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### **Conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region: the Continuing Russian Occupation of Georgia<sup>\*</sup>**

Beginning from 1801, for more than 200 years Georgia is occupied, in one way or another, by Russia. In 1801-1917 it was the Russian Empire, who broke the existing treaty, abolished the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom, and started the process of annexation of Georgian kingdoms and princedoms. Later they were incorporated into two *Gubernias*, namely Tbilisi Gubernia and Kutaisi Gubernia. After the defeat of Russian Empire in the First World War, Georgia got independence, but just for three years. In 1921 the Soviet Russia broke treaty with Georgian Democratic Republic, occupied Georgia after the brief war and incorporated her into the USSR. In December 1991 the Soviet Union officially broke up and the 70-year Soviet occupation of Georgia had ended. But soon there began hostilities in Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia and both regions, at first partially, and from 2008 completely fell under the Russian control. In the following presentation I will attempt to show what were the reasons of those conflicts and what was the Russian role in their inspiration. First of all, I will pay attention to the deep historical roots of Russian influence in these regions.

Beginning from the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> c., the Russian imperial government started the process of alienation of population of Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia. The process started after the end of the Crimean War of 1853-1856 and coincided with the activation of the nationally-minded forces in Georgia and the foundation of the society spreading the Georgian literacy. The process of alienation reached its height after the end of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, when the great part of Moslem population, mainly Abkhazs, were encour-

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aged to leave their native lands. The colonial authorities spared no effort to tear Abkhazia off the common Georgian cultural and historical entity and push the Georgian language and literature aside. This is best illustrated by the fact that the Abkhazians were given their own written language. P. Uslar, who created the Abkhaz alphabet, had the following to say about the true intentions of Russia's "language policy": he described the Georgian alphabet as "essentially the best alphabet in the world," which could be taken as "the starting point of a common alphabet for all Caucasian languages that had no written word", yet, he added: "If we borrow not only the alphabet but also letters from the Georgians, we shall unwittingly create problems when the Russian written language spreads across the Caucasus".

Evgeny Veidenbaum, another prominent Russian figure, was even more straightforward: "...the Abkhaz written language cannot be an aim in itself: it should undermine, through the Church and schools, the need for the Georgian language, which should be gradually replaced with the state language."

In 1904, on the suggestion of Prince of Oldenburg, the imperial authorities intended to make Gagra with its nearby lands the part of the Black Sea Gubernia by separating them from the rest of Georgia. The attempt was cut short by the Abkhaz nobility who were dead set against those who wanted to disrupt the Georgian-Abkhaz historical and cultural entity. The Abkhaz delegation, which arrived in Tiflis on 26 April, 1916, to meet the Caucasian viceroy was the best confirmation of the prevailing sentiments.

Nevertheless, the constant political and ideological pressure on the Abkhazians barely camouflaged by hypocritical statements about the concern over the local people's cultural and national awareness bore fruit. "Abkhaz resurrection" was obviously anti-Georgian; the so-called new Abkhazians came to the forefront to capture the political initiative after the February 1917 revolution in Russia. Beginning from February 1917, when the Russian Empire was crumbling, the new Abkhaz leaders, who usurped power, moved ahead to rupture all ties with the rest of Georgia.

Nevertheless, the government of the Georgian Democratic Republic, which was formed on May 26, 1918, was able to change the situation. On 13 February, 1919 Abkhazia held the first universal democratic elections to the People's Council – the highest state power structure in Abkhazia. The ruling Social-Democratic Party of Georgia won 27 seats out of 40. Simultaneously, Abkhazia elected deputies to the Constituent Assembly of Georgia.

On 20 March, 1919 the newly elected People's Council of Abkhazia

adopted the Act of Abkhazian Autonomy, Point 1 of which said: “*Abkhazia is part of the Democratic Republic of Georgia as its autonomy*”. The short-lived 1921 Constitution of Georgia approved that article, but the the state and legal relations between the Georgian Democratic Republic and Autonomous Abkhazia were completely destroyed when the Red Army of Bolshevik Russia brought down the legal government of sovereign Georgia. E. Eshba and N. Lakoba, two Bolshevik leaders of Abkhazia brought to power by the Soviets, based their anti-Georgian propaganda on the notorious slogan about the rights of nations to self-determination and moved forward with the idea of Abkhazia’s independence from Georgia to become a Soviet socialist republic. On 31 March, 1921 the Revolutionary Committee of Abkhazia, encouraged by the higher Communist Party structures, proclaimed Abkhazia a Soviet socialist republic; the same day it officially informed Lenin and did not fail to refer to the “great liberation mission” of the “valiant” Red Army.

