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THE CONFLICT OF ABKHAZIA AND ITS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Abstract: The conflict in Abkhazia, which erupted in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, remains one of the most significant territorial disputes in the South Caucasus. This article explores the historical, political, and geopolitical dimensions of the Abkhazian conflict, focusing on its origins, the escalation of hostilities, and the role of external actors, particularly Russia, in exacerbating the situation. The conflict, rooted in Soviet-era policies that fostered ethnic divisions, reached its peak during the War of 1992-1993, resulting in massive displacement and ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population. Despite several international attempts at peace, including the Geneva Process and multiple ceasefire agreements, the region remains under de facto Russian control, with Abkhazia functioning as a quasi-state. This article examines the long-term political consequences of the conflict on Georgia's sovereignty, the broader South Caucasus security environment, and the international community's response to the crisis. By analyzing the impact on Georgia's foreign policy, this study highlights how the Abkhazian conflict has shaped the country's alignment with Western institutions, further straining relations with Russia. Ultimately, the Abkhazian conflict serves as a complex case study of post-Soviet separatism, international diplomacy, and the lasting consequences of ethnic and geopolitical tensions. Moreover, the conflict is part of a broader pattern of unresolved and frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus, including those in Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, which continue to destabilize the region.

Key words: Abkhazia conflict, South Caucasus, Georgian-Abkhazian War, Post-Soviet separatism, Territorial integrity, Ethnic cleansing, Russian Federation, Frozen conflicts, Geopolitics of the Caucasus, Russian involvement in Abkhazia, International diplomacy, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Peace negotiations.

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unstable political situation in the South Caucasus, the determination of the different vectors by the countries and the economic crisis created a great threat to the region in terms of security and development. Several conflicts, that arose in the region, greatly damaged the political development and stability of the countries of the South Caucasus. During this period, the issue of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries came into question.

The process of formation of separatist regimes on the territory of Georgia by the Soviet Union was going on for a long time and separatist aspirations

emerged in the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the visible paradoxes of post-Soviet separatism is the phenomenon of Abkhazia. The history of the conflict in Abkhazia did not begin in the 90s, as long as it could be noticed even during the Bolshevik regime. The Soviet Union was deliberately preparing the area for ethno-conflict confrontation.

From a historical point of view, the region of Abkhazia was always considered to be an integral part of Georgia. According to the historical retrospect after the overthrow of the independent republic of Georgia and the establishment of Bolshevik rule, on March 31, 1921, Abkhazia first attempted to declare

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independence, although the current momentum was not enough to achieve the separatist goal. Instead, the above-mentioned case became the starting point for the Bolsheviks to create “Slow Action Mines”, which were intended to gradually and consistently incite separatism in threatened regions.

At the end of the 1980s, in the background of the awakening of the national-liberation movement in the Soviet Republic of Georgia, Moscow directed its efforts to mobilize separatist and anti-Georgian forces in Abkhazia. “Aidgilara”, the Abkhaz People’s Forum, created in November 1988, which was distinguished by separatism and anti-Georgian sentiment, can be considered as an example of the formation of aggressive separatism in Abkhazia. The aforementioned public forum adopted the so-called “Likhni Appeal” (resolution of the Abkhaz people, adopted in the village of Likhni and an appeal to Mikhail Gorbachev), which meant granting the status of the Soviet Republic of Abkhazia and as a result declaring independence from official Tbilisi. As a counterbalance to the current events, the tension between Abkhazians and Georgians reached its peak and resulted in separatist Abkhazians attacking the students and professors of the Sukhumi branch of Ivane Javakhishvili University¹ on July 16-17, 1989. In consequence of the conflict 14 people died and about 150 were injured. The incident was considered as the first armed conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians and had a great impact on the further development of confrontation.

