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Russia's Hegemonic Policy in the Occupied Territories of Georgia

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Abstract: Russia's role in the South Caucasus is often viewed as an expression of hegemonic policy aimed at maintaining its influence in the region through the use of military, economic, and political instruments. The situation in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region serves as a means for Russia to exert influence over Georgia's foreign policy orientation, particularly regarding its Euro-Atlantic integration process. The *de-facto* regimes in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region have a significant impact on Georgia's state development. First and foremost, this concerns the issue of territorial integrity. Secondly, these conflicts hinder the country's security environment, economic development, and investment stability. Thirdly, the persistent tensions complicate the establishment of long-term peace in the region. The existence of *de-facto* regimes affects not only the state directly concerned but also regional security as a whole. Territories with similar status often become sources of military escalation, smuggling, instability, and humanitarian challenges. At the same time, international organizations face difficulties in resolving such conflicts, as they must simultaneously take into account state sovereignty, demands for self-determination, and the interests of great powers. The purpose of this article is to analyze how Russia's hegemonic policy contributes to the formation and consolidation of *de-facto* regimes, how identity politics and historical narratives are employed to legitimize these entities, and what impact the involvement of international actors has on the process of conflict resolution.

Keywords: *De-facto* Regime, Hegemony, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region

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1. Introduction

Relevance of the Topic

Conflicts in the post-Soviet space are not merely ethnic or political confrontations; they also represent concrete manifestations of geopolitical interests pursued by great powers. The emergence of conflicts is often driven by incompatibilities between the parties involved, with significant contributing factors including economic and social inequality, as well as ethnic, religious, political, and geographical discrimination.[1]

Hegemony and *de-facto* regimes constitute one of the most significant and relevant topics in contemporary international relations and political science. These two concepts are closely

interconnected, as the influence of powerful states often determines the existence and development of unrecognized or partially recognized political entities. The relationship between hegemony and *de-facto* regimes is particularly evident in cases where powerful states support such entities in pursuit of their own geopolitical objectives. A *de-facto* regime may serve as an instrument of pressure against a neighboring state, a means of expanding influence, or a mechanism for safeguarding military and strategic interests. Through such arrangements, a hegemonic power not only maintains control over a specific territory but also exerts influence on broader regional processes.[2]

Georgia represents one of the most important cases for examining this issue. The *de-facto* regimes in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region have existed for many years with limited international recognition and remain heavily dependent on Russia's political, economic, and military support. This circumstance demonstrates how a hegemonic state utilizes *de-facto* regimes to preserve and strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus.

The unstable political environment that emerged in the South Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union generated numerous challenges that remain unresolved to this day. Historical narratives played a significant role in both the emergence and intensification of the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (so-called South Ossetia). Within the framework of Soviet national policy, distinct Abkhaz and Ossetian historical narratives were formed. These narratives, often contradicting Georgian historical sources, defined the identity of their respective groups and asserted their indigenous rights to the territory. National projects in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region were largely built upon these historical claims during the period of Perestroika, contributing significantly to the escalation of conflicts following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[3]

Despite numerous other domestic and international challenges, the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region continue to shape the primary directions of Georgia's domestic and foreign policy. Direct impact of Russia's hegemonic policy on the creation and consolidation of *de-facto* regimes can be most clearly observed in these regions.

Research Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the characteristics of Russia's hegemonic policy in Georgia's occupied territories—Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region—and to analyze the political, military, economic, and socio-identity mechanisms through which Russia maintains regional influence and control.[4]

Research Objectives

The objective of the research is to analyze Russia's hegemonic policy in Georgia's occupied territories—Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region—and to identify the mechanisms through which Russia maintains political, military, economic, and social influence in these regions.[5]

2. Research Methodology

The study employs qualitative research methods, including:

- Content Analysis;
- Case Study Analysis;
- Analytical Method.

Theoretical Framework

Balance of Power Theory - According to the balance of power concept, powerful states seek to counterbalance one another either through the use of their own political and military resources or through the development of alliance systems capable of offsetting rival powers.

Realist Theory - Political realism is one of the most influential theories in the field of international relations. According to this perspective, the state is the primary actor in international politics; national interests constitute the main driving force of state behavior; power—military, political, and economic—is the determining factor; and the balance of power serves as the principal

regulator of international relations, to which even international law is subordinate.[6]

Hegemonic Stability Theory - According to Hegemonic Stability Theory, the international system is most stable when there is a single dominant power — a hegemon — that establishes and enforces the rules of the international order. The central premise of the theory is that the global system does not function effectively on its own; rather, it requires a powerful actor capable of maintaining security and ensuring economic order.

