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TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONFLICT FIELD IN ABKHAZIA: CONTEMPORARY POLITICS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract. Since the Soviet Union disintegration, the South Caucasus has become one of volatile parts in Eurasia. Although now it has found itself in the shadow of Ukraine, the events of 2020–2023 in Nagorno-Karabakh attracted political as well scholarly attention to this region. Today we observe the shaping of the new South Caucasus regional order, when some familiar alliances are experiencing crises, while others, on the contrary, are significantly strengthening. Against this background, the situation in Abkhazia looks, at first glance, static. However, it cannot be treated as a breakthrough in the conflict resolution. Until now, this partly recognized entity represents a set of contradictions and collisions. While the Georgian influence is not so serious, the growing impact of the Russian economic and military assistance has established a dilemma between the national self-determination and deepening integration with Russia. This situation of apparent stability opens up a good opportunity to study the conflict dynamics in Abkhazia through the prism of new approaches. The Abkhazian case is well-studied in the schorarly literature and therefore discovery of new research niches is a difficult task to implement. At the same time, the vast majority of scientific works are distributed across various disciplinary areas (history, ethnology and ethnopolitical science, international relations and international law) or focus on narrow chronological periods. Hence the formation of a research phenomenon, defined as the predominance of "detailing" over the "system", empirics over generalizations and synthesis. This article proposes a new approach to considering the genesis and dynamics of conflicts in Abkhazia. In accordance with the theoretical approaches of P. Bourdieu, the author examines the Abkhaz case as a conflict field. It is studied as interaction, competition, and confrontation among various players from the mid-19th to the first quarter of the 21st centuries.

Keywords: conflict field, Abkhazia, Russia, Georgia, frontier, nationalism, identity, South Caucasus, self-determination.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ КОНФЛИКТНОГО ПОЛЯ В АБХАЗИИ: СОВРЕМЕННАЯ ПОЛИТИКА И ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ КОНТЕКСТ

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Аннотация. В статье предлагается новый подход к рассмотрению генезиса и динамики конфликтов в Абхазии. В соответствии с теоретическими построениями П. Бурдье автор исследует абхазский кейс как конфликтное поле. Оно представлено в виде взаимодействия, конкуренции и конфронтации различных игроков с середины XIX до первой четверти XXI в. По мнению автора, конфликтное поле в Абхазии не тождественно грузино-абхазскому противостоянию времен советского распада, дезинтеграции Российской империи или конфронтации между РФ и Западом за доминирование на Южном Кавказе. В формировании абхазского конфликтного поля автор выделяет несколько поворотных моментов. Они связаны с радикальной реконфигурацией регионального порядка, изменением этнодемографического баланса, национальным самоопределением и конкуренцией различных государственных проектов за доминирование на абхазской территории. В статье прослеживаются взаимосвязи между изменением регионального порядка в Кавказском регионе в середине – второй половине XIX столетия, грузино-абхазским этнополитическим конфликтом и развитием Абхазии как частично признанного образования под российским военно-политическим патронажем.

Ключевые слова: конфликтное поле, Абхазия, Россия, Грузия, национализм, сецессия, махаджирство, идентичность, Южный Кавказ, самоопределение.

CAUCASIAN TURBULENCE AND ABKHAZIAN CONFLICT DYNAMICS

During the last years of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus became one of the most turbulent and insecure regions in Eurasia. Most of the conflicts associated with the disintegration of the once-unified state took place in the Caucasus region [1]. An unprecedented number of *de facto* entities also emerged here; until 2014, the South Caucasus accounted for more than half of the post-Soviet republics with "problematic" sovereignty. The Caucasian ethnopolitical dynamics in many respects have set the pattern for other regions of the former USSR. Conflicts in different areas of the South Caucasus have clearly shown that the division of the "Soviet heritage" based on the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, i. e. demarcation in strict compliance with the borders of the Union republics, is difficult to put into practice. It was in the Caucasus region that the precedent of international legitimization of former Soviet autonomous entities was set [2]. Subsequently, however, another precedent was established here – the elimination of the secessionist (irredentist) project and the successful restoration of the territorial integrity of the state [3].

