



EU's Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy Towards Occupied Territories of Georgia: Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Literature review and gap.....	7
Research design.....	11
Research question and hypothesis.....	11
Conceptualisation.....	11
Theory.....	13
Methodology.....	13
Limitations.....	14
Russia.....	16
Introduction.....	16
Economic ties.....	17
Political ties.....	18
Military ties.....	20
Social ties.....	21
Conclusion.....	23
Abkhazia.....	24
Introduction.....	24
Historical background.....	25
Self-isolation.....	26
Conclusion.....	28
Tskhinvali Region.....	29
Introduction.....	29
Historical background.....	30
Self-isolation.....	32
Conclusion.....	34
Georgia.....	35
Historical background (after 1992-1993 Abkhazian conflict).....	35
Further isolation of <i>de-facto</i> states.....	37
Conclusion.....	39
The EU.....	40
Introduction.....	40
EU member-states' foreign policy priorities.....	41
Other factors.....	43
Conclusion.....	46
Recommendations.....	47

Conclusion..... 52
Bibliography..... 56

Introduction

In 2008 after the Russo-Georgian August five-day war Russia recognised Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region (also referred to as Samachablo or South Ossetia) as sovereign states. Later Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru and Syria also recognised the *de-facto* territories' independence. In 2011 Vanuatu and Tuvalu followed the same path of recognition.^{1 2} Yet, they renounced the decision shortly afterwards, amid establishing diplomatic relations with Georgia in 2013 and 2014, respectively.³

Following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the OSCE Mission had to withdraw from Georgia due to the pressure from Russia and no consensus among the other participating states. The EU was urged to play a more significant role in the conflict resolution in the region.⁴ Consequently, an extraordinary European Council called for the accelerated process for Georgia's approximation to the EU, as the Union saw the importance of expanding the continent's security zone.⁵ To this end, in December 2009, the EU Political and Security Committee adopted the EU Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) towards Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region that was stated to serve the conflict resolution. The policy's non-recognition dimension is to demonstrate support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, whereas engagement envisages de-isolating conflict regions, reducing dependence on Russia, promoting alternative ties and European values, confidence-building, integrating territories to a greater extent into Georgian common space, rather than the Russian one, responding to the threat coming from the EU's immediate neighbourhood.^{6 7 8} The two pillars of non-recognition and engagement are inseparable parts of one policy. It is based on the belief that isolation promotes further dependence on Russia and stimulates negative attitudes towards Georgia and the West among the population of occupied territories.⁹ The policy indicates that engagement with the people behind the occupation line is of utmost importance for building

1 Embassy of the Republic of Abkhazia in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, "Countries that have recognized the independence of the Republic of Abkhazia", retrieved in 2020, [Link](#)

2 BBC News, "Syria recognises Russian-backed Georgia regions", 2018, [Link](#)

3 RFERL, "Tuvalu Retracts Recognition Of Abkhazia, South Ossetia", 2014, [Link](#)

4 Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in: IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

5 Carl Bildt and Radoslaw Sikorski, "Multiplying civil society's voice in the Eastern partnership, a challenging task", in Eastern Partnership Turns 10, New Eastern Europe Magazine (NEE), No3-4, 2019.

6 Cooley, Alexander, and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "Engagement Without Recognition: A New Strategy Toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States," 2010, The Washington Quarterly 33 (4): 59–73, [Link](#)

7 Nicu Popescu, "EU and the Eastern Neighbourhood: Reluctant Involvement in Conflict Resolution", European Foreign Affairs Review 14, 457–477, 2009, [Link](#)

8 Sabine Fischer, "The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia", EU Institute for Security Studies, Seminar Reports, Brussels, 2010, [Link](#)

9 Civil, "Interview with the EUSR for South Caucasus Peter Semneby: "Less Tensions, More Emphasis on Substantial Issues Before Elections", 2010, [Link](#)

confidence with the societies on the ground, avoiding an information vacuum, alienating the locals, and ultimately bringing about a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Since 2008 the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) and Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) together with the NREP have been trying to promote peaceful conflict resolution and confidence-building.¹⁰

During 2008-2017, the EU offered nearly 40 million euros to fund the projects within the NREP (aid to local NGOs, healthcare programmes, humanitarian and internally displaced persons' (IDPs) support, civil society projects, supporting private entrepreneurs in Abkhazia or other economic and infrastructure projects).¹¹ The EUMM started monitoring conflict territories' Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) from the Georgian side, since Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region and Russia do not let the EUMM patrol the ABL on the other side of the wire.¹²

Yet, despite the EU's attempts to promote conflict resolution, "creeping occupation" continues. Somewhat recently, residents of Georgia's Khurvaleti village found their land 30 meters deeper into the occupied area, surrounded by the newly erected barbed wires, installed by Russian forces, who patrol across the occupation line. Near the ABL Georgian citizens are frequently detained simply for being in their backyard. They are accused of "crossing the border", since it is hardly ever clear where the "newly established" occupation line lies as Russian forces occasionally rearrange barbed wires, gradually grabbing more Georgian land.¹³ These checkpoints alongside the ABL are also deployed to better monitor who crosses the "border" from occupied territories to the Tbilisi-controlled one, while this too might lead to the arrest.¹⁴ Such "borderisation" violates the right to freedom of movement, while 20% of Georgian territory is occupied by Russia.

Further militarisation is also ongoing in the regions, alongside discrimination of citizens holding Georgian citizenship. For example, a bill passed in 2019 deprives ethnic Georgian in Abkhazia of the right of inheritance.¹⁵

Even though discriminating activities are subject to criticism from international communities, Brussels struggles to acknowledge its due diligence in the region, whereas its achievements remain fragile. Real change seemingly needs more resources rather than mere rhetoric.

¹⁰ EUMM Factsheet, "EUMM in Georgia: Towards Security and Building Confidence", 2015, [Link](#)

¹¹ Thomas De Waal, "Enhancing the EU's Engagement with Separatist Territories" Carnegie Europe, 2017, [Link](#)

¹² Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in: IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

¹³ Agenda, "Fresh hardships for Khurvaleti village locals as Russian occupying forces install barbed wire", 2019, [Link](#)

¹⁴ InterPressNews, "Ketevan Tsikhelashvili: Construction of artificial barricades is a daily battle launched by the occupational regime against people", 2019, [Link](#)

¹⁵ Agenda, "Occupied Abkhazia to strip Georgian citizens of right to inheritance", 2019, [Link](#)

The EU financial assistance to these regions also tends to be quite limited. The Kremlin's aid through pension funds for Abkhazia during 2008-2016 was ten times larger than the EU's financial support.¹⁶

Meanwhile, despite their intensified search for more international recognition, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region have no prospect of being recognised states on the international arena. Even though both territories have tried to maintain the facade of independence, they are vitally dependent on Russia, their northern patron.

The stagnating situation does not seem to favour any party of the conflict except for Russia. Even though the Kremlin failed in propagating recognition of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region, especially to Russia's close partners, such as Belarus and Armenia, it benefits from a volatile security situation in Georgia, thus influencing yet another post-Soviet country.

Considering the deteriorating situation in the conflict regions, the question of why NREP has seen limited success arises. This paper serves the purpose of exploring what causes such ineffectiveness. Hence, the research focuses on the following question: *Why has the EU Non-recognition and Engagement Policy proven to be largely ineffective in terms of meeting all the stated objectives?*

Exploring the deficiencies of the NREP gains additional relevance for the EU since its immediate neighbourhood is seen as an essential space for establishing normative power. Good relations with the EU's eastern neighbours have continuously been a priority for Brussels. Furthermore, separatist territories represent potential sources of security threat and environmental concerns (for instance, Abkhazia contaminates the Black Sea, which affects other countries of the Black Sea region).¹⁷ Thus, since political, economic and military stability is crucial for the EU, addressing the drawbacks of NREP is significant for the well-being of the member-states. As Semneby emphasised "the EU itself has an interest in engaging Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region within the framework of the EU's respect for Georgia's territorial integrity. The EU cannot afford white spots to develop on the map of its immediate neighbourhood. The 2008 war and its aftermath have made this abundantly clear."¹⁸

In times of rising Euroscepticism, it is within the EU's primary interests to be aware of the shortcomings and successes the Union has had in terms of conflict management. The latter is of importance for reinforcing the reputation of a peacebuilder. Hence, the research is of significance for the EU itself.

¹⁶ Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ European Parliament, "Statement by the EUSR for the South Caucasus Peter Semneby", on OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, PC.DEL/126/11, 2011, pp.5, [Link](#)

Furthermore, the issue of the occupied territories stays on the priority list of the Georgian government. The 2018 National Security Concept of Georgia, names "occupation of Georgian territories by the Russian Federation and terrorist acts organised by the Russian Federation from the occupied territories" as the main threats to the national security of Georgia.¹⁹ Moreover, Georgia's Foreign Policy Strategy for 2019-2022 states that "the most important priority of Georgian foreign policy is the peaceful resolution of the Russian-Georgian conflict, the non-recognition of the so-called 'independent' occupied territories of Georgia, de-occupation of the country, promotion of reconciliation and confidence-building between the population on both sides of the occupation line, the achievement of lasting peace and security on the site".²⁰ Therefore, since conflict resolution is of vital significance to the government and the people, the topic gains substantial relevance in the Georgian political landscape.

As noted, the NREP policy in question was adopted in 2009. Therefore, the research will cover 2009-2020 timeframe. However, the historical background is also worth revisiting as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War played a crucial role in conflict development.

The thesis will be opening with a literature review and research design. The main body of the research will cover the chapters on Russia, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region, Georgia, the EU and recommendations, finalising with the overall conclusions, including study findings. This breakdown will be further explained below.

Literature review and gap

The literature on the topic mostly argues that even though the projects within NREP have proven to be somewhat successful, many challenges persist. They also stress that Brussels lacks the will, hence, practical tools to actively engage in a conflict dominated by its eastern neighbour, Russia. The lack of a consistent conflict resolution strategy and a "capacity-expectations" gap contributes significantly

¹⁹ National Security Concept of Georgia, "Threats, Risks and Challenges to the National Security of Georgia", Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 2018, pp.7, [Link](#)

²⁰ Georgia's Foreign Policy Strategy for 2019-2022, "Strategic goals and objectives of foreign policy", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019, pp.3, [Link](#)

to the ineffectiveness of the EU efforts.^{21 22 23} Yet, Stöber considers the EU to have been doing much better than its predecessor in the region, the OSCE, but she acknowledges that the EU still has a long way to go. To justify the argument, the author points out a couple of examples: persuading Georgia to renounce violence towards occupied territories and refuse to station heavy military equipment alongside the ABL; EU deploying more monitors than the OSCE ever did (at its biggest scope OSCE had 183 staff members, while the EUMM positioned 250 monitors); taking the concerned parties to the negotiation table.²⁴ Nevertheless, none of the drawn examples seems to have contributed substantially to conflict resolution or confidence-building. The author only indicates the EU's initiatives refraining from specifying their merits to conflict management. Thus, a more in-depth analysis is necessary for the subject.

There is an overall disagreement on whether the conflict regions should be considered as separate parties to conflict resolution discussions since these territories are mostly dependent on Russia. For instance, Tsurtsumia acknowledges *de-facto* officials as a third party in the conflict negotiations, whereas, according to the Georgian government, as well as Batashvili, there are only two key players in the process: Georgia and Russia.^{25 26} Numerous scholars argue that if the West wants to extend its roots in the regions and tangibly contribute to conflict resolution and diversification of Russian support, it should engage directly with the *de-facto* authorities rather than through Tbilisi.^{27 28 29 30}

Georgian authors, including Batashvili, believe that any financial or other aid from Georgia and its partners directed towards occupied regions will undoubtedly go through Russia and strengthen the Kremlin's rule in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. The latter will challenge the impartiality of financing agents and their trustworthiness. Batashvili acknowledges the limited nature of

21 Sabine Fischer, "Europe needs to engage with Abkhazia to keep the communication channels open", *Caucasus Times*, 2013, [Link](#)

22 Bardakçı, M., "EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in Georgia: Towards a more Proactive Role", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4 (3): CRIA, 2010, [Link](#)

23 Urban Jakša, "EU Policy Options towards Post-Soviet *De Facto* States", *Polish Institute for International Affairs*, No. 6 (159), 2017, [Link](#)

24 Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, *OSCE Yearbook 2010*, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

25 Tsurtsumia-Zurabishvili, "Visa-Free Regime with the European Union: Prospects of Democratisation and European Choice among Residents of Occupied Territories of Georgia" *Georgian Institute of Politics: Tbilisi*, 2016, [Link](#)

26 David Batashvili, "'Surkov leaks': Glimpse into Russia's Management of Georgia's Occupied Regions", *The Clarion Brief* supported by The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, October, 2016, [Link](#)

27 Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, "Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution", *Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, East European Politics*, 2016, VOL.32, NO.3, 297–313, [Link](#)

28 Cooley, Alexander, and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "Engagement Without Recognition: A New Strategy Toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States," 2010, *The Washington Quarterly* 33 (4): 59–73, [Link](#)

29 Mankoff, Jeffrey, "The Big Caucasus Between Fragmentation and Integration", *Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2012, [Link](#)

30 Whitman, Richard G., and Stefan Wolff, "The EU as A Conflict Manager? The Case of Georgia and Its Implications," 2010, *International Affairs* 86 (1): 1–21, [Link](#)

engagement with these territories, yet, depicts it to be crucial for foreign and Georgian officials to work together on the issue.³¹ The author practically neglects the part that the *de-facto* officials play in the process, as he assigns the principal role to Moscow.

Gerrits and Bader agree with Batashvili and stress that in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region Russian involvement is extreme, referring to overly deep economic, military, intergovernmental and social ties, which naturally result in the absence of the alleged autonomy the regions claim to have. They emphasise that "the existence of near-exclusive linkages between Russia and the occupied regions is still one of the main obstacles to conflict resolution today."³² Yet, the research is highly theoretical and primarily concerned with developing the concepts of a "linkage" and "leverage" from the works of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way.