Since 1989, the anti-Georgian movements in Abkhazia started to be stirred up and the conflict was provoked. The same year, the “Confederatoin of the Caucasus”, which was directly connected to the Union Security Service of the Soviet Union, was created. Confederation regarded Abkhazia as a part of it and the city of Sukhumi was considered as its capital. In December 1990, anti-Georgian Vladislav Ardzinba was elected as the chairman of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Soviet Social Republic of Abkhazia. A number of anti-constitutional resolutions were adopted by the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, including the decision regarding the creation of Abkhazian units (Guards), which contradicted the Georgian constitution thus further stirring up the ethnic conflict. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the July 23, 1992, the elite of the House of Sukhumi under the leadership of V. Ardzinba declared Abkhazia independent, which further offueled of confrontation between Georgians and Abkhazians. In the current period, the symbols of the Abkhazian separatists appeared: the flag and the coat of arms. Additionally, the operation of the Constitution of Georgia on the territory of Abkhazia was condemned

and suspended. All of the above created a problematic situation from the point of view of transport and communication security. In particular, explosions of roads and railways, robbery of freight trains and transport units became more frequent. Situation was getting aggravated by the highly volatile political climate in the country as a result of the coup d’état. Russia had analyzed the unstable situation in the country and deliberately started spreading information through the country’s leading news media that Georgian troops had declared war on Abkhazia. Despite the fact that official Moscow recognized Georgia’s independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it actively supplied Abkhazian separatists with weapons and encouraged them to fight against Georgians. Additionally, military equipment, weapons, machine guns and hand grenades were provided to the Abkhazian separatists from the Russian anti-aircraft forces.

On August 10, 1992, a certain contingent of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Defense of Georgia entered the territory of Abkhazia for the purpose of security, to ease the situation, in particular, to protect the Abkhaz railway and to disarm illegal armed formations. Although the entrance was in advance agreed upon by Vladislav Ardzinba, the Abkhaz separatists opened fire on the units, which led to the start of large-scale hostilities in the region.

The first clashes were recorded in Ochamchire and Gulrifshi districts. Georgian military units camped on the outskirts of Sukhumi to prevent bloodshed and large-scale actions. This was followed by the decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia to declare mobilization, after which the Abkhazian separatist units occupied the strategic points of Sukhumi. After the start of the hostilities, the separatists did not sign the agreement, which meant the mobilization of Georgian and Abkhazian military units of 200 men each from the Psou River to Samegrelo to ensure the safety of transport communications. From August 18, 1992 the separatist government of V. Ardzinba left Sukhumi, and at the same time, the Confederation of “Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus”, which was created by the official Moscow special services, made a decision to send militants to the region of Abkhazia. At this time, the Georgian units occupied Sukhumi and on August 19 they entered Gagra.

On September 3, 1992, on the initiative of Russia, an agreement on ceasefire and conflict resolution was signed in Moscow. In the referenced document, the point about the territorial integrity of the Republic of Georgia was emphasized. It was also mentioned in the agreement that the Russian units, which were in the territory of Georgia, would maintain

¹ Papinashvili, D. (2009). South Caucasus problems and regional stability problems. Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Publishing House. (Trans: auth. G. Jintcharadze)

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neutrality and did not interfere in the internal politics of the country. The agreement was signed by the presidents of the Russian Federation and Georgia, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze. Vladislav Ardzinba was also on the list of signatories. The Russian Federation was represented as the guarantor of the agreement.²

In the period of September 5-30, 1992, the Georgian side withdrew the units of the armed forces from the Gagra region based on the agreement. The Abkhazian side broke the agreement and on October 1, 1992, they stormed the city of Gagra with the militants of the "Confederation of Mountain Peoples", backed by the Russian Federation, and started ethnic cleansing. On October 2, a Deputy of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, head of the Gagra administration, Mikheil Jincharadze was killed for not leaving the city and for loyalty to his country. At that time, around 1,000 innocent civilians lost their lives in Gagra only. Terrible facts of the destruction of the civilian population were recorded. The Russian Federation, as the guarantor of the agreement, avoided responsibility for such a development of events and, moreover, provided direct military and financial support to the Abkhaz separatists with weapons and manpower.

From November 1992 to May 1993, Russia actively supported the Abkhazian separatists. Through their support they occupied the territories of Gagra and Tkvarcheli, as well as the Gudauta zone. With the help of the units of the Russian Federation, both the Abkhazian separatists and the units of the "mountainous people" systematically carried out direct attacks on the remaining territories of Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia.