Research Questions

- What instruments does Russia employ to maintain its hegemony?
- How are *de-facto* state institutions formed and sustained?
- What are the reactions and levels of involvement of international actors?

Hypothesis

Russia's hegemonic policy constitutes a central factor in the formation and maintenance of *de-facto* regimes, which function as geopolitical instruments serving Russia's strategic interests.

Scientific Novelty

The scientific novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive analysis of Russia's hegemonic policy in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region through the combined examination of political, military, economic, and identity-based mechanisms. The paper demonstrates how Russia employs narratives of "stability" and "security provision" to strengthen its regional influence and facilitate the integration of *de-facto* entities into its broader geopolitical framework.[7]

3. Result and Discussion

The origins of the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are closely linked to the administrative boundaries established during the Soviet period, ethnic and regional disagreements, and the dynamics of national movements that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russia's role in deepening these conflicts and exploiting the resulting power vacuum has been expressed through both direct military intervention and political and economic support for the *de-facto* regimes.[8]

Russia has established regional hegemony through multidimensional mechanisms that combine military, political, economic, energy, cultural, and informational instruments. In this context, hegemony signifies not only military dominance but also the creation of a regional order in which other states are compelled or encouraged to act in accordance with Russian interests.

The most significant instrument of Russian hegemony is military power. Moscow seeks to preserve its role as the principal guarantor of regional security. As military force constitutes its major instrument, Russia prioritizes the deployment of military bases, particularly in the South Caucasus. One of the most important examples is the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia, which represents the largest Russian military facility in the region.[9] While Russia presents the base as a mechanism for strengthening regional security, its presence has generated mixed reactions among the local population. Russia expedited the strengthening and manning of its 102nd Military Base with the aim of enhancing its military and political leverage over the South Caucasus states. According to various reports, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Russia redeployed military equipment and personnel from the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, as well as from the 4th Military Base in Tskhinvali and the 7th Military Base in Gudauta, to support military operations in Ukraine. Personnel stationed at these bases were also mobilized and transferred to the Ukrainian front. It is important to note that Russia has expressed concern over the increasing engagement of the United States in efforts related to the opening of the Zangezur Corridor, including proposals to place the corridor under a 49-year lease arrangement. It may be argued that this development constitutes one of the factors motivating Russia to reinforce its military presence at the Gyumri military base.[10]

Russia maintains two major military bases in Georgia's occupied territories—the 4th Military Base in the Tskhinvali region and the 7th Military Base in Abkhazia. There has also been speculation regarding the modernization of the Ochamchire naval facility, which could potentially become part of the military infrastructure associated with the 7th Military Base, but supporting military and intelligence infrastructure of those two bases, effectively covers the entire territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region.

In addition to military bases, military settlements have been constructed in both Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region to accommodate Russian servicemen and their families. Various estimates suggest that between ten to twelve thousand Russian military personnel and border guards are permanently stationed in Georgia's occupied territories. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has affected these numbers, as some personnel have periodically been redeployed to the Ukrainian theater.

Approximately 5,000 military personnel are stationed at Russian bases in the Tskhinvali region. This figure includes both Russian military forces and local units integrated into the Russian military structure, which collectively operate under the framework of Russia's 58th Army. Satellite imagery and open-source intelligence indicate the existence of at least eighteen military facilities throughout the region.[11]

The core function of Russia's 7th Military Base is to guarantee security of the *de-facto* Abkhazia and safeguard Russian interests in the South Caucasus. The base is part of the Southern Military District of the Russian Federation and plays a crucial role in maintaining Russia's military and political influence throughout the Caucasus.

The establishment of the 7th Military Base became a matter of strategic importance in the aftermath of the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War. The formation existed as a division from 1918 to 1992, was reorganized as a brigade between 1992 and 2009, and was subsequently transformed into a military base on 1 February 2009. Over the course of its history, its personnel took part in the Russian Civil War, the Second World War, and armed conflicts in the North Caucasus during the post-Soviet era. In July 2018, Sukhumi hosted commemorative events marking the centenary of one of the oldest military formations of the Russian Armed Forces.

