

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND
SECURITY STUDIES
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY AND FILOSOPHY
The field: International Relations and European Studies**

**RUSSIA`S POST-IMPERIAL LEGITIMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FROZEN
CONFLICTS IN ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA
(SUMMARY)**

**Doctoral adviser:
Prof.Univ. dr. Vasile Vese**

**Phd. Student:
Valeria Chelaru**

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Brief introduction to frozen conflicts

As Vicken Cheterian has put it: „the collapse of the USSR was part of a dramatic, accelerated phenomenon already taking form in different shapes and expressions on a global level: the retreat of the state.”¹ Caught in the whirlwind of the post-colonial process, post-Soviet countries had to „produce” institutions that in the past were imposed from the outside. Their recognition by international community as legitimate independent states was followed by attempts at making their own steps on international arena. The new states became members of international and regional organizations, such as the United Nations and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe – the future OSCE – and were recognized by major international and regional powers, such as the US, EU states, Turkey, and Iran. In the same time, as Gorbachev`s programmes of glasnost` and democratization had set off chain reactions of chaotic political change, Moscow was losing its grip on power and the capacity to act as an authority at the periphery. Within the power vacuum in the Caucasus various national movements clashed in the quest for new political adjustments, such as the status of Mountainous Karabakh or power arrangements in Abkhazia, etc. In spite of most of these frictions having been a reality well before perestroika, they were not old hatreds which resurfaced. It was rather the attempt at reforms that destabilized the existing political configuration, marginalized the former ruling elite within the hegemonic party, and opened up space for new political forces to emerge and eventually to clash first with Moscow and then with each other.²

The conflicts broke out in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the wake of Soviet disintegration and, as one observer noted, they have never been really „frozen”, as their nature, dynamics, and prospects changed over time. They displayed individual differences and shared the chief similarity of all having occurred in small states on the periphery of the former Soviet Union.³ Despite their economic, political, cultural, and ethnic specificities, not to mention the geopolitical aspect, the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space can be defined by some common features. Firstly, the dominant ex-titular nations have lost the battle against the so-called separatist ethnic minorities. Secondly, the territorial integrity has been damaged in

¹ Vicken Cheterian, „War and Peace in the Caucasus, Russia`s Troubled Frontier”, Hurst&Company, London 2008, p. 285.

² *Ibidem*, 288.

³ William H. Hill, „The thawing of Russia`s frozen conflicts”, In: *Russia Direct*, 23.VIII.2015, p. 10-11.

both the ex-union republics and independence-aspiring nations. Thirdly, on ideological level, the Communism in both parties involved, was replaced by nationalism. Fourthly, and to a lesser degree in Transnistria, the disputes have mobilized a massive wave of displaced people.

Chapter I. Conceptual and methodological aspects of the thesis

The first chapter of the thesis explains the technical aspects of the work: its structure, operational tools and methodology. It also pays particular attention to the the sources used for the elaboration of the study. In addition, in this part is presented the main aspects and perspectives which dominate the exploration of frozen conflicts as an analytical issues for both scholars and public opinion. As the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus have regained general attention in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, the subject has become massively politicized and deprived of deep analysis based on its historical roots. Thus, the historical dimension of the frozen conflicts is obscured by the strong emphasis which scholars put on further predictions or irrelevant debates over the role of the international political actors. In such context, the purpose of this work is mainly to explore the imperial legacies (the common history of the Abkhaz, the Ossetians, and the Georgians within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union) and trace the sources on which the centre-periphery relationship is still functional nowadays, empowering Moscow with moral and symbolic support from Tskhinvali and Sukhumi and also creating a sort of symbolic legitimacy through which could be explained and analysed Russia`s strong presence in the region.

Chapter II. The conceptualization of the terms

This chapter deals with the main operational terms of the thesis and analyses the term of “legitimacy” in the context of statehood and its “dilution” as a result of the evolution of international system as well as the development of more complex international relations. Moreover, the chapter represents the theoretical part of the thesis with a strong emphasis on the concept of legitimacy as opposed to that of legality. The aspect is particularly important as it underlines that the purpose of the study does not consist in legitimizing Russia`s role, influence or right of intervening in the frozen conflicts on Georgia`s territory; it rather uses the term of legitimacy as an explanatory mode of analyzing the tools through which Moscow gains support and authority from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to explain its symbolic and moral “right” of remaining a crucial political actor of these frozen conflicts. Combined with the practical part of the thesis, which is represented by the next chapter, “legitimacy” is

backed by the socio-political context of the two frozen conflicts in the ex-Soviet space and becomes a clear-cut definition able to sustain the analytical basis for the theories of this work.

