

“PASSPORT POLITICS”: PASSPORTIZATION AND TERRITORIALITY IN THE DE  
FACTO STATES OF GEORGIA

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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In 2002, the Russian government began distributing tens of thousands of Russian passports in the *de facto* states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some scholarly attention has been devoted to this process, known as passportization, but most of the literature treats passportization as a primarily political process, ignoring its geographic aspects. This thesis shows that passportization in Abkhazia and South Ossetia amounted to a process of "biocolonization," wherein the populations of the *de facto* states were discursively captured by Russia through individual naturalization. Consequently, passportization served to create "Russian spaces" within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia and, in the process challenged international legal norms rooted in the logic of the modern state system.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

То, что существует, не признаётся.  
То, что признаётся, не существует.

(That which exists is not acknowledged.  
That which is acknowledged does not exist.)  
-Soviet-era proverb

On August 8, 2008, on the first day of the Summer Olympics in Beijing, the Russian 19<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Division crossed into Georgian territory. The invasion was justified on the grounds that Georgia was engaging in genocide in South Ossetia and that Russian citizens, whom the Kremlin had a duty to protect, were caught in the crossfire. Only four days later, the fighting was over. The Georgian military had been routed, Russia controlled the main highway connecting eastern and western Georgia, effectively bisecting the country, and much of Georgia's infrastructure lay in ruins. What became known as the Five Day War provoked an avalanche of criticism and commentary in the Western press. Much of this commentary focused on assigning blame for the war to one side or the other, trying to fit the conflict into some larger ideological framework, or attempting to find in it some greater meaning or lesson for policymakers regarding the future of European security and Russia's place in it. Was the war Moscow's response to the West's support for Kosovo's independence? Were these the opening moves of a "new Cold War?"

The exact causes of the Five Day War remain obscure. Some argue that the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, provoked the attack by recklessly trying to

reestablish Tbilisi's jurisdiction in South Ossetia.<sup>1</sup> Others maintain that the invasion had been in the works for years, and that the timing of it was basically incidental.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the true reason, the Kremlin ultimately claimed that it had a right and duty to defend Russian citizens in South Ossetia, whom, it claimed, had come under attack by Georgian forces. An attack on its citizens, even if they lived beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, was treated as an attack on the territory of Russia itself. Numerous commentators<sup>3</sup> have pointed out that the "citizens" in question were neither ethnic Russians, nor did they have any factual connection to Russia itself.<sup>4</sup> Their status as Russian citizens, in fact, was the product of a relatively recent program of "passportization," the mass conferral of Russian citizenship on non-Russians living outside the borders of the Russian Federation.

Unfortunately, much of what has been written about the Five Day War has largely ignored the issue of passportization. When passportization is mentioned, it is usually treated in a somewhat cursory fashion. Most commonly, it is simply noted that the newly naturalized Russian citizens conveniently constituted populations that Russia was able to justify "defending" in accordance with Article 61 of the Russian Constitution, which pledges "defense and patronage" to Russian citizens living beyond the borders of the

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Thomas, "The Bear Went Through the Mountain: Russia Appraises its Five-Day War in South Ossetia," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 22 (2009): 33-35.

<sup>2</sup> Andrei Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe & Co., 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Illarionov, 56.; Ronald Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), 42.

<sup>4</sup> According to the official European Union report on the war, "[a] sufficient factual relationship is created by residence in the territory, when the person to be naturalized has a biological (family) relationship to the state, and when he or she was in the governmental service of the state." See: Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG), *Report Vol. 2* (2009), 160.

Russian Federation. The traditional narrative of the war thus argues that passportization simply created a convenient excuse for Russia to go to war; Other factors, such as "revenge for Kosovo," "punishment for American meddling in Russia's 'backyard,'" and "preventing Georgia from joining NATO" are commonly cited as the proximate causes of the conflict.

While not necessarily dismissing these popularly accepted explanations for the war, I argue that passportization had important territorial and legal repercussions, and was therefore a far more complex phenomenon than is normally understood, one that cannot be reduced to a mere ploy to manufacture a *casus belli*. Passportization was also a means of subverting the norms of international law and the modern state system by discursively laying claim to parts of Georgia's territory and quietly violating the principle of territorial sovereignty. One scholar has aptly called passportization "the instrumentalization of citizenship to justify territorial claims... a form of imperialism by civic means."<sup>5</sup>

Although passportization was not introduced until 2002, it was one of the most drastic measures taken by the Russian government to solidify its hold over the secessionist territories.<sup>6</sup> It also had the most far-reaching consequences. By converting the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russian citizens, not only did Russia grant itself *de facto* veto rights over any decisions made in Tbilisi regarding the status of the secessionist provinces, it also contributed to the effective territorial dismemberment of the Georgian state. As a result of passportization, which exploited the longstanding

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<sup>5</sup> Florian Mühlfried, "Citizenship at War: Passports and Nationality in the 2008 Russian-Georgian Conflict," *Anthropology Today* 26, no. 2 (2010): 9.

<sup>6</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 2*, 147.

discursive link between population and territory, any attempt by Georgia to re-integrate the *de facto* states would immediately escalate to an inter-state conflict with the Russian Federation; any attack on Abkhazia or South Ossetia would be treated as an attack on Russia itself. In effect, passportization created "Russian spaces" within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia in which the government in Moscow had more effective control than even the authorities in Tskhinvali or Sokhumi, to say nothing of officials in Tbilisi.

Against this backdrop, the passportization can be viewed as a last-ditch attempt to prevent the collapse of a political-territorial regime that persisted since the early 1990s rather than as an excuse to start a war. When Abkhazia and South Ossetia attempted to break away from Georgia shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia sided with the separatists, ensuring that Georgia had little chance of prevailing in its attempts to prevent their secession. Once the fighting ended, however, the government in Moscow stopped short of recognition for the new *de facto* states. Instead, it established peacekeeping missions and began to provide significant political and economic support for the separatist regimes.

This arrangement was consistent with Russian policy elsewhere in former Soviet realm. Hoping to preserve Russian influence in the newly independent states at a relatively low cost, the Kremlin opted to "freeze" the conflicts in Georgia. Moscow stepped in as a putative mediator between Tbilisi and the *de facto* regimes and Russian military personnel led the peacekeeping forces in the region, but in reality the Kremlin worked to prevent a real rapprochement between Georgia and the separatists. Until 2008, Russian recognition of the *de facto* states hung over the head of the government in Tbilisi

like a Sword of Damocles, forcing the Georgian government to accommodate Russia's interests.

Due to its focus on the link between passportization and territory, this thesis avoids trying to answer questions such as "who shot first" or to confirm or refute explanations such as the "Kosovo" or "NATO" theses. These topics have already been the subject of numerous treatments by Ronald Asmus, David Smith, and others.<sup>7</sup> Nor do I take a position on whether Abkhazia and South Ossetia are morally or historically deserving of statehood. Instead, this thesis explores the largely neglected territorial aspects of passportization as well as its implications for international law, putting passportization, as well as the wider conflict between Georgia and Russia, into a historical context.

The study begins with a discussion of Soviet nationality policy. When the Soviet Union fell apart, the internal borders that were drawn by Soviet cartographers frequently became sites of violence between competing ethnic groups. The thesis goes on to trace the contours of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy. If it was Soviet nationality policy that set the stage for the violence that erupted in Georgia in the 1990s, then it was Russian involvement that eventually "froze" the conflicts and helped to prevent their resolution. Support for the *de facto* regimes in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali was perceived by Moscow as a low-cost means of keeping Georgia destabilized and reestablishing Russian hegemony in the Transcaucasus. In the wake of Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, however, the new Western-oriented and reformist government began to undermine Russian hegemony

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World.*; David Smith, "The Saakashvili Administration's Reaction to Russian Policies Before the 2008 War," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe & Co., 2009), 122-142.

by openly declaring its commitment to joining NATO and taking more aggressive steps toward reestablishing Georgia's territorial integrity.

The fifth chapter of this study investigates the territorial and legal aspects of passportization. Russia soon realized that it could no longer rely upon the presence of its peacekeeping forces alone to discourage Georgia from attempting to revise the *status quo*. The chapter also documents how passportization was employed to capture the populations of the *de facto* states, a process I call "biocolonization." The result of this process was the discursive redefinition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "Russian spaces" within the borders of Georgia. It was in defense of the residents of these territories that Russia went to war in 2008, invoking the controversial and little-used legal concept of the protection of nationals abroad to justify its invasion of Georgia.

Beyond the obvious fact, then, that it created a potential *casus belli* to justify Russia's invasion of Georgia, passportization is also problematic in terms of international law and presents distinct challenges to the logic of the modern state system. Not only did the large-scale naturalization of Georgian citizens represent a fairly clear violation of Georgia's territorial sovereignty and personal jurisdiction, but the net result of passportization was the creation of two new and largely unrecognized states in the South Caucasus. In the aftermath of the conflict, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, although their legal status remains unclear. Despite that the international community maintains that the recognition of Kosovo is a *sui generis* case, Russia has nevertheless cited Kosovo as a precedent for recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, raising questions about whether they themselves will be seen as having set a precedent for the recognition of other separatist territories elsewhere in the world.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Even seemingly small and unimportant political territories have the capacity to empower, differentiate, and provide meaning and identity...  
-Robert Ostergren<sup>8</sup>

As is the case with most military conflicts, the Five Day War did not materialize out of thin air. The war that broke out between Russia and Georgia in 2008 was the product of numerous historical and political circumstances that date back in some cases to the early 1920s, if not before. Of particular importance to the political and territorial situation in post-Soviet Georgia was Soviet nationality policy, which was responsible for initially constituting Abkhazia and South Ossetia as autonomous units subordinate to the government in Tbilisi.<sup>9</sup> The political borders drawn by Soviet ethnographers frequently did not conform to the actual distribution of populations; this was no accident. The Soviet government created numerous pseudo-autonomous ethno-territorial units, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and subordinated them to larger, more powerful republics, like Georgia. This practice effectively built instability and inter-communal friction into the territorial network of the USSR. Writing in 1992, Minogue and Williams once noted the “curious fact” that, in their words, “the Bolsheviks seem to have created, quite deliberately, some of the problems they now face.”<sup>10</sup> With the Soviet government playing the role of peacemaker, the system held together for several decades. However, fuelled by

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Ostergren, “Defining Liechtenstein,” in *Borderlines and Borderlands*, ed. Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 138.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), 412.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Minogue and Beryl Williams, “Ethnic Conflict in the Soviet Union: The Revenge of Particularism,” in *Thinking Theoretically about Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR*, ed. Alexander Motyl (New York, Columbia University Press, 1992), 226.

the sudden availability of ethno-nationalism as an ideological alternative to Communism during the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the 1980s, the autonomous regions of Georgia began to demand independence from Tbilisi, just as Georgia itself was seeking independence from the Soviet Union. The result was the outbreak of bitter wars between the Georgian government and the separatist movements in the early 1990s.

Ultimately, it was thanks to Russian support, military and otherwise, that the secessionist regimes were able to survive.<sup>11</sup> After an initial period of withdrawal from its former empire, the Russian government eventually reengaged in the so-called "near abroad." Moscow's patronage of the separatist governments in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali states can be seen as a continuation of the old Soviet policy of "divide and rule," which been a key feature of Russian imperialism in the Caucasus for centuries.<sup>12</sup> By the time the Five Day War broke out in 2008, the long-simmering conflict between the Georgian government and the separatist regimes had been transformed from an inter-ethnic conflict between the secessionist regimes and metropolitan Georgia into an interstate conflict between Georgia and Russia, one in which the *de facto* states themselves played a somewhat peripheral role.

### ***2.1: Georgia Until 1918***

Fifteen independent states emerged out of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some, such as Kazakhstan, had no history of statehood prior to their creation as Soviet republics. Other states could point to a long historical existence that in some cases predated both the Soviet and Russian Empires. In Georgia, as in the Baltic States, a long pre-

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<sup>11</sup> Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York, New York University Press, 2007), 135.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Soviet history proved to be a potent rallying point for the incipient nationalist movement. Inspired by discourses of anti-imperialism that emphasized Georgia's historical and cultural distinctiveness, the Georgian national movement quickly became one of the most powerful in the in the late Soviet Union. Ghia Nodia has described the Georgian nationalists' uncompromising stance, writing that

[t]he predominance of radical philosophy could be explained by the Georgian political heritage. Historical memory traced Georgia's glorious past as an independent country to medieval times. Decades of communist rule had destroyed the elements of civil society that had emerged before the forcible Soviet occupation of 1921, and had left the intellectual elite, and the general public, with mostly medieval ideals of political behavior. The heroic 'irreconcilable' stance had much stronger appeal than the search for concrete political means of achieving specific ends. The radical mood was characterized by a lack of (if not contempt for) political sobriety and tolerance.<sup>13</sup>

The vehemence with which Georgian nationalists argued for separation from Russia has its roots in the conflicted relationship between Georgia and Russia, which dates from the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout history, the Caucasus region has been a proverbial "crossroads of empires." Various falling under the control of the Roman, Persian, Mongol, Ottoman, and Russian empires, Georgia, being small and relatively weak, has often had little choice but to accept domination by its more powerful neighbors. Russia began to throw off the shackles of Mongol dominance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and Georgia, which had Christianized in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, began to see the growing Orthodox power to its north as a possible protector against its traditional suzerains, the Ottoman and Persian Empires. The Georgian monarchy's appeals to Russia produced few tangible results, however, until 1801, when Tsar Aleksandr I politically annexed eastern

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<sup>13</sup> Ghia Nodia, "Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia," in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels, VUBPRESS, 1996), 76.

Georgia. Although the Russian Empire had established a presence in the western part of Georgia as early as 1812, this region, which included Abkhazia, was not fully integrated until 1864, when it was ceded to the Tsar by the Ottoman Empire. The fact that the western part of the country was considered a separate territory, only coming under Russian control at a relatively late date would eventually prove to be a crucial factor in Abkhaz territorial discourses, which emphasized Abkhazia's "historical separateness" from the rest of Georgia.<sup>14</sup>

While annexation by Russia more or less ensured that the Orthodox Georgians would remain free from Islamic rule, it also laid the foundations for a centuries-long tension between Georgia and Russia. From the very beginning, Georgia felt abused by its more powerful neighbor. For instance, not long after annexing Georgia, Tsar Aleksandr, after initially promising to leave the Georgian ruling monarchy on the throne, instead abolished outright the Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, as it was called at the time.

As historian Ronald Suny notes:

By unilaterally removing the [Bagratid dynasty] from the [Georgian] throne, Alexander ended any pretense of Georgian acquiescence in Russia's actions. Instead of signing a treaty of mutual consent, the tsar made the final decision without even consulting the Georgian representatives in St. Petersburg.<sup>15</sup>

Such imperial arrogance would become all too familiar to Georgian elites, whose wariness of Russian – and later, Soviet – power has its roots in centuries of highhanded imperial arrogance.

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<sup>14</sup> Stanislav Lak'oba, "History: 18<sup>th</sup> Century – 1917," in *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, ed. George Hewitt (Richmond, Curzon, 1999), 84.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994), 59.

After annexation, Georgia became a key part of the Russian Empire. Its capital, which at that time was known by its Armenian name, Tiflis, was considered to be one of the empire's most cosmopolitan cities. The Georgian aristocracy was highly integrated into Imperial power structures, with numerous Georgians, such as the famous Pyotr Bagration, who fought against Napoleon, holding high rank in Russian society. The bulk of Georgian society, meanwhile, remained predominantly agrarian. Ethnic Russians oversaw the administration of the territory while Armenians largely controlled the economy.<sup>16</sup> The predominantly rural nature of pre-Soviet Georgian society is illustrated by the fact that, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic Georgians only made up just over a quarter of the population in their own capital city, while Armenians were nearly 40%. A century early, Armenians had constituted over 75% of Tiflis' population, while most Georgians remained peasants.<sup>17</sup>

Russian and Armenian control of the country largely relegated the native Georgian aristocracy to the management of their own estates, which left them particularly vulnerable to the changing social currents in the Russian Empire. Indeed, when Tsar Aleksandr II abolished serfdom in 1861, the Georgian aristocracy had few means of supporting itself and swiftly became impoverished. It was around this time that the Georgian national movement began to coalesce, and it is important to note that the nascent national movement was almost entirely limited to the upper class, which resented its perceived oppression at the hands of Russians and Armenians.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 116.

If nationalist ideas began to gain a foothold among the upper classes, socialist ideas began to acquire a great deal of currency among the growing Georgian working class in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As in Russia, the growth of socialism was driven to a large extent by the migration of the peasantry into cities in search of work after the abolition of serfdom.<sup>18</sup> In Georgia, however, socialist ideas quickly became intertwined with nationalism. "In the view of the Marxists," writes Suny, "Georgia could be returned to the Georgians only when the revolution eliminated the dual domination of Russian bureaucracy and Armenian industrialists."<sup>19</sup> While it would be a mistake to portray socialist agitation in Georgia as being primarily a nationalist project, the anti-imperialism embedded in Marxist discourses nevertheless lent itself to the Georgian national struggle. In the words of one historian, Georgians became known as

perhaps the most sophisticated Marxists in the empire, taking over from the Austrian Marxists the notion of individual cultural autonomy as the best way of making possible inter-ethnic cooperation in a multi-national state. They also adapted their original agrarian programme so that it met the demands of peasants, and in that way were able to make themselves the leading political force in the countryside as well as the towns.<sup>20</sup>

As Marxism gained more widespread support in Georgia, however, major cleavages began to develop in the movement. As in Russia, perhaps the most famous – and ultimately the most historically significant – was the schism between the moderate Menshevik and the more radical Bolshevik factions. After the February Revolution of 1917, the Mensheviks, led by the popular Noe Zhordania, seized control of the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001), 386.

government. Zhordania later criticized the October Revolution in Russia, condemning the new Bolshevik government "illegitimate and irresponsible."<sup>21</sup> Despite presiding over a weak, post-colonial economy and an unstable political landscape, the Mensheviks enjoyed widespread support throughout Georgia, although both the Ossetian and Abkhaz populations supported the Bolsheviks.

The collapse of the Russian Empire severely undermined the old center-periphery relationship between Russia and its former colonies, and the need for some semblance of political structure in the Transcaucasus during the chaos of the Civil War forced the Mensheviks to accede to the creation of the Democratic Federative Republic of Transcaucasia, a short-lived attempt to unite Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. In April of 1918, Turkey, eager to aggrandize its territory at the expense of Russia, began to pressure the Transcaucasian Republic to declare its independence. The Transcaucasian Republic proved to be politically unworkable, however, and Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were all more interested in pursuing their own national interests than they were in regional cooperation. The republic disintegrated into its constituent parts after only one month, leaving the Mensheviks in control of the first independent Georgian state in over a century.

This period of independence, although it was brief, was a crucial moment in Georgian history. For the first time in centuries, Georgia was free from external control, whether Russian, Turkish, or Persian. Despite grievous economic problems, many of which were the result of centuries of Russian domination, the government enjoyed

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<sup>21</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 191.

genuine popularity.<sup>22</sup> When Georgia once again became an independent state in 1991, Menshevik Georgia the only previous example of self-government that the country's political class could draw upon. The importance of the Menshevik period on post-Soviet Georgia was reflected by the fact that the new Georgian republic quickly reverted to the flag flown by the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia between 1918 and 1921. The brevity of Georgia's existence as an independent state in the modern era, however, also left it without a deeply rooted political tradition, which led to confusion and chaos when it seceded from the Soviet Union.

Having finally achieved independence from Russia, Georgia was once again to fall victim to Russian imperialism. In 1920 Lenin signed a treaty giving up all Russian claims to Georgian territory.<sup>23</sup> The Bolsheviks soon violated this accord. In an echo of Tsar Aleksandr I's abolishment of the Georgian monarchy in 1801, the Red Army invaded Georgia in 1921 to support a Bolshevik insurrection in southern Georgia, an uprising that Azerbaijani and Armenian Bolsheviks had organized in the first place.<sup>24</sup> The Menshevik government was quickly toppled and, within a year, Georgia had once again been merged with its neighbors. The new state called the Federal Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of Transcaucasia (FSSSRZ), once again combined Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The decision to create the FSSSRZ was strenuously opposed even by Georgian Bolsheviks, but in the end, they were overruled by Moscow. By the end of 1922, the FSSSRZ itself had once again been reorganized, this time into the

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Parsons, "Georgians," in *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union*, ed. Graham Smith (New York, Longman, 1990), 181.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>24</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 206-7.

Transcaucasian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic (ZSFSR), which was forced to join the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Interestingly, while the ZSFSR itself theoretically had the right to secede from the Soviet Union, none of its constituent parts were afforded the right to secede either from the ZSFSR or from the Soviet Union itself. There can be little doubt that this arrangement was intended to prevent Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan from attempting individually to assert their independence from the Soviet state. It was only in 1936, when Soviet control was firmly established in the region, the states of the Transcaucasus once again became separate republics. As discussed later in this chapter, Soviet laws regarding the rights of different kinds of federal units to secede would prove to be of paramount importance in building ethno-territorial conflict into the geography of post-Soviet Georgia.

## ***2.2: The Soviet Period***

From its very inception, the Soviet government was faced with the problem of trying to implement a putatively internationalist socialist ideology in an empire characterized by a high degree of ethnic diversity. There is no room here, of course, to delve too deeply into the details of Soviet nationality policy.<sup>25</sup> Suffice it to say, however, that from its very inception the Soviet Union was organized around the principle of ethno-territorial “autonomy.” Georgia's modern-day territorial configuration, moreover, is a direct result of the application of Soviet nationality policy. As will become clear, the

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<sup>25</sup> For a number of good studies, see: Ronald Wixman, *Language Aspects of Ethnic Patterns & Processes in the North Caucasus* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1980), 121-169.; Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR.*; Robert Conquest, ed. *The Last Empire: Nationality and the Soviet Future* (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1986).; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993).

repercussions of these policies lie at the very heart of the events that resulted in the Five Day War.

### ***2.2.1: The Territorial Organization of the Soviet Union***

By the end of the Civil War, most of the former Russian Empire had come under Soviet control. Before the Revolution, Marxists had engaged in heated debates over the so-called "national question," or how socialism, which was conceived of at the time as an internationalist movement, was to relate to the problem of nationalism. Some socialists, such as Rosa Luxemburg, argued that nationalism was corrosive to proletarian unity and that territorial autonomy based on national identity was impermissible.<sup>26</sup> Others, like Otto Bauer and other so-called "Austro-Marxists," were heavily influenced by the fraught national politics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They favored of what they called "cultural autonomy." Cultural autonomy was an arrangement in which different groups would live in a multi-ethnic state and have the right to manage their own affairs while not possessing any particular territory of their own.<sup>27</sup> Still others, such as Lenin and Stalin, advocated full territorial autonomy for minorities, arguing that democracy was impossible without the right to self-determination, which would remain impossible unless national groups controlled their own territories and had the right to secede.<sup>28</sup>

When the Bolsheviks assumed control over the remnants of the multi-ethnic Russian empire, the "national question" became much more than a purely theoretical

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<sup>26</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The National Question: Selected Writings by Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Horace B. Davis (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1976), 102-103.

<sup>27</sup> Otto Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 260.

<sup>28</sup> Josef Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," in *Marxism and the National Question: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York, International Publishers, 1942), 64.

problem. On the one hand, while Lenin supported territorial autonomy, he remained wary of ethno-federalism. He feared that the subordination the various ethnic territories to a central Russian government could eventually result in a return to the sort of Great Russian chauvinism that had characterized the late Tsarist era. On the other hand, Lenin had, following contemporary Marxist thought, originally assumed that economic factors would discourage separatism. Events proved him wrong. After the rapid secession of virtually all of the Russian Empire's minority populations, Lenin no longer harbored any illusions that non-Russian nationalities would willingly remain yoked to Russia if given the chance to secede. Reluctantly, then, Lenin acceded to proposals to establish the Soviet Union as a federal state comprised of national republics, all of which were nominally equal in status.

In reality, real power was not invested in the republics themselves. Instead, the supposedly "above national" Communist Party assumed control of the state and the republics had only a limited amount of autonomy in making policy. The amount of actual independence enjoyed by a given republic depended on its level of autonomy, but in the end most important decisions wound up being dictated from "the center." The result was an arrangement that historian Richard Pipes has described as "a peculiar brand of pseudo-federalism that provided neither equality nor authority" to the republics.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, the Soviet Union wound up being organized as a rigidly hierarchical state. Beneath the "all-Union" level were the Union Republics (Georgia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, etc.). Beneath the Union Republics were the Autonomous Republics (ASSRs) and Autonomous Oblasts (AOs), like Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Svante

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York, Vintage Books, 1996), 108.

Cornell has described the Union Republics as "smaller versions of the [Soviet] Union itself, with parliaments, constitutions, and virtually all the state structures enjoyed by independent states," while Autonomous Oblasts and Republics were usually limited to deciding on certain cultural policies, although they too had some institutions of state.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, Union Republics possessed the legal right to secede from the Soviet Union, although Stalin once wryly observed that "[o]f course, none of our republics would actually raise the question of seceding..."<sup>31</sup>

Crucially, the right to secede was *only* given to Union Republics; territorial units with lower levels of autonomy had to petition their Union Republic or the authorities in Moscow to effect any change in their status. The fact that only Union Republics were allowed the right to secede was to have serious repercussions in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union was in the process of disintegration. Under Soviet law, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) had the right to withdraw from the Soviet Union, but neither South Ossetia nor Abkhazia, both of which desired to separate from Georgia, could legally secede without authorization from both Moscow and Tbilisi. Ultimately, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had little choice but to resort to violence to achieve their goal of independence.

Soviet nationality policies, however, gave even Autonomous Republics and Oblasts a number of benefits, including, in some cases, access to native language education for non-Russian speakers. The state also implemented a number of "affirmative

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<sup>30</sup> Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (Richmond, Curzon, 2001), 41.

<sup>31</sup> Josef Stalin, "The National Question and the Soviet Constitution," in *Marxism and the National Question: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York, International Publishers, 1942), 220.

action" policies that gave the titular nationality<sup>32</sup> of a given republic preferential access to primary schooling, higher education, jobs, and positions in the government. Similar benefits did not accrue to non-titular nationalities living in the same republic. This meant, for instance, that Georgians and Mingrelians, who made up nearly half of the population of Abkhazia, found themselves at a severe disadvantage in relation to ethnic Abkhaz, who made up less than a quarter of the population.<sup>33</sup> Unsurprisingly, ethnic Georgians began to feel discriminated against. As Soviet power began to wane, the state was increasingly unable to moderate such disputes, and the bottled-up tensions that resulted from Soviet "affirmative action" policies became increasingly difficult to keep in check.