Stöber, Kirova, König and De Waal also acknowledge Russia's role in these conflicts but point out the Georgian contribution to a lack of success in conflict resolution as well.^{33 34 35 36} For example, by being overly paranoid, Georgia blocked transporting materials for infrastructure projects due to a suspicion that these supplies would be used for military purposes.³⁷ De Waal also emphasises that greater engagement with secessionist regions might lead to "creeping recognition", which a parent state – Georgia is highly preoccupied with. This hinders engagement since international organisations face restrictions from parent state's authorities. As an instance, the author stresses the Georgian officials' request to Thorbjørn Jagland, secretary-general of the Council of Europe in 2010 not to travel to Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia. "The Georgian authorities are afraid that if we begin to travel directly to Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia, that will result in creeping recognition," – he cites Jagland's words.³⁸

31 David Batashvili, "“Surkov leaks”: Glimpse into Russia’s Management of Georgia’s Occupied Regions”, The Clarion Brief supported by The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, 2016, [Link](#)

32 Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, "Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution", Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, East European Politics, 2016, VOL.32, NO.3, pp.310, [Link](#)

33 Iskra Kirova, "Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", Figueroa Press, Los Angeles, USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School, University of Southern California, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, Paper 7, 2012, [Link](#)

34 Marietta König, "The Effects of the Kosovo Status Negotiations on the Relationship Between Russia and the EU and on the De Facto States in the Post-Soviet Space", in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2007, Baden-Baden 2008, pp.37-50, [Link](#)

35 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe’s De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

36 Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

37 Ibid.

38 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe’s De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.11, [Link](#)

De Waal barely considers Tskhinvali Region as a *de-facto* state since the entity is internationally isolated and entirely dependent on Russia. The region would instead fall under the category of "ephemeral states".³⁹ This allows the author to overlook Tskhinvali while discussing the EU's engagement efforts. Thus, discussion on Tskhinvali Region is absent from his work. De Waal discusses Transdniestria, Northern Cyprus and Abkhazia in the same book, devoting relatively less attention to Georgian separatist territories, the approach that most of the experts prefer when discussing conflict regions.

Some experts acknowledge that only limited research exists on the Georgian conflict region.⁴⁰ There is even less work done towards studying NREP, its outcomes, drawbacks and reasons behind inefficiency. Existing scholarship tends to be predominantly theoretical and abstract. Even if some scholars offer insights into the conflict and how the EU performs in the occupied territories, they deliver little to no recommendations on a future course of action. As De Waal stresses, the most recent paper on policy recommendations was derived by Dov Lynch's "Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States", which was published in 2004. The author names lack of access to these territories as one of the most significant hindrances for discussing the issue comprehensively.⁴¹

Moreover, some literature is based on a single-area case study (e.g. the role of history in explaining NREP effectiveness), whereas a more holistic approach is needed.⁴²

Furthermore, whenever the *de-facto* states are touched upon, they are nearly always discussed together, despite their inherent differences, including their *de-facto* leaders' ultimate aspirations. Abkhazia is demanding full independence, while Tskhinvali Region supports a union with North Ossetia and joining the Russian Federation. Yet, both *de-facto* states advocate for their independence for strengthening their positions internationally.⁴³

Overall, there is a lack of literature specifically on why EU's NREP has been rather fruitless. There is no extensive study that connects and examines the roles of all the sides of the conflict: the EU, Georgia, Russia, and the *de-facto* states. Further recommendations are also needed, as they bear the

39 Ibid.

40 Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, "Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution", Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, East European Politics, 2016, VOL.32, NO.3, 297–313, [Link](#)

41 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

42 Alan Parastaev, Liana Kvarchelia, Flemming Hansen and Predrag Jureković, in "Failed Prevention – Case of Georgia", National Defense Academy and Bureau for Security Policy, in co-operation with the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes: Study Group Information, 2010, [Link](#)

43 Marietta S. König, "The Effects of the Kosovo Status Negotiations on the Relationship Between Russia and the EU and on the De Facto States in the Post-Soviet Space", In: IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2007, Baden-Baden 2008, pp.37-50, [Link](#)

potential for improving the overall prospects of effective policymaking of the EU in the occupied regions.

Research design

Research question and hypothesis

The research focuses on the following question: *Why has the EU Non-recognition and Engagement Policy proven to be largely ineffective in terms of meeting all the stated objectives?* As mentioned above, the stated goals are de-isolating conflict regions, reducing dependence on Russia, promoting European values and confidence-building, integrating territories to a greater extent into Georgian common space, responding to the threat coming from the EU's immediate neighbourhood. Hence, the term *effective* in this context would refer to producing a desired or intended result successfully, according to the relevant criteria defined beforehand.⁴⁴

The work derives the following hypothesis: there are multiple actors responsible for the NREP's ineffectiveness: the EU, Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. Thus, the lack of effectiveness involves the supra-national, international, national, and local levels and entails a lingering asymmetry in the goals of each actor.

Considering the complex nature of the topic, a further sub-question within the research emerges: *Are there specific fields where the EU could work more extensively for greater effectiveness?*

Conceptualisation

Since the issue of even referring to the leaders of the *de-facto* territories is sensitive, some ground rules should be introduced. Leaders of separatist regions strive towards normalising their power and boosting their legitimacy, by stating that they have appointed their ministers, presidents and officials. Since they lack the *de-jure* title, the paper will refer to them as "so-called" or by utilising quotation marks. The territories will be described as "*de-facto*", "occupied", "separatist" and "secessionist".

⁴⁴ Guy Peters, Giliberto Capano, Michael Howlett, Ishani Mukherjee, Meng-Hsuan Chou and Pauline Ravinet, "Designing for Policy Effectiveness", Cambridge Elements, Public Policy, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Georgian official documents on Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region refer to the regions as "occupied territories", while the EU often refrains from using the term.⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ According to the 1907 Hague Regulations' Article 42, "territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of a hostile army".⁴⁷ This way Georgian authorities emphasise the Russian role in the conflict, especially given that the Russian military is still present in these regions. Thus, while acknowledging the Russian part in the process, the paper will also utilise the concept of "occupied territories" but with a slightly different connotation. In addition to Russian role in the conflict, "occupied territories" will refer to the "control that unrecognised political entities exercise over their territory and population", thus stressing the role of *de-facto* authorities as well.⁴⁸ The term "separatist" will also be deployed, as it serves the same purpose to impose responsibility onto Abkhazian and Tskhinvali Region's *de-facto* officials ("separatist regions... either seek autonomy within their central states or to establish newly independent states").⁴⁹

Furthermore, Georgia emerges as a "parent state" (considering separatist entities originated from here and the country still finds these territories under its legal authority), where Russia is represented as a "patron state" considering its military, economic, social and other support of the *de-facto* states.⁵⁰

Some concepts that the paper touches upon should be further explained for a correct interpretation.

Confidence-building refers to a set of activities that "reflects goodwill toward or a willingness to exchange information with an adversary. The purpose of such measures is to decrease misunderstanding, tension, fear, anxiety, and conflict between two or more parties by emphasising trust and limiting conflict escalation as a form of preventive diplomacy".⁵¹

Creeping recognition represents attempts to legitimise the separatist territory by participating in a wide range of multilateral meetings, events, etc. "Certain forms of interactions, or the sum of interactions, could be seen to imply recognition of the *de facto* state".⁵²

45 Law of Georgia, "Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories", Parliament of Georgia, 2008, [Link](#)

46 Thomas De Waal, "Enhancing the EU's Engagement with Separatist Territories" Carnegie Europe, 2017, [Link](#)

47 International Committee of Red Cross, "Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907", Annex to the convention: regulations respecting the laws and customs of war on land – section III: military authority over the territory of the hostile state – Regulations: Article 42, [Link](#)

48 Bruno Coppieters, "'Statehood', 'de-facto Authorities' and 'Occupation': Contested Concepts and the EU's Engagement in its European Neighbourhood", *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 343–361, Routledge, 2018, pp.343, [Link](#)

49 Ross Dayton, "Separatism, Globalization, and the EU", *Miami-Florida European Union Center of Excellence*, Vol.15 No.1, 2015, pp.3, [Link](#)

50 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.9, [Link](#)

51 Harman, S., "Confidence-Building Measure: International Relations", *Britannica*, 2016, [Link](#)

52 Eiki Berg and James Ker-Lindsay, "The Politics of International Interaction with de facto States: Conceptualising Engagement without Recognition", Routledge, 1 edition, 2018, [Link](#)

Theory

Multi-level governance theory (MLG) will be an asset to the research. The concept of MLG, which was widely discussed first in 1992, is commonly used in discussions on European politics. Unlike realism, it provokes the existence of other actors on the international arena rather than states. These actors can be international organisations such as the EU, as certain powers of sovereign states have been conferred to the supranational level. "The presumption of multi-level governance is that actors participate in diverse policy networks, and this may involve subnational actors—interest groups and subnational governments— dealing directly with supranational actors."⁵³ As Piattoni stresses, "policymaking no longer separates neatly policy-makers from policy-takers, nor does it distinguish between public and private actors, but rather enlists all types of actors in all types of roles throughout the policy process."⁵⁴ Hence, considering the hypothesis of the paper indicates that the lack of effectiveness of NREP entails the supra-national, international, national, and local levels (the EU, Russia, Georgia and occupied regions), the MLG theory represents an asset to explain each actor's role in the absence of tangible progress towards conflict resolution. All these parties are essential for effective policy implementation.

Methodology

Regarding the methodological framework of the paper, an explanatory single-case study on NREP will be deployed, which has five dimensions: Georgia, Russia, the EU, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. As Yin (1989) stresses, "how" and "why" questions are of explanatory nature, and a case study is an appropriate tool for addressing them.⁵⁵ The explanatory case study focuses on an explanation of the phenomenon, in our case, a puzzling ineffectiveness of NREP and delves deeper into what explains it.

53 Gary Marks, Fritz W. Scharpf, Philippe C. Schmitter, Wolfgang Streeck, „Governance in the European Union”, SAGE Publications: London, 1996, pp.42, [Link](#)

54 Simona Piattoni, “The Theory of Multi-Level Governance: Conceptual, Empirical, and Normative Challenges”, Oxford University Press: USA, 2010, pp.249, [Link](#)

55 Robert K. Yin, “Study Research: Design and Methods”, third addition, Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol. 5, SAGE Publications: London, 2003, pp.6, [Link](#)

Moreover, official documents (e.g. Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories, National Security Concept of Georgia, Georgia's Foreign Policy Strategy, etc.), and already existing interviews with *de-facto* authorities, Georgian government and the EU representatives, locals of the *de-facto* regions and experts are of importance to the research.

Limitations

The research naturally encounters certain limitations.

The soft power approach of the EU policymaking (of which NREP is part) is time-consuming and aims at long-term goals. Thus, it can be argued that the policy has not shown its full potential just yet; therefore, one cannot claim that it has demonstrated ineffectiveness. However, NREP has been around for more than ten years, and concrete outcomes should already be present.

Additionally, considering Georgia's unwillingness to demonstrate its failures in occupied territories, the topic gains sensitivity. There are little to no literature about the drawbacks within the policy implementation or mistakes that the country officials made along the way in the Georgian language. As Kvarchelia points out "official international criticism of the Georgian administration's restrictions on the activity of international organisations [on the occupied territories] is traditionally never made public".⁵⁶ Yet, the gap can be filled via sources in other languages such as English and Russian, as well as existing interviews and reports from the international and local professionals that were willing to discuss the policy gaps.

Furthermore, the language barrier (no knowledge of Abkhazian and Ossetian) represents a challenge. Yet, being fluent in Russian is a useful substitute, considering that news, official documents, laws, interviews and other information in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region are always published in Russian as well.

Moreover, Georgia itself is inclined towards isolating separatist regions, which might alter the degree to which EU policy in these territories can be potent. Even though the Georgian government acknowledges that engagement is the single pathway to restoring territorial integrity, it is still clearly concerned that cooperating at certain levels might lead to a "creeping recognition" of these territories.⁵⁷ Officials in Tbilisi refrain from implementing certain policies and conducting near-official relations with *de-facto* states since Georgians think that such behaviour can be interpreted as

⁵⁶ Liana Kvarchelia, "Georgian policy on Abkhazia: strategy or tactic?", in: The De-isolation of Abkhazia, International Alert, 2011, pp.13, [Link](#)

state-to-state policy conduct, and eventually lead to speculation that the *de-facto* countries are unofficially recognised as independent states. Yet, such policy decisions of Georgian government to isolate occupied territories can be empirically observed in more detail and their effects studied. Chapter on Georgia will cover this dimension.

More importantly, access to the NREP's original EU document has been restricted. Due to the classified nature of the document, the policy tends to be largely overlooked and often forgotten during discussions on strategies on occupied territories.⁵⁸ Yet, a similar Georgian document endorsed by the EU, "Action Plan for Engagement" also exists and could be observed together with specific projects and initiatives that have been deployed in the regions. Furthermore, Sabine Fischer's report on NREP from the EU Institute for Security Studies exists and examines the policy objectives.

Finally, the research encounters the problem of generalisability. The results and conclusions cannot be generalised to other conflict regions of Europe, considering their individualistic nature and approach that are only relevant to Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region. Nevertheless, the NREG, if practised with its full potential, which includes combining political and economic strategies, could re-emerge as a single EU policy document towards conflict resolution that would serve as a model for engagement with other conflict regions.⁵⁹

The thesis will further expand on the role that Russia (the most controversial actor in the conflict) plays in hindering conflict resolution and the NREP.

Russia

Introduction

57 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

58 Ibid.

59 Sabine Fischer, "The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia", EU Institute for Security Studies, Seminar Reports, Brussels, 2010, [Link](#)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian troops remained on the Georgian territory. In 1999, the Russian side agreed on cutting down the number of military personnel and equipment. Yet, a broader Russian military withdrawal from Georgia occurred only in 2007.⁶⁰ As the Kremlin perceives post-Soviet states and countries of its "near abroad" as its sphere of influence, such behaviour is acceptable within the Russian policy-makers.

Even though Russia repeatedly sides with China on non-interventionism and respecting the sovereignty principle within the UN Security Council, the Kremlin disregards sovereign rights of post-Soviet states on a daily basis.⁶¹ In June 2008, Russia's Deputy Duma Chairman, Aleksandr Babakov requested from the EU to be consulted before launching such initiatives as the Eastern Partnership (EaP - eastern dimension of the EU Neighbourhood Policy including Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine) towards post-Soviet states, that would touch upon "traditional interests" of the Kremlin, thus neglecting states' sovereign right to self-determination.⁶²

Therefore, in order not to lose its influence on the post-Soviet area and hinder western presence there, the Kremlin exploits every possible weakness of countries such as Georgia and tries to maintain leverage over them. Separatist regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region are such weak spots, which also play part in preventing Georgia from NATO and the EU accession.

Even if Russian involvement in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region is more profound than in other post-Soviet conflicts, Moscow applies similar strategies to these entities. Russian patronage, along with *de-facto* states' dependence is consistently strengthened by ever-closer economic, political, military and social ties.