The turbulence in the South Caucasus provoked the active involvement of external actors in regional processes [4]. At the same time, the internationalization of the conflicts taking place in this region was not confined to a local remake of the Cold War in the form of a confrontation between Russia and the West. Turkey, Iran, China, India, and other actors also highlighted their interests in the Caucasus, which were not always in line with the approaches of Moscow, Washington, and Brussels. Although in 2014 the Caucasus region was overshadowed by the situation in Ukraine with the beginning of the armed confrontation in Donbass, the events of 2020–2023 in Nagorno-Karabakh again increased its international importance. Currently, the region is undergoing the establishment of a new status quo, marked by crises in certain established alliances (such as Russia–Armenia and NATO–Georgia) while others, like Turkey–Azerbaijan, are gaining strength [5].

In this context, the situation in and around Abkhazia appears at first glance to be static. After Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence on August 26, 2008, and the republic's elites and population received credible guarantees of security and economic recovery from Moscow, the influence of the Russian Federation in the region has significantly strengthened. Official Tbilisi refused to put into practice the ideas of revenge, i. e. "restoration of territorial integrity" by military operations. The West, although it did not recognize the "new normal", in fact, agreed with Abkhazian "specificity". The Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia was de facto suspended long before the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. Thus, the military and political balance of power established in this part of the Caucasus in 2008 was essentially "cemented".

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to identify the current Abkhazian stability with a full-fledged peaceful settlement. First, Georgia does not regard the status of Abkhazia as a settled issue that has been definitively resolved against its interests. Second, Tbilisi's claims are still supported by the vast majority of UN member states, including not only countries labeled "unfriendly" by Russian authorities but also key Moscow partners such as China, India, and Iran. Third, the diversification of Georgia's foreign policy course and Tbilisi's refusal to "open a second front" against Moscow in the context of the growing confrontation between Russia and the West leave certain opportunities for Georgian-Russian normalization. Especially since Moscow, after several years of almost complete "freezing" of bilateral relations, decided to lift visa requirements for Georgian citizens, restore direct air travel, and remove Georgia from the list of countries not recommended for visits.

If the Georgian-Russian "détente" gathers momentum, the issue of determining Abkhazia's status will unavoidably become a priority topic in the dialog between Moscow and Tbilisi, and later, possibly, between Russia and the West. As a consequence, the issue of a possible geopolitical "deal" between Russia and Georgia at the expense of Abkhazia for the purpose of strengthening Moscow's position in the South Caucasus may become relevant.

Nevertheless, conflict resolution in Abkhazia cannot be confined to the format of Russian-Georgian relations, as well as to "big geopolitics".

Within the Abkhazian society and political community, one can observe serious reprioritization. Public discussion there is no longer focused on the struggle for self-determination from Georgia, but on the "price paid" for building an asymmetric strategic alliance between Russia and Abkhazia. The issues of Russia's access to Abkhazian resources, development and adoption of political and managerial decisions on issues of shared interests, and the equality of allies are the focus of attention. Within the framework of this discussion, historical issues (Abkhazia's entry into the Russian state, the Lykhny ("strange") uprising of 1866, and Muhajirs) are also interpreted in a new way. At the same time, interest in them is determined not so much by academics as by social and political reasons. The current ethnodemographic problems are primarily interpreted as long-lasting negative consequences of the Caucasian War and many years of Russian-Turkish confrontation in the region [6].

Currently, there is no competition over "geopolitical projects" within Abkhazia's establishment – both government and opposition – and a pro-Russian orientation unites even the most irreconcilable rivals, such as President Bzhania and his predecessor Khajimba. However, the relationship between Russia and Abkhazia is not without complexities. These tensions primarily arise in the search for optimal models of the republic's post-conflict development and encompass a wide range of issues, including dual citizenship and Russian access to Abkhazian land ownership [7].

In this context, it is highly relevant to develop a new explanatory model of the conflict dynamics in Abkhazia. Such a model should extend beyond the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, encompassing the broader historical timeline from the mid-19th century to the present day.

