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Lasha Takalandze,

*Master Student of the European and International Studies (MEIS)
University of Trento (Italy)*

Olha Rudenko,

*Director of SRI of Public Administration and Management,
Professor of the Department of Management of Chernihiv*

*National University of Technology,
Doctor of Sciences in Public Administration,
Associate Professor (Ukraine)*

THE RUSSIAN INVOLVEMENT IN DOMESTIC CONFLICTS OF GEORGIA

Статтю присвячено виявленню причетності Росії до етнополітичних конфліктів у Грузії в контексті домінуючих теорій міжнародних відносин. Дослідження зосереджено на основних конфліктах, що виникали у Грузії, зокрема в Абхазії та Південній Осетії (Цхінвальська область), починаючи від 1920-х років аж до російсько-грузинської війни 2008 року. Незважаючи на те, що внутрішні характеристики конфліктів Абхазії та Південної Осетії децю різняться, російська політика, пов'язана з ними, є аналогічною.

В основі статті – методологія контент-аналізу. Дослідження ґрунтуються на двох теоріях міжнародних відносин: теорії Вальца про неореалізм («оборонний реалізм») та теорії Мізерсхаймера про «наступальний реалізм», яка доводить гіпотезу, що основною причиною російської агресії в Грузії є прагнення регіональної гегемонії в регіоні Південного Кавказу для контролю енергоносіїв та енергопостачання, а також припинення західної інтеграції Грузії, особливо процесу інтеграції в НАТО та Європейський Союз. На підтвердження цих теорій проведено аналогії між Грузією та Україною щодо прагнення Росії здобути регіональну гегемонію в пострадянських регіонах та отримати статус наддержави в усьому світі.

Ключові слова: *неореалізм, регіональна гегемонія, конфлікти.*

The main purpose of the paper is to identify the involvement of Russia in the ethno-political conflicts of Georgia, in the context of the dominant theories of international relations. The research is focused on the conflicts in Georgia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region) – starting from the 1920ies till the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. Despite the fact that the internal characteristics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts are different, Russian politics related to those issues is similar. In this research the qualitative research methodology, particularly qualitative content analyses and case study method are used. Research is based on two theories of International Relation: Waltz's theory of neo-realism "Defensive Realism" and Mearsheimer's theory of "Offensive Realism". Mearsheimer's theory of "Offensive Realism" supports the argument

that the main reason for the Russian aggression in Georgia is to remain regional hegemony in the South Caucasus region to control the energy carriers and energy supply, as well as to stop the Western integration of Georgia, especially the integration process into the NATO and the European Union.

Key words: *Neo-realism, Regional Hegemony, Conflicts.*

Introduction. This research analyzes the processes began during 1920ies, when Georgia was occupied by Soviet Russia and will be analyzed the conflicts that began at the end of the 1980ies in Georgia, while Gorbachev's Policy of "Perestroika" (Restructuring) and "Glasnost" (Openness) led to 'the Explosion' of national movements in Soviet republics and it finally led to the dismantle of the Soviet System. As a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, there emerged sovereign states and, consequently, started a new era in international relations. These processes had profound impact on relations between nations and ethnic groups, especially in the South Caucasus region (conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh) [1, p. 5-7].

In this context, the case of Georgia is very interesting. Usually, scholars identify internal and external factors for explaining causes of the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. The paper examines and discusses the main external factors that caused violent conflicts in Georgian separatist territories and I want to show that the artificial escalation of conflicts is linked to Russia's great strategic goals. In 2005 Vladimir Putin mentioned that the collapse of Soviet empire "was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" [2]. As the successor of the Soviet Union, Russia was actively trying to maintain its influence in the region, and was therefore interested in escalating the conflicts. The Kremlin was mobilizing and manipulating separatist and nationalist forces in the South Caucasus; The presence of hostile camps in the South Caucasus region is a source of constant tension, allowing Russia to take advantage of the volatile situation and maintain its influence and control mechanisms in the region [3, p. 298-312]. At the external level, the causes of these conflicts will be determined by examining the basic theories of international relations, in particular, Neo-realism makes a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis in the context of these conflicts.

The paper consists of one research question: Why is Russia involved in the Abkhazia and in the South Ossetia Conflicts?

This study consists of one hypotheses: The main reason for conflict has been Russia's desire for regional hegemony.

Numerous variables and their interrelationships can be distinguished in the paper. I consider the following to be the decisive equation: Independent variable: Russia's desire for regional hegemony; Dependent variable: Russia's encouragement and support of separatism.