On April 1, 1993, according to the resolution of the Parliament of Georgia, the Georgian side for the first time accused the Russian Federation of ethnic cleansing of Georgians and promoting the policy of genocide in Abkhazia. In the mentioned resolution, Russia's political action was assessed as an act of aggression, with the aim of violating the territorial integrity of Georgia and encroaching on the country's independence.³

On July 27, 1993, through the mediation of the Russian Federation, an agreement was signed between the Georgians and the Abkhazians on "Ceasefire in Abkhazia and control mechanisms for its protection".⁴ The agreement encompassed the rationale of the disarmament of the parties and the gradual delimitation of the conflict zones.⁵ Additionally, the use of any military equipment, non-agreed movement

of formations and delivery of weapons were prohibited in the conflict area, according to the agreement. The government under the leadership of Eduard Shevardnadze once more chose to believe in the peaceful role of Russia and fulfilled the agreement immediately after signing, accordingly, Georgian units with heavy equipment were withdrawn in the direction of Poti. Only two observation posts were left on the section of the Gumista River. The displaced population returned to Sukhumi and the academic year resumed. The restoration works of the city also started. As for the Abkhazian side, in contrast to the Georgian side, they did not withdraw their units, which was a direct indication of provocation. The situation was aggravated by the political situation that was taking place on the territory of Georgia, in particular, the armed clashes between the supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the government units in western Georgia.

On September 16, 1993, with the help of official Moscow military units, the Abkhaz groups violated the Sochi Agreement and launched massive attacks on the disarmed Sukhumi. It is also worth mentioning, that the attacks were mainly focused on the innocent civilians. In order to ease the situation, Eduard Shevardnadze held a meeting with the Minister of Defense of Russia Pavel Grachov, but the negotiations did not take out any results. On September 18, E. Shevardnadze issued an appeal to various countries and the Secretary General of the United Nations, where he directly exposed Russia for violating agreements and provoking Abkhazian separatism. Unfortunately, the international community did not react to the government's statements.

On September 27, 1993, despite repelling massive attacks and selfless battles, the city of Sukhumi fell. After capturing the city, the separatists organized a brutal massacre of the remaining population. In front of the government building, the separatist units shot the members of the local government, Chairman of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, Zhiuli Shartava, Guram Gabiskiria and Raul Eshba, who did not leave the city. Other members of the government were also brutally assaulted. Three days after the fall of Sukhumi, the territory of Abkhazia was completely cleansed of the ethnically Georgian population. A massive massacre began, more than 250 thousand people were forcibly displaced and became exiles in their own country. In the resolutions of the 1994 Budapest, 1996 Lisbon and 1999 Istanbul summits of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, what happened

² Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict, Document Source – Human Rights Watch (HRW), 01/03/1995

³ Papinashvili, D. (2009). South Caucasus problems and regional stability problems. Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Publishing House. (Transl. Auth: G. Jintcharadze)

⁴ ⁴ Л., А. (2002). «Абхазский вопрос»: взгляд из Тбилиси. Институт стратегических оценок и анализа.

⁵ Areshidze, M. (2014). Political interests of major players in the South Caucasus. Tbilisi: Technical University of Georgia. (Transl. Auth: G. Jintcharadze)

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during these times, was confirmed to be a genocide against Georgians.⁶

After the end of the war, Shevardnadze's government agreed to join the CIS and also accepted the presence of four Russian military bases on its territory. Despite Georgia's membership in the CIS, Russia continued to support the separatists and maintain the anti-Georgian charge. On November 26, 1994, the de facto government of Abkhazia adopted the "Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia"⁷, according to which it declared itself an independent, sovereign, democratic state. Despite the agreements on the peaceful settlement of the conflict, the Abkhazian side did not fulfill the conditions of the signed documents and changed the clauses of the agreement accordingly. Such a fact happened on April 4, 1994, at the meeting held in Moscow in the presence of the Secretary General of the United Nations, when the "Measures for political settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict" was signed. According to the Abkhazian interpretation, the document emphasized the right to sovereignty of the Abkhazian state. Relations between Russia and Georgia became even more strained and deteriorated when Boris Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister in 1999. This process was accompanied by the transformation of Russia's policy towards the issue of Abkhazia. Official Moscow deepened its ties with the separatist regime and supported the presidential elections in Abkhazia, which implied on recognition of its independence.