Large-scale socio-political transformations in the late Soviet Union intensified the controversy concerning the national-state self-determination of the Georgian SSR and aggravated contradictions between the leadership of Georgia and Abkhazia, the union center and Tbilisi. The disintegration of the unified state actually left the Georgian and Abkhaz sides "one-on-one" without a moderator represented by the central government, which for many years ensured a fragile status quo in the region. In the meantime, the key issues of the conflict agenda – such as language and resettlement policies, ethnic representation in governance, and the legal status of the autonomous entity within the union republic – were shaped long before Gorbachev's perestroika, as evidenced by regular gatherings, protests, and signature campaigns that took place in the 1930s-1970s in Sukhumi, Tbilisi, and other settlements of the Abkhaz ASSR and the Georgian SSR [8]. However, these contradictions had been brewing for years. The discourses surrounding radically opposing visions of an "ideal" Abkhazia began to take shape as early as the early 20th century. Revolutionary turmoil in the Russian Empire followed by its disintegration, escalated latent conflicts into open armed struggles for ethno-national self-determination.

However, these discourses did not emerge in a vacuum. They were significantly shaped by the end of the Russian-Ottoman rivalry for control of the Caucasus and the integration of the Principality of Abkhazia into the Russian state. Between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, Abkhazia's ethnic composition underwent substantial changes [9]. With the disintegration of the Russian Empire – an arbiter in inter-ethnic disputes, much like the USSR would later be – existing tensions escalated into open conflict. The "Sovietization" of the South Caucasus subsequently established a new "general demarcation" in the region, which maintained a political-legal and military-political status quo for nearly seven decades. However, this balance of power did not satisfy all parties. With the weakening and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, these latent problems and contradictions resurfaced and became increasingly apparent.

Thus, it appears necessary to trace the interrelation between the geopolitical reconfiguration of the Caucasus in the second half of the 19th century, the different stages of the Georgian-Abkhazian ethnopolitical conflict in the periods of imperial and Soviet disintegrations, and the modern stage of Abkhazia's national-state self-determination under the auspices of Russia. The main research question of this paper can be formulated as follows: **How and why did interstate and interethnic confrontations in modern Abkhazia – differing in nature, origin, intensity, and composition of par-**

ticipants – converge to form a common conflict field? Addressing this question will provide a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics of the Abkhazian situation in comparison to other conflicts in the South Caucasus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND BASIC CATEGORIES OF THE STUDY

The political history of Abkhazia and the ongoing developments in the partially recognized republic have been the subject of extensive academic historiography, alongside numerous expert and analytical reports. At first glance, these issues appear thoroughly explored, making the identification of new research niches a challenging task. However, the majority of scholarly works on Abkhazia are fragmented across various disciplines, such as history, ethnology and ethnopolitics, international relations, and international law, or focus narrowly on specific chronological periods. This has led to a research phenomenon that the American conflict resolution expert J. David Singer (1925–2009) described as the predominance of "detailing" over "system," and empiricism over generalization and synthesis [10].

One can distinguish a number of fundamental historical studies dedicated to the incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian state, the genesis of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, and the Soviet national policy in the Georgian SSR and the Abkhaz ASSR [8, 11, 12, 13]. The collective academic monograph "Abkhazians", specifically devoted to the ethnic history of this nation and ethnopolitical processes on the territory of modern Abkhazia [14], deserves special attention. A separate body of works is devoted to the genesis of post-Soviet Abkhazian de facto statehood, prospects of its international legitimization, as well as the impact of external forces on internal political processes in Abkhazia in the period from 1991 to the present day [15, 16, 17, 18]. Consequently, the study of conflict dynamics in Abkhazia requires interdisciplinary systematization and overcoming the chronological and discipline-specific barriers that have been formed in scientific literature.

The present study relies on the field theory proposed by the French thinker Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) in his studies on the sociology of politics and culture. He suggested viewing the social world as a multidimensional space. In this case, each of its dimensions, economic, political, and cultural, according to the scientist, can be represented as a certain field of interacting players, as a special place of relations and "struggle aimed at the transformation of these relations, and therefore a place of continuous change". The structure of the field, according to Bourdieu, is a balance of forces "between the subjects involved in the struggle" [19, p. 75].