Chapter III. Historical dimension of the interethnic conflicts

ABKHAZIA

Tsarist period: Russia's expansion and imperial consolidation in the Caucasus was officialised in 1801 through the annexation of the Georgian principality of Khartli-Kakheti. In order to to enthrone a rebel Abkhaz prince who had taken refuge in the vicinity, Russian troops entered Abkhazia from neighbouring Mingrelia. At the time of Russian intervention in the region, the two ethnic groups of the Abkhaz and the Georgians – particularly the Svans and the Mingrelians – had been bonded by strong cultural and economical relations. Recurrent uprisings against the rule of Russia and its puppet princes were harshly suppressed, and in the 1850s and 1860s many Abkhaz joined the Circassian struggle against Russian conquest. In 1864 Russia abolished the formally autonomous Abkhaz principality and placed Abkhazia under direct military administration. New uprisings followed in 1866, and then again in 1877-1878, coinciding with the war between Russia and Turkey, which backed the Abkhaz rebels. The suppression of the uprisings was accompanied by the forcible deportation of much of the Abkhaz population (perhaps as many as 100,000 people in all) to the Ottoman Empire, leaving uninhabited large tracts of land amounting to almost half the area of Abkhazia.⁴

During the last few decades of the tsarist period, there occurred a gradual transformation of what had at the outset been almost exclusively an Abkhaz-Russian confrontation into a primarily Abkhaz-Georgian conflict. This transformation accompanied the socioeconomic and political consolidation, under the aegis of tsarist Russia, of the various Kartvelian groups into the modern Georgian nation. Owing to the massive campaign of phisycal annihilation of the Abkhaz and their ethnic relatives such as the Ubykh and Circassian people, a process of forcible outmigration and the emergence of the Abkhaz diaspora started the so-called phenomenon of muhadjirstvo, which according to Thornike Gordadze represented the first tragical classification of Georgian and Abkhaz people as two distinct and

⁴ Stephen D. Shenfield, "Origins and Evolutions of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict", on-line: <http://abkhazworld.com/aw/conflict/31-origins-and-evolutions-of-the-georgian-abkhaz-conflict>, accessed on 11.XII.17, 21:07.

rival ethnic groups.⁵ The growth in anti-Georgian feeling among the Abkhaz in the late 19th century was connected to the fact that a growing proportion of the new settlers on what the Abkhaz still regarded as “their” lands were Georgians, mainly land-hungry peasants from Mingrelia, Guria, Imereti, and other densely populated lowland districts of western Georgia. As Russian authorities represented the only defenders against Abkhaz neighbouring enemies, a new balance of relations between the first, the latter and the Georgians emerged. Thus, relations between the three people living under the rule of the Russian Empire acquired the basic pattern that they retain to this day.

Soviet Abkhazia: In its early Soviet period, between 1921-1936, Abkhazia enjoyed a privileged status within the Soviet Russia. While for the Georgians the imposition of the new regime meant the loss of precious independence, for the Abkhaz it represented if not independence (ultimate power resided in Moscow) then at least a much greater degree of autonomy than they had enjoyed since 1810. Moreover, predominantly Menshevik Georgia suffered much more intense repression than Abkhazia with its strong indigenous Bolshevik movement. Nevertheless, the formal status of Abkhazia within the Soviet Union was reduced by stages to a level more in keeping with its small size. In December 1921, the Abkhaz Bolsheviks who governed Abkhazia concluded, at the urging of Moscow, a “special union treaty” with Georgia. Under the terms of this treaty, Abkhazia was no longer separate from Georgia, but it remained a Union Republic with the autonomy corresponding to that status. In 1925 Abkhazia was able to adopt its own constitution. In 1931, Abkhazia was reduced to the status of an Autonomous Republic within Georgia. The incumbent Abkhaz leadership headed by Nestor Lakoba, who remained in office for another five years, retained substantial de facto autonomy. By referring to the special conditions prevailing in Abkhazia, they were able to halt collectivization, protect Abkhazia from mass repression, and even distribute financial allowances to Abkhaz princes and nobles. The tranquility of Abkhazia presented a remarkable contrast with the upheavals in the rest of the Soviet Union during these years. Nevertheless, the alteration of the Abkhazia’s political status on one hand, and its privileged position in comparison with Georgians, brought more animosities between the two ethnic groups.

