

MAINTAINING THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: RUSSIA'S GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS IN GEORGIA

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Abstract. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been fuelling frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus region in order to promote instability and force security dilemmas as part of its geopolitical strategy in the former Soviet republics, geared towards maintaining its control over the post-Soviet space. Throughout the post-Cold War period, Russia has been actively involved in stirring up conflicts in the South Caucasus, sustaining interstate tensions and unsolvable security dilemmas by supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan, and the secessionist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia against Georgia, resulting in diminished regional cooperation and curtailing Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia's geopolitical strategy often follows the principles of the Eurasianist ideology that has identified Russia as an alternative power to the West. Owing to that, Russia's geostrategic ambitions in the South Caucasus regard the region as a critical battlefield in the status conflict between Russia and the West, with Russia actively pursuing these strategic ambitions by keeping the region in a constant state of destabilization through interstate security dilemmas and frozen conflicts.

Keywords: *South Caucasus, conflicts in post-Soviet space, Russo-Georgian war of 2008, security dilemma*

1. Introduction

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the security environment in the South Caucasus became highly unstable, with numerous security dilemmas emerging in the region. For decades, many of these did not experience any progress towards peace and reconciliation. These regional armed conflicts were often accompanied by interethnic violence and ethnic cleansing. In the post-Cold War period, Russia has been actively involved in fuelling conflicts in the South Caucasus and has brought about a situation of persistent instability in the region by supporting, for example, Armenia against Azerbaijan, and the secessionist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia against Georgia. Conflicts between the South Caucasus nations have evolved into a major issue thwarting regional cooperation and hindering the development

of cooperative security mechanisms that could bring peace and stability to the region. What is more, interethnic violence has exacerbated the refugee problem because, as a result of armed conflicts, Azerbaijanis have fled from Nagorno-Karabakh, and Georgians from South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh War that ruined the relationship between neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out in the 1980s, during the final years of the Soviet Union, and quickly progressed into an interstate war in 1992. Although a ceasefire was established in 1994, there have been numerous instances of interstate tensions in subsequent years. In April of 2016, another military conflict, the Four-Day War, broke out between the Artsakh Defence Army, backed by Armenia, and the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. From 1991 onwards, there were several ethnic conflicts in Georgia that led to violent civil wars in the early 1990s. As a result of these civil wars, Abkhazia and South Ossetia proclaimed independent statehoods that were actively supported by Russia. After ceasefires were signed in 1992–1993, peacekeeping forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), comprising Russian units, were deployed along the administrative borders between these secessionist republics and Georgia. However, interethnic tensions and ceasefire violations flared up again in 2004, following the Rose Revolution in Georgia. The August War of 2008 between Georgia and Russia is a direct consequence of the conflicts originating in the 1990s.

Russia has had a long history of leveraging its influence over the South Caucasus. For centuries, Russia has competed with Turkey and Iran over domination of the region. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus became part of an intensifying status conflict between Russia and the West. The geopolitical aspirations of modern Russia include the re-establishment of spheres of influence in its neighbourhood, reminiscent of the Westphalian international system prevailing in the 19th and 20th centuries, while also aiming to maintain and even enhance its influence over the post-Soviet space by encouraging security dilemmas based on misperceptions that the former nations of the Soviet Union might harbour about each other. Indeed, by employing various methods from economic and cultural influence to power demonstration, Russia has been attempting to suppress the development of the South Caucasus republics and curtail their aspirations regarding Euro-Atlantic integration.

This paper argues that due to Russia's effective strategic interference in its regional matters, the South Caucasus has not been able to establish cooperative forms of security following the end of the Cold War, remaining stranded in an anarchical security order with multiple security dilemmas.

Sustaining these security dilemmas has become the prevalent strategic tool for Russia, used for the purposes of maintaining its control over the post-Soviet space. The most prominent of these post-Cold War security dilemmas are strategic predicaments between Russia and Georgia, which emerged after the Abkhazian war in 1992, and between Azerbaijan and Armenia after the Nagorno-Karabakh War. The unstable environment resulting from these unresolved security dilemmas could be considered the decisive factor that instigated the armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

2. Russia's Geostrategic Ambitions in the South Caucasus

The countries in the South Caucasus region are located in a geostrategically unique area, at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, serving as a strategic transit hub and offering excellent potential for their own economic development. This important gateway connects Europe with the economically prospective oil and gas rich areas of Central Asia and the Middle East through the Black Sea, the Azov Sea, and the Caspian Sea. Therefore, achieving control over the South Caucasus region has always been one of the priorities of Russian foreign and security policy.¹ Russia wields dominance in terms of its energy or military power and is intent on enhancing its influence in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan whenever possible by maintaining interstate relations in a state of constantly simmering tension in order to use this strategic corridor for controlling the Caspian hydrocarbon potential.² Despite the fact that Georgia is not rich in energy resources, it is endowed with a pivotal geostrategic location that can play a unique transit function and possesses great economic potential: 1.4% of the world's oil production flows through the Georgian territory via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa pipelines, originating from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, respectively. In addition, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline is another important transnational infrastructure running across Georgian territory.