The working hypothesis of this paper relies on the assumption that the conflict field in Abkhazia is not identical to the Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation during the disintegration of the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. Certainly, it also should not be interpreted as a fragment of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. The Abkhazian conflict field emerged earlier than nationalist discourse gained a foothold in the Caucasus; its origins should be sought in the struggle of the two largest empires of Eurasia – the Ottoman and Russian Empires – for dominance in the Black Sea region. It was then that many problematic knots took shape that still remain relevant today.

Thus, any discussion regarding the Abkhazian national and foreign policy identity today is built around the issues of ethno-demographic security. This underpins the alarmism often referred to as the "curse of eighteen percent" inherent in many statements. According to the last All-Union census of 1989, ethnic Abkhazians constituted approximately 18 % of the total population of the Abkhaz ASSR within the Georgian SSR. The roots of this issue are closely linked to changes in Abkhazia's ethnic composition following key historical events: the abolition of the Principality of Abkhazia in 1864, the Lykhny uprising of 1866, and the initiation of active settlement and economic development in the region. These processes, both individually and collectively, contributed to the consolidation of irreconcilable nationalist narratives and competing ideas of collective ethnic ownership over what is considered their "own Abkhazia" [8, 9, 14, 16].

Consequently, the conflict landscape in Abkhazia is broader than it might initially appear, encom-

passing a diverse range of actors and numerous disputes, contradictions, and confrontations. At certain points, these different lines of conflict intersect and overlap. Conflicts that originated in one historical epoch – shaped by a specific set of issues, opponents, and allies – often exert a direct or indirect influence on the genesis of subsequent conflicts.

Five key turning points can be identified in the formation of Abkhazia's conflict field. The first was the end of Ottoman domination in the Caucasus and the establishment of Russian hegemony, which facilitated Abkhazia's incorporation into the Russian state. The second was the collapse of the Russian Empire, accompanied by the emergence of the first Transcaucasian nation-states and conflicts over ethno-national self-determination. The third was the process of Sovietization, which paradoxically combined both internationalist and nationalizing practices. The fourth was the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of independent nation-states from its ruins. A central issue during this period was the question of the limits of self-determination: should it be confined to the principle of *uti possidetis juris* (respecting existing borders), or should it extend beyond the former Soviet republics to include autonomous entities. The fifth turning point was Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence, introducing a new dilemma: whether Abkhazia should defend its distinct national statehood under Moscow's auspices or move toward gradual integration into the Russian Federation.

The history of the conflict field in Abkhazia reflects a continuous shift in state sovereignties over the disputed territory, along with changes in statuses, loyalties, identities, and political alliances. For instance, while the Russian Empire regarded the Abkhazians as a "guilty people" and viewed the Georgian nobility and settlers as allies and agents of its influence, modern Russia sees Abkhazia as a strategic partner. However, Moscow-Sukhumi relations throughout the post-Soviet period have been far from stable, experiencing fluctuations influenced by at least three key factors: security concerns within Russia's North Caucasian republics, the dynamics of Russia's relations with Georgia, and its interactions with the West [17, 20].

The territory of Abkhazia has never been merely an arena for rivalry among external powers. Abkhazian state entities, which have taken various forms over time – such as the Principality of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz ASSR, the de facto independent Republic of Abkhazia without recognition, and the partially recognized state with disputed sovereignty – have consistently asserted their own subjectivity and defended it through diverse political-legal and military-political means.

The existence of a stable conflict field in Abkhazia has been evident for the past century and a half. Over time, the country's ethnic composition has changed, some actors and conflicting parties have disappeared while new ones have emerged, and different disputes and confrontations have arisen. However, newly emerging conflicts are often rooted in unresolved issues and unaddressed ethnic and national traumas from the past. As a result, rather than resolving old conflicts, they tend to transform and persist in new forms. For many years, this conflict interaction has occurred in the absence of clearly defined state borders that are accepted by all involved parties.

BETWEEN THE IMPERIAL BREAKUPS AND THE SOVIET COLLAPSE

The present study identifies the 1860s as the starting point for the formation of the conflict field in Abkhazia. During this period, significant geopolitical reconfigurations occurred in the Caucasus, shaping the region's development for decades to come. The three-century dominance of the Ottoman Empire ended, giving way to Russian hegemony. Following the conclusion of the Caucasus War – despite its heavy toll – the Russian Empire succeeded in consolidating its authority over both the North and South Caucasus.

