

IDENTITIES, INTERESTS AND THE RESOLUTION OF THE ABKHAZ CONFLICT

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Abstract

The recent crisis in Abkhazia reveals a fundamental qualitative change in the conflict in which the balance among three main actors is shifting, and increasingly the conflict plays a more important role in the triangular relations between Georgia, Russia and the West. The search for a new equilibrium in the conflict, one that would be an optimal outcome for the actors involved, will require rethinking the mutually constitutive roles (identities) and interests they want to assume with respect to the conflict and the entire South Caucasus. This is argued to be a matter of the 'first order' with respect to conflict resolution in Abkhazia, with confidence-building measures and political status questions representing only a 'second order'. For Tbilisi and Sukhumi, such a process may involve resigning the discourse of sovereignty; for Russia, pondering the costs and benefits of the current 'hard power' approach; and for Western actors, delimiting their interests towards the region and recognizing the power they possess vis-a-vis Russia's current weakness.

Keywords: *Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, identity, interests, narratives.*

Introduction

It seems to have become a commonplace in Western scholarship to start any study about the conflicts in the North and South Caucasus with the mythopoetical narrative of the dissolution of the USSR, accompanied by the emergence of ethnic nationalism founded on ancient hatreds, Soviet policy of *nacionalnost*, and/or economic and political grievances imposed by the dominant groups. As the linear antecedents in the narrative, they are inevitably rendered as causes of the consequent ethnopolitical conflicts, or its most contemporary manifestation in the *long durée* of struggle for the survival of minorities. As the narrative unreels, they are then succeeded by an essentially sanitized ("scientific") account of the ensuing violence citing statistics of dead, dispossessed and displaced, and the subsequent – in the case of South Caucasus – "freezing" of the conflicts, the development of contested state sovereignty due to the presence of three quasistates,

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and resulting instability fomented by the malignant Kremlin. The ancient history of the region underlining its unique position between the East and the West (asserting its geopolitical importance), records of shifting political allegiances to ephemeral local political units (underlining the ancient character of the indigenous ethnic rivalry), and the infamous list of foreign *conquistadors* including Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Tatars, Persians, and finally Russians (again, emphasizing the region's importance, and eternalizing the great power struggle over the precious piece of geopolitical chessboard) is perhaps mentioned too.

The point is not that these myths are *false*. Myths, at least as conceived by Poststructuralist theory, escape the criterion of truth as the correspondence to reality while bearing immense importance for producing and reproducing identity, collective psychological (pathological, as may be) states, and dominant theoretical paradigms (e.g. Realism in IR Theory). Instead of perhaps a more typical introduction, the aim of the previous lines is to point to the serialized and standardized character of many academic and journalistic narratives related to the conflict in the South Caucasus, including that of Abkhazia,¹ which is the proper subject of this article, and suggest that by – consciously or inadvertently – reifying a certain version of the past and thus producing and reproducing structures of knowledge, alternatives for the present and the future may be severely limited.

More specifically, the limits contained in the structural narratives of ethnic security dilemmas, associated with the imperial decay,² occurrence of violence in the conditions of anarchy,³ or in the grand narratives of geopolitical conflict over the Caucasus⁴ – all reminiscent of the eternal and unchangeable laws of history – reduce human (individual and collective) agency to the role of mere spectator to historical processes that transcend it. Whereas the conflicts may have arisen precisely as a result of the action of an emerging or incumbent political elite, one reflecting constraining structural conditions and existing ethnosymbolic narratives, yet also one acting freely and rationally to gain, sustain and expand political power through mass mobilization against the external enemy by employing discourses of danger and Utopian "normal states" (e.g. of independence in quasistates, "restored sovereignty over the occupied territory" for the newly

¹ Dissenting narratives do exist, disseminated e.g. by prof. George Hewitt. His plain bias towards the Abkhaz side of the conflict, of whose language he is an imminent Western scholar – for example, he described the situation before the outbreak of the war in the early 1990s in the following emotive terms: "Yet another sacrifice on the depressing altar known as the territorial integrity of states was in line for the sacrificial dagger" (B.G. Hewitt, „Abkhazia: A Problem of Identity and Ownership,“ in John F.R. Wright et al., Eds., „Transcaucasian Boundaries“, London: UCL Press, 1996, p. 216) – is however likely attributable to what Valey Tishkov (paraphrasing Fredrik Barth) called the "problem of sympathetic anthropology" (Tishkov, Valery, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Former USSR: The Use and Misuse of Typologies and Data," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 36, no. 5, Sept. 1999, pp. 571-591). For a recent article by Hewitt on political issues in Abkhazia, see "Abkhazia: Land in Limbo," *Opendemocracy.net*, 10 Sept. 2006, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/abkhazia_future_3983.jsp.