¹ **Nation, R. C.** 2015. Russia and the Caucasus. – *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 14; No. 2, pp. 1–11. <<http://connections-qj.org/article/russia-and-caucasus>> (accessed June 1, 2018).

² **Nuriyev, E.** 2015. Russia, the EU and the South Caucasus: Forging an Efficient Over-Arching Cooperative Regional Security Scheme. – *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 51–63. <<http://connections-qj.org/article/russia-eu-and-south-caucasus-forging-efficient-over-arching-cooperative-regional-security>> (accessed June 1, 2018).

Owing to that, Russia considers the South Caucasus to be a strategically important transport corridor, offering significant economic benefits.³

Since the 1990s, Russia has been gradually establishing a new paradigm in its relationship with the former republics of the Soviet Union, often referring to the legacy of its imperial past.⁴ As the legitimate successor of the USSR, Russia considers the post-Soviet space as its legitimate sphere of influence and persistently lays claim to its special rights over the “near abroad”. Therefore, the colour revolutions in Georgia and in the Ukraine in the early 2000s were received painfully in Moscow because Russia viewed the consolidation of non-Russian national identities in the post-Soviet space as challenging the legitimacy of Russian influence in the former Soviet republics. Ultimately, these strategic developments led to the 2008 military intervention in Georgia because Russia’s political and security establishment was looking to “reverse the verdict on Russia’s imperial collapse”.⁵ The Kremlin perceives the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a devastating geopolitical catastrophe, upending the established world order from stable bipolarity and thrusting it into unstable multipolarity.

Consequently, Russia is striving to maintain the old balance of power system between the West and Russia’s sphere of influence, aspiring for similar hegemonic status as enjoyed by the United States, while unable to establish itself as the dominant super power.⁶ However, the ongoing status conflict between Russia and the West over the South Caucasus has led to practically unsolvable security dilemmas, which only serve to enhance instability in the region. Russia is inclined towards pursuing the status of a great power respected by other powers in a highly competitive security environment, and it does that by maintaining a sense of uncertainty that undermines regional development in the South Caucasus and the successful integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic system.

During Putin’s presidency, significant changes were introduced in Russian foreign policy, with Russia becoming more belligerent and contemptuous toward the West.⁷ At the same time, Putin’s foreign policy doctrine became

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ **Mankoff** 2009,

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁶ **Makarychev** 2014.

⁷ **Novikova, G.** 2015. The South Caucasus between Russia and the West: How Pragmatic are the Stakeholders’ Approaches. – *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 37–50.

increasingly influenced by the ideology of Eurasianism⁸, with its emphasis on re-establishing its right of control over the so-called “near abroad” as a legacy from the Soviet Union.⁹ For example, Vladislav Surkov, one of the Kremlin’s top strategists, talks about the objective of modernisation without Westernisation, which is closely linked to the concepts promoted by the Eurasianist movement.¹⁰ As a result, today’s Russia may be even more precarious and oriented towards offensive action in its neighbourhood.

Eurasianism, influenced by the Slavophile ideas of the 19th century, emerged in the 1920s among Russian emigrants and offers an alternative to Russia’s integration with the West. The ideology refers to Russia’s unique geostrategic position between Europe and Asia, pitting it against Western and Asian powers, including the United States, the European Union, China, and Japan. The key tenet of Eurasianism is that Russia does not belong to Western civilization as it is culturally closer to Asia than to Western Europe.¹¹ The resurgence of Eurasianism occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This school of thought was actively promoted by Russian political philosopher Alexandre Dugin, who has served as an adviser to Sergey Naryshkin, former Chairman of the Russian State Duma. Dugin¹² rejects what he calls Western hegemony and North-American expansionism, defining Eurasianism not only as a counter-movement to the West and Western liberalism, but also as an alternative to Russian westerners and modernists. Dugin’s ideology is based on the concept of permanent war and rivalry between competing civilizations, which sees no place for the

<<http://www.pfp-consortium.org/index.php/publications/connections-journal/item/201-the-south-caucasus-between-russia-and-the-west-how-pragmatic-are-the-stakeholders-approaches>> (accessed June 1, 2018).

⁸ **Danks, C.** 2013. *Politics Russia*. London and New York: Routledge.

⁹ **Makarychev, A.** 2014. *Russia and the EU in a Multipolar World: Discourses, Identities, Norms*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag. [Makarychev 2014]

¹⁰ **European Stability Initiative.** Alexander Dugin and Eurasianism.

