



Russo-Georgian Conflict on The Background of the Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

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Abstract

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and began a full-scale war on the European continent. This was an event the International Community could not foresee after the end of the Cold War. Albeit it was preceded by somewhat lesser symptoms of the Russian Imperialism that insinuated Russian foreign policy's logical, current path. Russian Aggression of 2008 against Georgia, which has a lot in common with the aggression undertaken against Ukraine was one of such conflicts. Although, some differences exist. Accordingly, highlighting parallels would be the most useful tool for assessing Russian policies and comprehending the test that was set by ongoing events against South Caucasia, more precisely, the Georgian security structure.

The research focuses on the threat Russian Federation creates for the Black Sea and South Caucasian regions from the viewpoint of Georgia on the background of the ongoing war. For this purpose, a comparative analysis is conducted between Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukrainian conflicts. Similarities and differences are underlined to determine what kind of risks these factors entail for Georgian and its regional security. The study centers around the Abkhazian war of 1992-1993, the 2008 August war, and the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. As 20% of Georgia is occupied by Russia, threats coming from Moscow in different forms still endure.

Keywords: Russian Aggression, Georgia, Ukraine, Black Sea Region, South Caucasian Region, Invasion

აბსტრაქტი

2022 წლის 24 თებერვალს რუსეთი უკრაინაში შეიჭრა და წამოიწყო სრულმასშტაბიანი ომი ევროპის კონტინენტზე. მოხდა ის, რასაც საერთაშორისო თანამეგობრობა ვერც კი წარმოიდგენდა ცივი ომის შემდეგ. თუმცა, ამ აგრესიას წინ უძღოდა რუსული იმპერიალიზმის გამოვლინებების უფრო მცირემასშტაბიანი სერიები, რომელიც მიანიშნებდა მოსკოვის საგარეო პოლიტიკის ლოგიკურ, ამჟამინდელ გეზზე. 2008 წლის აგვისტოს ომი იყო ერთ-ერთი ამგვარი კონფლიქტი, რომელშიც ჩანს ბევრი საერთო უკრაინაზე განხორციელებული აგრესიის მიმართ. ასევე, იკვეთება განსხვავებები. ამიტომაც, პარალელის გავლება ხელსაყრელი იქნება რუსეთის პოლიტიკის შესაფასებლად და იმ გამოწვევების გასაცნობიერებლად, რაც ამჟამინდელმა მოვლენებმა შექმნეს სამხრეთ კავკასიური, კერძოდ, ქართული უსაფრთხოების სტრუქტურის მიმართ.

კვლევაში რუსეთისგან მომდინარე საფრთხე შავიზღვისპირეთის და სამხრეთ კავკასიის რეგიონის მიმართ შეფასდება საქართველოს თვალსაწიერით, მიმდინარე ომის ფონზე. ამ მიზნით, შედარებითი ანალიზი გაკეთდება რუსეთ-საქართველოსა და რუსეთ-უკრაინის კონფლიქტებს შორის. დადგინდება, რა მსგავსება და განსხვავება იკვეთება ამ ორ მოვლენას

შორის და რა ტიპის გამოწვევებს ქმნის ეს ფაქტორები საქართველოს და რეგიონის უსაფრთხოებისთვის. კვლევა ორიენტირდება 1992-1993 წლის აფხაზეთის, 2008 წლის ავღისტოს ომებსა და 2014, 2022 წლების რუსეთის აგრესიაზე უკრაინის მიმართ.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: რუსეთის აგრესია, საქართველო, უკრაინა, შავიზღვისპირეთი, სამხრეთ კავკასიის რეგიონი, შეჭრა

Introduction

The roots of the Russo-Georgian conflict can be traced for centuries, just as Ukraine’s subjugation by the Russian Empire (Britannica, n.d.). [see Ukraine’s history from the treaty of Pereyaslav onwards]. Although, the main focus ought to be on the post-soviet experiences, as the recent times hold details of current developments and should be analyzed in the framework of our time. In 1992, while Georgia was still recovering from a 2 week-long civil war (Chapple, 2021), tensions went up in Abkhazia. In 1989 Abkhazian separatists attacked Georgian students and professors in Sokhumi. USSR’s Union Security Service created an organization “Caucasian Peoples Confederation”, which aimed at cleansing the Abkhazian region from Georgians. Russian involvement was significant and contributed to the outbreak of the war because it intended to keep Tbilisi in its sphere of influence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Even though, only 17% of the population were ethnic Abkhazians and 46% were Georgians; local representation disproportionally favored the former, and seeds for conflict have long been sown (Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, n.d.; Sayin and Modebadze, 2015). Scars continued to widen ever since and resulted in an outbreak of war that resulted in atrocities like Bucha in the city of Gagra 30 years prior – an event that will be discussed in more specific details below. Russia gained better strategic access to the region with its military bases secured in Abkhazia. Moreover, it obtained a bargaining chip that would hold back Georgian aspirations to develop as a modern Western Nation. In 2008, when Tbilisi’s progress was too apparent, Moscow took further measures to cut short its Southern Neighbor’s Euro-Atlantic ambitions and invaded in August. Kremlin sensed that it might have been too late afterward as Georgia was promised membership of NATO at Bucharest Summit (NATO, 2008) and would receive its “defensive umbrella”. Another aspiring state that would become a member in the future was Ukraine.