The situation got even worse in the context of “georgianisation” after 1936. As its main engineers were ethnic Georgians – Iosif Stalin and the Communist Party secretary for

⁵ Ivlian Haindrava *apud* Thornike Gordadze, “Perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict before August 2008”, in Archil Gegeshidze and Ivlian Haindrava, *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: rethinking the paradigm*, on-line: [http://www.c-r.org/downloads/Georgian%20Perspective Transformation%20of%20Georgian:Abkhaz%20Conflict 201102_ENG.pdf](http://www.c-r.org/downloads/Georgian%20Perspective%20Transformation%20of%20Georgian:Abkhaz%20Conflict%201102_ENG.pdf), accessed on 8.XII.2016, 08:15.

the whole South Caucasus, Lavrenti Beria – the new phase of hardship was put down by Abkhazians as ethnic discrimination. Thus began a period marked by the de facto elimination of Abkhaz autonomy, a reign of terror in which most of the Abkhaz political and intellectual elite perished, and the forcible Georgianization of Abkhazia and of the Abkhaz. Georgianization took two main forms. First, more Georgians were settled in Abkhazia, shifting the ethno-demographic balance further against the Abkhaz and breaking up remaining contiguous areas of Abkhaz habitation. Second, public use of the Abkhaz language was progressively restricted: Georgian place names replaced Abkhaz ones; Abkhaz writing, based since 1926 on the Latin alphabet, was switched to a version of Georgian script; radio broadcasting in Abkhaz ceased; and after the war Abkhaz was replaced by Georgian as the language of instruction in schools. The last of these measures left particularly painful memories in the minds of the generation of Abkhaz growing up at that time, for they were beaten if they spoke their native language and were forced to cope with a language of which they had no previous knowledge.

Starting with 1953 and up until the Soviet desintegration the collective memory had a great impact on Abkhaz-Georgian relationship. In addition, the „thaw” which accompanied the Khrushchev era maintained a superficial appearance of interethnic harmony, in fact there was constant latent and intermittent open tension in Abkhaz-Georgian relations at all levels – within the ruling party-state bureaucracy in Abkhazia, in cultural and educational institutions, and among ordinary people. Despite the fact that the Abkhaz were not directly persecuted, neither did they regain the degree of autonomy they had enjoyed de jure up to 1931 or de facto up to 1936. Abkhaz discontent was aroused not only by substantive grievances but also by ostensibly scholarly disputes in the field of ethnic history. They were upset by the appearance in the press of articles in which Georgian historians claimed either that the Abkhaz were just another regional variety of Georgians (like the Mingrelians or Svans) or, on the contrary, that they were “newcomers” to Georgia who originated to the north of the Great Caucasus Range, implying that they were merely “guests” on Georgian land. Moreover, since their official incorporation into the Soviet Georgia’s state structures, the reconsideration of the status of Abkhazia became a stringent priority for the Abkhaz. Periodically, in 1931, 1957, 1967 and 1977 the representatives of Abkhaz national intelligentsia requested Moscow the permission to leave Georgia and become a part of Soviet Russia, or regain their lost status as a union republic within USSR.⁶ These attitudes combined with Abkhaz asymmetrical access to

⁶ Serghei Markedonov, “De facto obrazovaniya postsovetskogo prostranstvo: dvadcat’ let gosudarstvennogo stroitel’stvo”[The emergence of the post-Soviet *de facto* space: 20 years of state consolidation],ed. Institut

resources amplified the negative feelings of the Georgians. Against a backdrop of liberalisation and rising nationalism during Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the confrontation between these ethnic groups became inevitable. Their escalation in the context of the Soviet dismemberment had set the stage for military clashes and paved the way for future frozen conflicts.