<https://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=281&story_ID=26&slide_ID=9#_ftn25> (accessed June 7, 2018). [European Stability Initiative]

¹¹ **Johnson, M. R.** 2014. *Russian Nationalism and Eurasianism: The Ideology of Russian Regional Power and the Rejection of Western Values*. – Center for Syncretic Studies, 2 August. <<http://syncreticstudies.com/2014/08/02/russian-nationalism-and-urasianism-the-ideology-of-russian-regional-power-and-the-rejection-of-western-values/>> (accessed August 28, 2016).

¹² **Dugin, A.** 2014a. *Eurasia in the Netwar: Eurasian Networks in the Eve of 2015*. – Open Revolt, 17 December. <<http://openrevolt.info/2014/12/17/alexander-dugin-urasia-in-the-netwar-urasian-networks-in-the-eve-of-2015/>> (accessed February 15, 2015).

consolidation of the international community around the universal principles of human rights.

Nevertheless, although this ideology bears heavy influence on the conceptual foundation of Putin's regime, pursuing similar strategic goals, there are also obvious differences between Eurasianists and Russia's ruling political elite. Dugin has actually been critical of President Putin and his regime, describing Russia as a western liberal democracy. He writes:

*Russia is a liberal democracy. Take a look at the Russian constitution: we have a democratic electoral system, a functioning parliament, a free market system. The constitution is based on Western pattern. Our president Vladimir Putin rules the country in a democratic way. We are not a monarchy, we are not a dictatorship, we are not a Soviet communist regime.*¹³

In Dugin's view, the post-Soviet space and countries like Georgia or Ukraine serve as an arena of competition between the West and Russia.¹⁴ It also bears noting that Eduard Kokoity, an influential South Ossetian politician and the former President of South Ossetia, openly shares Eurasianist views, arguing that South Ossetia should be part of the Russian Empire; he also views the conflict over South Ossetia as part of the status conflict between Russia and the West.¹⁵ In 2006, Kokoity declared: "In fact, the conflict is clearly politico-legal – Georgia would like to impose the norms of Western democracy [on us], while these can never be [placed] above our Caucasian [traditional] laws".¹⁶

The Eurasianist ideology envisions that the Caucasus problem can be resolved by creating a multiethnic and multireligious federation.¹⁷ On 26 August 2008, Dugin visited South Ossetia, after the Russian Duma had recognized its independent statehood, and called that act a manifestation of the "long-awaited renaissance of the Russian Empire". Dugin views the developments in the Caucasus as part of U.S. strategies to destroy Russia,

¹³ **Dugin, A.** 2014b. United by Hatred. Manuel Ochsenreiter interviews Alexander Dugin on the Ukraine crisis. – Counter Currents Publishing. <<http://www.counter-currents.com/2014/01/manuel-ochsenreiter-interviews-alexander-dugin-on-the-ukraine-crisis/>> (accessed August 28, 2016).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ **Mankoff, J.** 2009. Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 297. [**Mankoff** 2009]

¹⁶ **Kokoity: 'Caucasian Laws' Superior to Western Democracy** 2006. – Civil.ge. <<https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13992&search=\>> (accessed June 7, 2018).

¹⁷ **European Stability Initiative.**

referring to the encirclement of Russia by states representing U.S. interests as one of the goals of this particular strategy.¹⁸ Already back in 2004, Dugin proposed that Russia should actively interfere in Georgia, and that it should convince the newly elected President Saakashvili to develop a special relationship with Russia on the basis of shared religion, type of civilization, and economic interests. He also indicated that if Russia should fail to increase its influence in Georgia, it would probably lead to a bloody armed conflict.¹⁹

Eurasianism is clearly based on the assumption that Russia is an alternative power to the West. This opposition is the focal point for upholding the status conflict between Russia and the West, with Russia having to defend itself against Western strategic ambitions to bring Russia down. Forsberg²⁰ has noted that Russia (as well as the Soviet Union) has often highlighted the importance of perceptions and emotions with regard to the status of the country. Stephen Cohen²¹ argues that the guiding tenets of Russia's foreign policy have always followed the narrative where the recognition of Russia's parity with the United States as a sovereign nation and legitimate super power should be indisputable. Such status conflicts can emerge quite easily as states have a natural tendency to pursue a higher status position, which leads to conflicts between status seekers and status granters; however, the interests of others may also impact the development of a status conflict.²²

After Putin's rise to the presidency, Russia has been prioritising the use of hard power policy in conjunction with increasing its influence through sustaining military threat in the South Caucasus. During this period, the status conflict between Russia and the West has intensified, with images referring to the West as an adversary gaining a strong presence in Russian public discourse. Status-seeking efforts differ in terms of performing status-seeking functions and, in the context of the ongoing status conflict with

¹⁸ **Ganapolskii, M.** 2008. Interview with Alexander Dugin. – Ekho Moskvyy, Talk show "Osoboje mnenije", 8 August 2008.

