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- 3 THE GEOPOLITICS OF ABKHAZIA'S SOVEREIGNTY  
*Vasco Martins*



### Portuguese Journal of International Affairs

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Rua Vitorino Nemésio, 5

1750-306 Lisboa

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Email: [ipris@ipris.org](mailto:ipris@ipris.org)

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# The geopolitics of Abkhazia's sovereignty

**Vasco Martins**

Researcher, Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)

The events of August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008 in South Ossetia may have jumpstarted military hostilities between Russia and Georgia in this breakaway region. The conflict ended nine days later and reshuffled the balance of power in the Southern Caucasus, specially in Georgia, which saw its territorial integrity damaged after Russia officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Ronald Asmus' seminal description of the events that led to the war of August 2008 between Russia and Georgia provides a critical window into the movements and political decisions that spurned and enabled the August war's end result. Asmus describes Russian military movements along Georgian borders before the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, a greater South Ossetian capacity for shelling – possibly provided by the Russian army – and Mikheil Saakashvili's dilemma between engaging the incoming Russian army to defend the People and his Presidency, or following the advice from the West and doing nothing. Saakashvili choose the former.<sup>1</sup> However, was this a scheme to trap the Georgian President into a situation he could neither win nor forfeit? Was there a bigger plan behind all of these events?

Predictably, the spillover for Abkhazia came at lightning speed, triggered by the deployment of several thousand Russian troops in the region and the mobilization of its Black Sea Fleet stationed in Sevastopol towards the Abkhaz and Georgian Black Sea coast. The consequences were set to be enormous.

Notwithstanding the importance of assessing the progression of the conflict, this article will not focus on military developments or on Georgia's political decisions throughout and after the conflict. This article will provide a critical analysis of the geopolitical motivations of the Russian leadership in recognizing the independence of both breakaway provinces. It argues that the war in South Ossetia was not only a reaction to regional and international circumstances, but that in fact the entire episode might have been engineered by a 'hard line' faction of the Russian leadership, as a way of pushing for the carefully planned recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Four hypotheses are presented in this article in an attempt to assess the benefits and geopolitical gains of Abkhazia's independence and close association with Russia, a move that would allow the latter to dramatically broaden its presence and influence in the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Stemming from countering NATO expansion in the

region and dispelling any hopes Saakashvili might have of membership in the West, while adding two military bases to its roster and using the region as a platform to assist with the construction of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games, Russia had an outstanding motivation for recognizing Abkhazia as an independent, albeit heavily associated, state. Moreover, this association would allow to roll back the internal liberal movement brought on by Dmitry Medvedev's curricula, which was believed to be a threat to the established vertical power of the Russian regime.

The recognition of Abkhazia was intensely criticized by Western powers, who continue to support Georgia despite some restrictions. Nevertheless, this presented an opportunity to settle several geopolitical issues surrounding the Black Sea and the Southern Caucasus, and the benefits of such recognition proved to be immensely more profitable than any criticism or even sanction attached to the violation of established European security doctrines.

## **Real de facto independence**

The unraveling dispute between Abkhazia and Georgia reached one of its most dangerous points when the Soviet Union disintegrated. Much like Russia, Georgia was left with a heritage of rising nationalist and secessionist groups, one of them being the Abkhaz.

An independent Georgia, free from the shackles of the Soviet regime, represented a significant threat to Abkhazia's aspirations, specially to its ambition of becoming independent. The underlying principle within Abkhaz leadership was that as long as Georgia controlled specific state resources and the entirety of its former Soviet territory, which includes Abkhazia, it could eliminate the latter's autonomy.

Abkhazia was sovietized prior to Georgia in 1921, with the status of a Union Republic. However, it was associated with Georgia in 1925 and later became an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) under the Georgian SSR by Stalin's decree. Abkhaz ambitions of independence have existed ever since. If during the Soviet Union both the Abkhaz ASSR and the Georgian SSR had to answer to Moscow, in the post-Soviet years, Abkhazia was subjected to Tbilisi's commands. The Abkhaz people feared the Georgian government would use state resources – the army, the police, the courts and its economic influence – to undermine its autonomy and subject it to Georgian rule.