For the first time in history, Abkhazian elites and Abkhazian people came under Russian sovereignty. In the mid-1860s, "the territory of modern Abkhazia (with Samurzakano and Sukhum)" was formed [21, p. 399]. Since then, the role of Russia, in its various state forms, has been a key determinant in the trajectory of Abkhazia and its people. However, at different stages, Russian-Abkhazian relations have been described as "very uneasy

and sometimes ambiguous" [7, p. 451]. Russia's actions – ranging from the suppression of rebellions and the imposition of sanctions to military-political support and the recognition of national independence – have been pivotal in shaping Abkhazia's fate.

During the 1860s and 1870s, a radical shift in the ethno-demographic situation took place, profoundly influencing the formation of the Abkhazian conflict field. Approximately 80,000 ethnic Abkhazians left their historic homeland during this period [12; 21, pp. 402-403]. Within the Abkhazian national historical-political narrative, the emotional and psychological impact of these events is perhaps comparable only to the armed conflict with Georgia in 1992–1993.

Throughout the Soviet period, the tragedy of Muhajirs was a subject of constant reflection for both the Abkhazian party elite and the intelligentsia. Even the charismatic first chairman of the Abkhazian Council of People's Commissars, N.A. Lakoba (1893–1936), addressed this topic. Public appeals from republican intellectuals to Moscow in 1977 and 1988 repeatedly raised the "Muhajir issue," often alongside criticism of "Georgian chauvinism" [18, pp. 160-188]. In March 1993, even before the armed conflict with Georgia had concluded and Sukhumi had been liberated from Georgian forces, the Abkhazian State Committee for Repatriation was established. While both pro-government and opposition Abkhazian political elites today regard Russia as a strategic ally and discuss potential accession to the Union State of the Russian Federation and Belarus at the highest levels, Abkhazians continue to observe the Day of Remembrance of Victims of the Caucasian War annually on May 21. Although the repatriation of Abkhazians, descendants of Muhajirs, has not reached a significant scale in the post-Soviet period, the issue remains a relevant and politically significant subject.

The dramatic shift in the ethno-demographic balance in Abkhazia, coinciding with the abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire and the Caucasus, facilitated the resolution of land scarcity issues for Georgian peasants through resettlement to unoccupied territories. It is important to note that this study rejects the politicized nationalist narrative portraying Georgians as "outsiders" or "newcomers" in Abkhazia, which is not scientifically accurate. Georgians have long constituted a significant portion of the population, particularly in Samurzakano [21]. However, the Georgian settlement of Abkhazian lands during the late 19th and early 20th centuries exhibited several fundamental differences. Most notably, it occurred alongside the rising tide of nationalist sentiments among the Georgian nobility and intelligentsia. In contrast, the development of Abkhazian nationalism lagged behind for two primary reasons. Firstly, the social factor was significant: the Georgian population was more urbanized and had higher levels of education during this period. Secondly, the Tiflis and Kutaisi provinces – territorial foundations of the future Georgian state – had the highest proportion of nobility among all territories of the Russian Empire. Despite this, their economies did not generate sufficient income [8]. This economic strain heightened the relevance of Georgian "specificity" outside the framework of the imperial project.

By the early 20th century, three critical points of tension had emerged in the Abkhazian conflict field: the first between the Russian government and Abkhazians, the second between Georgians and Abkhazians, and the third between Russia and Georgia. Throughout much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Georgian elites served as key facilitators of Russian interests in the Caucasus. However, as nationalist sentiments grew within Georgian ranks, this dynamic began to shift. In the Abkhazian context, the imperial authorities adopted a contrasting approach, moving away from discriminatory measures in favor of integration – removing collective guilt from the Abkhazians and allowing them to serve in the military. Over time, these three points of contradiction either gained prominence, escalated into open conflicts, or evolved in a positive direction. Nevertheless, they have played a defining role in shaping the structure of the Abkhazian conflict field and continue to influence its dynamics to this day.

