

# The Role of Russia in Provoking Conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians

## *Gürcistan-Abhazya Çatışmasını Alevlendirmede Rusya'nın Rolü*

**Fatih Mehmet SAYIN**

Assist. Prof. Dr., Canik Basari University, Department of Political Science and International Relations,  
(fmsayin@basari.edu.tr)

**Valeri MODEBADZE**

Assoc. Prof. Dr., American University for Humanities, Department of Social Sciences, (valery\_4@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** *Frozen conflicts, Georgia-Abkhazia conflict, Russian Imperialism, "Divide and Rule" policy, repatriation of Georgian refugees*

Soviet government deliberately created three autonomous units in Georgia in order to establish absolute control on freedom-loving Georgian people. These autonomous units served to the political interests of Russia and they were used by Kremlin as a political weapon for retaining influence over Georgia. After the collapse of Soviet Union, Russia has started to assist separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to retain control over independent Georgia.

Russia played a decisive role in inciting Georgian–Abkhazian conflict. International community is well informed about the involvement of Russian forces in the war of Abkhazia in 1992-1993. Russia still uses breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as leverage for making pressure on Georgia and avoids its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

### ÖZ

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Soğuk Çatışmalar, Gürcistan-Abhazya Çatışması, Rus emperyalizmi, "Böl ve yönet" siyaseti, Gürcü sığınmacıların geri iadesi*

Sovyet hükümeti, özgürlüğüne bağlı olan Gürcü halkı üzerinde kesin kontrol kurma amacıyla Gürcistan'da kasıtlı olarak üç özerk birlik oluşturdu. Bu özerk birlikler Rusya'nın politik çıkarları doğrultusunda hareket edip Kremlin tarafından Gürcistan üzerinde kullanılmak üzere politik bir silah olarak hizmet verdiler. Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından sonra Rusya, Gürcistan üzerindeki kontrolünü devam ettirebilmek için, Abhazya ve Güney Osetya'daki ayrılıkçı güçlere destek olmaya başladı.

Rusya, Gürcistan-Abhazya arasındaki anlaşmazlığını tetiklemek için kararlı bir rol oynadı. Uluslar arası toplum Rus kuvvetlerinin 1992-1993'deki Abhazya Savaşı'na dâhil olduğu konusundan haberdardı. Rusya hala Abhazya ve Güney Osetya ayrılıkçı bölgelerini Gürcistan üzerinde baskı uygulamak ve Gürcistan'ın Avro-Atlantik yapıya dâhil olmasını engellemek için bir baskı unsuru olarak kullanmaktadır.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between different ethnic groups residing in Caucasus started to deteriorate sharply which created a lot of instability in this region. Caucasus is a multiethnic and multi-confessional region, and Russia has always used this multiethnicity to achieve its political objectives. In the Post-Soviet period, the region has witnessed a number of violent conflicts with large refugee flows, which caused the emergence of enormous socio-economic problems in all Caucasian states. Separatist conflicts brought devastation and massive suffering. One of the most brutal conflicts which attracted the attention of the whole world was the conflict in Abkhazia which still remains unresolved, and the status of Abkhazia has not yet determined (Cohen, 1999). These conflicts are an obstacle to progress in building a viable state and a prosperous democratic country. Territorial integrity of Georgia is in danger since the de facto independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia may encourage other minorities to start secessionist conflicts and destabilize the country.

Russia is still pursuing a traditional policy of 'Divide and Rule' in Caucasus. With the Russian help, the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia managed to secede from Georgia and the region is effectively under control of Russian army, and Russian

occupation forces are deployed at this breakaway region. Approximately 15 thousand people died in Georgian-Abkhazian War, and 200 to 250 thousand Georgians, which was more than half of Abkhazia's population, were forced to abandon Abkhazia and move to other regions of Georgia. The displacement of hundreds of thousands of people has changed a demographic balance and in the future it may cause the emergence of manpower crisis in Abkhazia. The population of Abkhazia has been reduced from 525 thousand people in 1989 to an estimated 100 to 150 thousand today. The conflict had devastating consequences for Abkhazia, as well as for Georgia.