In fact, the Kremlin leaders, the Georgian Communists, and the Abkhaz Bolsheviks knew that there could be no genuinely independent Abkhazian state. According to the Georgian and Abkhaz Bolshevik leaders *Abkhazian independence was temporary: “for no longer than one minute”* as Nestor Lakoba put it. It proved correct. From the very beginning Abkhazia was regarded as an autonomous part of Georgia. On 16 December, 1921 Abkhazia became part of the Georgian SSR as a so-called republic on a contractual basis. The Constitution of Georgia of 1922 directly stated: “The Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of Adjara, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, and the Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia are parts of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia, which they joined voluntarily on the basis of self-determination. The Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia joined the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia on the basis of a union treaty between them.” The first Constitution of the Soviet Union clarified that the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR) as a subject of the USSR consisted of three socialist republics – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Abkhazia was listed as an autonomous republic. In 1931 Abkhazia officially became the autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Georgian SSR.

After March 9, 1956 Tbilisi massacre the Kremlin tops once again decided to use the Abkhazs against the emerging Georgian national liberation movement. In 1957 the certain separatist forces, which were guided by Kremlin, tried to exploit the Khrushchev Thaw and to stage the “all-Abkhaz revolt” with the aim of detaching the Abkhazian ASSR from the Georgian SSR. The Geor-

gian Communist leaders, who were afraid to anger Khrushchev, decided to pacify the Abkhazs. As a result, only the Georgians involved in the events were punished while the leaders of the Abkhaz revolt moved higher up the party ladder to fill the top posts in the power structure. The Kremlin tops continued that policy till the break-up of the Soviet Union. Once in ten years following the activation of Georgian national liberation movement, the Abkhazs, following the orders from kremlin started the meetings. The results were always the same: the Georgian Communists in Abkhazia were punished and the Abkhazs were awarded the higher posts.

The new wave of separatism in Abkhazia rose in 1988 against the background of Mikhail Gorbachev's "perestroika" and "glasnost" policy. Not strangely, it followed the protests in Tbilisi in November 1988 against the proposed change of the Soviet Constitution, which could deprive the Soviet Republics the right to leave the Soviet Union. The Abkz separatist movement reached its height in the spring and summer of 1989. On 18 March, a people gathering of the Abkhazs was held in the village of Lykhny (the Gudauta District) endorsed and attended by the highest party leaders together with First Secretary of the Abkhazian Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia B. V. Adleiba. It adopted a new appeal demanding that the status of the Abkhazian SSR should be restored to make it a direct member of the Soviet Union as a Soviet Socialist Republic.

The first blood was shed on 15-16 July, 1989 in Sokhumi costing nine Georgians and five Abkhazs their lives, however the worst was avoided. It seems that either the Kremlin had realized its mistake or maybe E. Shevardnadze, who was the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, contributed to the change of minds. As a result, the Soviet Army for the first time (and for the last time too) in history played a positive role in Abkhazia. In the fall of 1990 Georgia received a new president. After coming to power, the new top people and their leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia came face to face with trouble in the autonomies, especially in the so-called South Ossetian autonomous region. To avoid a some type of a second front in Abkhazia President Gamsakhurdia had to accept Vladislav Ardzinba, the leader of the separatists, as the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhazian ASSR (the autonomous republic's highest post). The new Georgian president tried to ease the tension in the autonomous republic and frustrate the plans of the Soviet Union's leaders to use the Abkhaz card against Georgia, but he failed. This step proved to be wrong. Throughout 1991 (until 19 August) Vladislav Ardzinba disobeyed the Georgian president: he was

actively involved in the Kremlin's efforts to sign a new Union Treaty under which the autonomous republics were expected to become Union republics.