Unsurprisingly, this hovering threat led Abkhazia to reinstate its 1925 constitution, which was perceived as an act of secession by Tbilisi and led to the deployment of Georgian paramilitary forces to restore order in Abkhazia in August 1992. However, according to Svante Cornell, the Abkhaz were able to counterattack in October of the same year “with heavy armament, helped by North Caucasian volunteers and air support which came from Russian forces in the Caucasus, which had obviously also provided the heavy weaponry to the Abkhaz”.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of another Georgian military attack and fearing

loss of autonomy for its government, the Abkhaz leadership committed to secessionism as the only viable option, a decision which was formalized in the 1992 Abkhaz declaration of independence. Nonetheless, these events mark Russia's first significant interference in Georgia's breakaway republics since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which continued throughout much of the 1990s.

Notwithstanding Abkhazia's century long presence in the region, its previous status of autonomy, *frail de facto* sovereignty, medieval independence (during the Kingdom of Abkhazia), its ethnic differences with Georgia and its history of conflict with the latter, a real *de facto* independence only materialized much later, when Russia officially recognized its sovereignty after the 2008 August war against Georgia. This ended almost two decades of post-Soviet unrest, while starting a new, more dangerous period of tension in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even though only four countries in the world recognize it as an independent sovereign state, there are several reasons to consider that Abkhazia has *de facto* seceded from Georgia. Firstly, after the war in the early 1990s between Abkhazia and Georgia and several recurring clashes prior to Russian intervention in 2008, most ethnic Georgians had fled the region or were brutally ethnically cleansed, leaving behind a reduced but homogenized population, even though some ethnic Georgians returned to their homes in Abkhazia. Secondly, with regard to its economic and administrative apparatus, Abkhazia uses the ruble as its official currency, most citizens currently hold Russian passports (as Abkhaz passports are not accepted on international flights), and retirement pensions and other monetary benefits are all delivered by Russia. None of these elements are provided by the Georgian state, the same state which claims Abkhazia as part of its territorial sovereignty. Thirdly, when Georgia attempted to regain control of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia – one of President Saakashvili's top priorities – by use of military force, it found a superior military opposition in the Russian army, which had built up its presence in both regions a few months prior to the actual conflict.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Georgia ceased to control what Max Weber called the 'monopoly on violence' in its territory, ultimately giving *de facto* independence to Abkhazia.

To be sure, Abkhaz *de facto* secession was already under way, only to culminate with the official recognition of the Russian Federation. Georgia had been losing military power, political leverage and economic legitimacy, in a region whose inhabitants consider themselves to be historically entitled to the land, ethnically very singular and destined to be independent.

While considering Abkhazia to be *de facto* independent, its defense, economy, political apparatus, overall independence and daily functioning seem to be heavily dependent on Russian assistance. Consequently, if left without any support from Russia, Abkhazia will become either a failed state – as it lacks the proper resources and overall functioning of a sovereign state – or another among many frozen conflicts in the region with the potential to be reignited in the future.

The conclusion is that politically and economically disadvantaged or disenfranchised groups will more likely consider secessionism or irredentism – even if ethnic kinship fails to be present – to be a plausible option. However, if secessionism fails as it did when Abkhazia declared its independence in 1992 but did not obtain international recognition, the only option left is to seek help or even shelter in another more powerful state such as Russia.

From the Abkhaz point of view, it is possible to conclude that its leadership aspired only to independence and had no hidden agenda. However, while the facts mentioned above help to understand the process of Abkhaz secession from Georgia, the reasons behind Russian involvement in the process remain unclear.

Hence, one central question must be answered: why did Russia officially recognize Abkhazia and push other countries to do so as well almost two decades after the republic declared independence? What were the true motivations (if any) behind this?

## The profits of recognition

Several hypotheses are suggested to explain such behavior. Taking into account the international context and the region under analysis, the geopolitical gains of recognizing the South Caucasian republic seems to far outweigh any international criticism or sanction this might entail. A more practical assessment suggests four interlinked hypotheses that point to the immense advantages to recognizing Abkhazia:

### Hypothesis 1:

#### **Russia recognized Abkhazia in objection to the Kosovo war and subsequent independence.**

The Russian leadership believes NATO and some European states opened 'Pandora's Box' when they recognized the independence of Kosovo. Indeed, Russia was by far the most active opponent of such a measure, and it had its reasons.