After the disintegration of the Russian Empire, the interests of the Georgian Democratic Republic, Soviet Russia, and the "white movement" led by General Denikin in the Russian South [13]

collided in Abkhazia. For the first time, Abkhazia became part of a national entity rather than an imperial project, where ethnic Abkhazians were not the "state-forming" people.

The Sovietization of the Caucasus brought significant transformations to the Abkhazian conflict field. On one hand, it led to the dissolution of the first national post-imperial state formations. On the other hand, it provided these entities with a new political life in the form of unions and autonomous republics within the USSR. In this new framework, Georgia was granted a higher status than Abkhazia, which lost its bid to become a separate subject of the Union.

The national policy of the Georgian Democratic Republic prompted the emergence of a unique form of Abkhazian nationalism, where the struggle for "own land" against the ambitions of "Georgian chauvinists" was intricately intertwined with appeals to "internationalism". This dynamic can be attributed to the absence of a strong external ally with whom the Abkhazian national movement could collaborate to pursue an irredentist project. Bolshevik Russia (and later the USSR), despite its many drawbacks, was perceived by Abkhazian intellectuals as a guarantor of their national identity's preservation within a republic shared with another "titular nation". Another paradox of Abkhazian nationalist discourse later emerged: a combination of "Russophilia"—manifested in repeated demands by Abkhazian elites from the 1930s to the 1980s to transfer the Abkhaz ASSR from Soviet Georgia to the RSFSR – and antagonism toward the policies of the Russian Empire [14, 15, 16, 18].

During the Soviet period, the Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation moved to the forefront of Abkhazia's conflict field. However, in the new socio-economic and political-legal reality, the ethno-demographic balance remained the most pressing issue. The national policy in the Georgian SSR, as well as the broader Soviet course at the all-union level, was not uniform. Instead, Soviet Georgia pursued general principles that were adapted to local specifics. In the 1920s and early 1930s, "indigenization" practices and efforts to accommodate the interests of smaller ethnic groups were prioritized. By contrast, from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, a trend toward unification became more pronounced. During this period in Abkhazia, the Abkhazian alphabet was converted to the Georgian script, and education in the Georgian language was introduced in Abkhazian schools. Additionally, there were significant toponymic changes, the "Georgianization" of memory policy – exemplified by the influential work of philologist and historian P.I. Ingorokva (1893–1983) on the ethnogenesis of the Abkhazians – and the mass resettlement of Georgians from regions of "core Georgia" [8, 14].

It is important to note that not all actions by the Georgian authorities during this period were purely nationalizing practices. In many cases – particularly in matters of industrialization and agricultural development – they were motivated by economic considerations, primarily the acute shortage of manpower [8]. However, when combined with discriminatory measures in language, memory policy, and education, these actions had a compounding effect. As a result, attempts to mitigate such policies during the "thaw" and "stagnation" periods – when the "excesses" in the handling of the "Abkhazian issue" were officially acknowledged – were insufficient to reverse negative trends. The demographic shifts highlight the extent of political radicalization within the two communities: from 1801 to 1989, the share of Abkhazians fell from 80% to 18%, despite their population increasing from 60,000 to 93,000. Meanwhile, the Georgian population grew from 20% to 46% by the time of the Soviet Union's disintegration [9; 21, p. 402]. The negative demographic trends for Abkhazians that began in the pre-revolutionary period persisted throughout Soviet times.

CONFLICT FIELD AND DILEMMAS OF SELF-DETERMINATION

The disintegration of the Soviet Union marked a new turning point in the transformation of the Abkhazian conflict field. Unified sovereignty over the South and North Caucasus was disrupted, and national self-determination unfolded along lines that did not align with the boundaries established during the Soviet era. This was true not only for Georgia but also for Russia. Ethno-terri-

torial separatism within the Russian Federation emerged as a critical factor shaping Russia's approach to the Caucasus region as a whole and to Abkhazia in particular.

The primary conflict trend in post-Soviet Abkhazia was the confrontation between the newly independent Georgian state and the Abkhazian movement, which sought to achieve secession using the power structures of the former autonomy. Over time, the secessionist entity evolved into a stable *de facto* state that endured multiple challenges, from sanctions to attempts at forcibly "unfreezing" the conflict, and even gained limited international recognition. Meanwhile, post-Soviet Georgia underwent a challenging journey from near insolvency to internal stabilization, albeit without the "encumbrance" of its rebellious regions.

