super-regions of growing international significance: the Greater Middle East, the Black Sea Region and the “European Neighborhood”, including the European Union's neighbors to the east, such as Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, which have not been offered an EU membership perspective.

Although Georgia does not border the endowed with natural resources, Caspian Sea, it is connected by oil and gas pipelines to the Azerbaijani port of Baku, while its main ports in the Black Sea provide international shipping connections with Black Sea and Mediterranean ports.¹ Apart from being a significant energy transit state between Caspian Sea and the West, Georgia also offers trade and transportation routes between the allies of Azerbaijan and Turkey, on the one hand and Russia and Armenia, on the other.

Georgia remained under the sphere of the absolute Russian influence for several centuries. However, Russian - Georgian relations came repeatedly to a dead-

¹ Georgia is the only South Caucasus state to have access to the Black Sea.

end in the 1990s with areas of contention including Georgia's separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the presence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory, transit routes for hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea, allegations of Russia that Georgia sheltered terrorism, and Georgia's potential NATO membership.

The inertia that characterized both the resolution of the intractable foreign policy issues and the political and economic progress of the country, favoured the increasing entanglement of the West, namely the USA and NATO, which progressively challenged the Russian dominance in the region of South Caucasus. It is widely argued that today, Georgia is the most pro-Western of the three South Caucasus states, while it has consistently sought to get rid of Moscow's domination, since its independence in 1991 (German, 2011).



Figure 1: Location Map of Georgia (Available from: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/europe/georgia/>)

The multitude of factors that affected and addressed Russian foreign policy over the years, contributed to the objective difficulty of the West to understand the operation mechanisms of this immense country (Karagiannis, 2010). The present essay aims at outlining the main traits of Russian foreign policy towards Georgia the

last two decades, through the lens of pluralism. The latter consists actually a composition of elements of several international relation theories, rather than a pure set of principles, and therefore it can be characterized as a quasi theory (Kouskouvelis, 2004).

Nevertheless, the analysis that follows is totally deprived of any idealistic element, while it borrows elements from classical, offensive and structural realism, known also as neorealism. Regarding Russian foreign policy towards Georgia, some of the key points, adopted in this paper, are as follows:

- (a) The international global system is consisted of both states and international organizations, though states are the most important actors of it (classical realism).
- (b) The primary state objectives are survival and security in an anarchic international system. Towards this direction, great powers are not satisfied with a given amount of power, but seek hegemony, i.e. maximization of their power (offensive realism).²
- (c) There are complicated interactions between the units of the international global system, in a way that the behavior of one state or the changes of it are effectively attributed to changes or pressures of the system (structural realism).
- (d) The international global system is anarchic and competitive. Nonetheless, there is not complete disorder, by virtue of the existence of cooperative patterns among the actors (pluralism).
- (e) The political behavior of a state, regarding both internal and external decision making policies, is also affected by the sophisticated internal processes and the achieved level of democracy (pluralism).
- (f) The national interest of any state is not restricted to the rather limited goal of national security, which refers to the assertion of the physical security of its citizens

² For a detailed analysis, see Mearsheimer, John (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Powers Politics*, New York, US: Norton.

and its territory. By contrast, national interests are multifaceted (Kouskouvelis 2004; Shearman et al. 2009). They can also be linked to identity issues, perceptions of external threats and most importantly, economic interests (pluralism).

In the wake of the analysis that follows, this paper will argue that in the post-communist world, Russian foreign policy towards ‘near abroad’³ and hence Georgia is dictated by a multitude of factors, including domestic policies, the rivalry among the several stakeholders in the political and economic arenas, the dominant perceptions regarding the role of Russia as a regional power or a ‘superpower’,⁴ as well as other economic and historical factors. This argument is certainly remarkable, as it challenges the immediate and widespread interpretations of the 2008 armed conflict between Russia and Georgia. These interpretations advocate for the restoration of Russia as a ‘superpower’, while others have erroneously stated that Russia was returning to the practices of the Cold War (Blank, 2008).

The plan of the current paper is as follows: the next chapter proceeds with a historical review of Russia’s relations with Georgia, from 1801, when Georgia was completely absorbed by the Russian Empire, until 1991, the year that Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia gained its independence. The analytical presentation of the current developments that follows, sheds light on two distinct periods of the post-soviet Russian history: from 1992 to 1999, under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency and from 2000 to 2008, under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. In the final part of the essay, the features of Russian conduct towards Georgia are analyzed in a comparative perspective and the challenges and prospects, regarding the relations of the two countries, are discussed.

³ ‘Near abroad’ is a term used to indicate the former soviet republics that gained independence from the Soviet Union, shortly before its collapse.

⁴ The term ‘superpower’ emerged as an analytical concept in the middle 1940s just before the advent of the Cold War [see: Rich, Paul B. (2009b) ‘Russia as a great power’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 20, No 2, pp. 276-299]

A SHORT LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of Russian foreign policy towards the 'near abroad' has offered the ground for research and analysis to many specialists and academics. Either referring to different periods or investigating different parameters, which affect and interpret Russia's conduct in its 'near abroad', there is almost not a single reference to advocate in favor of a purely idealistic motivation of Russia. By contrast, Russian strategy towards the 'near abroad', and especially Georgia, is presented to be dominated by the paramount objective of ensuring the multifaceted Russian national interests.

Lynch, in his 2000 study, presents an overview of the formation of Russian foreign policy towards the 'near abroad' under Yeltsin's presidency, and the Russian strategy towards the Abkhaz conflict. His analysis is mainly focused around the institutional actors in the policy-making process and the struggle for power among them. The findings of this study, incorporating elements of structural realism and pluralism, produce strong evidence that Russian strategy, throughout the 1990s, was affected, *inter alia*, by factors external to Russia -such as the political developments in Georgia and the increasing involvement of external actors in the region- the bureaucratic differences between the decision-making agents, and the insufficiency of resources.

Focusing her analysis in the 1990s, as well, Deyermond (2008) examines the course of the dispute between Russia and Georgia, over the Black Sea Fleet, the military bases and other military assets on Georgian territory. Describing the events from the Georgian side and engaging elements from the quasi theory of pluralism, she concludes that Georgia's failure to establish a Western model of state sovereignty - most notably, in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia- had a negative impact on

external sovereignty in relation to Russia. Therefore, Georgia had almost no negotiating power to assert its share on the Black Sea Fleet, and stipulate the establishment of the Russian military bases. Russia, on the other hand, claiming its own national interests, had many reasons to underpin, all the more, the maintenance of Russian military bases in Georgia.

Turning to the decade of the 2000s, Filippov (2009) exposes the friction points in Russo-Georgian relations under Putin's presidency, and outlines the diversionary role of the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict. Explaining the reasons why this theoretical framework, incorporating elements of offensive realism and pluralism, fits well the case of both Russia and Georgia, he clarifies the domestic purposes that such a conflict may serve for each of these countries. One could argue that while this theory explains in a precise and comprehensive way, how domestic intentions affect the foreign policy decision-making, it is proved rather narrow, as it fails to account for a host of other influential parameters.

Using the 2008 conflict, as focal point, Mankoff (2009) sketches the contours of Russian foreign policy the last twenty years. His analysis often adopts a comparative perspective between the two distinct periods of Yeltsin's and Putin's presidency. He concludes that, throughout both periods, the principal goals of foreign policy remained the same. Still, the economic necessity forced both Yeltsin and Putin, at some time to their tenure, to be less assertive and more prone to cooperation with the West. What seemed to have changed between the two presidencies, are mainly the economic circumstances and the foreign policy-making process. In turn, these changes favoured Russia's assertiveness towards its 'near abroad'.

Haas (2010) reaches also a similar conclusion about the external security policy of Russia between the first and second term of Putin's presidency; the

ostensibly pro-Western course that Putin followed in his first term was rather dictated by Russia's economic necessity. When the country and its economy recovered, largely due to the booming energy revenues and the political stability, it became also capable of adopting a more assertive stance towards the West. Integrating in his analysis elements of several strands of the realism theory, he elaborates on the attributes of Russia's security and defence policy, through a detailed presentation of the main security documents of the last two decades. Having established the outline of Russia's relations with the West and its strategic allies, he proceeds on a minute assessment of the Russo-Georgian armed conflict of 2008.

CHAPTER 1

THE RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN GEORGIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW (1801-1991)

1.1 FROM THE CHARIST RULE TO THE SOVIET DOMINATION

Before we kick off the analysis of the Russian foreign policy towards Georgia the last two decades, it is crucial to make a short reference to the historical background of the two countries' relations. Its geostrategic location in the heart of the Caucasus rendered Georgia the site of contention among successive empires, seeking hegemony in the region. Conquered by the Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols and Ottomans, Georgia acceded to the need for protection within the Russian Empire as an annexed state, as early as 1773. Observers of that period comment that incorporation into the empire probably saved Georgians from demographic catastrophe: Georgian population reduced from an estimated five million in the mid thirteenth century to a mere 500,000 by the early nineteenth century (Lieven 2003; Jones 2004).

Russia incorporated Georgia completely in 1801 and it proceeded to expand into the Caucasus region. In the early nineteenth century, Tbilisi was under the control of a Russified Georgian elite, who was supported by the Russian military. By 1850 a great part of the Caucasus was annexed, though resistance still continued from many of the Muslim groups in the region. From this early period, Russia started assessing the geostrategic significance of the Caucasus (Rich, 2009b).

By and large, in the nineteenth century, the governance system in the Caucasus was characterized by the rule of Russian military viceroys and the grant of a

uniform citizenship (*grazhdanstvennost*). In part, this method was promoted by the realization that in other cases, forcible military conquests had led to exiles and ethnic cleansing. The argument was that, since the exiles could be assimilated into rival powers and fight against Russia (as it was the case with Cherkess, who fought alongside the Turks in the war of 1877-1878), the imposition of a uniform citizenship would halt this process. Apart from the military strengthening of Russia, this tactic would secure its economic growth, as the political obligation of forced labor and payment of taxes was well-established in tsarist Russia of that period.

The project was also underpinned by the fieldwork of linguists and ethnographers, who classified the various tribes throughout the Caucasus and introduced a 'Caucasian alphabet' to initiate them to Russian culture. Yet, it is argued that Russian imperial elite had not adopted concrete assimilation policies and therefore by 1900, a concept of 'aliens' (*inorodtsy*) for inassimilable groups, emerged in the official parlance (Lieven, 2003).

On the turn of the twentieth century, Armenian businessmen and merchants had dominated the urban class in Georgia, and along with Russians occupied the top posts in the government, despite the ethnic dominance of Georgians. The weakening of imperial Russia during World War I was instrumental in the subsequent ethnic mobilization in the Caucasus (Rich, 2009b). The Transcaucasian Federation, formed by the Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis in 1917-1918, proved short-lived, partly because of the long-standing historical antipathies among them and the different allies and protectors of each ethnic group.

In 1918, after the Bolshevik revolution and the ensuing collapse of the Charist Empire, Georgians, as many other ethnic groups, gained independence for the first time. During the following three years of independent statehood, Georgia was

recognized by twenty two countries, including Soviet Russia in 1920, and formed alliances with Western states. Nonetheless, as Georgia attempted to depart from the Russian sphere of influence, it faced internal disunity and a rebellion among the Ossetians, who supported the Bolshevik Russians. This was an early indicator of the ethnic heterogeneity in Georgia that would undercut the attempts for the creation of a unified Georgian state in the 1990s (Burns, 2009).