¹⁹ **Dugin, A.** 2004. The Georgian scenarios (Грузинские сценарии). – Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 6 February 2004. <<https://rg.ru/2004/02/06/stsenarij.html>> (accessed June 7, 2018).

²⁰ **Forsberg, T.** 2014. Status conflicts between Russia and the West: Perceptions and emotional biases. – Communist and Post-Communist Studies, Vol. 47, pp. 325. [**Forsberg** 2014]

²¹ **Cohen, S.** 2012. America's Failed (Bi-Partisan) Russia Policy. – World Post, 28 February. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-f-cohen/us-russia-policy_b_1307727.html> (accessed June 7, 2018).

²² **Forsberg** 2014, p. 325.

the West, Russia is a status-inconsistent hard power seeker.²³ Turning to the theories of international relations, offensive realists insist that the best defensive tactic is a good strategy of offence.²⁴ In order to assert its status as a great power, Russia often turns to offensive practices and acts as the offensive player in the post-Soviet space by defending its own interests in its proclaimed sphere of influence. Destabilization and fuelling internal conflicts in its so-called “near abroad area” is an integral part of Russia’s regional strategy, which allows Russia to reap strategic benefits from the existing frozen conflicts. Pursuant to the destabilization strategy, protracted conflicts around its neighbourhood allow Russia to maintain its political and military domination over the countries in its surrounding areas, to control their developing internal processes, and to thwart their progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration. In fact, territorial proximity and historical legacy, together with military, economic or political strength, provide Russia with the leverage needed to preserve its interests in the post-Soviet space. Various regional organizations spearheaded by Russia (i.e. the Commonwealth of Independent States system together with the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union) serve the same purpose.²⁵

Russia’s efforts to maintain its influence over the post-Soviet space are supported by various approaches and political orientations that increase interstate misperceptions among the South Caucasus countries with regard to each other’s intentions. For example, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have contradictory regional prospects in the South Caucasus. Armenia is economically dependent on Russia and has joined the newly established Eurasian Economic Union, under Russian leadership. As a result, Armenia is motivated to appease Moscow and to contain Russian aggression.²⁶ On the other hand, Georgia has managed to maintain its pro-Western orientation and is focusing on strengthening its ties with Western institutions, such as the European Union and NATO, by working towards joining these organisations

²³ **Nitoiu, C.** 2016. Russia and the EU’s quest for status: the path to conflict in the post-Soviet space. – *Global Affairs*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, pp. 143–153.

²⁴ **Mearsheimer, J. J.** 2014. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton & Company. [Mearsheimer 2014]

²⁵ **Dias, V. A.** 2013. The EU and Russia: Competing Discourses, Practices and Interests in the Shared Neighborhood. – *Perspectives on European Politics & Society*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, pp. 256–271.

²⁶ **Bishku, M.** 2011. The South Caucasus and the Growing Influence of Russia: Balancing on a Tightrope. <<http://www.rubincenter.org/2011/08/the-south-caucasus-republics-and-russia%E2%80%99s-growing-influence-balancing-on-a-tightrope/>> (accessed June 1, 2018).

in the future. Lastly, Azerbaijan has chosen to balance Russian influence through active cooperation with Turkey and the West. These differences among the foreign policy orientations of these South Caucasus countries are due to several factors, the majority of which are related to the frozen conflicts stifling the region as each of these states has a different perception with regard to whom they can rely on in the process of conflict resolution. As a result, unresolved regional conflicts have impeded regional development and undermined the socio-economic situation.

These frozen conflicts and regional instability serve as a guarantee for Russia that the Western institutions, NATO and the European Union, will never grant membership to the countries of the South Caucasus. It is inherently a preventive strategy that does not endanger Russia's control over the post-Soviet space and maintains its extensive influence over the region. Nevertheless, the presence of Russian troops in conflict zones, the establishment of military bases, and the practice of kindling separatism by promoting misperceptions between ethnic groups offers another possibility to destabilize a latent peace equilibrium. However, all frozen conflicts in the region directly imply Russia's involvement in the process of conflict resolution because it is directly linked with Russia's strategic interests and helps persuade the domestic audience that Russia's national security is being threatened.