² Posen, Barry, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 27-47 (1993).

³ Waltz, Kenneth, „Theory of International Politics“, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979, p. 102; or in more recent formulation, Mearsheimer, John, „The Tragedy of Great Power Politics“, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

⁴ E.g. in one of the most comprehensive and meticulous recent Western studies on the subject, Cornell, Svante, „Small Nations and Great Powers“, London, 2003.

independent republics, and erstwhile political influence in the Caucasus for Russia) that serve to discipline the populaces.⁵

This article aims at a critical analysis of the recent political development related, yet not spatially delimited to, Abkhazia. This development may be termed "escalation" of the conflict with Georgia, but for reasons detailed below I will rather speak of "crisis". Therefore, I intend not to provide the archaeology of the present myths suggested and criticized above; neither do I, however, intend to harness and present new facts about the conflict and the present situation on which considerable amount of ink has been spilled. Rather, this article aims to provide a more "abstract" critical perspective in reflecting the recent events and thus aspire at contributing to the current debate on the issue.

The Present Crisis: Overview

A cursory review of the events that caused an intensification of hostile relations between the major actors involved in the Abkhaz conflict is presented prior to their analysis. The key events in this development have been the declaration of independence by Kosovo on February 17, 2008 and its international ramifications, Russia's decision to suspend sanctions against the Abkhaz Republic⁶ imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the establishment of formal relations between Russia and the Abkhaz 'Republic', reinforcements of the formally CIS peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia, and escalation of the military tension between the Abkhaz 'Republic' and Georgia.

Russia declared not to abide by the sanctions imposed on Sukhumi in 1996 by CIS Heads of State,⁷ which forbid economic and military cooperation and establishment of formal relations with the *de facto* government, on March 6, following the Russia's presidential election in which Dmitri Medvedev received ca. 90% of votes by participating citizens of the separatist republics with Russian passports.⁸ (The decision, which to great extent represented only a formal confirmation of the *status quo*, paralleled – and possibly halted – Tbilisi's overtures to ease the trade blockade of Abkhazia.) The next day, both *de facto* governments (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) pleaded to the Russian Duma to recognize their independence in view of the "Kosovo precedent".⁹

⁵ Campbell, David, „Writing Security“, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999; Constantinou, Costas, „States of Political Discourse“ in: „Words, Regimes, Seditions“, London, 2004

⁶ Referring to "Abkhaz Republic" in this article is not intended to implicitly acknowledge legitimacy of the separatist *de facto* government. Also, a distinction is maintained between Abkhaz Republic (*de facto* administration of the territory of the former Abkhaz SSR with the exception of Upper Kodori) and Abkhazia as a strictly geographical referent.

⁷ The *CIS Head of State Declaration* (19 Jan. 1996) cited "Abkhazia's destructive behavior" as the reason for imposing the sanctions, mainly as related to the (then) absence of conditions for the return of Mingrelian IDPs. Cf. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17293>.

⁸ An estimated 80% Abkhaz citizens hold also Russian passports, as compared to 85-90% South Ossetians.

⁹ The Duma then recommended to the Russian government to ensure protection of Russian citizens inhabiting the separatist territories, including by reinforcement of the peacekeeping contingents. It also proposed opening

During NATO's Bucharest summit on April 2-4, Ukraine and Georgia were not, as had been expected for some time due to Russian pressure and consequent reluctance of some member states, awarded Membership Action Plans (MAPs). Instead, the final declaration read that the two countries, now enjoying Intensified Dialogue with NATO, "will [eventually] become members."¹⁰ While Georgia's government tried to recast the failure into a diplomatic victory, it was the Kremlin, who warned that the membership for the two countries could "jeopardise European security" (Medvedev) and "threaten democracy" (Putin)¹¹, that could be content with the lack of NATO consensus.¹²