The establishment of the 7th Military Base became a priority following the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War. On February 17, 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and de facto leader of Abkhazia Sergei Bagapsh signed an agreement in Moscow establishing a unified Russian military base in Abkhazia. The agreement was concluded for a period of forty-nine years, with provisions for automatic renewal. Pursuant to the agreement, the unified military base included the facilities of the former peacekeeping contingent deployed in the Gudauta District, the Bombora military base, the military training ground and naval facilities located near Ochamchire, and the joint Russian–Abkhaz military garrisons stationed in the Kodori Valley and in the vicinity of the Enguri Hydroelectric Power Plant. Military trainings and exercises are conducted at training ranges located in Gudauta and Nagvalou, as well as at Molkino in Russia's Krasnodar Krai. The agreement provides for the development of Russia's military infrastructure along the Black Sea coast of the South Caucasus. Although the agreement was originally expected to be signed in 2009, this became possible only after Sergei Bagapsh's re-election as president. In essence, the agreement envisages a military alliance-type relationship. According to expert assessments, such an arrangement was specifically sought by Bagapsh, who opposed the independent existence of Russian military bases in Abkhazia. His demand was that all facilities of the 7th Military Base be integrated into the infrastructure of Abkhaz military garrisons. In other words, he sought a high degree of interoperability between Russian and Abkhaz armed forces, as well as the conduct of joint combat training activities.[12]

The 7th Military Base is actively involved year-round in military exercises conducted at both the local and regional levels. The agreement further establishes procedures governing Russian military aviation operations, the movement of naval and other non-land transportation assets, border-crossing arrangements, the use of communications infrastructure, and the provision of logistical, medical, transport, educational, and commercial support services, as well as matters

related to taxation, fees, and liability for damages. For instance, a notable example occurred on 1 October 2018, when military training facilities in Abkhazia took part in Russia's largest military exercise of the preceding three decades. According to Alexander Dvornikov, Commander of Southern Military District, the drills were conducted not only within Russia but also in Armenia, Abkhazia, and the Tskhinvali region. The exercises focused on contemporary methods of warfare and the application of advanced combat capabilities, including lessons derived from Russian military operations in Syria.[13]

At present, the occupied region of Abkhazia hosts the so-called Bombora, Ochamchire, Okhureisi, and Sokhumi 'military bases.' According to the Istanbul Agreement, which envisages the liquidation of Russian Federation military bases on the territory of Georgia, the Russian Federation undertook an obligation to dismantle one of the largest facilities in occupied Abkhazia—the Gudauta military base. Article 9 of the same agreement stipulates that 'the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, which are temporarily stationed on the territory of the Republic of Georgia, including Abkhazia, shall maintain strict neutrality and shall not participate in internal conflicts. Contrary to this agreement, Russia renovated three large barracks at the Bombora military base and developed infrastructure for receiving military aircraft and other types of equipment.

In occupied Abkhazia, Georgians and Abkhaz have different attitudes toward Russian military personnel. It is likely that for a large part of the Abkhaz population, Russians are perceived as guarantors of peace and security. However, they still express dissatisfaction with the presence of Russian military bases, particularly their expansion beyond the occupied Gali district into other areas. A certain segment of the Abkhaz population considers the presence of a so-called "base" along the occupation line necessary, as it is seen as a means of protection from a "Georgian attack". Such Russian propaganda has achieved significant success in recent years. From the above, it can be concluded that Russia appears to create a security vacuum and exploits existing conflicts in order to later present itself as the principal force of stability.

Russia also seeks to maintain its position as the primary guarantor of regional security through multilateral institutions. One of the most important examples is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), established in 1992 and formally institutionalized in 2002. The CSTO functions as a Russian-led military-political alliance within the post-Soviet space and is widely regarded as one of Moscow's principal instruments for maintaining regional hegemony. Through this organization, Russia preserves military and political influence, shapes regional security architecture, and constrains the expansion of Western institutions.

The construction of Russian military bases in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (then under the guise of a 'mandate of international peacekeeping forces') and the associated transport infrastructure began long before the 2008 war. After the war, in violation of the six-point ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008, the pace of construction increased and expanded to include territories occupied by the Russian army during the conflict, namely the Greater and Lesser Liakhvi valleys, the Prone valley, the Akhalgori district, and the Kodori Velly, known as Upper Abkhazia.[14]

A crucial component of Russia's regional hegemony is the creation of economic dependence in *de-facto* states and economically vulnerable territories. Economic influence allows Moscow not only to maintain financial control but also to preserve political and security dominance. Russia actively finances territories that, under international law, are considered unrecognized or partially recognized entities. Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region rely heavily on Russian financial assistance and infrastructure support. Their budgets, energy sectors, and social systems are deeply dependent on Moscow, significantly limiting their political and economic autonomy. Statistical data demonstrate the extent of this dependence. Approximately 80–90 percent of the budgets of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are financed through Russian assistance. Such systemic dependence reinforces Russia's geopolitical interests in the region and consolidates its influence over the *de-facto* regimes.