Despite the failed August putsch and the idea of a "refurbished Union," President Gamsakhurdia gave Vladislav Ardzinba another chance, but Ardzinba pushed aside everything they had promised. The coup d'état that removed Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the period of turmoil that followed helped the separatists to realize their far-reaching plans. The crisis in the relations between Tbilisi and Sokhumi reached its apogee on 14 August, 1992 Vladislav Ardzinba ordered his illegal military units to open fire on the internal troops of the Republic of Georgia moving across the territory of Abkhazia according to an earlier agreement between the Abkhaz and Georgian leaders. As it became clear later, he was following the recommendations from the Kremlin, particularly from the Russian Vice-President Alexander Rutskoy. The Russian troops were actively involved in the fighting since 31 August (before it they just gave the armaments to the Abkhazs as it happened in Gudauta military base on the first day of fighting), when the Russian military forces, based in the laboratory with still unknown functions in Eshera, disrupted the Georgian crossing over the r. Gumista. After it the Russians were regularly bombing the Georgian positions at the frontline and the civilian districts in Sokhumi. They used both artillery and aviation. The Russians were actively involved in capturing Gagra in October 1992. They were extremely active before the failed Abkhaz attack on Sokhumi in March of 1993. After March fightings, which proved to be disastrous for the Abkhazs (they lost 1000 men as dead only), the Kremlin decided to involve on a broader basis. In July the new attack on Sokhumi was mounted and the Russian troops began to participate in the ground fighting too. The Georgians were able to destroy the Russian invasion forces in Ochamchire region, but had to leave some key positions nearby Sokhumi. This proved fatal afterwards. In September 1993, thanks to the active help from the Russian regular army and hundreds of mercenaries from the Northern Caucasus, the separatists emerged victorious. They captured most part of Abkhazia. Nearly 300 thousand Georgians were thrown out of their homes. Abkhazia proclaimed itself independent, although it actually fell under the Russian control.

While in 1990s the Kremlin tops had never admitted that they were involved in the hostilities against Georgian troops (they denied their participation even when the Russian plane SU-27 was shot down near Sokhumi), in 2008 they changed the tactics. The Russian troops used Abkhazia as a springboard for attack against Georgia. Along with the occupation of Zugdidi, Senaki, Poti, and

other Western-Georgian cities, the Russian troops captured the Upper Abkhazia, which was beforehand controlled by Georgian government. Thus, all the territory of Abkhazia fell under the Russian occupation.

The similar story can be told about the conflict in Tskhinvali Region, which is the part of the Inner (in Georgian *Shida*) Kartli, the northern frontier of which was always running along the natural border – the Great Caucasus Ridge. The Inner Kartli is, and always was the centre of the Georgian statehood. The Ossetians began to settle in the region from the 17<sup>th</sup> c. (There was a brief period in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. when they tried to settle in region during the Mongol rule in Georgia, but were forced to return to their homeland during the reign of Giorgi V the Brilliant /1314-1346/, who overthrow the Mongol yoke.), but they never were a danger to the Georgian statehood until the 1917 February Revolution. The Russian imperial officials had never tried to establish an Ossetian administrative unit in the Inner Kartli. Only after the collapse of the Russian Empire the so-called “South Ossetian National Council”, which was created by the Russian Bolsheviks attempted to the establish an administrative unit in the Inner Kartli and to seize its part. (The term “South Ossetia” was used for the first time in 1830, in the series of publications in the newspaper “Tiflis Bulletin”. However, the official documents of the same period refer to them as “the Ossetians of the Northern Kartli situated to the South of the Caucasus mountain range”. “South Ossetia” is used just once in the numerous Georgian, Russian, Turkish, and Persian documents of the twelve-volume edition of the Acts of the Caucasus Archeographic Commission, published in 1864-1917, and only twice in the Georgian periodical press of 1852-1915. ) The Georgian Democratic Republic defeated the rebelled bolshevik Ossetians and the situation in the region was calm until the Soviet occupation of Georgia.

Following the sovietization of Georgia, the Bolsheviks created the administrative-territorial unit – South Ossetian Autonomous District – in the Northern part of the Inner Kartli with the centre in Tskhinvali. (It should be mentioned that prior to the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> c. there were no Ossetians living in the city of Tskhinvali.) The creation of the “South Ossetian” autonomous district was an artificial act and the main reason of it was rewarding the Ossetians for their fighting against the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1918-1921.

