

**The irreversibility of history: the conflicts in South Ossetia and  
Abkhazia**

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**Abstract:**

In 2008, Georgia engaged militarily its breakaway region of South Ossetia, a fact which aggravated the bilateral tension and culminated in Russia's military presence in both S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia's second breakaway region. This development rekindled the two smoldering, since the early 1990s, conflicts, revitalizing also interest in the causal mechanism. Thus, a historical institutionalist account examines lasting regional political preferences, through an ethnicized (Georgian) national identity, comparatively feeble growth, and unemployment. Russia serves as a contextual factor to allow for the primacy of the state-level analysis. The conclusions corroborate the irreversible impact of structural deficiencies.

**Key words:** Georgia, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, regional political preferences

## 1. Introduction

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, South Ossetian separatists, capitalizing on earlier tensions between S. Ossetia and Georgia, blew up a Georgian military vehicle, wounding five Georgian peacekeeping troops (Financial Times). Georgia fought back, killing six S. Ossetian militiamen and leaving many wounded in a sniper war which had just begun (Olearchyk 2008). Both sides incriminated the other for inciting violence in the mountainous region adjacent to Russia, expediting, in parallel, its evacuation in polar opposite directions; S. Ossetians were being transported to Russia's Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia's capital city, whereas Georgians were fleeing for other, safer places in Georgia (Amnesty International 2008, 8).

A Russian initiative to convene a United Nations (UN) Security Council emergency meeting on the rapidly deteriorating situation proved short of getting the two belligerents to renounce the use of force (Amnesty International 2008, p.9). Consequently, the initial skirmishes soon revealed their tidal forces, with a five-day war breaking out at 11.30pm on August 7<sup>th</sup>, when the Georgian offensive pounded Tskhinvali (Avaliani et al. 2008). This war quickly soared into a major international incident, enmeshing regional and global powers; Russia, the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) became integral parts, each in its own manner.

Russia, acting within the legal framework that had been created in the aftermath of the first major eruption of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in 1991-2, sent its 58<sup>th</sup> army in S. Ossetia to reinforce its peacekeeping forces (Izvestya.ru 2008). The US, which at the time stationed 130 military advisers in Georgia, found itself in a diplomatic plight, denying, on the one hand, that it had ever sanctioned the action against S. Ossetia, and being accused, on the other hand, for not doing more to intercept the crisis (Financial Times 2008). Indicative is the statement by Strobe Talbot, the former US deputy secretary of state: "I am quite convinced there was no green light. There was definitely a problem with an insufficiently red light" (Financial Times 2008).<sup>1</sup> France, finally, which was holding the rotating presidency of the EU, succeeded, on August 13<sup>th</sup>, in persuading the leaders of Georgia and Russia to give their consent to a six-point peace plan that would stop the war, the second major eruption in S. Ossetia in the post-soviet period (Kramer 2008).

This five-day war, apart from the international outcry, added numerous internally displaced peoples (IDPs) to those of the brief civic wars in the early 1990s. According to estimates by the Georgian government and the UN refugee agency, 192,000 IDPs were the direct effect (UNHCR 2008). Within this estimate, 2,500 people were displaced from the Georgia-controlled Upper Kodori valley in Abkhazia, since the S. Ossetian conflict served the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict as a convenient pretext for expelling the remaining Georgians from the second breakaway region (Amnesty International 2008, p.51). Although the biggest part of the IDPs has returned to its place of residence, 31,000 people have not (UNHR 2008)

Thus, considering that Georgia is hosting 223,000 IDPs from the early 1990s, the extra 31,000 of August 2008 totaled the number to 254,000 at the fall of 2008, only to be revised upwards in December 2014 to 262,704 (UNHR 2008; IDMC 2016). This situation permeated the Georgian society, with a displaced woman at the Dila camp on the outskirts of Tbilisi to encapsulate the widespread distress as follows: “Why do we need this fighting and the atrocities? Why are they killing us?” (Fawkes 2008).

In view of these, the aim of the present article is to examine the August 2008 crisis within a comparative historical continuum. Employing a primarily historical institutionalist theoretical platform, it is argued that in a crisis, where Russia would be involved, lasting regional political preferences embedded in a highly ethnicized (Georgian) national identity, comparatively feeble macro-economic growth, and unemployment, would serve as the main mobilization factors in both S. Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even more, they would set in motion an almost irreversible course by solidifying a *de facto* institutional order which had been smoldering since the era of the first major eruption in early 1990s. To substantiate such an argument, two, critically important, periods (early independence period vs crisis period – 2008) are put in comparative perspective with a dual purpose: a) to assess the existence of the same or similar regional political preferences and national identity type then and now, and b) to assess the contextual impact of the (economically-perceived) quality of life of Georgia and Russia on the breakaway regions by connecting the two periods *via* time-series.

## **2. The issue of ethnic conflict in Georgia within a structure-agent frame**

The Soviet state (USSR) was founded on the institution of ethnofederalism, according to which multiethnicity was deemed the leading principle of social and political life (Beissinger 2002, 50). It was territorially divided into a hierarchical system of administrative units (Soviet Socialist Republics –SSRs-) and sub-units (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics –ASSRs-, autonomous okrugs, and autonomous oblasts), designed in such a manner so as to represent the “fatherland” of a respective nationality (Wheatley 2009, 120). Focusing, now, on the case of the Georgian SSR, Abkhazia and Adjara had been attributed the status of the ASSR, whereas S. Ossetia had been attributed the status of the autonomous oblast (Wheatley 2009, 120).<sup>2</sup>

Tracing back lasting regional political preferences and dominant types of national identity, S. Ossetia had been part of the Georgian SSR from 1936 till 1991. During this period, it never ceased to be a separate minority, above all in an identity-critical element such as that of the language; the dominance of an Eastern Iranian language among Ossetians that is hardly compatible with that of the Georgians, has brought about a reality, that as of 1988, 86% of Ossetians could not communicate with Georgians (Hunter cited after Nielsen 2009, 174). Moreover, the Georgians perceived the creation of a S. Ossetian territory within Georgia as a manipulation of ethnic groups in the form of “divide and rule” on behalf of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) so as to avert its independence (Birch 1995, 44; Hunter cited after Nielsen 2009, 176). This co-existence on parallel tracks deteriorated in the late 1980s, when the Ossetian Popular Front, Ademon Nykhaz (“Popular shrine”), riding the widespread across the Soviet territory “tide of nationalism”, denounced what it perceived as Georgianization policy against the Ossetian identity (Nielsen 2009; Beissinger 2002). Furthermore, it awakened the old (since 1925) demand for the reversal of Stalin’s federal structures, which had artificially divided Ossetia into North (within the RSFSR) and South (within Georgia), thus allowing for the unification of the two regions, even if this would happen “under the protective wing of Russia” (Birch 1995, 44).