Methodologically, the paper is considered in the category of qualitative research and uses the case-study method as a basic methodological approach. For the purpose of data collection and analysis, secondary sources and other scientific literature on the topic were analyzed to create a scientific basis for the research. Specific techniques such as content analyses were also used.

Literature Review. In the process of the research there were analyzed secondary sources, in order to collect the historical events and the subject related scientific literature. The review includes the views of some representatives of the Neo-Realism school, including Kenneth Waltz – “*The Theory of International Politics*” and John Mearsheimer – “*Structural Realism*”.

The paper uses statements from international organizations, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, and official documents, as well as public speeches by the leaders of the parties to the conflict. Also, scientific-research papers of Georgian scholars, articles, materials found in electronic media. In particular, Neil S. Macfarlane – *The Paradoxical regional Implications of Russia’s Actions in Georgia*, 2008; Nino Okhanashvili – “*Theoretical Analysis of the Causes of Ethno-Political Conflicts (South Caucasus Case)*”, 2018; Teimuraz Kancheli – *The Role of International Factor in Settlement/Pegging of Conflict*, GFSIS, 2013; Davit Matsaberidze, *The Emergence of The Post-Soviet Conflicts in Georgia*, 2013 and there were analyzed internet sources as well.

Historical overview: Case of South Ossetia and Case of Abkhazia. The volatile political situation in Georgia has created many problems since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which remain unresolved. Conflicts in Abkhazia and in the Tskhinvali region are still the main vectors of Georgia’s domestic and foreign policy, despite many other problems. The causes of Georgian conflicts are at different levels. Internal and external factors are interrelated. The aim of the paper is to show how external factors affect the internal level and research is based on the views of some of the School of Neo-Realism as well. The Neo-realism is systemic theory, which describes the world as an anarchic system, where the main actors are states and all the others are irrelevant or instrument of the more powerful states.

Since the occupation of Georgia in 1921, Russians constantly interfered in the relations between Georgians and Abkhazians or Ossetians and tried to separate Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region from Georgia. On March 28-29, 1921, Soviet occupiers declared Abkhazia as an autonomous socialist republic. On April 20, 1922, Soviet Russian government formed the so-called South Ossetian Autonomous Region as well, which was an artificial formation and an inappropriate term for the historical territory of Shida Kartli, where Ossetians lived. Of course, Russia needed these autonomous republics as political mines to use these mines when Georgia would decide to leave from the USSR. In the end of 1980ies in Georgia began demonstrations against the Soviet regime. Gorbachev warned the leaders of Georgian National Movements that if Georgia would try to leave the USSR, the country would have had a serious problem, in particular, in its autonomous formations and regions populated by national minorities. Parallel of this, in Abkhazia and in Ossetia were escalated ethnic conflicts by Russians. Gorbachev did not hide Russia’s plans. In a telephone conversation with Zviad Gamsakhurdia (the leader of the National Movement of Georgia) in 1991, Gorbachev threatened that “if independence was declared, Georgia would have to leave the USSR without the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia” [1, p. 63-85]. The events unfolding in the future became clear that these threats were real.

Georgia officially declared independence on 9th April 1991. In July 9, 1991 was adopted a new electoral law in Abkhazia, according to this law, a majority of the Supreme Council of the Abkhazia belonged to the ethnic minority – Abkhazians. 47% of the population (Georgians) was presented by 26 deputies in the parliament; – 17% of population (Abkhazians) – 28 deputies; the rest (of various ethnic population) – 11 deputies. In August 1992, the Georgian government dispatched 3,000 troops to the region, ostensibly to restore order. The conflict had been started and lasted till 1993. The Abkhazian separatists were supported by thousands of the North Caucasians and by the Russian Federation forces stationed in and near Abkhazia. In 1993 the Abkhazia declared its “independence” [4, p. 1-2]. Georgia’s military defeat in Abkhazia was followed by the ethnic cleansing of the Georgian majority in this region.

As for the case of South Ossetia, while the Soviet Union was crumbling, the Tskhinvali Region declared independence from Georgia on 20 September 1990, calling themselves “the Republic of South Ossetia”. 1991 Georgian central government decided to restore territorial integrity and deploy troops in Tskhinvali region [5, p. 8]. As in the case of Abkhazia, these conflicts were escalated by Russia. And the 1990ies conflict ended up with defeat of Georgia by Russian troops and separatist militaries.