SOUTH OSSETIA

The Ossetian people within Imperial Russia: The geographical position and religion represented the two main factors which had influenced the history of the Ossetians and their relations with both Georgia and Russia. Their decision to join the Russian Empire in the XVIIIth century had been dictated by the need to leave the mountainous area to which they had been pushed in the context of the Mongol invasion. Thus, the necessity for better life conditions and the protection against much more powerful neighbours made for a natural closeness between the Ossetians and the Russian Empire. This alliance proved to be particularly profitable for St. Petersburg due to the mineral resources of the region, but more importantly, due to its geostrategic importance – the Georgian Military Highway crossing this area represented the main access route to Transcaucasia. Up until 1774 Russia could not apply its project with the Ossetian people owing to the treaty signed with Ottoman Empire in 1739. Nevertheless, its strategies in the region had been carried out by constructing and developing the Mozdok fortress, which gradually produced an amalgam of Russians, Georgians, Kabardins and Ossetians, and finally opened the first Ossetian school in 1764.⁷ In addition, Russia's promise to fully support the Ossetians to settle on lower lands of the region, and their need for security under Russian umbrella, made this people to embrace the Orthodox religion. Compared to the imperial campaigns in Abkhazia, the alliance with the Ossetians had been much more amiable from the very beginning, living no negative memory for any of the two sides.

The Soviet engineering of South Ossetia: Sergey Markedonov pointed out that „compared to Abkhazia, the historical name of South Ossetia had distinguished itself through geographical, cultural-ethnographical connotations, but not through political ones. These had been used by the Russian military men and imperial functionaries in the Caucasus during the

Kavkaza, Erevan 2012, pp. 53-54.

⁷ „Prisoedinenie Osetii k Rossii” [The accession of Ossetia to Russia], on-line: http://www.osetini.com/view_post.php?id=28, accessed on 28.IV.17. 13:43.

XIXth and the beginning of XXth century; their „politicization” was the effect of the nationalistic discourse which characterized the Caucasus in the context of the collapse of Tsarist Empire and the emergence of the new nation-states.”⁸ As was the case with the Abkhaz people, the Ossetian tendencies of self-determination and their refuse to be part of the Menshevik Georgia provoked a series of military confrontations between 1918 and 1920 which ended up with the Ossetians declaring their allegiance to Russia. The escalation of the conflict from social to interethnic sphere resulted in the death of approximately 4.800 Ossetians, the arson of 50 villages, provoking the outmigration in tragical conditions of 5000 people.⁹ Owing to the fact that Georgian-Ossetian relationship had not registered such confrontations by that moment, and rather could be described as harmonious, the events of 1920 marked a new stage in the collective memory of the Ossetians; after new clashes with Tbilisi in 2007, the Parliament of South Ossetia officialy recognised the tragedies between 1918-1920 as actions of genocide against the Ossetian people.¹⁰

Despite the hard memories of 1820-1920, in 1921 South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (AO) was created within the Soviet Georgia. The drawing of its administrative boundaries was quite a complicated process. Many Georgian villages were included within the South Ossetian AO despite numerous protests by the Georgian population. While the city of Tskhinvali did not have a majority Ossetian population, it was made the capital of the South Ossetian AO. Nevertheless, gradually, an important number of Ossetians moved to the new capital. Similar to the Abkhaz case, the history of the Georgians and the Ossetian had been connected throughout two thousand years; the fact was proved by the common fight of these people against the invading armies as well as their numerous interethnic marriages. Unlike the Abkhaz, the Ossetians and the Georgians – not only on the territory of South Ossetia, but also in other Georgian areas – had lived in mixed settlements which prevented the formation of ethnically distinct regions. Taking into consideration all these aspects, Thomas de Waal pointed out the lack of real conflict incentives between the two groups and also emphasised the political dimension to which the animosities had been pushed and exploited: the small number of Ossetians, their high level of integration into Georgian community, the shorter distance to Tbilisi compared to Vladikavkaz, and the difficulty in communicating with their kin group – all represented clear evidence of lost chances to de-escalate the future

⁸ Serghei Markedonov, „Ătnopoliticeskie konfliktî v Abhazii i v Iujnoi Osetii: pricinî, dinamika, uroki”, [The ethno-political conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: causes, dynamics, conclusions], on-line: valerytishkov.ru/engine/documents/document1996.doc, accessed on 9.V.17, 13:47.

⁹ Thomas de Waal, „The Caucasus. An Introduction”, ed. Oxford University Press, New York 2010, p. 137.