### ***2.2.2: Practical Applications of Soviet Nationality Policy***

During the Imperial period, internal borders between regions where different national groups lived were seldom demarcated. While numerous administrative districts were created, these borders were often drawn in accordance to the structure of military commands or the requirements of colonial government. During the early Soviet period, however, the government was constantly involved in the project of drawing and re-drawing its internal borders in accordance with Lenin and Stalin's theories regarding national self-determination. Although some analysts have described Soviet border drawing as "arbitrary,"<sup>34</sup> this should not be taken to mean that it was without rhyme or reason. While geography and population size played an important role in determining

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<sup>32</sup> A "titular nationality" was the national group for which a particular Soviet republic was named: Georgians in Georgia, Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, Abkhaz in Abkhazia, etc.

<sup>33</sup> Revaz Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 84.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example: Marie B. Broxup, "Volga Tatars," in *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union*, ed. Graham Smith (New York, Longman, 1990), 280.

whether a group was allowed to have an autonomous territory, and what level of autonomy that territory was could have, numerous scholars have pointed out that nationality policy was frequently instrumentalized by the state as a means of achieving concrete political goals.<sup>35</sup> The power to draw the borders of autonomous regions, for instance, was utilized by the Soviet regime to weaken potentially threatening populations, a strategy commonly referred to as “divide and rule.”

Perhaps the classic case of the Soviet government employing policies of "divide and rule" is Bashkiria, which many scholars agree was created to prevent the formation of the proposed Idal-Ural Republic. Had this republic been created, it would have been a powerful, Tatar-dominated republic at the heart of the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> The Bolsheviks feared the emergence of a unified Turkic or Islamic resistance movement, and so Idal-Ural Republic represented a serious potential threat to Soviet power. While David Laitin *et al.* argue persuasively that the Bolsheviks "probably overestimated" the pan-Turkic/Islamic menace,<sup>37</sup> there was nevertheless a *perceived* danger that a powerful, unified Tatar Republic at the heart of the Soviet Union could threaten Soviet power.

Although the threat may not have been as imminent as the Bolshevik government imagined, it was nevertheless taken quite seriously, as is indicated by the extraordinary

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<sup>35</sup> Ronald Wixman, "Applied Soviet Nationality Policy: A Suggested Rationale," in *Turco-Tatar Past Soviet Present: Studies Presented to Alexandre Bennigsen*, ed. Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejey, Gilles Veinstein, S. Enders Wimbush (Paris, Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1986), 456.; Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 155.

<sup>36</sup> For an in-depth treatment of this case, see: Ronald Wixman, "The Middle Volga: Ethnic Archipelago in a Russian Sea," in *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, ed. Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).; Azade-Ayse Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> David Laitin, Roger Petersen, and John Slocum, "Language and the State: Russia and the Soviet Union in Comparative Perspective," in *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR*, ed. Alexander Motyl (New York, Columbia University Press, 1992), 145.

steps that were taken to prevent the emergence of the Idal-Ural Republic. The Soviet government's response was to preempt the creation of the republic altogether by instead establishing several smaller, and Tatar republics that could be more easily controlled by the state. As Azade-Ayse Rorlich has written:

To prevent Turkic unity and the emergence of a dynamic republic in the Middle Volga, the Soviet government chose to sponsor the formation of smaller republics; by doing so, it also fostered isolation and even nourished old jealousies and rivalries, thus facilitating its control over the peoples of the area.<sup>38</sup>

The Bashkir ASSR, formed in 1919 out of a piece of territory that would have been included in the Idal-Ural Republic, wound up being the first Autonomous Republic established in the Soviet Union. The Tatar ASSR itself followed in 1920, along with the Chuvash, Mari, and Urdmurt Autonomous Oblasts, each of which would have been included in the proposed Idal-Ural Republic. In addition to preventing the consolidation of a powerful Tatar state, the new republics were also useful for propaganda. They served as concrete examples of the Soviet state's supposedly "progressive" attitudes toward ethnic minorities and its support for national self-determination.

Although the Bashkir case is perhaps one of the clearest examples of Soviet "divide and rule" tactics, similar methods were employed throughout the Soviet Union, including in the Transcaucasus. Within the Georgian SSR, for instance, there were three autonomous regions: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara.<sup>39</sup> This meant that Georgia contained more autonomous regions than any other Union Republic except for Russia itself. The first of these, Abkhazia, has a long history as both an independent kingdom as

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<sup>38</sup> Rorlich, 434.

<sup>39</sup> See Map 1, 147.

well as a constituent part of Georgia. Originally formed as a Union Republic in 1921, after supporting the Bolshevik faction against the Menshevik government in Georgia, Abkhazia subsequently subordinated to Georgia as an Autonomous Republic.

The Abkhaz ASSR was likely created to foster pro-Soviet sentiment among the large Abkhazian diaspora living in Turkey,<sup>40</sup> which would fit the Soviet pattern of creating what historian Terry Martin has called Soviet "Piedmonts." This term, of course, refers to the state of Sardinia-Piedmont, which served as a base for spreading Italian nationalism. In the Soviet context, in Martin's words, it refers to the idea that "cross-border ethnic ties could be exploited to project Soviet influence into neighboring states."<sup>41</sup> Additionally, by making the Abkhaz ASSR administratively subordinate to the Georgian SSR, the Soviet government ensured that Georgia would be a divided state, weakening the potential threat of Georgian nationalism.

The borders of Abkhazia were drawn, for instance, in such a way that they bisected a large proportion of Georgia's Mingrelian population, which speaks a dialect of Georgian, between Georgia and Abkhazia. Despite having a total population several times as large as the Abkhaz, however, the Mingrelians were never given autonomy. Over time, and as a result of policies that encouraged ethnic Georgians to migrate to Abkhazia, tensions between Abkhazia and Georgia began to grow. Ethnic Abkhaz increasingly considered the republic's Mingrelian population little more than agents of Georgian chauvinism.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the Georgian government frequently complained

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<sup>40</sup> Roughly 400,000 Abkhaz were expelled from the Russian Empire and most settled across the border in Ottoman territory. See: Wixman, "Applied Soviet Nationality Policy," 464.

<sup>41</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001), 274.

<sup>42</sup> Lak'oba, 84.

that, despite making up nearly half of the population of the Abkhaz ASSR, Mingrelians and other Georgians living in Abkhazia faced discrimination in hiring, access to higher education, and representation in the government.

By drawing Abkhazia's borders to include part of the sizeable Mingrelian population and subordinating it to the Georgian republic, then, the Soviet government was able to drive a wedge between the two groups. The result was that the Soviet government effectively built inter-ethnic tensions into the political geography of the Soviet Union and ensured that disputes would have to be arbitrated by the government in Moscow. More than anything, this reinforced the center-periphery dynamic that emphasized the primacy of the Soviet central government over the republics. As discussed later, the center-periphery relationship was in some ways reproduced after the Soviet collapse when, after Georgia became independent, the secessionist governments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia effectively became clients of Moscow as a matter of survival in the face of Georgia's attempts to forcibly reestablish its territorial integrity.

Although Abkhazia was by far the largest and most important autonomous region in Georgia, Soviet cartographers also created two other, smaller autonomous units: Adjara and South Ossetia. The former was unique in the Soviet Union because its titular nationality was not in fact a "nationality" at all, but a religious group. The Adjars are ethnically and linguistically Georgian, distinguished mostly by the fact that they are Sunni Muslims who converted during a period of Ottoman rule. It therefore seems unlikely that the Soviet authorities would have attempted to play the Adjars off against their fellow Georgians. Not only is there no history of antagonism between Georgians and the Adjars, but the atheist Soviet state was also extremely reluctant to employ

religion as a wedge in the same way that it used nationality. Instead, the creation of Adjara can likely be interpreted as an attempt to create a "Piedmont" republic with the purpose of influencing other Muslim populations living along the Georgian-Turkish border. One example of such a group would be the Laz, who speak a Kartvelian language related to Georgian and whose population is distributed on both sides of the border with Turkey.

While the creation of Adjara was probably not intended to foster ethnic divisions, the case of South Ossetia would seem to be a fairly unambiguous case of using a national minority to weaken Georgia. In the Soviet Union, minorities that already had a "homeland" were not given autonomous structures within other republics. This policy explains, for instance, why the sizeable Russian populations that lived in places like Ukraine and Kazakhstan were never given territorial autonomy. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) already existed as a "homeland" for ethnic Russians, and therefore they were not provided with autonomous territories elsewhere. The policy also explains why the sizeable Azeri and Armenian populations living in the southeastern parts of Georgia did not receive autonomous structures.

South Ossetia, however, provides an exception to the rule. Despite the existence of the North Ossetian ASSR, which during Soviet times was part of the RSFSR, South Ossetia was made an Autonomous Oblast within Georgia in 1921. The Ossetes were a mostly Orthodox population and had been traditional allies of Russia since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, along with the Abkhaz, they supported the Bolsheviks against Zhordania's Mensheviks.<sup>43</sup> The creation of South Ossetia was therefore likely an instance

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<sup>43</sup> Zürcher, 124.

of the Soviet government attempting to weaken Georgia by creating another autonomous unit within its territory, one that Moscow could expect to be reliable and loyal.

Despite much evidence to support it, however, some scholars reject the "divide and conquer" thesis. Charles King, for instance, maintains that Soviet border drawing was little more than the product of local circumstances. In his popular history of the Caucasus, *The Ghost of Freedom*, he writes that

[t]he decision of Soviet leaders to draw boundary lines in one place and not another... had little to do with any putative grand strategy... Indeed, if Soviet officials had been able to foresee the violence that would erupt over precisely these borders in the 1980s and 1990s, they might well have opted for a different arrangement.<sup>44</sup>

Counterfactual speculation aside, of course, it is impossible to know for sure what the Soviet leadership would have done had circumstances been completely different. In any case, whether there was or was not in fact a "grand strategy" of divide and rule is, in some sense, irrelevant. The practice of manipulating boundaries and dividing ethnic groups between multiple polities persisted throughout the Soviet period. Even if the creation of inter-ethnic tension was not *intended*, the list of places where just such a policy *did* create conflict is long; besides Georgia, it includes almost the whole of the rest of the Caucasus region, much of Central Asia, and even parts of Ukraine, Belarus, and even in Russia itself.

### ***2.2.3: Soviet Collapse***

During the Second World War, numerous national groups – the so-called "punished peoples" – had been deported for disloyalty to the state. These groups, including the Chechens and the Ingush, were "rehabilitated" and allowed to return to their

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<sup>44</sup> Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 189.

newly reconstituted homelands under Khrushchev.<sup>45</sup> While Stalin's death ended the large-scale deportations and other efforts to drastically reconfigure the ethnic landscape of the Soviet Union, the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras witnessed the growth efforts to russify the Soviet population as a whole, driven by an ideology that sought to create a "new Soviet man" through the "merger" of the Soviet Union's different nationalities. Major revisions of borders, however, became increasingly infrequent. Particularly under Brezhnev, the state's emphasis was on stability, and the ethno-territorial system that was put in place in the 1920s and 1930s would persist with relatively few modifications until the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

During the Brezhnev era, the entire Soviet Union experienced deepening stagnation and rampant corruption. Although the USSR remained a police state, the renunciation of terror<sup>46</sup> meant that Moscow gradually began to lose its grip on the republics which, over time, became "fiefdoms to be exploited for the benefit of the local party aristocracy."<sup>47</sup> Moreover, it became increasingly clear that, despite widespread linguistic russification,<sup>48</sup> little progress was actually being made toward creating the hoped-for "Soviet" nation. If anything, the republics had become even more "national" in character than they had been during the time of Stalin, controlled as they often were by local cadres for whom Moscow's writ was increasingly unimportant. Indeed, the patronage systems that

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<sup>45</sup> Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule* (Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press, 2006), 179-180.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>47</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 130.

<sup>48</sup> In 1979, 62.2% of all non-Russians in the Soviet Union reported that they considered themselves "fluent" in Russian. See: Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*. 109.

developed in the periphery, especially in the Caucasus, became nodes of quiet resistance to the center.<sup>49</sup>

The severity of the Soviet Union's situation in the early 1980s was understood very well by Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov. Perhaps by dint of his long tenure as the chief of the KGB, Andropov had an unusually sober assessment of the social and structural problems facing the USSR, and seemed aware that nationalism in the republics was beginning to pose a serious challenge Soviet power. Dying after only fifteen months in office, however, he never had the opportunity to make any real attempt to mollify the growing restiveness among the Soviet Union's non-Russian minorities. Likewise, Andropov's even more short-lived successor, the neo-Brezhnevite Konstantin Chernenko, possessed neither the time nor the interest in addressing the problems facing the USSR, dying within months of taking office. According to one account, throughout the Andropov and Chernenko periods, the "emphasis remained on improving the teaching of Russian, instilling 'internationalist' values, while at the same time continuing to suppress national dissent and combat 'hostile' foreign influences."<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, nationalism continued to inspire dissident movements throughout the Soviet Union.

After Chernenko's death, the new Soviet Premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, developed a plan to revitalize the Soviet Union by addressing both the economic woes that were crippling the state as well as attempting to foster more open political expression, at least within certain limits. The vaunted policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, however, had the unintended side effect of encouraging alternative forms of political organization outside

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<sup>49</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 117-118.

<sup>50</sup> Bohdan Hahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR* (New York, The Free Press, 1990), 225.

of the Communist Party's purview. National identity, even in the forms officially sanctioned by the state, proved to be a convenient rallying point for disaffected Soviet citizens, especially in the non-Russian republics.<sup>51</sup>

It is not difficult to see why nationalism proved so attractive to Soviet citizens in the 1980s. As Ernest Gellner has pointed out, by the early 1980s, socialism had become largely discredited, at least in the Soviet Union. The clear failure of Marxism-Leninism left behind an ideological vacuum that nationalism, facing few rivals, was poised to fill.<sup>52</sup> Especially in places such as Georgia, Armenia, and the Baltic states, nationalists could draw upon romantic narratives that emphasized the historic independence of their peoples before succumbing to imperial subjugation.

Nationalists discourses throughout the Soviet Union were aided the very structures of national autonomy that the Soviet state had cultivated since its very inception. If other alternatives to Communism did not yet exist, or were still in their infancy, "nationhood" was a category that already possessed a great deal of cultural capital of its own as well as, in many cases, autonomous territorial units and functioning, if frequently powerless, governments. The very identities and institutions that the Soviet state had fostered became focal points around which opposition movements began to coalesce. Dissidents in numerous republics, especially in the Baltic States and in Georgia, where nationalist sentiment was particularly strong, began forming so-called "national fronts," which were essentially alternative political parties. Seizing on the rhetoric of

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<sup>51</sup> Ernest Gellner, "Nationalism in the Vacuum," in *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR*, ed. Alexander Motyl (New York, Columbia University Press, 1992), 249.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

*glasnost'* and *perestroika*, they marched through the streets bearing portraits of Gorbachev and demanded a devolution of power from the center to the republics and an end to Russian domination.

*Glasnost'* and *perestroika* put the Communist Party into an increasingly untenable position: if the Soviet Union was to be saved, at least according to Gorbachev's thinking, it had to become more open and democratic. On the other hand, the very sort of openness envisioned by Gorbachev seemed only to be adding fuel to the nationalist fire that was burning the USSR to the ground. There seemed to be no way to square the circle between real democracy and "Soviet democracy."

The paradox was not entirely lost on Gorbachev, but he nevertheless seemed unsure how to respond. While he was certainly aware that there was a contradiction at the heart of his ideas, there is strong evidence to suggest that he did not really understand its nature. In his book *Perestroika*, he wrote that "[e]very nation is entitled to choose its own way of development, to dispose of its fate, its territory, and its human and natural resources."<sup>53</sup> It is clear, in this case, that Gorbachev was writing about "nation-states" in general, but the same arguments applied just as easily to the nations of the USSR, a connection he does not seem to have made. Indeed, Gorbachev seems to have confused "nationalism" for "patriotism," in the words of Walker Connor, and "loyalty to the nation" for "loyalty to the Soviet state."<sup>54</sup> He appears to have believed that nationalism was little more than a response to dissatisfaction with the ossification of the Soviet

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<sup>53</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York, Harper & Row, 1987), 163.

<sup>54</sup> Walker Connor, "Man is a National Animal," in *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), 207.

economy and society, and was thus something that could be remedied by means of the right reforms. Reminiscing in 2000, Gorbachev wrote:

Were there problems in the Soviet Union, including ethnic problems? Yes, there were political, economic, and social problems. These were not, however, problems of our country as a whole but of the system that had been established.<sup>55</sup>

Judging from this, it would appear that Gorbachev viewed the nationalism in the Soviet Union as a problem that could be solved by *perestroika* and *glasnost'*, rather than being a symptom of them. "We were moving away from traditional attitudes," he wrote, "and heading toward a policy aimed at transforming the bureaucratic, unitary Soviet Union into a democratic federation of independent states."<sup>56</sup> What Gorbachev failed to understand, however, was that the Soviet Union's non-Russian minorities no longer had any interest in being part of the state he was so desperately trying to preserve, and no amount of social or economic reform could alter that fact.

Perhaps as a result of this misunderstanding, Gorbachev's responses to the challenges posed by nationalism were erratic and halfhearted. The few times the state attempted to use force against protesters, as in Tbilisi in 1989, it managed to spill just enough blood to completely discredit itself and cede the moral high ground dissident nationalists without achieving any desirable results.<sup>57</sup> Certain concessions were eventually given by the state in the areas of economic decentralization and language policy,<sup>58</sup> but the "national question" was not – indeed could not have been – definitively

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<sup>55</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000), 84.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>57</sup> Zürcher, 122.

<sup>58</sup> David Laitin *et al.*, 158.

solved within the framework of the Soviet system. By granting legitimacy to nationalism outside of the control of the Party and the state, and thereby undermining policies that had stood since the time of Lenin, Gorbachev unwittingly conceded that Stalin's old dictum about the nature of the republics, "national in form, socialist in content," was by the 1980s an empty slogan; nationalists in the Soviet Union had long since begun to demand political structures that were both national in form and national in content.

As Ronald Suny has pointed out, the national groups that emerged from the ruins of the USSR were radically transformed by 74 years of Soviet rule. "Their pasts," he writes, "were constructed and reconstructed; traditions were selected, invented, and enshrined; and even those with the greatest antiquity of pedigree became something quite different from past incarnations."<sup>59</sup> In Georgia, there was to be no return to the halcyon days of some imagined past. Even the memory of the short-lived Menshevik experiment after the collapse of the Russian Empire proved to be of little more than symbolic value, and provided little in the way of tangible experience that could be applied to the problems of governing a state. "The independent republic of Georgia," he wrote,

is a nation possessed by its own history. Like the other republics floating free after the demise of the Soviet empire, Georgia is reinventing its past, recovering what had been forgotten or distorted during the long years of Soviet rule and reconstructing the story of Georgia as a land belonging for all time to the Georgian people... [T]he rapid unraveling of Communist rule in Georgia, the end of empire, and the evaporation of the "socialist choice" brought to power a fractured political elite and an exclusivist nationalism imbued with an authoritarian political culture inherited from the years of Soviet power.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 160.

<sup>60</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 334.

Linked to the problem of “exclusivist nationalism,” and further complicating matters was the conflict between different versions of what Alexander Murphy has called “regimes of territorial legitimation.” Murphy defines these regimes as consisting of “the institutions, practices, and discourses that are designed to legitimate a particular territorial conception of a state.”<sup>61</sup> Among the discourses underlying regimes of territorial legitimation are historical links between a particular territory and a particular ethnic group, the physical uniqueness of the area where a state is located, and the ability of a state to trace its roots back to some older political entity.<sup>62</sup>

In the case of Georgia, the newly independent government could make strong claims to each of these discourses, particularly the first and third: the Georgian people have lived in more or less the same area for millennia, and, as mentioned, Georgia has a long and well-documented history of statehood. Unfortunately Georgia’s discourses of territorial legitimation were incompatible with those of other minorities living in Georgian territory, particular the Abkhaz, who could themselves argue that Abkhazia was the historical home of the Abkhaz people and that, moreover, Abkhazia had a history of statehood, albeit ancient.<sup>63</sup> Combined with the decades of ethnic tensions fostered by Soviet nationality policies and the political legacy of Soviet domination, these competing regimes of territorial legitimation resulted in a series of civil wars that were to leave tens

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<sup>61</sup> Alexander Murphy, “Territorial Ideology and Interstate Conflict: Comparative Considerations,” in *The Geography of War and Peace: From Death Camps to Diplomats*, ed. Colin Flint (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), 281.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>63</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, “History: First-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries,” in *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, ed. George Hewitt (Richmond, Curzon, 1999), 59-66.

of thousands of people dead and hundreds of thousands more displaced from their homes, to which many may never return.

### ***2.3: Civil War in Independent Georgia***

The resurgence of nationalism during *glasnost* was not directed solely at the Soviet government. Accompanying it was widespread inter-ethnic conflict that grew in large part from the "divide and rule" policies pursued by the state. Clashes between Armenians and Azeris in 1988, for instance, eventually escalated to all-out war over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a sizeable autonomous region within Azerbaijan containing an Armenian majority population. The war, which resulted in tens of thousands dead and wounded, and hundreds of thousands of refugees, was one of the worst post-Soviet conflicts. But it was by no means the only one. Aside from the tragedy that unfolded in Chechnya, there was also a short war between North Ossetia and Ingushetia over the Prigorodnyi District, which had been administratively re-assigned to North Ossetia when the Ingush were deported in 1944 and never returned. A terrible civil war was fought in Tajikistan, and war also broke out between Transdnistria and Moldova.

In Georgia, too, the situation was beginning to unravel. Nationalist discontent reached a fever pitch after a protest in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989, when Soviet airborne troops killed 20 people, mostly women and children, and wounded over 6000 others. Rumors at the time held that Soviet troops had in fact used trenching spades and toxic gas to beat back the protesters.<sup>64</sup> While never substantiated,<sup>65</sup> such stories were frequently repeated and readily accepted by a Georgian public that was all too ready to believe the

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<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2005), 41.

<sup>65</sup> Zürcher, 122.

worst about the Soviet empire. "It would be difficult," writes one scholar, "to exaggerate the impact of these events – made worse by the subsequent attempted cover-up by Soviet authorities – on Georgian politics. Public opinion was inflamed, and what was afterwards referred to as the ‘April tragedy’ fundamentally radicalized political life in the Republic."<sup>66</sup>

"Independence" became the watchword of the Georgian political scene. Even Georgian Communists favored separation from the Soviet Union. In addition to declaring Georgia an "annexed and occupied state,"<sup>67</sup> the Georgian Communist Party participated in a massive demonstration in Tbilisi and declared ten minutes of silence at 3:30 pm on the one-year anniversary of the April tragedy.<sup>68</sup> Despite their pro-independence stance, however, the Communists were by that time totally discredited in Georgia. The 1990 elections handed a resounding victory to the "Round Table," a nationalist party led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a Mingrelian and dissident intellectual. Gamsakhurdia's government wasted little time, quickly declaring Georgia to be an independent republic in April of 1991. Until the legal dissolution of the USSR in December of the same year, this act was of purely symbolic value, but it nevertheless signaled the effective end of Soviet Georgia.

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<sup>66</sup> Darrel Slider, "Democratization in Georgia," in *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, ed. Karen Dawisha, Karen and Bruce Parrott (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 161

<sup>67</sup> Zürcher, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Peter Nasmyth, *Georgia: A Rebel in the Caucasus* (London, Cassell, 1992), 80.

### ***2.3.1: Tensions in Abkhazia***

Unfortunately, untangling itself from the legacy of seven decades of Soviet rule was not so simple: Many of the internal borders of the Soviet Union, as we have seen, were drawn for purely political reasons. After independence – and in some cases, even before – they became sites of violence. In the absence of a strong center capable of preventing conflicts from spiraling out of control, inter-ethnic tensions became unmanageable. Even prior to Georgia's secession from the Soviet Union, ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia complained of discrimination at the hands of the numerically inferior Abkhaz. As the titular nationality, ethnic Abkhaz, despite comprising less than 18% of the population, held 67% of government positions in the republic, wildly out of proportion to the size of their population.<sup>69</sup> They also had better access to jobs and higher education. Georgians, who made up nearly half of the population of Abkhazia, complained that their interests were being ignored.<sup>70</sup>

For their part, ethnic Abkhaz worried about the possibility of being demographically overwhelmed by Georgians. Abkhaz nationalists argued that Georgian chauvinism and Soviet policies that promoted Georgian migration into Abkhazia had caused the Abkhaz to become a minority in their own republic. While this was largely a fiction, since even before 1917, Abkhaz only made up about one quarter of the population of Abkhazia,<sup>71</sup> they nevertheless exploited the political, economic, and cultural privileges that came with Soviet autonomy as a means of shoring up their national identity. Not

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>70</sup> Kaiser, 362.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel Müller, "Demography: Ethno-Demographic History, 1886-1989," in *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, ed. George Hewitt (Richmond, Curzon, 1999), 225.

surprisingly, the spiral of antagonism between Georgians and Abkhaz eventually resulted in protests and sporadic violence.

The Abkhaz government finally demanded to separate from Georgia and to become a Union Republic, a request that was denied by the Soviet government. This came as little surprise, as the Abkhaz ASSR had requested a similar adjustment in its status in 1957, 1967, and 1977. Each time, the request was denied and subsequently followed up with a new package of political and economic concessions that benefited ethnic Abkhaz at the expense of other minorities living in Abkhazia. By the end of the 1980s, the Georgian government began to feel that, despite the fact that Abkhazia was technically subordinate to the Georgian government, it was increasingly slipping out of Tbilisi's control.<sup>72</sup>

### ***2.3.2: War in South Ossetia***

Meanwhile, in August of 1990, South Ossetia voted to raise itself from the status of an Autonomous Oblast to an Autonomous Republic. Gamsakhurdia's government responded by stripping South Ossetia of its autonomy altogether and attempting to impose direct rule on the breakaway province. The resulting war devastated the already destitute South Ossetian landscape. The capital city, Tskhinvali, was shelled by the Georgians and became, in the words of one author, an "Ossetian Sarajevo."<sup>73</sup> Nearly sixty thousand people were forced to flee the region. Most of them were Ossetes, who fled

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<sup>72</sup> Zürcher, 120.