The international community largely does not recognize the *de-facto* authorities in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Nevertheless, certain *de-facto* diplomatic and economic interactions exist,

while international organizations remain engaged through conflict-management and confidence-building mechanisms.

The conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region have become integral components of the broader international security system, involving numerous international organizations engaged in peace negotiations, humanitarian assistance, human rights protection, monitoring activities, and the development of international legal positions.

The United Nations was among the first international organizations to become involved in conflict management efforts. In 1993, it established the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), whose primary functions included monitoring ceasefire agreements, overseeing compliance with negotiated arrangements, and facilitating the return of internally displaced persons. Following the 2008 war, Russia vetoed the extension of UNOMIG's mandate in the United Nations Security Council, resulting in the termination of the mission. This was an significant diplomatic victory for Russia, which sought to gradually exclude the Abkhaz issue from international formats.

Similarly, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was actively engaged in monitoring the conflict in South Ossetia from 1990's. Its activities focused on monitoring the conflict zone, preventing military escalation, protecting human rights, and facilitating communication between Georgian and Ossetian representatives. Following the August 2008 war, Russia also blocked the extension of the OSCE mission, forcing the organization to withdraw from the region. This once again indicated Russia's attempt to limit the influence of Western and international institutions in the occupied territories.

Despite Russian efforts to limit international involvement, the role of international organizations expanded significantly after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, as the conflicts increasingly came to be viewed not merely as regional security issues but as challenges to the broader international order.

Turkey's policy toward Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia is particularly noteworthy. Officially, Turkey supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and does not recognize either entity as an independent state. In this respect, Ankara aligns itself with the broader Western and NATO position. At the same time, Turkey maintains certain economic, social, and informal connections with Abkhazia. A large Abkhaz diaspora has resided in Turkey for more than a century and actively seeks to maintain contacts with Abkhazia, thereby influencing aspects of Turkish domestic politics.

Turkey's approach is shaped by several geopolitical considerations. The Black Sea region represents a strategic space for Ankara; consequently, Turkey seeks to maintain strong relations with Georgia, preserve influence among North Caucasian and Abkhaz communities, and avoid unnecessary tensions with Russia, which remains the dominant military power in the region.

Following Russia's recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, Turkey adopted an increasingly cautious approach. Turkish policy toward Abkhazia can therefore be characterized as a form of "pragmatic balancing" or "neorealist balancing." In contrast, Turkey largely views the so-called South Ossetia as falling within Russia's military and political sphere of influence and consequently pursues a less active policy toward the region. After the 2008 war, Turkey neither recognized South Ossetia nor allowed the issue to seriously damage relations with Russia. Instead, Ankara proposed the establishment of a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform," although this initiative ultimately failed to materialize.[15]

4. Conclusion

Occupation, hegemony, and *de-facto* regimes in Georgia's occupied territories constitute a complex political phenomenon. Russia's hegemonic policy represents the primary factor underlying the existence and functioning of the *de-facto* regimes. The findings of this study demonstrate that the ongoing developments in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are not merely the result of internal conflicts; rather, they form part of Russia's broader strategic interests. In this context, *de-facto*

statehood does not represent an expression of full sovereignty but rather a controlled political construct. The conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region clearly illustrate how an external power can influence, manage, and transform internal political processes. Russian hegemony serves as the central factor shaping both the dynamics of these conflicts and the continued existence of *de-facto* state entities. These cases indicate that conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space cannot be effectively addressed without taking into account the role and interests of external powers.

Recommendations

The Government of Georgia should strengthen its strategic communication regarding the conflict regions. It is important to provide populations both within Georgia and in the occupied territories with objective information about Georgia's social, economic, and educational opportunities.

Particular attention should be devoted to countering disinformation, which is frequently used as a tool for shaping and manipulating public opinion. Enhancing access to reliable information, promoting people-to-people engagement, and expanding educational and socioeconomic outreach initiatives may contribute to confidence-building and foster conditions conducive to long-term conflict transformation and peaceful resolution.

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