In 1921, nine months after the recognition of Georgia's independence by the Soviet Union, the Red Army forcefully placed Georgia under Soviet domination. One could argue that Georgia's assimilation into the Soviet Union was not so much a traumatizing political subordination, but rather the continuation of an existing relationship of a protectorate state and its imperial guardian (Mackinlay et al., 2003).

Georgia became a Soviet Socialist Republic, as part of the Republic of Transcaucasia, along with Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 1936, it became a separate Union Republic and remained as such, throughout the rest of the Soviet period. Georgia was also a federation, comprising three political-administrative entities: the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) of Abkhazia and Ajaria and the Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia. The ASSRs had been conceded more state functions than the Autonomous Oblasts, which were designed mainly to give recognition to smaller ethnic groups (Toft, 2002). In the 1990s, these autonomous structures of the Soviet era will assert greater autonomy from Georgia, as the latter will seek to leave the USSR.

Bloody anti-Soviet revolts and demonstrations were held in Georgia throughout the Soviet era and most remarkably in 1924, 1956 and 1989. The political system favored conspicuously Russians at the expense of Georgians and non-Georgians, and suppressed any indication of nationalism.

Nevertheless, as the system evolved, the Georgian communist elite became competent enough to influence the running of the state. The Soviet leader, Joseph Jugashvili (Stalin) and the last Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze were of Georgian origin. What is more, at that time, Georgian officials adopted all the basic traits of the Soviet political system: they were corrupt, chauvinistic, and remained anchored to cliques, linked by clans, families and villages (Mackinlay et al., 2003).

These developments were at the expense of non-Georgian minorities, as Georgians, apart from the top political positions in the republic, received the lion's share of the rest of the rewards: access to a vast economic network of black market and other illegal operations, and largest subsidies for cultural projects. However, Georgians felt threatened by the ethnic minorities, living in the republic. This disquiet can be partly explained by indications –based mainly on the 1979 Soviet census- that the demographic balance of the republic would be disturbed at the expense of Georgians, due to the higher birth rates of some non-Georgian minorities. By and large, the welfare of Georgians remained a dominant issue, throughout the Soviet period (Toft, 2003).

With regards to the posture of the Soviet Union to the global political system, Rich divides Soviet era into two distinct periods: from 1918 to 1945, when the Soviet Union sought to reassert itself as a European great power, and from 1945 to 1991 (the Cold War era), when it aspired to play the role of a superpower.⁵ The course of events proved that it was not completely effective in assuming either role.

Following Soviet troops' invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) conducted to the discouragement of Soviet Russia from using violence, when its interests in Eastern

⁵ For a detailed analysis, see Rich, Paul B. (2009b) 'Russia as a great power', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 20, No 2, pp. 276-299

Europe were threatened. Yet, with the Helsinki Accords, the West recognized the Soviet Union's legitimate right in its nearest neighborhood, in return for the latter's commitment to fundamental human rights. It could be argued that the approach with the West, through such organizations, helped the maintenance of a steady balance of power in Eurasia, till the collapse of the Soviet Union.

1.2 RUSSIA, GEORGIA AND ITS AUTONOMOUS ENTITIES

Commencing a short presentation of the historical course of Georgia's three autonomous political subjects and their respective ethnic groups, it must be underlined that perceptions of identities deviate among them. For instance, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing rise of nationalist tendencies, the notion that one could not be truly Georgian without being Orthodox was not adopted by the non-Christian populations, who claimed to be ethnic Georgians, namely the Ajars. Likewise, the theories or views of a Georgian Western identity or a common Pan-caucasian identity were unevenly distributed among the different ethnic groups, depending on the historical context.⁶

As already mentioned, Georgia was joined by the Soviets with three different ethno/political entities. The largest of these regions was Abkhazia, occupying the north-western part of Georgia in the Black Sea coastline, and bordering Russia in the north (see figure 1). Ethnic and linguistic differences marked the Abkhaz-Georgian relations.⁷ While both Abkhaz and Georgians recognize that Abkhaz are a distinct

⁶ For a detailed analysis, see Jones, Stephen (2004) 'The role of Cultural Paradigms in Georgian Foreign Policy' in Rick Fawn (eds.) *Ideology and National Identity in Post-Communist Foreign Policies*, pp. 83-110, London, UK: Frank Cass Publishers.

⁷ The language of Abkhaz is written in the Cyrillic script, as opposed to the Georgian script. According to a 1979 estimate, almost 25 per cent of Abkhaz and 44 per cent of Georgians living in Abkhazia could not communicate with one another (Toft, 2003).

ethnic group, disputes arise over which group first inhabited the territory of contemporary Abkhazia (Toft, 2003).

After Abkhazia was conquered by the Russians in 1864, half of the Abkhaz population, which was Muslim, fled to Ottoman Turkey, while many of those who remained, converted to Christianity. Today, although both Islam and Christianity are present among the Abkhaz, religion does not consist a source of interethnic friction.

Under Stalin, Georgian assimilation was imposed on Abkhazia (Lynch, 2000). When in 1936, Soviet authorities made Abkhazia an ASSR, subordinate to Georgia, an influx of Georgians settlers caused disquiet for the Abkhaz. In 1978, as discrimination by Georgians came to a head, Abkhazia sought to secede from Georgia and join the Russian Republic. However, although Abkhazia was fairly important for the Soviet economy, by virtue of its tourist industry, agriculture and access to the Black Sea, it was not conceded annexation.

Located to the central-northeastern part of Georgia, South Ossetia is another region to be granted autonomy in Georgia (see figure 1). It borders Russia in the north and particularly the autonomous republic of North Ossetia-Alania, which pertains to the Russian Federation and is inhabited by Ossetians, as well. Notwithstanding their linguistic differences, Ossetians and Georgians, living in South Ossetia, could communicate with each other and lived peacefully together for many centuries.⁸ As Georgians and Ossetians have no actual religious differences, intermarriage was common (Stalin's father was Georgian and his mother Ossetian).

After Georgia's incorporation into the Russian Empire, both communities underwent a forceful process of Russification. As a matter of course, Ossetian peasants coalesced with Georgians in a number of revolts against Russian authorities,

⁸ The Ossetian language stems from the Iranian group of Indo-European languages and its written version is based on the Russian alphabet, while the Georgian language belongs to the Caucasian languages of the Kartvelian group.

throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, the Georgian nationalism, which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, started challenging the bilateral relations. As it was mentioned above, during the first period of Georgian independence (1918-1921), South Ossetians, being supported by their nationals of North Ossetia, revolted against Georgian rule. These revolts were bloodily suppressed by the Georgian government, before the invasion of the Soviet army (Birch, 1996).

South Ossetia's hostility to Georgian rule and expression of loyalty to Moscow were apparent throughout the Soviet period. It could be argued that Ossetia was one of the most pro-Russian regions of the Soviet Union (Birch, 1995). The process of 'georgianization' -similar to the one imposed to the Abkhaz- which took place in South Ossetia under Stalin, deepened the cleavages between the two communities, although the conflict remained frozen under the Soviet rule: South Ossetians demanded unification with North Ossetia and subordination to Russia in 1925, a claim that was massively laid again only in 1988, when *perestroika* and *glasnost* created a new context for such claims.⁹

Bordering Turkey in the south and having access to the Black Sea, Ajaria is the third autonomous region of Georgia (see figure 1). Despite being Muslims, the Ajars view themselves as ethnic Georgians and regard the territory of Ajaria as integral part of Georgia. Their written language is Georgian, although they speak a dialect with numerous Turkic words (Toft, 2003).

Ajaria was an old Ottoman province, which was ceded to the Russian Empire in 1877. In the late nineteenth century, Russia developed the capital Batumi as an industrial centre, while its port became of great importance for Russian economy and military.

⁹ *Perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) are the two words that characterize the changes of the Soviet structure in the political, social and economic levels, during the second half of the 1980s.

Soviet period signaled for Ajaria its subordination as an ASSR first to the Republic of Transcaucasia and then to Georgia. Ajaria was one of the two entities in the Soviet space, to be granted autonomous status on the basis of religion.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Ajaria followed a similar course with the other autonomous entities of Georgia, during the Soviet era. Georgianization policies, in this case, included the shutting down of mosques and religious schools, and the georgianization of the Islamic names. Yet, these policies were proved more fruitful than in the two previous cases, as most Ajars were assimilated into the Georgian national body.

When Moscow's Communist Party organs started losing their central control over the Soviet republics, the wave of nationalism surged and threatened both the Soviet regime and the rights of national minorities within those republics (Mackinlay et al., 2003). However, while in the early 1990s, violence broke out first in South Ossetia and then in Abkhazia, Ajaria acquired the distinction of being the only region to avoid it. This can be partly explained by the fact that in the case of Ajaria, the conflict was almost exclusively over administrative and economic autonomy, contrary to the conflicts over national autonomy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Toft, 2002).

1.3 THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION AND THE RISE OF NATIONALISM

On the turn of the 1980s, the course of events in the Soviet space gave an impetus to the emergence of nationalism in the Soviet republics, and their pursuance for independence. As Paul Kennedy puts it, in this period “the USSR seemed to be suffering from ‘imperial overstretch’, as it was burdened with commitments it could

¹⁰ The other one was Birobidzhan, inhabited by Jewish.

not match with its existing military and technological capacity”.¹¹ In the field of foreign policy, Gorbachev attempted to move Russia away from its isolation and facilitated the approach with the West. His acceptance of German unification seemed to be the greatest expression of this trend (Rich, 2009).

This climate of political change resuscitated the independence claims of the Soviet republics and their autonomous entities, as well. In Georgia, although Soviet forces were not actively helping separatist military units at this stage, their inertia and decay were proved to be conducive to future events. At the same time, the communist leadership started promoting a Georgian rather than a Soviet identity; it endorsed a multitude of measures, such as the settlement of displaced ethnic Georgians in non-Georgian territories and the establishment of national military units (Karagiannis, 2002).

During the late 1980s ethnic tensions came to a head: in 1988, the South Ossetians and in 1989, the Abkhaz demanded their secession from Georgia and subordination to Russia. These claims triggered the reactions of Georgians, culminating into demonstrations, which in turn brought the Abkhaz to the streets. On April 9, 1989, the Soviet army intervened to dissolve Georgian demonstrators, who demanded their independence from Moscow and decried Abkhazia’s call for independence. The casualties of this operation offered further legitimacy to the Georgian independence claims (Toft, 2003).

In 1990, the emergence of nationalist leaders in both Georgia and Abkhazia was affirmed by their victory in the elections: on October 28, 1990, Gamsakhurdia was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet and formed Georgia’s first non-Communist government. His government made it clear at once that Georgia would

¹¹ For a detailed analysis, see Kennedy, Paul (1987) *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, New York, US: Vintage Books.

proceed on pursuing independence, while his slogan “Georgia for the Georgians” indicated his decisiveness to follow an assertive policy towards the ethnic minorities. At the same time, Ardzinba, one of the leading figures for Abkhazia’s direct subordination to Moscow, was elected chairman of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet. These policy guidelines were well-reflected in the results of two referendums in Georgia and Abkhazia, which called for independence from Russia and Georgia respectively.