Ukraine was a different case with many similarities. Putin eyed the country from the very beginning of the 2000s and allegedly involved Russia in the poisoning of pro-Western presidential candidate Yushchenko and fraud which resulted in pro-Russian candidate Yanukovich’s victory that caused the famous “Orange Revolution” in 2004 (Paniotto, n.d.). Although Yanukovich was successful in winning the presidency in 2010, Russia would not forgive him for an association agreement with the EU. His decision to take Moscow’s loans instead caused another revolution in Ukraine and led to the Russian

invasion, which saw the loss of Crimea and Donbas to the Russian occupation (Pifer, 2019). As one can observe, Kremlin's military action is preceded by its prey's aspiration to grow as a modern nation. In the latter case, not even a question of NATO membership was involved but an association with a European economic-based organization was enough to infuriate Putin. A full-scale invasion followed after 8 years.

How do Georgian and Ukrainian cases compare and differ in regards to the Russian aggression and what kind of threats do the Kremlin's methods of subjugating its neighbors create for Georgia and the Black Sea Region security structure? According to our hypothesis, there are inherent similarities in the Russian misdemeanor against Ukraine and Georgia, which if highlighted, would contribute to understanding how Moscow is trying to expand its sphere of influence and hinder Tbilisi's or Kyiv's aspirations for the Euro-Atlantic future; in addition, assaulting practically non-existent Black Sea and South Caucasian security structures, undermining adherence to the international law and damaging informational integrity of the region through its propaganda.

Methodology

The methodology for this research includes Comparative Analysis, Secondary Source Analysis, Content Analysis, and Data Analysis. Parallels between Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukrainian conflicts are underlined so that the main question of the threat Russia creates with the tools it utilizes can be answered. Additionally, information from different literature is conveyed to comprehend the context and analyze events with concrete numbers and details, so that one can grasp the real causes and effects of the Kremlin's belligerence. Moreover, the content analysis serves the purpose of studying precise information, such as quotes that would enable one to understand the context and form logical bonds between premises. The trend of Georgian and Ukrainian state-building practices is highlighted to compare how Russian belligerency is caused by the development of nations it perceives as spheres of influence, because of their proclivity to escape Moscow's grip and integrate into a substantially more prosperous domain of the West.

Literature Review

Russian "annexation" of Crimea in 2014 was a direct action from Moscow, undertaken by soldiers that were officially not affiliated with the Russian Federation and named "Little Green Men", but everything became official later (Radio Free Europe, 2019). It cannot be compared to any measures utilized against Georgia, apart from its ambiguous nature, which became almost endemic to every hostility of the Kremlin's doing. Albeit the very configuration of conflict in Donbas has a plethora of similarities with the struggles in the Georgian breakaway regions. Ronald Asmus's book "A Little War

That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West,” tells us of the events of 2008 in a detailed manner and how separatism within Georgia flourished thanks to the Russian contribution – a power that was supposed to be an impartial broker according to its international status at that time. One can find parallels regarding how Russia tried to act as a “peacekeeper” in Ukraine.

In 1992, when Russians and Abkhazian separatists occupied Gagra, 4321 people were tortured and killed according to The Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia report. 268 went missing. Cases of rape, mutilation, execution, burning of living individuals, abuse of corpses, and other horrible instances of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and war crimes were detailed (Mountain Stories, 2022; Independent, 1992). After almost precisely 30 years, hundreds of civilians were massacred in Bucha (The New York Times, 2022), resembling the events of Gagra and highlighting yet again the brutality of the Russian campaigns. An event “Before Bucha came Abkhazia” was held in Georgia to showcase these similarities. Although, no sophisticated research has yet been written to connect these factors.