¹⁰ Declaration of the genocide of 1920 in South Ossetia, on-line: <http://www.mfa-rso.su/en/node/362>, accesat la 10.V.2017, 09:43.

conflicts.¹¹

The creation of South Ossetia represented also an important moment of identity awareness against the Georgian ethnic group. During the Soviet years, the various policies imposed according to changing administrations widened the gap between the two ethnic groups. For the Ossetians, their inferior political status within Georgia along with the denial of their ethnic union in a period marked by national ideals inculcated in them an acute sense of discrimination against Georgians. Likewise, for the Georgians, all efforts carried out by the centre in order to support the manifestation of local identity as a way of forging the idea of a unique Soviet people, exacerbated the resentment of local elite towards both Moscow and their neighbours. From a political standpoint, throughout the Soviet years, the Georgians had seen the Ossetians as an artificial entity on their territory and ethnic rivalries had lain dormant. The feelings of discrimination to the detriment of Ossetians had characterised the atmosphere in Tbilisi in the same time when Ossetians felt politically disadvantaged compared to north-Ossetians or Abkhazians, which benefitted from a higher status within the autonomous republics.¹² The indigenization (korenizatsia) favoured the Ossetians as much as Stalin's deportations in the Caucasus labelled this ethnic group "the most Sovieticized people of the Caucasus."¹³ Much like in Abkhazia the animosities between Tskhinval and Tbilisi broke out in the context of political depressurization during perestroika.

Chapter IV. From interethnic conflicts to frozen conflicts

1.REGIONAL DISSENTION OR INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS?

National Georgia in the context of new post-Soviet order: ethnicity, autonomy, conflicts:

This section of the thesis explains the changes which occurred in post-Soviet Georgia, its need to reformulate the national agenda in the context of new political realities. It argues that in the first stages, Eduard Shevardnadze as the leader of the sovereign country tried to find a balance between keeping amiable relations with the Russian state and finding new partners in the West in order to revive Georgia. He took advantage of his previous political positions in the USSR, the good reputation he had made for himself, and long-lasting relations with some Western partners. In such context, the general impression on Georgia in the western world

¹¹ Thomas de Waal, *op.cit.*, pp. 137-138.

¹² "Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia", ICG Europe Report N° 159, 26 November 2004, p. 3.

¹³ John O'Loughlin et al. *apud* Julian Birch, "The Localized Geopolitics of Displacement and Return in eastern Prigorodnyy Rayon, North Ossetia", in *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2008, N. 6, pp. 635-669, p. 642.

was that of a new progressive country determined to change its orientation on international arena. Nevertheless, the stark reality was in fact a weak and fragile country, trying to find its way out after the separation from the Soviet Union and hold in place the multitude of its social, economic, political, and ultimately, ethnic issues. Moreover, in the context of the Rose Revolution in November 2003, the situation in the country as well as the perceptions of the Western leaders had a great effect on further events in Georgia as well as on international arena. Many countries watched Georgia transition from an autocracy to a democracy, but the key players were primarily Russia and the United States. Russia was suspected of being involved in Georgia's affairs from the beginning as it was assumed to have been involved in various coup and assassination attempts of Shevardnadze. Apart from that, Moscow's influence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was seen as one of the major problem concerning Georgia's territorial integrity and state consolidation. As these two ethnic groups have always been seen as part of historical Georgia, their aspiration to gain self-determination was labelled as separatist tendencies. In addition, Mikheil Saakashvili made it clear that the priorities of new Georgian state after 2003 consisted not only in channeling the country on a different path from that of Russia while seeking close relations with USA and particularly NATO, but also in solving the problem of the frozen conflicts as a way of curbing Moscow's intervention in Georgia's domestic affairs. Indirectly backed by USA, overconfident in his abilities to confront the Kremlin and consolidate the country in a democratic and pro-western manner, he added to the already sensitive relations between regional players as well as international ones. The problem of South Ossetia and Abkhazia moved from a regional disagreement to an international and geopolitical problem.

2. RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TWO FROZEN CONFLICTS

Russia's role in maintaining the conflicts in limbo: It is noteworthy that Russia's implication in the post-Soviet frozen conflicts is bound not only to the common historical legacies from which the ethno-federalism stemmed in these regions, but also to a more complex global order which emerged at the end of the Cold War. It was due to the Soviet collapse and the birth of the unipolar international system that Russia came to reshape the stance towards its former empire and, consequently, to have been participating in a long and protracted process of uncertainties in the ex-Soviet space, as well as on the international level. After the fall of the USSR, the Kremlin had to reformulate the strategical dialogue with the new emerging states, a task which was hardly imaginable, considering that in a not far away