It can be argued that the unresolved frozen conflicts in the area are induced by Russia's commitment to maintaining the role of the dominant regional power through destabilising and weakening the countries in the region. Consequently, Russia has set itself a strategic goal of keeping Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan under its patronage. In the framework of the South Caucasus conflicts, Russia has demonstrated its willingness to take advantage of cultural differences and regional multiethnicity in order to support its policy agenda, because without Russia's support these ethnic conflicts would have hardly reached their current levels. Kornely Kakachia²⁷ argues that Russia has always pursued the policy of "Divide and Rule" in order to weaken the South Caucasus states and to achieve its strategic objectives. On the other

²⁷ **Kakachia, K.** 2010. Challenges to the South Caucasus regional security aftermath of Russian-Georgian conflict: Hegemony stability or new partnership? – *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, pp. 15–20. <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366510000382/>> (accessed June 1, 2018).

hand, Alexander Orlov²⁸ claims that the outbreak of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the result of Georgia's inability to perform its function as a stakeholder. The secessionist Georgian republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, neither of which are recognised by the majority of the international community, have been able to maintain their current *status quo* only due to active support from Russia. Russia has always demonstrated mistrust towards international peace mediation in the post-Soviet space and has often laid claim to its particular responsibility over the area. Consequently, Russia cannot be considered a neutral arbiter in these negotiation processes, which is one of the reasons why Georgia aims to keep Russia away from the negotiation table and wants to increase the number of western mediators.²⁹ This might help generate a shift in mindset, and have the South Caucasus conflicts recognized as part of the joint responsibility of the international community and not just a matter of Russia's sphere of influence.

3. Security Dilemma as the Underlying Factor behind the Conflicts

According to Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler³⁰, the security dilemma is a two-level strategic predicament that consists of two related dilemmas – a dilemma of interpretation and a dilemma of response. The first refers to perceptions and misperceptions related to the security-motivated actions of international actors, and the latter refers to the reactions of others arising from their perceptions and misperceptions with regard to the action.

*A dilemma of interpretation is the predicament facing decision-makers when they are confronted on matters affecting security, with a choice between two significant and usually but not always undesirable alternates about the military policies and political postures of other entities /.../ A dilemma of response logically begins when the dilemma of interpretation has been settled. Decision-makers then need to determine how to react.*³¹

²⁸ **Orlov, A.** 2011. Global and Regional Problems of Southern Caucasus. – Open Dialogue Research Journal. <<http://orientalreview.org/2011/07/11/global-and-regional-problems-of-southerncaucasus/>> (accessed June 1, 2018).

²⁹ **Shakov, A. Y.** 2005. Russia's role in the South Caucasus. – Helsinki Monitor, Vol. 16, Issue 2, pp. 120–126.

³⁰ **Booth, K.; Wheeler, N. J.** 2008. The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 4. [**Booth, Wheeler** 2008]

³¹ **Booth, Wheeler** 2008.

The unsolvable security dilemmas that emerged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were a prelude to the August War between Georgia and Russia in 2008, arising from the strategic predicament that developed there in the 1990s, and stemmed from Russia's geostrategic ambitions to maintain its control over the post-Soviet space through the strategy of frozen conflicts, which is aimed at destabilising the political, military, and economic situation in its neighbourhood and establishing long-standing security dilemmas that can be easily provoked to escalate into armed conflicts.

Frozen conflicts can produce a lot of mistrust and misperceptions between nations because they are aimed at maintaining permanent instability in interstate relations, and they hinder effective international security governance. Kenneth Waltz³² posits that the existence of anarchy in the underlying structure of international relations and the absence of a central governing mechanism are the decisive factors causing security dilemmas between states. Due to uncertainty, states must always stand ready to use violence, while the use of force is reserved for defending their sovereign interests. Hence, all states must be prepared for war and should be especially wary of powerful neighbours. However, ultimately, the decisions regarding when and where to use force will rest with each state.³³

Thus, maintaining security dilemmas in interstate relations has been the key element of Russia's strategic ambitions in the post-Soviet space. Encouraging misperceptions and distrust enables Russia to maintain control over its proclaimed sphere of influence and effectively interfere in the political power games of the concerned countries. Russia has successfully implemented this strategy in several states designated as its near abroad area, e.g. Moldova (Transnistria), Ukraine (Novorossiia, particularly Donetsk and Luhansk), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Nagorno Karabakh). Furthermore, Russia often uses Russian minorities in the Baltic States, especially in Estonia and in Latvia, to generate misperceptions towards their host countries. In addition, during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, Russia annexed Crimea, a strategically critical area for maintaining control over the Black Sea. However, in most cases, Russia is primarily interested in destabilising the political, military, and economic situation and maintaining security dilemmas in targeted areas, which serves Russia's ambitions to solidify its dominating status in the most effective way, without taking any responsibility to ensure peace and prosperity in its sphere of influence.