As a result of the armed confrontation in the early 1990s, the Abkhazian national movement achieved, for the first time in a century and a half, a favorable ethno-demographic balance for the "titular nation." However, Georgia and its allied states are unwilling to acknowledge this reality, perceiving it as an ethnocratic manifestation. Tbilisi continues to demand the return of refugees and internally displaced persons of Georgian nationality to their pre-war places of residence [14, 15, 21].

Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence in August 2008 brought Moscow's "revisionism" to the forefront of discussions about the post-Soviet Caucasus, highlighting the complexity and ambivalence of Russia's actions in the Abkhazian context during the 1990s and early 2000s. It is important to note that both Sukhumi (and, in 1992–1993, Gudauta) and Moscow had to overcome significant mutual distrust and fears over time. By the time of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the Abkhazian movement viewed the Russian leadership as unwilling to mediate relations with Tbilisi in the same way the Soviet central authorities once did. This perception was shaped by the intense conflict between the USSR and RSFSR leadership in 1990–1991. Consequently, Sukhumi focused on strengthening ties with the North Caucasian national movement within the framework of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. Conversely, the Russian Federation prioritized mitigating the negative effects of the Soviet Union's collapse by recognizing the "Belovezh" realities – demarcation based on the principle of *uti possidetis juris* – and therefore acknowledging Georgia within the borders of the Georgian SSR.

These dynamics resulted in Moscow's "multipolar" policy toward both Georgia and Abkhazia, characterized by support for Tbilisi from the Russian executive branch and pro-Abkhazian sentiments within the parliamentary corps and military ranks [22, p. 209]. These trends largely influenced the imposition of Russian sanctions on Abkhazia (introduced *de facto* in December 1994 and *de jure* in January 1996, with the last restrictions lifted only in the spring of 2008) as well as diplomatic efforts to pressure Sukhumi into integrating with the Georgian state under special terms. In this context, the "common state" project proposed in 1997 is particularly noteworthy, though it was never implemented in practice.

By the early 2000s, Russian policy in the region had undergone significant changes. First, stabilization in the North Caucasus played a key role; the suppression of separatist threats within Russia gave Moscow greater freedom to act along its external borders. Second, Georgia's increasing alignment with the West – sharply intensified after Tbilisi's unsuccessful attempts to alter the status quo in Abkhazia by military means in the spring and summer of 1998-also influenced the situation. These shifts contributed to a notable transformation of the Abkhazian conflict field. Georgia's efforts to restore "territorial integrity" within the 1989 borders of the Georgian SSR, relying on external actors such as the U.S., NATO, and the European Union, ultimately strengthened the alliance between Russia and the two *de facto* republics that had survived the armed conflicts of the 1990s. Without direct Western intervention in these conflicts, Tbilisi stood little chance of success in a one-on-one confrontation with Moscow. As a result, Georgia's attempts to "unfreeze" the conflict with Abkhazia in 2001 and again in 2006–2008 did not bolster its position but instead further weakened its standing in the Abkhazian conflict field.

Moscow's decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) was delayed for several years, even after it became evident that

Georgia was deepening its ties with NATO and the EU, pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration as its strategic goal rather than Eurasian alignment. In many ways, this recognition became a "last argument of kings," prompted by Tbilisi's decision to accelerate its efforts of "gathering of lands" by military means.

Moscow's actions significantly restructured the Abkhazian conflict field, shifting the focus from elements of armed confrontation to political-legal, political-economic, and diplomatic issues. The prospect of Georgia seeking military revenge became irrelevant. Moreover, albeit in a limited form, the process of Abkhazia's international legitimization began. However, this development posed difficult dilemmas for Russia. If the recognition process gained renewed momentum, Russia risked losing its position as Abkhazia's exclusive ally and military-political patron. This would force Moscow to compete with alternative proposals presented to the Abkhazian side. Consequently, significant skepticism emerged toward initiatives like the European Union's or Georgia's concept of "involvement without recognition".

