

CHECKBOOK DIPLOMACY

Russia Seeking Recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Stina Aava, University of Tartu

Motives of both Russia and USA in South Caucasus are based on their own needs. Complexity and ambiguity of their actions driven by power relations, can be illustrated by their opinions on recognizing or non-recognizing Georgia's breakaway regions. Amidst Russo-Georgian war in 2008, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Subsequently, Russia started looking for other states which could join in recognizing these regions and turned its eyes towards Latin America. Concurrently, USA and Europe stood and are still standing firmly behind Georgia's integrity and sovereignty. Investigating the logic behind all sides of the conflict and their rationale for recognition, we get a new look on the conflict in South Caucasus which brings out mistakes made by involved parties and prepares us for analogous cases in the future.

Excuses of Recognition and Motives of Stepping In

In the end of August 2008, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia which did not happen too long after West's decision on Kosovo's independence. The uniqueness of these regions is still under a heated discussion and considered by latter as *sui generis*. Whereas underlining the uniqueness has become very common, at the same time it is strongly emphasized that Abkhazia nor South Ossetia are precedents¹. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov categorically denied that Abkhazia and South Ossetia could have any similarities with other regions². On the other hand, while USA considers Kosovo independent, it clearly does not so with Georgian breakaway regions. It brings us to a notion that recognition of a state in 21st century does not follow same patterns, but instead has more in common with states' wishes and aspirations in the specific region.

Lawyer Rein Müllerson has brought out main motives of USA and Russia: 1) Russia acts under the commitment to protect minorities, 2) USA and Western powers act behind the rationalization of integrity and democratization³. There are shortages in both sides' explanations, starting from Russian side: as Abkhazia with its notable population could theoretically be independent, then South Ossetia is too small to be a properly operating state. Therefore, recognizing it would be a

¹ Müllerson, Rein 2009: Precedents in the Mountains: On the Parallels and Uniqueness of the Cases of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. *Chinese Journal of International Law* 8(1), 2–25.

² RIA Novosti 2008: *Признание Абхазии и ЮО не прецедент для Нагорного Карабаха – Лавров*. September 18.

³ Müllerson, Rein 2009: Precedents in the Mountains: On the Parallels and Uniqueness of the Cases of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. *Chinese Journal of International Law* 8(1), 2–25.

surreal act with no adequate arguments behind it⁴. This brings us back to Russia's worries about minorities – simply giving statehood to all tribes would be irrational and world would be scattered with ethnically clean but non-functioning states or in South Ossetian and Abkhazian cases – having less independence than before, when being under Georgia. Paradoxically, compared to current situation, South Ossetia and Abkhazia had somewhat more independence when they were completely unrecognized⁵. Russian side mostly controls economy and transport, moreover, since 2009 Russia has a right to access Abkhazia's military facilities for 49 years⁶. From the so-called protection of minorities, it has moved towards to controlling and leading a group of people instead.

In addition, Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist compare Russo-Georgian relations and conflict through different political theories. One of the subpoints is about Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which is put into four theoretical frames. Constructivism is the only theory which after facts and figures proves itself and according to this, recognizing was for Russia a measure to increase its internal honor⁷. When considering a proposal made by authors, then it is important to remember, that theory does not equal to practice and they lack of many other theories, which could have been used instead. Still, it gives us at least one of the possible reasons of Russia's unpredicted behavior, such as reactionary politics and reshaping identities. Distancing from Russian cover-up reasons, it is important to notice that also USA has relatively fake motives, while hiding its actions under the word "humanity"⁸. After all, USA's and Russia's attitudes give a glimpse towards what roles do countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Baltic States have in their minds – they are merely a border between the two big world powers. Georgian and Ukraine conflicts did not happen because of the changes in politics *per se*, but also included aspects such as NATO expanding towards East, honor of states and multifaceted world powers.

Russia's New and Old Allies

Although East and West stand in different positions with the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they act according to the same simple principle – who is not behind our opinion, is our enemy. In this question West (incl. Europe and international organizations) is homogenous and

⁴ International Crisis Group 2007: Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly. *Europe Report* no. 183, June 7.