Since 1992, the United Nations (UN) and the UN Security Council have been involved in the peaceful settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia. In 1993, the UN developed a negotiation format known as the Geneva Process. Since 1998, the USA, Great Britain, Germany, France, and Russia have joined the Geneva negotiations. However, until now the mentioned format is being conducted on the principle of "meeting for meeting" and it has not brought any tangible results.

The conflict in Abkhazia caused great damage to Georgia's political, economic and social development. More than 9,000 Georgians died in the war in Abkhazia, including both military personnel and civilians. The Georgian population of Abkhazia, numbering approximately 250 thousand, were forcibly displaced in their own country. More than 1,500 people are considered lost in the war, whose corpses are still being transferred and buried. The conflict inflicted grave damage on Georgia and immense psychological and moral impact on its population. The infrastructure of Abkhazia region

(about 50,000 buildings, 25 units of culture and 25 units of administrative facilities) was destroyed. The railway, 450 kilometers of highway, 32 bridges, 500 kilometers of power lines, and etc. were completely destroyed. The conflict caused the most severe economic crisis.⁸

The process of alienation between Georgians and Abkhazians can be linked to the two-century rule of the Russian Empire. The feud between them and the artificial creation of the image of the enemy has been one of Moscow's important geopolitical tasks for decades. Based on the results of the war in Abkhazia, the contours of the fact that the Russian Federation bears responsibility for the armed conflict in Abkhazia, the genocide and grave human rights violations committed against the Georgian civilian population can be drawn. The geopolitical, humanitarian and security problems caused by the conflict in Abkhazia have long become a global challenge. The main starting point for the peaceful settlement of the situation is the return of internally displaced persons to their own land. Only after this, it will be possible to discuss the issues of full-scale and fair settlement of the conflict, including the decision on the political status of Abkhazia within Georgia.

As a result of the 1992-1993 war in Abkhazia, Georgia's jurisdiction over the territory of Abkhazia was terminated, and the de-facto government of Abkhazia, under the official directives of Moscow, carries out the management of the so-called Republic of Abkhazia. Today, Abkhazia exists as a quasi-state, which is governed by the influence and directives of Russia and grossly violates the territorial integrity of Georgia. There is no serious format of Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue, focused on results and goals, which implies only direct dialogue between the two parties, Georgia and Abkhazia. However, considering the aforementioned Russian control of Abkhazia, it can be considered impossible.⁹

The conflict in Abkhazia made a significant contribution to the formation of Georgia's foreign political vector. The presentation of Russia's role in the conflict allowed Georgia to turn into a satellite of the United States of America in the region. Accordingly, the country directed its foreign political vector towards Europe and Euro-Atlantic integration. Accordingly, as relations and cooperation between Georgia and the West deepened, the ties between official Moscow and Tbilisi became increasingly strained.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the most prominent examples of separatism is the 1992-1993 conflict in Abkhazia. However, it should be

⁶ ., А. (2002). «Абхазский вопрос»: взгляд из Тбилиси. Институт стратегических оценок и анализа.

⁷ Бочарников, И. (2013). Кавказская политика России. Москва: Издательство "Экон-Информ."

⁸ E-source: << <https://www.abkhazia.gov.ge/> >>

⁹ Pipinashvili, D. (2009). South Caucasus conflicts and regional stability problems. Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Publishing House. (Transl. Auth: G. Jintcharadze)

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emphasized that the conflict in the international community is recorded not as between Abkhazians and Georgians, but as one conflict - between Georgia and the Russian Federation. The conflict in Abkhazia is paradoxical from the point of view that separatism arose in the community that represented the minority of the population of the region. In particular, according to the 1989 census, about 525,000 people lived in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. Out of the whole number 45 percent were Georgians, 17.8% were Abkhazians, 14.6% were Armenians, and 14.2% were Russians. Besides, Greeks, Ukrainians,

Estonians and people from other nationalities also lived in Abkhazia. This once again emphasizes the external political and military interference and continued support on the part of the Russian Federation in fueling the conflict on the territory of Georgia.

As a final summary, it can be said that the conflict in Abkhazia, whose peaceful settlement is still unsuccessful, represents one of the most serious problems for Georgia, as well as for the stability and security of the entire region.

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