³² **Waltz, K.** 1986a. *Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power. – Neorealism and Its Critics.* Ed. by Keohane, R. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 98–99. [Waltz 1986a]

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Russia's destructive involvement in resolving frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, which in the case of South Ossetia led to the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, serves as the best example of Russia's power demonstrations and its inclination toward the pursuit of cementing its regional supremacy. Mamuka Tsereteli³⁴ has analysed the various consequences brought on by the armed conflict between Russia and Georgia. Firstly, the war seriously damaged the region's transit function and had a negative effect on the socio-economic and political situation in Georgia. More importantly, it revealed Russia's underlying intention toward achieving regional dominance and its objective of hindering Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.³⁵

Russia's strategy of using security dilemmas for achieving its strategic ambitions worked effectively in Georgia, and the August War of 2008 serves as a perfect example for describing the long-term effects of unsolved security dilemmas in the post-Soviet space that have devolved into frozen conflicts on the border between Russia and Georgia, particularly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia's military presence in the region was the catalyst for the war in 2008, as their intervention in the conflict focused more on maintaining the security dilemma in the region, rather than mitigating its effects.³⁶ In 2008, Russia effectively provoked an armed conflict, which arose from a power demonstration in conjunction with the elements of regional crisis management. First, Russia sent in its peacekeepers and subsequently deployed its conventional military forces to interfere in the ethnic conflict between Georgia and the pro-Russian independence movement in South Ossetia. Essentially, Russian involvement in South Ossetia amounted to a hybrid warfare operation where the overt use of military force was followed by a range of covert operations, including cyber-attacks against Georgia. Consequently, Russia was able to assert its control over South Ossetia, and as a result, Russia's strategic position in the area was strengthened, as compared to the period before the events of 2008.³⁷

³⁴ **Tsereteli, M.** 2009. The Impact of the Russia-Georgia War on the South Caucasus Transportation Corridor. – The Jamestown Foundation. <http://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/pdf/Impact_of_the_Russia-Georgia_War.pdf> (accessed June 1, 2018).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ **Ellison, B. J.** 2011. Russian Grand Strategy in the South Ossetia War. – *Demokratizatsiya*, Fall 2011, Vol. 19, Issue 4, p. 343.

³⁷ **Connable, B.; Campbell, J. H.; Madden, D.** 2016. Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War. How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, pp. 17–18. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1003.html> (accessed June 20, 2018).

The August War of 2008 was triggered by a number of Russian provocations that were aimed at increasing instability and insecurity in the area of frozen conflict, and followed Georgia's responsive action to restore its constitutional order. An already unstable situation escalated into a full-scale war after Russia's decision to step up its military response by deploying army troops to South Ossetia in order to defend the rights of Russian citizens in the area. As a result of this war, Georgia suffered considerable civilian casualties, together with infrastructural and military devastation. This transformation of the security situation had a negative effect on the inflow of foreign investment and led to an import-export gap, resulting in significant economic setbacks for Georgia.³⁸

According to Dmitri Trenin³⁹, the war was not only a power demonstration against Georgia but it was also meant to serve as a reminder to its Western allies. Through this demonstration of power in the South Caucasus, Russia asserted its control over its near abroad and deterred Western organisations (NATO and the European Union) from the region. On the one hand, Russia was not happy with the post-Cold War developments in the world order, especially NATO's enlargement across the post-Soviet space, motivating Russia to use every last measure to maintain its regional dominance. On the other hand, Russia was irritated by the fact that the U.S. had been training and equipping Georgian military throughout the years, and Russia could never allow the U.S. to have an advantage in Russia's "sphere of privileged interests".⁴⁰

However, within the security dilemma framework, states need to anticipate their opponent's potential response and estimate actual gains *vis-a-vis* the cost of the risk of aggression, because the benefits obtained through the escalation of power should be higher than the resulting costs. According to Mearsheimer⁴¹, great powers often tend to miscalculate the actual outcome, and that is the tragedy of power politics. Nevertheless, in this particular case (i.e. the Russo-Georgian War of 2008), Russia managed to gain more than it lost. Its offensive action enhanced its influence over its neighbour-

³⁸ **Sarikaya, Y.** 2011. Georgian Foreign Policy After The August 2008 War. – Journal of Black Sea Studies, Vol. 8. Issue 31, pp. 1–16.
<<http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/105882>>.

³⁹ **Trenin, D.** 2009. Russia in the Caucasus: Reversing the Tide. – Brown Journal of World Affairs, Spring 2009, Vol. 15. Issue 2, pp. 143–155.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ **Mearsheimer** 2014, pp. 30–52.

hood in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and it diverted the South Caucasus countries from their aspirational Euro-Atlantic trajectory. At the same time, by pursuing an aggressive policy in the South Caucasus, Russia managed to reinforce its negative image as a troublemaker in the international arena.