⁵ Cooley, Alexander; Mitchell, Lincoln A. 2010: Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States. *The Washington Quarterly* 33(4), 59–73.

⁶ Radio Free Europe 2010: *Russia Gains Military Base in Abkhazia*. February 17.

⁷ Tsygankov, Andrei P.; Tarver-Wahlquist, Matthew 2009: Duelling Honors: Power, Identity and the Russia-Georgia Divide. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5, 307–326.

⁸ Müllerson, Rein 2009: Precedents in the Mountains: On the Parallels and Uniqueness of the Cases of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. *Chinese Journal of International Law* 8(1), 2–25.

Russia mostly has failed in its search for recognition. Nevertheless, Russia has found partners in Latin America and possible causes for such behavior may include⁹:

- 1) Cooperating with Latin America is a clear threat for the USA. Unstable neighboring states which collaborate with an enemy should not be overlooked, especially when their ideological background is different from yours and are comparable with enemy's ideas. This situation could be compared to Cuba during the Soviet times and nowadays Russia uses similar situation to provoke tensions.
- 2) Currently economically/politically problematic states are easy to affect and to work upon, by simply providing some kind of aid.
- 3) As Georgian breakaway regions are parts of a power game, so is Latin America and it is a chance to win over a bordering area.
- 4) Lastly, US Army War College professor Evan Ellis has noted that some states in Latin America who nowadays work closely with Russia, have no previous experience in communicating with them. As some states act intentionally against US like during the Soviet era, then for example Venezuela has no common past to rely on. This might explain why they jump into cooperation without measuring pros and cons properly¹⁰.

States which have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent and sovereign, prove that Russia puts a lot effort to make Georgian situation harder in managing the conflict. Russia, Syria, Nauru, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Tuvalu and Vanuatu all have recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, of which last two have withdrawn their recognition.

Tiny atoll Nauru decided to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as they got \$50m from Russia in return. As Nauru is somewhat known for making money-deals out of recognition, it is certain that Russia was seeking for a potential state to support Russian-backed territories and this large amount of aid was not accidental¹¹. Similarly, Nicaragua has been in Russian influence sphere since 1980s. In 2000s Russians deepened the relationship, as their deputy prime minister Igor Sechin promised aid for Nicaraguans who had suffered from natural disasters like hurricanes¹². In addition, in 2008 Russian warships visited Nicaragua and \$200,000 worth aid was given to the Latin American state¹³. Two states also created several bilateral agreements in 2008, in fields like agriculture, cosmonautics and communications¹⁴.

Therefore, it is not a surprise that Venezuela followed the same pattern – vast loans and aids were answered with the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Venezuela has had tight military

⁹ First three points are author's original ideas on this question.

¹⁰ Ellis, Evan R. 2015: *The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic position, commerce, and dreams of the past*. United States Army War College, 10–11.

¹¹ Harding, Luke 2009: Tiny Nauru struts world stage by recognising breakaway republics. *The Guardian*, December 14.

¹² Reuters 2008: *Russia seeks close ties with US ex-foe Nicaragua*. September 18.

¹³ Radio Free Europe. 2008. Russian Warships Visit Cold War Ally Nicaragua. 14th December 2008.

¹⁴ Sputnik News 2008: *Russia, Nicaragua sign deals after presidents' meeting*. December 18.

cooperation with Russia during Chávez leadership. Venezuela is an attractive partner because of its oil and since the deepening of a relationship in 2004, Russia has made treaties to build its petrochemical and power plants to Venezuela, they also invested in modernization of Venezuelan coal industry, as well as in aluminum and bauxite production. In addition, Russia has sold Kalashnikovs and helicopters¹⁵. The list of aid and cooperation between those two states seems almost endless. Besides military and energetical cooperation, Venezuela and Russia deepen the anti-American teamwork.

