CIVITAS, 2021, 11(2), 249-270
www.civitas.rs

**Nikola Rajić**[1]

UDC 327(470:479.22)
Professional paper
Received: 27/09/2021
Accepted: 02/11/2021

# RUSSIA'S NEO-IMPERIALIST AMBITIONS: ANALYSIS OF THE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS GEORGIA

**Abstract:** The Caucasus, dubbed "the Eurasian Balkans" by Zbigniew Brzezinski, or "the near abroad" (*bližnee zarubežье*) by the Russians, is both a region of strategic interest for Russia, and a space where the Russian foreign policymaking was clearly manifested, Russia's main goal being to establish regional dominance and discourage the Western influence in the region. Using comparative and content analysis and relying on the theory of offensive structural realism, the paper will discuss the foreign policy of the Russian Federation towards Georgia in the years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Analysing the case studies of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the paper seeks to show how Russia's neo-imperial foreign policy has been shaped, and how Russia's foreign policy has shifted in accordance with the part of the Caucasus involved in the conflict and the degree of anti-Russian influence in it. The results show that Russia carefully created the conditions and chose the moment to use the conflict, i.e., the secession on the Georgian soil, to position itself as a regional hegemon.

**Key words:** Caucasus, regional security, Russia, Eurasia, Russian foreign policy, Abkhazia and South Ossetia

[1] Teaching Assistant, Faculty of Law and Business Studies Dr Lazar Vrkatić, Security Department – nikola.rajic@flv.edu.rs

## 1. Introduction

Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been recognized as independent states by only a few countries, such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Syria, as well as Vanuatu which recognized Abkhazia but not South Ossetia. Apart from Russia, these countries have little influence globally to significantly improve Abkhazia and South Ossetia's chances of international recognition. Even Russia's recognition of the two states can be interpreted as more of a political move with the aim to position itself as a regional hegemon and prevent Western influence, rather than a sign of faith in the right to self-determination of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's citizens. This paper will give insights into the events in the region since the collapse of Soviet Union, which brought about the creation of fifteen independent states, with several other nations also exhibiting separatist tendencies, until the present day and recent developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan erupted again with six weeks of intense fighting until Russia (and Turkey) intervened and brokered a cease-fire. Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to exist under the Russian patronage and remain existentially dependent on it in economic, military, political and other aspects. Both states can therefore be considered Russian protectorates.

Using the abovementioned conflicts as examples, this paper will analyse the ways in which Russia's foreign policy changes and adapts to a current situation. The paper further looks at the change from the initial decision to let Georgia try to pacify the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the all-out war in 2008. The 2008 war was incited by-Georgia's attempt to join the NATO. Russia entered the conflict under the guise of exercising "the right to protect", which involved the protection of Russian citizens on the territory of both republics, which was preceded by the mass passport issuance. Moreover, the paper will follow Russia's shift from the active participation in global affairs and a billion-dollar worth weapon sale to Yemen in the 1990s, to a more prudent policy of balancing Yemen and Azerbaijan by selling weapons to both parties and preventing the intrusion of NATO impact at all costs, even by isolating the region from the unwanted influence.

The paper starts with a review of literature that explains the theoretical framework of realism, or offensive structural realism of John Mearsheimer. The following chapter discusses and explains the development of the foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation, starting from the collapse of Soviet Union after which Russia shortly turned to pro-Western liberalism. However, after a series of events that resulted in the increasing US influence in the region, Russia decided to pursue a neo-Eurasian policy with strong neo-imperial ambitions. The next chapter explains the historical roots of conflicts in Georgia, or Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Then, we will analyse the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through the prism of the neo-imperial ambitions of Russian Federation. The case study shows how the conflict developed and how Russia created the right conditions so that, when the opportunity arises, it can use the conflict to position itself as a supreme regional hegemon. Lastly, in the conclusion we will summarize the insights and viewpoints discussed in the paper.-

## 2. Literature Review

Theoretical approach to realism had an enormous impact on the development of security studies with their focus on the concepts of power, fear and anarchy as crucial factors for providing explanation of the conflict and war. Realist theory went through six stages: classical, neoclassical, the rise and fall realism, neo-realism, as well as offensive and defensive realism (Williams 2012).

According to perceptions of classical realists, the will of power is rooted in the corrupted human nature, and states are continuously engaging in struggles to maximize their power. As noted, this is the reason why war is understood as a consequence of either the aggressive nature of state officials or the nature of the internal political system. Security studies, as a predominantly realistic area of study, claims that states can maintain their security only by relying on their own military power or by entering military-political alliances.

Defensive structural realism starts from the assumption that the states seek security in anarchic international system, that the main threat to their welfare comes from other states. Defensive structural

realism alludes to the act that predominant technology or geographical conditions often favour defence, seized resources cannot be added easily to those already possessed by the metropole, dominoes do not fall, and power is difficult to project at a distance. Accordingly, defensive structural realists predict that states should support the status quo since conquest in such a world comes with a hard price (Williams, 2012).

Offensive structural realists disagree with the defensive structural realist perception that states only should only seek an 'appropriate' amount of power. The main proponent of this theory is John Mearsheimer, who in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, argues that states face an uncertain international environment in which any state might use its power to harm another (Williams, 2012).