Prior to the summit, Mikheil Saakashvili's government presented a peace proposal to the *de facto* Abkhaz authorities (who refused its delivery from the hands of UNOMIG (the United Nations Mission in Georgia), denouncing it as a shallow rhetoric), including articles on broad autonomy, free economic zones, representation for the republic at governmental level, veto power of the autonomous government on key issues related to the autonomy, and the position of the Vice-President to be established and held by an ethnic Abkhaz.¹³ The two parties later exchanged notes on the proposal; on May 12, Georgia's Ambassador to the UN (and former chief negotiator with Abkhazia) Irakli Alasania visited Sukhumi; and finally, news of the talks between Abkhazia and Georgia in Sweden on June 15-17, 2008 were announced by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.¹⁴ However, there was a fundamental incompatibility on which confidence building measures (CBMs) were obtained. Georgia focused mainly on the return of IDPs, while Abkhazia stressed (international) security guarantees, demilitarization of the Kodori Gorge, and the establishment of a sea and train connection with Turkey. Moreover, the relations between Georgia and Abkhazia/Russia had undergone a severe crisis by that time.¹⁵

The UN Secretary General report presented to the UN Security Council before the semi-annual resolution on the status of the conflict in Abkhazia and extension of the UNOMIG monitoring

representations with the *de facto* governments to strengthen economic relations (*RIA Novosti*, 21 March 2008). As the account of following events shows, the Kremlin followed recommendations of this non-binding resolution very closely.

¹⁰ „Bucharest Summit Declaration“, 3 Apr. 2008, http://www.summitbucharest.ro/en/doc_201.html. The summit of NATO Foreign Ministers to be held in December was empowered to decide on awarding the MAPs.

¹¹ „Putin in NATO Summit Spotlight“, BBC News, 2 Apr. 2008.

¹² It is difficult to comprehend how could the declaration be interpreted by International Crisis Group as "arguably a stronger political message than inclusion in MAP would have been." „Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia“, Europe Report No. 193, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2008, pp. 14-15.

¹³ The proposal reflected to a considerable degree the criteria of consociational democracy set by Arend Lijphart – segmental autonomy, segmental veto power, executive coalition on the state level and proportional representation in the state institutions. See Lijphart, Arend, „Democracy in Plural Societies“, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977.

¹⁴ *Eastweek*, no. 131, 25 June 2008.

¹⁵ In retaliation to what it interpreted as hostile Russia's moves, Georgia *inter alia* suspended bilateral talks about Russia's WTO membership. Yet it is worth mentioning that amidst the crisis in Abkhazia, both countries resumed air and sea transport service between the both countries on March 25, 2008 (after a 1 ½ year break enforced by Russia following an "espionage affair" of her diplomats stationed in Tbilisi).

mission status at the beginning of April still evaluated the situation as "generally calm."¹⁶ Yet by the middle of the month, it sharply deteriorated after Russia's decision to establish legal relations with Abkhazian authorities through Russia's government representation in Sukhumi,¹⁷ a decision criticized by the U.S., NATO and European Union (EU).

Furthermore, it was immediately followed by Abkhazia's accusations of Georgia's military manoeuvres along the ceasefire line and the destruction of a Georgian aerial surveillance vehicle flying over Abkhazia (April 20, 2008). While the Abkhazia initially claimed that it was shot down by its 9K37-Buk missile (or alternatively, an armed version of its L-39 Albatros) – and that in fact it was already a second eliminated vehicle of the kind (it would later claim at least six others) – the incident caused a diplomatic confrontation between Georgia and Russia, as the former released video footage and radar records allegedly confirming that the vehicle was destroyed by a MiG-29 fighter which took off from the Gudauta base in Abkhazia, formally stationed by the CIS peacekeeping force, and following the incident retired to Russia. This was later confirmed by a UNOMIG report that however stated that Georgian surveillance flights constituted "military activities" which contradicted the Moscow Agreement (1994) and may have been interpreted by the other party as a prelude to invasion.¹⁸ Russia denied any involvement, and interestingly, Russian Ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin suggested that the incident could have been staged by Tbilisi in cooperation with a NATO member in possession of MiG-29s, which pointed in the direction of either Lithuania or Poland, the most vocal critics of recent Russian policies in the South Caucasus and elsewhere.¹⁹