In a more or less similar vein, Abkhazia constituted, after a brief period as an associated SSR (1922-1931), an ASSR inside the Georgian SSR from 1931 till 1991 (SSR Abkhazia 1925; Nielsen 2009, 175). The first twenty years of this co-existence

witnessed the suppressing and discriminatory policies of Lavrentii Beria, a Mingrelian born near Sukhumi (Abkhazia's capital) and first secretary of the Transcaucasian Communist Party, which jeopardized the Abkhaz cultural identity; in particular, immigration of large numbers of Mingrelians and other Georgians, Russians and Armenians took place, the representation of the Abkhaz people in the Abkhaz Communist Party was gravely curtailed (from 28.3% to 18.5%), the Abkhaz-language media ceased, the schools with curriculums in the Abkhaz language were abolished in favor of Russian or Georgian schools, while the Georgian alphabet replaced the Latin script (Slider 1985, 51-54). Although these policies were reversed *post mortem* Stalin's era, they had left their imprint; the Russian language had become the *lingua franca*, with the Abkhaz and the Georgian language to rather divide than unite; 75% of the Abkhaz claimed fluency in Russian, let alone many Abkhaz students pursued their academic studies mostly in the RSFSR, while 56% of the Georgians in Abkhazia claimed the same capacity (Slider 1985, 55). Moreover, the Abkhaz who spoke Georgian were limited to 1.4%, whereas Georgians of Abkhazia who spoke Abkhaz were 0.3% (Slider 1985, 55). This ethnic cleavage within Georgia, "one of the most nationalistic of the Soviet republics", rekindled the Abkhaz nationalistic orientation, which, since the 1930s, had preferred "separation from Georgia rather than Russian domination" (Beissinger 2002, 223; Hunter cited after Nielsen 2009, 176). As a result, in the late 1980s, concurrently with the Ademon Nykhaz, the Abkhaz nationalists formed their own Abkhaz Popular Forum, Aydgylara, which, although there was no "northern Abkhazia" in Soviet Russia to turn to, it did appeal to Moscow to protect the Abkhaz interests (Nielsen 2009, 175).

Bringing the two cases together, it emerges that erstwhile (Soviet-era) regional political preferences in both S. Ossetia and Abkhazia pointed towards the direction of either unification or independence, whereas the "Russia" option was resorted to as *ultima ratio*.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, these two cases showcase the (ethnic) type of nationalism permeating not only the Georgian SSR, but all the USSR.<sup>4</sup> This type draws extensively on elements from the German romanticism-coined concept of "primordialism", according to which the language, followed by the culture and religion, form the key determinants of nationality (Wheatley 2009, 121). Consequently, a primordial nation develops and crystallizes the notion of unquenched and unchallengeable rights over specific territories (Wheatley 2009, 121).

In December 1991, a Soviet long period of institutional stability and reproduction (institutional equilibrium) was succeeded by abrupt and change-breeding episodes of institutional fluidity (critical junctures), during which 15 independent new states were created (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341). Georgia's critical juncture period lasted almost four years, till August 1995, when the Georgian constitution was adopted, stipulating in the Article 1 par. 1, that:

Georgia shall be an independent, unified and indivisible state... including the (former) ASSR of Abkhazia and the Former Autonomous Region of South Ossetia by the Act of Restoration of the State Independence of Georgia of 9 April 1991 (The Constitution of Georgia 1995).

In this new institutional equilibrium (the critical juncture period included), there were two major interruptions as far as the conflicts are concerned: first, during the early 1990s with the formation of the *de facto* states of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, and second, during the mid-2008 with the heavy Russian military presence and the ensuing international recognitions by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru (Vzglyad 2016).

Within this context, much of the scholarly work focuses on the conflicts, covering multiple aspects. Moving across a structure (institutions) - agent (interests)scope, prime emphasis is placed on Georgia's state-building efforts and on the management of ethnic diversity within its borders (Broers 2008; George 2009; Wheatley 2009). Wheatley (2009, 119), in particular, operationalizes his argumentation around four structural variables: a) the "inability of the newly independent state to provide basic public goods", b) the lack of a "civic" type of nationalism "for the accommodation of minorities", c) the preservation of the Soviet norm according to which leaders used to operate disregarding the rule of law, and d) the Soviet legacy of ethnofederalism, "which carved out autonomous territories- Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia- from within Georgia that would...resist the encroachment of the new Georgian state". In parallel with Wheatley, George (2009, 135) discusses how certain centripetal aspects of Georgia's state-building policies on anti-corruption and democratization after the Rose Revolution in 2003 backfired, escalating interethnic tensions and, expediting the collision course up the August 2008 five-day war. In the same direction, Broers

(2008) pursues a structure-centered argumentation in demonstrating how ethnic diversity is conceived and managed, elaborating on political representation, language and education.

Another part of the scholarly work prioritizes the conflicts *per se* (Ambrosio and Lange 2016; Artman 2016; Birch 1995; Fabry 2012; Garb 2009; German 2016; Karagiannis 2014; King 2001; Nielsen 2009; Thomas 2009). To begin with, King (524, 552) develops a structure-agent analytical mix for understanding Eurasia's unrecognized states of the early 1990s, according to which "the distinction between freebooter and founding father, privateer and president, has often been far murkier in fact than national mythmaking normally allows...in civil wars, as in politics, asking *cui bono* can be illuminating". In a similar vein, Garb (235) emphasizes on the civil societies of Abkhazia and S.Ossetia after the August 2008 events, since comprehending institutionalized attitudes is essential in building trust "as a necessary foundation for progress in the political negotiations". Apart from that, other pieces (Ambrosio and Lange, Artman, Birch, German, Karagiannis, Thomas) adopt a primarily agency perspective, allocating special weight on Russia's multifaceted presence (military performance, passportization, annexation *via* bilateral agreements) in either the early 1990s conflicts or the 2008 five-day war. Further to this direction, a number of efforts (Faby, Nielsen) stresses the impact of the Kosovo precedent on Russia's recognition of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, with Faby (661) stating that, "it is extremely unlikely that Russia's recognition of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008 would have ever occurred without the prior US-led recognition of Kosovo in February 2008".

Finally, the last trend of the scholarly work takes on the internal dynamics within either S.Ossetia or Abkhazia (Bakke et al. 2014; Toal and O'Loughlin 2013). Bakke et al. (591-602) assess the quality of state-building in Abkhazia by measuring legitimacy, and conclude that the state-builders' success is contingent upon the fulfillment of fundamental aspects of the social contract such as security, safety and welfare provision. Likewise, Toal and O'Loughlin (136) look into S. Ossetia and measure "trust in local institutions and leadership, ethnic Ossetian attitudes towards other groups,...as well as relations with Russia and Georgia".