Besides Russia, countries such as Spain have much to lose with the so-called "Kosovo precedent". Both are not nation-states as they host more than one ethnic group/nation, and both have separatist forces on their territory. In fact, Russia houses more than one hundred different ethnic groups and has had several regions claim independence ever since the demise of the Soviet Union. Hence, the recognition of Kosovo created the one precedent multinational states like Russia and Spain have been trying to avoid for decades. It bluntly said to the Basque, Catalan, Chechen, Dagestan, Ingush and Tatar leadership (among others) that independence is possible if they manage to pressure the central government and take their plight to the US and Europe. Although the nature of the Kosovo precedent is much more complex for reasons outside the scope of this article,<sup>4</sup> this recognition was perceived by Russia as

an attack on its territorial integrity and sovereignty, since it gave separatist leaders a pretext to reinforce their bid.

If so, why then after so much criticism did Russia recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus effectively doing the exact same thing it had so strongly condemned?

The answer might lie in the fact that to the Russian leadership, Kosovo – with a population of approximately two million – could in fact become a functioning sovereign state. On the other hand, Abkhazia's strong dependence on Russia would in principle prevent this from happening. This is why Abkhazia was recognized but not annexed: annexation would involve harsh criticism and precise policies which do not fit in with any possible justification the Kosovo precedent might present. Moreover, the Russian leadership understood that recognition would be enough, and that with time the decision to annex would be taken off their hands: heavy economic and administrative dependence on Russia would make annexation Abkhazia's only way of avoiding becoming a failed state.

Russia took the risk of using the precedent excuse when it played the fragile balance between recognizing Abkhazia and avoiding its own disintegration. The trick, it seems, was to use the precedent to its fullest, while avoiding antagonizing domestic separatist forces. Recognition without annexation was the key, as the latter would fall out of the Kosovo precedent, thus making Russia open to domestic and international criticism. By doing so, Russia managed to successfully show NATO that it is prepared to go further than condemnation, into concrete action. It successfully contained NATO's expansion and broke its undisputed rule, positioning itself as an actor with sufficient power and influence which should not to be ignored.

## **Hypothesis 2:**

### **Russia recognized Abkhazia in objection to Saakashvili's bid to join NATO.**

One of the many motivations to go to war and subsequently to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia was to undermine and ultimately shut down Saakashvili's bid to join NATO. While the war of August 2008 highlighted the unlikelihood of Georgia joining NATO – because it could potentially drag the entire Atlantic Alliance into conflict with Russia – the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has completely terminated its bid. NATO will not offer membership to a territorially broken country which is divided by war. In fact, even before the war, granting the guarantees of article 5 of the Washington Treaty to a state with unresolved territorial disputes raised reservations for many NATO members, including Germany, France, Spain and Italy.<sup>5</sup>

The August war made Georgia a dubious state, one that no NATO member is willing to defend. This was the outcome the 'hard line' section of the Russian leadership had expected and probably foreseen when it played what it understood as NATO's proxy war in Georgia against Russia. Indeed, with the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia not only terminated any hopes Georgia had to join NATO, but also took control of the accession process.

In the current status quo, Georgia's membership to the Atlantic Alliance was dashed, only to be replaced by an abstract NATO-Georgia Commission, talks of future cooperation and the necessity of reform.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, NATO accession hinges on the adoption of unconceivable solutions, such as having Georgia recognize Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence; drastically improving relations between Russia and NATO; NATO granting Russia membership or the Atlantic Alliance completely changing its nature. Either way, Georgia will only be able to join NATO when Russia allows it to do so.

From this point of view, Russia's policy was extremely successful in matching its goal of containing NATO. Furthermore, building military bases on Abkhaz soil makes it officially impossible for Georgia to join NATO, much like Ukraine when it extended the lease on the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol.