Economic ties

Russia is a crucial trading partner for Abkhazia and the sole partner for Tskhinvali Region. The Kremlin accounted for 80% of all the goods Abkhazia consumed in 2009. Since 2009 Russia has been providing budgetary support of 1.9 billion roubles (\$65.5 million in 2009) to Abkhazia, which

⁶⁰ Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

⁶¹ Mu Ren, "China's Non-intervention Policy in UNSC Sanctions in the 21st Century: The Cases of Libya, North Korea, and Zimbabwe", Institute of International Relations and Area Studies, Ritsumeikan University, Ritsumeikan International Affairs Vol.12, pp.101–134, 2014, [Link](#)

⁶² Susan Stewart, "Russia and the Eastern Partnership: Loud Criticism, Quiet Interest in Cooperation", German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comment, 2009, pp.2, [Link](#)

amounted to 60% of the total budget.⁶³ In 2009, Russian participation amounted to 99% in "foreign investment" of Abkhazia. As for Tskhinvali Region, during 2008-2010 financial aid totalled 26 billion roubles (\$840 million at a time), which was \$28,000 for every resident.⁶⁴ According to Russian sources, the financial assistance constituted 34 billion roubles (\$ 1 billion at a time) during 2008-2013.⁶⁵ The sum included budgetary aid, infrastructure projects, construction of gas pipeline etc. Without Russian aid, Tskhinvali is unable to pay even to its *de-facto* officials.⁶⁶

In 2012 under the name "comprehensive aid plan", Moscow dedicated 4.9 billion roubles (\$163 million at a time) for infrastructure projects in Abkhazia. The Kremlin also devotes two billion roubles (\$27.2 million) for pensions to Abkhazian residents with Russian passports (approximately 80% of Abkhazians had Russian passports in 2013).⁶⁷ This "passportisation" began at the beginning of 2000s when Soviet passports expired. It granted receivers the possibility to apply for social benefits and to travel. On the other hand, Russia strengthened the *de-facto* republics' dependence on the Kremlin, ensured their loyalty, justified the "responsibility-to-protect" (R2P) argument for future interventions and weakened their links with Tbilisi.⁶⁸ R2P rhetoric was also deployed in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War with Georgia. Russian side stressed the protection of Russian nationals in Tskhinvali Region as the primary ground for intervention.⁶⁹

Yet another Russian project "comprehensive aid plan for the socio-economic development of Abkhazia" for 2010-2012 allocated 11 billion roubles (\$350 million at a time) for infrastructure to repair roads, schools and other buildings.⁷⁰ For the years of 2020-2022, Russia asserted assistance to Abkhazia to amount to 4.5 billion roubles (\$66 million).⁷¹

Russian contribution to the economies of occupied territories also includes tourism. Abkhazia attracts 1-1,5 million tourists annually, most of whom are Russian (around 90%).⁷² Due to attractive prices of sea resorts and relevant advertising in Russia (in 2009 Russia's capital alone was reported to

63 ICG (International Crisis Group), "Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence", Europe Report N°202–2010, [Link](#)

64 ICG, "South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition", Europe Report N°205–2010, [Link](#)

65 NEWSRU, "Хлопонин: объем российской финансовой помощи Южной Осетии с 2008 года составил 34 млрд рублей", 2013, [Link](#)

66 ICG, "South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition", Europe Report N°205–2010, [Link](#)

67 ICG, "Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation." Europe Report N°224–2013, [Link](#)

68 Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, "Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution", Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, East European Politics, 2016, VOL.32, NO.3, 297–313, [Link](#)

69 Gareth Evans, "Russia and the 'Responsibility to Protect'", LA Times, 2008, [Link](#)

70 ICG, "Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation." Europe Report N°224–2013, [Link](#)

71 OC-Media, "Abkhazia 'has not received' Russian funding for 6 months", 2020, [Link](#)

72 Andrew Higgins, "Bad Pipes, Worse Service: A Soviet Riviera Jewel Is Reborn and Booking Up", NY Times, 2016, [Link](#)

have 40 banners urging Russian residents to spend their holidays in Abkhazia) the separatist states seem like an exciting destination for Russian tourists.⁷³

Abkhazian *de-facto* authorities continuously stress the importance of tourism in Abkhazian economy. Since Russians do not need a visa to visit Abkhazia, while most of the other nationals require one, it is difficult to attract foreign tourists. Additionally, the only way a person can enter the *de-facto* state is through the Russian territory or their border guards, which contributes to Russians being the majority of tourists in Abkhazia and hinders admission of visitors of other nationalities.⁷⁴

As for Tskhinvali Region, it has significant Ossetian diaspora (approximately 46,000 – 90% (since many of ethnic Georgians had to flee the region), while the overall population of Tskhinvali region is 51,572 according to 2012 data.⁷⁵ This promotes the movement of people from North Ossetia to Tskhinvali Region and vice versa. Thus, the tourism sector here is even more dependent on the Russian population. Such economic dependence of *de-facto* states on Russia gives the Kremlin sufficient power to hinder the successful implementation of NREP.

Political ties

Given that independence of Georgia's *de-facto* regions is only recognised by Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Syria and Russia, their conduct of "diplomatic relations" is fairly limited. Thus, Russia has a practical monopoly on "diplomatic relations" in the conflict regions.

Furthermore, *de-facto* state institutions and legislations are similar to those of Russia. Like Russia, both *de-facto* states are semi-presidential republics. Some provisions of older constitutions of secessionist territories, dating to 1994 and 2001 are indistinguishable to the Russian ones from 1993, while Tskhinvali Region's election laws are identical to those of Russia. Other similarities with equivalent Russian policies and laws could be found in the rules for the composition of election commissions and political party laws.⁷⁶

73 Анжела Кучуберия, "В 2009 году туристический поток в Абхазии увеличился на 20%", Кавказский Узел, 2010, [Link](#)

74 Andrew Higgins, "Bad Pipes, Worse Service: A Soviet Riviera Jewel Is Reborn and Booking Up", NY Times, 2016, [Link](#)

75 Кавказский Узел, "Общие сведения о Южной Осетии: Население", 2016, [Link](#)

76 Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, "Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution", Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, East European Politics, 2016, VOL.32, NO.3, 297–313, [Link](#)

In Tskhinvali, *de-facto* ministries are also staffed with ethnic Russians.⁷⁷ The Kremlin handles all strategically important appointments in Tskhinvali, including security services.⁷⁸

Even though the Kremlin influences and largely controls most of the daily lives of residents of occupied regions, there are domains where Russia has less power and is often forced to pressure *de-facto* officials.

Considering Abkhazia's resentment not to be fully absorbed by Russia, the officials in the Kremlin come up with diverse initiatives and agreements to achieve this objective. In 2014 the Kremlin's new "integration treaties" envisaged total dependence of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region's security systems on Russia.⁷⁹ The agreements were naturally accepted in Tskhinvali Region in 2015 but initially resented in Abkhazia (until the word "integration" was changed to "strategic partnership" and the proposal of granting Russians easy access to Abkhazian "citizenship" was withdrawn).⁸⁰ The treaties were considered as a "*de-facto* annexation", since they called for "coordinated foreign policy", "common defence and security space", merging militaries, and "common social and economic space". The agreements were based on the 2008 "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" between Russian and Abkhazia-Tskhinvali Region. They stressed the importance of closer "strategic partnership" with the regions, taking into consideration new global challenges and the need to ensure "territorial integrity of the *de-facto* states".^{81 82}

In 2016 Vladislav Surkov's (a close adviser of Putin) emails were leaked by CyberHunta, a Ukrainian hacker group. The leak made clear that Russia faces resentment from Abkhazia, which the Kremlin tries to counter with personal pressure on Abkhazian *de-facto* officials. The emails exposed that the two regions are by no means considered as parts of the Russian Federation, nor independent since the Kremlin tries tirelessly to gain full control over them (mainly Abkhazia). The leaks depict Russian manipulation of legislative, administrative, regulatory spheres and even micromanagement of conflict regions, as well as striving towards complete economic, military and political control.⁸³

77 Maxim Edwards, "Thus Votes South Ossetia: A Referendum the Kremlin Would Prefer to Ignore", Intersection, 2017, [Link](#)

78 Cooley, Alexander, and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "Engagement Without Recognition: A New Strategy Toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States," 2010, The Washington Quarterly 33 (4): 59–73, [Link](#)

79 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

80 Thomas de Waal, Interview prepared for Caucasus Times by Sergey Markedonov, "Thomas de Waal: The new treaty is not a watershed in Russian-Abkhaz relations", Abkhaz World, 2014, [Link](#)

81 Официальные сетевые ресурсы Президента России, "Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Абхазия о союзничестве и стратегическом партнерстве", official agreement, 2014, [Link](#)

82 Официальные сетевые ресурсы Президента России, "Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Южная Осетия о союзничестве и интеграции", official agreement, 2015, [Link](#)

83 David Batashvili, "'Surkov leaks': Glimpse into Russia's Management of Georgia's Occupied Regions", The Clarion Brief supported by The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, October, 2016, [Link](#)

This political control that Russia practises over the separatist regions is undoubtedly reflected in the tattered success of NREP.

Military ties

Moscow spends hundreds of millions on military build-up in conflict regions, especially on the Black Sea coastal area, where Abkhazia is situated.

In 2009 the Kremlin signed pacts announcing official right to protect borders of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. Russia also established military bases in occupied regions as it signed "defence agreements" with the *de-facto* states. Thus, the Kremlin would deploy 1700 militaries for 49 years in the occupied regions and control the "territorial waters of Abkhazia".⁸⁴

In 2012 Abkhazia was said to have 5000 Russian militaries, including so-called border guards and representatives of Federal Security Service. The Kremlin also spent approximately \$465 million for military purposes in four years, reconstructed naval port of Ochamchire, build apartments for military personnel near the ABL, etc. The Russian military was also made subject to granting Abkhazian citizenship, if they completed military service on the site, an exception that Abkhaz laws made.⁸⁵

In 2012 Russian "border guards" began monitoring the only checkpoint of Enguri River dividing *de-facto* Abkhazia and Tbilisi-controlled territory. This gave the Russian military broader control over the "border" and decision on who to let into Abkhazia. The noteworthy aspect was that Russian "border guards" were wearing the same uniforms as Abkhazians and it was impossible to tell if they were Russian or Abkhazian.⁸⁶

Due to agreements of 2013 and 2015 between Russia and *de-facto* Tskhinvali, the latter agreed on hosting a "Russian military presence for 99 years" whereas there are 3000 Russian militaries already deployed on the site.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Bardakçı, M., "EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in Georgia: Towards a more Proactive Role", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4 (3): CRIA, 2010, [Link](#)

⁸⁵ ICG, "Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation." Europe Report N°224–2013, [Link](#)

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Maxim Edwards, "Thus Votes South Ossetia: A Referendum the Kremlin Would Prefer to Ignore", *Intersection*, 2017, [Link](#)

Most recently, in 2019 Putin pledged to modernise Abkhazian military forces, albeit no indication of a specific amount of funding.⁸⁸ Hence, Russian control of the military sphere on the ground grants the Kremlin further leverage to hamper western presence in these regions and influence the meagre success of NREP.

Social ties

The education sector is highly influenced by Russian soft power as well. The Kremlin offers a significant number of state scholarships to locals of Abkhazian and Tskhinvali Region to receive higher education in Russia. The program was launched in 1993 and has since allocated more places for scholarships to the regions than they could fill. In 2010, out of 84 scholarships, only 57 was utilised in Abkhazia. In 2009 nearly every second high school graduate (275/597) in Tskhinvali Region was offered a scholarship to receive higher education in Russia.⁸⁹

Russia also promotes Russian language, cultural and scientific exchanges with *de-facto* states, establishing Russian centres of science and culture in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region (e.g. Rossotrudnichestvo, Russkiy Mir Foundation).⁹⁰ According to the web-page of the Russian Centre for Science and Culture (RCSC) in Tskhinvali, the main objectives of RCSC are as follows: "preservation of the Russian-speaking space in the territory of Tskhinvali Region; strengthening bilateral ties in the cultural and humanitarian sphere; assisting with establishing contacts in the field of science and sports; supporting compatriots; cooperating with state and non-governmental organisations; information support of the foreign and domestic policy of Russia."⁹¹

Russian influence is significantly strengthened by the role that the Russian language plays in separatist regions. Reportedly in 2009, one-third of the Abkhazian population did not speak any Abkhazian, and even fewer of them were able to read or write it.⁹²

88 Государственная система правовой информации, ""О подписании Соглашения между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Абхазия о финансировании расходов на модернизацию Вооруженных Сил Республики Абхазия", Распоряжение Президента Российской Федерации от 2019 №314-рп, [Link](#)

89 Iskra Kirova, "Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", Figueroa Press, Los Angeles, USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School, University of Southern California, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, Paper 7, 2012, [Link](#)

90 Арсныпресс, "Российские центры науки и культуры откроются в Абхазии и Южной Осетии", 2011, [Link](#)

91 Российский центр науки и культуры в г. Цхинвал, "Информация о Представительстве", last accessed 19 May, 2020, [Link](#)

92 Brian Whitmore, "Half-Abkhaz, Half-Georgian - One Woman Fights To Preserve Ethnic Heritage", Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 2009, [Link](#)

In 2011, Tskhinvali Region held a referendum on making Russian together with Ossetian their "official state language", where 84% voted in favour.⁹³ Unlike Tskhinvali Region, Abkhazia did not make Russian official language. Instead, together with Abkhaz language, Russian is utilised for communication between governmental institutions and negotiating official matters (according to 2007 "Law on State Language of Abkhazia").⁹⁴

Russian language influence contributes to information manipulation by the Kremlin in the occupied territories. Russian media plays a significant role in the regions, and if the outlet is not of Russian origin, then it is often broadcasted in Russian. Russian newspapers are easily accessible in all parts of the *de-facto* states. All the main Russian television channels are present in *de-facto* entities: Rossiya, First Channel, TVTs, NTV, NTK Krasnodar Channel, the Culture Channel, Sputnik, etc., while Georgian mass-media are practically non-existent.⁹⁵ Russian tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda started publishing weekly publications for Tskhinvali Region in 2009. The press in Tskhinvali Region also includes Yuzhnaya Osetiya in the Russian language, that is also state-run.⁹⁶ Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2018" report suggests that in Abkhazia "many local publications have difficulty competing with Russian media".⁹⁷ It also emphasises that broadcast media are predominantly controlled by the government, the issue that has been disputed by Abkhaz journalists since the content is subject to harsh state censorship.⁹⁸ As for remote access, in 2012, only 25% of Abkhazians had access to the internet through Russian providers and extensively used Russian online platforms in their daily lives.⁹⁹ Thus, the Russian language and state-controlled media is a standard reality in the daily lives of citizens in *de-facto* regions. The *de-facto* states are stuck with conducting travel, education, culture and social contacts solely with Russia, while granting their patron state significant leverage within these domains and further.