All that having been said, certain elements become apparent; first, there is more emphasis needed on the role of lasting regional political preferences within S. Ossetia and Abkhazia. Second, there is a call for a unified analytical framework, since

attention is paid to one of the two major-eruption periods, either to the early independence in the 1990s or the crisis in August 2008. Third, no political economy variables such as the GDP and the unemployment have been employed in a comparative manner, juxtaposing the major regional rivals, Georgia and Russia. It is important, however, to mention that Bakke et al (2014, 599-601) show the high correlation ( $r=1.01$  on average) of economic development problems with all forms of legitimacy, i.e. state, regime, and institutional, thus setting the grounds for plausible extrapolations at interstate level. As a result, the present analysis aims to systematize the probe into Georgia's conflicts, by examining within a comparative historical continuum the two critical periods of its post-soviet history in terms of lasting regional political preferences, a highly ethnicized type of national identity especially on behalf of the titular nation (Georgians), and comparatively feeble macro-economic growth and unemployment.

Discussing a historical, structure-focused, continuum, the theoretical account of Historical Institutionalism (HI) makes a critical case. Having been developed in parallel with Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) and Sociological Institutionalism (SI), all three seek to address two fundamental issues: a) the relationship between institutions and behavior, and b) the process whereby institutions originate and change (Hall and Taylor 1996, 937). Whereas RCI upholds the "calculus approach" which qualifies a rational actor (agency) primacy *vis-à-vis* the aforementioned issues, and SI adopts a "cultural approach" which emphasizes the primacy of both formal and informal institutions (official institutions and cultural respectively), HI stands in the middle benefiting from both strands (Hall and Taylor 1996, 945-950; Harrison and Huntington 2000; Peters, Pierre, and King 2005, 1296).

In particular, History is presented as a "contingent product of the interactions of a diversity of actors and institutions" along a continuum where a long, path-dependent, period of institutional equilibrium comes to be succeeded by a critical juncture period of fluidity and reconfiguration (Lecours 2000, 514; see above). Therefore, History, and more specifically slices of it, are put in comparative perspective so as by focusing on path dependence, which shows how institutions push "historical development along a set of 'paths'", to "explain the causes...and similarities of particular phenomena", with emphasis on power (James 2014, 5; Lecours 2000, 515; Hall and Taylor 1996, 941). Nevertheless, the "politics of path dependency" are faced with a challenge; "to explain what precipitates...critical junctures, and, although historical

institutionalists generally stress the impact of economic crisis and military conflict”, the issue of “change” invites further refinement (Hall and Taylor 1996, 942).

In the case in point, it is argued that:

- In a crisis where Russia would be involved, lasting regional political preferences embedded in a highly ethnicized (Georgian) national identity and in a comparatively feeble macro-economic growth and unemployment, as emerges from the juxtaposition of Georgia against Russia, would serve as the main mobilization factors in S. Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even more, they would instigate an almost irreversible course by solidifying a *de facto* institutional equilibrium which had been smoldering since the era of the first major eruption in early 1990s.

Operationalizing this hypothesis, the “lasting regional political preferences” constitute the independent variable, the “highly ethnicized (Georgian) national identity” the intervening variable, whereas Georgia’s and Russia’s “GDP per capita with the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) included (GDP per capita, PPP), and unemployment” form the contextual variables.<sup>5</sup> Russia and Georgia could influence the developments in both S.Ossetia and Abkhazia in two ways: first, their direct (military) involvement would make the lasting regional political preferences exhibit themselves in a more assertive and *de facto* manner, whereas second, a promising or not quality of life, reflected, at present, on the economic variants of the term, would help solidify these preferences.

Methodologically speaking, the conflicts are put within a comparative historical continuum which juxtaposes the two critical (major-eruption) periods of its post-soviet history, i.e. the early independence in the 1990s versus the crisis one in August 2008. Thus, an effort is made to prove the “path dependence” of regional political preferences within an ethnicized national identity in Georgia’s polity by creating “valid associations of potential causes” through Mill’s “Method of Agreement” (Skocpol 1979, 36). Nevertheless, putting side by side two slices of history in search of potential causes, a method developed for assessing natural experiments, would encounter difficulties, given the changeability of human nature and society (Mill 1950, 344). Therefore, in order to minimize this effect, the present analysis includes the abovementioned contextual variables in the form of time-series, so as to assess the

diachronic impact of the quality of life in Georgia and in Russia on the breakaway regions. It follows that, should the contextual variables have any influence on the intensity of regional political preferences, the maximum divergence between Georgia and Russia in the figure should coincide with the eras of the major eruption in both breakaway regions.

### **3. Inside the predicament: the first major-eruption period**

#### **3.1 South Ossetia and Abkhazia**

Georgia, just before the critical juncture period of the early 1990s (1991-1995) and the commencement of the all-out hostilities in S.Ossetia, made some decisive “policy-stops” that polarized political attitudes in the regions in point; briefly stated, in August 1989, its Supreme Soviet adopted a language program that expanded the use of Georgian, the official language of the SSR, throughout the public sphere, sidelining in this manner minority languages, such as the Ossetian or the Abkhaz, which up to that time relished equal status in minority areas (Cvetkovski 1999). Moreover, in August 1990, on the “eve” of the parliamentary elections, it passed an election law against the participation of area-confined parties, such as the Ademon Nykhaz or the Aydgylara, in the elections (Cvetkovski 1999).

Within this canvass of ethnic nationalism, the S.Ossetian oblast council revitalized its prior demand for more political autonomy *via* its upgrading to an ASSR, declaring on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1990, S. Ossetia an “Independent Soviet Democratic Republic” within the USSR (HRW 1992, 7). Heading towards polarization, on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1990, Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table, a coalition of political parties with extreme nationalistic views, won the parliamentary elections, airing the slogan “Georgia for Georgians”; this, in turn, made S. Ossetians more steadfast on their demand for independence, in fact by organizing elections for the region’s supreme soviet (HRW 1992, 8). By December 11<sup>th</sup>, S. Ossetians found themselves in a political “ground zero”, with the Georgian Supreme Soviet abolishing even the incumbent status of the Autonomous Oblast (Nielsen 2009).

On December 12<sup>th</sup>, the Georgian government, claiming the murders of two Georgians (with gun permits) and one Ossetian in Tskhinvali, declared a state of emergency, and USSR Interior Ministry troops (MVD) arrived in the region in an effort to diffuse the situation (HRW 1992). The Georgian government vehemently objected such an action, which considered as Moscow's intervention in its own affairs, and deployed 3000-4000 militia to Tskhinvali, a move which, in turn, was translated as "occupation" by the S.Ossetians (HRW 1992, 8-9). On January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1991, Gorbachev annulled both S.Ossetia's Declaration on Independent statehood and Georgia's state of emergency (calling also all armed units except for the USSR MVD troops to leave S. Ossetia) (HRW 1992). Georgia, however, rejected Gorbachev's decrees, on grounds of third-party unaccepted intervention to internal affairs (HRW 1992). An all-out confrontation was *ante-portas*.