### **Hypothesis 3:**

#### **Russia recognized Abkhazia to control military bases on its territory.**

Prospects for renewing the lease on the Black Sea Fleet were bleak in 2008, when Viktor Yushchenko was still President of the Ukraine. The thought of losing its historical naval base forced Russia to search for other alternatives. Abkhazia provided the best option for such an endeavor. It has a port in Ochamchira, though much smaller than Sevastopol, and the biggest airfield in the entire Caucasus, in Gudauta. Several reports in the international media indicate that Moscow's plans to establish military bases in these two sites are already underway. A naval base is projected to be constructed in Ochamchira, and the former soviet base of Bombora in the Gudauta region of Abkhazia is due to be renovated.

Therefore, the solution to Russia's military problems was very straightforward: it could solve the problem with the extension of the lease on the Black Sea Fleet and legally keep the largest military airport in the Caucasus by recognizing Abkhazia.

The Gudauta airfield was largely used by the Soviet Union as a strategic point in the region to station its air defenses and airborne troops. The airfield remained under Russian control, which made it a center of conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, in the 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul, Russia agreed to shut down the base and remove all personnel and equipment under international inspection, an inspection later blocked by the Abkhaz leadership.

After the August war and in return for recognizing Abkhazia, Russia was naturally allowed to keep its highly prized base in Gudauta. According to Sabine Freizer from the International Crisis Group, Russia has since dispatched 10.000 troops to Abkhazia and is planning to spend US\$465 million to refurbish and build military bases, including the Gudauta airfield.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Russia is rearming its Air Force, counting on a US\$417 billion program that will provide 350 new aircraft and 400 new and modernized helicopters in the next five years. In ten years time, the entire fleet is expected to include 1.500 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft,



including at least 800 new and modernized combat planes.<sup>8</sup> Referring to a source close to the Russian Ministry of Defense, Ariel Cohen states that Moscow plans to deploy some 20 aircraft, both attack and transport aircraft in Gudauta, justifying the move as an attempt to deter Georgia and provide security to the 2014 Sochi Olympics.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the immensity of the rearmament program could enable further heavy deployment in the future.

With regards to the port in Ochamchira, the picture is much more complicated. Ochamchira is much smaller than Sevastopol, its waters are shallow and it does not have a protected bay. Intensive construction work would be needed in order for it to accommodate the largest warships in Russia's Black Sea Fleet. In fact, Cohen argues that even if waters were to be dredged, Russia's main naval forces in the Black Sea, the missile cruiser Moscow and the large anti-submarines Kerch and Ochakov would still be unable to enter the port. Nonetheless, it could still serve as a key forward supply post for Russian warships.

When facing the possibility of failing to renew the lease of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, the Russian leadership was eager to find other alternatives in the region. Although lacking important specifications, Ochamchira offered a complicated but plausible alternative for the allocation of the Sevastopol Fleet. By recognizing Abkhazia's independence, Russia ensured that it could return to (or maintain<sup>10</sup>) the Gudauta airfield, while also finding a temporary solution for the fate of the Black Sea Fleet.

The geopolitical and military advantages of recognizing Abkhazia only to assure these two foreign bases seem to be enough to compensate the losses and the international criticism of battling Georgia in 2008. Indeed, by building a stronger military presence in the region, Russia will not only advance its interests but keep others' – specially American – at bay, while controlling the entire Black Sea coast of Georgia.

#### **Hypothesis 4:**

#### **Russia recognized Abkhazia because it needed to use its territory in the upcoming 2014 Winter Olympic Games, which will be held in Sochi.<sup>11</sup>**

Abkhazia's territory is very near Sochi, the place where the 2014 Winter Olympic Games will be held. The bid to host the Olympics was won by Russia in July 2007, after great efforts by the Russian Olympic Committee and political pressure from then President Vladimir Putin. The construction of the Sochi Olympic Park is going according to schedule and moving at an impressively fast pace.

After being awarded the Olympics in 2007, Russia declared its intent to engage Abkhazia in preparation for the games. Due to its geographic proximity and resource availability, the republic could prove to be a crucial partner in the Sochi Olympics, since transporting the necessary materials from distant parts of the country would be extremely costly and time consuming. A plausible alternative thus emerged in Abkhazia.