Conclusion

93 РИА Новости, "За госстатус русского языка в Южной Осетии проголосовали почти 84%", 2011, [Link](#)

94 Закон Республики Абхазия, "О Государственном языке Республики Абхазия", Парламентом Республики Абхазия, 2007, №1891-с-IV, [Link](#)

95 Iskra Kirova, "Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", Figueroa Press, Los Angeles, USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School, University of Southern California, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, Paper 7, 2012, [Link](#)

96 BBC, "Regions and territories: South Ossetia", 2012, [Link](#)

97 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018 – Abkhazia", 2018, [Link](#)

98 Ibid.

99 BBC, Regions and territories: Abkhazia", 2012, [Link](#)

As demonstrated, *de-facto* states are one-sidedly and extremely dependent on Russia within the domains of economy, politics, military and social spheres with little to no other outside connection and foreign participation.

Within the economic dimension, Russia is the leading trading partner for Abkhazia and the only one for Tskhinvali Region. The Kremlin finances two-thirds of Abkhazian and practically full “state budget” of Tskhinvali Region. Via further "passportisation", infrastructure projects and tourism aid, the Kremlin ensures its patron status in *de-facto* states.

The political sphere is characterised by Russia as the only substantial actor conducting "diplomatic relations" with *de-facto* states. Sokhumi and Tskhinvali (central cities of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region respectively) have copied several state institutions and legislations of Russia. *De-facto* officials' appointment in these regions is significantly influenced by the Kremlin and "integration treaties" that ensured "*de-facto* annexation" as they merged the main state-building domains with those of Russia. Even though Abkhazia struggled with accepting such strengthened influence of Russia, it eventually surrendered to the treaties with some revisions.

Significant military aid, Russia's monitoring of the ABL and their military base on the site further strengthened military domain dependency on Russia. Russian language, educational, culture, scientific ties and Russian media dominance in the regions made the Kremlin's social leverage over occupied territories even more powerful. Thus, the Kremlin makes the two *de-facto* states extremely dependent on its aid and protectorate. This situation makes EU engagement with the separatist region, as well as conflict resolution more challenging. As Bader and Gerrits say, "the current lack of a viable alternative to Russia for the two regions is one of the main factors standing in the way of even the beginning of a conflict resolution process".¹⁰⁰

While the *de-facto* territories' "statehood" is utterly reliant on Russian support, in case the Kremlin cuts the aid to these entities, separatist regions will lose the support they need to even exist in the isolation that Russia imposed upon them. Yet, no such scenario is anticipated in future, since these territories represent useful tools towards manipulating Georgia and western entities such as NATO and the EU, not to further expand to the neighbourhood of Russia's strategic interest (according to popular opinion, if Georgia were to become a NATO member, the organisation would straightforwardly find itself in war with Russia, since Tbilisi considers *de-facto* states to be occupied by Russia).¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, "Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution", Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, East European Politics, 2016, VOL.32, NO.3, pp.311, [Link](#)

Abkhazia

Introduction

As mentioned above, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region differ from one another with many significant aspects including history, demography, economy and politics. While Abkhazia has always been multi-ethnic, Tskhinvali Region has stayed rather homogeneous with 90% of the population of Ossetian ethnicity.¹⁰²

Tskhinvali Region shares a "border" only with Russia and Georgia, Abkhazia has an extensive coastline on the Black Sea, thus enjoying less isolation and dependency on Russia. This geographical situation also influences economic viability. As Abkhazia has a larger population (220,000) than Tskhinvali Region (40,000-60,000), possesses natural resources, a port, an airport, and has some independent media, it grants Sokhumi the general ability to entertain the idea of independence.¹⁰³

More importantly, unlike Tskhinvali, Sokhumi is hesitant about Russia since it strives towards actual independence. Therefore, Abkhazia struggles between close cooperation with the Kremlin and being cautious not to be subject to further dependence on it, so-called Ossetianisation (a "*de-facto* absorption" of Tskhinvali Region into Russia).¹⁰⁴

Unlike Tskhinvali, Sokhumi stands out with its somewhat unrealistic European aspirations. *De-facto* officials of Abkhazia have repeatedly demonstrated willingness for closer cultural, political, economic and social cooperation with European countries without the involvement of Tbilisi. As a former *de-facto* President of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh stressed, "we have one aspiration – to be in Europe... And we want openness and dialogue from the EU".¹⁰⁵ Yet another Abkhazian politician

101 Shota Utiashvili, "What is the Connection between NATO and Reclaiming Abkhazia?", Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2019, [Link](#)

102 Кавказский Узел, "Общие сведения о Южной Осетии: Население", 2016, [Link](#)

103 Cooley, Alexander, and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "Engagement Without Recognition: A New Strategy Toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States," 2010, *The Washington Quarterly* 33(4): 59–73, [Link](#)

104 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.24, [Link](#)

105 Nicu Popescu, "Europe's Unrecognised Neighbours: The EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", CEPS Working Document No. 260/March 2007, pp.18, [Link](#)

emphasised: "Today we can go only to Moscow for research and education. If we had other opportunities, this would benefit us. People have to see how things are done in Europe as well."¹⁰⁶

Due to these divergencies, each territory will be discussed in separate chapters.

Historical background

The *de-facto* states of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region emerged because of conflicts that by no means arose in 2008 but rather drew their roots in the 1990s and even earlier history. The territories still operate according to a 'survival' logic and sustain due to the ideology of surviving the injustices and winning the fight for democracy and freedom.¹⁰⁷ Thus, to understand the conflict better, a brief history after the Soviet rule should be revisited.

Back in Soviet times Abkhazia bore the name of a "treaty republic" associated with Georgia and enjoyed a special status under the Soviet rule. Sokhumi has always been a home for people with diverse cultural backgrounds including Georgian, Russian, Armenian, Ukrainian, Turkish and Greek people. Yet, ethnic Abkhazians have never been keen on the idea of assimilation. Political, social and identity issues have always been present in Abkhazian-Georgian relations, while Georgia never managed to exercise full control over Abkhazia. Therefore, Sokhumi and Tbilisi had always differed on the idea of who ruled Abkhazia rightfully. Hence, anti-Georgian riots were the regular routine for Abkhazia.¹⁰⁸

In 1931 Abkhazia's status was changed to the "Autonomous Republic within Soviet Georgia". During Joseph Stalin's Soviet rule, in the 1930s, Abkhazian language was forced to adopt the Georgian script. Stalin, together with Lavrenti Beria, captured and executed members of the Abkhaz elite (in 1943 and 1953 Stalin also intended to deport Abkhazians to Central Asia, but the plan was never implemented) and promoted the settlement of a significant number of ethnic Georgians in the region. This led to the new demographic distribution leaving the ethnic Abkhaz population as a

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. pp.18.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

minority by the end of World War II and to 18% in 1989.^{109 110} Even after Stalin's death, the "Georgianisation" of Abkhazia continued.¹¹¹

After Georgia declared independence from Soviet rule, Abkhazia did not support the idea, since the region benefited from special privileges. Thus, in 1992, Abkhazia declared separation from its parent state.¹¹² This social unrest resulted in an August 1992 armed confrontation between Georgia and Abkhazia, which destroyed large areas, killed between 13,000 to 20,000 ethnic Georgians and 3000 Abkhazians, made 30,000 civilians escape to Russia, left 2000 missing and displaced over 200,000 Georgian population.^{113 114 115} After the conflict, the situation periodically escalated in the region, and a peace agreement was never truly implemented until 2008. Abkhazia repeatedly declared independence from Georgia (again on November 1994 and October 1999).¹¹⁶

Overall, the 1990s demonstrated that Abkhazia's nationalistic aspirations towards independence, absence of western interest and Russia's role as a mediator contributed to the inability to address the conflict. Thus, political ties and trust between Georgia and Abkhazia have gradually deteriorated from the 1990s.

Sokhumi *de-facto* officials' attempts to discriminate against ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia further worsened relations. 50,000 ethnic Georgians living in Gali, close to Tbilisi-controlled territory, are restricted access to move across the ABL, a fundamental human right to free movement, as well as being barred from receiving education in their native language.¹¹⁷

Self-isolation

Abkhazia was granted international recognition by Russia at the expense of further international isolation. For instance, after signing of the "Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership" with Russia in 2014, Sokhumi politics became ever more entangled with the Kremlin. In 2015 after

109 James Minahan, "Ethnic Diversity Within Nations: The Former Soviet Union's Diverse Peoples", 2004, ABC-CLIO, [Link](#)

110 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

111 James Minahan, "Ethnic Diversity Within Nations: The Former Soviet Union's Diverse Peoples", 2004, ABC-CLIO, [Link](#)

112 Bardakçı, M., "EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in Georgia: Towards a more Proactive Role", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol.4 (3): CRIA, 2010, [Link](#)

113 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

114 UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), "Georgia - UNOMIG – Background", 2009, [Link](#)

115 Agenda, "Occupied Abkhazia to strip Georgian citizens of right to inheritance", 2019, [Link](#)

116 UNOMIG, "Georgia – Background", 2009, [Link](#)

117 Thomas De Waal, "Can the Coronavirus Reset the Abkhazia Conflict?", Carnegie Europe, 2020, [Link](#)

Vladislav Surkov's (adviser to the Russian President) meeting with *de-facto* leader Raul Khajimba, Abkhazia announced joining the Russian sanctions on Turkey. This decision proved to be more damaging to Abkhazia itself, since Turkey is the second-biggest trading partner for the *de-facto* state after Russia with 14.2% of trade conducted with Turkey in 2014.¹¹⁸

Abkhazia often contributes to its own isolation, hence hinders NREP. Political disputes on its status are of particular significance in this matter. Such disagreements also affect environmental and cultural projects, including financing sewage system renewal, handling unmonitored ammunition dumps and even the 2013 International Children's Festival in Turkey, where Abkhazia intended to participate but refused to change the name to "Abkhazia Autonomous Republic-Georgia" instead of "Republic of Abkhazia".¹¹⁹

Yet another issue that hinders engagement with occupied territories and promotes self-isolation is the general fear of the population to consider utilising any opportunities offered by the western actors. Tbilisi has offered neutral passports to citizens of occupied regions to make it possible for them to also travel visa-free to Schengen countries since a visa liberalisation for Georgia entered into force in 2017. However, a person must take a passport physically on Tbilisi-controlled territory. Thus, since many believe that receiving a "Georgian" passport would cost them their job and social status, the policy largely failed. Moreover, several NGOs faced significant obstacles due to receiving western grants. Many believed that adopting Law on Foreign Agents was underway. Thus, they refrained from "taking western money".¹²⁰

Self-isolation that hinders NREP is further strengthened by *de-facto* authorities refusing Europeanisation through Georgia. As Abkhaz MFA stressed, "if Georgian leaders are sincerely concerned about the freedom of movement of Abkhazia's citizens, then they should abandon the policy of international isolation of our citizens, who, owing to Tbilisi, are denied entry to the EU countries".¹²¹

Since the EU is perceived as pro-Georgian, EU projects are seen with distrust. Abkhazians condemn the EU for channelling their assistance primarily to the Gali region, which is the closest to the

118 Burcu Gültekin Punsman, Izida Chania, Rashad Shirinov, Sos Avetisyan, Vadim Romashov, Zaal Anjaparidze, "Review of Isolation Policies Within and Around the South Caucasus", Caucasus Edition, Journal of Conflict Transformation, 2016, [Link](#)

119 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

120 Ibid.

121 Civil, "Sokhumi, Tskhinvali Reject Tbilisi's EU Liberalisation Offer," 2017, [Link](#)

Tbilisi-controlled territory and is believed to be the most vulnerable group in Abkhazia. In their opinion, the EU encourages the return of IDPs, thus benefiting ethnic Georgians only.¹²²

Further frustration with the EU is demonstrated in the widespread idea in Abkhazia that the Union views conflict regions only in terms of an annex to EU-Russian relations, thus, overlooking *de-facto* states' aspirations. Number of Abkhazians stressed that in their opinion, the EU strives towards advancing its position in the region for the sake of competing with Russia on the site and that the member-states are less concerned with bringing tangible change and promoting stability. Abkhazians also believe that since Georgia has not been criticised for the 1992-1993 armed conflict, the EU endorses the aggressive policymaking of Tbilisi.¹²³ As Rouvier stresses, "the EU is perceived as a 'Trojan horse' from Georgia".¹²⁴

However, part of the Abkhazian population considers that *de-facto* officials could do better in engaging with Europe. Notably, they could show enthusiasm and initiative, suggest practical proposals for collaboration, communicate their concerns to the EU appropriately and promote Abkhazia's ambitions towards being more European. Yet, some locals consider engaging with European countries unacceptable until they officially recognise Abkhazia.¹²⁵

Conclusion

Several factors are speaking to how Abkhazia contributes to a lack of effectiveness of NREP.

The *de-facto* authorities have so far been delusional about their potential to be a *de-jure* entity. Even if the *de-facto* officials refuse to be part of Georgia and do not consider joining Russia, they overlook the crucial fact that maintaining "statehood" would be impossible without the help of their patron state. The most feasible way to conflict resolution would be Abkhazia seeking a special autonomous status within Georgia or Russia. However, as none of the parties considers such scenario (Russia benefits from uncertainty and instability within the region, and for Abkhazia and Georgia it often

122 Franziska Smolnik, "Lessons Learned? The EU and the South Caucasus De Facto States", *Caucasus Analytical Digest* No.35–36, 2012, [Link](#)

123 Liana Kvarchelia, "Perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and prospects for the EU–Abkhazia engagement", Analytical report, 2012, [Link](#)

124 Elisabeth Rouvier, "Breaking the Ice: The EU's Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy for the Georgian Breakaway Region of Abkhazia", *College of Europe, EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies*, Academic Year 2017-2018, pp.1

125 Liana Kvarchelia, "Perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and prospects for the EU–Abkhazia engagement", Analytical report, 2012, [Link](#)

comes down to pride and political reputation) any attempt to conflict resolution of NREP will remain meagre.

Abkhazian history of ethnic discrimination against ethnic Georgians does not alleviate Georgian-Abkhazian relations either. Thus, the unwillingness to cooperate with Tbilisi in any domain, even as essential as a humanitarian field, creates a vacuum that hinders engagement.