Indeed, on the night of January 5<sup>th</sup>, Georgia's recently formed National Guard, one of the two fighting forces which substituted for the absence of a Defense Ministry, entered Tskhinvali and engaged in atrocities in the presence of the USSR MVD troops (Cvetkovski 1999; HRW 1992, 9).<sup>6</sup> During the rest of the 1991, the conflict was scaled down, with the Joint Commission of May 31<sup>st</sup> between Georgia, North Ossetia, the USSR and the RSFSR to recognize the impediments posed to the reestablishment of Georgian Independence and to assign the resolution of the conflict with political means to the Georgian government (HRW 1992). Finally, the Joint Commission proved of very limited capacity due to the abstention of the Georgian parliament, and violence resumed in S.Ossetia in early winter of 1991 (HRW 1992).

This time, however, in a far more polarized, ethnicized, and systemized manner; at first, in November 1991, eleven months after its imposition, the state of emergency was revoked by the Georgian parliament so as the USSR MVP troops which were safeguarding the S.Ossetians to be devoid of their cause of existence (Birch 1995). Then, Gamsakhurdia called on "all Georgians who can carry gun" to head toward Tskhinvali to terminate the South Ossetian aspirations for independent statehood or unification with the Russian North Ossetia (Birch 1995, 44). Experiencing such an irreversible course of events, the S. Ossetians coalesced behind the declaration on independent statehood, as the only means to defend themselves against an assertive and rising Georgian "tide of nationalism" (Beissinger 2002, 29).

In fact, having previously resorted to all the low-mobilization institutional "tools" a state possess regarding issues of political autonomy or statehood, i.e. the Supreme

Soviet of Georgia and the oblast council, now, the high-mobilization institutional “tool” of the referendum was activated, in an effort to establish regional political preferences. In particular, on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1992, a referendum with two questions was organized by the *de facto* authorities of S.Ossetia, with Znaur Gassyev serving temporarily as both a Prime Minister and President (Birch 1995).

**Table 1: S.Ossetia Referendum on Independence and Unification with Russia – January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1992**

Question	Right to vote	Voting Participation	Valid	Yes	No
1. "Do you agree that the Republic of South Ossetia becomes independent?"	55151	53441	53356	53308	48
"Согласны ли Вы, чтобы Республика Южная Осетия была независимой?"		96.9%	99.8%	99.91%	0.09%
2. "Do you agree with the decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of South Ossetia of 1 September 1991 on reunification with Russia?"	55151	53441	53348	53291	57
"Согласны ли Вы с решением Верховного Совета Республики Южная Осетия от 1 сентября 1991 г. о воссоединении с Россией?"		96.9%	99.8%	99.89%	0.11%

This referendum corroborated and added to the intentions of S.Ossetia’s *de facto* authorities. Not only mobilized the population with 97% of the voters taking part, but promulgated also the lasting regional political preferences. The answers typify the lasting separateness perceived by the S.Ossetians within a highly nationalistic Georgia, since the 99.9% voted in favor of the establishment of an independent South Ossetia. Moreover, a second question is included which ascertains attitudes on the prospect of reunification with Russia. Again, 99.8% of the population favored this option, with its placement as second, however, to be of high symbolism as far as the S.Ossetian political preferences are concerned. In particular, S.Ossetians first prioritize independence, and, then, unification with North Ossetia, accepting their presence within Russia more on security terms, since the latter could foster for their security against a rather assertive and nationalistic Georgia. This argumentation is further corroborated by the June 1992 cease-fire agreement.

Specifically, on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1992, after a semester of smoldering regional clashes and Russia’s last-minute (June 12<sup>th</sup>) military engagement of S.Ossetia *via* the Roki tunnel, the only way in/out N.Ossetia, the Head of the State Council of Georgia

Eduard Shevardnadze and the Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed in Dagomys, Russia, the Sochi Agreement on the Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict; it was, *inter alia*, stipulated the withdrawal of forces, a 14km wide buffer corridor along the common border between Georgia and S.Ossetia, and the deployment of a Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) by Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian troops under the command of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) (Thomas 2009, 37). “Despite retaining their ultimate goal of a unified Ossetia within Russia”, the presence of the JPKF, and the Russian forces, in particular, was recognized by the S.Ossetian Prime Minister Teziyev and many other Ossetians more as a security necessity to put up with rather than as a preference (Birch 1995, 48).

Being in the same context and following in the same footsteps, Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia in response to the August 1990 election law (HRW 1995, 16). With the violence raging in the S.Ossetian front, in November 1991, the Abkhaz authorities coined an agreement of confederation with “thirteen peoples of the North Caucasus”, located within Russia (HRW 1995, 16). This agreement was also rebuffed by the Georgian government, with the latter to announce instead, its intent to curtail to a grave level the status of increased autonomy that Abkhazia had been relishing, first as an ASSR (Soviet era), and then as a Autonomous Republic (post-soviet era) (HRW 1995, 16). Soon, polarization and division emerged within Abkhazia’s state institutions, with Abkhaz and ethnic Georgians to form two separate and rival parliaments, each denying the other’s legitimacy (HRW 1995, 16). In summer 1992, the Abkhaz parliament reinstated its 1925 Constitution, according to which Abkhazia had been a SSR associated with the Georgian SSR, and then declared independence (HRW 1995, 16).

An all-out confrontation was already there; on the night of August 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>, 1992, the heavily armored Georgian National Guard marched under the commands of Kitovani into the Gali region of Abkhazia (HRW 1995, 17). With the Abkhaz steady on their demand for expanded autonomy and ultimately full independence from Georgia, the polarization and division within the Abkhaz state institutions passed down to the streets; Georgians of Abkhazia and Abkhaz pitted themselves against each other in a purported effort to ouster the opposite ethnic group from areas critical to their ethnic group (HRW 1995, 5). The primordial perception of nation, institutionalized during the Soviet times and survived afterwards, revealed its true colors, with whole villages being taken captive (HRW 1995, 5).

In this line of reasoning is also placed the committed violence and abuses by the belligerents (regular and irregular forces allied together), the pattern of which showed partial intent in transgressing the boundaries of the law in waging a war in favor of ethnic gains maximization (HRW 1995, 6). Russia's role in the conflict had been an interchangeable one between neutrality supported by force if necessary, intervention, and mediation along with humanitarian aid (HRW 1995, 37).