Notwithstanding these complications, on April 9, 1991, the Georgian parliament declared itself independent. As Moscow had a multitude of strategic interests in the region, it did not recognize automatically Georgia’s independence, while the Soviet military remained the only legitimate representative of Moscow in Georgia. A month later, Gamsakhurdia was elected president, affirming once again his great public appeal.

However, Georgia appeared unprepared to deal with its burdens, falling into the trap of political chaos (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2005). While Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained intransigent over their demands for national autonomy, Ajaria also proved reluctant to give in political autonomy, by refusing to pay taxes to Georgia or to allow the Ajars to be recruited for the Georgian army (Goltz, 2006).

In the meantime, armed conflict erupted in South Ossetia. Soon after the October 1990 elections, Gamsakhurdia bustled to abolish its autonomous status. In response, South Ossetia declared its intention to secede from Georgia and violence, broke out in January 1991, continued until the mid 1992.

What is more, the August 1991 coup in Moscow, against President Gorbachev, made the situation even more complicated: the direct subordination and control of the Soviet troops, which still remained in Georgia after its independence, were blurred.

As Mackinlay and Sharov comment, in many cases, the former Soviet armed forces, stationed outside Russia, were neither Soviet nor Russian. They were independent military forces, which started acting without political control from the Communist Party. Yet, these forces were seen by the South Ossetians as the defenders of their interests. As a matter of fact, at that time, it is uncertain whether the military assistance that Soviet-Russian military offered to the South Ossetians was part of a Moscow-designed strategy for sustaining a long-term Russian presence in the region (Mackinlay et al., 2003).

This argument is also reinforced by the several attempts, in bilateral level, to regulate the conflict before the collapse of the USSR. In March 1991, Boris Yeltsin, as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federal Republic, and Gamsakhurdia agreed on the withdrawal of the Soviet units from South Ossetia and their replacement by a joint Russian-Georgian unit of Ministries of Internal Affairs (MIA). However, the MIA troops failed to control the conflict and disarm the illegal forces, which were offered military assistance by outside parties, such as the Confederation of Mountain People of the Caucasus, consisting of pro-Russian north Caucasian ethnic groups.

At the time being, different views, regarding the preferable stance of the Soviet Union towards the South Ossetian conflict, were expressed by the various Soviet political components, a phenomenon that will be reiterated time and again in the post-Soviet Russia. In particular, contrary to the aforementioned cease-fire attempts, conservative forces inside the Russian parliament supported the demands of the South Ossetians, while some Russian politicians assessed the possibility of including South Ossetia in a Russian Federation (Payin, 1994).

Meanwhile, Gamsakhurdia's policies led to Georgia's isolation from both Russia and the West, as not only did he refuse to join the CIS, but he was blamed for supporting the August coup against Gorbachev, as well.¹² In parallel, a strong Georgian opposition emerged. The hostilities between the proponents and the detractors of Gamsakhurdia came to a head in December 1991 and Gamsakhurdia was finally forced to flee Tbilisi, on January 5, 1992.

The December of 1991 signaled the definite collapse of the Soviet Union and its replacement by the fifteen newly independent states from the former Soviet republics.¹³ In the Soviet Union, they had shared every vital resource for their existence: the transport infrastructure, the energy networks, the military, the financial system and the mass media. As the federal break-up was rapid and mostly peaceful, they naturally continued using these resources and had to maintain several forms of cooperation, in order to manage their shared assets (Filippov, 2009). Nonetheless, this was not the case for Georgia, a republic where the ethnic conflicts of the next two decades were strongly connected to the Russian interests in the region of Caucasus.

¹² As Burns comments, "the West viewed Gorbachev and his foreign minister, Shevardnadze, with hope and admiration and the fact that Gamsakhurdia openly despised both of them did little to endear him to the West."

¹³ Russian Federation became the legal successor state of the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 2

FOREIGN RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA UNDER YELTSIN'S PRESIDENCY (1992-1999)

2.1 THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL STRUGGLE IN RUSSIA

Soon after Boris Yeltsin, the first President of the modern Russian Federation, came to power, he had to deal with a host of challenges, regarding both the internal structures and the foreign affairs of the state. The omnipresent legacy of the past regime often rendered the decision making process inflexible, as long as political elite had a poor understanding of democracy building.

Therefore, the first two years of Yeltsin's presidency were marked by losses in the political, economic and social battle. In particular, he was accused of losing the opportunity to forge a new democratic constitution, and failing to close the old Duma, when he had the power to do so. With regard to Russia's economic transition from a command into a free market economy, a string of 'shock therapy' reforms that he embarked on, conduced to the emergence of a small class of super rich, who acquired the appellation of 'oligarchs'(Rich, 2009).

What is more, the failure of the central authority to shut down or re-design the state structures, it took over, had a a strong effect on foreign policy affairs. It could be argued that the initial failure of Yeltsin to break up the KGB favored the emergence of a new political block, which, having on its nucleus the military and security services, spurred the war in Chechnya within three years. By 1994, the Federal

Security Service -the reincarnation of KGB, was often acting beyond complete state control and in several cases, in close cooperation with sections of the military. As one point of the quasi theory of pluralism suggests, the nascent Russian democracy was still too weak to lead to the opportune internal reforms, which, in turn, could have a positive effect on the field of foreign policy.

With respect to the evolution of Russian foreign policy, it focused initially on the 'far abroad'. There never existed a coherent strategy on the 'near abroad' and as Lynch comments "in 1992, Russian policy towards the 'near abroad' was an empty vessel, characterized by ill-defined generalities."¹⁴ Yet, in line with the structural realism vision that the conduct of one state is affected by systemic pressures, the course of events in the post-Soviet republics conduced to the shift of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) policy towards the 'near abroad', from neglect to deep engagement.

However, the role of the MFA was not unchallenged, since the exertion of foreign policy became an instrument in the domestic political struggle, in 1992-1993. While initially the MFA dominated foreign policy, members of the presidential apparatus started also being involved in policy making. President Yeltsin, on his part, adopted a neutral stance in many cases, leaving space for the government ministries to squabble over the foreign policy decisions.

Moreover, the establishment of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), in May 1992, signaled a more assertive policy towards the 'near abroad', as the military leadership recognized the use of force as an acceptable policy instrument. The Moldovan-Dnestr conflict was the turning point, when Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed in Moldova, in late July 1992 (Lynch, 2000).

¹⁴ See Lynch, Dov (2000) *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan*, London, UK: Macmillan Press LTD.

In line with the MoD, both the MFA and Yeltsin increasingly supported an assertive, post-imperial role of Russia in its 'near abroad'. Central pivots of this new role would be the pursuance of national interest, featuring the legitimization of the use of force within the CIS, and the differentiation of policies according to particular states and regions. One could argue that at the very first years of modern Russia, when the formation of borders was still in process, the Russian national interests, in congruence with classical realism, were mainly about the guarantee of the territorial integrity and the protection of Russian citizens.

However, despite the wide consent, in practice, coordination problems among the brokers of foreign policy-making persisted, as the ministries and administrations in charge were numerous and often with overlapping mandates (Lynch, 2000). These difficulties were largely surpassed, between mid-1993 and 1996, when the MoD and the MFA acquired distinct roles, with respect to Russian peacekeeping policy: the MoD directed the operational dimension of peacekeeping, while the MFA focused on its political aspects. Still, in practice, the MFA's jurisdiction was severely restricted, especially regarding the peacekeeping strategy and approaches to NATO.

In the field of peacekeeping policy, the Russian foreign minister, Kozyrev, linked the operations with the future of internal reforms, as he openly expressed his disquiet about the imminent wave of refugees towards Moscow, in case that Russian peacekeeping forces withdrew from their posts (Kozyrev, 1994).

Departing from the restricted notion of national interest, as it was described above, he also proceeded on raising a campaign for international support, including financial assistance and dispatch of observers, with the argumentation that peacekeeping operations were conducted not only in favor of internal and regional security but also international security. Nonetheless, the government restricted the

scope of international community in the former Soviet Union and therefore, the UN and OSCE missions in Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan had a limited impact on conflict resolution.

It is argued that the CIS peacekeeping was an early example of military cooperation and a basis for a first approach towards NATO structures (Lynch, 2000). Indeed, in late 1993, the MFA supported that Russia should eventually join NATO, although the MoD rejected utterly this proposal.

The appointment of Primakov as foreign minister, in early 1996, gave a new impetus to the role of the MFA in Russian policy. Although the principles of the foreign policy towards the 'near abroad' did not change, the focus was now placed on Russia's economic problems, for the solution of which, non-military means were necessary. This does not mean that the traditional military concerns ceased to be important, but the economic pressure forced the government to start rationalizing its military expenses (Lynch, 2000). While classical realism remained firmly dominant in the Russian foreign policy rhetoric and practice, the conception of national interest and the means for ensuring it, broadened, on the grounds of Russia's economic predicament.

2.2 THE RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE 'NEAR ABROAD'

In the meantime, the correlations of forces changed in the space of Russia's 'near abroad', as well. Initially, the Russian political and military leadership considered that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), set up in December 1991, would evolve into an organization similar to that of the former Soviet Union, naturally under Russian domination. Nevertheless, a number of CIS states formed their own armed forces and subsequently, shaped independent security policies. In response, Russia did

the same, by forming its own armed forces and, as already mentioned, a Ministry of Defence, in 1992 (Haas, 2010).

From this very year, the doctrine of Russian foreign policy towards its 'near abroad' started being shaped, emulating in many aspects the 'Monroe doctrine' of the US in the Latin America. In its final form, the doctrine underlined that "Russia is responsible for the establishment of a new system of positive relations among the post-Soviet states, and it is rendered the guarantor of these relations' stability" (Lynch, 2000).

Furthermore, the Russian interventionism, derived from the doctrine, acquired a stronger realistic imperative, when it came for the protection of citizens of Russian origin, who resided in the CIS, still beyond the Russian Federation. In parallel, the emergence of the CIS, as a vital space for Russia's national security, was a prerequisite for the re-emergence of Russia as a great power in the global system (Dawisha, 1996). On the whole, the materialization of the doctrine of the 'near abroad' included the emergence of Russia as the sole nuclear power in the post-Soviet space, the continuation of Russia's access to military establishments in the post-Soviet states, the Russian control of their energy infrastructure, and the manipulation of the Russians or Russian linguals of the rest fourteen post-Soviet republics, as a leverage for pressure towards the governments of these states (Tsakiris, 2010).

Russian foreign policy towards its 'near abroad' was consolidated in the three leading security documents, generated in the 1990s, namely the National Security Concept (NSC), the Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) and a Military Doctrine, which came to fill the ideological vacuum after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These documents re-established Russia's position, as a central stakeholder in the global system, in general, and in the CIS, especially.

In addition, they were strongly influenced by legacies of the Soviet era: similarly to the revolutionary nature of the Soviet state, the Military Doctrine emphasized all the more the offensive as the main form of reaction, though from a political point of view, it was presented as defensive. Another remnant of the Soviet period, illustrated in these documents, although in a variant form, is the perception of the West as a threat. Yet, as Marcel de Haas notes, some of the Soviet ideological principles on security were, in essence, a continuation of tsarist characteristics and hence tsarist, Soviet and Russian Federation security thought present notable similarities.¹⁵

In practice, we can distinguish between two periods throughout the 1990s, in which distinct characteristics can be attributed to Russia's national security policy: in the first half of the decade, as the internal socio-economic situation was recognized as the greatest threat, Yeltsin's foreign policy was primarily directed towards the West, and international cooperation received priority.