## **2. TSARIST RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARDS ABKHAZIA**

The reasons of conflict should have already been searched in earlier centuries. Although ethnically Abkhazians are not related to Georgians, Abkhazia formed part of Georgian cultural and political realm since ancient times. Abkhazians, unlike Georgians, did not have the alphabet, and Georgian was the language of the Abkhaz elite and aristocracy. The language of worship for the Orthodox Abkhaz people was ancient Georgian (Coppeters, Nodia & Anchabadze, 1998). The spread of Christianity played very important role in diffusing Georgian culture in Abkhazia. However, close cultural and political ties between Georgians and Abkhazians were somehow weakened after the spread of Islam along the Black Sea Coast.

From the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Islam began to spread along the Abkhazian coast, even though it has never entirely replaced Orthodox Christianity. The Abkhaz elite remained mostly influenced by Georgian culture and traditions. Georgian-Abkhazian relations deteriorated especially after the arrival of Russians in Caucasus region. The Russian Empire started to expand rapidly southwards and reached the Transcaucasia at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Russians began to spread their influence in Caucasus and created settlements along the Black Sea Coast. Thus, Russia started active colonization of the whole Black Sea shore which was considered as a threat by Caucasian nations. Russians forcefully changed ethnic composition of Abkhazia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Jackson, 2003). Abkhazians and their kinsfolk resisted the attempts of Russia to colonize whole Black Sea coast. All kinds of rebellions were violently suppressed by Tsarism. Abkhazians and their ethnically related people such as Ubykhs and Adigheans were forcibly displaced to Turkey. As a result of aggressive Russian imperial policy, Abkhazians became a minority in their own country and Russia slowly retained control over the newly occupied lands (Petersen, 2008).

Tsarist government pursued very active Russification policy in Abkhazia the aim of which was to weaken Georgian influence, replace historical Georgian orientation typical in Abkhazians by a Russian orientation, and assimilate the people residing in Abkhazia. Russians were determined to eradicate all signs testifying that Abkhazia was an integral part of Georgia. Russification process which continued during the Soviet Era, affected especially small nations including the Abkhazians which are on the whole rightly regarded as Russian speakers. A high percent of people in Abkhazia who have no command of the mother tongue and are Russophones. As the Georgian language lost its significance in Abkhazia, pro-Georgian orientation was gradually replaced by pro-Russian orientation.

Russian empire played also very important role in the development of Abkhaz ethnic nationalism as a counterweight to Georgian nationalism, which was regarded as more dangerous. Russians actively encouraged the creation of Abkhaz alphabet based on Cyrillic. The creation of a written Abkhazian language and the emergence of a new nation was the result of tsarist government's "Divide and Rule" policy (Coppeters, Nodia & Anchabadze, 1998).

## **3. SOVIET UNION'S POLICY TOWARDS ABKHAZIA AND THE OUTBREAK OF WAR**

When Bolsheviks occupied Georgia in 1921, they decided to divide it into a number of autonomous units which would be subordinated to the influence of RSFSR. First, they separated Abkhazia from Georgia, and declared it as an independent Soviet Socialist republic. Later on, in 1931, they changed the status of Abkhazia and recognized it as an autonomous republic which formed part of Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Abkhazia was supposed to be a 'hot point' which, in case of necessity, could be used against freedom-loving Georgians if they would start claiming independence. Tensions in Abkhazia continued for decades, and several times in 1957, 1967, 1978 and 1988, Abkhazia unsuccessfully tried to secede from Georgia and join Russia. Moscow supported separatist forces and encouraged them to fight against the central government of Georgia. In 1988 and 1989, Abkhazian people applied again to Russian authorities with the request to change the autonomous status of Abkhazia, and expressed their desire to remain in Soviet Union as a union republic. The tension intensified when Abkhaz Supreme Council decided to restore the constitution of 1925, which practically meant the declaration of independence of Abkhazia (The constitution of 1925 specified that Abkhazia was a separate Union Republic rather than an inseparable part of Georgia). The declaration of independence paved the way for the emergence of conflict. In August 1992, Georgian State Council immediately sent 3000 Georgian troops led by the Minister of Defense Kitovani in order to restore order and stability in Abkhazia, establish control on the highways and railroads, and disband illegal armed troops stationed in the autonomous republic.

From the very beginning of the war, Abkhazians received support from the North Caucasians and Russians (Fawn, 2003). The majority of Bolsheviks, who fought on the side of Abkhaz separatists, were Russian citizens, and their organization into the battle groups, provision with army and ammunition took place on the Russian territory. The anti-Georgian military coalition consisted mostly of North Caucasians, Armenians, Cossacks, militants from Transnistria and various Russian special units. Without Russian support, Abkhazians, who represented only 1.8% of Georgia's total population, were incapable of offering any serious resistance to Georgians (Fain, 2006). Thousands of Russian Bolsheviks and volunteers from the Northern Caucasus joined the Abkhaz side. Because of the Russian support Abkhazians felt confident enough to fight against Georgians. Thus, the Russian military and armed forces played a decisive role in defeating Georgians. With the Russian military assistance, a small ethnic group of 93 thousand managed to defeat a nation of 3.8 million (Graham, 2000).