After a short-lived effort towards a cease-fire in mid July 1993, the Government of Georgia and Abkhazia signed in Moscow, in May 1994, the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces (UN 2006). This agreement, *inter alia*, brought to the region 136 military observers on behalf of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), and 1600 Russian peacekeeping troops under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)(UN 2006). Although it did de-escalate the tension, it did little in forging a lasting peace settlement, since the bone of contention, i.e. the political status of Abkhazia, remained outside the scope of the provisions. In fact, the Abkhaz and the Georgian authorities have been moving on incompatible grounds, given that the former's lasting regional political preferences have been opting for full independence, in the best case scenario, or for a confederative status within Georgia, in the worst case scenario (HRW 1995, 6). Russia, just like in the case of S.Ossetia, did not weigh in the Abkhaz political preferences since it has been mostly esteemed in security terms, i.e. to protect Abkhaz interests *via* the peacekeeping force.

In further attestation of this argumentation, on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1996, the Abkhaz parliament declared anew its independence upon the solid foundations of a new constitution, further torpedoing prospects of co-existence within Georgia and solidifying its *de facto* status (HRW 1995, 7).<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. *En route* to the events of August 2008: the second major-eruption period**

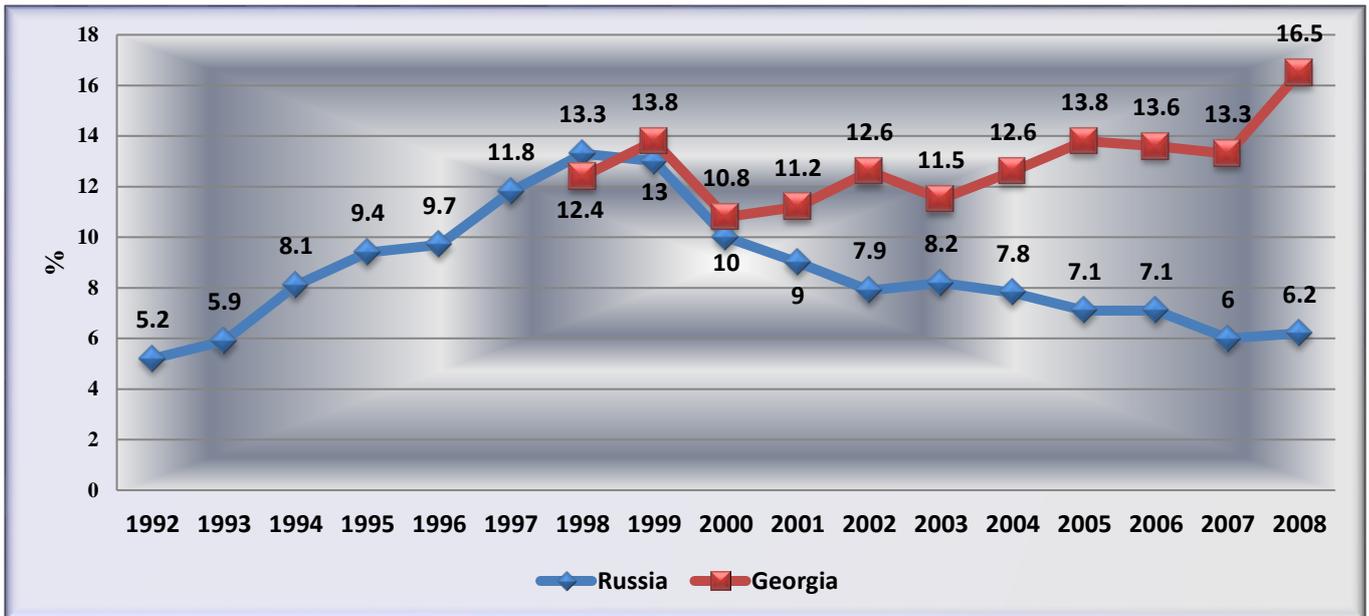
##### **4.1 South Ossetia and Abkhazia**

Since the two breakaway regions begun to exist as *de facto* states during Georgia's critical juncture period, in 1992 and 1994 respectively, three elements had been

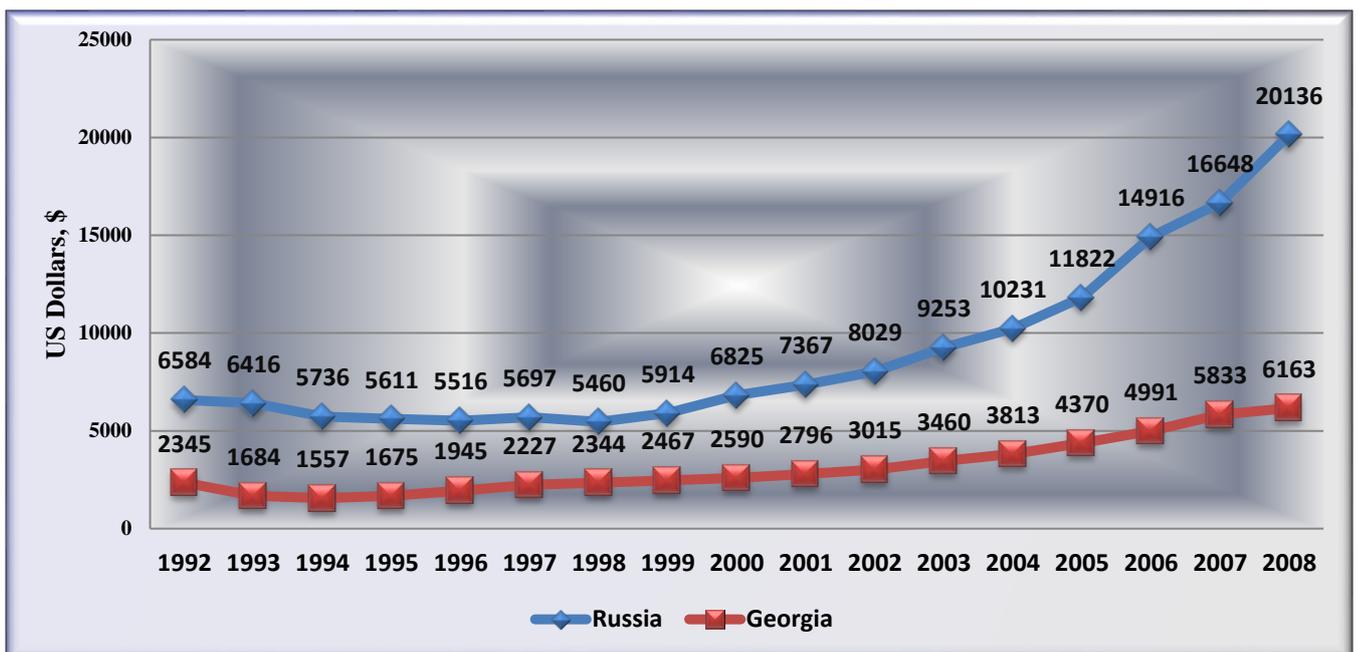
crystallized: a) their lasting political preference towards independence, b) their aversion towards the Georgian polity, and c) the acceptance of the Russian presence, mostly in security terms (JPKF) rather than political preference. On these premises, Georgia and Russia constitute two critical variables, which aside from their direct involvement at the time of the conflict, they may also have had an indirect and enduring (contextual) impact on the political preferences of both S.Ossetia and Abkhazia; in fact, they could have facilitated their manifestation in a more assertive manner, bordering consolidation. How?