On April 29, Moscow reported it was enforcing the peacekeeping regiment in Abkhazia – citing the deployment of 1,500 Georgian army troops in Kodori (not confirmed by UNOMIG report released on May 8, 2008)²⁰ in preparation of an armed offensive – again instigating international criticism for increasing tension in the conflict zone. The Russian government denied the claims and maintained that the number of troops was still below the CIS agreed levels. It was later detailed that 400 paratroopers, 30 BMD-2 armed vehicles deployable from air, aerial defense systems and artillery units were included in the transfer, and among the units were possibly Russian special forces composed of Chechen troops (the Chechen "Abkhaz Battalion", led by the Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, is remembered among Georgians for its brutality unleashed against the Mingrelian civilian population, which added symbolic power to the news). President Saakashvili related this to Russian efforts to "change the world order" and the conquest of the then independent Georgia by the Bolshevik Russia in 1921, "followed by the invasion of Poland,

¹⁶ S/2008/219, 2 Apr. 2008, retrieved from <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/sgrep08.htm>

¹⁷ The representation (identical to one opened in Tskhinvali) also started providing consular services. The decision took the form of Vladimir Putin's executive decree, which moreover commanded the government to compile a list of legal documents issued by Abkhazia that Russia would consider valid. Furthermore, legal persons registered with the de facto governments in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali would now be recognized as such also in Russian Federation.

¹⁸ *Report of UNOMIG on the Incident of 20 April*, www.unomig.org/data/other/080526_unomig_report.pdf.

¹⁹ Quoted by Lenta.ru, 30 Apr. 2008.

²⁰ Cf. http://unomig.org/data/file/979/PR_2008_90_eng.pdf. According to ICG, Senaki base in Samegrelo, as well as the units in Kodori, were put on a combat alert. *Georgia and Russia*, op.cit. 5.

occupation of the Baltic countries and the bloody war in Finland."²¹ As the tension mounted and Russian and Abkhaz media speculated about the possibility of Georgia's offensive, Abkhazia proposed to Moscow that it would host Russian troops in exchange for security guarantees (an unidentified number of Russia's "advisers" that are not elements of the CIS operation already operate in Abkhazia).²²

On May 15, 2008, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution (although a great majority of the member states abstained), proposed by Georgia, that recognized the right of Mingrelian IDPs to return to Abkhazia and condemned the acquisition of property in Abkhazia by foreign (implicitly Russian) persons.²³ The next day, Georgia's forces detained several Russian peacekeepers in the border town of Zugdidi, producing a fierce response from Russia. Georgia also protested against the deployment of unarmed Russian Railway Troops from Russia (reported by Russian Ministry of Defense on May 31, 2008) which the latter claimed to be a humanitarian enterprise to rebuild Abkhaz infrastructure destroyed in the 1990s,²⁴ while the former interpreted it as a reinforcement of the opposing party and preparation for an armed invasion; the presence of units in Abkhazia (and not a formal part of the CIS peacekeeping contingent) was criticized by NATO Secretary General as an infringement upon Georgia's sovereignty.²⁵

In June, the tension among the political representatives decreased somewhat; however often manipulative broadcasting spreading fear of the enemy's invasion (Abkhazia) or Russia's annexation of Abkhazia (Georgia) continued. Interestingly, *Kommersant* reported on June 27, 2008 that a deal was a matter of negotiations between Russia and Georgia under whose provisions Tbilisi's sovereignty would be restored in the whole of Abkhazia, while the region would be divided into "spheres of influence". Both parties immediately refused to have engaged in discussing such a scenario. The hostile rhetoric finally intensified at the end of the month after a series of four explosions in Sukhumi and Gagra on June 29-30, 2008 as Abkhazia blamed the "terrorist acts" on Tbilisi, allegedly trying to sabotage the local tourist industry.²⁶ In response, it restricted the movement of persons across the Inguri river between Gali and Samegrelo. (Georgia's government suggested, in turn, that the explosions were the result of a power struggle amongst Abkhaz organized crime structures.²⁷)

²¹ President Saakashvili's speech at a meeting with EU Foreign Ministers in Tbilisi, 13 May 2008. Retrieved from UNOMIG <http://unomig.org/media/headlines/?id=10605&y=2008&m=05&d=13>.

²² Civil.ge, 6 May 2008.

²³ For a press statement outlining the preceding debate see <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2008/ga10708.doc.htm>.

²⁴ Specifically, this included the railroad track between Sukhumi and Ochamchire, and two bridges across Mokva and Kodori rivers. See *Eastweek*, no. 128, 4 June 2008.

²⁵ See Press Release 2008(076), 3 June 2008, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-076e.html>.

²⁶ Kavkaz-uzel.ru, 30 June 2008, <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/newstext/engnews/id/1224573.html>.