<sup>73</sup> Georgiy I. Mirsky, *On Ruins of Empire: Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Former Soviet Union* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1997), 76.

across the mountains into neighboring North Ossetia.<sup>74</sup> Attacks also increased on the large Ossetian community in Tbilisi, which was home to more Ossetes than in South Ossetia itself.<sup>75</sup>

Crucially, the South Ossetians received support from Russia. While the Georgian armed forces could hardly have been called a formidable war machine, comprised as they were of independent armed militias that were barely under the control of the government, the small and poorly armed Ossetian militias, which could initially muster no more than about 300-400 fighters,<sup>76</sup> were even less effective and stood little chance of winning a protracted conflict. Thomas Goltz, who was in Georgia during this period, has written that

without overt and covert Russian military intervention it is difficult to imagine that the grossly outgunned and outnumbered South Ossetians could have held their own against the Georgians.<sup>77</sup>

Moscow's involvement in the South Ossetian war, however, was not large. While Russian peacekeepers eventually enforced a ceasefire between the two sides, most of the arms obtained by the Ossetian militias were "leaked" from arms depots located in North Ossetia and smuggled across the mountains.<sup>78</sup> The extent of Russian collusion in such smuggling is difficult to ascertain, though it seems likely that weapons and ammunition

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<sup>74</sup> Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States* (Washington, D.C., United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004), 30.

<sup>75</sup> Gachechiladze, 88.

<sup>76</sup> Zürcher, 142.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas Goltz, "The Paradox of Living in Paradise: Georgia's Descent into Chaos," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe & Co., 2009), 18.

<sup>78</sup> Zürcher, 142.

from ex-Soviet military caches were sold on the black market by freelancers in the Russian armed forces.

### ***2.3.3: War in Abkhazia***

The situation in Georgia continued to deteriorate. By December of 1991, even before the end of the war in South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia himself had been overthrown and replaced by the former Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, who had also served as the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party from 1972 until 1985. Hailed as something of a moderate, at least in comparison with the erratic and increasingly dictatorial Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze seemed overwhelmed by the fractious political landscape in Georgia. Between the time of Gamsakhurdia being toppled and November of 1993, a brutal civil war raged between Shevardnadze's faction and the so-called "Zviadists," partisans still loyal to Gamsakhurdia. Shevardnadze, moreover, shared Gamsakhurdia's uncompromising stance on Georgia's territorial integrity. When the Abkhaz unilaterally declared their independence in July of 1992, Shevardnadze immediately declared the action legally null and void. Shortly thereafter, following the kidnapping of a government minister in Abkhazia, a number of semi-autonomous Georgian militias crossed into Abkhazian territory. Despite the ongoing civil war, the invasion proceeded with Tbilisi's blessing and the support of the government.

The ensuing war in Abkhazia was, in the words of one scholar, "the worst event in the contemporary history of Georgia."<sup>79</sup> The republic was laid waste. Most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed and the capital city, Sokhumi, was ravaged by bitter urban warfare. Hundreds of thousands of people, including most of the ethnic

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<sup>79</sup> Gachechiladze, 43.

Georgian community, were driven from their homes. Although some have managed to quietly (and unofficially) return, to this day most still live in makeshift shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>80</sup> The mass exodus of Georgians – nearly half of the pre-war population – left many parts of Abkhazia almost entirely de-populated, which has had severe consequences for the already weak Abkhaz economy.<sup>81</sup>

The Abkhazians received far more assistance from Russia than did the South Ossetians. Alone, the Abkhaz were a more formidable foe than the Ossetians had been. For one, they had access to a substantially larger number weapons and resources. They also benefited from the presence of so-called "North Caucasian volunteers" – fighters from places such as Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan, including the infamous Chechen guerilla leader Shamil Basayev – who came to Abkhazia to help the Abkhaz repel the "Kartvelian" invaders. But it was Russian intervention that tipped the scales decisively in Abkhazia's favor. In addition to receiving aid in the form of weapons, armored personnel carriers, and helicopters, Russian fighter jets were used to attack Georgian positions, even going so far as to bomb Sokhumi, which at that time was held by the Georgians.<sup>82</sup> Besides giving Abkhazia substantial amounts of military hardware, Russian units fought alongside Abkhaz formations on the front lines, and proved to be more than a match for the poorly trained and disorganized Georgian forces.

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<sup>80</sup> Molly Corso, "Georgian IDPs Face Evictions at Start of New Year," *Eurasianet.org*, December 23, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62631> (accessed January 12, 2011).

<sup>81</sup> Lynch, *Engaging Europe's Separatist States*, 46.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Goltz was in Sokhumi during the Abkhaz/Russian assault, searching for Shevardnadze, who was in the city attempting to negotiate a peace deal. For Goltz's account of the attack, see: Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary* (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe & Co., 2006), 151-182.

Russia's role in the Abkhaz war was more or less understood at the time. While the Abkhazians possessed a somewhat more formidable fighting force than the Ossetians had, they nevertheless had little access to heavy weaponry, to say nothing of aircraft. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, of course, it was not uncommon for various parties to procure armaments from Soviet arsenals on the black market, but the massive array of tanks, heavy artillery, and ammunition that appeared in the hands of the Abkhazians and their allies in the early 1990s seems to have come largely from the Russian military. Shevardnadze himself, in an interview with Thomas Goltz, claimed that between 80 and 90% of the forces arrayed against the Georgians in Abkhazia were Russian citizens, people "who just happened to have very good connections to the Russian defense establishment and enjoyed access to everything from fighter-bombers to satellite photography."<sup>83</sup> While the "80 to 90%" figure is almost certainly an exaggeration, the Russian presence in Abkhazia was nevertheless substantial.

The Georgian forces, as was the case in the war in South Ossetia, consisted largely of private militias. Since the Georgian government at this time was too destitute to properly fund a military, these militias largely financed themselves by looting and pillaging, and selling whatever they could on the black market.<sup>84</sup> The militias' ranks were thus filled with so-called "weekend fighters" and unemployed young men with relatively little military experience, who were lured by the possibility of monetary gains. As the Abkhaz continued to receive heavy weapons and reinforcements from Russia and the North Caucasus, their resistance stiffened and the morale of the poorly armed and disorganized Georgian fighters withered. Whatever remained of the military effectiveness

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>84</sup> Zürcher, 138.

of the Georgian forces quickly crumbled and the war was essentially decided in Abkhazia's favor.

### ***2.3.4: The Rationale for Russian Intervention***

The importance of Russian involvement was demonstrated not by how much material support they provided to the Abkhaz, nor to the Abkhazians' seemingly unlikely success on the battlefield. Russian political clout also had a profound effect on how the war was finally ended. The Abkhazians only agreed to a ceasefire after Shevardnadze himself flew to Moscow made a direct appeal to Boris Yeltsin to put a stop to the fighting. By the time the Abkhaz War was over, Russia had thus already begun to reassert its hegemonic position in Transcaucasia. In the end, after all, it was the Kremlin, rather than the Abkhaz government, with whom the Georgians ultimately had to negotiate.

Curiously, despite its support for the separatists, at no time did Russia ever support their claims for independence. Formally, the Kremlin maintained its commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity until the Five Day War in 2008. The extent of Russian "neutrality," of course, is debatable. Worried as it was about a possible "spillover" of violence into the North Caucasus, the government in Moscow was anxious to see an end to the fighting between Tbilisi and the separatists. Intervening in Georgia thus made a certain amount of sense from the standpoint of Russian security. Even after the debacle in Chechnya some years later, Russia was a more formidable military power than either Georgia or the *de facto* states. Although it remained hesitant to exercise hard power after its defeat in Chechnya, Russia was nevertheless able to in some ways reproduce the role once played by the Soviet state in preventing the further outbreak of widespread hostilities between ethnic groups in Georgia.

Some have argued that the Russian intervention in the *de facto* states was initially the result of little more than the actions of "rogue elements" within the Russian military, rather than a deliberate decision by the Russian government.<sup>85</sup> While it is easy to overstate the actual autonomy of the military forces stationed in the Caucasus, the fact remains that the Kremlin's attention, at least until mid-1993, largely lay elsewhere. Yeltsin's authority in 1993 was not at its apogee and control over the military was, at times, dubious at best. Despite the bureaucratic infighting between the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, to say nothing of Yeltsin's shaky credibility within the defense establishment, Russian forces in the Caucasus were nevertheless acting within certain general parameters set by Moscow. Roughly speaking, these parameters were to prevent a power vacuum from developing along Russia's southern periphery, to prevent conflicts in the former Republics from spreading into Russia itself, and to secure Russian interests in the post-Soviet sphere.<sup>86</sup>

These parameters were dictated by the necessity of massively realigning Russian foreign policy after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which did not, after all, mean simply the end of the Cold War, but also the demise of the Russia's internal empire. Republics like Kazakhstan, Georgia and Ukraine became independent states that were at least nominally outside of Moscow's control. Suddenly, Russia found itself ringed by what Dov Lynch has termed a "belt of insecurity... rife with political and economic instability, and local armed conflicts."<sup>87</sup> Making sense out of this new political landscape

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<sup>85</sup> Dodge Billingsley, "Military Aspects of the War: The Turning Point," in *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, ed. George Hewitt (Richmond, Curzon, 1999), 155.

<sup>86</sup> Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

was one of the key challenges of the new Russian government. Differing views on what Russia's orientation should be toward the former Soviet republics, especially those in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, led, as Sengupta says, to a fierce debate over how to determine "what constituted 'critical space' for the new Russian state..."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Anita Sengupta, *Heartlands of Eurasia: The Geopolitics of Political Space* (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2009), 25.

## CHAPTER III

### THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Vladimir Putin once described the collapse of the USSR as the "major geopolitical disaster of the century,"<sup>89</sup> which numerous commentators have incorrectly interpreted as evincing nostalgia for the Soviet Union.<sup>90</sup> In reality, Putin was giving voice to the geopolitical angst that has preoccupied Russian policymakers since 1992. Russia's rapid loss of empire in the wake of the Soviet collapse, and the country's subsequent military weakness and financial travails, were a bitter pill to swallow for a state that had recently been one of the world's two superpowers.

A sort of duality has thus characterized Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy. On the one hand, there is a firm belief that Russia is a "great power." And yet, shortly before he replaced the ailing Boris Yeltsin as President of the Russian Federation, Putin gave voice to the anxieties that had accompanied Russia's precipitous decline, warning of the danger that Russia could become a "second-, and possibly even a third-rate nation."<sup>91</sup> "Stripped of the geopolitical and ideological certainties at the heart of Soviet politics," writes Jeffery Mankoff, "contemporary Russia has been forced to answer a series of fundamental questions about its relationship to the post-Cold War world and its own

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<sup>89</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, (2005)," [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031\\_type70029type82912\\_87086.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml) (accessed November 02, 2010).

<sup>90</sup> See, for example: Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West* (New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008).; Nick Allen, "Soviet break-up was geopolitical disaster, says Putin," *The Telegraph*, April 25, 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/1488723/Soviet-break-up-was-geopolitical-disaster-says-Putin.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).; Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York, Free Press, 2010), 167-8.

<sup>91</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium," in *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities*, ed. Andrei Melville and Tatiana Shakleina (New York, Central European University Press, 2005), 234.

identity as a state.”<sup>92</sup> Attempting to resolve the apparent contradiction between its “great power” ambitions and the reality that it is too weak, economically, socially, and militarily, to fulfill that role has been at the heart of the Kremlin’s foreign policy since independence. The circumstances that led to the Five Day War were in fact rooted in Russia’s attempts at reestablishing itself as a hegemonic power in the post-Soviet space.

### ***3.1: “Post-Colonial Confusion”***

Initially, the Kremlin’s policies toward the former Soviet republics were characterized by a certain confusion. Indeed, in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian leadership was faced with the task of elaborating a new, post-colonial discourse vis-à-vis the newly independent states. Given the shock of the Soviet collapse and the social and political upheavals that followed in its wake, it is perhaps unsurprising that Russian foreign policy during this period has been characterized as having a “certain mesmerized fixation on the ruins of the Soviet order.”<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Vladimir Putin once described the early 1990s as a time of “clearing the debris resulting from demolishing the old edifice.”<sup>94</sup> 75 years of communism, after all, had left an indelible mark on Russia and its neighbors, and when Soviet power disintegrated, Russia suddenly found itself having to reevaluate its relationship with its former empire. Economic, military, and cultural ties continued to bind the newly independent states to the old imperial center, and even twenty years after the Soviet Union dissolved, these ties

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<sup>92</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 11.

<sup>93</sup> Sergei Prozorov, “Russian Postcommunism and the End of History,” *Studies in East European Thought* 60 (2008): 212.

<sup>94</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, (2004),” [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/05/26/1309\\_type70029type82912\\_71650.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/05/26/1309_type70029type82912_71650.shtml) (accessed November 02, 2010).

remain strong. The Russian government has also had to formulate a policy regarding the millions of ethnic Russians who suddenly found themselves living in independent states such as Kazakhstan and Estonia, where they were often considered unwelcome at best. The fate of this "beached diaspora," as David Laitin has called it,<sup>95</sup> has remained a top priority for the Kremlin. While much of the old Communist ideological "debris" was eventually swept away, the structures of imperial rule and the dynamics of center-periphery relations have persisted nevertheless.

Walking away from empire, as it were, has proven difficult for Russia. Indeed, the new Russian government found the task of formulating a coherent foreign policy, both toward the former Soviet republics as well as the rest of the world, confusing and frustrating. The Kremlin's sometimes erratic policies in the 1990s, particularly immediately after the Soviet collapse, has led Leszek Buszynski to write that Russia began the 1990s with a "foreign policy of disorientation."<sup>96</sup> Even Russia's relations with the so-called "near abroad," the states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Empire, represented kind of anchor to an imperial past that Russians were eager to leave behind.<sup>97</sup> As Pavel Baev has written,

Yeltsin started his reign with one really dramatic cut of Russia's external involvement and during his first year in the Kremlin insisted that he was serious about it. Yegor Gaidar argued with facts and figures that there was no money for a proactive course in the newly created CIS, and

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<sup>95</sup> David Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998), 102.

<sup>96</sup> Leszek Buszynski, *Russian Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (Westport, Praeger, 1996), ix.

<sup>97</sup> Mankoff, 22.

Andrei Kozyrev translated this imperative into a policy of benign neglect...<sup>98</sup>

Alexander Pikayev concurs, writing that “[u]ntil mid-1992 and to a lesser extent during the second half of that year, the official line of the Kremlin was motivated by an isolationist vision.” This policy, he claims, had four chief goals:

1. Withdrawing Russian troops from the near abroad as quickly as possible;
2. “Tacit support” for the new national governments in the near abroad taking control of some former Soviet military assets;
3. Establishing strong diplomatic ties with the new national governments while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of separatist movements;
4. Attempting to involve the international community in efforts to mediate inter-ethnic conflicts like Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>99</sup>

It is clear from these objectives that Russia initially had little interest in continuing to attempt to assert itself as an imperial power in the post-Soviet space. Indeed, Russian policymakers viewed disengagement with the newly independent states, which had long been dependent on subsidies from Moscow, as a kind of “self-liberation,” both economically and spiritually, even while it pursued close relations with the governments of the newly independent states, which were often headed by former Communist officials.<sup>100</sup>

Despite Russia’s apparent commitment to dismantling its former empire, the relationships of power that had developed between Moscow and the republics were not so

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<sup>98</sup> Pavel Baev, “Russia’s Departure from Empire: Self-Assertiveness and a New Retreat,” in *Geopolitics in Post-Wall Europe: Security, Territory, Identity*, ed. Ola Tunader, Pavel Baev, and Victoria Einagel (London, Sage, 1997), 181.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander A. Pikayev, “The Russian Domestic Debate on Policy Toward the ‘Near Abroad,’” in *Peacekeeping and the Role of Russia in Eurasia*, ed. Lena Jonson and Clive Archer (Boulder, Westview Press, 1996), 52-53.

<sup>100</sup> Jaba Devdariani, “Georgia and Russia: The Troubled Road to Accommodation,” in *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Robert Levgold (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005), 159.

easily dissolved. Although Russia's goal had been a near-total military withdrawal, Soviet-era military units, which were now mostly under Russian command,<sup>101</sup> remained stationed throughout the newly independent states. The Russian military headquarters for the Caucasus region, for instance, remained in Tbilisi, despite the vehemently anti-Russian attitudes of Georgia's president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, new strategic concerns meant that instability in Russia's so-called "southern tier" – the Caucasus and Central Asia – became increasingly important relative to old Cold War-era priorities in the northern and western regions of the country.<sup>103</sup> Russian military units, moreover, were already embroiled in local conflicts throughout the near abroad on the eve of independence. Although the government in Moscow still looked hopefully to the West, Russia's disengagement from its former empire was never as complete as might have initially been hoped.

Increasingly, the Kremlin began to assert what Graham Smith has called “a more active, even interventionist, role within the post-Soviet Eurasian space, in order to protect its own geopolitical interests...”<sup>104</sup> This strategy reflected both a growing sense that Russia's security was indelibly linked to events in the former Soviet republics as well as increasing dissatisfaction with what was perceived as a lack of concern for Russia's

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<sup>101</sup> Russia ended up with the lion's share of the former Soviet military, including roughly half of the Red Army's tanks, heavy artillery, and armored fighting vehicles, two-thirds of the Soviet Air Force's combat aircraft, and nearly all of its attack helicopters. Moreover, almost 3 million of the roughly 4 million troops that had been in the Soviet military in 1992 passed into Russian control. See: Steven Miller, "Moscow's Military Power: Russia's Search for Security in an Age of Transition," in *The Russian Military: Power and Policy*, ed. Steven Miller and Dmitri Trenin (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004), 6-7.

<sup>102</sup> Thornike Gordadze, "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe & Co., 2009), 33.

<sup>103</sup> Miller, 10.

<sup>104</sup> Graham Smith, "The Masks of Proteus: Russia, Geopolitical Shift, and the New Eurasianism," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24 (1999): 488.

interests on the part of the West. “[T]he external world confronting Russia,” writes Mankoff,

continued to look much as it had during the Cold War. Institutions such as NATO had not themselves undergone sufficient transformation since the end of the Cold War and were in the mid-1990s torn between attracting Russian and containing it in the event that democracy failed. With no formal institutional mechanisms for managing Russia’s integration with the West, Moscow often felt itself faced with a series of *faits accomplis* that it had no ability to influence, above all in connection with the expansion of NATO.<sup>105</sup>

In the face of NATO’s apparent indifference to Russian security concerns, Russian policymakers began increasingly to turn away from engagement the West and to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Protecting Russia’s geopolitical interests by necessity implied a re-engagement with the near abroad and an abandonment of the old policy of what Pavel Baev has called “benign neglect.”<sup>106</sup>

Moscow’s fear of instability in the near abroad spilling across Russia’s borders meant that, by the time the 1993 “Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation” was published, the newly independent states had been discursively transformed from being a “drain” on Russian coffers and an unpleasant reminder of Soviet imperialism into being the lynchpins of Russia’s security.<sup>107</sup> The “Foreign Policy Conception” declared that “eradicating armed clashes, settling conflicts around Russia and preventing them from spilling into [Russian] territory and ensuring strict observance of individual human rights and minority rights in the countries of the near abroad, particularly the rights of

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<sup>105</sup> Mankoff, 29.

<sup>106</sup> Baev, “Russia’s Departure from Empire,” 181.

<sup>107</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region,” in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels, VUBPRESS, 1996), 93.

ethnic Russians and Russian speaking populations” were Moscow’s “most important foreign policy tasks.”<sup>108</sup>

Although the government continued to disavow overt imperialism, Russia nevertheless began to once again assert a right to intervene in the affairs of its neighbors in order to ensure peace and stability. This shift did not reflect a new policy of altruism. Indeed, the Foreign Policy Conception hinted rather ominously that it would be in the newly independent states’ best interests to align themselves with Moscow:

In a number of CIS states, the formation of foreign policy is being affected by ostentatious dissociation from Russia, so typical of the initial stages of state-making, as well as by territorial disputes fueled by nationalist sentiments, including claims to Russia, and by an aversion to anything that is a reminder of their past dependence on the union structures. Some time will pass before these states realize that resolution of their national problems can be facilitated if they chose to rely on their ties with the renewed Russia.<sup>109</sup>

In reality, securing Russia’s interests often trumped other concerns, and the Kremlin sometimes supported both sides of a given conflict at different times in a bid to engineer a favorable outcome for itself. As discussed in Chapter 4, for instance, the Kremlin’s decision to intervene in the civil wars in Georgia followed precisely this pattern: Russia first supported the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia against the Georgian government, thereby weakening Georgia. Moscow then lent assistance to the government in Tbilisi against a nationalist insurgency to prevent its collapse. The result was a weakened Georgian government that owed its existence to Moscow’s benevolence

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<sup>108</sup> Russian Federation, “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,” in *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities*, ed. Andrei Melville and Tatiana Shakleina (New York, CEU Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

while simultaneously fearing that Russia would extend recognition to the *de facto* states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was therefore in Georgia's best interests to accommodate Moscow as much as possible, and the Georgian government in fact granted a whole host of concessions to this very end.

### ***3.2: "Diaspora Politics" and Passportization***

The Russian diaspora living in the newly independent states has proven to be a particularly problematic issue for the Russian government. Numbering some 25 million people,<sup>110</sup> it is distributed throughout the post-Soviet space, particularly in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.<sup>111</sup> In some of the newly independent states, notably the Baltic States, ethnic Russians have been viewed as unwelcome colonizers and have faced discrimination and nationalist factions in Russia have put pressure on the Kremlin to address the plight of these "compatriots."<sup>112</sup> The government has, to some extent, been willing to oblige. For example, relations between Russia and Estonia declined dramatically in 2007 after the Kremlin signaled its tacit approval when a mob of ethnic Russians rioted after the Estonian government attempted to relocate a Soviet-era war memorial in Tallinn. Interestingly, the incident culminated in a large cyber-attack on Estonia's internet infrastructure, a tactic that would be repeated against Georgian government websites in 2008.<sup>113</sup> Around the same time, "activists" affiliated with the racist and nationalist youth organization, *Nashi*, which has ties to the Russian

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<sup>110</sup> Charles King and Neil Melvin, "Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages, Foreign Policy, and Security in Eurasia," *International Security*, 24, no. 3 (1999): 118.

<sup>111</sup> See Map 2, 148.

<sup>112</sup> Mankoff, 64.

<sup>113</sup> Asmus, 167-168.

government, defaced the Estonian embassy in Moscow.<sup>114</sup> On the other hand, the Russian government has not done a great deal to solve the problem of the “beached diaspora,” and has sometimes sidelined its commitment to ethnic Russians living in the near abroad when politically expedient.

Early in the 1990s, dual citizenship was considered as a possible solution to the diaspora problem. Indeed, Russia’s first passportization program, which occurred in 1993, was targeted at ethnic Russians living in the newly independent states. Unlike in 2008, the distribution of Russian passports was limited only to ethnic Russians living outside of the borders of the Russian Federation. As Igor Zevelev has noted, however, this solution was itself problematic, since many of the newly independent states do not recognize dual citizenship.<sup>115</sup> The problem of dual citizenship would raise its head again in Georgia after 2002, when the Georgian government claimed that the passports distributed by the Russian government to the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were null and void, arguing that Abkhazians and South Ossetians were already Georgian citizens. Russia disagreed and continued to treat Abkhazians and South Ossetians who held Russian passports as if they were in fact Russian citizens.

The “beached diaspora” has also served as a convenient lever that Russia has employed from time to time against its neighbors. While numerous commentators decried Russia’s cynicism in creating new Russian citizens in Georgia’s *de facto* states and subsequently using their “safety” as a pretext for invading Georgia, it should be noted that this strategy was not a particularly new innovation. As King and Melvin have noted,

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<sup>114</sup> Lucas, 151-155.

<sup>115</sup> Igor Zevelev, “Russia’s Policy Toward Compatriots in the Former Soviet Union,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, 6, no.1 (2008): 50.

diaspora politics legitimated an active Russian engagement with the internal and external affairs of the new states of Eurasia. At a time when many of the non-Russian successor states and the international community harshly criticized Russia's potential neo-imperial designs, the Russian government was able to couch its interests in the "near abroad" in broadly humanitarian terms. Concern for the cultural, linguistic, educational, and political rights of the Russian diaspora became an important component of Russian official discourse.<sup>116</sup>

As we will see in Chapter 5, a similar narrative was invoked to justify Russia's invasion of Georgia during the Five Day War – namely that "Russian citizens" were under attack and that Russia had both the right and duty to intervene on their behalf.

### ***3.3: Geopolitics and Ideology***

Upon independence, the Russian government staked a great deal of hope on developing strong ties with the West. However, "Westernizers" in the government, such as Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, began to face increased criticism when the vaunted partnership with Russia's old Cold War enemies appeared to be paying few dividends. Faced with growing skepticism over Russia's "Western" course, the Yeltsin government began seeking a new organizing principle, what Natalia Morozova has called a "new rational consensus," around which the Russian Federation's foreign policy could be constructed.<sup>117</sup> According to Jeffrey Mankoff,

Russia's foreign policy "revolution" was the result of the mounting frustrations evinced by the Russian population (elites as well as masses) over the course of the country's reforms in the early 1990s, the failure of the West to step in to rescue the Russian economy or integrate Russia into Western security structures, and the perception that

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<sup>116</sup> King & Melvin, 121.

<sup>117</sup> Natalia Morozova, "Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian Foreign Policy under Putin," *Geopolitics* 14 (2009): 668.

Kozyrev was kowtowing to the west without achieving anything appreciable in return. For a Russian elite... that had never ceased to think of the country as a major world power, Kozyrev's approach was both humiliating and counterproductive.<sup>118</sup>

Russian policymakers eventually turned to what has been called “great power politics” to fill the gap left by the ideological bankruptcy of communism.<sup>119</sup> “Great power politics,” with its strong emphasis on staking out “spheres of influence” and its tendency to view international relations as a zero-sum game, is heavily infused with classical geopolitics. Mankoff writes that “[t]he focus on states and power generally, coupled with the belief that Russia's position in the world is threatened by the formation of a world order from which it is excluded, are the basic tenets of what could be termed a geopolitical understanding of world politics.”<sup>120</sup>

The idea of “great power politics” is not necessarily tied to the political ideologies that defined the Cold War rivalry. Morozova argues that the new emphasis on geopolitics was “intended to close the door on the ideology-permeated foreign policy of the Soviet past” and to “call off the centuries-old search for a distinct Russian identity and move the debate from the discussion of identity into the discussion of Russian national interests.”<sup>121</sup> It is debatable, of course, whether Russian geopolitics can truly be considered to be “non-ideological.” But it is clear, in any case, that rather than focusing on ideological abstractions like spreading Communism, Moscow's new foreign policy

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<sup>118</sup> Mankoff, 28.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>121</sup> Morozova, 668.

focuses almost exclusively on advancing Russian economic and security interests, which in turn has justified reengagement in the near abroad. Bassin and Aksenov argue that

[t]he sudden erosion of [superpower] status, which appears to undermine Russia's ability to contend with and resist the strategic and civilizational challenges it faces from the surrounding world, stirs deep feelings of unease mixed with chagrin and resentment. This in turn engenders an obsession of sorts with planning for its reacquisition.<sup>122</sup>

Geopolitics in the guise of “great power politics” has thus provided Russia with a convenient rationale for abandoning the “humiliating” policies of the early 1990s and embracing its old role as a hegemonic “great power,” looking to the former Soviet empire as its “privileged sphere of influence.”