The economically-perceived quality of life is inherent to the human thinking, much more after an embattled situation which results in *de facto* independence has taken place. As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, Georgia and Russia had been following a quite dissimilar path as far as two significant components of the quality of life-GDP per capita, PPP and Unemployment- are concerned.

To begin with, throughout the 1990s, Georgia and Russia had been close in terms of unemployment, at least for the part that there are available data for both, with the former to fare better in 1998 (12,4%), the year that Russia suffered a major financial crisis. This trend, however, was irreversibly reversed the ensuing years, with the gap to deepen all the more from 1999 onwards, till it reached its maximum value in 2008, with a point difference of 10.3% (Figure 1). Likewise, in terms of GDP per capita, PPP, from the very beginning (1992) the two countries had been on parallel but qualitatively different tracks, with the gap, in this case too, to irreversibly deepen after the 2000, reaching its maximum value at 2008, with a point difference of \$14000 (Figure 2).



**Figure 1:** Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (national estimate), **Source:** The World Bank 2017.



**Figure 2:** GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$), **Source:** The World Bank, 2017.

In this context, an intensification of regional political preferences was taking place, with the Abkhaz to approve, in a referendum in 1999, the new constitution of their independent statehood by 97,7% (Volkov 2017).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, occasional ethnic-instigated fighting in the two breakaway regions, such as that in Abkhazia's area of

Kodori in 2001, kept erupting.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in January 2004 Mikheil Saakashvili assumed the Georgian Presidency after the bloodless “Rose Revolution” of previous November had overthrown his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze (Welt 2006). On his agenda, anti-corruption and democratization reforms stood atop, with promises for “broader autonomy” for both Abkhazia and S.Ossetia in the form of guaranteed language and education rights and representation quotas in government structures, to serve the purpose of restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity (Saakashvili 2005; George 2009, 148).

These promises, however, met with skepticism and suspicion on behalf of both S.Ossetians and Abkhaz, who witnessed a contradiction between words and deeds; Georgia’s aim at joining NATO, and thus the western military system, contradicted the 1990s reality within the breakaway regions, where their *de facto* independence had been safeguarded by Russia (Fuller 2004a; George 2009, 149). Moreover, the crisis of 2004 in the ethnically Georgian-inhabited Adjara, which resulted in the removal of its leader Aslan Abashidze on corruption charges and in the restoration of Tbilisi’s control in the Autonomous Republic, negatively impacted on the populations of both S.Ossetia and Abkhazia, who were suffering by a major lack of trust *vis-à-vis* the government (George 2009, 149; Geostat 2002).<sup>10</sup> In fact, Saakashvili understood the issue of Georgia’s restoration of territorial integrity in terms of agency and not structure; to him, leaders such as Kokoity (S.Ossetia) were kept in power *via* their networks of corruption; consequently, once uprooted, democratization and territorial integrity would sprout (Fuller 2004). By this logic, Saakashvili also targeted, in the summer of 2004, Ergneti, a central contraband market on the border with S.Ossetia, and tried to establish customs control to goods flowing across the Russian border (Georgiatimes 2012). Such action, however, added up to the S.Ossetian economic hardships, ignited violence for the first time since the 1992 ceasefire, and was harshly criticized by both Russia and the local leadership, with the latter rather uniting the S.Ossetians around it than becoming isolated from them, as Saakashvili would expect (BBC 2012; ICG cited after George 2009, 149). To add fuel to the fire, at the time, the gap between Georgia and Russia in terms of unemployment and GDP per capita, PPP, was becoming wider, and thus comparisons of the kind would not only be unavoidable, if not felt, by the S.Ossetians, but they would also increase the intensity of the regional political preferences.

Indeed, in this context of disappearing trust and heightened suspicion, the S.Ossetians headed towards their presidential elections on November 12<sup>th</sup> 2006. The Kokoity regime, while planning to associate the presidential vote with a referendum asking: “Should the republic of South Ossetia retain its current status as an independent State, and be recognized by the international community?”, witnessed a political counteroffensive; the S.Ossetian town of Eredvi had become the center of an Electoral Commission for a Tbilisi-supported presidential vote and referendum, focusing on the Georgian-populated and the mixed Georgian-Ossetian villages, with a population not exceeding 14,000 (Fuller 2006; Landru 2006). The question asked would be: “Should South Ossetia engage in discussions with Tbilisi concerning a federal State uniting it with Georgia” (Landru 2006).

Polarization and interethnic tension reached anew the “red zone”; competing advertisements in the streets of Tskhinvali served as tokens of this situation. On the one hand, a caption calling for the rebuilding of the “Grand Alani”, was setting forth the following reasoning: “if all peoples of the Caucasus have the right to a State, why not us-the Ossetian Nation?...Such an independence for North Ossetians is currently impossible in Russia. We must show them the way” (Landru 2006). Tbilisi-supported candidates, on the other hand, presented themselves as defenders of peace within a multi-ethnic S.Ossetia reconciled with the Georgian state (Landru 2006).

Presidential and referendum results sealed this polarization along ethnic lines, albeit not recognized by members and institutions of the international community, Russia and Georgia included (NATO 2006).<sup>11</sup>

**Table 2: S.Ossetia Referendum on Independence – November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

Question	Right to vote	Voting Participation	Yes	No
1. “Should the republic of South Ossetia retain its current status as an independent State, and be recognized by the international community?”	55163	52163	51565	60
"Согласны ли вы с тем, чтобы Республика Южная Осетия сохранила свой нынешний статус независимо гогосударства и была признана международным сообществом"		94.5%	98.88%	0.11%

Kokoity received 98,1%, with his referendum on retaining the *de facto* Independence and be recognized by the international community as such to receive 98.8%. According to Kokoity, the second referendum on the regional political preferences since the 1992 ceasefire “was made in order to give the younger generation of voters, who did not participate in the previous referendum in 1992, a change to register their views” (Fuller 2006).