Initially Georgians were successful and controlled most of the territory of Abkhazia but in 1993 Abkhazians launched a counter offensive with the help of Russia, and expelled Georgian troops from all regions of Abkhazia (Aybak, 2001). In 1993, after the humiliating defeat in Abkhazia, Georgia was forced to join CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) which they had previously spurned and agreed to legitimize Russian military bases in Abkhazia and other parts of Georgia. As a result, the Russian military presence increased in Georgia, and Russia managed to deploy CIS peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia (de Waal, 2010). Russia was allowed to keep military bases in Gudauta, Akhalkalaki, Batumi and Vaziani. Although joining CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) was a shameful and humiliating event and perceived in Georgia as an act of capitulation, people expected some concession from Russia in return of this act of capitulation. There was a widespread opinion that Russia would help Georgia to restore its territorial integrity and establish control over the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Mass return of the Georgian refugees under the protection of the Russian army was assumed to be the first step taken for the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia. But Russian peacekeeping forces failed to create favorable conditions for the safe return of Georgian refugees. About 30 thousand Georgians who had returned to Abkhazia were forced to abandon the country because of the complete lack of security guarantees (Nygren, 2007). Only a small amount of Georgian refugees could return to their homes and most of them still remain outside of Abkhazia. Abkhazians and Russians are reluctant to accept Georgian refugees because they are afraid to lose control over the region and their dominant political position. The return of refugees is perceived as a threat to the national security because Abkhazians are afraid to become a minority again (Kocaman, 2007). Georgians were the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia and they made up 45.7% of the population while Abkhazians were only 17.8%. The rest of the population of Abkhazia consisted of Armenians, Greeks and Russians.

Since the end of the war, Georgia has sought to regain control over Abkhazia but without exit. Little progress has been made in bilateral negotiations on the future political status of Abkhazia. The separatist regime does not accept any Georgian proposal on conflict resolution. The Georgian government offered large autonomy to Abkhazia but the puppet regime of Sokhumi has refused all proposals of union with Georgia and threatened to quit Geneva talks many times. The Georgian government intends to resolve the conflict peacefully, only through diplomacy, and rejects the use of force in the future. The peaceful resolution of the conflict is one of the main priorities of Georgian government. However, the conflict still remains unresolved because Russia is interested in freezing the conflict and using Abkhazia as a political weapon. Russian government believes that unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are an excellent insurance policy against the expansions of Euro-Atlantic institutions into its neighborhood (Cornell, 2014).

Over the last decade, Russia started to act more aggressively in Caucasus region and offered more support to separatist forces because of Georgia's pro-Western stance and the desire to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. Russia decided to violate Georgia's territorial integrity and recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia officially in order to stop Georgia's integration in NATO. As the former president of Russia Medvedev stated, the 2008 August War and the invasion of Georgia's breakaway regions thwarted NATO's plans to expand further on the post-Soviet space. "We have simply calmed some of our neighbors down by showing them that they should behave properly in respect of Russia and in respect of neighboring small states. And for some of our partners, including the North Atlantic Alliance, it was a signal that before taking a decision about expansion of the Alliance, one should at first think about the geopolitical stability. I deem these [issues] to be the major lessons of those developments in 2008," Medvedev said (Civil Georgia, 2011). Moscow thinks that frozen conflicts will thwart further NATO expansion in Caucasus. Russians believe that European Union and NATO will never grant membership to countries with unresolved conflicts. Putin knows that grabbing Abkhazia and South Ossetia will prevent any possibility of Georgia's future membership in NATO and European Union. Therefore, Moscow will continue to use frozen conflicts to destabilize and weaken Georgia and prevent its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Kremlin is seeking to retain its influence over Caucasus and former Soviet states (German, 2006). Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations remain an irritant for Russia; Russia's main goal is to make Georgia ineligible for EU and NATO membership, and therefore, adamantly opposes any attempts of restoration of peace and stability in Caucasus (Andersen, 2001).