While Sokhumi strives towards more cooperation with European countries, it rejects the EU's practice of coordinating its policies with Georgian officials. Since Europeanisation through Georgia is unacceptable for the separatist region, international engagement becomes little to non-existent.

Russian patronage also comes with consequences. Due to several treaties signed between Russia and Abkhazia, the latter must follow certain decisions of its patron state, including self-isolation. This makes the attempts of the EU to engage significantly more complicated.

Overall, there is a dire need for Abkhazian *de-facto* officials to acknowledge the unpleasant reality that cooperation with Georgia is necessary for the welfare of its population and development of the region. Both sides should admit mistakes made and overcome the pride even at the expense of political popularity if they want to achieve tangible results in confidence-building and conflict resolution. This collaboration also bears the potential for Abkhazia's Europeanisation, democratisation and general progress, which can be beneficial for both sides of the barbed wire.

Tskhinvali Region

Introduction

The *de-facto* officials in Tskhinvali reiterate that their "state" is independent and sovereign, yet, the policies and initiatives they implement reveal an aspiration to further integrate into Russia.

In 2015, the *de-facto* leader of Tskhinvali Leonid Tibilov proposed renaming the region as "South Ossetia – Alania" similar to "North Ossetia – Alania", which is part of Russia. "The whole world should know that there is a problem with the divided nation," – he stressed.¹²⁶ This division of North and South Ossetias creates the illusion that historically these two regions were one. Yet, the so-called

¹²⁶ Interfax, "Президент Южной Осетии предложил переименовать страну в Южную Осетию-Аланию", 2015, [Link](#)

"South Ossetian" territory (Tskhinvali Region) has never been separate from Georgia including under Russian Tsarist rule.¹²⁷ The names of "South Ossetia" and "North Ossetia" were devised by Russia back in 1922-24 when South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was created within Georgia.¹²⁸

Despite the *de-facto* leaders being eager to join the Russian Federation, the Kremlin does not consider formal annexation to be beneficial, as the status quo provides valuable leverage against Georgia. Russia practically already enjoys full control of Tskhinvali Region without any need for formalities.¹²⁹

Historical background

Due to policies introduced by the Soviet Union, Ossetians were segregated between the two regions of North Caucasus and South Caucasus (Russia and Georgia respectively).¹³⁰ Before 1990, the number of Ossetians living in Georgia was 164,000. According to the 2002 census, there are 38,000 Ossetians currently living in Georgia (excluding the data from Tskhinvali Region).¹³¹

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tskhinvali Region declared its independence under the name of "Soviet Democratic Republic of South Ossetia". In response, Georgian officials decided to abolish the autonomy of the region that existed during the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. The dispute triggered conflict and eventually, the war in 1991-1992, which killed more than 1000 people and displaced tens of thousands.^{132 133 134}

In 2001 Tskhinvali Region held the so-called presidential elections, where Eduard Kokoity, who holds Russian citizenship won with 95% of the vote. Kokoity took on a negative approach towards Georgia. The worsening of the economic situation in the region also contributed to a hostile attitude

127 Myth Detector, "Falsifying History: Stalin Awarded the Territory of South Ossetia to Georgia", 2018, [Link](#)

128 Georgian Parliament, "Information about the "Georgian-Ossetian conflict", Temporary Commission for the Restoration of Territorial Integrity of the Parliament of Georgia, 2006, [Link](#)

129 Maxim Edwards, "Thus Votes South Ossetia: A Referendum the Kremlin Would Prefer to Ignore", Intersection, 2017, [Link](#)

130 Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

131 Government of Georgia, "Former South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast", 2014, [Link](#)

132 Dennis Sammut and Nikola Cvetkovski, "Confidence-building Matters: The Georgia—South Ossetia Conflict", Verification Technology Information Centre, March 1996, [Link](#)

133 Government of Georgia, "Former South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast", 2014, [Link](#)

134 Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

of Tskhinvali. He preserved a status-quo and refused to cooperate with Tbilisi, thus progressively striving towards a *de-facto* status.¹³⁵

In 2004, Tskhinvali declared that it no longer considered the "Baden Document" (adopted in 2000), that used to be the basis of ongoing discussions, as binding.¹³⁶ The document was a single largest step towards conflict resolution. The decision was also supported by Russia to encourage secessionist ambitions of separatist territories.¹³⁷

In 2006 Tskhinvali Region Ossetians voted for independence from Georgia in the referendum. *De-facto* officials stated that 99% of voters backed the initiative.¹³⁸

In July 2008 Russia was said to conduct military exercise near the border with Georgia. The training named "Caucasus 2008" involved 8000 Russian militaries and is believed to have been a preliminary practice for the further military attack launched on Georgia. Meanwhile, there was an attack involving a bomb on Ossetian chief of policy in one of the villages in Tskhinvali Region. At the same time, such a strike was executed against an alternative Tbilisi-backed head of Tskhinvali government Dmitriy Sanakoyev. Subsequently, both sides launched attacks on each other's checkpoints, causing casualties.¹³⁹

Later in July another bomb attack was launched in Tskhinvali, triggering further fire exchange. Explosions and attacks continued until both sides accused each other of launching a massive attack on 7 August.¹⁴⁰ Consequently, the war broke out, which is known as the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.

Naturally, after 2008 the relations between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi further deteriorated. In 2013 more than 90% of Tskhinvali Region local respondents distrusted Georgian leadership.¹⁴¹ Worsening ties made engagement with these territories ever more complicated.

Self-isolation

¹³⁵ Molly Corso and Elizabeth Owen, "Georgia's South Ossetia: One Unrecognized State, Two Unrecognized Governments", Eurasianet, 2006, [Link](#)

¹³⁶ Marietta König, "The Effects of the Kosovo Status Negotiations on the Relationship Between Russia and the EU and on the De Facto States in the Post-Soviet Space", in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2007, Baden-Baden 2008, pp.37-50, [Link](#)

¹³⁷ Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

¹³⁸ The Guardian, "South Ossetians vote for independence", 2006, [Link](#)

¹³⁹ Jim Nichol, "Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests", Congressional Research Service, 2009, [Link](#)

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, "Inside South Ossetia: a survey of attitudes in a de-facto state", Post-Soviet Affairs, Routledge, Vol.29, No.2, 136–172, 2013, [Link](#)

Tskhinvali Region has vividly demonstrated an inclination towards self-isolation from the outside world. The *de-facto* authorities have restricted international organisations and NGOs to encourage IDPs' return to Tskhinvali Region. For instance, The UN High Commissioner for Refugees only functions in Abkhazia, while the most recent major international organisation's permanent presence in Tskhinvali was back in 2009 when the OSCE had to withdraw its mission from Tskhinvali.¹⁴² Thus, the EU's NREP is practically non-existent in Tskhinvali.

Most recently, Tskhinvali Region had to appeal to Russia for help about addressing COVID-19 issues, including drastic food shortages, lack of medical personnel, tests for the virus, face masks, etc. After closing checkpoints with Tbilisi-controlled territory, their only connection with the outer world was through Roki Tunnel to North Ossetia, Russia.¹⁴³

Tskhinvali refused to accept any help from Tbilisi in times of a widespread crisis, especially when in Tskhinvali prices on face masks and coronavirus supplies increased 20 times. Furthermore, Russia imposed restrictions on exporting medical supplies, necessary for Tskhinvali Region.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, the International Crisis Group reported that Tskhinvali lacked healthcare personnel who have had "no training for years, lacking even the know-how to operate 26 ventilators delivered from Russia". "We don't dare to even go for blood tests with the local doctors", - a local in Tskhinvali Region reported.¹⁴⁵

Due to the heavy snow Russian – Tskhinvali Region route or Roki Tunnel was also closed down, which caused drastic shortages of food.¹⁴⁶ While Tskhinvali Region cargo importers had already been facing considerable challenges when crossing the Nizhny Zaramag checkpoint in North Ossetia due to Russian regulations, the further blockage affected the situation in far worse ways. Moreover, in March 2020 Russia declared that it would close its borders for the citizens of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region that do not possess Russian citizenship, leaving everybody else on their own, isolated from every side.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, the "authorities" of occupied regions prohibited residents from receiving urgent medical care at hospitals in Tbilisi-controlled territory on top of seizing Georgian-language labelled medication from Tskhinvali drug stores, amid having medication

142 Ibid.

143 OC-Media, "Abkhazia and South Ossetia scramble to prepare for coronavirus", 2020, [Link](#)

144 InterPressNews, "Occupied Tskhinvali seeks humanitarian aid from Russia", 2020, [Link](#)

145 ICG, "The COVID-19 Challenge in Post-Soviet Breakaway Statelets", Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°89, 2020, pp.13, [Link](#)

146 Государственное информационное агентство "Рес": Республика Южная Осетия, "Нехватка ряда продуктов в Цхинвале, - власти обещают решить проблему", 2020, [Link](#)

147 OC-Media, "Abkhazia and South Ossetia scramble to prepare for coronavirus", 2020, [Link](#)

shortages. Furthermore, Tskhinvali Region "officials" decided to refrain from cooperating with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).¹⁴⁸

De-facto authorities also repeatedly declared that their approach to Georgia is unlikely to change even under the circumstances of power shift. They proclaimed that Tskhinvali "counts only on its forces and Russia's support".¹⁴⁹

In retrospect, these self-damaging steps can be considered as unreasonable and destructive for NREP. Such self-isolation is harmful not only to the population on the occupied territories but the reputation of *de-facto* officials. Yet, harsh criticism or violation of human rights hardly concerns these "leaders" since their authority is guaranteed by their northern neighbour.

Another controversial issue concerns the changing trends on separatism in Tskhinvali Region. The 2013 survey found out that the younger generation of Tskhinvali Region residents are less reconciliatory and more prone to believe that "only South Ossetians should make decisions for South Ossetia", backing the ethnocentric sentiment. More than 50% of surveyed young individuals "absolutely agreed" with this statement, while less than 40% of middle-aged and nearly 30% of older generations asserted the same.¹⁵⁰ As the former *de-facto* Prime-minister Merab Chigoev points out, "after living for the last twenty years in almost total isolation from each other in South Ossetian and Georgian communities, a new generation has inherited feelings of enmity and mistrust of each other as a result of the conflict".¹⁵¹ This tendency does not benefit confidence-building and conflict resolution, and it demonstrated that more effective measures towards reconciliation are of vital importance.

The study also found out that Ossetians living in Tskhinvali Region have a negative attitude towards ethnic Georgians. 75% of the surveyed individuals registered "mostly bad" or "very bad" feelings towards ethnic Georgians.¹⁵² In a 2016 opinion survey, it was demonstrated that less than 10% of Ossetians had a positive attitude and 70% had a negative one towards the population of Georgia (in

148 Civil, "COVID-19: Tbilisi Warns of 'Grave Situation' in Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Due to Pandemic", 2020, [Link](#)

149 InterPressNews, "Bibilov says Georgia's presidential election results will change nothing in "Georgian-South Ossetian relations", 2018, [Link](#)

150 Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, "Inside South Ossetia: a survey of attitudes in a de-facto state", Post-Soviet Affairs, Routledge, Vol.29, No.2, 2013, pp.156, [Link](#)

151 Merab Chigoev, "Some Aspects of Solving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Light of Georgian-Ossetian Relations", Point of View, 2011, [Link](#)

152 Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, "Inside South Ossetia: a survey of attitudes in a de-facto state", Post-Soviet Affairs, Routledge, Vol.29, No.2, 136–172, 2013, [Link](#)

Abkhazia the numbers were 35% and 40% respectively).¹⁵³ This mindset largely influences NREP's reconciliation attempts, since engagement with occupied regions is practised through Tbilisi.

Conclusion

Unlike Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region's sustenance depends entirely on Russia and its aid. Thus, Tskhinvali is more susceptible to Russian influence and its policy of isolation, which forces them to refuse any outer international activity in the region. Tskhinvali does not even consider the prospect of outside help on such drastic humanitarian emergencies as a global pandemic and prefers to maintain its isolation reasserting its commitment to Russia.

The attempts of engagement are also halted due to ethnic Ossetians and *de-facto* leaders showing a lack of respect for human rights. According to the former *de-facto* President Kokoity, many Ossetians in Tskhinvali Region do not consider IDPs to have been displaced forcibly. Thus, 65% of Ossetian respondents "strongly" or "mostly agree" that "some people who left should not be allowed to return".¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, antagonistic attitude towards ethnic Georgians affects the confidence-building and NREP's engagement. As time goes by, locals of Tskhinvali Region become more single-minded on the territory's segregation and less open to the dialogue with Tbilisi. Only 10% of Ossetian respondents consider that cooperation with Tbilisi should be strengthened.¹⁵⁵ This attitude clearly depicts the crucial nature of better engagement and confidence-building measures.

Georgia

¹⁵³ John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolosov and Gerard Toal, "Inside the post-Soviet de-facto states: a comparison of attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorny-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2014, Vol.55, No.5, 423–456, Routledge, [Link](#)

¹⁵⁴ Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, "Inside South Ossetia: a survey of attitudes in a de-facto state", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Routledge, Vol.29, No.2, 136–172, 2013, pp.160, [Link](#)

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Historical background (after 1992-1993 Abkhazian conflict)

As a result of an armed conflict between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia in 1992-1993, Tbilisi adopted the policy of Abkhazia's isolation. For this purpose, Tbilisi cut off Abkhazia's electricity, telephone communications and the way to Georgia proper through Psou River. The isolation was strengthened in 1996 with a "Resolution of the Council of CIS Heads of State on measures to resolve the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia" when Abkhazia officially became a subject of international isolation. Through further trade restrictions, Tbilisi impeded the development of a financial sphere on the site. Georgian officials criticised the idea of opening an airport and a port of Abkhazia, which caused extreme hardship on the local population. With the stricter sanctions, the people of the conflict region felt ever more forsaken by the outside world.¹⁵⁶ The policy intended to "squeeze the Abkhaz till they capitulate and crawl back to Georgia."¹⁵⁷ Consequently, increased criminal activity was generated, and the Abkhaz economy began to crumble. With Soviet passports losing validity, locals did not possess authorised travel documentation either.¹⁵⁸

In 1997, during the negotiation between Sokhumi and Tbilisi the Georgian President at a time, Eduard Shevardnadze refused to grant the *de-facto* state a status of a sovereign entity with conferring specific crucial powers to Tbilisi. The President stressed that the country was unprepared for such drastic changes. König called the decision "a critical turn in Georgian-Abkhazian negotiations", as Abkhazia has changed their approach to the status negotiations and demanded acknowledgement of its independence since.¹⁵⁹

After the change of the Georgian government, 2003 Rose Revolution and overwhelming victory of Mikheil Saakashvili as a Georgian President with 96% of votes, population developed a hope towards easing tensions with the occupied territories.¹⁶⁰ However, soon it became clear that the relations with *de-facto* states were instead deteriorating.