In the second half of the 1990s, essential developments, such as NATO's leading role in the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, its expansion eastwards and the two conflicts in Chechnya (1994-1996 and 1999) signaled a turning point in Russia's national security policy. Military means for conflict resolution received greater attention, while anti-Western references and a latent desire for regaining the status of superpower started appearing more often in the security documents (Haas, 2010). Hence, while in the first half of the 1990s Russia's national security featured attributes, which can be included in a wide pluralistic vision, the course of events, in the second half of the decade, shaped correspondingly the content of national security, as structural realism suggests.

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis, see Haas, Marcel (2010) *Russia's Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century: Putin, Medvedev and Beyond*, London, UK: Routledge.

It is widely argued that these developments served, *inter alia*, Russian domestic political interests. In other words, as the ‘diversionary conflict theory’ suggests, the Russian political leadership tried effectively to divert public attention from domestic issues, by reinforcing perceptions of external threats and focusing on them.¹⁶

The maintainance of a controlled level of conflict with the post-Soviet countries helped Russia not only to sustain some optimal level of ‘diversionary tensions’ with the West, but also to detach several political and military concessions from these states or special privileges, regarding the exploitation of energy resources. Indeed, the new status quo allowed Russia to reap benefits from the newly established states, without being burdened with the subsidy cost of their regimes and economies (Drezner 1999; Tsakiris 2010).

2.3 THE POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN GEORGIA

Despite the separatist conflict in the North Caucasus, in the early 1990s Georgia seemed to be the state most likely to lose regions through secession or simply to fail totally. Gamsakhurdia’s removal from power signaled the emergence of the former Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, in the Georgian political scene. Shevardnadze was invited by the key figures in the coup against Gamsakhurdia to head the interim government, and was elected president, on October 11, 1992. However, Gamsakhurdia and his loyalists organized a rebellion against the new

¹⁶ ‘Diversionary conflict theory’ can be subdued into the wide quasi theory of pluralism, as it uses elements of both internal and external policy, as well as often counteracting domestic interests, to interpret the foreign policy decision-making of a state. For a detailed analysis, see Filippov, Mikhail (2009) ‘Diversionary Role of the Georgia-Russia Conflict: International Constraints and Domestic Appeal’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, No 10, pp. 1825-1847.

president and as it will be discussed later, they continued to be a hindrance on government's attempts to consolidate democracy and stability.

Still, the most serious of Georgia's security problems have been the two separatist conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹⁷ The armed conflict between Georgian and South Ossetian forces, that broke out in January 1991, continued until June 1992, when Yeltsin and Shevardnadze signed the Sochi ceasefire agreement and established a joint control commission (JCC), a month later. The JCC had the mandate to withdraw armed forces, disband self-defence units and monitor a joint peacekeeping force (JPF), comprising Russian, Georgian and South Ossetian forces. The JPF was responsible for maintaining order in the conflict zone, surrounding South Ossetia's southern border with Georgia. (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2005; Welt 2005).

What is more, the JPF was complemented by a small mission from the OSCE, which established in December 1992, with the aim to facilitate the peace, promote respect of human rights and advance negotiations towards a political settlement. Yet, one could argue that the OSCE acted as mediator, only ostensibly, while in essence, Russia had the leading role in the process of conflict regulation. The key element of the JPF was the Russian battalion, which was financed and controlled by the Russian MoD (Mackinlay et al., 2003). Although a pattern of cooperation was established, the well-entrenched Russian interests in the region did not allow it to be operational and effective.

As a result, the presence of the Russian-leading JPF, in South Ossetia, seems to have had mixed results. On the one hand, the Russian initiative managed to foster a gradual restoration of normality, at the moment that the conflict in South Ossetia was on the brink of diffusing its spill-over effect in the wider region of Transcaucasia. On

¹⁷ In addition to these conflicts, a number of other Georgian regions, such as Ajaria, Megrelia and the largely Armenian region of Javakheti, were under little or no central government control, during the 1990s (Deyermond, 2008).

the other hand, problems of paramount importance, such as the resolution of South Ossetia's political status, the disarmament of the local population and the return of refugees and the displaced, remained unresolved and undermined the potential for peace and stability.

In the period following the conflict, South Ossetia made organized attempts to acquire several of the trappings of an independent state: by 1996, it had its own president, parliament and ministry of defence, without, yet, managing to gain recognition by the international community, as an independent republic.

Meanwhile, the cleavages between ethnic Georgians and the Abkhaz deepened within Abkhazia. Georgians accused the Abkhaz Parliament of encouraging Abkhazia's independence from Georgia. Indeed, on July 23, 1992, the Abkhaz Parliament declared its independence from the republic, adopting officially the position that Abkhazia was to become a federal republic to Georgia and not fully-independent from it. Moreover, the situation in Abkhazia was further complicated by the fact that the Georgian population was divided between those who supported the new government, under Shevardnadze, and those who remained loyal to Gamsakhurdia.

Thus, Tbilisi had to face simultaneously two sources of confrontation, one against the separatist tendencies in Abkhazia and one against 'Zviadists', the supporters of Gamsakhurdia, who were still active and became increasingly popular among the Georgians, living in Abkhazia.¹⁸ The interlocking of the two conflicts became an issue, when in August 1992, the Georgian government sent troops in Abkhazia to release the Georgian officials, who had been kidnapped by a group of Gamsakhurdia's supporters. (Toft, 2003).

¹⁸ 'Zviadists' were named after the first name of Gamsakhurdia, Zviad.

While the Georgian government was expected to destroy the Zviadist military formations, it is argued that it also sought to regain control over Abkhazia, as Georgian troops captured the capital of Abkhazia, Sukhumi, in August 1992. Abkhazian forces, on their part, received support from volunteers from the North Caucasus -including Chechen fighters- and Russia, as well. In addition, Moscow sent Russian paratroopers to protect Russian military installations and formed the Russian Group of Forces in the Transcaucasus, which were alleged to intervene in support of the Abkhaz separatists. Although Russia was officially neutral, both Russian soldiers and independent experts acknowledged Russian military involvement in the conflict on the side of Abkhazia (Lynch 2000; Karagiannis 2002; Toft 2003).

Nevertheless, Yeltsin appeared to side with Tbilisi, by emphasizing Georgia's territorial integrity and brokering a ceasefire agreement, in September 1992. What he might have feared most of all was the potential spill-over effect of this –and other conflicts, as well- on the stability of the whole Caucasus region. At a time when the status quo of many regions of the post-Soviet space was still fluid, Moscow's political calculations of how to protect the under formation national interests, was an intractable issue.

Yet, the ceasefire was not long-lasting, as the skirmishes resumed. The type and quantity of military equipment, that the Abkhaz used, was an evidence that Russian troops were actively helping separatists. The situation was led to a stalemate, with renounces to succeed failed attempts for ceasefire and conflict resolution. In September 1993, Abkhazian forces, after a sudden offensive, took back Sukhumi and regained complete control of all Abkhazian territory. Georgian forces were expelled, while more than two hundred thousand ethnic Georgians were forced from their homes.

The course of events forced Shevardnadze to surrender and join the Russian-led CIS, membership of which Georgia had previously refused. In return, he received military assistance from Russia, to suppress Gamsakhurdia's forces. As structural realism advocates, once defeated, a state usually has to capitulate and meet the demands of its superior opponent.

In the meantime, a final ceasefire agreement, reached in May 1994, provided for the disengagement of forces, the deployment of a CIS peacekeeping contingent, in a security zone around the Abkhaz-Georgian border, and the presence of a UN observer mission (UNOMIG) to monitor the truce (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2005; Burns 2009). However, as it was the case with the task of the OSCE in South Ossetia, the job of UNOMIG in Abkhazia was also sidelined by Russia's desire to retain once again a leading role on conflict resolution.

Searching for the actual reasons that led to this conflict, one could argue that Shevardnadze conducted this war, in order to unite the pro- and anti-Gamsakhurdia's supporters against a common enemy and therefore to consolidate his power. Russia had its own motives to resort to war; Russia's oil-related interests were contrary to a growing Western and Turkish influence in the region. Russian presence in Abkhazia would mean the control of Georgian oil exporting ports, while the general turmoil in the area would favor the persistence of high oil prices (Cohen 1996; Van der Leeuw 1999).

By the middle of the 1990s, after two separatist conflicts on its territory, Georgia lacked territorial integrity, by all means. At the time being, as Deyermond notes, "Georgia existed in a security relationship of profound dependence in relation

to Russia”.¹⁹ Given the political situation in Georgia, as one would normally expect, its national security interest was limited to the protection of its territorial integrity, in contrast with Russia, which had to balance economic interests, identity issues and its stance as a formerly great power at the global system.

In 1995, a year after the cessation of hostilities, Russia proposed Abkhazia’s reunification with Georgia in a pattern of ‘asymmetrical federalism’, but the Abkhaz rejected it, insisting on confederal ties. The sanctions that Russia imposed on Abkhazia did not curve the stance of the Abkhaz to abstain from negotiations. Furthermore, notwithstanding the signing of the 1994 ceasefire agreement, skirmishes between Georgian militias and Abkhazian forces reiterated sporadically, throughout the second half of the 1990s (Welt, 2005).

2.4 THE BENEFITS REAPED BY THE RUSSIAN SIDE

In the 1990s, the stabilization of Georgia and its inclusion within a Russian sphere of vital interest were two of the primary objectives of the Russian strategy, regardless the fact that different views, with regard to the instruments, which would best serve this goal, were expressed at times. Yet, what stands beyond doubt is the Russian willingness to maintain military facilities in Georgia and to draw the latter into the CIS.

While, as aforementioned, Russian policy towards the Transcaucasus was characterized by generalities and ambiguities for the greatest part of 1992, the Abkhaz conflict conduced to the emergence of a broad consensus in the Russian leadership. According to the latter, Russia had to play a leading role in the region, so as to thwart the entanglement of other external stakeholders. At the same time, it had to localize

¹⁹ See Deyermond, Ruth (2008) *Security and Sovereignty in the Former Soviet Union*, London, UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

conflicts, in order to prevent a spill-over effect. The orientation of Yeltsin's policy towards this direction was well-reflected in the Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement, signed in September 1992.

The period after the first round of warfare in Abkhazia, was marked by the emergence of antagonism between the Russian MFA and the MoD. The Russian government, on the whole, agreed on certain principles, such as its refusal to withdraw Russian forces from Abkhazia until the conflict was resolved, the domination of Russia in the conflict resolution process, and the rejection of the idea of an independent Abkhazia.

Still, differences emerged in the implementation of these principles. While the MFA advanced a peaceful resolution of the conflict, the military leadership, represented by the MoD, favoured the use of military means to compel Georgia to comply with its demands (Lynch, 2000). This division was often emphasized by Shevardnadze, who referred to a 'democratic' Russia, represented by President Yeltsin, and a 'reactionary', represented by various political forces, including the MoD. Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether the MoD fomented the Abkhaz offensive in September 1993, in order to press Georgia to accept Russian demands, just because this assault brought Georgia to the verge of collapse, threatening the stability in the whole region.