past they used to be entities of the same highly centralized authoritarian apparatus. Following the next years after the Soviet collapse, Moscow's approach to CIS countries vacillated between treating them as new independent states and establishing privileged interrelations based on various agreements and exchanges. As the successor state to the Soviet Union, Russia could not ignore the new problems occurring on the CIS territory, yet it understood that its capacity and resources were not able to resolve them. Nevertheless, the foundation of CIS under the aegis of Moscow, and settling privileged relations with its co-members, got Russia frustrated by its new position as a donor in exchange for political loyalty from the independent states. Moreover, based on the same mechanism, Russia exerted a strong pressure on its relations with Ukraine and other member states, concerning issues such as territory, ethnicity, economy, and military. As Nadezhda Arbatova has noted, the war in Chechnya represented the most prominent damage to Russia's national interests, including its relations with the CIS countries and the internal development of Russia's itself. Not being able to convert CIS to an integrative organization with flexible geometry, Moscow decided to take advantage of the weakest spots in the CIS countries, in order to preserve its positions in the so-called inner abroad.¹⁴ However, throughout the years of the Soviet history, Moscow's attitude towards its ethnic empire, „socialist in content but national in form”, encouraged more or less involuntarily the separatist aspirations of ethnic minorities within the various union republics. This principle became conspicuous with Stalin's Soviet nationality policy which inoculated the tradition of using the autonomous units in the union republics in order to counterbalance the nationalist stirrings of the titular nation. Most frequently, favouring a certain ethnic group equated to local elites of the autonomous entities gaining a disproportionate access to resources, as long as their loyalty to the centre was unquestioned. In the late period of perestroika, Moscow applied again this procedure and largely supported both Abkhazia and South Ossetia against Georgia politically and, after the outbreak of hostilities, militarily as well. As the crumbling status-quo in the wake of the Soviet disintegration gave way to nationalistic assertiveness of the titular nations, the small ethnic entities responded by natural attempts at preservation. Secessionism in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria was originally a reaction towards safeguarding the Soviet Union by revitalizing its federal structure.¹⁵ In many respects, theoretically and practically, Moscow

¹⁴ Nadezhda Arbatova, *Замороженные конфликты в контексте европейской безопасности*. [Frozen conflicts in the context of European security], In: *Index Bezopasnosti*. Vol. 94, No. 3, Tom 16, p. 57-66. On-line: http://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/0/1340702241_0.pdf/, accessed on: 13.I.18, 15:23, p. 60.

¹⁵ Michael S. Bobick, „Separatism redux. Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia's de facto states”, In: *Anthropology Today*, 2014, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp.3-8, on-line: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467->

remains the ex-imperial core towards which the periphery represented by former Soviet ethnic minorities would turn for help and directions. To a certain degree, the Soviet emphasis on ethnic multicultural diversity not only led subsequently to alternative identity institutionalization, but also resulted in Russia to symbolize the sole defender against discriminatory nationalism in its former titular republics. Perceiving threats and backings as normal phenomenon of daily life, separatism in the regions of frozen conflicts not only is indirectly prolonged by Russia, but also acts as a mechanism of identity shaping. Rogers Brubaker pointed out how ethnicities can act as modes of identification by simply situating oneself in relation to others. He also considered religion, nationality and ethnicity as „ways of understanding and identifying oneself, making sense of one`s problems, predicaments, identifying one interests, orienting one`s action.”¹⁶

Moscow`s most evident way of sustaining the disputes derives from the simple fact that de facto statehood in the breakaway republics is only possible due to Russian military and financial support. From the very inception of separatist movements in the post-Soviet space, Moscow has been involved in the process and greatly influenced all subsequent stages of the conflicts. In all the cases here discussed, the separatism emerged after a smaller group of population declared their independence against the de jure state. The following step represented a power shift towards a nationalistic framework which emphasized the marginalization of minority groups perceiving themselves ethnically and linguistically outside of the nation. Legitimacy had been achieved via the referendum, and finally, Moscow stabilized the situation with an one-sided peace-agreement (Transnistria), annexation (Crimea), or international recognition (Abkhazia and South Ossetia).¹⁷ The process has been also backed up continuously through military aid and despite Russia claiming neutrality as was the case in Transnistria, the 14th Army provided weapons and logistical support during the civil war between the separatists and ex-titular nation.¹⁸

In terms of material benefits, all frozen conflicts are heavily reliant on Russian subsidies. This Soviet era practice has been particularly preserved in Abkhazia, where the

[8322.12108/epdf?r3_referer=wol&tracking_action=preview_click&show_checkout=1&purchase_referrer=www.google.ro&purchase_site_license=LICENSE_DENIED_NO_CUSTOMER](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/brubaker/Publication%20s/religion_and_nationalism_forthcoming.pdf), accessed on 19.XII.17, 9:50.