Mearsheimer's theory is built on five assumptions: there is anarchy in the international system; all great powers possess offensive military capabilities, which they are capable of using against each other; states can never be certain that other states will refrain from using those offensive military capabilities; great powers seek to maintain their survival above all other goals; great powers are rational actors.

Based on these assumptions, Mearsheimer concludes that all great powers fear on one another and argues that the best way for great powers to ensure their survival is to maximize power and pursue hegemony, relying only on themselves (Marković, 2014). Mearsheimer claims that security requires accumulation of as much power as possible, in relation to other states, and argues that only the most powerful state in the system can achieve the ultimate security.

However, the "stopping power of water" makes such a global hegemony impossible, so the other more reachable goal is achieving regional hegemony, the dominance of the area where the great power is located. Aside from that, even in the absence of both types of hegemony the states still seek to maximize their wealth and power. Mearsheimer also distinguishes between different kinds of power, such as continental and insular, and the power of regional hegemons. A continental great power seeks regional hegemony but, if unable to achieve this level of dominance, it will seek to maximize its relative power to the extent possible. On the other hand, an insular great power would rather seek the balance against other states than try to become the regional

hegemon, just like Great Britain that acts as an offshore balancer and intervenes only when the continental power threats to achieve the primacy. Lastly, the third type of power according to Mearsheimer is the power of regional hegemons, the states which seeks to defend the existing favourable distribution of power, such as the USA (Williams, 2012).

From the point of view of the states which cannot be qualified as great powers, Mearsheimer's theory is full of unacceptably hegemonic standpoints, overlooks the role of international institutions, and does not contribute to global security, regardless of states' individual power. Another important factor in interpreting Russia's neo-imperial regional ambitions is the theory of the security dilemma, or the endless "game" of competition, requiring a constant increase of defence capabilities of one state as a response on other state's threats. This leads the states into a "spiral model" of constant increase of military power and/or an arms race (Marković, 2014). Using theories of offensive structural realism and the theory of the security dilemma and examining the case study of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it is possible to better understand and analyse the foreign policy of the Russian Federation through the prism of the five-day war with Georgia in 2008.

It can be concluded that most authors who wrote about foreign policy of the Russian Federation mainly rely on theoretical approach to realism or offensive realism of John Mearsheimer. They emphasized Moscow's desire to become the regional hegemon, which necessitated the implementation of a neo-imperialist project in the Caucasus, a region that Russia has traditionally laid claim on. According to the Russian foreign policy, Russia can act at its own discretion by arranging its troops across the region which is also a clear sign that Russia is not yet ready to accept independence and sovereignty of the states formed after the collapse of the USSR. After the dissolution of USSR, Russia's policy balanced between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian orientation for some time. It even went through the "western liberalism" while under Yeltsin's leadership, but eventually still opted for the concept of Euro-Asian policy implementation as well as becoming the leader of the region, which was even essentially stated as a part of their mission in the strategic acts from 1992 and 1993.

In addition, Russia also held that all former republics should join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and that the international community, including other forces such as China and USA who already showed interest in the region, should acknowledge Russian supremacy. Also, Russian soldiers should be positioned along the CIS external border with Turkey and Iran (Abushov 2009). O'Lear (2011) explains that this border is not merely a border denoting territorial boundary of a state, but a frame with its political, economic and cultural dimensions along with local mediations within these dimensions, as well as the existing structures that shape individual operations. All this adds to the fact that Russia has been the leader of this region for the past 200 years and consequently implements its policy not only on Caucasus but also Belarus, Ukraine, and Central Asia so as to achieve dominance, either by cooperation or coercion (Blank, 2013; Abushov, 2009).

Some authors argue that Russia will use all political, military, and economic power to control the states of the former USSR in the campaign to succeed in implementing the neo-imperialist project and become a regional hegemon (Sushentstov & Neklyudov 2020). Russia believes that achieving regional hegemony can prevent other states from gaining any influence in the region Russia traditionally considers its own (Karagiannis, 2012). Implementing the neo-imperialist project with its expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia provided the validation of such concepts as the near-abroad (*bližnee zarubežье*), "Russian interest zone" and the idea of the state as a strong multi-ethnic empire, with Russia as the primary actor (Abushov 2009). The Soviet Union acted as the "glue" that kept everything under control, so, after its fall, maintaining the status of some nations' autonomous regions was no longer possible which subsequently led to the rise of secessionism. Markedonov's article (2015) discusses the phenomenon of *de facto* states and statelets in the Eurasian region and their relations to other internationally recognized states. It is argued that the major problem for the region, and the international community as well, is the domestic dynamics in these entities, i.e., the overwhelming majority of the population in favour of the policy of extremism and separatism.