Prior to the break-up of the USSR, the Soviet Committee of State Security (KGB) and local communist officials began to inspire ethnic confrontation in Tskhinvali Region. The discord started in 1988, when there was founded “Adamon Nikhas” – the “People’s Front of the South Ossetia”. “Adamon Nik-

has”, which received orders directly from the Kremlin, became the main organizer of the protest actions. It opposed the anti-imperial liberation movement, which had begun in Georgia.

In November 1989 the Ossetians started the legal confrontation with the government of the Georgian SSR. The special session of the Council of People’s Delegates of the 20<sup>th</sup> convocation of the South Ossetian Autonomous District made a decision on raising the status of the South Ossetia. The Autonomous District of South Ossetia was proclaimed as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of South Ossetia. The session appealed to the Supreme Council of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia and the Supreme Council of the USSR to discuss the issue of assigning the status of an “autonomous republic” to the Autonomous District of South Ossetia. The session also amended the paragraph 1 of the decision of the 11<sup>th</sup> session of the 20<sup>th</sup> convocation of National Deputy Council of District held on September 26, 1989, regarding the adoption of the “State Program for the Development of the Ossetian Language”. It declared the Ossetian Language as the state language on the territory of the South Ossetian Autonomous District, and the equal and free functioning of the Georgian and Russian languages “in accordance with the language policy of the USSR”. It started the wave of protests among the Georgians. The next stage of escalation of the situation took place in summer of 1990. The Supreme Council of Georgia adopted the election law, which prohibited participation of regional parties in the parliamentary elections. Ossetian organization “Adamon Nikhas” regarded this step as the action against it, and by the decision of local communist organization and local governing bodies on September 20, 1990 South Ossetia was announced as the sovereign subject (South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic) of the USSR. On the next day the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Georgia annulled that decision.

In October the Ossetian side ignored the Georgian parliamentary elections and held its own parliamentary elections on December 9. In response to that, on December 11 the Georgian Supreme Council nullified the results of the illegitimate elections in South Ossetia and the abolished the South Ossetian Autonomous District. The state of emergency was introduced in the region.

On January 7, 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of the USSR declared that any decision regarding the change of the status of South Ossetia would become legitimate only after its approval by the highest bodies of the USSR, returning by this act to the *status quo ante*. Nevertheless, on March 23, 1991 Zviad Gamsakhurdia, head of the Supreme Council of the Georgian Re-

public met Boris Yeltsin, Head of the Supreme Council of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic in Kazbegi. Joint memorandum stated: “with the intention of stabilizing the situation in the former South Ossetian Autonomous Republic the parties agree on the following, ...Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian SSR and Ministry of Internal Affairs of the republic of Georgia will create joint militia teams to ensure demilitarization of all of the illegal armed units on the territory of former Autonomous Republic of South Ossetia.” According to this document, the Government of RSFSR practically recognized the legitimacy of the Georgian government’s decision to abolish the Autonomous District of South Ossetia.

The hostilities began in January of 1991, when the additional units of the Georgian police were introduced to Tskhinvali. The separatists put up an armed resistance. The Imperial military machine was backing up the separatists, and that made the situation even tenser. When despite their support the situation turned in favour to the Georgians, the Russian government threatened with using the helicopters stationed at the Russian military base nearby Tskhinvali. This forced the new Georgian government, headed by Eduard Shevardnadze, to sign the Dagomis agreement on “The Principles of Resolution of Georgian-Ossetian Conflict” (June 24, 1992). According to the agreement, the peace in the region were kept by the Joint Peacekeeping Forces, which were subordinated to the Joint Control Commission, and consisted of Russian, Georgian and North Ossetian battalions (500 people from each parties). In fact the “peacekeepers” were usually following the orders from the Kremlin and supported the Ossetians. The status quo was held until 2008 (with a brief hostilities in 2004), when the Russian government started the preparations for the direct aggression against Georgia. The Russian aggression started in August 7 of 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia calling its action Operation for the Peace Enforcement”. The Russians claimed that they were defending their “citizens”. (Of course, the Kremlin had forgotten that those so-called “citizens” were made “citizens” after 2002 as a result of breaking every international regulation and law, ignoring the protests from the international organizations and the Georgian government, who accused the Russian government in “latent annexations”). The results of the Russian-Georgian war were disastrous for Georgia: temporarily are lost dozens of villages in Tskhinvali and Znauri regions, the entire Akhalkalaki region, Upper Abkhazia; the war created the new wave of IDP’s; several regions in Georgia suffered from the hostilities. Despite the fact, that the Russians signed an agreement on cease-fire, according which the Russian troops

had to return to the pre-war status-quo, the Kremlin tops “recognized ‘South Ossetia’ and Abkhazia”.