¹⁶ Rogers Brubaker, „Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches”, p. 4, on-line: [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/brubaker/Publication s/religion_and_nationalism_forthcoming.pdf](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/brubaker/Publication%20s/religion_and_nationalism_forthcoming.pdf), accessed on 16.I.18, 14:33.

¹⁷ Michael S. Bobick, „Separatism redux. Crimea, Transnistria, and Eurasia`s de facto states”, In: *Anthropology Today*, 2014, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp.3-8, on-line: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8322.12108/epdf?r3_referer=wol&tracking_action=preview_click&show_checkout=1&purchase_referrer=www.google.ro&purchase_site_license=LICENSE_DENIED_NO_CUSTOMER, accessed on 19.XII.17, 9:50.

¹⁸ Michael O. Slobodchikoff, „Building Hegemonic Order Russia`s Way”, ed. Lexington Books, Lanham 2014, p.23.

competition for resources such as money transfers from Moscow, but also over cadre positions and control of profitable segments of the shadow economy, accounted for most of political frictions between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.¹⁹ The economic situation in Abkhazia since independence has registered a modest increase, which combined with the financial support from Moscow has developed the conviction that independent statehood is viable in the long term, even in the absence of broad-international recognition given the region's continued attraction to million Russian tourists. In addition, recent information shows that 25% of Abkhazia's annual budget comprises subsidies from Russia, not to mention the heavily financed infrastructure programmes for roads, schools, public buildings and agriculture. The situation is even more suggestive in South Ossetia, where total dependence on Russian funds is mainly conditioned by the need for rebuilding infrastructure and industrial capacity destroyed during the 2008 war with Georgia. In such light, chances for the region to join the Russian Federation, directly or through the union with North Ossetia-Alania, have increased in the last years. Apart from diplomatic, economic, and social aid, Moscow grants all the de facto states Russian passports, an issue of which many analysts have been massively disapproving. Transnistria's international indeterminacy, as is the case with the other frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, has been devastating in both social and economic aspects. The state's population has reduced from 750.000 in early 1990s to less than 500.000 today.²⁰ This can be mainly attributed to economic out-migration and to the fact that the disproportionately old people constituting almost 40% of the population are encouraged to remain by higher Russian pension supplements. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are facing similar population loss. The latter's populace fell from 98,527 in 1989 to an estimated 40.000, whereas Abkhazia has shrunk from 525.061 – over 45% of which were ethnic Georgians – to 240.000, an estimate considered high by some.²¹ From this perspective, Vladimir Putin's much cited „geopolitical catastrophe” of the Soviet breakdown resonates with most de facto states. The Russian Federation significant symbolic and material benefits combined with the profound loss associated with the Soviet collapse not only generates a sense of reciprocation²²

¹⁹ Christoph Zürcher, „The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus”, ed. New York University Press, New York 2007, pp. 118-125.

²⁰ Michael Bobick, „Active Measures: Separatism and Self-Determination in Russia's Near Abroad”, in: Council for European Studies, 24.IV.2014, on-line: <http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/activemeasures-separatism-and-self-determination-in-russiasnear-abroad>, accessed on 11.I.18, 13:35.

²¹ Gerard Toal, John O'Loughlin, „How people in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria feel about annexation by Russia”, In: The Washington Post, 20.III. 2014, on-line: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkeycage/wp/2014/03/20/how-people-in-south-ossetia-abkhaziaand-transnistria-feel-about-annexation-by-russia/>, accessed on 11.I.18, 14:20.

²² Michael Bobick, „Active Measures: Separatism and Self-Determination.....”

in the breakaway regions, but also perceive Moscow as the sole guarantor of their sovereignty. Social studies on public attitudes and internal dynamics within the post-Soviet the fact states carried out after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 indicated a strong pro-Russian inclination in South Ossetia and decisive aims at preserving the independence granted by Moscow in Abkhazia, respectively. What is more, over 75% of the Abkhaz, Armenians and Russian in Abkhazia and Ossetians in South Ossetia want the Russian troops on their territory to „remain forever.”²³ In a context in which these populations see themselves as the targets of Georgian military aggression, the Russian troops` presence gives them a sense of security and stability.

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