## 3. Russian Foreign Policy

Since December 1991, Russia's foreign policy went through numerous reforms with various stages. Soon after the collapse of the USSR, two broad trends or "schools of thought" appeared – the Euro-Atlanticist and Neo-Eurasionist (Meshabi 1993: 181). The Euro-Atlanticist school of thought was led by pro-Western liberals whose main goal for Russia to join the international community and thus boost the economic growth. Furthermore, they believed that the traditional concept of Russia having a special role as the "bridge" between Europe and Asia should be rejected and that Russia should turn its focus towards Europe (Light 2003: 44; Krpatcheva 2012: 375). This school of thought had been the cornerstone of thinking in Russian foreign policy during the first year of Boris Yeltsin's government (Борис Ельцин) when Yegor Gaidar (Егор Гайдар) was the Prime Minister. However, joining the West meant abandoning the traditional idea of Russia as a great power, while the transformation into a market democracy weakened the state's sovereignty and role. Hence, the liberal pro-western policy did not last long and was replaced with the idea of a sovereign Russia, the state with a greater role, and the idea of reviving Russia as an independent great power (Kuchins & Zevelev 2012: 149). In late 1992, after the short period of idealizing Western society and attempts to emulate it, it was decided that the Russian foreign policy would be directed towards achieving the regional hegemony over the post-Soviet space (Abushov 2009: 191).

The other school of thought - Neo-Eurasionist – consisted of several subgroups such as neo-imperialists, Russian interest zone ("the near abroad") proponents and ethno-nationalists. They all shared the ambition to establish the regional domination of a strong and sovereign Russian state that would subordinate the former Soviet Union republics by using economic, political, and military power along with establishing more *de-facto* protectorates, i.e., states dependent on Russia (Kuchins and Zevelev 2012: 151). These newly established independent states in the region that was seen as being of special interest to Russia –the near abroad, were supposed to be the focus of the new Russian foreign policy. Russian governments viewed the post-Soviet space as a neo-imperialist state (*держава императорская*), which required the securitization of

the Caucasus as a region in which potential threats to Russia's sovereignty and integrity are manifested (Abushov 2019: 4; Rezvan 2020: 7). Neo-imperialism, as the cornerstone of Russian foreign policy, is nothing but a covert form of imperialism: a state can recognize the independence of another state yet continue to dominate it by controlling its market and resources (Abushov 2009: 188). In the Caucasus, there are three forces at work which shape Russia's foreign policy: firstly, the rivalry between Russia and Turkey, as well as between Russia and the USA; secondly, local conflicts such as those in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and South Ossetia and Abkhazia; lastly, the threats of separatism and terrorism, as was the case in Chechnya, where Russia fought two wars (Sushentsov & Neklyudov 2020: 5).

In the spring of 1993, the then President Yeltsin and the Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev (Андрей Козырев) sent a formal request to the UN to recognize the role and importance of Russia as a guarantor of peace in those areas through the deployment of Russian troops (Trenin 2009: 8). After the Cold War ended, the main purpose of Russia's policy was to remove valuable Soviet infrastructure facilities from under the influence of hostile neighbours, while building preferential relations and alliances with friendly states such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Armenia, therefore trying to restore its own influence lost after the USSR collapse in the post-Soviet space (Sushentsov & Neklyudov 2020: 4). The rhetoric used at the time echoed the desire to view the post-Soviet space as a Russian sphere of influence. Thus, a post-imperialist strategy was designed, which implied the restoration of Russian imperial power over the Baltic, Caucasus and Central Asia, monopolisation of the Caspian Sea, and allowing the new states a limited sovereignty. The CIS and the later Collective Security Treaty (CST; the Tashkent Declaration, later Organization of the Agreement on Collective Security) were to be the new tools of Russian foreign policy to reach this goal (Abushov 2009: 191). Despite the fact that the former state disappeared for good, Russia has remained a major player in the post-Soviet space which makes up the CIS. This area has become an international arena in which Russia attempted to play the role of a mediator in conflicts (Morozova 2009: 671). The CIS, which included all former Soviet republics (except the Baltic states), was in fact a transitional stage whereby Russia managed

to keep its hold over the USSR's nuclear arsenal, but also permanent membership in the UN Security Council and the USSR's assets, embassies, and infrastructure abroad (Trenin 2009: 7). From 1993 until 1999, when Putin came into office, Russia had been keeping up the pretence of being a superpower, although the state's power and influence had been at their lowest. In this period, Russia sought to balance or at least restrain the US influence in the region (Kuchins & Zevelev 2012: 154; Razvani 2020: 9). However, the event that forced Russia to change its strategy in terms of the Caucasus was the NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia (Karagiannis 2013: 84; Hughes 2013: 994; Zellner 2006: 393, Fabry 2012: 667). This event made Russia realize how democratic states can even wage wars for their own benefit under the guise of concern for human rights (Wolff & Peen Rodt 2013: 814). Furthermore, after the bombing and subsequent expansion of NATO to Europe (accession of Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic), for the first time in the past 250 years, Russia stopped being the European superpower. It was nothing more than a former Soviet Union (Trenin 2009: 9; Marten 205: 189; Kazantsev, Rutland, Medvedeva & Safranchuk 2020: 3). After Putin's taking office, the Russian foreign policy became more coherent and constant. It was embodied in the centralization of the Kremlin's power as well as in the subordination of other states in the region, including those in North Caucasus, to Moscow's will. Moreover, starting in 1994, the West (the USA and the EU), driven by economic interests, began to venture into the Caucasus and strive for influence in it, such as signing of an agreement between Azerbaijan and 10 large corporations that allowed the exploration of Azerbaijani part of the Caspian Sea. When Putin came to power, the Kremlin has had no other choice but to pursue a more consistent policy towards the Caucasus (Abushov 2009; 197).