Later the complete control of South Ossetia followed by the process of ‘Russian Passportization’ in this region starting from 2002. This process was effectively used later by Putin, because Russians justified its August 8, 2008 invasion of Georgia on its responsibility to protect South Ossetia’s Russian citizens from the Georgian government’s aggression. As well, in April 2008, Russia accused Georgia of trying to exploit the NATO support in order to control Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region by force, and announced, it would increase Russian military in the region, pledging to “retaliate” militarily to Georgia’s efforts. The 2008 Russia-Georgian War was an armed conflict between Georgia on one side, and Russia and the separatist governments of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the other. August 2008 events have had very heavy results, both, for Georgians and for Ossetians. Territorial administration existing before August 2008 has changed completely and this further complicates restoration of Georgian-Ossetian dialogue.

This war was very important in sense of International Politics. If Russia had not officially declared its involvement in Georgia’s “domestic conflicts” and was only indirectly involved, in 2008 Russia emerged as a party in this war. Russia officially declared its imperial ambitions to remain post-soviet countries as its own spheres of influence [6, p. 2-3]. On 25 August 2008, the Federal Assembly of Russia unanimously voted to urge President Medvedev to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. In response to Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian Parliament in October 2008, adopted the Law “On the occupied territories”. Currently about 20% of territory of Georgia are considered as occupied territories according to this law. The unilateral recognition by Russia was met by condemnation from the International Community because of the violation of Georgia’s territorial integrity.

Theoretical Expectations and Empirical results. Neo-Realism is the theory of international politics and it is divided into two theories – Offensive and Defensive Realism. Mearsheimer studies international context with a high interactive density and support the idea that the internal attributes of the international actors and the attributes of their interactions are often not enough to modify the context of international politics. Mearsheimer believes that increasing power for the state is not limited. He disagrees with Kenneth Waltz's theory of "defensive realism" [7, p. 173-190], which argues: for state it is important to maintain strength but not to increase strength. Waltz's world is made up of states that are content with their power – Status-quo states. Mearsheimer believes that the international system is pushing states to maximize power, and they prefer a situation where the benefits outweigh the costs [8, p. 33-38].

Thus, Mearsheimer [9, p. 71-88] concludes that states will soon analyze that the most effective way to survive in anarchy is relative strength, and that the main goal is to become the strongest force – the hegemonic state. But achieving the global hegemony is not enough for the state. Superpower will try to maintain a balance of power and to prevent the hegemony of other states in its own region. Global hegemony is virtually impossible unless the state has a "nuclear advantage". Mearsheimer believes that hegemon can only be regional.

According to some political analysts Putin is pursuing a plan to revive Russia's superpower status. This includes reorganization of military forces and development of new weapons, consolidation of political and economical relations with neighboring countries. To gain status of superpower globally, Russia should have at first sufficient decision-making power within neighbour countries (Post-Soviet region) – Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, etc. Georgia is the best target on this list according to different political, geopolitical, economical, internal situation, existing regional problems [3, p. 298-312].

First of all, what irritates Russia is Georgia's permanent vector to join NATO. This approach is clearly set out in the "Russia's National Security Strategy Until 2020" (proved by Presidential decree N537 of May 12, 2009). It clearly states Russia's determination to oppose the eastern expansion of NATO and not to yield to the "competition" for influence over the region rich in energy resources; including the "Caspian Sea Basin". In Spring 2008 Ukraine and Georgia were promised to get Membership Action Plans (MAP) at later stage, but at the Bucharest NATO summit MAP was not offered for these countries. This negative decision became the "Green Light" for Russia to intervene Georgia and to stop the NATO's eastern expansion.

Secondly, Russia wants to have full control over gas (South Caucasus Pipeline, also known as: Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum Pipeline, BTE pipeline, or Shah Deniz Pipeline) and oil pipelines (from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil field in the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. It connects Baku – Azerbaijan; Tbilisi – Georgia; and Ceyhan, a port on the south-eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey) – the only pipelines which supplies oil to Europe bypassing territory of Russia [3, p. 298-312].

Conclusion. Thus, as Mersheimer states, the fundamental factor of international stability should be the sought for in the attributes of the international

structure which induces states to maximize their power, proceeding “offensively” and actively accumulating it until they are not stopped by others.

In conclusion, after analyzing the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it appeared that Mearsheimer’s offensive realism best explains Russia’s policy in the South Caucasus region and particularly in Georgia. But in opposite Waltz’ defensive realism claims, that rational states do not increase their power, but they try to keep Status-quo globally and to avoid conflicts, which less corresponds the cases of Georgia. Moscow’s policy was to have as much confrontation as possible between the ethnic groups in Georgia, to have more mines planted. Thus, the main goal for Russia is to increase power and gain the regional hegemony in Post-Soviet regions; the 2008 war and later the conflict escalations in Ukraine are the proof of Mearsheimer’s theory of defensive realism.

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