In addition to the security dilemma, the lack of regional cooperation has been another problematic issue in the South Caucasus. Kenneth Waltz⁴² maintains that cooperation is within reach but difficult to sustain. The international structure and uncertainty, fuelled by numerous misperceptions among the concerned countries themselves, hinder the prospects for cooperation. Self-sufficiency is extremely rare in a globalised world that is strongly influenced by the free market economy. As a result, given the active promotion of free market ideology in recent years, states have become economically more interdependent, which should contribute to the reduction of their security concerns. If states are motivated to improve and foster the welfare of their citizens, they can opt to pursue non-security goals instead of engaging in an arms race. However, if their security concerns outweigh non-security objectives, then that could easily serve as a reason for confrontation.⁴³

4. Current Developments in the Russia-Georgia Relationship

Today, the situation regarding these frozen conflicts remains unresolved, and the relationship between Russia and Georgia is still entrapped in the age-old predicament. From the Russian standpoint, Georgia has already learned its lesson from the August War and understood the meaning of the red line set by Russia. Despite recognizing the independent statehoods of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia will never support their actual independence. Both breakaway territories are economically and politically under Russia's patronage, not to mention their dependence in terms of security. In recent years, Russia has signed a friendship and cooperation agreement with both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and deployed 7600 soldiers along their borders. In Abkhazia, Russia has managed to establish control over critical infrastructure, including airports and railways. In addition, Russia has set up military bases in Gudauta (former base of the Soviet Air Defence Forces, located on the Black Sea in Abkhazia) and has also revealed plans to erect military

⁴² **Waltz, K.** 1986b. *Political Structures. – Neorealism and Its Critics*. Ed by Keohane, R. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 73–74.

⁴³ **Mearsheimer** 204, pp. 30–52.

infrastructure in Ochamchire (another Abkhazian city on the Black Sea). The main aim of these Russian military bases is to diminish the influence of the EU and the U.S. in the region. Thus, the constant fuelling of the security dilemmas in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has enabled Russia to maintain the strategic predicament in the South Caucasus.

Ten years have passed since the end of the August War and only a minimal amount of positive signs can be seen regarding the relationship between the two countries – Russia and Georgia. Following Russia's recognition of the independent statehoods of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Tbilisi suspended diplomatic relations with Moscow. However, in 2009 the two countries restored consular relations through Swiss embassies in Moscow and also in Tbilisi. In 2012, Georgian parliamentary elections were won by a coalition led by Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia. After assuming power, the new political leadership attempted to change Georgia's political course. In November 2012, Georgia's newly elected Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili established an office of the prime minister's special envoy on relations with Russia, headed by Zurab Abashidze, former Georgian ambassador to Russia (2000–2004). On 14 December 2012, Abashidze met Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin, in Geneva to discuss restoring bilateral relations with the Russian Federation, with subsequent meetings held in Prague.⁴⁴ At that time, Russia was particularly concerned about the fact that Georgia continued to pursue close military cooperation with the U.S. and NATO. Georgia's cooperation with NATO includes regular military exercises in the Georgian territory, training of Georgian officers and equipping the Georgian army with NATO weapons, including the latest supply of Javelin portable fire-and-forget anti-tank missile systems, perceived by Russia as an anti-Russian move undermining the normalization of bilateral relations.⁴⁵

The most recent meeting between the representatives of the Russian and Georgian governments took place on 31 January 2018 and focused on the issues of trade, economy, transport, and culture. According to the latest statistics, Russia has become Georgia's biggest export partner (\$28,665 million), while in the overall trade balance (\$94 million) it is second only to

⁴⁴ **Moscow hails Georgian PM's intention to normalize relations with Russia** 2018. – TASS, March 12, 2018. <<http://tass.com/politics/993616>> (accessed June 24, 2018).

⁴⁵ **Kupatadze, D.** 2018. Georgian-Russian relations: *per aspera ad astra*. – EurAsia Daily. February 20, 2018. <<https://easaily.com/en/news/2018/02/20/georgian-russian-relations-per-aspera-ad-astra>> (accessed June 24, 2018).

Turkey (\$112 million) and only slightly ahead of Azerbaijan (\$91 million). These statistics prove that the two countries have developed rather close economic ties, indicating some interesting developments, especially considering that tensions between them remain high and the 10th anniversary of the August War of 2008 is approaching. Thus, although the prevailing fundamental security dilemma prevents any significant improvement of the official relations between the two countries, at least it seems that they are able to communicate in some areas in order to decrease tensions.⁴⁶

Despite the fact that Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili declared his country's readiness to normalise bilateral relations with Russia, several warning signs indicate that the security dilemma persists, and that the bilateral relationship is still under the risk of potential confrontation. Russia persists in pursuing the strategy of provocations that exacerbate tensions in interstate relations and continues the gradual annexation of Georgian territory in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For example, on 22 February 2018, Georgian citizen Archil Tatumashvili was apprehended by Russian police in the South Ossetian city of Tskhinvali. He was accused of committing war crimes against the civilian population during the 2008 war and plotting "acts of sabotage" in South Ossetia to thwart preparations for Russian presidential elections in March 2008. Tatumashvili was brutally tortured and ultimately killed. Later it was uncovered that Tatumashvili had served in the Georgian peacekeeping contingent in Iraq in 2008 and therefore could not have taken part in the fighting in South Ossetia.⁴⁷ Another controversial situation arose in May 2018, when the government of Syria recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What is more, they decided to open embassies and deepen relations between Syria and the disputed Georgian territories that, in addition to the Russian Federation and Syria, have also been recognized only by Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Russia has implemented punitive measures against Georgia by imposing a trade embargo and doubling the gas price, enabling it to attain

⁴⁶ **Avdaliani, E.** 2018. Media source: Georgia Today. Can Georgian-Russian Relations Improve? – GT. Georgia Today, March 12, 2018. <<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/9439/Can-Georgian-Russian-Relations-Improve%3F>> (accessed June 24, 2018).