### 3.1 Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia)

To understand Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia, and the entire Caucasus in general, through the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it is necessary to first discern the causes of dispute in these two *de facto* statelets. As one of the 15 republics of the Soviet Union,

Georgia consisted of two sub-units - Abkhazia and Adjara - which both had the status of Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republics, as well as the autonomous region of South Ossetia (Sotiriou 2017: 2).

In April 1922, South Ossetia gained the status of an autonomous region (hierarchically lower in status than Abkhazia and Adjara as Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republics) as a minority in Georgia. According to the 1989 census, less than 100,000 people lived in South Ossetia, of which 66% self-identified as Ossetians and 29% as Georgians (Tuathail 2008: 673-674). South Ossetia was an autonomous region of the Georgian SSR from 1936 to 1991, and according to a 1988 report, 86% of Ossetians did not speak the Georgian language (Sotiriou 2017: 2). During the late 1980s, a movement called the South Ossetian Popular Front (*Ademon Nykhaz*) emerged, a network of Ossetian nationalists who sought unification with North Ossetia, as well as an upgrade in status from autonomous region to Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic, making it an integral part of Georgia, but with the possibility of potential future secession. The Georgian parliament accepted the request on November 10, 1989; however, the decision was revoked the very next day (Tuathail 2008: 676; Cooley & Mitchell 2010: 61). Georgian national leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia (*Звиад Гамсахурдия*) led a protest towards Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, opposing the regional parliament's law pertaining to the Ossetian language, under the false guise of defending the Georgian people. The road to Tskhinvali was blocked by Ossetian nationalists and protesters where they confronted Gamsakhurdia supporters; many people suffered injuries (Karagiannis 2012: 77). Since then, the territorial integrity of Georgia has been a matter of dispute (Tuathail 2008: 676). In October 1990, Gamsakhurdia was elected leader of Georgia and, with the goal of enforcing the slogan "Georgia for Georgians", he deprived South Ossetia of its autonomy, which culminated in the open conflict of 1991 (German 2016: 157). Fearing an outbreak of local strife, along with the election of Eduard Shevardnadze as President of Georgia in March 1992, prompted a more peaceful approach leading to a peace agreement on June 24, 1992. Subsequently, peacekeepers from Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia were deployed along the conflict zones (Karagiannis 2012: 78; German 2016: 157); furthermore, in July 1992, an OSCE mission

with the aim of establishing facts was sent to South Ossetia (Nishimura 2007: 32). Shevardnadze was persistent in his intentions to restore Georgia's territorial integrity but having refused the use of military force for that purpose, the South Ossetian clashes became a frozen conflict (Karagiannis 2012: 78).

Between 1922-1931, Abkhazia had the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), after which it was united with SSR Georgia and gained the status of an Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic from 1931 to 1991. Following the unification of Abkhazia and Georgia, a repressive and discriminatory policy was used against the Abkhazian people, with the aim of dismantling their cultural identity. The media using the Abkhazian language were shut down and the use of Abkhazian in schools was replaced by Russian or Georgian. The implementation of this approach ceased after Stalin's death, but it still made a substantial impact, given that 75% of Abkhazians (from approximately 220,000, according to estimates) spoke Russian fluently, while the number of Georgians speaking Russian in Abkhazia was 56%. Such a policy gave rise to Abkhazian nationalism, which had been, since the 1930s, more focused on the fight for secession from Georgia than concerned by Russia's domination. The arise of the "People's Parliament" in South Ossetia led to Abkhaz nationalists establishing the Abkhaz Popular Forum ("Aydgylara") through which they appealed to Moscow in order to protect Abkhazian interests (Sotiriou 2017: 2-3; Kereselidze 2015: 311). Secessionist movements in Abkhazia and the Nagorno-Karabakh region sought the right to self-determination, but this was not in accordance with the USSR constitution (Coppieters 2018: 996-997). Before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the leaders of Abkhazia demanded secession from Georgia and the restoring of Abkhazia's status to what it was before 1931. Subsequently, in August 1990, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia declared the sovereignty of the republic (Murinson 2010: 8). Georgia declared its independence on March 31, 1991, invoking the 1921 Constitution, according to which both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are inseparable parts of Georgia (Sotiriou 2017: 3). This brought on the re-introduction of the 1925 Constitution in Abkhazia wherein the country was in a special union with Georgia, but which still enabled secession from both the USSR and the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal

Socialist Republic. The crest and the flag were accepted, and the state was renamed from the ASSR of Abkhazia to the Republic of Abkhazia. Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba (*Владислав Ардзинба*) stressed that this should not be seen as an act of secession; however, it still led to the invasion of Georgian troops on August 14, 1992, which started the war in Abkhazia (Murinson 2010: 8). Georgian troops held the capital of Abkhazia, Sukhumi, under occupation for almost 14 months, until a surprise attack in September 1993 that allowed Abkhaz forces to penetrate, resulting in a mass exodus of Georgians from Abkhazia (Fawn & Cummings 2007: 84). Georgia was convinced that the Abkhazians could not wage war without external support and logistics, namely, without Russia's help. Because of this, Eduard Shevardnadze accused the Russian Federation Army of supporting Abkhazia with the intention of suppressing the independence of Georgia and supporting the separatist intentions of Abkhazia (Fawn 2007: 132). In October 1993, Shevardnadze surrendered to pressure from Russia and agreed to open military bases and ports, after which Abkhazia and Georgia signed a truce. Shevardnadze also overturned the position and approach of his predecessor Gamsakhurdia, which enabled Georgia to join the Commonwealth of Independent States on October 8, 1993. In return, fearing a complete disintegration, Georgia expected Russia's help in curbing secessionist disputes on Georgian territory (Fawn & Cummings 2007: 85-87; Fawn 2007: 136). It should also be noted that the international fact-finding mission during the conflict in Georgia confirmed in the "Tagliavini Report", that South Ossetia and Abkhazia had the right to self-determination, not only as ethnic minorities but also based on objective characteristics such as common language, culture, and religion, as well as the stated intention to form their own political community. At the same time, the report states that the right to self-determination does not imply the right to secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Markedonov 2015: 198-199).

Still, Shevardnadze was dissatisfied with Moscow's support in his intention to regain sovereignty over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and from 1995 onward he began to seek support and partnership with the United States and NATO to balance out Russia's influence over the region, which was seen as the primary source of instability in the

region (Devdariani 2005: 167-173). In 1997, Georgia applied for NATO membership and provided shelter to Chechen refugees and fighters. After the OSCE summit in Istanbul in 1999, Russia's influence over the region diminished even further and prompted them to remove all military bases from Georgian territory, including those in Abkhazia, as Georgia suspected those bases had provided support for separatist regimes. Moreover, at the OSCE summit, an agreement was reached between Georgia, Azerbaijan and the United States on the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which would bypass the existing Novorossiysk pipeline, to transport energy resources from the Caspian basin to the European markets. The balancing efforts of Georgia and Azerbaijan in the late 1990s led to the emergence of the GUUAM regional alliance (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan (which left GUUAM in 2005), Azerbaijan and Moldova). This alliance was perceived by Moscow as an instrument for limiting Russian influence in a zone that traditionally belongs to Moscow, aided by the West (Abushov 2009: 197). Georgia left the Collective Security Treaty in 1999, which was later reorganized through Vladimir Putin's initiative into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (Kazantsev, Rutland, Medvedeva & Safranchuk 2020: 9). Russia, dissatisfied with pro-NATO slogans and Shevardnadze's refusal to help Russia in the conflict with Chechnya, implemented more severe measures. Beginning in 1999, Russia changed its isolationist stance toward South Ossetia and Abkhazia, opening borders with Abkhazia, ignoring the embargo, and supporting the employment of Russian reserve personnel and retired veterans in South Ossetia or Abkhazia's security structures. Since 2000, Russia has established a visa regime for Georgia, at the same time assimilating the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by giving them Russian passports. This was painted as a humane gesture that would enable the people to travel. This way, Russia managed to retain the right to intervene in both *de facto* states in the event of a military action by Georgia (Abushov 2009: 199).

The 2003 Rose Revolution brought Mikheil Saakashvili to the helm of Georgia. During the election campaign, Saakashvili advocated for strengthening Georgia's relations with Europe and the United States, promising to reunite the country through the reintegration of South Ossetia (Killingsworth 2012: 229; Tuathail 2008: 681). Initially,

Putin supported the regime change in Tbilisi, hoping that this would improve bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia, but his hopes were short-lived, and Putin soon turned against Saakashvili. From the Russian perspective, the rosy revolution was not a real democratic event, but instead a well-coordinated operation from the West, with its goal of isolating Russia (Nodia 2012: 722; Abushov 2009: 199; Karagiannis 2012: 78). Not only did Saakashvili openly point out that he was pro-Western, but he also, in exchange for American help and support in Georgia's application for NATO membership, sent 2,000 Georgian troops to Iraq, making Georgia the third largest country in terms of troop numbers in the war, right behind the US and Britain (Tuathail 2008: 682). In May 2004, Saakashvili forced Adjara leader Aslan Abashidze to resign, reintegrating Adjara into Georgia, which was not opposed by Russia. Saakashvili hoped for a similar scenario in South Ossetia but had to face a different situation in June 2004 when a minor conflict broke out along the Georgia and South Ossetia border. Georgia encountered a fierce Russian opposition, both military and political. Gennady Savchenko, an emissary to the Foreign Ministry of Russia, said Russia respects the principle of territorial integrity, however, in the case of Georgia, territorial integrity is more of a possibility rather than a political and legal reality (Abushov 2009: 199; Karagiannis 2012: 78). Georgian officials have repeatedly stressed that they plan on continuing to fight for their territorial integrity, but in the meantime, bilateral relations still lie between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as Georgia and Russia.