Security environment of Georgia considerably worsened after the 2008 August War and the deployment of Russian occupational forces in Georgian territories. The presence of Russian troops in the breakaway regions of Georgia and the construction of military bases there create a staging ground for new provocative actions and possible renewed military aggression against the sovereign state. Russian military presence in the occupied Georgian territories is regarded as the major

threat to the national security of Georgia (Modebadze & Sayin, 2014). The threat of renewed hostilities persists as long as Russian occupational forces remain in breakaway regions of Georgia.

#### **4. ETHNIC CLEANSING OF GEORGIANS AND THE ISSUE OF REPATRIATION OF GEORGIAN REFUGEES**

Russian Federation managed to infringe the territorial integrity of Georgia through military aggression and occupied 20% of its territories. Massive human right violations occurred by Russian and separatist forces in the occupied territories. The international community has revealed widespread facts of ethnic cleansing of Georgians as well as the deliberate destruction of their belongings and private property. Russia has forcefully implemented demographic changes in the occupied territories, and Georgian people repeatedly became the victims of ethnic cleansing in their own country (Modebadze & Sayin, 2013).

The ethnic cleansing and massacres of Georgians has been officially recognized by the OSCE conventions in 1994, 1996, and 1997 during the Budapest, Lisbon and Istanbul Summits which condemned the genocide against Georgians and war crimes against humanity. On May 15, 2008, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution A/RES/62/249 in which it expressed deep concern by 'the humanitarian situation created by the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of persons from Abkhazia, Georgia and regretted any attempt to alter the pre-conflict demographic composition in Abkhazia, Georgia' (General Assembly, 2008). This is a very important resolution which 1) recognizes the right of return of all refugees and internally displaced people and their descendants, regardless of ethnicity, to Abkhazia, Georgia; 2) emphasizes the importance of preserving the property rights of refugees and internally displaced people from Abkhazia and Georgia, including victims of reported "ethnic cleansing", and calls upon all member states to deter people under their jurisdiction from obtaining property within the territory of Abkhazia and Georgia, in violation of the rights of returnees; 3) underlines the urgent need for the rapid development of a timetable to ensure the prompt voluntary return of all refugees and internally displaced people to their homes in Abkhazia and Georgia" (General Assembly, 2008).

There is no doubt that soon or later all Georgian refugees should return to Abkhazia. Nobody can take away this internationally recognized right from them. In 1994, the Abkhazian side signed the Quadripartite Agreement on the 'voluntary return of refugees and displaced people'. By signing this agreement, the Abkhazian side agreed to guarantee the safe and dignified return of all refugees to Abkhazia (Francis, 2011). However, because of the total absence of security guarantees and the widespread human rights violations, the implementation of the above mentioned resolution seems impossible at the moment. The 250 thousand Georgian refugees, about half of the pre-war population of Abkhazia, who left the breakaway republic at the end of 1993, are being deprived of their unconditional right to return home. Once returned, they may become the victims of discrimination, humiliation, maltreatment and physical abuse. As long as Russian occupation forces stay in Abkhazia, the repatriation issue will remain unresolved. Russia from the beginning of the war was and still remains responsible for escalating human rights violations in Abkhazia. Russian citizens committed atrocities in Abkhazia and assisted separatists in carrying out massacres against Georgians. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (U.N.H.C.R.) which has been charged with the duty of repatriation of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia since the fall of 1994 suspended the repatriation process in late 1994 because of the absence of any security guarantees and lack of progress in returning internally displaced people to their home (Human Rights Watch, 1995).

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Russia uses Abkhazia as a tool for establishing control over Georgia. Moscow is interested in freezing Georgian - Abkhazian conflict in order to keep its influence in the Caucasus region. The conflict in Abkhazia was nothing but Kremlin's provocation the aim of which was to draw Georgia back into Russia's orbit. After the Georgian - Abkhazian War, Russia managed to achieve its geo-political objectives: defeated Georgia was forced to join CIS (Commonwealth of Independent states) and legitimize Russian military bases in the country. Russia was allowed to keep military bases in Georgia and expand the size of its armed forces in Abkhazia. Thus, the main purpose of Georgian - Abkhazian War was to convert Georgia into a satellite state of Russia.

Triggering territorial disputes in the Former Soviet Republics that try to escape from the Russian 'sphere of influence' has become Moscow's common practice to regain control over post-Soviet space. This is part of long-term strategy the aim of which is to extend Moscow's 'sphere of influence' and draw the post-Soviet countries back into Russia's orbit. Russia uses frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to stop Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and the European Union.

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