When the conflict seemed to come to an end, Russian policy consolidated around the principal aims of securing Georgia's position in the CIS and deploying Russian peacekeeping troops in the region. Shevardnadze was also keen on strengthening ties with Russia, as he considered that the future of Georgia was connected inevitably to the Russian interests.

The outcome of this Russian-Georgian rapprochement was the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (TFC), signed in February 1994, when Yeltsin made his first visit to Georgia. This treaty established broad political, economic and military cooperation between the two countries. Yet, the Duma, which was dominated by the nationalists and the communists, blocked the ratification of the treaty. The complex political processes continued to affect, in many cases, the foreign policy decision-making. At the same time, the Georgian and Russian sides concluded an agreement for the transfer of the Georgian gas pipeline company ‘Transgazi’ to the Russian state monopoly Gazprom, until 1999²⁰ (Jervalidze, 2006).

Nevertheless, dissension emerged on the benefits and concessions that the two parts were prepared to accede, and therefore tensions re-emerged in Russian-Georgian relations, in 1995-1996. Especially, Russia agreed to cease active support to the Abkhazian authorities and to assist the Georgian forces against ‘Zviadists’. In exchange for these allowances, Georgian leadership agreed to join the CIS, to allow the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia, and to consent to the maintenance of four Russian military bases in Georgia, and Russian troops on Georgia’s borders with Turkey.

Georgia, on its part, claimed also that Russia had to guarantee the territorial integrity of Georgia, to assist Georgia establish its own armed forces, and to ensure the return of Georgian IDPs to Abkhazia, a demand that, at the time being, fell on deaf ears (Lynch, 2000).²¹ The outright unfavorable stance of Georgia *vis-à-vis* Russia rendered the former, least or not at all competent to assert any of its interests.

²⁰ Yet, this agreement was never implemented, due to the various stalemates in Russian-Georgian relations, the next years (see below).

²¹ Georgia failed to include the issue of the Black Sea Fleet division, in the negotiations with Russia. The issue was not at the top of the Georgian security agenda in the 1990s, as Georgia had to face other issues, vital for its very existence. After the gradual removal of fleet vessels to bases outside Georgia

With regard to the Russian commitment to bases in Georgia, this stemmed from concerns about activity across the Georgia-Chechnya border, fears about growing external influence and geopolitical concerns about energy. In September 1995, Russia and Georgia signed an agreement that permitted Moscow to establish four Russian bases in positions of strategic importance, on Georgian soil, for 25 years. These bases were at: (a) Vaziani, close to Tbilisi, described as a key transit point for contraband goods and military equipment, (b) Gudauta, in Abkhazia, a strategic point for the control of both the Abkhaz and the Chechen conflict, (c) Akhalkalaki, in the largely Armenian region of Javakheti, near the border with Turkey and (d) Batumi, in the autonomous region of Ajaria, on the Black Sea coast.

Elaborating on the strategic significance of these bases, one could also note that the bases of Vaziani and Batumi were close to the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, while Akhalkalaki was on the proposed route of the forthcoming Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline (Karagiannis 2002; Deyermond 2008).

In exchange for the Georgian ratification of the agreement on bases, the Russian government agreed to convey ten military facilities, on Georgian territory, to Georgian control. Nevertheless, dissension emerged once again, with the Russian Duma calling on Yeltsin to ban this transfer.

Regarding Georgia's assertions, by 1997, inertia characterised the progress for the resolution of Abkhazia's political status and of the intractable issue of the return of IDPs. The exclusive stipulation of negotiations with Georgia by the Russian side was contradictory at many points; Russia had a strong incentive not to fulfill its pledge for the re-establishment of Georgia's territorial integrity, as in such a case, it should withdraw its military bases from the Georgian territory. It is further argued that

during the Abkhaz conflict, the issue of the Black Sea Fleet was finally arranged between Russia and Ukraine, in May 1997, excluding totally any Georgian claim on part of the fleet (Deyermond, 2008).

the very presence of most of the Russian military bases, in autonomous or even secessionist areas, undermined the establishment of Georgian internal sovereignty (Deyermond, 2008).

What is more, Russia had effectively managed to thwart a project for the shipment of Turkmen gas to Turkey through a new Georgian gas pipeline, which would be connected with the existing Russian network. In lieu of this project, in late 1997, Russia agreed with Turkey the construction of the 'Blue Stream' gas pipeline, which was to become the shortest gas export route from Russia to Turkey, crossing the Black Sea underwater (Jervalidze, 2006). On the eve of the imminent economic crisis of 1998, according to a structural realism interpretation, Russia had to diversify or to enrich its political tools, in order to defend its miscellaneous national interests.

As a matter of course, Georgia sought to get away from isolation and diversify its strategic allies: it coalesced with other post-Soviet states in GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova), a pro-US regional organization, to promote their common economic, energy and military interests against the Russian domination. The Baku-Supsa oil pipeline between Georgia and Azerbaijan had already conducted significantly to Georgia's economic recovery. Moreover, Georgia agreed cooperation with Turkey on border protection and the training of the Georgian forces, while a military cooperation agreement was reached with the USA, in March 1998 (Lynch, 2000).

From an offensive realism perspective, this alliance between the US, on the one hand, and Turkey and some pro-Western Soviet republics, on the other, was the result of a Washington strategy to ascribe to third states the task of containing Russia's assertiveness in the South Caucasus. Indeed, the strained Russian-Turkish

relations, throughout the largest part of the 1990s, conduced to the absence of Georgia's NATO membership, as a perspective.

Under these circumstances, the CIS started planning the safe return of IDPs, a decision which was obviously accepted by the Russian government. In addition, the appointment of Primakov as foreign minister, in early 1996, signaled an increased emphasis on diplomacy, as a tool of exerting foreign policy. In particular, the negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia, organized by Primakov in 1997, promoted the return of IDPs, and the restoration of security and economic cooperation. Moreover, in November 1999, Russia and Georgia signed an agreement for the closure of the Russian bases in Vaziani and Gudauta, by July 2001.

This shift of Russia's position towards Georgia is partly explained by the casualties, suffered by the peacekeeping forces, as well as the economic constraints, given the high cost of sustaining such operations, at the moment that Russia was plagued by a deep economic crisis. However, these developments were not proved enough to restrain Georgia's increasing approach with the West. Having refused to renew membership in the CIS, in 1999, Georgia started pursuing in earnest to join NATO.²² Further consolidating its independent role in the international community, Georgia joined the Council of Europe, in 1999 and the World Trade Organization, the next year (Welt, 2005).

All in all, Russian responses to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict were influenced, *inter alia*, by (a) the bureaucratic discrepancies between MFA and MoD policies, (b) the stance of other Russian domestic actors, such as the Duma and the Russian regional leaders, and (c) external to Russia factors, such as the political developments in Georgia and Abkhazia, and the involvement of other states and international

²² Georgia had already joined the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, in 1994. According to the latter, partner countries carry out military reforms and could participate in NATO exercises and operations to adapt their military organization to NATO standards (Haas, 2010).

organizations (Lynch 2000; Filippov 2009). Therefore, while classical realism offers the theoretical foundation for the analysis of the Russian conduct, structural realism and some elements of pluralism explicate particular expressions of this conduct, as well.

CHAPTER 3

FOREIGN RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA UNDER PUTIN'S PRESIDENCY (2000-2008)

3.1 THE CHANGE OF POWER IN RUSSIA: FROM YELTSIN TO PUTIN

The advent of Vladimir Putin in 2000 signaled the initiation of a centralisation process in the domestic Russian politics, while the Chechen wars strengthened a growing authoritarian trend, which gradually marginalised liberal forces.

Simultaneously, a new nationalist consensus has been established, hinged on the perspective that Russia would regain its great power status, exploiting its energy potential, at a time when a number of actors, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, China, USA and NATO, were making efforts to create alternative routes to transport energy supplies in the Eurasian region (Cohen, 2007).

This shift of interest was actually not accidental; energy became a high security issue on the international agenda, when oil and gas prices started rising in 1999 and the increasing demand of energy resources drove up oil and gas prices even further. As structural realism would explain, Russia's foreign policy making, the next decade, would be formed, besides, in line with the protection of its own energy interests, when these would be at risk by the encroachment of external actors.

Therefore, Russia's renaissance under Putin has been more as an energy great power than a superpower in the traditional political and military sense. As Fiona Hill

argues, Russia has increasingly been transformed into an economic and cultural ‘soft power’, including its energy resources and attempts to expand Russian culture and investments abroad.²³ Towards this direction, Putin had to follow a more pluralistic path and establish new forms of cooperation with the West. Indeed, in the years following his ascent to power, relations with the West appeared to be improved, something that would eventually favour the Russian economy.

Nonetheless, as Russia continued to face the West –and especially the USA, as a threat, it never excluded the use of military means to achieve a stronger international position. One could further argue that Russia’s pursuance for closer ties with the EU could possibly challenge the relationship between Europe and the USA, serving the Russian foreign policy principle of multipolarity.²⁴ At the same time, Putin sought to intensify relations with developing countries, such as China, India and Iran and the so-called ‘pariah’ states, such as North Korea and Cuba, maybe in an attempt to demonstrate that his foreign policy was not dictated by the West (Haas, 2010).²⁵

In his second term in office, Putin’s stance towards the West became more assertive. This shift can be mainly attributed to the fact that the Russian interests in the former Soviet space were once again challenged by the regime change in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) with the ‘colour revolutions’, the ensuing political and economic penetration of external actors, namely the West, and the US military presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

²³ See Hill, Fiona (2006) ‘Moscow Discovers Soft Power’, *Current History*, Vol. 30, No 2, pp. 341-347.

²⁴ This was actually the case with the Iraqi war of 2003, when France and Germany opposed the invasion of the USA and the UK.

²⁵ Russia and China coalesced into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, and granted observer status to India and Iran. All three states – China, India and Iran – are main importers of Russian military equipment.

In the meantime, Russian economy had been strengthened, due to the revenues of energy resources, to such an extent, that Moscow managed to increase its prestige on the international stage. Subsequently, Russia could adopt a security policy less dependent on its economic ties with the West (Oliker et al. 2009; Haas 2010).

Russia's primary goal was now to solidify its increasing economic success, while striving to be perceived as a 'modern great power', which should not only be strong politically and militarily, but also economically and culturally (Bobo Lo, 2006). This kind of behavior is well in line with the way Morgenthau describes a prestige seeking state.²⁶

Although there seems to be a discrepancy in Putin's standpoint towards the West between his first and second term, this can largely be explained by Russia's economic necessity at the beginning of the 2000s; hence, notwithstanding the economic rapprochement with the West, Russia had already been alarmed at NATO's new Strategic Concept of April 1999 and its enlargement with new member states in the Eastern Europe. This is well-reflected in all the Russian security documents from 2000 till 2008, which systematically contained anti-Western elements, considering firmly NATO and the USA as threats.²⁷ By and large, it could be argued that Putin's foreign policy was dominated firmly by realistic elements, while a more pluralistic stance, including cooperation with the West, was adopted only when dictated, mainly, by the economic necessity.

²⁶ For a detailed analysis, see Morgenthau, Hans J. (1954) *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, US: Alfred A. Knopf.