The unilateral declaration of independence of the Republic of Kosovo on February 17, 2008, indicated what kind of year it would be, putting new pressures on already existing hotspots throughout the Caucasus (Cheterian 2012: 703). Western officials (who recognized the Republic of Kosovo) said it was a unique case, but in light of the recognition, statements were issued by the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia stating that they would soon ask Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the United Nations as well as other international organizations to recognize their independence (Caspersen 2013: 929). In April 2008, a Russian warplane shot down a Georgian drone in Abkhazian airspace, followed by many accusations from both sides and

creating a war climate between the two countries. This event revealed Russia's sensitivity to any kind of military incursion on Abkhazia, and Russian officials have frequently pointed out that they will defend their citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia at any cost, by force if necessary. On April 18, 2008, Vladimir Putin gave instructions on establishing official relations between Russia and the two *de facto* states, thus letting Georgia know that their reintegration into Georgia is not a possibility (Abushov 2009: 200; Karagiannis 2012: 79). Georgian forces prepared for war weeks before the conflict began, taking strategic positions around Tskhinvali, deploying their troops and weapons throughout the region and redeploying peacekeepers within the conflict zone (Antonenko 2008: 23). Namely, during July 2008, numerous military exercises were held: the US and Georgia cooperated under the name "Current Response 2008", while Russia performed "Caucasus 2008". In late July, a series of bombings in Tskhinvali killed several Georgians, sparking a revolt by Ossetian separatist groups which began attacking Georgian villages and military facilities in South Ossetia. During the night of August 7, Georgian forces attacked Tskhinvali, taking control of much of the city, killing many civilians and several CIS peacekeepers who were being stationed there ever since the last war. The response of the Russian troops followed approximately 12 hours after the start of the Georgian offensive, with air and infantry attacks. On August 9, together with the Abkhaz allies, they opened another front in the Kodori Valley, and shortly afterwards they entered the western part of Georgia and captured the port of Poti. By August 10, they had taken control of Tskhinvali and launched attacks against the Georgian army, which had begun retreating to its home country. The following day, Russian troops bombed and occupied an essential part of Georgia, including the city of Gori. On August 12, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev issued a statement saying that the goal of the Russian military operation to force Georgia into peace had been achieved, and that the decision to suspend operations had been made, thus ending the five-day war (Killingsworth 2012: 229; Karagiannis 2012).: 79). Essentially, Georgia's efforts to re-establish control over South Ossetia had provoked Russia into a military invasion. Considering that Russia had been giving passports to the citizens of South Ossetia and Abkhazia for years, they

used that as their reason and motive for launching a military operation on the territory of Georgia. After securing the region, Moscow went a step further and formally recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on August 26, 2008. According to *Izvestiya*, the war was seen as the most significant feat undertaken by Medvedev's mandate, which marked Russia's comeback as a global player. The unilateral declaration of independence of the Republic of Kosovo was also used by Russia as an excuse for the military invasion to punish Georgia for joining the NATO alliance, but also as a demonstration to the West that the Caucasus is a region which "belongs" to Russia (O'Lear 2011: 270; German 2012: 1654).

After the war had ended, Russia updated its legislation, granting to the president the authority to deploy Russian troops outside Russia under the pretext of defending the "honor and dignity" of Russian citizens throughout the post-Soviet countries. Under a law passed on August 11, 2008, Russian military units can be used outside Russian borders in cases when it is necessary to retaliate against attacks on Russian troops, prevent or retaliate against military aggression in another country is necessary, act against piracy and ensure the safe passage of ships, and defend Russian citizens outside Russian borders. This law was designed to be the legal basis for aggresive actions by the Russian military, such as a future attack against Georgia, but it would also provide a basis for the use of military force against any country from the Baltics to Central Asia under the veil of defending the honor and dignity of Russian citizens (2013: 6).

Abkhazia and South Ossetia occupy a unique position in the post-Soviet area. No other political entities in the region have deeper and more extensive linkages with Russia, which makes them *de facto* Russian protectorates. Russia is crucial for their survival, as one of a small number of states that recognizes their independence. Abkhazia was recognized by seven countries (Russian Federation, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Syria), and South Ossetia by only five, which are, besides Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru and Tuvalu. Russia has developed a strong mechanism of dependence and coercion in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which is reflected through seven types of linkages: economic, intergovernmental,

technocratic, social, informational, civil society, and finally institutional linkage and parallelism (Gerrits & Badder 2016: 298).

Russia supports the economies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by being their main economic partner – Abkhazia's largest and South Ossetia's only partner. In addition, the most important economic and infrastructural facilities are owned by Russia. Intergovernmental and technocratic linkages can be seen in Russia's issuing of passports to citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia over the course of many years, which further gives Russia the right to intervene in any attacks on its citizens. Furthermore, under Russia's patronage, several summits of the four unrecognized countries of the post-Soviet region – Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria – were organized. On August 26, 2008, Russia officially recognized the independence of the two states, and signed the agreements on coordinated foreign policies and a common defense space. Technocratic linkage is evident in in the fact that most elites and citizens of the two states got their education and training in Russia. Social, informational, civil society, and institutional linkages are more than obvious, considering that the laws in the two *de facto* states are almost identical to those in Russia, as well as in the forms of institutions and structures that exist and function in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia Russian is almost universally used as the official language, Russia offers scholarships and academic exchanges, and Russian television and media are dominant and widely available, which helps promote Russian as the majority language (Gerrits & Bader 2016: 298 -306).