²⁷ Civil.ge, 30 June 2008.

The Present Crisis: Analysis

I suggested in the introduction that instead of speaking of "escalation" of the conflict, it may be more useful to frame recent events as "crisis". The reason why the concept of escalation is ill-fitting is that it assumes a linear perspective of the conflict, an increase in relevant quantifiable variables such as "tension" (however hard it may be to define) or violence. Even if this perspective is retained, the recent development is at best only a continuation of a "grand escalation" that started in 2006 with Georgia's "police operation" to eliminate the fiefdom of Emzar Kvitsiani and his militia *Monadire* in the Kodori Gorge, which resulted in breaking the negotiations on the *Key to the Future* peace plan proposed by Tbilisi (a plan not dissimilar to the one presented by Saakashvili in March 2008).²⁸ More significantly, since "escalation" indicates a change in *quantity*, it may not capture the dynamic of the conflict, which, as it is suggested, has come to change in *quality*. And while the end of this transformation is yet to be seen, the term "crisis" (κρίσις) seems more productive in relation to its original Greek meaning as a decisive moment in the history of disease.

The recent development in the conflict indicates changing balances in the relationship between three main actors (Georgia, Abkhazia, and Russia); a consequent "revolutionary" move to change the nature of their relationship by Georgia; and increasingly also involvement – albeit to some extent involuntary – of the European Union, NATO and the U.S., actors which may with some degree of simplification be subsumed under the term the "West". The triangular relations between Georgia, Russia and the West play an increasingly dominant role in the conflict; a point that seems to have escaped Mr. Solana who in a recent statement in Tbilisi expressed the opinion that "this conflict should be solved fundamentally by the two sides [Georgia and Abkhazia]."²⁹

The importance of the Russia-West relationship for the developments in Abkhazia is illustrated by the impact that Kosovo's independence, sponsored by major Western powers, has had on the conflict.³⁰ Both Russia's rhetoric before and after the event, and Russia's policy (establishment of formal links) related to Abkhazia not only sought legitimacy, but arguably also were caused to some extent by the position of the Kremlin *vis-a-vis* the West. In other words, more global factors

²⁸ Kvitsiani fled to Abkhazia, suggesting that his allegiances had been divided at best. Beside personal economic gains from illicit trade, there may have been an ethnic explanation to this as Kodori is inhabited primarily by Svans, a people historically not keen to acknowledge Tbilisi's sovereignty. Following the events, "Abkhaz government in exile", previously located in Tbilisi, was moved to a village of Chkalt'a in Kodori as part of Georgia's strategy to increase legitimacy of its position by creating an alternative center of power in Abkhazia (see below). In 2007, two serious military incidents took place to aggravate the tension – on March 11 unmarked helicopters, likely of Russia's army, targeted Kodori with missile fire; on September 20, a skirmish took place between Georgia's and Abkhazia's troops, leaving several dead and injured. UNOMIG reported that the battle occurred most likely on the territory controlled by Abkhazia.

²⁹ Quoted by Civil.ge, 6 June 2008.

³⁰ Whether there exists a "basic similarity in character" between the Kosovo and Abkhazia conflicts is still subject to debate (cf. de Waal, Thomas and Bayran, Zeyno, "Abkhazia-Georgia, Kosovo-Serbia: Parallel Worlds," *Opendemocracy.net*, 2 Feb. 2008, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/abkhazia_serbia_3787.jsp).

than the one spatially delimited to the South Caucasus has likely been behind recent Russian policy of increasing pressure on Georgia *through* Abkhazia. This has been facilitated by the identity of Georgia's current regime as allied with the "West" (standing predominantly for NATO and the U.S.). Interestingly, in the last report on Abkhazia, International Crisis Group (ICG) interpreted this pressure as the result of the loss Russia suffered at the Bucharest summit.³¹ Given that the Kremlin's tactic has been to prevent Georgia and Ukraine's membership in NATO³² it is hard to read the results otherwise than as Russia's geopolitical victory and NATO's yielding to her demands, which in turn may have incited more assertive actions by Moscow at a vulnerable spot, such as Abkhazia.