Geopolitics quickly gained widespread currency in Russian foreign policy circles all across the political spectrum. From old guard Communist figures such as Gennady Ziuganov to extreme nationalists such as Aleksandr Dugin, geopolitics suddenly became the answer to the question of what post-Soviet Russia's place was in the post-Cold War world. Most proponents of geopolitics drew in one way or another on the so-called “Heartland Theory” elaborated by Sir Halford Mackinder in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>123</sup> Mackinder loosely identified much of Russia and Central Asia as the geostrategic “heartland” of the Eurasian continent.

The combination of the “Heartland Theory,” with its attendant preoccupation with security and territory, and various “Eurasianist” ideas emphasizing Russia's cultural and civilizational distinctiveness from the West were the new ideological bases for Russia's

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<sup>122</sup> Mark Bassin and Konstantin Aksenov, “Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 99 (2006): 100.

<sup>123</sup> Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History (1904),” *The Geographical Journal* 170, no. 4 (2004): 298-321.

new foreign policy, which Sengupta has described as being “imperial without being nationalistic.”<sup>124</sup> As James Sherr notes, Russia’s foreign policy has been largely influenced by

the geopolitical determinism of the military establishment which, thanks to the popularization of the works of Russia’s traditional and neo-geopolitical theorists, has acquired influence beyond this narrow milieu. In the Russian understanding, *geopolitika* refers not only to “struggle” between powers, but *ethnoses* (civilizations). With its Darwinian resonances, its emphasis on the “who-whom” of politics, and its “scientific” categories and idiom, geopolitics has filled much of the intellectual vacuum created by the collapse of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the influence Eurasianism has had on the foreign policy discourse in Russia, and while certain Eurasianist ideas continue to enjoy some currency at the highest levels of the Russian government, it is important to recognize that Eurasianism as such does not enjoy widespread support in Russia. According to a study published by John O’Loughlin, Gearóid Ó Tuathail, and Vladimir Kolossov, “the Eurasianist geopolitical orientation among the Russian population is confined to a small Communist sub-cluster.” Moreover, they write, there is “no apparent popular constituency for the extremist Heartland visions of Aleksandr Dugin.”<sup>126</sup> Despite the visibility of some of Eurasianism’s most vociferous proponents, like Ziuganov and Dugin, the Russian government has consistently emphasized the necessity of cooperation with the West, rather than rivalry,

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<sup>124</sup> Sengupta, 27.

<sup>125</sup> James Sherr, “The Implications of the Russia-Georgia War for European Security,” in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe & Co., 2009), 203.

<sup>126</sup> John O’Loughlin, Gearóid Ó Tuathail, and Vladimir Kolossov, “Russian Geopolitical Culture and Public Opinion: The Masks of Proteus Revisited,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005): 329.

and integration into the world economy. Eurasianists largely oppose these policies. Pragmatism, especially since the advent of Vladimir Putin, has been one of the central tenets of Russian foreign policy. “Fundamental national interests,” rather than ideological concerns, have been the watchwords of Russian administration, which has foresworn “conquest” for “security.”<sup>127</sup>

### ***3.4: Defining a Privileged Sphere of Influence***

The newly independent states were increasingly imagined by Russia as belonging to its “exclusive sphere of influence.” This outlook was shaped not only by the growing influence of geopolitics in the Kremlin, but also by the realities of power relations in the former Soviet Union:

[the newly independent states] became the “near abroad,” accepted (at least formally) as independent neighbors but taken for granted as not quite foreign. These were states in which Russia had very tangible interests. Their economies were inextricably linked to the old center and now to Russia, providing raw materials, manufactured goods, markets, and access to the rest of the world... In security terms, their territories had constituted the USSR’s frontiers; the new Russia had no border defenses and considered it natural to be vitally concerned about the condition of its neighbors’ defenses.<sup>128</sup>

Of paramount importance to the Kremlin was the perceived necessity of preventing other powers from gaining a foothold in the near abroad; As Graham Smith points out, defining the near abroad as a *Russian* space implied the exclusion of other actors.<sup>129</sup> In the Caucasus, which has become one of the most sensitive regions in the post-Soviet space,

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<sup>127</sup> “Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation,” 31. ###

<sup>128</sup> Stephen Page, “The Creation of a Sphere of Influence: Russia and Central Asia.” *International Journal* 49, no. 4 (1994): 788.

<sup>129</sup> Graham Smith, 489.

Russia has faced three potential challengers: Turkey, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Iran.

Of particular importance here is the United States and the challenge posed by American foreign policy to Russian hegemonic ambitions in the Transcaucasus. Even before the attacks of September 11, 2001, there was a moderate amount of Western attention on the region. Azerbaijan in particular, began to attract a great deal of attention from European and American investors. Azerbaijan's petroleum resources had turned the country's capital city, Baku, into a boomtown as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, foreign investors once again began to flock to city. Meanwhile, Georgia's strategic location as a transit point between the Caspian Sea and Turkey attracted increasing attention and investment.

American attention to the newly independent states has not been driven only by interest in petroleum resources. After 9/11, for example, the United States began to engage heavily with several Central Asian states, particularly Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, in order to secure access to airbases crucial to prosecuting the war in Afghanistan. Especially after the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia too has sought closer ties to the West, and part of its strategy has been to cooperate with NATO. Saakashvili's government has gone so far as to contribute troops to US-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In return, Georgia has enjoyed significant investment and a moderate improvement in its image in the West.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Niklas Nilsson, "Georgia's Rose Revolution: The Break with the Past," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War with Georgia*, ed. Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe & Co., 2009), 99-100.

Russia's reactions to these encroachments on its "sphere of influence" have been varied. Putin, for example, acquiesced without much complaint to the stationing of American troops in Central Asia, perhaps sensing a commonality between American goals in the War on Terror and Russia's own problems with Islamic terrorism in the North Caucasus. At other times, however, Russia has been more cautious with regards to what it has seen as Western "meddling." According to Mankoff,

the Kremlin and independent Russian observers often argue that outsiders' involvement in the CIS – whether in supervising Ukrainian and Georgian elections or seeking energy deals with countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – is predicated on precisely the same kind of geopolitical view of the world adhered to by much of the Russian elite and is designed to promote anti-Russian groups on Russia's borders.<sup>131</sup>

Russian fears of Western encroachment into its sphere of influence are especially pronounced in the Transcaucasus, a region considered by many in the Kremlin to be Russia's "soft underbelly."<sup>132</sup> Although Armenia has been a loyal client of Moscow since 1992,<sup>133</sup> both Georgia and Azerbaijan have adopted strongly anti-Russian foreign policies. Both, moreover, have sought closer ties with the West and Turkey. Marshall Goldman argues that, particularly in the case of Georgia, Russian *Realpolitik* has been driven by its concern that "foreign intervention" might threaten its monopoly over oil and gas pipelines in the region. "As for Georgia," he writes,

given its crucial role as the connecting link between Baku and Ceyhan, Russia has done its best to destabilize the region and keep Georgia from operating the pipeline in an

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<sup>131</sup> Mankoff, 241.

<sup>132</sup> Paul Kubicek, "Russian Foreign Policy and the West," *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (1999): 561.

<sup>133</sup> Cornell, 365.

orderly and reliable way. If Georgia collapses in turmoil, investors will not put up the money for a bypass pipeline and Russia will be able to maintain its pipeline monopoly. That, at least in part, explains why the Russian government has provided rather open support for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two regions that seek to separate from Georgia and align themselves instead with Russia.<sup>134</sup>

Moreover, given Moscow's fear of "outside meddling," it was perhaps inevitable that the Orange and Rose Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, respectively, were viewed by Russia through the lens of geopolitics. Rather than being understood as expressions of popular dissatisfaction with corrupt and unpopular governments, the revolutions were interpreted in the Kremlin as undisguised attempts to encircle Russia by replacing the old, more or less friendly governments with American-supported regimes that were hostile to Moscow. According to some analysts, Putin took the Orange Revolution as a personal affront.<sup>135</sup> According to Ronald Asmus,

[w]hen the Rose and Orange Revolutions occurred in 2003 and 2004 respectively, they were greeted in the West as new democratic breakthroughs and a chance to extend the wave of democratization of the 1990s further eastward. In Moscow, however, they were seen as dangerous. The same Putin who two years earlier had suggested he was relaxed about the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO now reacted as if developments in Ukraine and Georgia were mortal threats to Russia.<sup>136</sup>

In order to head off the possibility of Ukraine moving further from Moscow's orbit, the Russian government became heavily involved in the Ukrainian Presidential elections in 2004. Moscow eventually went so far as to send future president Dmitri Medvedev, who was at the time Putin's chief of staff, to organize the Kremlin's campaign to help elect the

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<sup>134</sup> Marshall Goldman, *Petrostate* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 149.

<sup>135</sup> Mankoff., 102.

<sup>136</sup> Asmus, 69.

pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. The strategy that ultimately backfired.<sup>137</sup> The result was a resounding victory for Yanukovich's opponent, Viktor Yushenko, who suffered hideous facial scarring as the result of ingesting poison in what many believe was a Russian attempt on his life.<sup>138</sup>

NATO expansion has also been consistently and bitterly opposed by Russia. The Russian political class does not accept the idea that NATO is remains anything but an anti-Russian alliance and dismisses outright claims that NATO "has become a political-military alliance dedicated to strengthening common security are regarded as risible and insulting."<sup>139</sup> Boris Yeltsin once went so far as to warn that enlarging NATO would run the risk of "plunging [Europe] into a cold peace,"<sup>140</sup> and in his explosive 2007 speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy, Vladimir Putin railed against the alliance, saying:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation... And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?<sup>141</sup>

Such reactions would seem to be a function of the Kremlin's tendency to view the world in purely zero-sum geopolitical terms: any expansion of NATO necessarily entails

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<sup>137</sup> Treisman, 136.

<sup>138</sup> Mankoff, 124.

<sup>139</sup> Sherr, 203.

<sup>140</sup> George Church, Sally Donnelly, and Ann Simmons. "Next, a Cold Peace?" *Time.com*, December 19, 1994, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,982016,00.html> (accessed November 14, 2010).

<sup>141</sup> Putin, Vladimir. "Speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy." *Munich Security Conference*, [http://www.securityconference.de/archive/konferenzen/rede.php?menu\\_2007=&menu\\_2009=&menu\\_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=179&](http://www.securityconference.de/archive/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2007=&menu_2009=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=179&) (accessed November 03, 2010).

a weakening of Russia's security. In spite of Russian opposition, however, the enlargement of NATO has proceeded apace. Particularly with regards to NATO and Western intervention in the war in the former Yugoslavia, Russian foreign policy during the 1990s has emphasized what Bobo Lo describes as the "primacy of participation over results."<sup>142</sup> In its weakened state, Russia has had to make do with protesting the expansion of NATO and Western bombing of Serbia, even though such protests have almost never had any appreciable effect on Western policy. Nowhere was this policy this more evident than in Moscow's campaign to prevent the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe. "During its losing battle to stop NATO expansion," writes Lawrence Caldwell,

the Kremlin initially attempted to prevent former Warsaw Pact states from joining; then, in the late 1990s, when it was evident that it did not have the resources to prevent the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland from becoming members of NATO, the Yeltsin government attempted a variety of threats and inducements to dissuade NATO from starting the process of offering admission to the Baltic States. Moscow expended a great deal of emotional effort and diplomatic effort into preventing, then proscribing NATO's move eastward. This policy, too, failed...<sup>143</sup>

Stripped of its ability to effectively project power beyond its own borders, Russia had to make do with empty threats and aggressive posturing.

Further underlining Russia's relative impotence with regards to NATO expansion, both Ukraine and Georgia have been involved in preliminary talks regarding the possibility of their joining the alliance in the future, although the election of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine and the Five Day War in Georgia would seem to have put such

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<sup>142</sup> Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking* (New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), 142.

<sup>143</sup> Lawrence Caldwell, "Russian Concepts of National Security," in *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past*, ed. Robert Levgold (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007), 313.

talks on indefinite hold. As we will see in the following chapter, Georgia's Rose Revolution and Mikheil Saakashvili's efforts to re-align Georgia toward the West by courting NATO and the European Union decisively undermined already sour relations between Georgia and Russia. The latter continues to interpret any encroachment into the former Soviet bloc as a mortal threat to its security and regional influence while the former's flirtations with the West were interpreted as signs that Moscow's grip on Georgia was weakening even further, representing a potential threat to Russia's hegemony in the Transcaucasus.

### ***3.6: Chechnya and the Decline of Russian Hard Power***

Although the Russian Federation continued to toughen its stance toward the newly independent states and insisted on its right to intervene militarily in the new republics to prevent instability, it faced serious internal turmoil of its own. In addition to the country's crippling economic woes and perceived humiliation at the hands of the West, Russia was plagued by ethnic separatism. Many of the autonomous regions that had been created during the Soviet period now began to agitate for greater independence from Moscow.<sup>144</sup> Others, taking advantage of the weak central government, became little more than the personal fiefdoms of their governors.<sup>145</sup> Although Yeltsin eventually managed to assuage most of the separatists with a variety of concessions, tax breaks, and subsidies, there remained one major exception: Chechnya.<sup>146</sup> The Russian experience in Chechnya fatally undermined Russia's ability to rely on hard power to coerce its

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<sup>144</sup> Treisman, 56.

<sup>145</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice* (New York, Routledge, 2004), 238.

<sup>146</sup> Treisman, 56.

neighbors to accommodate its interests, and would prove to be a powerful influence on Russia's policies toward the separatist regions in Georgia.

Chechnya had, to put it mildly, never been entirely sanguine about the prospect of subordination to Moscow's authority, and declared its independence in 1991. Yeltsin initially declared a state of emergency and sent 600 Interior Ministry troops to restore order. Upon arriving in Grozny, however, these forces found themselves vastly outnumbered. Yeltsin was forced to agree to a humiliating truce with the secessionist government of Dzhokar Dudayev, the former Soviet Air Force commander who had returned to his native Chechnya to become president. In return for the truce, Dudayev ordered the Russian prisoners to be loaded onto buses and escorted safely out of the country.<sup>147</sup> By June of 1992, all remaining Russian troops were withdrawn from Chechnya.<sup>148</sup>

Throughout the next several years, the political relationship between Chechnya and Russia remained unclear. Sebastian Smith notes that, while Chechnya had abandoned any pretense of subservience to Moscow, the Russian government continued to provide pensions to some Chechens until sometime in 1993. Moreover, contemporary government publications in Russia refer to Dudayev as the "President" of Chechnya, and there is even some evidence of semi-official contacts between Dudayev and Yeltsin.<sup>149</sup>

On the other hand, in 1994, the Russian government began actively supporting the Chechen opposition. This policy culminated in another humiliating defeat for Russia

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<sup>147</sup> Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: Politics and War in the Russian Caucasus* (New York, I.B. Tauris, 1998), 128.

<sup>148</sup> Gammer, 203-4.

<sup>149</sup> Sebastian Smith, 130.

when the oppositionists, bolstered by elements of the Russian military, attempted a brazen assault on downtown Grozny in November of 1994. The attackers were ambushed and hundreds died. The Chechen government paraded dozens of Russian prisoners in front of the media<sup>150</sup> and by December, Yeltsin had had enough. He ordered 40,000 Russian troops to invade Chechnya, setting off what Yeltsin himself would eventually call "the most botched war in the history of Russia."<sup>151</sup>

The first question that arises is: why did Yeltsin, after years of tolerating Chechnya's *de facto* independence, suddenly decide to topple Dudayev? Moshe Gammer has blamed the war on "inconsistent policy," citing "indecision between reaching a compromise with the Dudayev regime and trying to replace it..."<sup>152</sup> The logic underpinning the invasion acquires a certain coherence, however, if one remembers that much of Yeltsin's policy was driven by the perceived necessity of preventing the further erosion of Russian power and preserving Russia's territorial integrity, two of the Kremlin's top priorities in the 1990s. The invasion of Chechnya was therefore totally consistent with Russian geopolitical thought at the time. "The plan," according to Christoph Zürcher, "was to stage Yeltsin as preserver of Russian unity and guarantor of law and order..."<sup>153</sup> Sebastian Smith concurs, writing that "[f]orcing Chechnya into line would signal that the superstate was safe in Yeltsin's hands... he'd be remembered as Yeltsin the preserver."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>151</sup> Treisman, 57.

<sup>152</sup> Gammer, 208.

<sup>153</sup> Zürcher, 81.

<sup>154</sup> Sebastian Smith, 138.

The plan, of course, failed spectacularly. Not only did Russia fail to recapture Chechnya, but it failed to do so at a staggering cost. In addition to thousands of military dead, and tens of thousands more wounded, some estimates put the civilian death toll of the First Chechen War at somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000, with an estimated 3-400,000 refugees.<sup>155</sup> When the shooting stopped, moreover, there was an effective return to the *status quo ante*: Chechnya continued to enjoy *de facto* independence and the war had done nothing to remove the threat of separatism in the Caucasus. Russia wasted huge amounts of money and manpower in its attempt to retake Chechnya, to no effect. Given the shaky state of the Russian economy throughout the 1990s, Russia's military expenditures were simply no longer sustainable. By the time the war ended, the military was strained to the limit. Entire units had been decimated and morale was essentially non-existent. The war in Chechnya was also a disaster in terms of public opinion and, until 2008, the Russian public had little stomach for further military adventures elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Pavel Baev once declared that “[t]he Chechen War, from its very first day, was such an obvious and humiliating disaster that geopolitics went out of vogue overnight.”<sup>156</sup> While it is true that the war accelerated a period of strategic decline and military withdrawal, the Kremlin nevertheless remained committed to hegemony. The assertion that the Kremlin abandoned geopolitics after its defeat in Chechnya, however, is simply not tenable. Aside from their value as levers against the Georgian state, for instance, Abkhazia and South Ossetia – the latter in particular – have no real value to Russia. Their

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<sup>155</sup> Gammer, 210.

<sup>156</sup> Baev, “Russia’s Departure from Empire,” 184.

economies are small and their populations are even smaller. They have no appreciable resources to speak of. On the other hand, their territory is strategically important: both Abkhazia and South Ossetia lie on the southern end of two of the major north-south roads across the Caucasus, and Abkhazia has a reasonably large coast on the Black Sea, something which Moscow was largely deprived of when the Soviet Union collapsed. Moreover, as has been noted, they were considered valuable to Russia due to their utility in keeping Tbilisi compliant. In short, Russia's interest in Abkhazia and South Ossetia stems from a classically geopolitical way of viewing the world.

Thus, while Russia remained committed to maintaining its hegemony in Georgia, as result of its defeat in Chechnya its ability to do so, at least by means of exercising hard power, were severely constrained. "The irreducible strategic fact," writes Baev, "is that the war in Chechnya, while underscoring Russia's need to strategically position forces toward the Caucasus and Central Asia, drastically reduces its ability to do so."<sup>157</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter Five, however, the Kremlin increasingly resorted to relatively inexpensive means, including passportization, of keeping restive neighbors such as Georgia destabilized and obedient.

### ***3.7: Retrenchment: 1996-1999***

The period from the end of the First Chechen War until the advent of Vladimir Putin was a difficult interlude for Russian foreign policy. Boris Yeltsin's health remained poor, and he took lengthy breaks from his duties running the country. "In his second term," writes Daniel Treisman, "he seemed to visit the hospital almost as often as the

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<sup>157</sup> Pavel Baev, "The Trajectory of the Russian Military: Downsizing, Degeneration, and Defeat," in *The Russian Military: Power and Policy*, ed. Steven Miller and Dmitri Trenin (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004), 65.

Kremlin."<sup>158</sup> The health of Russia's government during this period was scarcely better: Yeltsin's administration went through five Prime Ministers between 1996 and 1999, with four of the five serving brief terms between 1998 and 1999.

In addition to weak leadership, Russia's financial situation suffered from continuing instability. A crisis rocked Russian markets in 1998, and Avraamova and Ovcharova concluded that "the uneven and incomplete nature of [market] reforms, the lagging nature of structural transformations, and the not yet fully formed institutional framework of the market economy" were largely to blame.<sup>159</sup> While some of these problems were probably inevitable given the staggering scope of Russia's economic transformation, the war in Chechnya did little to help.<sup>160</sup>

On the foreign policy front, matters were hardly better. The war in Chechnya had decimated the Russian military, and Russia's influence abroad looked increasingly uncertain. "In need of Western capital to finance marketization, possessed of a dilapidated and demoralized military, and preoccupied with the task of state building amid domestic ferment," writes David McDonald, "the new Russian state lacked the physical ability to act, even as it gained recognition as the successor to the USSR in international organizations..."<sup>161</sup> Beset by political turmoil and a collapsing economy,

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<sup>158</sup> Tresiman, 74.

<sup>159</sup> A. Avraamova, L. Ovcharova, "The Financial Crisis of August 1998: Did Russia's Middle Class Withstand the Blow?" *Problems of Economic Transition* 44, no. 1 (2001): 6.

<sup>160</sup> As Kotkin has written, "Give any country some 15,000 rust-belt factories, perhaps two-thirds of them non-viable in market conditions, as well as several million brigands empowered to act in the name of the state, and see how quickly such a place achieves the 'transition' to paradise." Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>161</sup> David McDonald, "Domestic Conjunctures, the Russian State, and the World Outside, 1700-2006," in *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past*, ed. Robert Levgold (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007), 178.

Russia entered a period of relative withdrawal and retrenchment. Even the role of the peacekeeping missions in Georgia, which had become so central to Russia's policy in the Transcaucasus, came to be questioned. After effectively shattering the Russian military in Chechnya, the Kremlin had become increasingly worried about the prospect of being dragged into a shooting war in the Caucasus. Developments in Abkhazia, in particular, underlined the very real risk of Russian lives being in potentially costly conflicts in Georgia, conflicts that Russia itself had a hand in prolonging.

### ***3.8: Recovery: 2000-2008***

Vladimir Putin's term in office is widely seen as a period of renewal for Russia.<sup>162</sup> Steep energy prices helped to bolster the country's economy, which in turn meant improved living standards for ordinary Russians.<sup>163</sup> Putin's style of governance, moreover, was far more muscular and proactive than that of the weak and often erratic Yeltsin. His energetic and athletic public image, combined with the perception that Putin had cracked down on the worst political and economic abuses of the 1990s and, moreover, put Russia back on the right track, means that, even as Prime Minister, Putin remains more popular by between 5 and 10 percentage points than the current President, Dmitri Medvedev.<sup>164</sup> Putin is thus in some ways a personification of Russia's post-Soviet renewal.<sup>165</sup>

Indeed, Putin's rise coincided with Russia's ability to once again able to assert itself as a "great power." Nicu Popescu has attributed Russia's new foreign policy vigor

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<sup>162</sup> Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 194-195.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-198.

<sup>164</sup> Treisman, 144.

<sup>165</sup> Treisman, 245-261.

to a number of factors.<sup>166</sup> First, of course, is that the improvement in Russia's economy from its mid-1990s nadir meant that it had more resources to devote to projects beyond its borders. Putin himself has argued that the growth of the economy has strengthened Russia's position vis-à-vis the rest of the world.<sup>167</sup> Not only has the economic recovery helped to stabilize budgets, but the petroleum industry also has provided Russia with substantial income as well as a powerful foreign policy lever. Both Georgia and Ukraine, for instance, have seen prices for energy substantially increased – and have even had deliveries halted entirely – when they have run afoul of Moscow.

Second, Russia's domestic situation has stabilized and Putin's clique has nearly unquestioned control over the organs of state. Unlike Yeltsin, who was often distracted by ill health and the messy internal politics of the 1990s, neither Putin nor Medvedev, despite sporadic protests, have faced any serious challenges to their authority. Moreover, numerous Russian media outlets, especially television networks, are owned by or sympathetic to the government. Gazprom, the gigantic, government-controlled energy corporation, has also bought up numerous newspapers and magazines.<sup>168</sup> Control of the media gives the government a reasonable degree of power to shape the popular discourse. This leaves them a great deal of leeway to pursue policies that, if not totally unconstrained by domestic concerns, then are at least not hamstrung by widespread popular opposition.

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<sup>166</sup> Nicu Popescu, "'Outsourcing' de facto Statehood: Russia and the Secessionist Entities in Georgia and Moldova," *CEPS Policy Briefs* 109 (2006): 3-4.

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Popescu, 3.

<sup>168</sup> Treisman, 96.

Third, the United States is widely seen to have become bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to the strain put on American and NATO military forces, worldwide disapproval of the invasion of Iraq left the United States with little political capital with which to mount a serious opposition to Russian interventionism in the former Soviet realm. Even after Barack Obama's vaunted "reset with Russia," US-Russia relations have been confined largely to negotiations over largely outdated strategic arms treaties initially drafted during the Cold War.

Finally, the almost total destruction of the Chechen nationalist movement in the Second Chechen War has meant that "the Chechen factor is no longer a constraint on [Russia's] policies toward the secessionist entities in Georgia and Moldova."<sup>169</sup> Previously, the government in Moscow had found itself in the uncomfortable position of opposing separatism in Chechnya and Kosovo while simultaneously sponsoring the separatist regimes in Georgia. These constraints no longer exist, and may have contributed to the Kremlin's aggressive strategy in Georgia in the lead-up to the war.<sup>170</sup>

Perhaps ironically, at the same time that Russia became able to once again begin to seriously assert itself as a regional hegemon, events in Georgia began to undo much of the progress that the Kremlin had made during the 1990s. As we will see in the next chapter, despite having more or less successfully reestablished itself as a regional hegemon, Russian influence in Georgia began to crumble. Instead of driving events, as it had anticipated, Russia soon found itself reacting to developments such as the Rose

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>170</sup> Russia now faces a different kind of conflict in Chechnya. The Chechen insurgency has evolved away from being a national separatist movement into an Islamic insurgency ostensibly fighting for a pan-Caucasian Islamic Caliphate. This has allowed the Russian government to frame the conflict differently than was possible in 1994.

Revolution and the ouster of Adjara strongman Aslan Abashidze, a longtime client of Moscow, which exposed the limits of Russian power in the region and threatened to diminish it even further.

## CHAPTER IV

### HEGEMONY AND CHALLENGE

“You think you can trust the Americans and they will rush to assist you? *Nobody* can be trusted! Except me. I’ll provide what I promise. That is how it is.”  
-Vladimir Putin to Mikheil Saakashvili<sup>171</sup>

Dov Lynch has written that the term “frozen conflict,” which is used to describe the situations that emerged in the *de facto* states after CIS peacekeeping units were deployed, is in fact somewhat misleading.<sup>172</sup> The term, after all, implies a stasis that in reality did not exist. Although no major developments in the peace process between Tbilisi and the *de facto* regimes were ever achieved, the period between the end of the war in Abkhazia and the Five Day War in 2008 nevertheless witnessed major developments in Georgia’s political landscape and in Tbilisi’s relationship with Moscow, Sokhumi, and Tskhinvali. While some of the dynamism in Georgia during this time was driven by policy decisions in Moscow, political developments in Georgia revealed the limits of Russia’s ability to control events in the region.