After 2008, background factors began to play a significant role in shaping the Abkhazian conflict field. The situation along the borders with Georgia stabilized, eliminating any substantial threat. Russia's military-political presence in Abkhazia, along with the republic's economic recovery, served as reliable guarantees against revising the status quo. However, the intensifying confrontation between Russia and the West, coupled with the Ukrainian crisis, deepened Abkhazia's ties with Moscow. This development made Abkhazia far more dependent on Russia than it had been before its recognition [23].

At first glance, such conclusions appear to have some merit. Over the past decade and a half, Russia has significantly expanded its presence in Abkhazia, not only in the military-political sphere but also in the socio-economic domain. Russia also acts as a mediator during internal crises and confrontations. However, a closer examination reveals that Abkhazia retains a notable degree of political independence. For instance, the issue of granting Russian citizens access to Abkhazian real estate remains unresolved. Additionally, citizenship of the republic is not automatically extended to Russians unless they are of Abkhazian (Abaza) ethnicity. It is also worth noting that any document concerning bilateral relations between Russia and Abkhazia undergoes active public and political scrutiny. Such agreements are often subjected to numerous amendments and adjustments.

In 2023–2024, some of the most contentious debates among Abkhazian society and political elites centered around the draft laws "On Non-Profit Organizations and Individuals Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents," "On the Regulation of the Legal Status of Apart-Hotels and Apartments," and the Russian-Abkhazian agreement on investments. The second of these proposals was even withdrawn from parliament "to reduce tension and maintain stability in the republic."

Under the new circumstances, the "perennial issue" of the Abkhazian conflict field – how to achieve and maintain an ideal ethno-demographic balance – has once again become highly relevant. The "echo" of the 1860s and 1990s in the current political context is more than a metaphor. Critics of the authorities' proposals argue that the ongoing presence of external economic players in the republic creates numerous loopholes, allowing them to obtain Abkhazian passports and influence local affairs. Additionally, the concept of "creeping Georgianization" has been raised, with concerns that Russian citizens of Georgian nationality could participate in Abkhazian social and economic life and subsequently assert political influence.

The proposed law on apartments and apart-hotels reflects broader socio-economic trends in post-Soviet Abkhazia, signaling a transformation of its established structure. Given the limited international recognition of the republic, its "opening" would effectively enhance Russia's presence and Moscow's influence over internal Abkhazian affairs, posing complex dilemmas. Isolation and closure, without external (primarily Russian) investments, would only entrench Abkhazia's economic stagnation, leaving little hope for broader recognition while increasing the risks of state insolvency. Conversely, a policy of "open doors," pursued without careful consideration of the local political community and the broader Abkhazian societal context, presents its own significant threats.

CONCLUSIONS

The Abkhazian conflict field is defined by a complex interweaving and layering of pressing issues, disputes, and confrontations from both the recent and distant past. While the attention of politicians and experts over the last three decades has largely centered on the events surrounding the Soviet collapse and its aftermath, it is insufficient to confine the conflict field to the 1992–1993 armed confrontation between Abkhazia and Georgia or to Russia's recognition of Abkhazian independence.

The fundamental conflict knots that remain relevant today began to take shape in the mid-19th century when Russia established hegemony in the Caucasus and Abkhazia became part of the Russian state. Issues such as maintaining a favorable ethno-demographic balance, national self-determination, and the stark divergence of ethno-national projects have significantly shaped Abkhazia's political agenda over the past century and a half.

The Abkhazian conflict field has been marked by a constant shift in players, redefinitions of spheres of influence, and evolving priorities. While some issues gained relevance over time, others diminished in importance, yet a certain consistency in contradictions and confrontations has persisted. For example, the radical changes in Abkhazia's ethnic composition during the mid to late 19th century continue to resonate in the republic's current agenda, even after the partial recognition of its national independence and the establishment of guarantees for its security and rehabilitation. Over the past century and a half, Abkhazia has been a focal point where the divergent interests of empires, nation-states, non-state actors, and social movements have clashed. Periods of stability, when they occurred, were brief and achieved through intense confrontations rather than compromise. Although Abkhazia's situation may seem stable and predictable compared to other conflicts in the former Soviet Union, it is clearly premature to declare the conflict field fully resolved.

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