It is rather a radical shift in the identity of Georgia's regime, now embracing a Utopian vision of a Western liberal state and seeking integration into NATO, that may be identified as a factor behind more assertive Russian policy in the South Caucasus in general, and Abkhazia in particular. The renewed imperial ambitions have finally been coupled with sufficient strength to restore the former sphere of influence penetrated by the "West", Russia's geopoliticians and critical Western academics often claim. Yet it is worth asking whether this recent assertive policy is not instead a sign of *weakness*, rather than strength. Russia notoriously lacks "soft power" beyond its borders (despite the unifying cultural affinity of the former *Soyuz*) and thus may strive to retain, rather than expand, its faltering influence in the South Caucasus only by blackmail, subversion and the rhetoric of threat, which is however a rhetoric of despair.³³ This is an alternative reading – aside from the residual "cold-war thinking" – to former President Putin's assertion that "the appearance of a powerful military bloc [NATO] along our borders would be taken in Russia as a direct threat to the security of my country."³⁴ The claim that NATO would exacerbate the explosive situation in the North Caucasus is not very credible; nor is the notion that Georgia in NATO would contribute to Russia's "encirclement", although this indeed may be a geopolitical view of some conservative *siloviki*. Russia offers nothing but pressure, extortion and "hard power" threats to merely preserve some influence in the former Soviet lands and not to concede defeat to a more "attractive" NATO, EU and the U.S. If this suggestion is true, then it must be noted that the first two miscalculate their potential, while the third is presently unable to effectively spread its influence unilaterally due to the crisis of legitimacy (partly as a result of Iraq war).

Together with the change of identity, Georgia under Saakashvili, while not necessarily advanced in the realization of the vision of a liberal state as far as it claims, or as Tbilisi's friends wish,

³¹ „Georgia and Abkhazia“, op.cit. 2.

³² In both cases it has employed a number of strategies to reach this goal, ranging from fomenting separatism (in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea) to supporting radical political opposition and internal unrest to direct verbal threats of an undefined retaliatory actions aimed at the entire Alliance.

³³ Moscow has employed the tactic of blackmail also *vis-a-vis* her allies in the South Caucasus – Armenia, and notably also Abkhazia, where e.g. by imposing a land and sea blockade on Abkhazia it forced annulling the result of the presidential election in 2004 and their repetition with Kremlin-favoured candidate Raul Khajimba, who lost in the first election to Sergei Bagapsh, running in the second election as Bagapsh's Vice-President.

³⁴ Quoted by Xinxua, 4 Apr. 2008.

strengthened its position in the conundrum of the Abkhaz conflict. This may be interpreted as the result of a comprehensive – if undeclared – strategy which according to Ośrodek Studiów Wschodni's analysis³⁵ includes internationalization of the conflict (i.e. the endeavor of Tbilisi to release itself from the current structural constraints of the peace process by more actively involving the West and persuading the international audience about the dishonest role of Russia in mediating and facilitating conflict resolution);³⁶ constructive measures towards the *de facto* separatist governments (these, however, are more salient in South Ossetia);³⁷ founding of alternative centers of power (in a contest for legitimacy of power over the separatist territories); and building a more capable military.

While success in the first three goals has been limited, it is in the fourth that Georgia's strategy may have succeeded in changing the "frozen" balance. This has been the result of an astronomical increase in defence expenditure, reaching \$906 million in 2007 (7.5% GDP), as compared to \$19 million in 2002.³⁸ It has made efforts in meeting NATO standards and capability to contribute to the alliance operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it has arguably also substantially increased Georgia's both defensive and offensive potential. In the latest report, ICG even pondered over increasing possibility of a Georgian strike from Kodori to the Abkhaz lowlands in order to secure and hold at least part of Abkhazia's territory and further improve Tbilisi's negotiating position.³⁹ However, such a move would likely cause Russian retaliation in Abkhazia, which even Georgia's modernized military would not be able to withstand. Moreover, it would invite widespread international condemnation and delegitimization of Tbilisi's position in the conflict, and of Saakashvili's regime as such. In effect, it would likely turn into the regime's suicide. Thus, the "offense-defence balance"⁴⁰ seems inclined toward the latter, and any invasion scenario, while not unfathomable, would be the product of irrational decision. The increase of defensive capability, at the same time, may however function as a deterrent for lower-intensity violent conflict scenarios – most likely under the present conditions as Russia also may want to avoid becoming involved in a full-scale war – and thus effectively improve Georgia's position.

³⁵ Strachota, Krzysztof and Bartuzi, Wojciech, „Reintegration or Conquest“, Warsaw, Centre for Eastern Studies, 2008, pp. 58-81.