#### ***4.1: Rebuilding Russian Hegemony***

As we have seen, one of the major goals of Russian foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union was the reestablishment of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. For a variety of reasons, Moscow viewed the Transcaucasus, and Georgia in particular, as critical regions for Russia’s security. Rebuilding its influence in Georgia, especially in the conditions of near-collapse that prevailed in the country after

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<sup>171</sup> Quoted in Asmus, 107.

<sup>172</sup> Lynch, 2004, 7.

independence, was not a trivial undertaking. Indeed, the re-establishment of Russian hegemony in the South Caucasus was not a foregone conclusion in 1992, but rather the product of a number of circumstances that Russia was able to successfully exploit to its own benefit.

By 1993, Georgia had come dangerously close to becoming a failed state. South Ossetia had managed to secure its *de facto* independence, and the war in Abkhazia was not going well. The poorly led and equipped Georgian military, made up as it was by private militias and amateur soldiers, was increasingly ineffective against the more motivated Abkhazian troops, their North Caucasian allies, and the well-trained Russian forces arrayed against them. Moreover, “Zviadist” rebels had managed to build up a base of power in Western Georgia and forces loyal to Gamsakhurdia continued to wage a civil war against the central government, effectively preventing the nascent Georgian state from consolidating its jurisdiction over significant parts of its territory.

From the Russian point of view, then, the situation in Georgia was becoming worrisome. Although supporting the *de facto* states against Tbilisi served Moscow's purposes, the prospect of the total disintegration of the Georgian state represented a potentially serious threat to Russia's security. In the hopes of stabilizing the situation, the Russian government offered Shevardnadze a sort of Faustian bargain: in return for military assistance against the “Zviadists,” Georgia would agree to join the Commonwealth of Independent States and allow the Russian military to keep its Soviet-era bases on Georgian soil. Shevardnadze agreed, and Russian troops subsequently intervened in the Georgian civil war, arming and fighting alongside pro-Shevardnadze forces while simultaneously taking control of the country's transportation system in order

to deprive rebel forces of ease of movement around the country. Russian assistance was thus a critical factor in ultimately putting down the "Zviadist" insurgency.<sup>173</sup>

On a purely practical level, backing Shevardnadze over Gamsakhurdia was not a difficult choice for Russia. In the words of one scholar, Shevardnadze was a "good fit" for Moscow<sup>174</sup>: as the former Soviet Foreign Minister, he was well connected in the Russian government and was, unlike the virulently anti-Russian Gamsakhurdia, willing to work with Moscow. Gamsakhurdia's defeat and subsequent death precluded the possibility of him returning to power in Georgia, helping to ensure that Russia would not be bordered in the south by a hostile state, at least for the time being. Support for Shevardnadze was also consistent with Russia's desire for stability on its southern flank. With violence in Georgia threatening to spill over into the North Caucasus, taking steps to stop the fighting was a prudent decision. Not only did it help bring an end to the conflict, reducing the possibility of violence spreading into the Russia itself, but it also helped to remind Tbilisi that it remained dependent on Moscow for its security.

In return for helping defeat the "Zviadists," moreover, Russia was able to extract a number of valuable concessions from the Georgian government. When it joined the CIS, for instance, Georgia became part of what Dov Lynch has called the Kremlin's "forward-positioning network," which also included Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Tajikistan. Despite its name, which suggests an outward-facing posture, the "forward-positioning network" was in reality intended to be little more than a buffer between

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<sup>173</sup> Oksana Antonenko, "Frozen Uncertainty: Russia and the Conflict Over Abkhazia," in *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Robert Levgold (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005), 217.

<sup>174</sup> Trenin, 100.

Russia and its neighbors, insulating Russia in the same capacity as the Warsaw Pact states had for the Soviet Union.<sup>175</sup> Svante Cornell concurs with this assessment, writing that the South Caucasus formed part of a “buffer zone between the Russian North Caucasus and the Islamic World to its South; in particular, the region is adjacent to Turkey and Iran, two states whose influence Russia sees as challenging to its own role.”<sup>176</sup> In addition to joining the CIS and allowing Russia to maintain bases on its soil, Georgia also handed the defense of its borders over to Russian troops and gave the Russian military control of a major railway with great strategic. In return, Russia transferred arms, mostly of Soviet vintage, to the Georgian military.<sup>177</sup>

By the middle of the 1990s, then, Georgia had once again been pulled into Russia’s orbit. The country remained deeply divided, and many considered President Shevardnadze to be a “traitor” who had “delivered” the country back to Moscow.<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, many Georgians now began to view the nationalist fervor that had swept their country over the last decade as nothing less than a “catastrophe,”<sup>179</sup> and there was little enthusiasm for more conflict in a country that Shevardnadze himself described as “exhausted.”<sup>180</sup> For Shevardnadze, and indeed Georgia as a whole, achieving some semblance of stability after years of violence was the top priority. It is no wonder, then,

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<sup>175</sup> Lynch, 2000, 8.

<sup>176</sup> Cornell, 2001, 341.

<sup>177</sup> Yevgeny Krutikov, "Russia Signs a Friendship Treaty with Georgia – Friendship with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is Called in Question," in *Countdown to War in Georgia: Russia's Foreign Policy and Media Coverage of the Conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia* (Minneapolis, Eastview Press, 2008), 60-61.

<sup>178</sup> Goltz, 2006, 207.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

that Shevardnadze himself once told Thomas Goltz that “[t]he most important thing is guaranteeing security through the deployment of peacekeeping forces in the region.”<sup>181</sup>

As we will see, however, the peacekeeping missions that the Georgian President hoped would bring security to the region would in the end only serve to help perpetuate the problem of separatism.

#### ***4.1.1: Peacekeeping Missions***

The Russian military would not again attempt military operations on the scale of the Chechen War during Yeltsin’s term in office. The massive drain on men, material, and morale had all but crippled Russia's armed forces, and the country had neither the economic means nor the political will to attempt any major mobilization for the remainder of the decade. Despite its growing inability to project hard power, however, the Kremlin was not willing simply to abandon its ambitions of rebuilding its hegemony in the post-Soviet space. Increasingly, Moscow resorted to comparatively cheap and low-risk means of coercing its neighbors into accommodating its interests.

One of the chief means by which Russia remained militarily engaged in the South Caucasus was by pushing for the establishment of Russian-led peacekeeping missions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The peacekeeping units were ostensibly inserted into the conflict zones to help enforce cease-fires between Georgian forces and those belonging to the separatist regimes, but they all too frequently became a component of what Dov Lynch has called a strategy of "forceful reengagement" in the post-Soviet space. Despite mounting criticism by the Georgian government, CIS peacekeepers remained deployed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia until the outbreak of the Five Day War. While Georgia also

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 204.

had a contingent of peacekeepers, they were subordinate to a Russian commander and were outnumbered by their Russian and Abkhaz or Ossetian counterparts. Indeed, when fighting broke out in August of 2008, the non-Georgian peacekeeping battalions joined the Russian military to fight against Georgia.<sup>182</sup>

For many, the word “peacekeeper” conjures up images of neutral soldiers wearing blue helmets, deployed for the express purpose of preventing warring factions from engaging in violence. Pavel Baev has enumerated six main characteristics of these rather familiar UN peacekeeping operations:

1. Peacekeepers are usually multilateral in nature, rather than a "unilateral instrument employed by self-interested states”;
2. UN peacekeeping missions are "set up with the consent of cooperation of the parties involved”;
3. UN peacekeepers are assumed to be impartial;
4. Peacekeepers, as much as possible, were provided by "small and medium powers, in order to exclude superpower rivalry from an operation”;
5. Use of force by peacekeepers is limited to self-defense;
6. Peacekeepers, traditionally, have only been deployed after the negotiation of a cease-fire.<sup>183</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, of course, these guidelines have undergone certain modifications. "Humanitarian interventions" launched without the consent of all involved parties, for instance, have become more common since 1991, but the general principles underlying UN peacekeeping operations have not changed dramatically.<sup>184</sup>

There are, however, several key differences between Russian-led CIS peacekeeping operations and more familiar UN peacekeeping missions. In Georgia, for instance,

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<sup>182</sup> Lynch, 2004, 74.

<sup>183</sup> Baev, 2000, 19-20.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 21.

Russian “peacekeeping” operations occurred after unilateral coercive intervention by Russian forces already in the combat zones. The nature of the consent afforded to these operations has been suspect, as Russia itself had been a party to these conflicts...

Moreover, according to Baev, “[a]ll Russian deployments have altered the prevailing distribution of power in these conflict zones in order to further Russian aims.”<sup>185</sup> That is to say that, although CIS peacekeepers were often (though not always) successful in their mission to enforce cease-fires between Georgia and the *de facto* states, the actual purpose of their deployment was simply to ensure a stable situation, rather than taking proactive measures to find a peaceful resolution to the conflicts.<sup>186</sup> Russia, meanwhile, as both the leader of the CIS peacekeeping missions as well as the chief mediator in the peace talks, became a major stakeholder in the peace process, further magnifying the importance in the region of decisions made in Moscow.

In some ways, then, support for the *de facto* states can be seen as a continuation of the old strategy of “divide and rule,” which had been a feature of Russian policy in the region throughout both the Imperial and Soviet periods. By ensuring that the separatist governments remained reliant on Russian peacekeepers to prevent Georgia from attempting once again to reintegrate their territories, Moscow guaranteed that it would continue to have loyal and reliable allies. At the same time, by positioning itself as a mediator, as well as by holding in reserve the threat of recognition for the *de facto* states, Russia made certain that Tbilisi would have to remain more or less compliant.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>186</sup> Trenin, 100.

<sup>187</sup> A diplomatic cable released to the public by the WikiLeaks organization demonstrates Russia’s willingness to use its influence in the *de facto* states to its advantage. In a discussion with the Kyrgyz Ambassador in Bishkek in 2008, the Duke of York, Prince Andrew revealed that Azerbaijani President

In some respects, peacekeepers were extremely convenient and effective tools for maintaining a strong Russian presence in Georgia. Many individual peacekeepers were drawn from Russian units that were already stationed in the Transcaucasus after the Soviet collapse. Russian airborne troops that had fought on the side of the Abkhaz, for instance, formed the core of the peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia.<sup>188</sup> The fact that Russian troops already stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia could simply be converted into “peacekeepers” obviated the need to waste resources on re-deploying troops to the Caucasus from other parts of the former Soviet Union.

Interestingly, the peacekeeping missions also enjoyed a certain amount of international legitimacy, at least initially. In the face of Western disinterest in the region, Moscow’s eagerness to intervene and put a stop to the violence in Georgia was welcomed as a positive sign that post-Soviet Russia was serious about engaging constructively in world affairs. Indeed, the CIS peacekeepers in Abkhazia operated under the auspices of the UN, which itself maintained a small and largely impotent “observation” mission in the southern part of the territory. In South Ossetia, CIS peacekeepers worked with another “observation” contingent, this one from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Despite such minor gestures of cooperation, Russia has, in the words of one analyst, “jealously guarded its peacekeeping mandate in Georgia” and

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Ilham Aliyev once told him that he had received a letter from Russian President Dmitri Medvedev warning that if he recognized the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33 as genocide that Azerbaijan could “forget about seeing Nagorno-Karabakh ever again.” See: Gfoeller, Tatiana, “Candid Discussion with Prince Andrew on the Kyrgyz Economy and the ‘Great Game,’” *Wikileaks.ch*, <http://www.wikileaks.ch/cable/2008/10/08BISHKEK1095.html> (accessed January 05, 2011).

<sup>188</sup> Baev, 2000, 76.

has sought to limit international involvement in peacekeeping operations in the *de facto* states.<sup>189</sup>

The reluctance to internationalize the peacekeeping missions may be related to Russian suspicions of outside involvement in military operations in its "sphere of influence." As Jaba Devdariani has written,

[b]y 1994, in holding the keys to a resolution of the "frozen" ethnic conflicts, Russia had essentially realized a *Pax Russica* in the region. To institutionalize this dominance, the Russians worked to undercut international participation in the OSCE's Minsk Group, an international body mandated to find a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. Russia made similar efforts at the UN and OSCE to prevent "internationalization" of the peacekeeping operations in Abkhazia beyond the UN/OSCE mission.<sup>190</sup>

The problem for Moscow was that internationalizing the peacekeeping missions, as Georgia repeatedly demanded, might have resulted in a weakening of Russia's grip on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If either the OSCE or the UN assumed a more prominent role in the region, greater pressure could be put on all of the actors, including the Kremlin, to finally resolve the "frozen conflicts." As long as Russia remained the chief guarantor of the *de facto* states' "independence," however, the threat of recognition could continue to be wielded against the Georgian government; so as long as Russia controlled the peacekeeping missions, it could continue to coerce Georgia into cooperation.<sup>191</sup> As Andrew Bennett has written,

[b]y 1993 the dominant view shifted toward unilateralism as it became apparent that other states and international organizations... would insist on greater neutrality in

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<sup>189</sup> Devdariani, 166.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>191</sup> Lynch, 2000, 4.

peacekeeping missions than Russian Nationalists were willing to tolerate.<sup>192</sup>

By serving as a "protective" ring behind which the secessionist governments could develop the institutions of statehood,<sup>193</sup> the peacekeepers helped to effect what amounted to a drastic reconfiguration of Georgia's internationally recognized borders. As discussed in Chapter 2, these borders had been created as internal administrative borders in the 1930s. As the 1990s wore on, however, the formerly internal borders of Georgia began to ossify into something resembling international boundary lines.<sup>194</sup> Despite the fact that international law continued to recognize Georgia's borders as including Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the peacekeepers made it impossible in practice for the Georgian government to attempt to reestablish control over the secessionist territories without risking war with the Russian Federation.

#### ***4.1.2: Government and Gas***

In addition to the use of peacekeepers to effectively guarantee the independence of the *de facto* states, Russia also began the gradual "infiltration" of the institutions of government in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali by agents of the Russian state.<sup>195</sup> Indeed, Russia's desire to maintain control over the *de facto* states was evidenced by its active involvement in the Abkhaz elections in 2004 and 2005. As Antonenko writes,

Russia had too many interests at stake, and Russian politicians not only stressed the importance of these elections but took a very active part in trying to shape their

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<sup>192</sup> Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999), 326.

<sup>193</sup> IIFMCG, *Report, Vol. 2*, 122-3.

<sup>194</sup> Lynch, 2004, 62.

<sup>195</sup> IIFMCG, *Report, Vol. 2*, 132-134.

outcome. Indeed, the elections were important because they determined the transfer of power from the first postwar president of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, to a new leader, who would be presiding for the next four years over important changes both within Abkhazia and potentially in its relations with Georgia, Russia, and the outside world.<sup>196</sup>

Antonenko points out that Ardzinba had been a “convenient leader for Moscow”<sup>197</sup> due both to his “uncompromising” stance toward reunification with Georgia as well as his close ties with senior Russian officials, including Yevgeny Primakov. There was some worry that whoever succeeded him would be more amenable to finally resolving the conflict with Russia, which the Kremlin viewed as a potential threat to its influence. Russia therefore decided to support its own candidate for president. This campaign

amounted to unprecedented external interference in the electoral process at all its stages. This policy can be compared only with Russia’s on “elections” of governors, which under Putin depend almost entirely on decisions made in Moscow and are simply “ratified” through manipulated elections.<sup>198</sup>

Unfortunately for Moscow, it misjudged the Abkhaz people’s genuine desire for independence, and the Kremlin’s candidate, Raul Khadzhimba, wound up losing the election to his opponent, Sergei Bagapsh. Moscow refused to recognize the results of the election and organized a runoff between Khadzhimba and Bagapsh, a contest that has been described in no uncertain terms as “rigged.”<sup>199</sup> Bagapsh himself refused to participate, and Russia responded by closing the Russian-Abkhaz border and banning the

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<sup>196</sup> Antonenko, 259.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>199</sup> Illarionov, 58.

import into Russia of Abkhaz produce, which was a vital lifeline to the shaky Abkhaz economy.<sup>200</sup> Indeed, Russia at one point even threatened to use military force against Abkhazia if Bagapsh did not concede the elections, though in the end it never followed through on such threats.<sup>201</sup>

It almost goes without saying that such open interference in the Abkhaz elections was clearly contrary to Russia's stated roles both as the leader of supposedly neutral peacekeeping operations and as an ostensible mediator in the "frozen conflicts." Moscow's attempts to "rig" the Abkhaz elections, however, illustrate very clearly the geopolitical interests that the Kremlin felt were at stake in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Indeed, Jeffrey Mankoff has noted striking similarities with the so-called "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, another former Soviet state where Russia's hegemony was beginning to appear increasingly shaky:

Bagapsh was not Russophobe (no Abkhaz politician could afford to alienate the region's only outside supporter), but his candidacy had developed outside the framework of the Kremlin patronage that sustained his rival, Raul Khadzhimba. The Abkhaz crisis of 2004-2005 was thus a smaller version of the struggle for Ukraine going on at the same moment.<sup>202</sup>

The internal affairs of the Georgian government were themselves subject to Russian meddling. One result of the concessions given up by Shevardnadze in return for support against Gamsakhurdia was that the Russian government had acquired a great deal of influence over the appointment of officials in a number of crucial ministries within the

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Mankoff, 260.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

Georgian government, including the Ministries of Defense, Security, and the Interior.<sup>203</sup>

In some views, this influence allowed Russia to effect the appointment of individuals that would steer Georgia's security apparatus away from closer ties with the West. As Thornike Gordadze writes, "Russia jealously supervised every move of the Georgian law enforcement and security forces and was careful to prevent links between them and their Western counterparts." The end result of such "steering" was that "[w]ith both its security and defense in the hands of Russian appointees, the Georgian government took no steps to move closer to NATO for several years."<sup>204</sup> This situation would only begin to change after the Rose Revolution of 2003.

In addition to Russia's effective supervision of some of the Georgian government's most critical ministries, throughout Shevardnadze's terms in office the country itself remained economically dependent on Russia for imports and exports and largely reliant on Moscow for deliveries of fuel and energy.<sup>205</sup> As a result, Georgia became a victim of Russia's so-called "pipeline politics." For instance when, in 2006, Tbilisi expelled a number of Russian embassy workers, having charged them with espionage, Russia responded by declaring an embargo on Georgian goods, effectively cutting the country off from its largest market. Moreover, as Goldman writes, transportation and postal routes were also closed, and ethnic Georgians began to be expelled from Russia *en masse*.<sup>206</sup> "In addition," he writes,

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<sup>203</sup> Gordadze, 35.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>205</sup> Trenin, 100.

<sup>206</sup> Goldman, 150.

There were disruptions in the flow of electricity from Russia. At about the same time in January 2006, the gas pipeline passing through North Ossetia from Russia to Georgia mysteriously exploded. This coincided with the campaign against Ukraine and the application of similar pressure on Moldova. As with Ukraine, the Russians demanded that Georgia and Moldova pay the much higher Western European market price for gas.<sup>207</sup>

Indeed, although prices were ostensibly raised in order to bring them into conformity with “market prices,” many analysts have interpreted such manipulation – in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere – as a fairly naked attempt by Russia to bully former Soviet republics that began to wander too far from Moscow’s orbit.<sup>208</sup>

#### **4.2: Challenge**

By the end of the 1990s, dissatisfaction with the “*Pax Russica*” was growing. Even Shevardnadze, who in many ways owed his presidency to Russia, began to more openly challenge the Kremlin, even while Georgia itself remained too weak to effect any serious changes to the *status quo*. This is not to say, however, that Russia’s hegemony went unchallenged. The Georgian parliament passed a law in 1997, for instance, that required Russia to finally relinquish control of Georgia’s borders, including the sensitive Georgian-Turkish border, to Georgian border guards by 1999.<sup>209</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, Russia appears to have basically acquiesced to this plan, and the handover proceeded without incident.

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Mankoff, 253.

<sup>209</sup> Gordadze, 43.

### ***4.2.1: Closing Russian Military Installations***

More problematic was the Georgian government's decision to close all of the regular Russian military bases stationed on Georgian soil.<sup>210</sup> According to one analyst, there were roughly 1,600 bases and other military facilities of varying sizes on Georgian soil that were "inherited" by the Russian military after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>211</sup> From the Russian standpoint, these bases were crucial outposts for securing Russia's southern flank, and there was little willingness on the part of the Kremlin to dismantle them. Communist and nationalist factions in the Russian Duma bitterly attacked any plan to close the bases. Despite their resistance, most of the less important installations were eventually closed between 1997 and 1999.<sup>212</sup>

By the end of 1999, only four bases remained, although these facilities were by far the most important and, perhaps not coincidentally, were located in particularly sensitive parts of Georgia's territory: There was a base in Gudauta, in Abkhazia, and another outside of Batumi, in Adjara; a third base was located in Javakheti, an occasionally restive majority Armenian region in the south of the country; the last base was located in Vaziani, which was in close proximity to Tbilisi itself.<sup>213</sup> Talks over the status of these bases took years. After ten rounds of negotiations, the Kremlin finally demanded fifteen years and \$500 million in recompense; Russia was later convinced to reduce the timetable to 11 years, though it refused to budge from the \$500 million price

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<sup>210</sup> This excluded those installations used by CIS peacekeepers.

<sup>211</sup> Nikolai Sokov, "The Withdrawal of Russian Military Bases from Georgia: Not Solving Anything," *PONARS Policy Memo* 363 (2005): 2.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> See Map 3, 149.

tag.<sup>214</sup> Throughout the period that the negotiations were taking place, the Russian side continually dragged its feet and even fomented some unrest among the Armenians in Javakheti, where the base was a major employer, in the hopes of forestalling the closure of the facility.<sup>215</sup>

The policy of demanding the closure of Russian bases in Georgia carried through the Rose Revolution of 2003. Although initially Moscow expected the new government to downplay the issue in order to ingratiate itself with its powerful neighbor, this did not occur. If anything, the new president took an even more activist approach to the issue. By early 2006, Tbilisi threatened that the remaining bases “would be effectively put under siege,” in the words of Sokov. “Siege” would have entailed the stoppage of water and electricity services to the bases, and the revocation of visas for military personnel, as well as the effective confinement of military units to the bases. Tbilisi’s threats forced the Kremlin’s hand and, the 11-year timeframe was abruptly reduced to 3-4 years, while the steep \$500 million price tag was halved.<sup>216</sup> By 2008, all of the bases were officially closed.

The closure of the bases was seen as “a major blow to Russia’s interests in the Caucasus,” in the words of Thornike Gordadze. Not only did the removal of Russian regular army troops begin to open holes in Moscow’s “forward positioning network,” but it weakened Russian hegemony in the Transcaucasus. Russia responded to the base closures by implementing a strict visa regime on Georgians, making it extremely difficult

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<sup>214</sup> Sokov, 3.

<sup>215</sup> Gordadze, 44.

<sup>216</sup> Sokov, 4.

for them to enter into or work in the Russian Federation. Significantly, this visa regime did not apply to residents of South Ossetia or Abkhazia whom, for “humanitarian” reasons, were exempted from the new rules.<sup>217</sup>

#### ***4.2.2: The Pankisi Gorge***

Tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi also came to a head over the question of whether or not to allow Russian troops to enter the Pankisi Gorge, a remote region in northern Georgia that borders on Chechnya. During the Second Chechen War, which began in 1999, Russia alleged that large numbers of terrorists – including Osama bin Laden himself – were taking refuge in Pankisi with Georgia's blessing. It is impossible to say for certain whether such charges were true. One scholar puts the number of actual “terrorists” in the Pankisi Gorge as only numbering in the hundreds.<sup>218</sup> The significance of this number becomes clear when one keeps in mind the fact that, due to the massive destruction the Russian military was visiting upon Chechnya itself, some 12,000 refugees were living in the area. In any case, Shevardnadze refused to allow Russian troops to patrol the Georgian side of the border. The Russians had demanded access to Pankisi ostensibly to slow the flow of weapons and reinforcements into the country. After being refused ground access to the region, the Russian military simply commenced a bombing campaign in the Pankisi Gorge, which represented a fairly clear violation of Georgia's territorial sovereignty.

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<sup>217</sup> Gordadze, 45.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. 42.

### ***4.2.3: The “Six Day War” in Gali and the Failure of Peacekeeping***

Perhaps the greatest rift that developed between Russian and Georgia, however, was the result of ongoing instability in the Gali region, an area in southern Abkhazia bordering on Georgia. Since the end of the war in 1994, some 30-40,000 ethnic Georgians and Mingrelians, who had been driven from their homes during the fighting, had quietly returned to the area on their own, making Gali a particularly sensitive region for both the Georgian government and the Abkhaz *de facto* government.<sup>219</sup> The exact cause for the fighting that broke out there in 1998 – the so-called “Six Day War” – remains unclear, although some reports indicate that Georgian nationalist militias, bearing names such as the “White Legion” and the “Forest Brotherhood,” attacked Abkhaz police units in the area.<sup>220</sup> The Georgian government, for its part, alleged that it was Abkhaz forces that had first attacked Georgian settlements in the Gali district. These attacks, according to the Georgians, were met with “armed resistance” from the local population, leading to further attacks by the Abkhaz.<sup>221</sup> Whatever the actual sequence of events was, what is clear is that, within weeks, both the Abkhaz and the Georgian government had moved military units into the area and there was a very real threat that a more general war between Georgia and Abkhazia could reignite.

The fighting lasted only for six days, however, and, regardless of which side actually started shooting first, the Georgian and Mingrelian population living in Gali nevertheless became the target of systematic reprisals by the Abkhaz side. Russian

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<sup>219</sup> IIFMCG, *Report, Vol. 2*, 86.

<sup>220</sup> Aleksandr Imedashvili and Igor Belov, “Renewed Fighting in Abkhazia – Russian Peacekeepers on the Sidelines for Now,” *Current Digest of the Russian Press* 50, no. 20 (1998): 19.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

peacekeepers, meanwhile, stood by and refused to intervene to stop the fighting, although they did attempt to prevent the infiltration of heavy weapons, such as artillery, from entering the combat area. Civilian casualties were numerous, and the result was that the Georgian and Mingrelian populations, who had been driven out of Abkhazia during the last war, were once again forced out of their homes,<sup>222</sup> many of which were razed.<sup>223</sup> After the fighting was over, Abkhaz forces engaged in a campaign of looting and burning villages, which was meant to serve as a disincentive for refugees to attempt to return to Gali in the future.<sup>224</sup>

Although the situation had threatened to spiral out of control, the fighting quickly died down after the Georgian forces beat a hasty retreat. Despite fears of another war in Abkhazia, none materialized. There were nevertheless several important long-term consequences. First, the legitimacy of the Russian-led peacekeeping missions was fatally undermined by the fact that peacekeeping troops had failed to intervene on behalf of the Georgian and Mingrelian civilians living in Gali.<sup>225</sup> Russia's reluctance to get involved may have been linked to the growing numbers of casualties sustained by Russian peacekeepers in Georgia throughout 1997 and 1998, largely as a result of incidents involving landmines.<sup>226</sup> After the disaster of the First Chechen War, the Russian

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<sup>222</sup> Damien Helly and Giorgi Gogia, "Georgian Security and the Role of the West," in *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Robert Levgold (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005), 286.