Certainly, this statement attests to the unaltered regional political preferences across the examined continuum, embedded in a highly ethnicized Georgian national identity and a comparatively feeble macro-economic growth and unemployment, as emerges from the juxtaposition of Georgia against Russia. On these grounds and in the presence of Kokoity’s rival and Tbilisi-supported Dmitry Sanakoyev, who had won 80% of the votes among the Georgian residents and onwards would foster the further polarization, the “zero hour” of the second major-eruption period was almost there.

#### **4.2 The “zero hour”: the August 2008 five-day war**

With the point difference between Georgia and Russia in terms of unemployment and GDP per capita, PPP to have reached its highest value, i.e. 10.3% and \$14000 respectively in favor of Russia, the “zero hour” came to consolidate a specific *status quo* in both S.Ossetia and Abkhazia: that of lasting regional political preferences within mono-ethnic territories under the security guarantee of the enhanced Russian military presence (JPKF).

In particular, close to the midnight on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Tbilisi had decided to stop small-scale skirmishes between S.Ossetians and Georgian soldiers of the JPKF by restoring “constitutional order in the entire region” of S.Ossetia (Civil Georgia 2008). Denouncing the shelling of Georgian villages in the conflict zone by S.Ossetians in violation of a unilateral ceasefire on behalf of Tbilisi, the latter unleashed, by 1:00am on August 8<sup>th</sup>, a large-scale military offensive on Tskhinvali (Civil Georgia 2008). S.Ossetian forces fought back, whereas, within half an hour, at approximately 1:30 am, tank columns of the Russian 58<sup>th</sup> Army were *en route* to Georgia through the Roki tunnel on the grounds of its proclaimed “responsibility to protect” (R2P) (ICG 2008, 28). At 06.00 am on August 8<sup>th</sup>, the fighting had also been transplanted to

Abkhazia, with its forces heading towards the Kodori Gorge, the only swath in its territory under Georgian control (ICG 2008).

The fighting lasted for five days, during which the logic of mono-ethnic territories was rife; (the remaining) 14,000 ethnic Georgians were forced out from S.Ossetia and 2,500 from Abkhazia (Upper Kodori), with a handful remaining in the Gali district (Amnesty International 2008, 51). On August 12<sup>th</sup>, the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy produced a six-point terse ceasefire document according to which:

1. No resort to the use of force
2. Permanent termination of hostilities
3. Free access to humanitarian aid
4. Return of the Georgian military forces to their places of permanent deployment
5. Return of the Russian military forces to their pre-conflict positions; awaiting an international mechanism, Russian peacekeeping forces will undertake additional security measures
6. Commencement of international discussion on ~~the future status and~~ the modalities for enduring security in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

**Figure 3:** The six-point ceasefire agreement, **Source:** Kramer 2008.

On August 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, the document-turned-agreement was signed and supplement by a side-letter by Sarkozy in which he clarified that the “security measures” of point 5 delineated an area around S.Ossetia not exceeding several kilometers beyond the administrative border between S.Ossetia and Georgia so as no major urban center, such as Gori, be included (ICG 2008, 4). Furthermore, he narrowed down these measures to patrols by the Russian peacekeeping forces which had been authorized by the 1992 arrangement, with all post-August 7<sup>th</sup> forces to pull back to N.Ossetia (ICG 2008, 4). Finally, the point 6 came under the careful consideration of both Russia and Georgia, whose objection led to the removal of the words “the future status”, thus adding more to the peacekeeping and security character of the Russian intervention than to the invasion-laden argumentation of Saakashvili (Financial Times 2008).

In the aftermath of the war and the terse agreement, Georgia lost control of almost all S.Ossetia and Abkhazia, with both to have been further established as *de facto* states, either completely mono-ethnic (S.Ossetia) or almost mono-ethnic (Abkhazia –

especially its political elite). Moreover, Russia, exploiting the loopholes provided by the point 5, increased its military presence in both regions, establishing a reality where lasting regional political preferences met the security guarantee of the enhanced Russian military presence (JPKF).<sup>12</sup> Truth be told, this reality was further assisted by the Georgian Law on Occupied Territories (2008), which not only criminalized the S.Ossetian and Abkhaz officials, but also tied them to various Russia-coined plots against Georgia, among which terrorism (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013, 147).

To prove the case, a survey on attitudes conducted by Toal and O'Loughlin in 2010, two years after the August 2008 five-day war is illuminating. Examining trust in key individuals and institutions, the S.Ossetian and the Abkhaz Presidents were trusted by more than 60% and 80% respectively, the S.Ossetian and the Abkhaz police by 50% in each case, and the Russian leadership by more than 80% in S.Ossetia. The Georgian leadership, on the contrary, met the largest distrust (90%) among S.Ossetians due to its inefficiency, or better said, to the inconsistency between words and deeds (Bakke et al. 2014, 597; Toal and O'Loughlin 2013, 154). Furthermore, this absence of trust passed also to the grassroots level, with an overall 90% of S.Ossetians feeling from neutral (23%), at best, to very bad (40%), at worst, towards the Georgians (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013, 157). These feelings were reversed when it comes to Russians with the overall acceptance-from very good (49%), at best, to neutral (9%), at worst- to reach close to 100% (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013, 157).

This intimacy with Russia, while not deviating from the security logic of the first major-eruption period, had started to shift from the military to the economic aspect. This is corroborated not only by the positive relationship between the widening gap between Georgia and Russia in terms of unemployment and GDP, per capita, PPP, and the intensification of regional political preferences (riots in Abkhazia in 2001 and 2004, referendum in S.Ossetia in 2006), but also by the direct Russian involvement in infrastructure projects such as the Sochi-Sukhumi railway in 2004. Moreover, the Russian Ministry of Regional Development allocated \$28,000 per person in order to alleviate the hardships inflicted by the August war (ICG 2008a, 2; Toal and O'Loughlin 2013, 146).

All things considered, the bottom line remains that S.Ossetia and Abkhazia never dropped their aspirations towards independent statehood. Quite the contrary, they remained steadfast, and when on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008 Russia recognized their *de facto*

statehood, both Presidents greeted the decision. President Kokoity stated: “Now we are an independent state, but we look forward to uniting with N.Ossetia and joining the Russian Federation”, while his Abkhaz counterpart stated: “I think everybody in this world wants to be independent. Abkhazia is no exception. We want to build a small, democratic, law-abiding state of our own” (Blair cited after Toal and O’Loughlin 2013, 148; Wagstyl 2008; Prezident Rossii 2008). Both statements stress the high prioritization of independence, with S.Ossetians aiming eventually at their historical justification by uniting with N.Ossetia and reinstating the “Grand Alani”, and the Abkhaz at the establishment of their independence, even if both would happen “under the protective wing of Russia”. In fact, as far as the Abkhaz case is concerned, close to 80% supports the status of independence and considers that their *de facto* polity is moving in the right direction, with the option of becoming either part of Russia or Georgia meeting less than 20% (Bakke et al. 2014, 596).