In 2004, Saakashvili vowed that he would work tirelessly to restore territorial integrity and recover occupied regions before the next presidential elections. However, his attempts proved to be faltering

156 Natella Akaba and Inar Gitsba, "Abkhazia's isolation/de-isolation and the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: an historical political analysis", in: The De-isolation of Abkhazia, International Alert, 2011, [Link](#)

157 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.23, [Link](#)

158 Ibid.

159 Marietta König, "The Effects of the Kosovo Status Negotiations on the Relationship Between Russia and the EU and on the De Facto States in the Post-Soviet Space", in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2007, Baden-Baden 2008, pp.43, [Link](#)

160 Civil, "Georgia Has a New President", 2004, [Link](#)

due to the decision in May 2004 to deploy the Georgian military in the regions. In efforts to address corruption, illegal activities and smuggling, Georgian troops blocked roads and thwarted the smugglers' operations between Ergneti (a Georgian village near Tskhinvali) and Tskhinvali. A significant number of people in Tskhinvali Region benefited from this illegal system. Thus, Tskhinvali stressed these manoeuvres were provocative. Therefore, an economic blockade was introduced in the belief that it would thwart separatist aspirations, and Tskhinvali would seek help in Tbilisi. On the contrary, Tskhinvali Region started transporting military equipment from North Ossetia. This revoked small arms decommissioning programme, hindered facilitation of Georgian-Tskhinvali Region joint police centre in Tskhinvali, promoted Kokoity's popularity, activated cross-border arms trade and set off military activities on the site in 2004.¹⁶¹

Further attempts from Georgian officials that were controversial included establishing an alternative Abkhazian government, ruled by former Abkhazian officials, that had to flee the site after the power shift.¹⁶²

In March 2008 Georgia withdrew from Joint Control Commission, as its composition was widely believed to be unfavourable to Georgian side. Instead, it persisted on creating a "2+2+2 format" with the following structure: Tbilisi together with Dmitry Sanakoev's Georgian parallel government in Tskhinvali Region + OSCE and the EU as mediators + Russia and Tskhinvali Region.¹⁶³

Furthermore, Georgia prevented international observers' vehicles from transporting building materials to Tskhinvali Region, that were intended for infrastructure projects such as rebuilding schools. Tbilisi representatives claimed that they possessed the proof that these materials could be exploited for military purposes.¹⁶⁴ With increasing paranoia from Georgian officials, even technical activities such as infrastructure projects were repeatedly hindered.

Further isolation of *de-facto* states

¹⁶¹ Giulia Prelz Oltramonti, "Borders, De Facto Borders and Mobility Policies in Conflict Transformation: The Cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia", in Jan Wielgohs and Arnaud Lechevalier (eds.), *Borders and Border Regions in Europe*, Bielefeld, 2013, [Link](#)

¹⁶² Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Christopher Marsh, "Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors", SAGE Publications, 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁶³ Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, *OSCE Yearbook 2010*, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

After the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Georgia declared conflict regions as territories occupied by Russia, issuing "The Law of Georgia on the Occupied Territories", thus determining the "occupied" status of *de-facto* states and depriving the regions of their voice while prioritising negotiations with Russian counterparts.¹⁶⁵ Therefore, Georgia overlooked separatist regions' and their own responsibility in the conflicts, pointing fingers at Russia. According to Kvarchelia, "the Strategy [on the Occupied Territories] itself may well merely be a propaganda exercise designed by the Georgian administration to acquit itself of responsibility in the eyes of its society for the 'loss' of Abkhazia", featuring Russia to bear the blame.¹⁶⁶

Tbilisi also restricted international access and travel to the regions enforcing penalties on visitors that entered occupied regions without Georgian approval (the Law on Occupied Territories, Article 4). Georgian officials also restricted "conducting economic activities and concluding transactions regarding real estate property in the occupied territories" (Article 3).¹⁶⁷ Responding to such measures, Venice Commission widely criticized the Law. "The entry in the country is punished whatever the intention of the person; it also applies to persons providing necessary humanitarian aid. In this respect, this provision may be in contradiction with the Georgian international engagements", - the criticism stressed.¹⁶⁸ These restrictions further contributed to the isolation of *de-facto* regions, thus, complicated NREP's attempts towards engagement.

In 2010 Georgia started regulating commercial and non-commercial activities on occupied territories, which faced criticism among NGOs. It restricted implementation of any governmental or non-governmental projects on the site without Tbilisi's clearance. These policies were coined as "Modalities". "Any activities carried out in the occupied territories shall be based on constructive dialogue between the Government of Georgia and the parties involved," – the document states.¹⁶⁹ Hence, the international actors could only engage with *de-facto* countries through Tbilisi, making some NREP's activities futile.

Georgia also prohibited travelling with *de-facto* or Russian passports, which significantly restricted the free movement of locals of occupied territories since most of them possess Russian passports. Instead, Tbilisi determined that the travelling will be allowed only via Georgian or neutral travel

165 Law of Georgia, "Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories", Parliament of Georgia, 2008, [Link](#)

166 Liana Kvarchelia, "Georgian policy on Abkhazia: strategy or tactic?", in: The De-isolation of Abkhazia, International Alert, 2011, pp.13, [Link](#)

167 Law of Georgia, "Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories", Parliament of Georgia, 2008, pp.1, [Link](#)

168 European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), "Opinion on the Law on Occupied Territories of Georgia", Opinion no.516/2009, pp.5, [Link](#)

169 Regulation of the Government of Georgia, "On Approval of Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia", N320 Tbilisi, 2010, pp.2, [Link](#)

documents also issued by Tbilisi. Thus, the only foreign country the residents could travel to was Russia. The international community was forced to submit to Georgian legislation as a sovereign state.¹⁷⁰ Hence, engagement and confidence-building with the conflict regions became ever more complicated as Tbilisi could reject any initiative on the site.

The responsibility for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War is also connected to controversies. While the Georgian side emphasises Russian culpability in the conflict, an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia points out that Georgia played a significant role in initiating the military attack.¹⁷¹ Yet, Tbilisi prefers to neglect its share of accountability in the conflict.

Further controversial policymaking of Georgia (and the EU) presents itself in the non-acknowledgement of the importance of *de-facto* elections publicly. For instance, concerning the most recent “presidential elections” in Abkhazia, Georgian and the EU officials repeatedly reiterated that they do not recognise their legitimacy.^{172 173} While both denounce these elections, they acknowledge the political importance of leadership in these territories behind closed doors. For example, under the so-called presidency of Raul Khajimba Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue was largely suspended. Khajimba had extremely discriminatory policies towards Georgian locals in the Gali region, who also were deprived of the right to participate in any political affairs.¹⁷⁴ Thus, Georgian officials certainly benefit from concrete political leaders coming to power in *de-facto* states, since engagement with them can be relatively trouble-free.

The Georgian government not only neglects the importance of political life of conflict regions but also condemns any response to it other than a negative one. In 2017, Herbert Salber, EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, was heard to congratulate the newly elected “President” of Tskhinvali Region, Anatoly Bibilov on the victory. The incident was followed by Georgian officials' request on Salber's resignation, which led him to step down from the post earlier than intended.¹⁷⁵

170 Ivlian Haindrava, “Civil Society and Peace Building Process”, in: Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict: Researching Peace”, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2011, [Link](#)

171 Council of the EU, “Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia,” 2009, [Link](#)

172 Rustavi 2, “Interview with David Zalkaliani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia”, “Kurier”, Video, min 8:16, [Link](#)

173 EU External Action, “Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the so-called presidential elections in the Georgian breakaway region of Abkhazia”, Brussels, 2020, [Link](#)

174 Rustavi 2, “Interview with Giorgi Kanashvili, Member of the Political Council”, “Kurier”, 2020, Video, min 15:00 [Link](#)

175 Thomas De Waal, “Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe’s De Facto States and Breakaway Territories”, Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, [Link](#)

The conflictual approach that the Georgian administration has actively practised makes policymaking towards the regions uncertain and disputable, thus hindering the implementation of the NREP. One thing remains clear, as long as Georgia does not have a single, united and coherent vision on the issue, no mechanism will be fully effective.

Conclusion

As noted above, the Georgian government is prone to isolate separatist regions. This policy has negatively affected the effectiveness of the EU's NREP in these territories. Fearing a "creeping recognition" and the further detachment of the area from the rest of Georgia, the authorities have often demonstrated an unwillingness to engage with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region tangibly. While Georgia plays a crucial role in conflict-management, such an approach significantly damages any prospects of conflict resolution.

Georgian political choices, such as the will to reintegrate conflict regions and suppress separatist aspirations via military means, contributed to a further worsening of relations. An inability to compromise and adequately address the conflict in the 1990s due to the hardship that Georgia experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union, further worsened the situation.

Georgian policy of isolating occupied regions, such as "The Law on Occupied Territories" is based on the premise that if *de-facto* states refuse a further dependence on Russia, they will turn to Georgia for support. This scenario is far from feasible as it overlooks the ethnic factor, especially when Abkhazia views Georgia as the main threat to its "statehood". Furthermore, the societies of the conflict regions are unlikely to strive towards de-isolation until they have experienced the benefits that it brings upon.¹⁷⁶

Tbilisi policymaking has not changed the political choices of separatist territories and only made the lives of local citizens harder. It brought upon financial hardship, increased criminal activity, corruption and infringed local population within *de-facto* borders. As Toal and O'Loughlin emphasise, "Georgia... is a victim of its own nationalist chauvinism, disastrous initial leadership, and collapse into lawless criminality at a moment of great consequence."¹⁷⁷

176 Irakli Khintba, "De-isolation via the West: opportunities and restrictions", in: The De-isolation of Abkhazia, International Alert, 2011, [Link](#)

177 Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, "Inside South Ossetia: a survey of attitudes in a de-facto state", Post-Soviet Affairs, Routledge, Vol.29, No.2, 164, 2013, pp.164, [Link](#)

The EU

Introduction

In retrospect, the EU succeeded in several occasions in Georgian conflicts when compared to the activities of other international organisations such as the OSCE and the UN. It was the EU that convinced Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili that violence was not the solution and signing a non-use of force agreement was necessary (Russia and the conflict regions advocated for Georgia to make such a commitment for years). Hence, in Strasbourg in 2010, Saakashvili committed to the renunciation of violence. Georgia gave the assurance that it would not try to recover separatist regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region forcefully. Tbilisi would also refrain from positioning heavy military alongside the ABL, which made the EUMM's responsibility to patrol ABL substantially easier.¹⁷⁸

The EU also succeeded in launching a negotiation platform between the parties within IPRM, established in February 2009, which tries to identify and address problematic issues around citizens' lives in the affected areas.¹⁷⁹ Together with the UN and the OSCE, the EU participates in Geneva discussions, the platform intended for finding long-term solutions to the conflicts. Yet, except for an actual launch of negotiations, not much has so far been accomplished.¹⁸⁰ Current Georgian President, Salome Zurbishvili also pointed out that Geneva discussions have only been of technical assistance.¹⁸¹

Still, one can list a large number of limitations and drawbacks in the EU policymaking towards Georgian occupied territories and Georgia in general, both of which have contributed to the limited effectiveness of the NREP.

¹⁷⁸ Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

¹⁷⁹ Agenda, "Russian-occupied Tskhinvali says 'borderisation' of Georgia will continue", 2018, [Link](#)

¹⁸⁰ Silvia Stöber, "The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia – What Remains?", in IFSH, OSCE Yearbook 2010, Baden-Baden 2011, pp.203-220, [Link](#)

¹⁸¹ First Channel, "President - Geneva format has had technical character in recent years, we need political dialogue", 2019, [Link](#)

EU member-states' foreign policy priorities

In some EU-member countries, Georgia is always discussed predominantly through the prism of its vulnerable security environment. These countries see policymaking with Georgia as "interference in Russia's backyard".¹⁸² This strengthens the rhetoric of Russia's "claimed sphere of influence" and deprives Georgia of its sovereign right to conduct foreign policy independently and without explicit or implicit pressure from outer actors. As Khintba stresses, "unsurprisingly, Abkhazia's de-isolation is a far lower priority for Brussels than relations with Russia. So, the West may prefer not to intrude in a space that Russia has designated as its' sphere of privileged interests'."¹⁸³ For instance, as Popescu indicates "every possible EU step in the eastern neighbourhood that might even theoretically upset the Russians is opposed by Greece".¹⁸⁴ Thus, some member-states have been significantly active in hindering the EU initiatives, such as NREP in Georgian conflict regions.

One would assume that eastern European nations (especially Poland, as the country, together with Sweden initiated the EaP), would be more supportive of cooperating with Georgia on conflict resolution, due to their closer ties and a shared Soviet past. These countries should be more concerned about the security situation in Georgia since if the crisis breaks out in the latter, it might have a spill-over effect on eastern European members. However, there are many instances of disproving this hypothesis.