<sup>223</sup> Imedashvili and Belov, 19.

<sup>224</sup> Nodia, 2000, 191.

<sup>225</sup> Helly and Gogia, 287.

<sup>226</sup> Lynch, 2000, 146.

government was wary of angering the war-weary electorate by risking Russian lives, especially on behalf of places as insignificant as South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Whatever the reason, as a result of Russia's decision to not commit peacekeeping forces during the conflict in Gali, the Georgian government's level of confidence in the peacekeeping missions, which had never been high to begin with, completely collapsed. Calls for the missions to be radically restructured, internationalized, or abolished entirely reached a fever pitch. Shevardnadze, who had only a few years earlier announced that deploying peacekeepers was "the most important thing," publically announced his opposition to their continued presence. For its part, the Abkhaz *de facto* government also registered its displeasure with the Russian peacekeepers, claiming that they had not done enough to prevent groups such as the White Legion and the Forest Brotherhood from encroaching on Abkhaz territory.<sup>227</sup>

In retrospect, the unrest in Gali in 1998 was the beginning of the end of Russia's reliance on peacekeepers alone to sustain its hegemony in the South Caucasus. Not only was there little stomach for more bloodshed in a Russia that was still licking its wounds after being defeated in Chechnya, but the merits of the peacekeeping missions themselves were also increasingly under attack. Boris Yeltsin gave voice to Russia's frustration in March, 1997 when he said, "If someone does not want Russia's help, we can withdraw our peacekeepers... it is now high time for the conflicting parties to start making decisions."<sup>228</sup> Indeed, already by this time, and certainly after the Gali incident, Russian policies toward the *de facto* states had begun to shift. Although Russia's new approach

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<sup>227</sup> Dmitri Danilov, "Russia's Role," *Conciliation Resources*, September 1999, <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/georgia-abkhazia/russias-role.php> (accessed May 14, 2011).

<sup>228</sup> Quoted in Lynch, 2000, 145.

toward maintaining its hegemony in Georgia would not come to full fruition until early in Vladimir Putin's first administration, by the end of the 1990s the Kremlin was already reconsidering the central role that had been played by peacekeepers since 1994. Writing in 2000, Dov Lynch noted that

the Russian leadership... recognized the dangers involved in the reliance on the military as a tool of policy. The importance of this region for Russia remains unchanged. The means by which the government pursues its objectives in the region, however, may change radically. The appointment of Primakov in early 1996 resulted in increased emphasis on diplomatic measures, and strengthened the MFA's [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] role in policy-making.<sup>229</sup>

Among the new means employed by Moscow was passportization, which, as will be discussed in the next chapter, fundamentally altered discourses of territoriality in the *de facto* states in a way that Russian peacekeepers, by their very nature as parties "external" to the conflict, were unable to do.

#### ***4.2.4: The Rose Revolution***

Aside from hollowing out what remained of the peacekeepers' legitimacy, the unrest in Gali had other significant ramifications as well. The short conflict was extremely unpopular in Georgia, where it was taken as a sign that the government was unwilling or unable to protect Georgians against ethnic cleansing.<sup>230</sup> Moreover, although the "Zviadist" insurgency had been crushed, parts of western Georgia remained restive. For instance, Shevardnadze and his government were deeply unpopular in Mingrelia, where Gamsakhurdia remained a local hero. The violence in neighboring Gali, moreover, had threatened to further destabilize the region, where people complained that

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 191.

the government was not doing enough to support the new flood of refugees from Abkhazia. Tbilisi found that it had little choice but to begin sending large sums of money to Mingrelia to calm the situation. The payments, however, proved to be unsustainable given the rampant corruption that characterized Georgia throughout Shevardnadze's tenure in office. The already weak Georgian economy began to slump even further and a major financial crisis ensued. The financial crisis that erupted in Russia at roughly the same time did little to help Georgia's recovery.

It was in this context that Georgia began the process of holding elections. Shevardnadze's position was so desperate that both the parliamentary elections in 1999, as well as the presidential elections, which were held in 2000, were rigged. According to Irakly Areshidze, "[t]hese two elections, especially the one in 1999, were characterized by greater and more serious electoral violations than anything ever seen in Georgia before or since."<sup>231</sup> Shevardnadze's victory, however, did little to alleviate Georgia's problems, as Lincoln Mitchell describes:

Shevardnadze's regime was rife with corruption, unable to deliver basic services or economic growth of any kind and relying increasingly on Shevardnadze's reputation, continuing mastery of politics and ability to keep the Georgian opposition disunified.<sup>232</sup>

By the time the 2003 parliamentary elections came around, Shevardnadze's party, Citizens' United Georgia (CUG) had begun to splinter. Forming a new party, For New Georgia, the old Soviet Foreign Minister made one final bid to hold onto power.

However, when exit polls from the 2003 elections wound up differing sharply from the

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<sup>231</sup> Irakly Areshidze, *Democracy and Autocracy in Eurasia: Georgia in Transition* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>232</sup> Lincoln Mitchell, *Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution* (Philadelphia, PENN, 2009), 43.

official results, which indicated a victory for the For New Georgia party, it became clear that the process had once again been rigged. This time protesters took to the streets to demand Shevardnadze's resignation.<sup>233</sup>

There is of course no space here to give a full account of what became known as the Rose Revolution, which was replete with the requisite politicking and power grabs. Suffice it to say that, when the dust began to settle, Mikheil Saakashvili, perhaps the most popular and visible reformist politician in the country,<sup>234</sup> emerged as the new president of Georgia. An energetic, English-speaking, Columbia-educated reformer, Saakashvili faced numerous challenges almost immediately upon taking office. In striking similarity to the problems faced by the Menshevik government after the collapse of the Russian Empire, Saakashvili's government rode a wave of optimism, even though, in the words of Niklas Nilsson, it "inherited extremely weak and corrupt governmental institutions, poverty, and a lack of control over a significant portion of the country's territory."<sup>235</sup>

#### ***4.2.5: The Adjara Crisis***

At the top of Saakashvili's agenda was the question of territorial integrity. Little progress had been made under Shevardnadze to finally resolve the problem of the *de facto* states on Georgia's territory. Possessed, in Nilsson's words, by a "zeal for territorial integrity," Saakashvili immediately began to make plans to bring the *de facto* regimes back into the fold. Saakashvili believed that Adjara would be the most readily reintegrated, due in large part to the growing unpopularity of Aslan Abashidze who, in

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>235</sup> Nilsson, 89.

the words of Christoph Zürcher, “ruled Adjara as a personal fiefdom...”<sup>236</sup> In addition to highly successful non-violent protests organized by Tbilisi against Abashidze, the Georgian government also held “large military exercises just across the administrative border” that separated Adjara from Georgia proper.<sup>237</sup>

At first, Abashidze remained unimpressed. Adjara had long since become what Georgi Derlugian has called “a Russian military protectorate,”<sup>238</sup> and the presence of a large Russian military base close to Batumi, Adjara’s capital city, reinforced his belief that there was little that Georgia could do to unseat him. He was not alone in this assessment. One Western scholar, writing in 2004 about Georgia’s ongoing campaign to close all Russian military bases in Georgia, confidently asserted:

In short, there are reasons to say that Adjara is well beyond Tbilisi’s reach and that Tbilisi lacks a leverage to remove the Russians by means other than negotiations. Adjara benefits from the base by having another ally on the ground and Moscow benefits from the strategic reach given by the current situation and hence there are no incentives for them to leave.<sup>239</sup>

Russia, however, would refrain from intervening militarily to prevent Abashidze’s ouster; indeed, committing the troops stationed in Batumi to Abashidze’s defense would have represented a serious breach of international law. In the end, Abashidze was convinced to step down by the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Igor Ivanov, whereupon he

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<sup>236</sup> Zürcher, 203.

<sup>237</sup> Nilsson, 91.

<sup>238</sup> Georgi Derlugian, *Bourdieu’s Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), 232.

<sup>239</sup> Robert Larsson, “The Enemy Within: Russia’s Military Withdrawal from Georgia,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 3 (2004): 417.

left Adjara for Moscow.<sup>240</sup> Ominously, Putin warned Saakashvili, “Now remember, we did not intervene in Adjara, but you won’t have any gifts from us in south Ossetia and Abkhazia.”<sup>241</sup>

### ***4.3: Exporting the “Adjara” Template***

The peaceful removal of Abashidze was a major coup for the new Georgian government, as well as for Saakashvili personally. Outside of Georgia proper, however, the developments in Adjara appeared worrisome. The narrative in the Russian press during this period highlighted Georgia’s supposed aggressiveness, and numerous articles published at the time warned of the danger of further attempts by Tbilisi to reintegrate the *de facto* states.<sup>242</sup>

Indeed, it is clear that there was some fear in Russia that the “Adjara scenario” could be replayed in Sokhumi or Tskhinvali, as evidenced in an article published in *Vremya novostei* on May 20, 2004, entitled “Last Stop – Sokhumi: Abkhazia Wants to Protect Itself From the Export of the Georgian Revolution”:

[C]onsultations [with Russia] are acquiring a special relevance since Abkhazia fears the export of the Georgian “Rose Revolution” along the lines of the Adjar scenario. Vice-President of Abkhazia, Astamur Tania, told *Vremya novostei* that “the peace process was under serious threat.”

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<sup>240</sup> Nilsson, 91.

<sup>241</sup> Quoted in Illarionov, 55.

<sup>242</sup> See, for example, Vladimir Novikov and Gennady Sysoev, “Be Georgian or You Will Lose,” *Kommersant*, June 3, 2004, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/480078> (accessed May 15, 2011). Gennady Sysoev and Vladimir Novikov, “Georgia Moves Forward,” *Kommersant*, June 1, 2004, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/479204> (accessed May 12, 2011).

In his words, “the Georgian authorities are actively talking about the restoration of territorial integrity...”<sup>243</sup>

Such fears were not necessarily unfounded. Throughout the period leading up to the Five Day War in 2008, Saakashvili’s government attempted unsuccessfully to duplicate the success of the “Adjara scenario” in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Saakashvili, however, seems to have seriously misjudged the difficulties he faced in the remaining *de facto* states. Unlike in Adjara, for example, the populations were not ethnically Georgian and had little interest in being part of a Georgian state. Perhaps more importantly, Adjara and Georgia had never fought a war against one another. By contrast, the memories of war, particularly in Abkhazia, remained fresh, and mistrust of and antipathy toward Georgia and ethnic Georgians remained high. Lastly, Russian control over the *de facto* governments in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali was far stronger than it had been in Batumi, despite Moscow’s close relations with Aslan Abashidze. This was due in part to Adjara’s physical remoteness from Russia as well as to Abashidze’s highly personalized style of rule.

It was due in large part to Saakashvili’s misunderstandings about the very real differences between Adjara and the other two *de facto* states that led him to adopt policies toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia that in hindsight appear rather rash and ham-fisted. For example, as Niklas Nilsson points out,

Between December 2003 and May 2004, Tbilisi mounted a campaign to undermine the South Ossetian authorities through an anti-smuggling operation. Checkpoints along the administrative border were closed, the Ergneti border market closed, and roads used for smuggling were blown

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<sup>243</sup> Mikhail Vigansky, “Next Stop – Sukhumi: Abkhazia Wants to Protect Itself From the Export of the Georgian Revolution,” *Vremya novostei*, May 20, 2004, <http://www.vremya.ru/2004/85/5/98709.html> (accessed March 04, 2011).

up. These efforts were aimed at fanning dissatisfaction with the *de facto* authorities and were combined with promises of humanitarian aid to win the hearts and minds of the local population. This strategy backfired, however, as the government apparently underestimated South Ossetian fears of Georgian aggression. This enabled the Kokoity government to mobilize significant support.<sup>244</sup>

Indeed, despite Saakashvili's various attempts to recreate his victory in Adjara, which often included wide-ranging proposals to give the *de facto* states substantial independence from Tbilisi in return for maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity, the peace process remained deadlocked.<sup>245</sup> Each of his proposals was rejected out of hand. Attempts to establish "alternative" Abkhazian and South Ossetian governments on Georgian-controlled territory in the *de facto* states, and neither the new Abkhaz "government in exile" nor the Georgian-backed "government" of Dmitri Sanokaev in South Ossetia ever garnered any real support.<sup>246</sup>

The reluctance of the *de facto* governments in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali to take seriously any of Saakashvili's proposals was likely linked to the increasing levels of support they had begun receiving from Russia in the wake of Abashidze's ouster. In addition to intensifying the campaign of passportization in the *de facto* states, Russia also unilaterally withdrew from the CIS-imposed sanctions that dated from 1996 and which had prohibited the transfer of armaments into Abkhazia by any member of the Commonwealth of Independent States.<sup>247</sup> Additionally, in April of 2008, Moscow

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<sup>244</sup> Nilsson, 92.

<sup>245</sup> David Smith, 132.

<sup>246</sup> Mankoff, 261-262.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

normalized relations with the *de facto* regimes while continuing to formally recognize Georgia's territorial integrity. According to Andrei Illarionov,

President Putin ordered the Russian government and Russian regional authorities to establish direct relations with the governments in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. The specific type of relationship which he proposed was virtually identical to that which existed between Moscow and the federal territories within Russia proper.<sup>248</sup>

Russian decision-making vis-à-vis Georgia after the Rose Revolution makes a great deal of sense when viewed as a means of preserving Russian hegemony in the region. Not only did Saakashvili's "zeal for territorial integrity" threaten to undermine Russian influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the Georgian President's stated goals of leading Georgia into NATO and the European Union were also seen as major threats to Russia's security interests. As Jeffrey Mankoff explains, support for the *de facto* regimes, which guaranteed a continuation of the "frozen conflicts" served the Kremlin's purposes by effectively preventing the necessary conditions for Georgia to join Western security organizations:

the Kremlin used the existence of the frozen conflicts (in Georgia as well as in Moldova and Azerbaijan) to keep a leash on post-Soviet states' ambitions of joining the EU or NATO, which are pledged not to admit member states with unresolved territorial disputes.<sup>249</sup>

Despite the fact that Saakashvili was probably too optimistic about his chances of successfully coaxing Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into communion with Georgia, it is clear that Russia was alarmed at the prospect of "losing" the *de facto* states and, immediately after the "loss" of Adjara, Moscow began to take steps to ensure that South

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<sup>248</sup> Illarionov, 68.

<sup>249</sup> Mankoff, 258.

Ossetia and Abkhazia would not be similarly pried from its grip. As we have seen, normalizing relationships with the secessionist governments was one method by which Russia tried to strengthen the regimes in Tskhinvali and Sokhumi. Despite closer political ties, however, Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained outside of Russia's effective jurisdiction. As we will see in the next chapter, however, passportization was the means by which Russia was able to discursively transform the *de facto* states into spaces where the Kremlin was able to argue that it had the right to exercise something resembling sovereign control, something that peacekeepers and political support for the separatist regimes could never have accomplished.

## CHAPTER V

### PASSPORTIZATION AND TERRITORY

“I would rather die of hunger than take a Georgian passport - that would be a betrayal of the memory of my brother, who died in the war.”  
-“Lasha,” an Abkhazian<sup>250</sup>

As the 1990s wore on, Russia started to view peacekeeping with a somewhat more jaundiced eye. Given the state of the Russian armed forces after the catastrophe of the First Chechen War, as well as continuing uncertainty about the future of the shaky Russian economy, particularly after the financial collapse of 1998, there was some trepidation in Moscow over the possibility that peacekeepers could wind up drawing Russia into an unwanted war in the Caucasus. This fear was not entirely unwarranted. The situation in South Ossetia remained peaceful, if tense, with the relative calm occasionally punctuated by small-scale skirmishes between Georgian forces and Ossetian militias. Abkhazia was more problematic, and major incidents, including the “Six Day War” in Gali, brought the region to the brink of war. The failure of CIS peacekeepers to intervene on behalf of the ethnic Georgians who were driven out of their homes by Abkhaz militias during the 1998 unrest in Gali caused the Georgian government to begin to openly question the worth of continued peacekeeping operations and tensions between Russia and Georgia declined dramatically when the Georgian government began to push for the complete removal of Russian military bases from its territory.

Russian peacekeepers, of course, remained deployed until after the Five Day War, but the Russian government was eventually forced to agree to the gradual closure of

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<sup>250</sup> Quoted in Inal Khashig, “Abkhaz Rush for Russian Passports,” *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, June 27, 2002, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/abkhaz-rush-russian-passports> (accessed March 21, 11).

military bases on Georgian soil. While this process did not proceed entirely smoothly,<sup>251</sup> the last Russian base was finally closed in 2008, shortly before the war broke out. Russia was also forced to hand over control of Georgia's borders, which had previously been patrolled by Russian troops, to the Georgian military in 1999.<sup>252</sup> The decline in Russia's ability to project hard power, along with growing Western attention to Georgia and Saakashvili's ambitions of joining NATO and the EU, gradually began to undermine Russia's hegemonic position.<sup>253</sup>

As Russia's ability to rely on military force to ensure Tbilisi's obedience began to crumble, the Kremlin was forced to innovate and find new ways of preserving its influence in Georgia. This chapter explores the phenomenon of passportization, which represented one of Moscow's most radical attempts to maintain its foothold in the South Caucasus. It argues that the widespread distribution of Russian passports carried with it not only legal and political ramifications, but territorial ones as well. By granting itself the right to intervene militarily wherever its citizens might live, and showing little hesitation to "manufacture" new citizens beyond its borders, Russia effectively created the right to violate the sovereignty of any state where the Kremlin determines that the lives of Russian citizens are at risk. Much like the "Bush Doctrine," which many agree essentially gives the United States the "right" to fight unilateral, preemptive wars anywhere in the world, Russia's use of the "right to protection of nationals abroad," which is linked to the right to self defense enumerated in Article 51 of the UN Charter, poses potentially significant challenges to international legal and territorial norms.

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 192-195.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>253</sup> Devdariani, 169.

Russia's program of passportization in the *de facto* states, of course, was not the first instance of passportization in history. Although the Bolsheviks initially abolished the old Tsarist system of internal passports after the October Revolution,<sup>254</sup> for instance, passports were eventually reinstated in the early 1930s during Stalin's industrialization and collectivization campaigns. Passportization in the Soviet Union took place on a massive scale, and by the end of 1934 some 27 million people, mostly in urban areas and other "strategic" regions of the Soviet Union, had been passportized.<sup>255</sup>

The documents distributed by the state served largely as a means of controlling the movement of people in the Soviet Union. "The introduction of the internal passport," writes Robert Conquest, "tied down the workers, whose possession of the document, and of the 'labour book,' was, with other measures, used to keep them in their jobs, or at least their cities."<sup>256</sup> Moreover the residency permit, or *propiska*, effectively tied peasants to the land by denying them the right to leave their collective farms or to reside in cities. The *propiska*, according to Conquest, "prevented not only kulaks, but any peasants who might wish to move to the cities from doing so without authorization."<sup>257</sup>

In addition to controlling movement, the passport also doubled as a means of identifying individual citizens, constituting them as either belonging to the body politic or being excluded from it. One contemporary description of the Soviet passport characterized it as

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<sup>254</sup> Louise Shelley, *Policing Soviet Society: The Evolution of State Control* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 34.

<sup>255</sup> David Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009), 247.

<sup>256</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986), 170.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

a biographical capsulization of its bearer in booklet form. It states, inter alia, his name, place and date of birth, nationality (based upon the nationality of his parents), information concerning his marital status and the identity of his children, a record of his military service, his place of work, notations concerning his failure to make court-ordered alimony payments, if applicable, and, most importantly, a *propiska*.<sup>258</sup>

"Despite the existence of other means of documenting identity," notes David Shearer, "the passport system became a primary means by which Soviet officials defined the social and ethnic composition of Soviet society, the degree of loyalty of different populations, and the geographic distribution of those populations."<sup>259</sup>

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the system of internal passports persisted in the Russian Federation, although it is no longer nearly as pervasive as it once was.<sup>260</sup> In most other newly independent states, however, the internal passport system quickly disappeared. In Georgia, the *propiska*'s disappearance was due partly to the extreme antipathy toward any reminders of Russo-Soviet domination that prevailed at the time of independence as well as to the almost total breakdown of the ability of the Georgian government to administer its territory during the civil war. When the situation stabilized after Gamsakhurdia's death, the Georgian government officially abolished the *propiska* system. The Georgian Constitution, meanwhile, guarantees the freedom of movement within the country.<sup>261</sup> Despite being officially abolished, however, internal

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<sup>258</sup> Simona Pipko and Albert Pucciarelli, "The Soviet Internal Passport System," *The International Lawyer* 915 (1985): 916-17.

<sup>259</sup> Shearer, 245.

<sup>260</sup> See: Noah Rubins, "The Demise and Resurrection of the *Propiska*: Freedom of Movement in the Russian Federation," *Harvard International Law Journal* 39, no. 2 (1998): 545-566.

<sup>261</sup> Republic of Georgia. *The Constitution of the Republic of Georgia*. [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2004/CDL\(2004\)041-e.pdf](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2004/CDL(2004)041-e.pdf). (accessed May 04, 2011).

passports have nevertheless remained acceptable forms of identification in Georgia, due in no small part to the fact that new Georgian ID cards and passports are expensive and frequently difficult for citizens to obtain.<sup>262</sup>

The Soviet government, of course, was not alone in using documentation as a means of social control. The Nazi regime also engaged in something like passportization, implementing a massive program of enumerating and identifying the Reich's Jewish population, which ultimately laid what John Torpey has called the "administrative foundation for the deportations to Auschwitz and the other death camps."<sup>263</sup> Jews, whose identity was documented in a variety of ways, were frequently forced to sell their homes and move to ghettos and so-called *Judenhäuser*, where they were subjected to frequent "spot checks" by the Gestapo. Part of the Gestapo's job, aside from simple harassment, was to ensure that Jews were complying with a laundry list of arbitrary rules and regulations, including possessing proper means of identification.<sup>264</sup> Moreover, the so-called "Office for Jewish Emigration," which was responsible for issuing to Jews passports that would permit them to leave the Reich, was soon transformed into an instrument "not of emigration," in the words of William Shirer, "but of extermination..."<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, *The Propiska System Applied to Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Council of Europe Member States: Effects and Remedies*, Doc. 9262, 2001, <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc01/edoc9262.htm> (accessed March 12, 2011).

<sup>263</sup> John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 132.

<sup>264</sup> Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998), 154-155.

<sup>265</sup> William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1960), 477.

It is important to remember, however, that passportization has not always been employed purely as a means of repression. During the Second World War, for example, there were numerous instances of foreign passports being distributed to Jews in desperate attempts to protect them from deportation to the extermination camps. One of the most dramatic cases involved Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat in Hungary who issued tens of thousands of so-called "protective passports" to Hungarian Jews.<sup>266</sup> While few recipients of these passports ever actually emigrated to Sweden,<sup>267</sup> the passportization of Hungarian Jews nevertheless placed passport holders under the protection of the Swedish government, with the result that many lives were spared from deportation to the camps. Elsewhere in Europe, Jews desperately sought to obtain passports from various Latin American countries, including Paraguay, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. Jews sometimes knowingly purchasing forgeries of passports from these countries in the hope that the falsified documents would be at least convincing enough to prevent their holders being sent to the East.<sup>268</sup> Tragically, the Gestapo learned of the demand for passports and exploited it. Many Polish Jews were lured by agents of the state to the infamous Hotel Polski after the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, for example, with the promise of obtaining foreign passports. Most of the documents that were available were either forgeries or belonged to people who were already dead, and the people who turned up to

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<sup>266</sup> Leni Yahil, "Raoul Wallenberg – His Mission and Activities in Hungary," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 15 (1983): 32.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>268</sup> See: Nathan Eck, "Rescue of Jews with the Aid of Passports and Citizenship Papers of Latin American States," *Yad Vashem Studies* 1 (1957): 125-152.

claim them were detained and subsequently deported to Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, or Treblinka.<sup>269</sup>

Passportization in the *de facto* states fell somewhere between the two extremes of Stalinist social control and the humanitarian benevolence of Raoul Wallenberg. Most of the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were actually quite eager to accept Russian citizenship, particularly since a number of benefits accrued to the recipients of passports. Such benefits included more freedom to travel in the Russian Federation, where many residents found work or had family,<sup>270</sup> as well as Russian state pensions that were more generous than their Georgian counterparts. While the Soviet government had employed passports in part to exclude what Shearer calls "social aliens" from the body politic, the Russian government instead used passports to stake a claim to the populations of the *de facto* states by explicitly *including* them within the Russian polity. The darker side of passportization in Georgia was that, by naturalizing the residents of the secessionist territories, the Russian government effectively "captured" a sizeable portion of the population and territory of the Republic of Georgia and laid the discursive foundations for war.

### ***5.1: The Rationale for Passportization in the De Facto States***

Not long after the end of the Five Day War, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, joined only by Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru. The new states remain entirely dependent on Russia for their political and economic survival. Moscow, meanwhile, has signed defense treaties with the *de facto* governments, some of which give the Russian military control over their borders, effectively moving

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 139-144.

<sup>270</sup> South Ossetians, in particular, had close ties to their ethnic compatriots in North Ossetia.

the frontiers of the Russian Federation up to what had previously been internal borders within Georgia. Given that Russia had already established effective sovereignty over the *de facto* states, however, one can argue that the Five Day War only formalized a situation that had already existed for a number of years. Although it was the force of Russian arms that ultimately secured the *de facto* states' independence, the process of passportization, as we will see, had effectively transformed the separatist territories into "Russian spaces" inside Georgia's borders, undermining Tbilisi's sovereignty in these spaces long before the war even began.

As discussed earlier, one of the Kremlin's main foreign policy goals after the collapse of the USSR has been the maintenance of Russian influence throughout the post-Soviet space. In Georgia, this stance initially meant taking advantage of political instability and supporting separatist movements. As the situation began to stabilize, the Russian government was able to position itself as an arbiter in the so-called "frozen conflicts," which it itself had been instrumental in creating. By lending political and economic support to the secessionist regimes, and thereby ensuring that the Georgian government would have to consider Russia's interests or run the risk of the Kremlin withdrawing its stated support for Georgia's territorial integrity, Russia succeeded in cobbling together on the cheap something resembling hegemony in the South Caucasus.

