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Russia and the South Caucasus: Exploiting Unresolved Conflicts

Is the West too focused on Ukraine and thereby diverting its attention from Russia's attempts to consolidate its influence elsewhere? Just look at what's happening in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, says Tracey German. Both territories are on the verge of being absorbed into the political and military structures of the Russian Federation.

By Tracey German for ISN

As the conflict in eastern Ukraine enters its second year, international attention has been diverted from Russian involvement in the unresolved conflicts of the South Caucasus. The West's focus on Ukraine has enabled Moscow to consolidate its position in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, signing alliance and integration treaties with both. In November 2014 Russia concluded a [Treaty of Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Abkhazia](#), which came into effect on 5 March 2015, only weeks after a [similar treaty with South Ossetia](#) was concluded in February 2015. In a highly symbolic gesture, Putin formally signed the pact with the South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov in Moscow on 18th March 2015, the first anniversary of the Russian annexation of Crimea. With the world's attention focused on Russia's activities elsewhere, both separatist regions are accelerating their move into the Russian orbit.

A tale of two territories

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been *de facto* independent since fighting brief wars with Georgia in the early 1990s and have enjoyed enduring support from Moscow, which has used the unresolved conflicts to maintain political leverage over Tbilisi. Efforts to restore central Georgian control over South Ossetia in August 2008 triggered a Russian military invasion, jeopardising security across the unstable Caucasus region. With the majority of the South Ossetian (and Abkhazian) population claiming Russian citizenship, Moscow was able to cite concerns for the security of its citizens as a motive for launching a military operation on Georgian territory. Having secured the two regions militarily, Moscow took its political support one step further, formally recognising the independence of Georgia's separatist regions at the end of August 2008. However, subsequent events have done little to reinforce this 'independence'. Rather, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become increasingly dependent on Moscow's patronage, a situation reinforced by the recent treaties. One of the most significant provisions to be found in both documents is a clause stating that any aggression or armed attack against one party will be considered an attack against both. This acts both as a warning to Tbilisi and formalises what has been clear since 2008: Moscow is determined to obstruct

any Georgian attempts to restore its territorial integrity and will respond to any such efforts.

There are some important differences between the two documents, however, reflecting the different positions of the two territories. The leadership of South Ossetia is content to increase its reliance on Russia, reflecting an understanding that the region would be unable to survive as a truly independent state (although there is still support for South Ossetia retaining its 'independence'). The agreement signed with Moscow in March envisages the incorporation of South Ossetia's armed forces, security agencies and customs authorities into those of the Russian Federation, and also includes a clause facilitating the acquisition of Russian citizenship for citizens of South Ossetia.

This is in contrast to Abkhazia, which is less keen to remain so dependent upon Moscow's continuing patronage. Unlike South Ossetia, which, prior to 2008, had been seeking reunification with the Russian republic of North Ossetia, Abkhazia has always sought full independence, based on close political and economic integration with Russia. Since 2008 there has been growing unease in Abkhazia about its increasing reliance on Moscow, and its desire to remain as independent as possible was reflected in the final version of the treaty: the [first draft](#) was a Treaty of 'Alliance and Integration', whilst the version that was signed saw 'integration' replaced with 'strategic partnership', suggesting a mutually beneficial relationship between two equal partners. The first article of the treaty stresses the bilateral nature of the relationship between the two, which is to be based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. The principal aims of the partnership are the development of a coordinated foreign policy (meaning, in reality, Moscow will oversee Abkhazia's foreign policy) and the development of common security, defence, economic and social spaces. Nevertheless, Abkhazia will retain its own armed forces, which are to be modernised in order to ensure interoperability with their Russian counterparts. Furthermore, a Joint Group of Forces, comprising Abkhaz and Russian forces, will be established to repel any aggression against Abkhazia.

In a clear manifestation of the balance of power within the relationship, the Commander of this Joint Group will be a Russian with an Abkhaz as the deputy. Following the ratification of the treaty, there have been indications that Moscow is seeking to strengthen its control over Abkhazia, after a retired Russian general, Anatoly Khrulev, was appointed as the republic's minister of defence. Although the appointment, announced in May 2015, was ostensibly made by Abkhazia's *de facto* president Raul Khadjimba, the timing of the decision coincided with his return from a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, suggesting that the choice was not Khadjimba's alone. The background of the appointee was also instructive: Khrulev commanded Russia's 58th Army until his retirement in 2010 and was wounded in South Ossetia during the 2008 war.

The different positions of the two territories towards their relations with Moscow is highlighted in the length of the respective treaties, both in terms of the number of clauses and terms of validity: the treaty between the Russian Federation and South Ossetia only contains 15 clauses and is valid for 25 years, automatically extended for successive ten-year periods. Abkhazia's treaty is far more complex, running to 24 clauses and is valid for 10 years, automatically renewed for successive five-year periods.

Russia and Europe

Russia's decision to assist Georgia's separatist regions and build up a strong military presence there, reflects the Kremlin's wider efforts to retain its influence over the post-Soviet space, in this case by manipulating existing fault lines and using separatist conflicts as foreign policy instruments. Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili has described the treaties as [annexation](#) and criticised Russia's 'destructive' response to negotiation efforts. However, Georgia is in a difficult situation -- under growing pressure from Moscow, which continues to seek the disruption of relations between the West and states within the post-Soviet space. Strengthening its already strong relationship with the two territories presents the Russian leadership with further opportunity to thwart its southern neighbour's

Euro-Atlantic ambitions. As it stands, Georgia's aspirations of NATO membership remain a distant dream, and other states in the region are wary of developing closer ties with the West, whose response to Russia's increasing absorption of South Ossetia and Abkhazia has been muted.

In March, the EU reiterated its support for Georgia's territorial integrity and its High Representative Federica Mogherini [warned](#) that the treaties risked undermining security and stability across the Caucasus region. With the ongoing insurgency in eastern Ukraine, unresolved conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Trans-dniestr, and instability in the North Caucasus, Europe's eastern periphery is very volatile. However, European organisations such as the EU and NATO appear powerless to act. Despite a desire to stabilise and contribute to the security of the wider post-Soviet space through indirect means, they are deterred by Russia's sustained influence, as well as a lack of consensus or clear long-term vision of how to engage states within what Moscow considers to be its 'zone of privileged interest'.

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