²⁷ See NSC, FPC and Military Doctrine (2000), Defence White Paper (DWP: 2003), 'Survey of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation' (2007) and 'Russia's Development Strategy towards 2020' (2008).

3.2 PUTIN'S APPROACH TOWARDS THE NEAR ABROAD AND PIPELINE POLITICS

As one would expect, the Russian interest in the former Soviet territories of the Caucasus and Central Asia remained fervent. Putin remained loyal to the idea that the deepening of economic, political and military integration within the CIS framework would restore Russia's position in the global system. The characterization of the collapse of the Soviet Union as 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century' is illustrative of the great importance that Putin placed on Russia's near abroad (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2005).

However, Putin did not promote an exclusively Eurasianist approach; as already mentioned, he sought simultaneously to intensify Russia's cooperation with Europe and the US, in the economic field and the battle against terrorism. In return, at this early stage, the US supported Russian membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and became more lenient with Russia's policy towards Chechnya (Kasim, 2010).

With regard to the energy trade, as aforementioned, the issue received a renewed impetus on the eve of the twenty first century. Russia was not anymore the unique undisputable stakeholder in the region of both Caucasus and Central Asia.²⁸ The construction of Baku-Novorossiisk, Russia, oil pipeline, which came onstream at the end of the 1990s was superseded by the rival Baku-Supsa, Georgia, oil pipeline, as the former, besides being longer and more expensive, suffered disruption from the protracted conflict in Chechnya (German, 2009).

²⁸ Even before the Soviet era, external players were activated in the region of Caucasus; in the 19th century, the Rothschilds financed the construction of a Transcaucasian railway to carry oil from Baku, in the Caspian Sea, to the Black Sea port of Batumi (Yergin, 1991).

Nevertheless, there was still the need for the development of new pipeline routes, as the above pipelines increased the pressure on the already congested Bosphorus Straits in Turkey, while they did little to reduce Europe's energy reliance on Moscow.²⁹ This demand was met by the construction of the US-backed BTC pipeline, which transports oil from Azerbaijan through Georgia to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean, since May 2005, when it finally came onstream. In addition, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, running parallel to the BTC, transfers gas from the Caspian Sea via Georgia to Turkey.³⁰

Although the amount of energy resources, transferred through these pipelines is not comparable to the relevant reserves of the Middle East or Russia, BTC and BTE pipelines strengthened Western energy security by bypassing Russia and Iran, as well. Furthermore, they reinforced the political and economic autonomy of Azerbaijan and Georgia *vis-à-vis* the Russian guardianship.

In turn, the construction of the BTC and BTE pipelines has incited other energy transportation projects that effectively bypass the Russian territory, such as the Nabucco (or Turkey-Austria) gas pipeline and the ambitious Kazakhstan Caspian Transportation System (KCTS), which would transfer oil from the Caspian fields in Kazakhstan to international markets via the BTC (Bozhilova 2009; German 2009). Whether these projects will be materialized or not, Russia's loss of the absolute control over the energy resources of its near abroad is irreversible.

According to the view of some Russian observers, the rivalry between Russia on the one hand and the US and Turkey on the other, is not just about securing transit revenues or the sufficiency of energy supply, but it is principally about a wider

²⁹ Although the Baku-Supsa pipeline does not transit Russian territory, its juxtaposition to the Georgian-Abkhazian border rendered its function volatile, at times when bilateral relations exacerbated.

³⁰ BTE is also referred to as South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP).

geopolitical control of the region; the construction of the subsea 'Blue Stream' pipeline, which transfers gas from Russia to Turkey, is considered not only significant for the Russian economy, but also a Russian success, resulted from the inefficiency of the American pipeline policy in the region (German, 2009).

The rapidly growing ties between Russia and Turkey, resulted from the pursuance of their own national interests and the failures of the US strategy in the South Caucasus, urged the US to be activated more directly in the region. According to the tenets of offensive realism, it was this Russian-Turkish rapprochement that shoved out the US to act as an offshore balancer in the South Caucasus to prevent the revival of Russian hegemony, through NATO's eastwards expansion.

Towards this direction, and in order to wane any form of Western influence in the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin has followed a strategy of coercive diplomacy *vis-à-vis* the more uncompromising countries in the near abroad. As Socor advocates, Russia has pursued a kind of 'controlled instability' in the Caucasus region, aiming at thwarting the integration of the South Caucasus into the Western institutions.³¹

3.3 RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS THE FIRST HALF OF THE 2000s

On the turn of the 21st century, Georgia was still preoccupied with the necessity of accommodating Russian interests. Meanwhile, it featured disastrous economic performance and enduring corruption. These problems were aggravated by the

³¹ For a detailed analysis, see Socor, V. (2004) *The Frozen Conflicts: A Challenge to Euro-Atlantic Interests*. Report prepared by the George C. Marshall Fund of the United States, on the occasion of the 2004 NATO Summit on 'A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region'.

continued absence of effective control by the central government over much of the territory, and the frozen separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³²

What is more, the interest shown until this time by the US and the key Western institutions, namely the NATO and the EU, in Georgia's security and economic problems was rather weak and limited, compared to the potential of the Russian influence. As international financial institutions adopted a cautious stance towards the possibility of economic assistance to Georgia, this urged the Georgian government into closer dependence on Russia, despite the political and economic weakness of Russia itself (Deyermond, 2008).

Nonetheless, there were still many points of friction in Russo-Georgian relations; following a resumption of the warfare in the North Caucasus -after a Chechen offensive into neighbouring Dagestan, in 1999- Russia increasingly accused Georgia of providing support and shelter to the Chechen rebels and Islamic radicals, in the Pankisi Gorge. (Souleimanov et al., 2008). It is argued that the actual cause of the clash was Georgia's refusal of Russia's request to use their bases in Georgia to attack into Chechnya (Haas, 2010). In turn, Georgia rejected these allegations, arguing that Pankisi area attracted fleeing Chechens, simply because of its geographical proximity to Chechnya and its large population of Kists –Georgian Chechens- with kinship ties in Chechnya.

Still, Russia acted in an assertive way towards Georgia, despite officially denying responsibility for its actions. Hence, the Russian military proceeded on air raids on the Pankisi Gorge, while the Russian gas delivery was repetitively interrupted during the winter of 2000, presumably for financial and technical reasons.

³² International community's attempts for the status resolution of the separatist regions were not fruitful, till this time. For instance, in the Abkhaz case, the UN-backed Boden document (February 2002) was rejected, by the Abkhaz side, as it stipulated the re-establishment of Georgia's sovereignty (Tarkhan, 2005).

Over and above, Moscow openly imposed a visa regime for Georgian citizens, while it started allotting privileges to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Not only did Russia exclude them from the aforementioned visa regime, but it also adopted a strategy of granting them the Russian citizenship (Filippov, 2009). One could argue that the Chechen conflict served perfectly Russia's goal for a continuing presence in Georgia and the wider Caucasus region, which in turn would discourage the expansion of the Western interests in the region.

In the meantime, the events of 9/11 turned the interest of the US, *inter alia*, into the Caucasus region. Concerned about jihadist elements in the Pankisi Gorge, the US offered military assistance to Georgia in the framework of the Georgian Train and Equip Programme (GTEP, February 2002). It must be underlined that also President Putin was supportive of this American military initiative, as it would help rid Pankisi of terrorists, operating in Chechnya (Tyler, 2002). While GTEP, indeed, contributed largely to the eviction of the militants from Pankisi, and the restructuring of Georgian armed forces, it also implied that Russia was not the only military power in the region and therefore, it could not act according only to its own willing.

Yet, many times throughout 2002, Russia threatened Georgia with a unilateral operation against Chechen separatists, and advanced on new air intrusions against Pankisi, with several civilian casualties. Shevardnadze was finally forced once again to make numerous concessions to Russian demands -such as to create joint border patrols- notwithstanding the strong domestic political pressures, calling for greater autonomy from Russia. Since then, Pankisi receded as a hotspot in Russo-Georgian relations, but still remained a possible irritant for a renewed dispute (Yalowitz et al. 2004; Filippov 2009).

In the period until November 2003, the Russo-Georgian relations seemed to be normalized; Shevardnadze attempted to extract Russian political backing, in return for great economic concessions to Russia. In particular, he permitted the sale of the main energy distribution company from a US business to a Russian one, and surrendered to the Russian company, Gazprom, the control over the Georgian gas distribution network, in exchange for subsidized gas supplies (Welt, 2005).

Moreover, Russian businesses continued to be involved in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thereby conducing to the economic sustenance and political legitimacy for the regimes in place, there. It is argued that these businesses, both licit and illicit,³³ not only seek profit, but can be mobilized as an instrument of Russian foreign policy, as well; ostensibly, the Russian government does not play a major role in regulating cross-border economic activity with these protectorates, while also claiming officially to back Georgian territorial integrity. Nonetheless, Russia allows some small-medium businesses, operating there, to have strong ties to political actors at the regional level in Moscow City and the Krasnodar region, while also upholding the separatist regimes. Obviously, when necessary, Russia would claim that these businesses have no ties to Russia's political leadership (Scott, 2006).

Meanwhile, Shevardnadze's removal from power was already in process. As early as the fall of 2002, Georgian NGOs, emulating the example of Serbia, started an attempt to activate and direct the public opinion against Shevardnadze. This wave of opposition came to a head with the demonstrations against Shevardnadze, alleging fraud during the November 2, 2003 parliamentary elections. The final outcome was

³³ Contraband trade continues to represent the prominent form of Russian business activity and the main source of revenue for the *de facto* regimes.

the bloodless hand over of power to a new political figure, Mikheil Saakashvili, to what was dubbed the 'Rose Revolution'.³⁴

The significance of the 'Rose Revolution' lies firmly to the fact that it was the first time that in a country of the former Soviet space, the succession in power did not take place in a managed way. This signaled the emergence to power of a generation of politicians less burdened by the Soviet legacy. It gave also the hope that it would create a precedent for similar movements in other post-Soviet countries, as it was proved in the cases of Ukraine and Kazakhstan. What stands beyond doubt is the mass support that the revolution got from world leaders, political analysts, international media and most prominently, the US government (Areshidze, 2007).

However, the necessity of such a revolution and its contribution to the consolidation of the Georgian democracy are open to debate; Saakashvili, immediately after his election as President in January 2004, amended the Constitution to create a Russian-style, over-centralized governance system, in which his powers became almost unlimited. In addition, he failed, as a matter of course, to satisfy most of the over-inflated expectations of the early post-revolution period, such as the promise for the re-establishment of Georgia's territorial integrity (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2005).

Although initially Saakashvili took confidence-building measures, with regard to the separatist regions, his movements to combat corruption and contraband trade in South Ossetia, following the removal of a corrupt, pro-Russian regime in the republic of Ajaria, had the adverse results. Probably Moscow resisted strongly Georgian efforts to resolve the South Ossetian conflict, as this would likely entail a similar attempt in Abkhazia. South Ossetians, on their part, saw their economic interests to be

³⁴ The Revolution took the appellation 'Rose', because of the roses with which Saakashvili and his supporters stormed the first session of the newly elected Parliament, on November 22.

threatened by an armed crackdown on the contraband trade. The final outcome was the start of sporadic skirmishes, which did not evolve into a large scale conflict, as the US consistently refused to support a non-peaceful conflict resolution (Welt, 2005).