In March 2008, Russia dropped out of CIS sanctions imposed on Abkhazia since 1996. According to a press release by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation,

these sanctions established “a ban on trade, economic, financial, transport and other ties with Abkhazia at a State level”.<sup>12</sup> The press release explained the sanctions were no longer applicable because the situation had changed, ethnic Georgians had returned to their homes in Abkhazia and the Abkhaz side had fulfilled its obligations in the conflict settlement process. But the decision raises some questions. If by that time Russia had already planned to use Abkhazia to help the construction for the Olympics, dropping the sanctions six months before the war was a clear sign of its intentions.

Russian investment in Abkhazia has been overwhelming ever since it officially recognized its independence. In return for its generosity and support, the Abkhaz government – led then by Sergei Bagapsh – offered to provide the building materials and labor force necessary for the construction of the required infrastructures for the games, as well as host the visitors and part of the working staff.

However, Abkhazia is rich in mineral resources, specially in construction materials, such as timber, stone and sand. Moreover, it already has the necessary road system and railway routes for transportation, something Sochi lacks. Engaging Abkhazia would save time and large amounts of money and compensate its leadership with tremendous investment and tourism revenues. Russia must have foreseen the immense potential in Abkhazia for such an endeavor.

Recognizing the small republic was a viable and logical step to assure its cooperation. If Russia meddled with the status of Abkhazia, Georgia would not be able to hinder its participation or collaboration in the Winter Olympic Games, which was obviously of the utmost importance to Russia. Participation in the Olympic project means Abkhazia will benefit from the forthcoming investment and construction boom in Sochi. Consequently, it will be pulled further into Russia’s orbit, deepening its economic dependence and giving strength to the possibility of formal accession to Russia at a later point in time.

## Particularities of the regime

These four hypotheses prove the benefits of recognizing Abkhazia’s independence were tremendous. But this is not to say everyone in the Russian leadership with sufficient decisional power knew about or planned this strategy. Jonas Bernstein from the Jamestown Foundation states that “according to one source ‘close to the Presidential administration’, Medvedev from the start of the campaign did not plan to go beyond the bounds of the peacekeeping mission in South Ossetia, but others close to Putin at a certain point began to talk to him about the ‘logic of war’ and the unexpected possibility of resolving ‘important geopolitical tasks’”.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Medvedev and Putin did not foresee the potential of recognizing Abkhazia, but someone in the administration must have understood it very clearly. Possibly ‘hard line’ factions within the power echelons of Russia carefully planned and exploited the tense situation in Georgia. Yet, whatever deals

were made between these 'hard liners' and the Abkhaz leadership, they have created a situation of dependency – one which will increase Abkhazia's need for further assistance from Russia.

In her seminal book *Russia – Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies*, Lilia Shevtsova states that Russian foreign policy is a reflection of the internal power struggles in the country.<sup>14</sup> These power struggles among the regime's most influential 'hard liners' do not necessarily mean the invasion and subsequent recognition of Abkhazia brought direct and visible gains to them. Although it is possible that some of these members might have construction or mineral exploration companies which will make tremendous amounts of money in Sochi, Abkhazia, Ochamchira and Gudauta, political profit must not be excluded. In fact, Shevtsova continues, "the logic of the Russian system demands resort to force, intimidation, or a show of force in international politics, without which the regime cannot retain power inside Russia". Shevtsova suggests that in order to maintain a tight grip on power, the regime's elite must find a common exploitable enemy, the 'other' who will serve to rally the population around its sphere. Several authors point to the reigniting of the Second Chechen War as a technique set up by Putin to mobilize the population against a common threat, thus surrounding himself with power and building the current vertical power structure in Russian politics today.

The regime itself has several divisions and internal struggles, typical of a bureaucratic-authoritarian type of rule. In fact, as argued by Alexei Levinson, the August war of 2008 against Georgia served the purpose of countering emerging liberal expectations grounded in Medvedev. The move from Putin's policy, Levinson continues, "to the imagined "policy of Medvedev" – imagined as an alternative – was also followed in 2008 by some people who not only have the capital, but the political resources too".<sup>15</sup> Although some in the business sector with sufficient political power approved of the liberalization represented by Medvedev's character and curriculum, established political circles around Putin – specially the siloviki, composed of law enforcement agencies such as the FSB, the Internal Ministry, the Tax Department and the Prosecutor's Office – had a critical interest in denying this liberalization because it would significantly challenge their position of power. Hence, the invasion and recognition of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia killed every liberal dream grounded in Medvedev and stunted the growth of the liberal movement in Russia, at a time when the President could have encouraged its development.