As Maszkiewicz, the Polish Ambassador to Georgia stresses, even introducing the EaP was essentially intended for covering the pro-Russian orientation of Donald Tusk's government, as Russia was allowed to participate in discussions on a case-to-case basis.¹⁸⁵ When initiating the EaP, the European Commission stated that the policy would be practised "in parallel with the EU's strategic partnership with Russia".¹⁸⁶

Some experts characterise the EaP as an attempt of Poland "to jump higher into European and global politics", its shift from a passive EU policy-taker to an active policy-maker. As Maszkiewicz points out, during 2009-2015, "the Polish government, consciously or not, abstained from intrepid projects

¹⁸² James Nixey, "The Eastern Partnership at 10 What is there to celebrate?", in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, pp.34, 2019

¹⁸³ Irakli Khintba, "De-isolation via the West: opportunities and restrictions", in: The De-isolation of Abkhazia, International Alert, 2011, pp.23, [Link](#)

¹⁸⁴ Nicu Popescu, "EU and the Eastern Neighbourhood: Reluctant Involvement in Conflict Resolution", European Foreign Affairs Review 14, pp.468, 2009, [Link](#)

¹⁸⁵ Mariusz Maszkiewicz, "Resetting the Eastern Partnership", in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, pp.16, 2019

¹⁸⁶ Susan Stewart, "Russia and the Eastern Partnership: Loud Criticism, Quiet Interest in Cooperation", German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comment 7, 2009, pp.2, [Link](#)

on security issues. Tusk sabotaged, ignored, or, at the very best, neglected President Lech Kaczynski's initiatives for the [EaP] region... Tusk's approach to Russia was not so much a result of his love for Putin but his conformism and calculation - similar to other western politicians."¹⁸⁷ For instance, Germany considers Russia to be unequivocally powerful. Thus, they maintain good ties with Moscow even if it generates weaker neighbours. Such a measured strategy of "interest above values" is observed in a large number of the EU countries.¹⁸⁸

Some EU member-states' attitude towards cooperating with Georgia on occupied territories can be summarised with the response that was given by Czech European politics teachers who upon being presented the topic on NREP responded: "we [eastern Europe] do not care!"¹⁸⁹

Yet another issue is that several member-states constantly advocate for closer ties with the southern neighbourhood, rather than the eastern one. This was largely demonstrated in 2011 when the two camps (southern-eastern neighbourhood supporters) clashed on directing the EU funds. The revolutions in North Africa encouraged five southern EU members (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Slovenia) and France to write an official letter to the EU requesting to transfer funds from the eastern to the southern neighbourhood.¹⁹⁰ As Popescu states, "Georgia is the most obvious case where the intra-EU competition for political attention and resources between southern versus eastern neighbourhood is seen."¹⁹¹

Since every EU member-state has the right to veto any foreign policy initiative, single members can easily succeed in hampering EU's engagement in *de-facto* entities.¹⁹² Bardakçı affirms that "while EU members can more easily cooperate on issues of low politics such as the economy, they still experience difficulties in forging common EU policies in strategic policy areas such as foreign and security policy".¹⁹³

Some EU members justify the lack of action in Georgian occupied regions due to the possible aggression threat from the Kremlin. They increasingly concentrate on events such as the 2008 war in Georgia and 2014 - in Ukraine. However, this type of judgement is narrow-minded and harmful in

¹⁸⁷ Mariusz Maszkiewicz, "Resetting the Eastern Partnership", in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, 2019, pp.16

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. pp.16

¹⁸⁹ Remarks given about the statement that the eastern Europe is more motivated to promote the NREP, open research seminar in Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, 2020

¹⁹⁰ Szymon Ananicz, "Tug-of-war over EU's policy towards its neighbours", OSW Commentary, Centre for Eastern Studies, Issue 49, 2011, [Link](#)

¹⁹¹ Nicu Popescu, "EU and the Eastern Neighbourhood: Reluctant Involvement in Conflict Resolution", European Foreign Affairs Review 14, pp.466, 2009, [Link](#)

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Bardakçı, M., "EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in Georgia: Towards a more Proactive Role", Caucasian Review of International Affairs, Vol. 4 (3): CRIA, 2010, pp.231, [Link](#)

the long run. Deploying such logic, most of the initiatives concerning Georgia's approximation to the EU and NATO should be withdrawn, which would mean granting Russia full control over the region, together with depriving Georgia of its independent voice and foreign policy orientation choice. Moreover, more evidence is needed to determine how far Russia is truly prepared to go to halt outer interference within its sphere of interest. Thus, bolder initiatives towards conflict resolution can be deployed, and a refusal to do so can no longer be justified with fear of the military response from Russia. If this kind of inaction continues, in the long run all the utilised resources would be wasted, and the EU would risk on eternally labelling Georgia as Russia's backyard, as well as maintaining the "frozen" state of these conflicts.¹⁹⁴

Other factors

The lack of effectiveness of the NREP includes several aspects, including how the EU implements the policy on the ground.

The limited resources of the NREP, and the lack of prioritisation among the EU and its member-states results in a significant blow to the success of the policy. As Nixey emphasises, "the very fact that the EU has given over 200 times more financial assistance to Greece than it has even to Ukraine suggests that the EU is more interested in looking after its own than helping neighbours".¹⁹⁵ The same principle applies to Georgia as "on the scale of the EU's global interests, EaP countries are of secondary importance because of their limited economic and political potential"¹⁹⁶. As De Wall also points out, "the policy [NREG] suffers from a lack of visibility while the EU's assistance programme has been dwarfed by much greater Russian support."¹⁹⁷ Political and economic relations with countries such as Russia and the U.S. are substantially higher on the political agenda of the EU.¹⁹⁸

Some EU member-states consider the Georgian conflicts to be unsolvable and de-isolation impossible since, in their opinion, the window of opportunity for change has already passed. As Popescu indicates, "the EU has a preference of getting involved in conflicts where it can make a

¹⁹⁴ James Nixey, "The Eastern Partnership at 10 What is there to celebrate?", in Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, 2019

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. pp.35

¹⁹⁶ Sadowski, Rafał, "Partnership in times of crisis: challenges for the Eastern European countries' integration with Europe", OSW, Vol.36, Warsaw, 2013, pp.39, [Link](#)

¹⁹⁷ Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De-Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.2, [Link](#)

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

difference, i.e. conflicts which would be potentially solvable. The South Caucasus conflicts do not seem solvable in the foreseeable future."¹⁹⁹

Additionally, the EU engagement with the conflict regions is rather superficial and only impacts external political and legal frameworks. EU policymaking does not initiate modernisation and tangible change.²⁰⁰ Thus, the EU has been criticised by experts and NGOs stressing the international organisation's inability to bring upon real change. They state that international organisations, including the EU, "continue to engage with the same small, closed and non-transparent group of people".²⁰¹

Furthermore, the EU demonstrates inconsistency among its officials working on the conflict regions in Georgia. According to Peter Semneby, EUSR for the South Caucasus, any conflict resolution attempts should acknowledge the ethnic background of the conflict. On the other hand, Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, approved of Georgian Strategy on the Occupied Territories, which largely neglects the ethnic divergencies of the people in conflict regions and limits their rights.²⁰² Moreover, EU members also struggle with acknowledging Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region as occupied entities and Russia as an occupying force. This hinders the unanimity of member-states.²⁰³

The NREP itself is also characterised with inconsistencies.

In 2013 with the change of the Georgian government, the NREP was given a chance to reignite. A new Georgian government acknowledged the aggressive approach towards conflict regions to be invalid, it softened the idea of "reintegration" and renamed the Ministry of Reintegration to the Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality. Yet, the EU abstained from stimulating its strategy. Since the policy document of NREP was never published, it created additional uncertainty within beneficiaries and the policy practitioners alike.²⁰⁴ This also sealed distrust among *de-facto* authorities towards EU initiatives.²⁰⁵

199 Nicu Popescu, "The EU and conflicts in the South Caucasus", *Caucasus Europe News*, 2007, [Link](#)

200 Irakli Khintba, "De-isolation via the West: opportunities and restrictions", in: *The De-isolation of Abkhazia*, *International Alert*, 2011, [Link](#)

201 Iskra Kirova, "Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", *Figueroa Press*, Los Angeles, USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School, University of Southern California, *CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy*, Paper 7, 2012, pp.48, [Link](#)

202 Irakli Khintba, "De-isolation via the West: opportunities and restrictions", in: *The De-isolation of Abkhazia*, *International Alert*, 2011, [Link](#)

203 Bruno Coppieters, "Engagement without Recognition", in: *Routledge Handbook of State Recognition*, Chapter 19, pp.241-255, 2019, [Link](#)

204 Sabou, A., "The EU "Engagement without Recognition" Policy in its Eastern Neighbourhood de-facto States. The case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" *Studia Europaea: Babeş-Bolyai University*, 2017, [Link](#)

Further doubt was generated as the EU mixed its funding with the other international organisation such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the ICRC, which were the ones executing projects in the conflict regions (e.g. COBERM programme). Hence, the EU was mostly invisible and kept a low profile with no apparent publicity.²⁰⁶

The EU fails to communicate information on occupied territories of Georgia to its member-states, Georgians and the population of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region alike. According to the 2012 opinion study in Abkhazia, regional and non-political respondents demonstrated no knowledge of EU's "engagement without recognition" policy. *De-facto* government representatives only had a general understanding of the policy, while civil society members were more enlightened about it. The strategy was largely believed to serve the reintegration of Abkhazia back to Georgia.²⁰⁷

Further mistrust was triggered by the EU's blending of its policymaking with that of the Georgian government, which overshadowed EU initiatives since the separatist regions considered EU projects to serve the reintegration attempts of Tbilisi.²⁰⁸ This approach made the EU policymaking overly politicised. The latter idea is further strengthened when the EU struggles to distance itself from politicising the engagement pillar of the NREP, while non-recognition is purely a political issue.²⁰⁹ Such an approach to the separatist regions makes engagement less desirable, thus, less effective.

Conclusion

The EU faces several limitations that result in the lack of effectiveness of the NREP. Such drawbacks include EU member-states' unwillingness to interfere in Russia's sphere of interest. Preferring to have favourable relations with Russia, relatively Russia-friendly states of the EU refrain from meaningfully engaging with Georgian conflict regions. Some member-states prioritise cooperating with other neighbouring countries and directing their funds there. As a result, NREP

205 Urban Jakša, "EU Policy Options towards Post-Soviet *De Facto* States", Polish Institute for International Affairs, No.6 (159), 2017, [Link](#)

206 Sabou, A., "The EU "Engagement without Recognition" Policy in its Eastern Neighbourhood de-facto States. The case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" *Studia Europaea*: Babeş-Bolyai University, 2017, [Link](#)

207 Liana Kvarchelia, "Perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and prospects for the EU–Abkhazia engagement", Analytical report, 2012, [Link](#)

208 Sabou, A., "The EU "Engagement without Recognition" Policy in its Eastern Neighbourhood *de-facto* States. The case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" *Studia Europaea*: Babeş-Bolyai University, 2017, [Link](#)

209 Iskra Kirova, "Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", Figueroa Press, Los Angeles, USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School, University of Southern California, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, Paper 7, 2012, [Link](#)

suffers from lack of financial support, it is characterised as solely affecting the outer layer of the conflict and being unable to penetrate the most pressing problems of the regions. The situation is worsened with the lack of support from the main forces behind the EU: Germany, France and the former EU member, the UK, all of which contributes to lack of EU engagement. Even the eastern European countries, which seem to be more interested in deeper engagement, refrain from adopting any tangible initiatives to promote NREP. For some supporting the NREP is a political issue and serves advancing their political status. Other states that support security cooperation with Georgia also consider the Russian factor thoroughly, calculating risks and gains. These countries often refer to the possible military action from Russia if the EU becomes overly active in the conflict regions, thus justifying less engagement.

There are more pressing issues on the priority agenda of the EU, such as directing resources towards other national (e.g. Brexit, migration issues, the financial crisis, rise of populism and Euroscepticism) or international challenges, rather than conflict resolution in the "far neighbourhood".²¹⁰ The current attitude of the EU can be described as inertia, lack of ambition and political will, withdrawal of its responsibility as an international political actor in the region.

The policy of NREP also suffers from a lack of publicity, institutional limitations, inconsistent and incoherent policymaking, and lack of trust. As the official document of the policy has never been published and the legal framework for engagement never settled, the mistrust of the population in *de-facto* states has deepened. The further politicisation of the policy does not benefit the overall situation. The EU's entanglement with Tbilisi and the purely political character of the NREP's pillar of "non-recognition" triggers suspicion and unwillingness to accept the policy benefits.

In general, Brussels lacks the will, and accordingly, practical tools to engage in the conflict of its eastern neighbour actively. The lack of a consistent conflict resolution strategy and a "capacity-expectations" gap contributes significantly to the ineffectiveness of the EU's efforts.²¹¹ As Kirova stresses, "while today there are markedly more dialogue and people-to-people initiatives compared to the predominantly developmental focus of the past, there is still little tangible outreach to the populations at large and the EU's initiatives lack visibility."²¹²

²¹⁰ Anders Aslund, "Eastern Partnership, Past, Present and Future: Expert Survey, Eastern Partnership, Partial Progress," in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, 2019

²¹¹ Bardakçı, M., "EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in Georgia: Towards a more Proactive Role", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4 (3): CRIA, 2010, [Link](#)

²¹² Iskra Kirova, "Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", Figueroa Press, Los Angeles, USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School, University of Southern California, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, Paper 7, 2012, pp.48, [Link](#)

Recommendations

➤ **EU should renew its engagement within NREP to achieve existing policy goals.**

The EU should consider the needs of citizens of *de-facto* states more seriously and adjust its policymaking accordingly as the EU has "an obligation and moral duty towards the partners in the East".²¹³

Considering that the EU repeatedly declares that it "remains committed to supporting a strong, independent and prosperous Georgia" and the "EU support to Georgia aims at improving the quality of life of ordinary Georgians in a tangible and visible manner", the Union should realise its responsibility in addressing one of the most pressing issues in the region: the topic of occupied territories.²¹⁴ Member-states should prioritise ideals and international law, rather than economic or political interests. Treating Georgia as a partner, rather than a Russian playground, will undoubtedly contribute to reinforcing EU values.

While the EU occasionally struggles from keeping its nationals confident of the EU values, more profound engagement with the region could aid regaining confidence into the EU ideals. The substantial change that might take place due to more reinforced policymaking could inspire the EU countries. Hence, more engagement with the region, that is stimulated by the EU ideals will help the Union remember what it does and why, reigniting the EU as a project.²¹⁵

As Abkhazians point out, "proposed engagement should mean something greater than small-scale one-off projects with vague objectives which mostly turn into a waste of resources."²¹⁶ Abkhazians themselves identified sphere where the EU could engage more meaningfully. These are: business and finance (European expertise, investment in small and medium-sized businesses, Visa and Mastercard authorisation, tourism); social services, health and science (healthcare, education, cultural exchange, recycling); democratic institutions and agriculture.²¹⁷

²¹³ Iwona Reichardt, "Interview with Jacek Sutryk: We have an obligation and moral duty towards our partners in the East", in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, pp.53, 2019.

²¹⁴ European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, "EU – Georgia Relations", European Commission official web-page, retrieved March 20, 2020, [Link](#)

²¹⁵ Joanna Hosa, "Eastern Europe Intrigue", in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10", NEE, No3-4, 2019.

²¹⁶ Liana Kvarchelia, "Perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and prospects for the EU–Abkhazia engagement", Analytical report, 2012, pp.8, [Link](#)

²¹⁷ Ibid.