## 4. Discussion

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation towards Georgia, the Caucasus, and the entire region can be seen as compliant with John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive structural realism. Namely, through the attitude of the Russian Federation towards Georgia, starting from the collapse of the Soviet Union until the war in 2008, the basic principles of Mearsheimer's theory can be clearly observed. Although we can reasonably assume that it has unipolar ambitions, the Russian Federation is very well aware of the "stopping power of water" as defined

by Mearsheimer, and therefore strives to establish regional hegemony, in which it has achieved great success. Although survival is the fundamental goal of every state, which was clearly seen in Russia after the disintegration of the USSR, a great power such as Russia will undoubtedly strive to become even more powerful, since the accumulation of power (to the detriment of other states) is the best path to achieving a high level of self-security and a high level of hegemony in the region. In addition, great powers are rational agents that act in a way which, in the anarchic international community, gives them a better chance of survival and a higher position in that community. Russia implemented its neo-imperial regional project in the Caucasus step by step, waiting for the right opportunity to act. Georgia's rapprochement with the US and the EU posed a threat to the hegemony of the Russian Federation in the region, so Russia began to naturalize the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, the best chance to achieve regional hegemony was through the unilateral declaration of independence of the Republic of Kosovo and Georgia's intentions to unite the former territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Having started (and won) the five-day war in 2008, which largely neutralized the influence of the US and the West, Russia made a definite comeback as the leader in the region that has traditionally been seen as its own.

## 5. Conclusion

After the disintegration of the USSR, the foreign policy of the Russian Federation went through several phases, which included a brief turn towards pro-Western liberalism. Over the years, Russia's foreign policy became focused towards achieving neo-imperial ambitions in the European-Asian region. During the 1990s, decades of inter-ethnic conflicts intensified, resulting in the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in which Russia saw the opportunity to expand or re-establish its influence in the now post-Soviet space. The Caucasus region was rife with instability and separatist tendencies after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The United States wanted to expand its influence in the region, offering Georgia (as well as Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and the Baltic

countries) economic growth and military security. Due to the colored revolutions, primarily the Rose Revolution and the arrival of Mikheil Saakashvili to the scene, Georgia turned to NATO membership with the ambition to reintegrate the former Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republics and autonomous regions. After the initial success with Adjara, Saakashvili hoped to see an equally easy success in South Ossetia (and Abkhazia).

However, over the years, Russia began issuing passports to citizens from the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, making them naturalized Russians, thus giving the Russian military the right to intervene in the case of the Georgian military invasion, as was the case in 2008. In the Russo-Georgian war, Georgia was defeated, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia got what they wanted - their (*de facto*) independent states. Russia got the opportunity to show the world that it would not hesitate to use force to defend its interests. This was particularly directed towards the US (and the EU) to show them who the real leader in the region was and to retaliate for the unilateral declaration of independence of the so-called Republic of Kosovo, as well as for the bombing of FR Yugoslavia in 1999, which Russia opposed and was exempt from making (and implementing) that decision.

The question remains what Abkhazia and South Ossetia gained from their independence and what their future orientation will be. The people of the region gained their independence, but they have been recognized by only a few (not very powerful) states in the international community, apart from Russia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are dependent on Russia to such as degree that they are *de facto* Russian protectorates. Without Russian economic and social support, it is doubtful whether they would be able to survive, in the political and military sense. Both states are under constant pressure from Georgia and isolated from the world: their citizens are unable to travel anywhere (except to their "mother country" Russia), and international businesses are unwilling to open their offices there, both for security reasons and legislation issues, given they are not unrecognized. Both states' economies and businesses are heavily dependent on Russian trade and support. Therefore, it is more likely that their future status will be resemble Northern Cyprus than the Republic of Kosovo.

Ultimately, Russia's protective attitude towards these states should not be seen as any special concern for the local population, but as Russian neo-imperialist ambitions towards the region. This is mainly reflected in staving off anti-Russian sentiment in the region, the 2008 war with Georgia being a prime example. This war was a very calculated move, which Russia had been preparing for years. According to Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory, Russia took advantage of the favorable situation and entered the war, emerging as a victorious leader in the region. Consequently, it was well-equipped to orchestrate the events in the region in the way most suitable for increasing its influence and power in the international community.

## References

Abushov, K. (2009). Policing the near abroad: Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 63:2, 187–212. DOI: 10.1080/10357710902895129

Abushov, K. (2019). Russian foreign policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh conflict: prudent geopolitics, incapacity or identity?. *East European Politics*. DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2019.1579711

Antonenko, O. (2008). A War with No Winners. *Survival*, 50:5, 23–36. DOI: 10.1080/00396330802456445

Blank, S. (2013). Russian defence policy in the Caucasus. *Caucasus Survey*, 1:1, 75–89. DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2013.11417284

Cheterian, V. (2012). Karabakh conflict after Kosovo: no way out?. *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 40:5, 703–720.

Caspersen, N. (2013). The South Caucasus after Kosovo: Renewed Independence Hopes?. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65:5, 929–945. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2013.805959

Cooley, A. & Mitchell, L. A. (2010). Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States. *The Washington Quarterly*, 33:4, 59–73. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2010.516183

Coppieters, B. (2018). Four Positions on the Recognition of States in and after the Soviet Union, with Special Reference to Abkhazia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70:6, 991–1014. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2018.1487682

Devdariani, J. (2005). "Georgia and Russia: the troubled road to accommodation.", in Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold (eds), *Statehood and security: Georgia after the Rose revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 153–205.