It has been noticed that Moscow is trying to get recognition from further Latin American states, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, and additionally, from its neighbor Belarus¹⁶. Belarus though, as an old puppet of Russia, has refused due to the European Union's warnings and fears of further sanctions¹⁷. Russia has not managed to get recognition from Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) members either. Russian side has explained that *de jure* recognition is not even so important, as is protection of these regions. Moreover, Medvedev has announced that many foreign leaders behind the curtains have expressed desires to give their recognition, but they are just afraid of international or national reactions¹⁸. CSTO members have used this case to show that they are not Russia's slaves, but independent instead, which has very little to do with their real opinions on Georgia¹⁹.

Lastly, on 29th of May 2018 Syria recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Syrian foreign ministry's representatives stated that recognition is given due to the support received from Abkhazia and South Ossetia against terrorist aggression in Syria²⁰. For Russia Syria is a new place, besides Latin America, where it can show its dominance in Middle East and engage another player to its games. Businesswise, sales of arms to Syria is beneficial and as Russia has its naval base in Tartus' since the Cold War, it is relatively easy to have a military cooperation and currently keep this country as a hotspot for anti-westernism²¹. Russian attempts to buy over partners to get a firmer grasp over occupied Georgian territories, shows that Russian representative's justifications in the Security Council to cast veto to United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) were simply not true²².

In 2009 when UNOMIG was vetoed, Russia claimed it wanted more independence for these regions and their equal treatment with Georgia. Current reality proves opposite – Russia is trying

¹⁵ Katz, Mark N. 2006: The Putin-Chavez Partnership. *Problems of Post-Communism* vol. 53, no. 4, July/August, 10–20.

¹⁶ Cooley, Alexander; Mitchell, Lincoln A. 2010: Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States. *The Washington Quarterly*, 33(4), 59–73.

¹⁷ Castle, Stephen 2009: EU warns Belarus not to recognize Georgian separatist regions. *The New York Times*, December 3.

¹⁸ Trenin, Dmitri 2009: Russia Reborn. Reimagining Moscow's Foreign Policy. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December.

¹⁹ Trenin, Dmitri 2009: Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence. *The Washington Quarterly*, 32(4), 3–22.

²⁰ Agenda 2018: *Syria recognises independence of Georgia's occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia*. May 29.

²¹ Satter, David 2012: Russia and Syria. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, June.

²² United Nations 2009: *S/2009/310*.

to establish its hegemony. Secondly, discussing Russian endeavors to get recognitions precisely from Nauru, Nicaragua and Venezuela is immensely important. All above-mentioned states are members of the United Nations and this raises a serious question – how there is no method to stop such deals? United Nation charter's article 2, paragraph 4 states: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."²³. On South Ossetian and Abkhazian cases, several members of the United Nations did act against Georgian territorial integrity by recognizing these territories as independent. As Cooley and Mitchell write, recognizing Abkhazia's independence would be equal to recognizing ethnical cleansing, as hundreds of thousands of Georgians had to leave their homes in 1990s. Internally displaced persons are still waiting to turn back to their old lands, so even in this sense, it is illegal to recognize Abkhazia²⁴.

What's Next?

Russia made two big mistakes while recognizing separatist areas of Georgia. Firstly, losing support of India, China, Indonesia and other possible allies – states which have their own problems of such areas. Secondly, Russia could have used Georgia as a measure to grant its needs with influencing but with no real-life actions. Instead, Russia did not use this opportunity wisely²⁵. This has led to a situation that after 10 years of recognition by Russia, South Ossetia nor Abkhazia have moved towards independence and they do not have international recognition. Russia learnt from the problem and when it came to Crimea in 2014, it already decided to make a referendum instead. Regardless of Crimean case, any referendum held on Abkhazia's independence would not be legitimate without involving internally displaced persons²⁶. Situation in the region without new actors stays deadlock, until new conflict lashes out or until any involved party does not make a significant novel decision.

Future in South Caucasus brings more dependence on Russia, without real independence. Russians have made too many mistakes in their foreign politics to get whole sovereign states back under their control. For example, helping Ukraine and Georgia would have given more benefits to Russia in terms of finding friends, but instead Russia itself pushed them towards Western Europe and got an angry opponent in the form of EU. Therefore, Russia has left with small problematic states as

²³ United Nations 1945: *The UN Charter*. Look at Charter's article 2 and its paragraph number 4.