Further recommendations in this domain include: adopting a visa granting campaign that would let Abkhazians and Tskhinvali Region residents travel to European countries and be exposed to cultural and social diversification, while also debunking widespread myths about Europe; more resources should be dedicated to the economic advancement of the regions; EU should bargain with perks that Russia is unable to offer, such as modernisation of the regions, including supporting the reconstruction of the railway line connecting Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and granting more scholarships for different cultural and educational programmes to separatist territory residents. It is crucial that the EU promotes educational programmes on the site and internationally. As Fischer points out, "in a society as small as Abkhazia, 80 or 100 scholarships could make a significant difference".²¹⁸ The latter would also significantly contribute to raising education levels, open-mindedness and less susceptibility to Russian disinformation (which is one of the main obstacles in the regions, since Russian news outlets dominate the media).

➤ **The EU should prioritise addressing the topic of Georgian occupied territories on its daily agenda.**

Prioritising Georgian conflicts will also signal Russia that it does not hold the hegemony in the region and that Georgia is an independent, sovereign state, capable of choosing its international policy course, which has been openly western since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This will also signal those disappointed in the absence of the topic of occupied territories of Georgia from the EU discourse that Georgia is still on the Union's mind and the organisation cares about those aspiring towards closer ties. This will reignite the EU support in society.

Prioritising the topic, along with studying the region more thoroughly might also help the EU to adopt a more comprehensive policy on Russia, better address challenges coming from the region, and come up with new initiatives and solutions to the "Russian question".²¹⁹ Hence, an argument that the EU should first address its internal problems and only afterwards try to assist others is ungrounded, since Georgia can be part of the solution.

²¹⁸ Sabine Fischer, "The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia", EU Institute for Security Studies, Seminar Reports, Brussels, 2010, pp.8, [Link](#)

²¹⁹ Joanna Hosa, "Eastern Europe Intrigue", in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, pp.42, 2019.

Addressing the conflicts effectively will contribute to transforming Georgia as a stronger and more reliable strategic partner committed to the EU in every aspect of foreign policymaking. It will intensify EU-Georgia relations and commitments. Therefore, "dealing with crises becomes an instrument for shaping co-operation and the future."²²⁰

➤ **EU should strive towards elaborating a more coherent strategy on the occupied territories.**

The EU requires a more systematic approach, within which it should focus on setting clear goals and work towards implementing them one by one.

The EU should be sincere and straightforward regarding its capabilities and ambitions in the region, considering over-promising will result in frustration in a long run. According to Kempe, "deep and comprehensive discourse, on a wider European level, about setting political priorities among joint interests and common values would be a crucial step towards the goal of developing democracy and stability both inside the EU and amongst the neighbouring eastern countries."²²¹ Thus, the EU should double down on conflict resolution attempts and initiatives.

Furthermore, there is a need to publish the NREP document to determine the legal framework and address the ambiguities around the policy. This will also serve more consistent policymaking.

➤ **The EU should try to depoliticise the policy of engagement.**

The EU should persuade, on the one hand, the *de-facto* authorities that its strategy differs from the Georgian one, and Georgia that the policy does not pose a threat to the recognition of these entities, on the other.²²² It should be communicated to Tbilisi that there can be no "creeping recognition". As Jakša states, "stronger engagement must still be conditional on the approval of parent states, but the EU should invest more effort into convincing them that more rather than less engagement is in their interest and persuade them to allow for engagement in areas of trade, infrastructure development and healthcare."²²³

220 Iris Kempe, "Towards a New European Ostpolitik", in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10, NEE, No3-4, pp.61, 2019.

221 Ibid. pp.60

222 Sabine Fischer, "Europe needs to engage with Abkhazia to keep the communication channels open", Caucasus Times, 2013, [Link](#)

223 Urban Jakša, "EU Policy Options towards Post-Soviet *De Facto* States", Polish Institute for International Affairs, No.6 (159), 2017, pp.8-9, [Link](#)

As the policy that restricts any activity on the conflict territories without Tbilisi's consent is openly criticised by the international community, Georgia refrains from practising it strictly.²²⁴ Hence, the EU could easily engage with the separatist territories on a deeper level, will there be a political will.

Moreover, rather than emphasising that *de-facto* elections are illegitimate, the EU should accentuate the idea that it welcomes selecting of a "leader of the Abkhaz (or Tskhinvali) community", excluding the indication of state structure elections, the practice that was introduced in Cyprus.²²⁵ This way, *de-facto* officials will be more open to the cooperation with the EU, especially Tskhinvali Region, that is characterised as overly self-isolationist and requires more engagement. Thus, the EU would also circumvent Georgia's criticism on the matter, since the statement would be diplomatically curved.

Furthermore, the EU policymaking in the region should be made more flexible. Instead of sticking to dogmas, flexibility together with the due diligence should be the guiding principles of the Union in Georgian occupied territories.

➤ **To make NREP more effective civil society exchange should be intensified.**

Civil societies' involvement in social, political and environmental issues is essential. While having more freedom than the government, they are capable of touching upon the fundamental problems that are usually ignored by the authorities.²²⁶ Due to the same fact of not representing a government or a business, they tend to be more successful in confidence-building. Thus, civil societies are a better platform for engagement, and the EU should empower civil society groups to a greater extent.

Encouraging civil society is also important, considering their devotion to the cause, defence of human rights, the rule of law and democracy despite personal risks. With their tireless attempts to create a safe environment and engage as much as possible with the affected society, they represent irreplaceable part of confidence-building and ultimately conflict resolution. Thus, the resource of civil societies should be fully utilised.

➤ **The EU should raise awareness about its support to Georgia's occupied territories.**

224 Liana Kvarchelia, "Georgian policy on Abkhazia: strategy or tactic?", in: The De-isolation of Abkhazia, International Alert, 2011, [Link](#)

225 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De-Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.16, [Link](#)

226 Marc Behrendt, "Civil Society and Confidence-Building", Chairmanship Workshop on Economic and Environmental Activities of the OSCE as Confidence-Building Measures: Vienna, Austria, 2011, [Link](#)

Even if the EU financially supports the programmes and organisations such as Red Cross's searches for missing persons' graves and UNDP projects, the Union mostly stays in a shadow due to a lack of publicity, thus contributing to lack of visibility and confidence-building.

The Union should implement an improved communications strategy on Georgian population, Abkhazian, Tskhinvali Region locals and its member-states. The latter is significant for making EU member-states more enthusiastic towards the policymaking, considering "for better or worse, Brussels is not the place where enthusiasm grows on trees".²²⁷ This might contribute to getting more interested parties and the EU capital on board, towards implementing tangible change and garnering more leverage in occupied territories.

Launching an information centre on the occupied territories will contribute to better engagement, raising awareness about the EU support to *de-facto* states along with the benefits of approximation to the EU, disseminating correct information on the Union and its initiatives. As the media outlets in occupied regions are predominantly pro-Russian, and the citizens' knowledge of foreign languages is limited, the local population is deprived of access to EU country media outlets. Thus, an EU liaison office on the ground will generate more robust EU presence in the regions and serve communicating EU objectives, initiatives, and benefits to the local population.²²⁸

➤ **The EU should utilise the aspiration of *de-facto* states towards respectability**

Unrecognised states akin to Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region are safe havens for smuggling, illegal trade, harbouring of criminals and other criminal activities. Yet, *de-facto* countries often display the desire to be respectable in the eyes of the international community. They are willing to fight to some extent against illegal activities to "shed their outlaw reputation".²²⁹ As De Waal points out, "this craving for respectability is the leverage that the international community has so far failed to use effectively."²³⁰ Hence, the EU could leverage on the separatist regions' openness in this dimension, thus engaging with them on deeper levels of internal affairs. As an Abkhazian opposition member emphasised, "we are interested in democratisation... Europe is interested in promoting democracy. So that's one area where we could work together."²³¹

227 Joanna Hosa, "Eastern Europe Intrigue, in: Eastern Partnership Turns 10", NEE, No3-4, pp.41, 2019

228 Urban Jakša, "EU Policy Options towards Post-Soviet *De Facto* States", Polish Institute for International Affairs, No.6 (159), 2017, [Link](#)

229 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De-Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.12, [Link](#)

230 Ibid. pp.12

231 Liana Kvarchelia, "Perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and prospects for the EU–Abkhazia engagement", Analytical report, 2012, pp.17, [Link](#)

While assisting these communities, the EU can develop specific conditionality mechanisms, which would contribute to conflict resolution and confidence-building.

Conclusion

Nearly eleven years of EU's Non-recognition and Engagement Policy has not shown tangible results in the occupied regions of Georgia. As a result of the EU policymaking, the *de-facto* regions are neither more stable, nor more secure. According to the UN report, "the absence of a political and legal solution continues to affect the local population and their human rights in and around Abkhazia and South Ossetia... the human rights situation in both regions has deteriorated."²³² Additional violations of the right to life, deprivation of liberty, right to health, right to education, no solution of the property issues, abandoned by IDPs, gender-based and domestic violence are also significant challenges in the region.²³³

The NREP remains fully restrained in Tskhinvali Region and insufficient in Abkhazia. Yet, the policy continues to be significant for creating an overall framework for engagement with conflict regions while denouncing their recognition.

Since the Geneva format has proven to be largely technical and has not brought upon substantial change, the NREP gains additional responsibility in conflict resolution. In the 1990s, the EU only limited its activities to calling on parties to promote de-escalation and conflict resolution. Today, the EU should be called upon to be more pro-active.

While addressing the research question of *why has the EU Non-recognition and Engagement Policy proven to be largely ineffective in terms of meeting all the stated objectives*, the earlier hypothesis that there are multiple actors responsible for the NREP's ineffectiveness has proven to be accurate. These actors are the EU, Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region.

Russia's policy of isolating occupied territories has proven to be extremely effective due to the regions' economic, political, military and social dependence on the Kremlin. Through the aid and "passportisation" policies, Russia secured the *de-facto* states' allegiance, strengthened the R2P argument and undermined Georgian central government's relations with separatist regions. Such dependency and control over occupied regions' daily lives, which is far more extensive in Tskhinvali

²³² UN General Assembly, "Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights", Human Rights Council, Forty-second session, 2019, pp.10, [Link](#)

²³³ Ibid.

Region than in Abkhazia, allows the Kremlin to isolate and manipulate these territories. The Kremlin uses the leverage that it has over Georgia to maintain the unstable situation in the region and prevent western presence, together with NREP. With this much larger support that the Kremlin provides occupied territories to contend with, the EU engagement seems insignificant and NREP rather ineffective as an instrument.

Even if Russia pays financially and diplomatically for its grasp of occupied territories and their isolation, even if it costs Russia 7.7 billion roubles annually, even if the majority of the Russian population does not support directing funds to these regions, while Russia faces internal economic problems, the Kremlin has a clear policy on Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region.²³⁴

Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region themselves also contribute to the limited effectiveness of the NREP. Due to their unrealistic aspirations towards independence, the distrust towards Georgian central government and EU institutions, the overall frustration with the EU, a historical trauma that the regions have been unable to overcome, the *de-facto* authorities' violation of locals' human rights, self-isolation, and fear of persecution of locals to accept opportunities delivered by western actors significantly hinders the EU efforts in the region. Tskhinvali's restriction of the international community's presence in the region, being open to only Russian aid, seldom irrational policy-conduct, local youth becoming more close-minded and inflexible towards reconciliation strengthen isolation.

Abkhazia, unlike Tskhinvali Region, strives towards being more European. However, as Abkhazia is *de-jure* part of Georgia, the former needs to normalise relations with Georgia if it wants more international engagement and cooperation. Yet, normalisation of relations with Georgia is not in the priority agenda of Abkhazia due to essential compromises that the *de-facto* state would have to undergo.

On the other hand, Tskhinvali aspires to join Russia. As the region does not have sufficient resources to survive as an independent entity and is internationally even more isolated than Abkhazia, such an objective is reasonable.

Throughout history, Georgia has politically chosen to isolate *de-facto* states. Fear of "creeping recognition" and an assumption that the exhausted separatist regions would seek help from Georgia have proven to be the main arguments of an isolationist treatment. Trade, economic, travel, commercial and non-commercial activities' restrictions, crucial historical mistakes, neglecting

²³⁴ James Nixey, "The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia", Chatham House, briefing paper, Russia and Eurasia Programme, June 2012, REP RSP BP 2012/03, [Link](#)

responsibility in conflicts, controversial policymaking and depriving the *de-facto* regions of their voice further contributed to the inability of the NREP to function properly.

Since any bilateral relations with the occupied territories would be perceived as a violation of Georgian territorial integrity, no European country, or even close strategic partners of Russia (such as Belarus and Armenia) would risk holding political talks with the *de-facto* regions and jeopardising their reputation on the international arena. This reinforces the international isolation of *de-facto* states.

As history demonstrates, a policy of isolation seldom reaches its objectives. Striving towards isolating the *de-facto* administration eventually results in isolating the local population and leads to the people's unification behind their leader and against the common foe.²³⁵ As Haindrava points out, "multiple non-political unresolved problems, in the absence of ongoing dialogue lead to increased mutual mistrust, preserve the enemy image, and reinforce estrangement of the communities."²³⁶

As for the EU, its member-states' foreign policy course largely influences their willingness to engage with Georgian conflicts meaningfully. Their policymaking in Georgia, through a Russian factor, considers engagement with the *de-facto* states as "interference in Russia's backyard." Such policy of "interest above values", an overall ambivalence, the prioritisation of other neighbourhoods, the justification of inactivity with an argument about the "unsolvable conflicts" and possible military action from the Kremlin results in hindering NREP initiatives. Additional factors such as limited resource of the NREP, thus, restricted economic and political potential and superficial policymaking, lack of prioritisation on the EU's global interests' agenda, lack of publicity of the NREP and the EU initiatives, incoherency of the policy, merging policymaking with the Georgian one and the failure to depoliticise the process of engagement weakens NREP efforts.

Considering the hindrances that the NREP faces, the recommendations for the EU are as follows: enforcing more engagement; prioritising the topic of Georgian occupied territories on daily agenda; striving towards a more coherent strategy on the occupied territories; depoliticising engagement; intensifying civil society exchange; raising awareness about support to Georgia's occupied territories; utilising aspiration of *de-facto* states towards respectability and Europeanisation. As De Waal stresses, "with goodwill and creativity, most conflicts can begin to be resolved".²³⁷

235 Irakli Khintba, "Introduction", in: The De-isolation of Abkhazia, International Alert, 2011, [Link](#)

236 Ivlian Haindrava, "Civil Society and Peace Building Process", in: Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict: Researching Peace", Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2011, pp.27, [Link](#)

237 Thomas De Waal, "Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De-Facto States and Breakaway Territories", Carnegie Europe: Washington, U.S, 2018, pp.17, [Link](#)

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