Another subsequent benefit of the war was that it enhanced Russia's domestic and international image. Shevtsova argues that the great power hegemony pursued by Russia is not an end in itself but a means of preserving a centralized state in need of vassals to order around. Accordingly, "the regime enhances Russia's internal image as a great power (...) by bullying Ukraine and Georgia".<sup>16</sup> This highlights a feeling of Soviet nostalgia, of emanating respect and even fear on the international stage, of depicting one's country as a superpower to be reckoned with.

Nonetheless, underpinning all these elements is, above all, the regime's need to maintain power and remove any obstacles to it. However, this also proves that the elite has not completely consolidated its power and fears it will be challenged every step it takes – such as the case put forward with Medvedev's election – otherwise characteristic of instituted vertical systems. Thus, although liberalization may not become a reality in Russia any time soon, the fact that the regime continues to struggle for domestic hegemony signals the readiness and openness of Russians in general to embrace the liberal model of democracy.

## Future uncertain

This very complex chain of events has made Abkhazia politically and economically dependent on Russia. However, it served to alienate the opposition, who criticize Sergei Bagapsh for relinquishing too much power and influence to Russia. Several political parties and movements, including war veterans, have expressed their concern over Bagapsh's plans to hand over Abkhazia's national heritage to foreign commercial companies for a long period of time.<sup>17</sup> The opposition argues such deals risk creating anti-Russian sentiment and domestic political tensions. Although they understand Abkhazia cannot develop economically without Russian assistance and don't want to be a burden to the latter, they feel the republic must retain control over its strategic structures. Time will tell if Russia's actions will alienate this opposition movement, which could contribute to further exacerbate the situation.

Although several authors understand that Abkhazia might become an integral part of the Russian Federation, and although there is evidence of it, nothing is completely guaranteed. In fact, the possibility of Russia using the territory of Abkhazia to extract whatever raw materials and resources it needs, plant two military bases and afterwards start reducing its financial and political support must also be considered. Much like the US, Russia also has several military bases across Eurasia, many of them inherited from the times of the Soviet Union and kept throughout the years as a federation. Accordingly, a situation of ethnic violence similar to the one in June 2010 in Kyrgyzstan – where Russia has a military base, exerts its influence and pays the Kyrgyz state, but refrains from attempting annexation or destabilization – might evolve in Abkhazia.

If Russia withdraws its support from Abkhazia, the small republic will become exposed to Georgian pressure and North Caucasian security threats, which would substantially undermine its process of independence and international recognition.

It remains unclear whether annexation is the ultimate goal or not. It is possible that after taking all it needed from Abkhazia, Russia would find other 'hot spots' to explore and leave the breakaway republic to its 'luck'. This would be the worst possible outcome not only for Abkhazia but for the entire Caucasus. Without Russian support, internal and external pressures could destabilize the Abkhaz leadership, reignite

ethnic conflict, and even 'import' terrorist practices from the surrounding Russian republics.

As shown in the recent ethnic unrest of June 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, the presence of Russian bases in a given territory does not entail compulsory intervention in its domestic issues, even if requested several times. Thus, nothing guarantees that Russia, having lost its interest in Abkhazia, would still come to its "defense" as it did in August 2008.

## Conclusion

Although in differing degrees and stages, Russia has been meddling in Abkhazia ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, using the republic to counter western influence and undermine Georgia marked a clear shift with the past. Ever since the August war of 2008, the situation in Abkhazia has changed, and will not be reversed any time soon.