Soon after the events in South Ossetia, the Beslan tragedy, in September 2004, hardened the Russian position with regard to Georgia; the Russian side expressed either implicitly or explicitly that the Georgian government had advance knowledge of the Chechen terrorists' intentions to capture the school and that at least one terrorist took refuge in Georgian territory. Georgia was now widely considered in Russia as a pawn of powerful –still unnamed- adversaries of the Russian state. Along the lines of the 'diversionary conflict theory', it could be argued that this perception was cultivated to serve Putin's pursuance for a stronger presidency and greater centralism, by uniting the masses around a strong leader, who counters powerful foreign forces (Filippov, 2009).

Meanwhile, Russia continued also to interfere in Abkhazia's internal political matters; Moscow mediated in the local presidential elections, in order to ensure the election of its preferred candidate, Raul Khadzhimba, in January 2005. The separatist leaders, on their part, increasingly sought to strengthen ties with Russia, fearing that Tbilisi would attempt to force them from power.

3.4 RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS THE SECOND HALF OF THE 2000s

Following the consolidation of President Saakashvili to power, Russia continued to strengthen its influence on the breakaway regions, besides by providing financial aid and setting ethnic Russians to key positions in the separatist governments. As

offensive realism would suggest, Georgia's approach with the West fueled Russian assertiveness towards the region, and conversely.

In the course of 2006, Russo-Georgian relations were severely aggravated; in March 2006, Russia banned the import of Georgian wine; in September 2006, the arrest of Russian officers on charge of espionage led to the withdrawal of Russian diplomats to Georgia, the suspension of transport links between Russia and Georgia, and the expulsion of hundreds of Georgians from Russia. Moreover, in November 2006, Gazprom more than doubled the gas price for Georgia (Deyermond 2008; Haas 2010).

This deterioration should be viewed in line with the advancement of Georgia's status in NATO; in September 2006, the grant of the NATO Intensified Dialogue status to Georgia signaled the amplification of cooperation between the two parts, despite the frustration of the Georgian aspirations for full NATO membership in 2008. Indeed, in April 2008, NATO refused to include Georgia in the Membership Action Plan (MAP) at its annual summit in Bucharest. It might be argued that the hesitation of NATO to press on Georgia's membership encouraged Russia's aim to promote the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, and to depose Saakashvili (Cornell 2008; O'Donnell et al. 2008; Kasim 2010). Yet, it is doubtful that if NATO supported the Georgian membership, this would deter Russia from being assertive.

Hence, in April 2008, Moscow announced official relations with the agencies of the separatist regions, while also deployed additional troops to its peacekeeping force in Abkhazia, without Georgia's consent. Meanwhile, many other concurrent events indicated the growing potential for an armed conflict; Russia had already tightened its grip on the separatist regions by promoting infrastructure projects, such

as the extension of the North Ossetian gas pipeline to South Ossetia. In May-June 2008, Russia deployed the so-called Railway Troops to restore its rail connection with Abkhazia, in order to ensure the timely transportation of reinforcements from Russia to Georgia, during an armed conflict. What is more, the Western recognition of Kosovo, in February 2008, created a precedence after which Russia was entitled to do the same with Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Haas, 2010).

The meeting between Medvedev and Saakashvili, on June 6, 2008, was proved fruitless; Georgia's demands, such as the call for the replacement of permanent Russian peacekeeping with an international force, were rejected by the Russian side and the secessionists, as well. While it seems that all the actors considered the high potential for an armed conflict, still the exact time was undefined. The US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that she went to Tbilisi in July 2008 to induce Georgia to sign a non-use of force pledge (Blank, 2009).

Thereafter, the war preparations were more than evident; in July, military exercises were conducted by both countries, namely the joint U.S.-Georgian 'Immediate Response 2008' and the Russian 'Caucasus 2008', conducted near Georgia's border. The official purpose of the latter was to train for anti-terror operations. Nonetheless, several units, involved in the exercise, took part later in the military operations in Georgia. Likewise, ships of Russia's Black Sea Fleet remained anchored in Georgian ports, being prepared for the imminent conflict. Therefore, Russian and American analysts have realistically described 'Caucasus 2008' as a rehearsal for an operation in South Ossetia (Felgenhauer 2008; Pallin et al. 2009).

At the beginning of August 2008, conflict broke out between Georgian and South Ossetian forces. It is difficult, still, rather meaningless, to conclude which part

started the warfare. Georgia brought the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali under control and Russian forces attacked Georgian ones, which started fleeing to Georgia.

However, from 8 August, Russia's air force conducted attacks on targets in Georgia proper, outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The conflict continued with a naval blockade of the Georgian ports, and the Russian terrestrial invasion into Georgia proper. Georgian armed forces withdrew around Tbilisi, as they were much inferior in troops and arms, compared to their Russian equivalent. In a matter of days, Russian forces shattered the Georgian military, seized control of South Ossetia and threatened the capital of Tbilisi (Mankoff, 2009).

Besides, the Russian attack affected the function of energy pipelines in Georgia, as the Baku-Supsa pipeline was temporarily shut down. On 12 August, Georgia and Russia finally signed a ceasefire agreement, the so-called 'six-point peace plan', drafted by the French President Sarkozy, holding the EU Presidency, and his Russian counterpart Medvedev.

Russia's war in Georgia, being the first military operation of the Russian Federation outside its own borders, revealed the defects of Russian military and its backwardness *vis-à-vis* the Western –namely the US and NATO- forces; although it is argued that the Russian forces were well prepared for the operation, the obsolete military equipment and the poor coordination between the units caused much collateral damage.

On the whole, the Russian military objectives, as expressed in the Russian security documents, were not yet realized, as long as Russia -despite a remarkable improvement of its military capability compared with the 1990s- still remained loyal to a Soviet concept of warfare, featuring the overwhelming use of arms and troops (Nicoll 2008; Sieca-Kozlowski 2009). The failure or the ineffectiveness of reforms, in

the domestic level, hindered Russia from reaching perfectly its foreign policy goals with regard to its 'near abroad'.

Investigating the reasons that led to the Russian invasion of Georgia, one could argue that the increasing involvement of the US in the internal political and military issues of Georgia, culminated with the US backed governmental change in 2003, stands as the most prominent cause. In addition, Georgia's application, under Saakashvili, for NATO membership –along with Ukraine- meant the expansion of NATO's influence into areas of the former Soviet Union. As the theory of offensive realism would advocate, Russia favoured the war option, in order to discourage Western influence and re-establish its hegemony in the South-Caucasus.

In line with the growing US influence and NATO enlargement, many analysts have traced the roots of the Russian conflict with Georgia to pipeline politics or 'petro-politics'; As Rich notes, "a new 'silk route' has become to emerge, linking Europe with Western China, based on pipelines, railways and fibre optics and it is possible to see Russia's desire to play a decisive role on Western energy security, as one of the main motivations behind Russian intervention into Georgia".³⁵

The fact that Russian forces targeted the Baku-Supsa and the BTC oil pipelines, both of which bypass Russian territory, reinforces the argument that the military intervention was more about the control of energy infrastructure and exports to Europe –and less about the officially declared Russia's objective of protecting its citizens in South Ossetia. Furthermore, we could argue that an additional aim of the Russian incursion was to demonstrate Georgia's vulnerabilities as an alternative transit state for Caspian hydrocarbons. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei

³⁵ For a detailed analysis, see Rich, Paul B. (2009a) 'Introduction: The Global Significance of a Small War', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 20, No 2, pp. 239-250.

Lavrov, Russia offers a host of energy routes, already operational or under discussion, which are not only safer, but also rest on a rational economic base (German, 2009).

All in all, the Russian decision to invade Georgia does not only reflect Russia's reacting stance towards the West, but also an attempt of Russia to regain its superpower status or at least to persuade the major global actors for this. Having already established an energy-based economy, Russia felt strong enough to assert its interests, *inter alia*, with military means. What is more, factors of culture and identity, regarding the difficulty Russia has had in coming to terms with its former territories, such as Georgia, should not be ignored (Shearman et al. 2009; Haas 2010).

Besides, the invasion may have also served internal objectives; in particular, what theorists of diversionary conflict suggest, is that the tensions with the former Soviet republics and Georgia was a way to strengthen the position of Prime Minister Putin *vis-à-vis* the new President Medvedev. Not only did Putin seem to have been better informed about the specifics of the first hours of the conflict than the President, but he took special foreign policy initiatives, as well; he created new agencies, such as the Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, in order to remove responsibilities from the *de facto* control of an over-centralized government, which was largely established by him (Filippov, 2009).

At the same time, one could not overlook the flaws of US policy towards Georgia -such as the backing of Saakashvili rather than a broader democratic development, and the support of Georgia's territorial integrity instead of an enduring conflict resolution- that offered Russia the opportunity to act in this assertive way.

Regarding the responsibilities of the Georgian side, it is argued that the Georgian leadership had its own incentives for failing to avoid the military conflict with Russia. As Filippov suggests, both the West and the Russian administration hold

their own versions of a diversionary interpretation of Georgia's behavior; western observers stress that Saakashvili became all the more intransigent in the foreign policy issues due to the growing domestic political tensions. In that way, he could weaken any dissident to his personal regime by presenting him as supporter of Russia. Then again, the Russian version argues that Saakashvili acted by the US order, so as the US political leadership to boost the chances of the Republican candidate.³⁶

The Five-Day War offered an opportunity for both Russia and Georgia to draw lessons not only for their relations with each other, but also for their stance in the global system and their domestic strengths and weaknesses. From a Russian perspective, the war was a success, if it deterred other neighbouring post-Soviet states from seeking confrontation with Moscow, and sent a message to outside powers about Russia's resurgence as a major power, at least in its own region (Pallin et al., 2009).

However, the record of the Russian military raises doubts as to whether it would be able to wage war against a more advanced enemy or one supported by a third party. Moreover, the fact that Russia recognized de jure the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on August 26 -few days after the ceasefire agreement was signed- created precedence for separatist groupings of Russian's own unstable North Caucasus region, namely Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan³⁷ (Haas 2010; Kasim 2010).

Considering the image of Russia as a modern great power, this was definitely undermined, since the invasion of Georgia proper was in violation of both the UN Charter and the 1975 Helsinki treaty. Still, apart from the Russian attack, it was also

³⁶ See also Traynor, I. (2008) 'Putin Accuses US of Starting Georgian Crisis as Election Ploy' *The Guardian*, 29 August. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/29/russia.georgia>

³⁷ It was the first time that Russia had given official recognition to the independence of a breakaway territory.

the continuing Russian military presence in Georgia, in breach of the ‘six-point peace plan’ that maintained frictions between Russia and the West.³⁸

Furthermore, the pretext, that the Russian military invaded Georgia to protect the rights of the Russian citizens in South Ossetia, alarmed other neighbouring states with Russian minorities, such as the Baltics, which were already NATO members. As a result, collective defence returned on the agenda of NATO. The issue of the Black Sea security became also opportune for NATO, since the Black Sea is vital, *inter alia*, for the trade and the energy supply of Europe. Another issue that the 2008 conflict brought in the forefront was the limitations of NATO’s eastwards expansion (Nichol 2008; Blank 2009).