³⁶ For example, Georgia's Minister for Reintegration (the change of the ministry's name from Ministry for Conflict Resolution in 2008 caused substantial protests by the *de facto* governments) Temuri Yakobashvili claimed on May 28, 2008 that Tbilisi would favour a joint police operation of Georgian and Abkhaz units "trained and managed by an international police force" composed of European states (Civil.ge, 28 May 2008). While Russia securitizes the situation in which CIS peacekeeping contingent leaves Abkhazia, as when the Russian Foreign Ministry warned that withdrawal of the CIS peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia would result in "defrosting the conflict" and spillover of violence around the South Caucasus (Quoted by Kavkaz-uzel.ru, 17 June 2008, <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/newstext/engnews/id/1223404.html>), it is increasingly the opinion of other actors that the mission's contribution is questionable.

³⁷ However, the post-conflict reconstruction activities are advanced by Georgia and Russia to support their respective agents, i.e. administrations competing for power and legitimacy in South Ossetia.

³⁸ Strachota and Bartuzi, op.cit. 80.

³⁹ „Georgia and Abkhazia“, op.cit. 8-9.

⁴⁰ Cf. Van Evera, Stephen, "Offense, Defense, and the causes of war“, in: *International Security*, vol. 22, Spring 1998, pp. 5-43.

Tbilisi has utilized this new position, together with increased legitimacy of the regime in Europe and the U.S., mainly for changing the format of the peace process. Therefore, it acts as a "revolutionary" actor which attempts to alter the structural conditions which were the product of the situation after the war in 1992-1993, and thus confirm its strengthened position. At its conception, this structure reflected the interests of each of the (then) main actors – while Georgia conceded to *de facto* sovereignty of Abkhazia when consumed by internal *stasis* (and thus retained at least sovereignty *de iure*), Abkhazia gained substantial effective self-determination, and Russia retained, through pressure that could be exerted against the newly independent states through the separatist republics (including Nagorno Karabakh), at least some of its former influence in the South Caucasus.⁴¹ For each side, however, this was not an optimal outcome of the game. Now it is Georgia that tries to change the equilibrium. Although it has not yet succeeded in modifying the peace process format by including other actors in the peacekeeping operations or negotiations, it has however effectively contributed to the existing impasse, as Tbilisi's *only* interest in this area seems to be to change the structure, rather than to work on a peaceful settlement within its frame.

Abkhazia is excluded from the scheme of triangular relations which are suggested as presently defining the conflict. The Abkhaz seem increasingly aware of the situation in which their *de facto* government continues to be supported by Moscow, yet the Kremlin seems unlikely to bring forward the optimal outcome, i.e. recognize their independence. Instead, they are being used by Russia in a global game that transcends their limited, telluric interests (striving for recognition of their independence), while Russian capital has been devouring attractive Abkhaz assets. Moreover, the likelihood of renewed violent conflict on the territory of Abkhazia grows as the crisis deepens. On the micro level, their situation can be compared to Mingrelians who returned to Gali and now suffer from the irreconcilable demands by the *de facto* Abkhaz authorities which exert control over the territory and Georgia's authorities which require their continuous allegiance.

Identities, Interests and Alternatives

The recent reports by ICG and Ośrodek Studiów Wschodni propose a variety of measures for facilitating a future conflict resolution. They encompass refraining from hostilities, endemic rhetoric and undermining Georgia's sovereignty, enactment of CBMs, easing the blockade of Abkhazia and employing the NATO-Russia Council to mitigate Russia's concerns about NATO expansion;⁴² or focusing on the peace process instead of Georgia's NATO membership aspirations.⁴³ While not contesting the sensibility of these recommendations, I suggest that these represent measures of the "second order". At the crossroads where the conflict in Abkhazia now stands, the questions of the "first order" are those of identities and interests of the four major

⁴¹ „Strachota and Bartuzi“, op.cit. 53.

⁴² „Georgia and Abkhazia“, executive summary.

⁴³ „Strachota and Bartuzi“, op.cit. 83.

actors – Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia and the "West" represented mainly by EU, NATO and the U.S.