⁴⁷ **Fuller, L.** 2018. Has Russia Called Georgia's Bluff Over Stated Desire to Improve Relations? – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 16, 2018. <<https://www.rferl.org/a/has-russia-called-georgia-bluff-over-better-relationships/29104767.html>> (accessed 24.06.2018).

⁴⁸ **Syria recognizes independence of Abkhazia, South Ossetia** 2018. – Nationalia, May, 30, 2018. <<https://www.nationalia.info/brief/11109/syria-recognizes-independence-of-abkhazia-south-ossetia>> (accessed June 24, 2018).

its strategic objectives through economic measures. Achieving control over Georgia's main economic and energy sectors is an effective strategy for establishing political dominance.⁴⁹ Because of its geopolitical aspirations, Russia views Georgia as its backyard, with a significant role in the re-establishment of the sphere of influence over the post-Soviet space. Russia's focus is on preventing Georgia's aspirations towards Euro-Atlantic integration by maintaining frozen conflicts in the region and ensuring permanent regional instability in the larger South Caucasus. This strategy is seen as a guarantee for Russia that NATO will never grant membership to Georgia, which, in turn, serves Russia's overarching interest of maintaining its status as a regional power. The presence of Russian troops in the conflict zones, the establishment of military bases, and the kindling of separatism in Georgian territories contributes towards the destabilisation of the latent peace situation. As long as Russia maintains security dilemmas in the South Caucasus, there is always a possibility for the eruption of an armed conflict.

5. Conclusion

Historically, Russia has tried to leverage its influence over the South Caucasus for several hundreds of years, which has not had any positive impacts on the region's development. The phase of direct domination over the South Caucasus countries came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but that did not mean the waning of Russia's interests in the post-Soviet space. The potent Soviet legacy and the geostrategic significance of the region do not allow Russia to cede its regional dominance in the so-called near abroad. As a result, Russia uses all possible tools and measures, including the maintenance of frozen conflicts, to prevent Euro-Atlantic integration in the post-Soviet space. Moreover, hard power policy is a supportive mechanism for maintaining its status-seeking ambitions in the status conflict with the West, a strategy actively pursued by Russia during the past decades.

Russia uses hard power in order to defend its historical legacy in the South Caucasus and to reaffirm its own status as a regional super power. The opposition to the United States and NATO has been Russia's guiding narrative throughout the whole post-Cold War period. In view of its legacy

⁴⁹ **Balakishi, S.** 2016. Eurasian Economic Union: Russia's New Foreign Policy in The South Caucasus. – Working Paper, No. 1, August 2016. Maastricht School of Management. <<https://ideas.repec.org/p/msm/wpaper/2016-1.html>> (accessed June, 24, 2018).

in the post-Soviet space, Russia will never allow NATO's troops near its border. In recent years, Russia has made significant progress in building up opposition to other Western institutions and individual countries, most remarkably to the European Union. However, due to the prevailing security dilemma, any Western engagement in the region is viewed as a threat to the Russian Federation that would cause its loss of influence over the post-Soviet space and its status as the dominant regional power. To counter these developments, Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union in order to balance the EU's interests in the post-Soviet space and to have a mechanism of regional control. However, if Russia should lose control over the South Caucasus energy infrastructure, it would result in significant economic and political losses for Russia. Furthermore, losing its status as the dominant regional power and the main energy provider to Europe would render another serious blow to Russia, already struggling with other political and economic setbacks.

Therefore, frozen conflicts serve as the best means to thwart the realisation of energy projects and curtail Georgia's integration into Western institutions. Recognition of the *de facto* republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the installation of Russian troops near the border demonstrates Russia's ambition to assert its power in the region. Russia continues to kindle separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia through various agreements that underscore Russia's patronage. Thus, all Russian attempts are aimed at weakening the region, rather than strengthening it. Ten years have passed since the Russo-Georgian August War of 2008, but Russia still continues the creeping occupation of Georgian territories. Despite the fact that former Georgian President Saakashvili, at the helm during the 2008 conflict and often accused of escalating the conflict, lost the elections in 2012 and left the country in 2013, to date, there have been no significant improvements in crisis management or with regard to the bilateral relationship between the two countries, confirming that Russia's geostrategic ambitions in the South Caucasus have not changed.

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