With the Abkhaz leadership in avid agreement, Russia managed to alter the overall situation in the Caucasus in its favor. The spillover effect created after NATO failed to intervene on Georgia's behalf has contaminated the region, making it harder for the Atlantic Alliance to reconnect with the disillusioned countries in the future.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, not only did Russia manage to retain the Sevastopol naval base, due in part to Ukraine's recent shift towards the East, but it gained two new military bases in Abkhazia. Ultimately, it found a way to gather resources to build the infrastructure for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games without having to transport materials from other distant parts of the country.

Domestically Russia was also affected during the war and subsequent recognition. The liberal momentum attached to President Medvedev seems to have been stopped due to internal power struggles, which were successful in maintaining and consolidating the instituted vertical regime. The 'hard line' factions proved to be sufficiently well connected to prevail in the liberal vs. authoritarian struggle inside the Kremlin. Moreover, the recognition of Abkhazia proved Russian foreign policy to be something more than just reactive. Although it first came as a response to western – specially US – foreign policy in the region, Russia proved it is very much aware of opportunities and changes in its 'near abroad'. In fact, the situation and gains created around the Abkhaz issue have shown that today Russia is much more capable in 'counter-politics'. It has evolved to a point where most in the West have not yet understood it and are not prepared to deal with the situation.

Many authors suggest that the August war brought specific losses to Russia. However, most of these studies do not consider the practical implications and subsequent gains of Abkhaz independence and reliance on Russian political and financial assistance. To conclude, the recognition of Abkhazia's independence entailed tremendous geopolitical, economic, and military gains. The sheer dimension of these benefits suggests segments

of the Russian leadership might have planned this recognition and understood its consequences, which are largely insignificant when compared to the advantages.

The future remains uncertain, but with or without annexation by Russia, Abkhazia will hardly become part of Georgia again.

#### (Endnotes)

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- 2 Svante E. Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia* (Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Report No. 61, 2002).
- 3 Although Russia had peacekeeping troops stationed in both regions since 1992, in 2008 it significantly raised the number of troops in the two breakaway regions.
- 4 For more information on the Kosovo precedent and its link to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, see Christian Nielsen, "The Kosovo precedent and the rhetorical deployment of former Yugoslav analogies in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" [*Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 9, Issue 1/2, March 2009], pp. 171-189; Igor Torbakov, "Russia Plays Up Kosovo Precedent For Potential Application in the Caucasus" [*Eurasia.net*, 11 April 2006]; and, Sebastian Schäffer, "The Kosovo Precedent – Directly Applicable to Abkhazia and South Ossetia" [*Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 2009], pp. 108-110.
- 5 Marek Madej, "NATO after the Georgian conflict: A new course or business as usual?" (Polish Institute of International Affairs, *PISM Strategic File*, No. 6, January 2009).
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- 7 Sabine Freizer, "Russia: Talking amongst friends about Georgia" [*Today's Zaman*, 7 June 2010].
- 8 Ilya Kramnik, "Neglecting the Navy could threaten Russia's sovereignty" [*RIA Novosti*, 3 June 2010].
- 9 Ariel Cohen, "Georgia: Russia Plans Three Military Bases in Abkhazia" [*Eurasia.net*, 5 February 2009].
- 10 Although Russia said it was shutting down the Gudauta airfield in 1999, Georgia claims the Russian military never actually left.
- 11 This hypothesis should not be considered alone to explain the overall recognition of Abkhazia, but rather associated with the hypotheses mentioned above, in a 3+1 exercise.
- 12 See "Russian Federation Withdraws from Regime of Restrictions Established in 1996 for Abkhazia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Information and Press Department, Press Release, 6 March 2008).
- 13 Jonas Bernstein, "Are Putin and Medvedev at odds over the Georgian campaign?" [*Jamestown Foundation*, Vol. 5, Issue 156, August 2008].
- 14 Lilia Shevtsova, *Russia – Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).
- 15 Alexei Levinson, "Russian public opinion and the Georgia war" [*openDemocracy*, 14 August 2009].
- 16 Shevtsova, *Russia – Lost in transition*, p. 166.
- 17 Liz Fuller, "Abkhaz Leadership, Opposition Exchange Accusations" [*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Caucasus Report*, 24 May 2009].
- 18 Disillusionment with NATO was one of the factors which helped Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich to win the Presidential elections of January/February 2010.