Two of these actors (Georgia and Abkhazia) are presently not content with the game outcome. Tbilisi actively attempts to establish a new one. The interests of the third actor, Russia, to preserve influence in the South Caucasus, are arguably founded on an unstable basis, given the lack of her "soft power" and consequent reliance on threats, blackmail and regime subversion. The interests of the fourth remained peripheral (U.S.) or undefined (EU), with a most obvious lack of consensus among the Western states on the role (identity) they should assume in the South Caucasus, and consequently poorly defined interests.⁴⁴ That said, the "West" – willingly or not – is part of the equation by virtue of its relations with Georgia on the regional level, and Russia on the global one.

The search for a new equilibrium in the Abkhazia conflict, one that would be an optimal outcome for the involved actors, will require rethinking the mutually constitutive roles (identities) and interests they want to assume with respect to the conflict, or the entire South Caucasus. For Georgia and Abkhazia, this may involve resigning the discourse of sovereignty that has proven thoroughly detrimental and weakened them in respect to an external power (Russia), as much as the dissemination of the discourses of danger and dehumanizing narratives of the Other. The political elites could find (and they partially do, as Saakashvili's administration shows) the elimination of the corrupt "pathological state" with its networks of organised crime and state weakness as a way to harness popular support, instead of the symbolic discourses of "independence" and "restoring territorial integrity" and point the vision of their populaces to the positive "normal states" of a liberal state, prosperity and regional integration to face the challenges of the global economy.⁴⁵ For Russia, it may mean pondering whether "soft power" and consent are not more effective founding stones of lasting influence, and whether a continuation of the current policy may ultimately not lead to the loss of control even, for example, in a substantial part of the North Caucasus. Finally, for NATO, EU and the U.S. after the Presidential election in November, it should involve first and foremost the very definition of their interests in the region (perhaps defined by energy security concerns and framed by the vision of limited rivalry instead of the Utopian project of a global security community) in whose fate they are – some without realizing it – implicated, and recognize their "soft power" potential.

⁴⁴ This is not to say that EU or NATO are absent from the South Caucasus, or that they, at least on the rhetorical level, do not show interest in it (cf. the latest *U.S.-EU Summit Declaration*, 10 June 2008, http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/Press_Releases/June/0610EU_USA_Declaration.html . For example, EU signed Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Georgia in 1999, and later hesitantly included the newly independent countries of the South Caucasus into the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), utilizing since then ENPI instrument to channel assistance to them. Yet, it has been accused of working "around the conflicts" and apparent lack of consensus obtains there, as much as in NATO, with some member countries (Lithuania, Poland, Sweden) more sincerely interested in the region, as manifested e.g. by the proposed project of EU Eastern Partnership, than others. The EU's policy towards Georgia is summarized at http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/georgia/eu_georgia_summary/index_en.htm

⁴⁵ Cf. Friedman, Thomas, „The Lexus and the Olive Tree“, New York, 2000.

The challenges of establishing this new equilibrium are immense. Identities and consequently interests, albeit "mere" ideas, prove very durable and unmalleable,⁴⁶ and the problem of consensus does not obtain only in the EU and NATO, but also in the Kremlin corridors, among the ruling elite in Tbilisi and in Abkhazia, where the Abkhaz negotiate from the position of mere plurality.⁴⁷ Yet it remains to hope that the only peace is not the "perpetual " (i.e. eternal) one described, with the seed of – often unrecognized or disregarded – irony, by Immanuel Kant.

An alternative to the redefinition of identities of the main actors, as the fundamental condition of establishing a new equilibrium in the conflict, is the Neofunctionalist formula of proceeding from below instead. The spillover of common interests at the non-governmental "bottom" has indeed proven an effective mechanism of identity transformation in post-WWII Europe. Yet it is a subject to debate whether this liberal project can flourish in an environment deeply penetrated by the essentially realist discourses of sovereignty, state, danger and power which the South Caucasus presently is. Identities and interests are mutually constitutive, and this venue of transformation should not be neglected. But at the present point, the fundamental change in identity may have to come from above, from the political elites reacting to domestic and international incitements and pressures.

Conclusion

The present crisis in the relations between major actors involved in the Abkhazia conflict demonstrates the need to search for a new equilibrium. This equilibrium may be found only by answering "first order" questions by the actors of their identity and interests. It remains to be seen whether at the end of the journey to the heart of darkness there is Conrad's "The horror! The horror!", or instead a "new thinking".

⁴⁶ Cf. Wendt, Alexander, „Social Theory of International Politics“, Cambridge, 1999

⁴⁷ Identity, Campbell claims, is after all "a negation of multiplicity." Campbell, David, „National Deconstruction“, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 20.