Fabry, M. (2012). The contemporary practice of state recognition: Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and their aftermath. *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 40:5, 661–676.

Fawn, R. (2002). Russia's reluctant retreat from the Caucasus: Abkhazia, Georgia and the US after 11 September 2001. *European Security*, 11:4, 131–150. DOI: 10.1080/09662830208407552

Fawn, R. & Cummings S. N. (2001). Interests over norms in western policy towards the Caucasus: How Abkhazia is no one's Kosovo. *European Security*, 10:3, 84–108. DOI: 10.1080/09662830108407507

German, T. (2016). Russia and South Ossetia: conferring statehood or creeping annexation?. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16:1, 155–167. DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2016.1148411

German, T. (2012). Securing the South Caucasus: Military Aspects of Russian Policy towards the Region since 2008. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:9, 1650–1666.

Gerrits, A. W. M. & Bader, M. (2016). Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution. *East European Politics*, 32:3, 297–313. DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2016.1166104

Hughes, J. (2013). Russia and the Secession of Kosovo: Power, Norms and the Failure of Multilateralism. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65:5, 992–1016. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2013.792448

Karagiannis, E. (2013). The 2008 Russian–Georgian war via the lens of Offensive Realism. *European Security*, 22:1, 74–93.

Kazantsev, A. A., Rutland, P., Medvedeva, S. M. & Safranchuk, I. A. (2020). Russia's policy in the "frozen conflicts" of the post-soviet space: from ethnopolitics to geopolitics. *Caucasus Survey*. DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2020.1728499

Kereselidze, N. (2015). The engagement policies of the European Union, Georgia and Russia towards Abkhazia. *Caucasus Survey*, 3:3, 309–322. DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2015.110245

Kropatcheva, E. (2012). Russia and the role of the OSCE in European security: a 'Forum' for dialog or a 'Battlefield' of interests?. *European Security*, 21:3, 370–394. DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2011.640323

Kuchins, A. C. & Zevelev, I. A. (2012). Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity in Change. *The Washington Quarterly*, 35:1, 147–161. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2012.642787

Light, M. (2003). In search of an identity: Russian foreign policy and the end of ideology. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 19:3, 42–59. DOI: 10.1080/13523270300660017

Markedonov, S. (2015). De facto statehood in Eurasia: a political and security phenomenon. *Caucasus Survey*, 3:3, 195–206. DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2015.1086565

Marković, I. S. (2014). *Bezbednost – tradicionalna i kritička shvatanja*. Novi Sad: Fakultet za pravne i poslovne studije dr Lazar Vrkatić.

Marten, K. (2015). Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine. *The Washington Quarterly*, 38:2, 189–204. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064717

Mesbahi, M. (1993). Russian foreign policy and security in central Asia and the Caucasus. *Central Asian Survey*, 12:2, 181–215. DOI: 10.1080/02634939308400813

Morozova, M. (2009). Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian Foreign Policy Under Putin. *Geopolitics*, 14:4, 667–686. DOI: 10.1080/14650040903141349

Murinson, A. (2004). The secessions of Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabagh. The roots and patterns of development of post-Soviet micro-secessions in Transcaucasia. *Central Asian Survey*, 23:1, 5–26. DOI: 10.1080/02634930410001711152

Nishimura, M. (1999). The OSCE and ethnic conflicts in Estonia, Georgia, and Tajikstan: A search for sustainable peace and its limits. *European Security*, 8:1, 25–42. DOI: 10.1080/09662839908407395

Nodia, G. (2012). The August 2008 war: main consequences for Georgia and its conflicts. *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 40:5, 721–738. DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2012.705270

O'Lear, S. (2011). Borders in the South Caucasus. *Defense & Security Analysis*, 27:3, 267–276. DOI: 10.1080/14751798.2011.604486

Rezvani, B. (2020). Russian foreign policy and geopolitics in the PostSoviet space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. *Middle Eastern Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2020.1775590

Sotiriou, S. A. (2017). The Irreversibility of History. *Problems of Post-Communism*. DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2017.1406310

Sushentsov, A. & Neklyudov, N. (2020). The Caucasus in Russian foreign policy strategy. *Caucasus Survey*. DOI: 10.1080/23761199.2020.1759888

Trenin, D. (2009). Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence. *The Washington Quarterly*, 32:4, 3 22. DOI: 10.1080/01636600903231089

Tuathail, G. O. (2008). Russia's Kosovo: A Critical Geopolitics of the August 2008 War over South Ossetia. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49:6, 670–705.

Vilijams, P. D. (2012). *Uvod u studije bezbednosti*. Beograd. Službeni glasnik, Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet bezbednosti.

Wolff, S. & Rodt, A. P. (2013). Self-Determination After Kosovo. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65:5, 799–822. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2013.792450

Zellner, W. (2005). Russia and the OSCE: From High Hopes to Disillusionment. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 18:3, 389–402. DOI: 10.1080/09557570500237995