All these developments might have led the Western media and many specialists to adopt interpretations of the conflict that lack analytical depth; Contrary to the latter, Russian intervention to Georgia was not precisely an act of ‘aggressive unilateralism’, while the assessment that a new Cold War era loomed, failed to take into account the real features of that period (Simes 2008; Shearman et al. 2009).

Meanwhile, Russia seemed to be rather isolated by its strategic allies; it did not receive the expected support by them and most notably by China, which abstained from recognizing Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence, as it faced similar domestic problems with separatist movements in Tibet and Taiwan. CIS states also refused to adopt an unequivocal stance, for similar reasons, while only Ukraine openly supported Georgia, being later under strong political and economic pressure from Moscow (Haas, 2010).

From a Georgian point of view, the belied expectations for support from the West and especially the US caused, initially, disillusion. Ukraine, also, facing the

³⁸ Russian troops remained at the buffer zones in Georgia proper, south of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, till the beginning of October 2008.

question of Crimea, was alarmed at the Western failure in the Russo-Georgian war. Still, NATO took action within its own borders; Poland signed the August 2008 Agreement, which calls on the US for direct assistance in the event of an attack on Poland.

Despite the initial disenchantment for the West, one could argue that Russian invasion weakened opposition groups in Georgia, which supported closer relations with Russia, and made them less skeptical about the West. As Kasim notes “just like Stalin’s territorial demands from Turkey after the Second World War fastened Turkey’s integration to the Western security system, Russia’s current policy towards the former Soviet Republics brought these states closer to the West”.³⁹ Even though this statement compares two different historical facts, which are not perfectly relevant, the Western orbit of many former Soviet and East European states seems to be irreversible.

All in all, it is difficult to reckon the costs and the benefits of that war for each side. What stands beyond doubt is that Russia failed to overthrow Saakashvili, while it challenged its own domestic stability and alienated further the West. Moreover, foreign investors, fearing increased political and economic risk, began withdrawing capital from Russia. All these in conjunction with the imminent global recession and a vertical fall of oil prices in the course of 2008 hit the Russian economy extremely hard and led the Kremlin to prop up the ruble (Mankoff, 2009).

Georgia has also lost; its economy has been heavily damaged after a decade of remarkable growth, the foreign direct investment has dried up and as it is argued, Saakashvili’s position has not been strengthened politically. Most notably, Georgian territorial integrity seems now, more than ever, an illusive concept; Russia has

³⁹ See Kasim, Kamer (2010) ‘The August 2008 Russian-Georgian Conflict and its Implications: A New Era in the Caucasus?’, *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies*, Vol. 5, No 9, pp.63-81.

deployed permanent troops in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where it built larger military bases, a fact that reversed the achievements of the Georgian side in this field, the previous years.

What is more, as Russia managed effectively to terminate the mandate of UNOMIG in Abkhazia, and the OSCE mission in South Ossetia, from July 2009 there was no independent presence to monitor ceasefire violations in the breakaway regions. As a matter of course, in December 2008 Georgia, still facing a host of unsettled problems, was denied by NATO, once again, the MAP status. More to the point, the Russian intervention in Georgia demonstrated that local disputes have not only serious ramifications for the states who get involved, but also for the wider international community (Blank 2009; German 2009).

CONCLUSION: RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER YELTSIN AND PUTIN IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The above analysis of the Russo-Georgian relations has well illustrated that Russia's foreign policy goals in Georgia have been all the more multifaceted. In order to promote its interests in the region, Russia has sought to minimize or, when possible, to counteract the growing involvement of other states, namely the US, European countries and Turkey.

Russia, either making conscious efforts to restore its image as a great power or simply reacting to the course of events, which the very same has often provoked, seemed never to deviate from a realistic orientation towards the countries of its 'near abroad'.

However, when it was dictated by the socioeconomic necessity that the very young Russian state -going through a decade of a failed transition in many aspects- often dealt with, Moscow had to approach the West and utilize its diplomatic means. This is not to say that Russia considered ever seriously the possibility of a Western orientation. By contrast, it has been firmly loyal to concrete fundamental principles, such as the ceaseless interest for its 'near abroad' and the consistent perception of the West as a threat.

In the case of Georgia, Russia, being member of the international community, had to comply at least to the fundamentals, regarding the process of conflict resolution in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Nonetheless, this did not hinder Russia to seek a leading role in the region and sometimes to be a maverick; in the 1990s, Russia

assumed almost exclusively the task of peacekeeping in the separatist regions, diminishing the mandate of the UN and OSCE peacekeeping forces. In 2008, it violated the UN Charter and the 1975 Helsinki treaty, invading Georgia proper, while the UN failed to condemn this act, due to Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council. Furthermore, a year later Russia achieved the withdrawal of the above referred international peacekeeping forces, as it stipulated the recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence by the international community, as a precondition for the continuation of these missions' mandate.

Hence, as the theory of structural realism would advocate, at many points Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia was formed and affected by external pressures. Still, according to the above expressed views, these pressures, either connected to the global economic crisis or simply put by the international community and related to the conflict resolution, were not apt enough to deter Russia from being aggressive and breaking the international law without impunity. In a purely offensive realism view, what staunchly has annoyed Russia, in relation to Georgia, is not the very nature of its domestic political developments, but rather the encroachments from rival powers on its periphery.

Contrary to its expectations, Russia did not receive, for the invasion in Georgia and the subsequent recognition of the separatist region's independence, the desired support of its traditional allies and most prominently China. Yet, Russia sought to diversify its strategic allies and forestall the forthcoming business and energy projects between Georgia and the West or Turkey. For instance, although Turkey has been a traditional antagonist of Russia for the most part of the 1990s, the agreement of the two countries for the construction of the 'Blue Stream' gas pipeline thwarted relevant energy projects, which would favour Georgia, but bypass Russia.

All these developments suggest that Russia's national interests started acquiring a specific content, which besides the physical security of territory and citizens, comprised also entrenched economic interests and geopolitical considerations. The formation of the multifarious Russian national interests signaled the diversification of foreign policy tools, as well as the emergence of cooperative patterns between Russia and any friend or former foe of it, that could serve its interests. But as aforementioned, even though Russia's foreign policy became more pluralistic, Russia has sought steadily, in line with the offensive realism dictates, to reassure its influence on Georgia and accentuate the competitive nature of its relations with the West.

In the theoretical light of a wider pluralistic vision, also, Russia's foreign policy with regard to Georgia, as well as other post-Soviet countries, reflects the quality of the Russian democracy and the character of the domestic political processes. In particular, Russia's willingness to use force in the dispute with Georgia echoes, *inter alia*, Russia's greater political stability and confidence, based largely on booming revenue from the sale of its energy resources during the 2000s.

The diversionary argument, as presented in the literature, applies perfectly in the case of Russia, which is a partial democracy; on the one hand, there is the incentive for such political practices, as the government's survival depends on the public approval, while on the other, these practices are exactly favoured by the poor quality of democracy and the low level of transparency.

At the same time, the foreign policy decision-making has often proved to be an equation, including a number of policy makers and stakeholders with different views and interests; the President and the MFA, the MoD and the military leadership, the Duma, the intelligence services, the regional governors and the economic

oligarchs, all had a hand in the formation of foreign policy, and as it is proved historically, the persons in office were sometimes more important than the position they held. Indeed, the role of the MFA was different under Kozyrev compared to Primakov, let alone the foreign policy under the President Yeltsin or Putin.

Nonetheless, political leaders should not be isolated from the general historical context within they exerted their political power; therefore, one could attribute the more assertive stance of Russia towards its 'near abroad' during Putin's presidency, rather to the change of circumstances than to the change of the strategic goals. As Mankoff comments "Putin and Medvedev's Russia has not embarked on a new, more threatening path in the world, but has merely recovered enough to act in a way that even most Yeltsinites desired".⁴⁰

What is more, one could argue that it was once again the socioeconomic circumstances that led both Yeltsin and Putin to follow a rather pro-Western strategy at the beginning of their first presidential tenure; the first half of the 1990s, Yeltsin seemed to have no other option but to cooperate and receive the assistance of the West, in order to embark on the complex transitional processes. Likewise, on the turn of the 2000s, after a decade of wrong choices regarding the reforms and their implementation, and poor economic performance with the deep economic recession of 1998 as apex, it was rather unfeasible for Putin to reset the development mechanisms of the country, following a path of isolation.

Besides the socioeconomic conditions, the foreign policy decision-making process also changed; the chaotic pluralism of the 1990s, featuring a host of decision-making agents was replaced by a more centralized decision-making scheme, comprising mainly the president and his staff.

⁴⁰ See Mankoff, Jeffrey (2009) *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, US: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, p.7.

Nevertheless, the struggle for influence among actors within the wider Russian state apparatus seemed to continue and shape to some extent the foreign policy decisions, especially those regarding the ‘near abroad’; for instance, in the case of Georgia, Russian business elites, who have strong connections with regional leaders in Russia, have sustained to a great degree the huge network of black market, which, in turn, is vital for the sustenance of the majority of the separatist region’s population. Therefore, as Scott concludes, any decision for an enduring conflict resolution in Georgia should also take seriously into account the economic interests of this business cohort.⁴¹

Notwithstanding the existence of various and often contradictory interests, the political trends regarding Russian foreign policy, the last twenty years, had as common denominator, Russia’s re-emergence as a great power; for the Eurasianists, who appear to support Russian invasion in Georgia, Russia will regain its great power status, only with the restoration of its absolute influence on its ‘near abroad’, without excluding the possibility of an open confrontation with the West.

For the opponents of Eurasianism, the conflict in Georgia can be accommodated within the wider objective of Russia’s re-emergence as a great power, which is, still, not at odds with the cooperation relations with the West. One could argue that neither Yeltsin, nor Putin showed an inclination to espouse wholly the Eurasianists’ vision for Russia’s future. Their goal was partnership with the West, but only on terms acceptable to Russia –that is to say on terms that Russia had a part in defining.

⁴¹ See Scott, Erik R. (2006) ‘Uncharted Territory: Russian Business Activity in Abkhazia and South Ossetia’ in Andreas Wenger, Jeronim Perovic and Robert W. Orttung (eds.) *Russian Business Power: The Role of Russian Business in Foreign and Security Relations*, pp. 217-238, London, UK: Routledge.

The content of Russia's confrontation with the West for the foreseeable future is likely to concern mainly the oil and gas prices and access to pipelines. Yet, taking into account the growing economic interdependence between Russia and the West, the arguments that suggest the re-emergence of a 'Cold War' era seem to be rather groundless and unverified.

With regard to the future of Georgia and the fortune of its Western orientation, it is more than obvious that the ideal upshot would be an enduring conflict resolution with the acquiescence of all the parts who get involved. The present Georgian political leadership has, indeed, many lessons to draw from either the 'no war, no peace' situation, sustained for a long period under Shevardnadze, or the recent armed conflict of 2008, which had unfavourable implications in any aspect, and thwarted further Georgia's prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration.

All things considered and in view of the growing economic uncertainty, already expanded globally, it is most likely that in the near future, Russia and Georgia will try to re-establish some forms of cooperation, mainly on the economic field, and will abstain from premeditated large-scale military operations. Besides, a proper appreciation of Russian foreign policy, through the development of new multilateral forums, would be instrumental in preventing a repeat of August 2008 events.

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