**Table 3:** The comparative historical continuum codified<sup>13</sup>

	S.Ossetia	Abkhazia			Test Case: Adjara	
<b>Soviet period</b>	Increased political autonomy, bordering independence	Increased political autonomy, bordering independence	“Ethnic” type of Georgian nationalism	Russian presence: first military security, then wider security (military/ economic)	Increased political autonomy, bordering independence	“Ethnic” type of Georgian nationalism
<b>First major-eruption period (critical juncture 1991-1995)</b>	Independence Georgian nationalistic attack Russia’s military involvement – Peacekeeping forces	Independence Georgian nationalistic attack Russia’s military involvement – Peacekeeping forces			No regional political preference No Georgian nationalistic attack No Russia’s military involvement – Peacekeeping forces	
<b>Second major-eruption period (en route to the August 2008 events)</b>	Independence Georgian nationalistic attack Russia’s military involvement – Peacekeeping forces	Independence Georgian nationalistic attack Russia’s military involvement – Peacekeeping forces			<p><b>May 2004:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Georgian President controls executive and legislative powers</li> </ul> <p><b>November 2007:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russia’s complete military withdrawal from Georgian soil – last military base in Batumi closes</li> </ul>	

## 5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to probe into the causes of the August 2008 events and extract useful policy implications for other conflict-afflicted regions of the post-soviet region and wider.

By employing a comparative historical continuum upon Mill's "method of agreement", it confirmed the research hypothesis pursued throughout the analysis. In particular, the lasting regional political preferences held, indeed, an independent role, being active long before the inception of post-soviet Georgia. Likewise, nuances of the ethnic type of nationalism had permeated the Georgian SSR's engagement of both S.Ossetians and Abkhaz throughout the Soviet era, but remained contained, given the USSR's institutional equilibrium. Thus, once the latter collapsed and the critical juncture period began, the already existent S.Ossetian and Abkhaz political preferences found their *cohabitation politique* with the Georgians heavily and irreversibly intercepted by the offensive of the Georgian nationalism. Finally, the divergence in the quality of life between Georgia and Russia held a contextual role, especially after 2000, when the more the gap was widening, the more incidents intensifying regional political preferences were taking place. The interplay of these factors consolidated after the August 2008 five-day war a *de facto* institutional equilibrium in S.Ossetia and Abkhazia which had been smoldering since the era of the first major eruption in early 1990s.

These findings reflect on two levels of implications: the academic and the policy ones. As far as the former are concerned, it has earlier been noted that the "politics of path dependency", with emphasis on the factors that precipitate change in a path-dependent institutional equilibrium, invite further refinement beyond the impact of economic crisis and military conflict. Thus, the present effort, without dissociating itself from the historical institutionalist literature, it has probed into the impact that "(political) preferences, embedded in a highly ethnicized national identity and a constantly widening gap in quality of life between a parent state and an affiliated neighbor" may have.

Passing on now to the policy implications, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that Georgia fell victim of its own blindness to the contradicting nationalisms at play in its territory. Should things had followed a different course, Georgia could have seen ahead of time, accepting the S.Ossetian demand of the late 1980s for its

upgrading to an ASSR, similar to that of Abkhazia, with securities on language and local autonomy for both regions. And in fact, as the comparative historical continuum showed, Georgia proved inelastic to the lessons of history, but with the cost of the lasting regional political preferences becoming more intractable after each time. On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008, few months before the irreversible becomes *de facto* consolidated, Saakashvili suggested to Abkhazia unlimited autonomy within a federal structure that would stipulate for just representation in the central governmental bodies, along with a right to veto laws concerning the status as well as the culture, language and ethnicity. Moreover, all these with international guarantees and Russia's inclusion as far as conflict resolution issues are concerned (ICG 2008a, 18). While such a plan would have served as an indicator of respect and gradual accumulation of social capital, especially at the beginning of the first major-eruption period, in 2008, after almost 20 years of empty promises and liquidated trust, it was automatically rejected by the Abkhaz *de facto* leadership on grounds of untrustworthiness (ICG 2008a, 18; Paraskevopoulos 2001, 259; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993). There is little doubt that if in the first major-eruption period Georgia had been belatedly drifted away by what Mark Beissinger termed "tide of nationalism", later, during the course of the historical continuum up to 2008, it could have learned from its earlier and repeated misjudgments so as to revise its policies, and thus serve as a useful policy-paradigm for other conflict-afflicted regions of the post-soviet space and not only, such as Crimea in Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan.

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<sup>1</sup>For more on the issue see also: (Cooper and Shanker 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Oblasts had the smallest degree of political autonomy

<sup>3</sup>The S.Ossetian and Abkhaz opening to Russia signaled a major policy *volt-face*, since for years had been resisting “both Russian and Georgian intervention in their internal operations” (Suny 1994, 307).

<sup>4</sup>According to Hansen and Hesli (2009, 4), an ethnic type of nationalism shows elements of strong ethnic attachment and intolerance of out-groups.

<sup>5</sup>Comparisons using the PPP are more accurate than just simply using the GDP when assessing a nation’s domestic market, because the PPP measures also the relative cost of local goods, services and inflation rates of the country in point, sidelining the distortive effects which the mere use of the international market exchange rates may have on the real differences in the per capita income.

<sup>6</sup>The other fighting force was Ioseliani’s “Mkhedrioni” (“Horsemen”) (HR 1995, 17).

<sup>7</sup>Nevertheless, from 1996-1999, Russia consented to a CIS-wide economic and arms embargo against Abkhazia aiming at curbing its intransigence (Antonenko 2005, 223)

<sup>8</sup>To “securitize” independence, Abkhazia proposed its inclusion into the Russian Federation as a “freely associated state” (Antonenko 2005, 207).

<sup>9</sup>in this case, Georgian partisans, owing no allegiance to the Georgian government, fought against Abkhaz forces mostly in retaliation for the numerous Georgian refugees expelled from Abkhazia during the 1993 (BBC 2001).

<sup>10</sup>For the restoration of central government’s institutional rule over Adjara, see: (Rukhadze 2013).

<sup>11</sup>Critical is the position held by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, who stated on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006, that Russia does not aim at incorporating S.Ossetia and Abkhazia, and suggested smooth over their differences with the Georgian government. Furthermore, he affirmed Russia’s commitment to Georgia’s territorial integrity (Fuller 2006).

<sup>12</sup>Russia’s military presence at what it was called prior to 2010 North Caucasian Military District (Severo Kavkavskii Voennyi Okrug) and after 2010 South Military District (Yuzhnyi Voennyi Okrug) amounts to more or less 90,000 troops (ICG 2008a, 9).

<sup>13</sup>For Russia’s complete military withdrawal from the Georgian territory, see: (Antidze 2007).

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