As long as the Shevardnadze regime more or less acquiesced to this arrangement, or was at the very least powerless to effect any changes to it, Russia's interests in the region were basically secure. After the Rose Revolution, however, Russian dominance in the region began to look somewhat more fragile. Not only was Saakashvili fêted in Western capitals – particularly in the United States, whose growing interest in the

Caucasus was viewed by Russia as a threat – but he was also far more interested than his predecessor had been in strengthening ties between Georgia and the West by courting such institutions as NATO and the European Union. This strategy, coupled with growing concerns within the Georgian government about the legitimacy of the Russian-led peacekeeping missions, as well as Saakashvili's aggressive stance vis-à-vis Moscow's client regime in Adjara, did little to endear the new Georgian administration to the Kremlin.

Most importantly Saakashvili was intent on pursuing a revisionist agenda with regards to the *de facto* states. His goal of reestablishing Tbilisi's sovereignty over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as his campaign to oust Abashidze, was greeted in Moscow with alarm. It was interpreted as a sign that Russia was in danger of losing its grip on Georgia. It was feared that if the "Adjara scenario" were repeated in South Ossetia or Abkhazia, Russian hegemony in the region would be fatally undermined.

According to Andrei Illarionov, a former Putin adviser:

Following the Adjara crisis, Moscow further ratcheted up tensions with Tbilisi by expanding Russian military and administrative control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and accelerating the distribution of Russian passports in the two territories. Henceforth it could rationalize its actions in these two regions by the claim that it was merely defending its "citizens." This period also saw growing violence in South Ossetia, as well as a botched Russian attempt to impose a new leader on Abkhazia, as it had done successfully in South Ossetia.<sup>271</sup>

The events in Adjara had made it clear to the Kremlin that the presence of the Russian military alone would not be enough to discourage Saakashvili's plans to reintegrate the *de facto* states. While there were no peacekeeping forces stationed in

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<sup>271</sup> Illarionov, 56.

Adjara, there was still a significant contingent of Russian regular army troops whose commanders were personally loyal to Abashidze. Their presence, however, did little to dissuade the Georgian government from organizing anti-Abashidze protests and holding military exercises of their own just across the Ajdaran border. The expansion of the passportization program in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the wake of the Adjara affair was thus likely motivated in part by the recognition that relying on peacekeepers alone, especially in the face of growing Georgian demands that the peacekeeping missions themselves either be internationalized or abolished entirely, was no longer feasible or, perhaps, even desirable.

Although the Kremlin had spent the previous decade patronizing Abashidze, and indeed gave him asylum when he was ousted, there was little it could do, concretely, to prevent him from being overthrown. First of all, the Russian military units stationed near Batumi had no peacekeeping mandate, so employing them to defend Abashidze's regime would have been a serious breach of international law; second, due partly to Abashidze's highly personal style of rule and partly to the territory's remoteness from Russia's borders, Adjara had experienced far less Russian infiltration, economically or politically, than had Abkhazia or South Ossetia; third, although there had been a plan in place to begin distributing Russian passports in Adjara, that plan was preempted by the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's subsequent reintegration of the territory into Tbilisi's political power structures.<sup>272</sup> The fact that there was no significant population of Russian citizens in Adjara meant that, unlike in the other *de facto* states, deprived Russia of any plausible pretext for intervening.

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<sup>272</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 3*, 181.

From the Russian standpoint, the reason that Adjara was “lost” was that, although Abashidze’s government had been effectively independent ever since Georgia left the Soviet Union, and although it had enjoyed strong ties with Moscow, Russia had no legal justification for preventing Georgia from bringing it back into the fold. When Saakashvili moved to reintegrate Adjara, the Kremlin’s only real options were to either acquiesce to Abashidze’s ouster or to commit Russian troops to defend his regime, the latter course being a grievous breach of international law. By contrast, when the Georgian government attempted to reintegrate South Ossetia, Russia was able to invoke the controversial, though not illegal, right to protect its citizens abroad as a justification for intervention.

As long as Russia remained publicly committed to Georgia's territorial integrity, which it did until the Five Day War, relying on military force alone to maintain control over the separatist territories was a risky strategy. The peacekeeping forces, after all, were ostensibly deployed simply to prevent violence from breaking out between Tbilisi and the *de facto* regimes. While they could effectively ensure the continued existence of separatist governments, their presence, in and of itself, did not affect the discourses of territoriality in the region: the *de facto* states, even as far as Russia was concerned, were simply separatist regions of Georgia that happened to enjoy close ties with Moscow. Passportization altered this situation by discursively transforming South Ossetia and Abkhazia into “Russian” spaces.

## ***5.2: Legal Issues***

By the start of the Five Day War in 2008, virtually the entire populations of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia had obtained Russian passports.<sup>273</sup> Unsurprisingly, the mass

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<sup>273</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 1*, 18.

distribution of Russian passports within the internationally recognized borders of another sovereign state did not take place without some controversy. This section examines some of the legal issues that have surrounded passportization in the *de facto* states.

### ***5.2.1: Factual Connections***

Although the Georgian government has described passportization as "illegal," the reality is that Russia's actions seem to exist in a sort of "grey area" of international law. The actual process of passportization was fairly straightforward. According to one contemporary report from Abkhazia,

[s]ince June 1, the public organisation, the Congress of Russian Communities of Abkhazia, has been collecting Abkhazians' Soviet-era travel documents. It has sent them to consular department specially set up by Moscow foreign ministry officials in the city of Sochi, on the Black Sea coast just north of breakaway region. When they have been checked, they are returned with a new page inserted certifying Russian citizenship.<sup>274</sup>

In its official statement to the IIFMCG, the Georgian government also claimed that representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defense were involved in the distribution of passports in the *de facto* states.<sup>275</sup> The program was not conducted with any particular secrecy. The Georgian government repeatedly protested, routinely decrying the passportization campaign as part of the "creeping annexation" of their country.<sup>276</sup>

Although some reports have surfaced indicating that, in certain cases, people were forced to accept Russian passports – a flagrant violation of international law<sup>277</sup> – these reports

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<sup>274</sup> Khashig, 2002.

<sup>275</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 3*, 180.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>277</sup> See: James Green, "Passportisation, Peacekeepers and Proportionality: The Russian Claim of the Protection of Nationals Abroad in Self-Defense," in *Conflict in the Caucasus: Implications for*

are unconfirmed.<sup>278</sup> For the most part, Russian passports were voluntarily accepted. The Russian government, for its part, has said little about the program, simply insisting that it was carried out "in accordance with legislation of the Russian Federation."<sup>279</sup> Such legislation itself represents a violation of Georgia's territorial sovereignty, since accepted state practice holds that the laws of one state should not directly apply to the citizens of another.<sup>280</sup>

Nevertheless, as James Green points out, "international law leaves it for a state to decide under its own domestic rules whether to confer nationality and upon whom. Therefore, Russia was and is entitled to grant nationality to whomsoever it likes."<sup>281</sup> That being said, rulings by the International Court of Justice have established that when the effects of the conferral of nationality are "no longer confined within the limits of the domestic jurisdiction of [a state] but extends to the international field," international law requires "a real and effective nationality" based on strong "factual ties."<sup>282</sup> Such ties include, but are not limited to "the habitual residence of the individual concerned... the centre of his interests, his family ties, his participation in public life, attachment shown

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*International Legal Order*, ed. James Green and Christopher Waters (New York, Palgrave-Macmillan 2010), 66-67.

<sup>278</sup> There would appear to be stronger evidence of forced passportization *after* the Five Day War. See, for example: Damien McElroy, "South Ossetian police tell Georgians to take a Russian passport, or leave their homes," *The Telegraph*, August 30, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/georgia/2651836/South-Ossetian-police-tell-Georgians-to-take-a-Russian-passport-or-leave-their-homes.html> (accessed March 18, 2011).; Ana Kandelaki, "South Ossetia: Ethnic Georgians Alarmed at New Passport," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, June 11, 2010, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/south-ossetia-ethnic-georgians-alarmed-new-passport> (accessed March 18, 2011).

<sup>279</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 3*, 431.

<sup>280</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 2*, 182.

<sup>281</sup> Green, 67.

<sup>282</sup> See: IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 2*, 158-160.

by him for a given country and inculcated in his children, etc."<sup>283</sup> "It is arguable," writes Green,

that there are many more *de facto* ties between the people in [South Ossetia] and Russians – ties of language, for example – than there are ties with Georgians. Irrespective of this, it may be difficult to hold that the ethnic Ossetians in question were ‘really’ and ‘effectively’ Russian enough to give rise to a right of self-defense against another sovereign state. The genuine nature of their Russian nationality, not just in fact but in international law, is debatable at best.<sup>284</sup>

Thus, although Russia may have been within its rights to naturalize residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it is less clear that there was any real "factual connection," in many cases, by which it could have justified doing so.

### **5.2.2: Citizenship**

Under international law, South Ossetia and Abkhazia remained part of Georgia when that state became independent.<sup>285</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, the Soviet Constitution only granted the right of secession to Union Republics. This meant that, as long as the Soviet Union existed, separatist regions had no inherent right to unilaterally separate themselves from Georgia. Moreover, the language of international law is written in such a way that, in most cases, only former European colonies have a right to unilaterally declare their independence.<sup>286</sup> Neither Soviet nor international law, therefore,

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<sup>283</sup> International Court of Justice, *Nottebohm Case (Second Phase) (Liechtenstein v Guatemala)*, Summary of the Judgment of 6 April, 1955, April 6, 1955, <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/addHit.php?summaryID=215&case=18&lang=en> (accessed March 11, 2011).

<sup>284</sup> Green, 67-68.

<sup>285</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 2* 144-147.

<sup>286</sup> Lawrence Hanauer, "The Irrelevance of International Law to Ethno-National Conflict: A New Look at the Western Sahara Case," *Emory International Law Review* 9, no. 133 (1995): 133-134.

recognizes the right of the *de facto* states to become independent states. Many scholars argue that South Ossetia and Abkhazia may have the right to “internal self-determination” as part of Georgia.<sup>287</sup> Nevertheless, “a right to external self-determination in the form of secession is not accepted in state practice,” despite Russia’s citation of Kosovo as precedent.<sup>288</sup> On the other hand, the Republic of Georgia has, not since its own independence, been able to establish effective jurisdiction over either Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Given that neither of the *de facto* states have ever had any interest in being part of the independent Georgian republic, there has been some dispute over what the citizenship status of the residents of these territories is.

Some commentators, such as geographer Gearóid Ó Tuathail, insist that the Abkhazians and South Ossetians became "stateless" after independence.<sup>289</sup> Generally speaking, however, in cases of state succession, international law recognizes a change in citizenship as concomitant with a change in territorial sovereignty.<sup>290</sup> When Georgia seceded from the Soviet Union, Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained integral parts of its territory, a fact that even scholars sympathetic to the secessionists concede.<sup>291</sup> Therefore, the law assumes that the residents of the breakaway territories acquired Georgian citizenship along with the rest of the population of Georgia when it became an

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<sup>287</sup> See, for example: Robert McCorquodale and Kristin Haulser, “Caucuses in the Caucasus: The Application of the Right of Self-Determination,” in *Conflict in the Caucasus: Implications for International Legal Order*, ed. James Green and Christopher Waters (New York, Palgrave-Macmillan 2010), 26-53.

<sup>288</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 2*, 141.

<sup>289</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Russia's Kosovo: A Critical Geopolitics of the August 2008 War over South Ossetia," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49, no. 6 (2008): 694.

<sup>290</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 2*, 152.

<sup>291</sup> Jurij Anchabadze, “History: The Modern Period,” in *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, edited by George Hewitt (Richmond, Curzon, 1999), 138.

independent state. As the IIFFMCG report notes, "[t]he right to confer its nationality on those living within its borders can be derived from the recognition of the Georgian borders by the international community."<sup>292</sup> Nevertheless, the question of citizenship has remained problematic, due to certain minor legal pitfalls.

The first and most important of these pitfalls was the product of the introduction of a new citizenship law in Georgia. In March of 1993, the Georgian government ratified a new Law on Citizenship,<sup>293</sup> which enumerated four criteria for becoming a citizen of the new republic:

1. A citizen must have lived permanently in Georgia for not less than five years;
2. A citizen must have lived in Georgia at the time the Law on Citizenship was adopted;
3. A citizen must not have *explicitly* refused Georgian citizenship within 3 months of the Law on Citizenship being adopted; and
4. A citizen must have received documents confirming their citizenship within four months of the law being adopted.<sup>294</sup>

It was the fourth criterion that was most problematic in legal terms. Given that South Ossetia had already declared itself independent and the war in Abkhazia had not yet been concluded, it was difficult, if not impossible, for many residents to obtain the necessary documentation. The establishment of a formal criterion for citizenship meant that, as far as the law was concerned, until an individual possessed the necessary documentation, they could not be recognized as a citizen. The Georgian government eventually recognized this problem and revised the Law on Citizenship in June of 1994, removing

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>293</sup> As the IIFFMCG report points out, between the time that Georgia became independent in April of 1991 and the adoption of the new Law on Citizenship in March of 1993, "the status of former Soviet nationals in Georgia remained undetermined." See: IIFFMCG, *Report Vol. 2*, 151.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

the requirement that proof of citizenship be received within four months. "Pursuant to this amendment," the IIFMCG report states, "the acquisition of nationality no longer depended on formal criteria. Residents of the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia became Georgian citizens even without any documentation"

It is possible that some people may have wished to refuse citizenship at the time and, due to the chaotic situation in Georgia at the time, may have been unable to do so.<sup>295</sup> The other major legal difficulty with regards to the citizenship status of the residents of the *de facto* states thus relates to the question of the right of refusal. Residents of the secessionist territories who chose to refuse Georgian citizenship faced the same difficulties as those who counted on receiving official papers to prove their citizenship. Political instability and armed conflict made it difficult, if not impossible, for people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to communicate with the Georgian government and renounce their citizenship and it is probable that some people did in fact choose to renounce their Georgian citizenship during this period.<sup>296</sup> Nevertheless, the IIFMCG report concludes that

[t]he residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who had not refused Georgian citizenship in a written form before 24 December 1993 became Georgian citizens for purposes of Georgian and international law. Their personal reservations against Georgian citizenship are irrelevant, as long as they did not exercise the right to refuse Georgian citizenship within the statutory delay. Eventual practical difficulties in exercising this right of refusal are immaterial from the perspective of international law, because international law did not require Georgia to grand this option.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. 154-155.

Therefore, although some commentators maintain that the residents of the secessionist territories were "stateless persons,"<sup>298</sup> this would appear not to be the case. Even acknowledging certain complications in the implementation of the Law on Citizenship, the residents of the *de facto* states indeed become Georgian citizens in 1993, despite Tbilisi's lack of effective control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the *de facto* regimes' close ties to Russia. The only ones who did not were those who were already citizens of another state.<sup>299</sup>

### ***5.2.3: The Right of Protection of Nationals Abroad***

When Russia invaded Georgia in August of 2008, it explicitly invoked its "inherent right to self-defense enshrined in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations."<sup>300</sup> It did so on the grounds that it was necessary to protect citizens of the Russian Federation from Georgian aggression. The right of "protection of nationals abroad" entails "the use of force by a state to protect its nationals that are under attack – actual or threatened – outside of its own territory, without the consent of the state against which the force is used or the authorization of the UN Security Council."<sup>301</sup> This "right," however is not uncontroversial, especially in a case such as South Ossetia, where the majority of the citizens on whose behalf the Russian government claimed to be intervening had only become citizens of the Russian Federation relatively recently, and only by means of a deliberate and controversial program of passportization.

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<sup>298</sup> See: Ó Tuathail, 2008; Khashig, 2002.

<sup>299</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 2*, 154.

<sup>300</sup> Vitaly Churkin, "Letter dated 11 August 2008 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council," S/2008/545, 2008.

<sup>301</sup> Green, 58.

Some scholars are skeptical of the "protection of nationals abroad" justification on the grounds that the definition of what constitutes "armed attack" under the "protection of nationals abroad" concept is not consistent with Article 51 of the UN Charter. They argue that the case of an "armed attack" mentioned in Article 51 actually refers to an attack on the territory of a state.<sup>302</sup> James Green, however, holds that "there is nothing in [Article 51] to preclude the extension of self-defense to attacks that occur outside of the territory of the responding state."<sup>303</sup> He cites the cases of the American invasions of Grenada and Panama, as well as the Israeli raid on Entebbe, as examples where "protection of nationals abroad" was deployed, more or less successfully, as a justification for military action. Although none of these military operations were uncontroversial, they nevertheless exist as *possible* precedents for the Russian intervention in South Ossetia.

While there is therefore some potential precedent for using the protection of nationals abroad as a justification for military action, Russia also faces the problem of proportionality. Green notes that "all exercises of self-defense must be proportional under customary international law, and that 'proportionality' is calculated by reference both to the scale of the response, and, fundamentally, to the necessity of defense."<sup>304</sup> Russia actions in South Ossetia clearly fail on this count. Not only was the invasion of South Ossetia itself wildly out of proportion to even major Georgian military actions such as the shelling of Tskhinvali, but the Russian military also advanced into Abkhazia, where there had been no fighting, and quickly expanded the theatre of war into Georgia proper. The

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<sup>302</sup> See, for example: John Quigley, "The Legality of the United States Invasion of Panama," *Yale Journal of International Law* 15 no. 276 (1990): 292-294.

<sup>303</sup> Green, 60.

<sup>304</sup> Green, 68.

IIFMCG concluded that, even allowing that there was a potentially legitimate right to intervene militarily to protect nationals abroad, the Russian invasion was clearly illegal based on its disproportionality. The report noted that

since 1945, numerous states have led military actions by pointing to the need to protect their own nationals abroad. In many cases, the legality of these actions was disputed. There is no customary law allowing such actions. If at all, such actions should be limited in scope and duration and exclusively focused on rescuing and evacuating nationals. In the case at hand, the action was not solely and exclusively focused on rescuing and evacuating Russian citizens, but largely surpassed this threshold by embarking upon extended military operations over large parts of Georgia. Consequently, it must be concluded that Russian military action outside South Ossetia was essentially conducted in violation of international law.<sup>305</sup>

It is interesting to note that, based on this quote, it would appear that, had Russia limited its operations to South Ossetia only, the IIFMCG might have ruled that Russian intervention on some scale was lawful and appropriate. Green would seem to agree, noting that the fundamental problem with Russia's response to Georgia's attempt to retake South Ossetia was its "disproportional nature"<sup>306</sup> rather than the fact that it justified its invasion on the premise that an attack on its newly minted citizens amounted to an attack on the Russian Federation itself. This is particularly fascinating, since it highlights passportization's territorial function: while "humanitarian concern" was the stated rationale for the distribution of passports,<sup>307</sup> the ultimate effect was the discursive conquest of Georgian territory by capturing bodies through non-military means and the creation of "Russian spaces" within the borders of Georgia.

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<sup>305</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 1*, 25.

<sup>306</sup> Green, 70.

<sup>307</sup> Gordadze, 45.

### 5.3: *The Discursive Capture of Territory*

Although the Russian government remained unquestionably committed to preserving its influence in the Transcaucasus it began to develop, not long after Putin succeeded Yeltsin, a new strategy for assuring Tbilisi's obedience, one more subtle and less dependent on hard power. Michel Foucault once said that "peace itself is coded war."<sup>308</sup> Nowhere was this truer than in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russia gradually enveloped the *de facto* states, discursively asserting territorial control over them by naturalizing the majority of their citizens.

Passportization has been considered by some as little more than a cynical political ploy to manufacture a *casus belli*.<sup>309</sup> By extending citizenship to the residents of the *de facto* states, however, Russia explicitly brought them into the Russian body politic. By doing so, Russia also extended its personal sovereignty over significant new populations. Following Samer Alatur, then, who wrote that "every construction of population (criminal, patient, citizen) creates a territorial effect (prison, clinic, state),"<sup>310</sup> we can begin to see how, by naturalizing the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Russian government created "Russian spaces" within the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Georgia. Within these spaces, Georgia's ability to exercise its legal sovereignty was severely attenuated, if not canceled out entirely.

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<sup>308</sup> Michel Foucault, "*Society Must be Defended*": *Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976* (New York, Picador, 2003), 50-51.

<sup>309</sup> See, for example: Illarionov, 56.; Asmus, 42.; Mankoff, 259; Scott Littlefield, "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia's Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 8 (2009): 1462.

<sup>310</sup> Samer Alatur, "Towards a Bio-Territorial Conception of Power: Territory, Population, and Environmental Narratives in Palestine and Israel," *Political Geography* 25 (2006): 609.

By naturalizing the residents of the *de facto* states, Russia challenged a number of classic territorial assumptions including the inviolability of international borders and the right of a state to territorial sovereignty. Indeed, what begins to emerge around this time is a pattern of overlapping and conflicting territorial discourses: the Georgian government, citing international law and the principle of *uti possidetis*, continued to insist that Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain integral parts of Georgia's territory; meanwhile, Russia, by naturalizing the populations of the *de facto* states, was staking its own claim to these territories.

Ernest Gellner once noted a tendency to try to make "culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof, and not more than one roof at that."<sup>311</sup> Although Gellner speaks of culture, he could just as well be speaking of "nations." Although word "nation" is frequently taken to mean an ethnic community, in multi-ethnic states like the Russian Federation, membership in the "nation" is essentially synonymous with citizenship and Alexander Murphy has recently pointed out the longstanding "conceptual conflation of the terms nation and state."<sup>312</sup> The territorial effects of passportization, arguably, were byproducts of this epistemic linkage. Peter Taylor, moreover, has written that, with the rise of the nation-state ideology, the "community was indissolubly linked to the land..." This linkage, he says, "completely changed the nature of territory, especially the integrity of its borders. From being parcels

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<sup>311</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006), 42.

<sup>312</sup> Alexander Murphy, "Identity and Territory," *Geopolitics* 15 (2010): 769.

of land transferable between states as the outcome of wars, all territory, including borderlands, became inviolate."<sup>313</sup>

Following Taylor, then, we can begin to see that, by deliberately constituting the populations of the *de facto* states as part of the Russian political nation, Russia was also implicitly laying claim to the territory of the *de facto* states themselves. Despite the fact that, as far as international law was concerned the *de facto* states remained (and remain) integral parts of the Republic of Georgia, Russia was able to discursively capture Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This development, in a sense, represented a repurposing of the logic of the modern state system to undermine the system itself.

### ***5.3.1: Signifying Territoriality***

Implicit Russian claims to the *de facto* states took a number of concrete forms. In his study of the Finno-Russian border, Anssi Paasi describes one particularly interesting example of how the Finnish government sought to "remind" people living in the country's isolated border regions that they were members of the Finnish political community, a process he called "signifying territoriality." Paasi writes that

[a]t Christmas 1934 a candle and a miniature Finnish flag were delivered to each of the inhabitants of the border areas to remind them through these abstract symbols in which country they lived."<sup>314</sup>

Russian passports arguably functioned in a similar way for the inhabitants of the *de facto* states, albeit in a far more concrete fashion. Rather than simply "reminding" Abkhazians

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<sup>313</sup> Peter Taylor, "The State as Container: Territoriality in the Modern World-System," *Progress in Human Geography* 18, no.2 (1994): 155.

<sup>314</sup> Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border* (New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1996), 175.

and South Ossetians of their citizenship, the passports served as concrete documents of their separateness, politically and territorially, from the Georgian state.

The Russian territorial embrace of the *de facto* states was manifested in other ways as well. Florian Mühlfried has described how passportization became "embedded," in his words, "in other political and economic activities":

In the case of South Ossetia, the main part of the annual budget is provided directly by Moscow and Russia's state-controlled gas consortium Gazprom invests extensively in the construction of pipelines to secure the region's energy supply from Russia. In addition, economic independence on Russia has led to the Russian ruble becoming the official currency in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>315</sup>

In both of the *de facto* states, moreover, Russians and other officials close to the Kremlin have taken over important positions in the separatist governments. Indeed, ties between Abkhazia and South Ossetia before the Five Day War were so close that one scholar has described the governments in Tskhinvali and Sokhumi as having "outsourced" many of their state institutions, particularly those concerned with security, to the Russian Federation.<sup>316</sup>

### **5.3.2: Biocolonization**

Samer Alatout has written that "states derive their power from the recognition that populations are not inherent in matters of things – they are constructed and continually so."<sup>317</sup> If passportization was the mechanism by which the populations of the *de facto* states were constituted as Russian citizens, we can give the process itself the name "biocolonization." Historically, colonization occurred when a state exported its subjects

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<sup>315</sup> Mühlfried, 10.

<sup>316</sup> Popescu, 6.

<sup>317</sup> Alatout. 609.

to new territories for the purposes of establishing outposts and colonies, thereby enlarging the state and extending the reach of its sovereignty. Biocolonization, by contrast, enlarges the state and extends its sovereignty not by means of sending colonists from one place to another, but instead by capturing bodies that already reside in the territory being colonized. Biocolonization therefore represents a sort of dual colonization, one both of the body as well as of territory.

It is important to reiterate, however, that passportization is not synonymous with biocolonization, even though there are certain similarities between what occurred in the *de facto* states and other instances of passportization. Marc Garcelon, for instance, once characterized the business of passportization in the Soviet Union as being a process of "colonizing the subject." He wrote that

... the concept of internal colonialism [serves] as a particularly apt description of the relation between the Party *apparatus* and the nominal citizen in the Soviet Union, the archetypal Party-state of the twentieth century. After all, the cadres of the Bolshevik Party in effect colonized the groups that fell under their domination by forcibly mobilizing such groups in to the project of "building socialism," along the way subjecting them to the administrative fiat, organizational principles, and ideological norms of Soviet power. In so doing, the Party leadership sought to cultivate a distinctively Soviet mentality befitting the "new man" of socialism. This strategy entailed marginalizing and co-opting prior identities in favor of Soviet ideological norms...<sup>318</sup>

Although passports were generally distributed on a more voluntary basis in the *de facto* states than they had been in the Soviet Union during Stalin's time, they served a similar social purpose: Soviet passports had as one of their functions the discursive normalization

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<sup>318</sup> Marc Garcelon, "Colonizing the Subject: The Genealogy and Legacy of the Soviet Internal Passport," in *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001), 84-85.

of Soviet identity, with all that it entailed ideologically. By accepting Russian passports, the residents of the secessionist territories, wittingly or not, became part of Russia's geopolitical project in the former Soviet space.