At the end of my presentation I have to touch the question, which is often raised during the discussions. There are people, who accuse Georgian side “for starting the war” in 2008. I have a question for them: against whom did Georgia start the war? If it is the Russian-Georgian war, the answer has to be Russia, but even the most hostile opponents of Georgian government avoid that answer because of its stupidity. It was Russia, who invaded Georgia and not vice-versa. It was the Georgian territory where the hostilities took place, not Russian lands. Therefore, the answer on the question “Who started the August war?” is only one: Russia! Moreover, the Kremlin tops were preparing for it beginning from March 2008, when Russia left the CIS agreement limiting economic and military cooperation with Abkhazia. On April 16, following the NATO summit in Bucharest, which refused to give MAP to Georgia, President Putin had directly ordered the Russian Government to establish relations with the separatist governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Few days later Russian fighter jet downed the Georgian unarmed UAV near the Enguri River within the conflict area. In spite of evidences, Russia had strictly refused its participation in this incident and stated that the plane was hit by Abkhazian armed force (the Abkhazs had no fighter jets actually). During June and July the armed provocations had significantly increased in Tskhinvali area, Georgian villages were put under fire, roads were mined, blocked, peaceful population was kidnapped, people were blown up on mines. On July 8, 2008, few hours before the beginning of the visit of Condoleezza Rice, the US State Secretary, to Georgia, four Russian jets have entered the Georgian air space in the conflict zone. Russia admitted the fact on July 10, but stated that by this action they prevented “military aggression” and “cooled off some hot heads in Tbilisi.” In July the large-scale military trainings were held by Russia in North Caucasus. These units later participated in the aggression against and occupation of Georgia. From August 1 the separatists started heavy shelling of Georgian villages in Tskhinvali using large-calibre artillery. This fact was also confirmed by the Russian peacekeeping forces. On August 3, 2008 separatists started the evacuation of children and women from Tskhinvali and the near-by Ossetian villages, and moved them to Russia. At the same time, there started the mobilization of the Russian military forces, the Cossacks and other armed gangs in the North Caucasus. Russian mass-media started intense disinformation and military campaign media-coverage against Georgia. On August 7, 2008 separatists had once

again started shelling and bombing of the Georgian villages. State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration arrived in Tskhinvali to start direct negotiations with the separatist leaders to avoid conflict escalation, but the separatists refused to meet. In the evening of the same day the Georgian President announced the unilateral ceasefire and once again offered direct negotiation, but separatists declined this proposal and re-opened the fire toward Georgian villages from every weapon in their possession, including heavy artillery. It was only after that that the Georgian government, in order to protect the population of the region, had to send the military units to the region. There are lot of evidences, which show that the Russian troops had crossed the Russian-Georgian border prior to the beginning of the hostilities. Therefore, even the hostilities were started by the Russian side, who used the Ossetian separatists for it.

In the end I have to say that unfortunately, despite all the agreements, Russia is still occupying the part of Georgia. The Russians have opened several military bases in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. They have heavily fortified the administrative borders. The Russian Federation officially “recognized the independence” of Abkhazia and the so-called “South Ossetia”, but in fact the Russians are the real masters there. This is the continuing occupation of Georgia, which does not allow Georgia to develop freely and be the master of its fate. The Kremlin tops are still thinking in the imperial manner of the 18-19<sup>th</sup> cc. That is why, I want to recall the words of the Finnish presenter, that Russia has not confessed in the Communist crimes. Of course, they do not confess in crimes. They are still doing the crimes. Nevertheless, I am sure the Kremlin will fail. The Empire will finally have to leave Georgian territories. The more the Kremlin tops will oppose this, the more fierce will be results for Russia itself. She will have not only to leave the Georgian territories, but the Caucasus on the whole!