²⁴ Cooley, Alexander; Mitchell, Lincoln A. 2010: Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States. *The Washington Quarterly*, 33(4), 59–73.

²⁵ Müllerson, Rein 2009: Precedents in the Mountains: On the Parallels and Uniqueness of the Cases of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. *Chinese Journal of International Law* 8(1), 2–25.

²⁶ Cooley, Alexander; Mitchell, Lincoln A. 2010: Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States. *The Washington Quarterly*, 33(4), 59–73.

its only allies, which does not give real long-term power, as these unstable countries can be easily influenced. This in turn, pushes Russia towards new conquests and conflicts, to prove itself and its society.

References

- Agenda 2018: *Syria recognises independence of Georgia's occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia*. May 29, <http://agenda.ge/news/101503/eng>. Accessed November 10, 2018.
- Castle, Stephen 2009: EU warns Belarus not to recognize Georgian separatist regions. *The New York Times*, December 3, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/23/world/europe/23iht-union.4.20381388.html>. Accessed November 10, 2018.
- Cooley, Alexander; Mitchell, Lincoln A. 2010: Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States. *The Washington Quarterly* 33(4), 59–73.
- Ellis, Evan R. 2015: *The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic position, commerce, and dreams of the past*. United States Army War College, 10–11.
- Harding, Luke 2009: Tiny Nauru struts world stage by recognising breakaway republics. *The Guardian*, December 14, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/14/nauro-recognises-abkhazia-south-ossetia>. Accessed November 10, 2018.
- International Crisis Group 2007: Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly. *Europe Report* no. 183, June 7, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/georgia/georgia-s-south-ossetia-conflict-make-haste-slowly>. Accessed November 10, 2018.
- Katz, Mark N. 2006: The Putin-Chavez Partnership. *Problems of Post-Communism* vol. 53, no. 4, July/August, 10–20.
- Müllerson, Rein 2009: Precedents in the Mountains: On the Parallels and Uniqueness of the Cases of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. *Chinese Journal of International Law* 8(1), 2–25.
- Radio Free Europe 2010: *Russia Gains Military Base in Abkhazia*. February 17, https://www.rferl.org/a/Russia_Gains_Military_Base_In_Abkhazia/1960545.html. Accessed November 10, 2018.
- Reuters 2008: *Russia seeks close ties with US ex-foe Nicaragua*. September 18, [://www.emirates247.com/eb247/news/europe/russia-seeks-close-ties-with-us-ex-foe-nicaragua-2008-09-18-1.177401](http://www.emirates247.com/eb247/news/europe/russia-seeks-close-ties-with-us-ex-foe-nicaragua-2008-09-18-1.177401). Accessed November 10, 2018.

RIA Novosti 2008: *Признание Абхазии и ЮО не прецедент для Нагорного Карабаха – Лавров*. September 18, https://ria.ru/osetia_news/20080918/151374624.html. Accessed November 10, 2018.

Satter, David 2012: Russia and Syria. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, June. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/153841/201206_satter_russia-and-syria.pdf

Sputnik News 2008: *Russia, Nicaragua sign deals after presidents' meeting*. December 18, <https://sputniknews.com/world/20081218118933560/>. Accessed November 10, 2018.

Trenin, Dmitri 2009: Russia Reborn. Reimagining Moscow's Foreign Policy. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2009-11-01/russia-reborn>. Accessed November 10, 2018.

Trenin, Dmitri 2009: Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence. *The Washington Quarterly*, 32(4), 3–22.

Tsygankov, Andrei P.; Tarver-Wahlquist, Matthew 2009: Duelling Honors: Power, Identity and the Russia-Georgia Divide. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5, 307–326.

United Nations 2009: *S/2009/310*. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/Georgia%20S%202009%20310.php>. Accessed November 10, 2018.

United Nations 1945: *The UN Charter*. <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/index.html>. Accessed on November 10, 2018.