Like passportization in the *de facto* states, the Soviet passportization program also had a territorial aspect. Garcelon notes that

internal passports functioned as the principle disciplinary mechanism by which the *apparat* consolidated its dominant position and inculcated the standards of the 'new Soviet man' among the peoples living beneath the edifice of the Party-state. Those who ran afoul of Soviet domination, from educated urban dissidents to 'punished peoples' – entire ethnic groups like the Chechens singled out by Stalin as 'enemies of the people' in the wake of the Second World War – discovered that the *pasportnyi rezhim* [passport regime] effectively condemned them to the marginal ranks of physical laborers, internal exiles, and labor camp inmates.<sup>319</sup>

The passport regime allowed the Soviet state to control the movement of people simultaneously serving as a marker of social inclusion or exclusion. With passports it became possible to effectively exorcize certain "undesirable" populations from the body politic, which in many cases ensured their geographic isolation in remote "special settlements" – or simply outright imprisonment.<sup>320</sup> Numerous areas in the Soviet Union – almost always far from the developed center – became "dumping grounds" for social undesirables. "Thus," writes Shearer, "contingents of people whom the police deported were, literally, extracted or "distanced" (*udalit'*) from socialist society," and confined to spatially-defined areas: the district, the settlement, the work camp.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>320</sup> For general information, see: Shearer, 253-260.; Polina Yemelyanova, "Stalin's Special Settlements" (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 2009).

<sup>321</sup> Shearer, 254.; Yemelyanova, 5-7.

This situation contrasts starkly with the territorial function of passportization in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Soviet passports served essentially to circumscribe the areas in which different groups of Soviet citizens were allowed to move; these areas, however, were already under Soviet control, even if they were sometimes uninhabited. By extending its sovereignty – even if illegally – into Georgia's separatist republics, however, Russia was engaging in something more recognizably "colonial." By constituting the populations of the *de facto* states as "Russian," it was also implicitly drawing upon the epistemic linkages between population/nation and territory, discursively constituting the territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a subject of Russia, though not an official part of the Russian Federation.

Finally, the Soviet passport was essentially concerned with control over the individual. It was a tool of surveillance and a means of ascribing various officially sanctioned identities – class, nationality, occupation – to the subjects of the state. Passports constituted one of the chief elements in the state's attempt to implement so-called "prophylactic policing," or what David Shearer calls a "positivist vision of universal social surveillance."<sup>322</sup> This is clearly illustrated in the following quote from Genrikh Yagoda, People's Commissar for Internal Affairs in 1935:

The passport is a powerful means for the purging of our cities, workers' settlements, industrial enterprises and construction sites not only of criminal, but also of anti-Soviet, counter-revolutionary elements. In order to realize this, it is necessary to make it unthinkable that a person can live in an apartment or a barracks without a passport or a propiska... *We need to create an atmosphere such that each citizen feels that without a passport he will be unable to travel anywhere, that the single document confirming his*

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<sup>322</sup> Shearer, 169.

*identity is the passport.* The first question you must ask a detained citizen is – show me your passport.<sup>323</sup>

Recalling what Foucault has said about "discipline," that it "tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished,"<sup>324</sup> it makes sense to characterize the Soviet passport as being, in essence, a disciplinary tool.

Passportization in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had an altogether different function. When Foucault describes what he calls "biopower," he locates it as the opposite pole to disciplinary power.

There is no room here for an in-depth discussion of biopower and discipline, but it will be helpful to describe them in brief. "Discipline," for Foucault, is something that regulates life. Each movement, each action is quantified and analyzed to determine its deviation from the norm. In the words of one commentator, "[d]isciplines attempt to codify and enumerate as closely as possible time, space, and movement, and they attempt to articulate the analytical space of work."<sup>325</sup> Discipline is concerned with controlling the individual *as* an individual.

Biopower, by contrast, is concerned with populations. Biopower focuses "on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanisms of life: birth, morbidity, mortality, longevity."<sup>326</sup> Whereas discipline atomizes, biopower is a power that that is "massifying,

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<sup>323</sup> Quoted in Garcelon, 89.

<sup>324</sup> Foucault, 2003, 242.

<sup>325</sup> Barbara Townley, "Foucault, Power/Knowledge, and its Relevance for Human Resource Management," *The Academy of Management Review* 18, no. 3 (1993): 530.

<sup>326</sup> Paul Rabinow, "Biopower Today," *BioSocieties* 1 (2006): 196.

that is directed not at man-as-body but man-as-species."<sup>327</sup> Passportization in the *de facto* states can be seen as a biopolitical technique because it was not intended to capture individuals as such. Rather, the purpose of passportization was to naturalize individuals insofar as they constituted a portion of the entire population. Indeed, merely issuing passports to individuals, even important figures such as the presidents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while perhaps carrying some symbolic value, would have been virtually meaningless in either biopolitical or territorial terms.

Biocolonization was novel in that it allowed Russia to discursively "cleanse" the secessionist territories of Georgian citizens simply by means of distributing passports that granted inclusion in the Russian body politic. As Georgian citizens disappeared from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they were instantly replaced by with Russian subjects. This process stands in stark contrast to the more familiar sort of ethnic cleansing that occurred in Abkhazia in 1993 and 1994, or in South Ossetia after the Five Day War, when most of the remaining Georgian populations were physically driven from their homes, or the Russian Empire's colonial expansion in the Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when hundreds of thousands of Circassians were killed or displaced to make room for Slavic settlers.

Even ethnic Georgians living in the *de facto* states came under significant pressures to accept Russian nationality. Amidst the diplomatic fallout from Georgia's announcement that it intended to close all Russian military bases on its territory,<sup>328</sup> the Russian government suddenly tightened visa restrictions on Georgian citizens living in Russia on the premise that it was attempting to stymie the flow of foreign terrorists into

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>328</sup> This meant only the regular Russian army bases scattered throughout the country, left over from the Soviet period, not bases serving peacekeepers.

Chechnya, despite the fact that most such fighters arrived in Chechnya via Central Asia, not Georgia.<sup>329</sup> These rules, however, were not applied to the residents of the *de facto* states who, for "humanitarian" reasons, faced few restrictions on travel to Russia.<sup>330</sup>

Writing in 2006, Noelle Cutts noted that

[e]thnic Georgians living in Abkhazia must obtain Russian passports if they wish to travel abroad, vote, or participate in the political process. Georgian passport holders are denied Russian visas, and most travelers wishing to enter Russia from Georgia without a Russian passport must do so via a third country.<sup>331</sup>

Georgia's official statement regarding passportization to the EU commission charged with investigating the Five Day War also points out that the separatist government in Tskhinvali offered to grant ethnic Georgians internal South Ossetian passports. Holding a South Ossetian passport would clearly signify that the bearer was a resident of the *de facto* South Ossetian Republic and therefore would permit ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia to acquire Russian citizenship papers, "provided they withdrew from their Georgian citizenship."<sup>332</sup> This would allow travel – and access to employment – in the Russian Federation.

The Georgian constitution, however, does not permit dual citizenship. Practical and political pressures thus effectively forced ethnic Georgians living in the secessionist territories to give up their Georgian citizenship and instead become subjects of Russia if they hoped to find work. Those who refuse passports become effectively marginalized

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<sup>329</sup> Gordadze, 44.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>331</sup> Noelle Cutts, "Enemies Through the Gates: Russian Violations of International Law in the Georgia/Abkhazia Conflict," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 40, no. 281 (2008): 300.

<sup>332</sup> IIFMCG, *Report Vol. 3*, 182.

and excluded. The only real alternatives to taking a passport was simply to leave their homes and join the tens of thousands of other IDPs who had fled during the wars or to try to eke out a living in a place where Georgian citizens were increasingly disenfranchised. For many, simply accepting Russian passports was the path of least resistance. After the Five Day War, of course, most Georgians living in South Ossetia fled to IDP camps outside of Tbilisi. In Akhalkgori, the largest district in South Ossetia that had been controlled by Georgia before the war, only one-fifth of the ethnic Georgian population that had lived there in 2008 still remains.<sup>333</sup> Those who have stayed in their homes seem to have acquiesced to new rules requiring them to eventually accept the South Ossetian passports that have been introduced since 2008. One Georgian still living in Akhalkgori described the plight of Georgian citizens living in the *de facto* states to journalist Ana Kandelaki:

“We buy most of our food in Tbilisi, so we have to cross the administrative border several times a month,” said Tamar Mearakishvili, who heads a youth centre in Akhalkgori. “Introducing payments at the checkpoint will make life harder for many locals.”

Mearakishvili said that she hoped the new passport rules would not force people to leave their homes, and that they would be allowed to keep their Georgian documents.

“People who live here on a permanent basis are not afraid of this passport system. We’ve lived through too much to worry about it. The most important thing is that there isn’t a war,” she said. “Besides, the deadline has been postponed several times and it isn’t clear when it’s going to start. We will deal with the situation as it comes up, since we can’t change anything anyway.”<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Kandelaki, “South Ossetia: Ethnic Georgians Alarmed at New Passport.”

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

Passportization and the concept of biocolonization are firmly in keeping with Foucault's notion of biopower, which, as the name would suggest, is chiefly interested in the regulation of life itself, rather than wielding the threat of death. As Foucault writes in the introduction to *The History of Sexuality*,

... a power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulator and corrective mechanisms. It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his obedient subjects; it effects distributions around the norm.<sup>335</sup>

In other words, the purpose of biocolonization is not to effect the replacement or enslavement of one population by another. Rather, it seeks to co-opt the local population and to constitute them as members of a new polity. In the case of the *de facto* states, the purpose of this strategy was to prevent the further erosion of Russian influence in Georgia by discursively redefining Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "Russian spaces" outside of Georgia's sphere of influence, even while remaining within its international borders. Geographer Louise Amoore once described the use of so-called "biometric borders" to prevent "risky" individuals from entering the United States after 9/11 as "something akin to a shift from geopolitics to biopolitics."<sup>336</sup> The biocolonization of the *de facto* states, on the other hand, represents a merger of geopolitics and biopolitics, wherein biopolitical techniques were employed to achieve geopolitical aims.

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<sup>335</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York, Vantage Books, 1990), 144.

<sup>336</sup> Louise Amoore, "Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror," *Political Geography* 25 (2006): 338.

## 5.4: Implications

"Independence" for Abkhazia and South Ossetia has, in many ways, been more virtual than real. Russia and Georgia continue to wrangle over their legal status<sup>337</sup> and Russia has assumed control of their borders<sup>338</sup> and came under heavy criticism from Tbilisi for deploying short range ballistic missile and anti-aircraft missile platforms in both territories.<sup>339</sup> Russia and Abkhazia, meanwhile, have become embroiled in a territorial dispute of their own. Russia now claims a 160 sq. km. tract of land on the Abkhaz side of the border, not far from a Russian ski resort that will be used during the 2014 Olympic games.<sup>340</sup> Abkhazia is in no position to resist. As Radio Free Europe's Brian Whitmore notes:

The current fears of Russian domination are, in fact, not new. When I visited Abkhazia in the June 2009, the signs of accelerating Russification were everywhere.

More than 90 percent of Abkhaz residents, for example, carry Russian passports. The Russian ruble is the territory's official currency. The Russian language is dominant. Russian flags are everywhere. Russian television rule the airwaves and Russian newspapers are ubiquitous.

Moscow was building a naval base in the port of Ochamchire. Russian businesses were snapping up prime real estate along Sukhumi's seaside promenade. Russia's

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<sup>337</sup> "European Diplomat on Russia-Georgia Conflict," *Civil.ge* March 23, 2011, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23270> (accessed April 18, 2011).

<sup>338</sup> See: Molly Corso, "Georgia: Russian Border Guards in Abkhazia, South Ossetia Pose New Challenges for Tbilisi" *Eurasianet.org*, May 11, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav051209c.shtml> (accessed April 13, 2011).

<sup>339</sup> See: "Moscow Says Deployed S-300 in Abkhazia in 2008." *Civil.ge*, August 15, 2010, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22599> (accessed April 12, 2011).; "Tbilisi Condemns Deployment of Tochka-U in S. Ossetia," *Civil.ge*, January 24, 2011, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23078> (accessed April 11, 2011).

<sup>340</sup> Brian Whitmore, "A Russian Land Grab in Abkhazia?" *Radio Free Europe*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.rferl.org/content/blog/3542144.html> (accessed April 13, 2011).

state-run oil giant Rosneft won the right to explore and develop Abkhazia's maritime oil fields.

And a controversial provision to give Russian soldiers serving in Abkhazia the right to purchase property sparked howls of opposition.

"After recognizing Abkhazia, Russia is now swallowing us," [Abkhaz journalist Inal] Khashig told me at the time. "This is happening economically, politically, militarily, and socially. Every day we are becoming more and more dependent."<sup>341</sup>

It would thus appear that independence from Georgia did not mean that Moscow would be willing to give up its claim to the *de facto* states. The *de facto* states are now, perhaps more than ever, "Russian spaces."

Prior to the Five Day War, the Georgian government had become fond of deploying the evocative phrase "creeping annexation," a term that has no legal meaning. "Annexation" is defined by the Oxford *Dictionary of Law* as "the acquisition of legal sovereignty by one state over the territory of another, usually by occupation or conquest,"<sup>342</sup> and it is clear that passportization fell far short of these criteria. The phrase "creeping annexation" nevertheless captures the sense that Georgia's legal sovereignty in the *de facto* states, although not effective, was being challenged by Russia, which all the while continued to publicly recognize Georgia's territorial integrity. As we have seen, such practices were not entirely uncontroversial from a legal standpoint. The unilateral creation of "Russian spaces" inside the borders of Georgia, for instance, was not a practice recognized by international law.

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> *A Dictionary of Law*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "annexation." (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

More obviously, perhaps, Georgia's territorial and personal sovereignty were violated. The process of passportization itself has been deemed illegal both by legal scholars as well as the official EU report on the war. The right to self defense based on the protection of nationals abroad, which Russia cited as its chief reason for going to war, is legally shaky, to say the least, especially since most of the existing cases of such a right being invoked have themselves been controversial and cannot be considered precedent-setting.<sup>343</sup> The Russian invasion itself, which immediately expanded into Abkhazia and wide swaths of Georgia proper, clearly breached the requirement of proportionality and was thus contrary to international legal norms.

Aside from these rather clear issues, passportization also raises other, more theoretical questions pertaining to international law. For instance, there has been a longstanding dialectical tension between the principle of "effectiveness," on the one hand, and the normative aspects of international law on the other. To put it briefly, the former refers to factual situations, while the latter is a measure of validity and conformity with legal norms. The tension arises because law based solely upon effective realities is law dictated by the *fait accompli*, whereas law that merely dictates what *should* be without having any correlation to reality is little more than a fantasy.

In terms of the conflict in Georgia, passportization resulted in a territorial situation that could in the future conceivably become legal. Despite the fact that the act of passportization itself was probably contrary to international law, Russia's claim to self-defense based on the right to defend its nationals abroad, while controversial, was not necessarily illegal. It was, however, legally invalid, since it derived from an illegal act, namely passportization. Moreover, while the Five Day War itself, by expanding far

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<sup>343</sup> Green, 63.

beyond the borders of South Ossetia, violated the requirement of proportionality and eventually resulted in a clear violation of the principle of *uti possidetis*, Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and have begun the business of concluding legally binding treaties with the new government. Moreover, in addition to Transdnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh, which are *de facto* states seeking independence of their own, the Palestinian organization Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, has also recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>344</sup>

We thus immediately begin to see the tension between effective and normative international law: the latter maintains that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are integral parts of the Republic of Georgia, whereas the former recognizes their factual existence. This state of affairs, then, presents a classic case of what Enrico Milano would call an “unlawful territorial situation” – “a territorial state of affairs, which is established and pursued in defiance of international norms and principles.”<sup>345</sup> Importantly, there is the potential for unlawful territorial situations to be legitimated *ex post facto*; Milano cites the cases of the decision to recognize the independence of Kosovo and the replacement of Saddam Hussein’s regime with a Coalition-backed government, both of which subsequently received the blessing of the UN Security Council, as good examples of this process.

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<sup>344</sup> Paul Goble, "Only Palestine's Hamas Backs Kremlin's Recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia," *Georgian Daily*, August 27, 2008, [http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=6756&Itemid=65](http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6756&Itemid=65) (accessed April 15, 2011).

<sup>345</sup> Enrico Milano, *Unlawful Territorial Situations in International Law: Reconciling Effectiveness, Legality and Legitimacy* (Leiden, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2006), 2-3.

It would appear unlikely, at this point, that the Security Council will recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, by providing Russia with a plausible legal justification for invading Georgia, passportization has raised a number of legal and territorial questions that international law, at this point, appears to be unable to address. Passportization would also seem to present challenges to international law similar to those posed by the so-called “Bush Doctrine,” which was formulated in the years after the attacks of September 11, 2001. As geographer Simon Dalby has written, one aspect of the Bush Doctrine is to

work to deter aggression and counter coercion because “rapidly deployable forces” can resolve conflicts “decisively on favorable terms.” But should such dissuasion and deterrence fail then the strategy promises to defeat adversaries, in the terms of an especially chilling phrase, “at the time, place, and in the manner of our choosing.”<sup>346</sup>

What Dalby is highlighting here is that the Bush Doctrine essentially grants the United States the “right” to preemptively intervene wherever in the world it deems necessary to remove potential threats. Unsurprisingly, this doctrine has proven to be controversial, and many legal scholars, while recognizing its potentially transformative effects on customary international law, remain wary of its implications and skeptical of its legality.<sup>347</sup>

Similar criticisms can be levied against the ways that passportization has been carried out in the former Soviet Union. While nowhere near as “globe-spanning” as the

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<sup>346</sup> Simon Dalby, “Regions, Strategies and Empire in the Global War on Terror,” *Geopolitics* 12 (2007): 590.

<sup>347</sup> See generally: John Cohan, “The Bush Doctrine and the Emerging Norm of Anticipatory Self-Defense in Customary International Law,” *Pace International Law Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 283-357.; Joel Paul, “The Bush Doctrine: Making or Breaking Customary International Law?” *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review* 27 (2004): 457-479.

Bush Doctrine, passportization, combined with the clause in the Russian constitution guaranteeing “defense and patronage” to compatriots abroad, would certainly seem to grant Russia the self-declared “right” to intervene wherever it sees fit. There is little chance, after all, that Russia will soon be distributing passports to the citizens of Middle Eastern countries in the hopes of securing some kind of geopolitical advantage there. Within the not-insignificant geographic boundaries of the former Soviet Union, however, passportization may prove to be the key to Russian hegemony. The existence of millions of ethnic Russians living beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, as well as the willingness to employ passportization to create citizens wherever it pleases, means that the Kremlin has effectively granted itself the right to intervene militarily anywhere in the post-Soviet space that it feels necessary. This is not to say that Russia is likely to use passportization as a widespread means of territorial expansion. Instead, “passport politics,” much like the Kremlin’s “pipeline politics,” is likely to become another tool of soft power that Russian can use to apply pressure on its neighbors for the purposes of maintaining some degree of hegemony in Eurasia.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In the end, war with Georgia was probably not the desired outcome of passportization. It is more likely that the intent of passportization was to dissuade Georgia from attempting to repeat the “Adjara scenario” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the ultimate goal being the maintenance of Russian influence in Georgia. Despite being a rather late innovation, passportization was therefore consistent with the general trajectory of Russian foreign policy since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As discussed elsewhere, the Kremlin's priorities vis-à-vis the newly independent states have largely focused on the task of rebuilding Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. Pursuant to this end, passportization can be seen as a last-ditch effort to prevent Moscow's influence in Georgia from being severely weakened in the event of the Saakashvili government managing to reestablish effective control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Although some aspects of passportization have received a certain amount of scholarly attention, particularly from researchers concerned with the program's legal aspects, the topic has in some senses taken a back seat to analyses that focus on questions such as the war's implications for European security structures. Passportization has nevertheless raised a number of intriguing questions that are worthy of further study. How, for example will international law respond to the challenges posed to it by Russia's undermining of the principle of territorial sovereignty? On a similar note, one could ask whether the events that have transpired in South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be considered as having set a precedent. Finally, there is the question of whether Russia is likely to employ passportization in the future. There is, of course, no way to answer these

questions without speculating. Nevertheless, the fact that such questions are even on the table, particularly the first two, should serve as an indication that, far from being a simple ploy to manufacture a *casus belli*, passportization at least has the potential to challenge some of the fundamental assumptions that underpin the modern state system.

Passportization, after all, has in some respects problematized the logic of the nation-state by undermining and exploiting the discursive linkage between population and territory. As has been shown elsewhere in this thesis, the idea that territory and population should be congruent has a long history, particularly in Europe. The population identified with a given state, so the story goes, belongs within the borders of that state. Passportization both exploits as well as disrupts this logic, which serves as the ideological basis of the nation-state by capturing a portion of the population that constitutes the target state without necessitating any change in borders. The passportizing state is then able to fall back on the population-territory discourse to assert its right to exercise power over its new citizens and the region in which they reside. In practice, passportization resulted in the creation of Russian exclaves where the Kremlin, by invoking the right to protect its nationals abroad, was able to plausibly justify using military force to “defend.”

International law appears to be poorly equipped to address the problems posed by passportization, which has challenged long-held beliefs regarding the right of states to territorial sovereignty and which, moreover, has resulted in the creation of two new states that the law itself maintains do not exist. This is problematic, since the longer Abkhazia and South Ossetia go unrecognized, the more disconnected prescriptive law becomes from reality. On the other hand, the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would

represent a fairly clear victory for the principle of effectiveness, which raises the spectre of the creation of law from *faits accomplis*.

The problem of effectiveness and how it relates to the legal status of the *de facto* states raises a question as to whether some kind of precedent has been set by Russia. While Abkhazia and South Ossetia may eventually gain widespread recognition, the means by which they became independent from Georgia – passportization and the concept of the defense of nationals abroad – are likely to remain controversial. Previous instances in which the right to defend nationals abroad has been invoked have all met with considerable criticism. The Five Day War was no exception, which has led some scholars to dismiss the idea that Russia has “changed the game” with its actions in Georgia. As James Green has noted,

[t]he seemingly disingenuous application of the protection of nationals abroad concept by Russia in 2008, and the possibility that it could employ this type of claim again in relation to other states will (rightly) strengthen the view of those who reject this manifestation of self-defense as one particularly open to abuse.<sup>348</sup>

On the other hand, Green also points out that, in an age of transnational terrorism, the concept of the protection of nationals abroad may in fact grow in importance. As states seek to justify military actions launched in retaliation against terrorists acts committed against their citizens living beyond their borders, the concept of the defense of nationals abroad may eventually come to enjoy more widespread legal acceptance.<sup>349</sup> Even if this concept were to gain more authoritative legal stature, however, Russia’s invasion of Georgia was sufficiently controversial that it is likely to either remain in a

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<sup>348</sup> Green, 72.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

sort of limbo, neither illegal nor entirely accepted, or, like the recognition of Kosovo, be treated as a special case that would not set precedent elsewhere.<sup>350</sup>

Even if no wider precedent is set, however, there is no reason to believe that Russia itself will abandon passportization as a strategy. Indeed, its ability to profoundly alter territorial discourses to Russia's benefit – something that more traditional hard power techniques or coercion through control of energy resources cannot achieve – means that passportization is likely to remain a component of any future Russian foreign policy. Given that the Five Day War clearly demonstrated the potential for Russian passport-holders to be used as foreign policy levers by Moscow, the presence of Russian nationals alone could in the future cause tensions between Russia and its neighbors.

Indeed, the fact that none of Russia's partners in the CIS have joined Moscow in recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia is a sign that the newly independent states are wary of Russia's ambitions and have concerns about the future potential for passportization on their own territory. States such as Ukraine, Estonia, and Kazakhstan have large ethnic Russian populations that already hold Russian passports and, as discussed elsewhere, tensions between Moscow and Estonia over the status of ethnic Russians have already resulted in violence and cyber-attacks. Indeed, worries over Russian irredentism were behind the decision to move the capital city of Kazakhstan from Almaty in the south to Astana in the north, where most of the country's Russian population resides.<sup>351</sup> Recent controversies in Ukraine, particularly in the Crimea, have also highlighted some of the deep divisions in Ukrainian society, where many people not

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<sup>350</sup> Asmus, 88.

<sup>351</sup> Zardykhan, Zharmukhamed, "Russians in Kazakhstan and Demographic Change: Imperial Legacy and the Kazakh Way of Nation Building," *Asian Ethnicity* 5, no. 1 (2004): 75-76.

only hold strong feelings of connection with Russia, but hold Russian passports as well. Such connections could, in the future, leave Ukraine open to Russian “passport politics.”

Despite the possibility of using passportization to pressure its neighbors into complying with Moscow’s wishes, it seems unlikely that Russia will attempt to use passportization as an excuse to aggrandize itself territorially; indeed, since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has shown little inclination toward territorial expansion. Despite its deep involvement in the political, economic, and defense institutions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, for instance, Russia has not attempted to annex either one, even though three years have now passed since the Five Day War. This suggests that, should passportization be employed elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, it may follow the same pattern as it did in Georgia: Moscow will slowly tighten its grip over a passportized population and gradual shift the discourse to emphasize the priority of Russia’s personal and territorial competence over the territory where that population resides. As in Georgia, the purpose of passportization would be to ensure compliance, rather than to deliberately precipitate a war. Whether such a strategy can succeed in the absence of the sorts of quasi-autonomous state structures that existed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is an open question, though research by Svante Cornell would seem to suggest that autonomy is a fairly crucial factor in separatism in the former Soviet Union.<sup>352</sup>

What will ultimately become of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is still an open question. As discussed in the previous chapter, Abkhazia in particular is beginning to chafe under what is increasingly seen as being an overbearing Russian presence, but aside from attempting to carve a small portion out of Abkhaz territory near Sochi, Russia has

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<sup>352</sup> Svante Cornell, “Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia” (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2002), 233.

shown no interest in incorporating the new states into its own territory. Legally, the new states remain in limbo: international law maintains that they are still part of Georgia, while the treaties turning defense of their borders over to the Russian military underscore the fact that it will likely be very difficult for Tbilisi to reestablish its jurisdiction in its erstwhile provinces.

More than anything, then, the Five Day War was the latest major episode in a much longer contest between Georgia and Russia. While Russia has consistently sought to establish itself as a regional hegemon, Georgia, especially in the early 1990s and again since 2003, has attempted to escape the orbit of the former imperial center. At stake throughout the entire period following in the wake of the Soviet collapse was the territorial status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Georgia maintained were integral parts of its territory and which Moscow, following classic geopolitical logic, viewed as crucial for maintaining its grip on Tbilisi and thereby securing its southern flanks. The conflicts in Georgia were as much between Georgia and Russia as they were between Georgia and the *de facto* regimes. As such, passportization effectively decided their outcome in Russia's favor long before the shooting actually began in August of 2008.

# APPENDIX

## MAPS



Figure 1: Map of the Republic of Georgia



Figure 2: The Distribution of Ethnic Russians in the Former Soviet Union



Figure 3: Russian Military Bases in Georgia

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