However, the similarities between the wars of 2008 and 2022 follow even more resembling roots. Both Ukraine and Georgia were invaded at the peak of their economic development. In 2007 Georgian GDP grew by 12%, according to World Bank Data. Even after the war of 2008 and at the start of the international financial crisis Georgia’s GDP still went up by 2.2%. It showed a twofold growth in the first quarter before the outbreak of the conflict. Ukrainian GDP, on the other hand, grew by 5.9% in the last quarter of 2021 (Gamkrelidze and Japaridze, 2022) and showed substantial signs of recovery from the pandemic. Additionally, such growth for an economy significantly larger than Georgia’s proportionally accounted for a higher degree of financial development. Therefore, in both cases these nations showed the potential of becoming self-reliant, strong economic powers that would fit Euro-Atlantic structures and criteria shortly, thus distancing them from the Russian sphere of influence. Apart from economic considerations, Moscow required lands that it would hold as a hostage to hamper those countries. Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region, Donbas, and Crimea served the purpose well enough, encouraging views in the case of NATO that Georgian membership might have led to war. Even though Natia Gamkrelidze and Tinatin Japaridze assess connections between Georgian and Ukrainian struggles against Russia as “tenuous” in their article “The limits of the Georgia prism in Ukraine”, they acknowledge these similarities.

Diagram 1: Georgian Real GDP Growth in Quarterly Measures (Mar 2006 – Dec 2008)



Diagram 2: Ukrainian Real GDP Growth in Quarterly Measures (Jun 2019 – Dec 2021)



David Matsaberidze’s “Russia vs. EU/US through Georgia and Ukraine” discusses what kind of threats Russia poses to Ukraine and Georgia. Research conveys how Moscow was insulted by the West’s decision to promise these nations a membership in NATO and concerned over the Rose and Orange revolutions – another occurrence that connects two cases. He believes that Ukraine and Georgia’s aspirations to become developed nations and escape the Russian grip, coupled with the Russian Federation’s resemblance to its old imperial past fuels the conflict.

NATO membership of these nations, which Russia is so afraid of, would solve problems for both Tbilisi and Kyiv and the region itself:

- NATO would fill the gap left by the absence of a real collective defense structure in the Black Sea and South Caucasian region;
- A new security-oriented actor could expand in the region to relinquish Russia's claim of "impartiality" as a "peacekeeper", which was finally broken after the events in Ukraine but still exists in its material form;
- Liberal democracy would flourish under the "umbrella" of the Northern Atlantic Alliance and create a much more stable ambiance in the region.

The Timeline of Russian Aggression

A clear Timeline can be constructed to compare the Russian invasion of Georgian and Ukraine in 2008 and 2022 respectively. Before the outbreak of the war in 2008, Russia conducted military exercises in North Caucasia named KAVKAZ 2008 (Whitmore, 2008). Similarly, at the beginning of 2021, on 21 February Russia held military exercises near Ukraine, which took the form of a joint exercise in Belarus a year later (BBC, 2022; Brown, 2022). Of course, this was a much-prolonged event, compared to KAVKAZ 2008 which took place merely a month before the invasion. Although, one must consider differences in scale and context but not deny how Russia uses its "exercises" as buildups for military aggression.

On 9 July 2008, there was a skirmish in Kodori Gorge between Georgians and Abkhazian separatists preceding the war (Civil. ge, 2008). Such clashes became regular in the Tskhinvali region as well, just as tensions flared. Similarly, on 17 February 2022 skirmishes between Ukrainian armed forces and Donbas separatists began. These events must not be seen as causes for war, as Moscow intends, but rather a symptom, which precedes the Russian aggression.

What is even more peculiar is how citizens were evacuated from Donetsk and Luhansk before the outbreak of war, just as in Tskhinvali 14 years prior. It happened 6 days before the outbreak of a full-scale invasion, just as in the Georgian case (Smith, 2022; France 24, 2008; Asmus, 2010). Meanwhile, shelling of villages was commonplace in both instances. For example, the Georgian village Nuli was being bombed from the 2nd of August, 5 days before to the beginning of hostilities. Ukraine's Stanitsa Luhanska was shelled on the 17th of February (The New York Times, 2022), a week before the invasion. Russians hit a kindergarten, gaining the attention of the Western media that was replete with more ambiguities in the Georgian case [see France 24's article].

Another similarity can be observed in how Russia utilizes its cyber-attack capabilities before it strikes decisively. Georgian government websites were attacked on 20 July 2008. President Mikheil Saakashvili's photos were compared to Hitler's [See picture number 1].

Picture #1 – President's official website, 2008



This case is of striking resemblance of how Russia claims to be “denazifying” Ukraine with its president of a Jewish origin (Waxman, 2022). Similarly, Ukrainian government websites were assaulted with destructive malware from the 13th of January 2022 (Cyber Peace Institute, 2022). Just as in the Georgian case, a series of cyber-attacks began a month before an invasion.

Although, in the Ukrainian case Russia recognized the “independence” of so-called Donetsk and Luhansk republics a day before the invasion and used it to form a Casus Belli. On the contrary, Georgian breakaway regions were “recognized” after hostilities. Albeit this step served to resemble aims in both cases. Moscow desired to hold Georgia and Ukraine as hostages in the mentioned instances, attain a bargaining chip for the hope of more “appeasement” from the Western side, and directly challenge NATO, by decreasing the possibility that these nations would indeed become members. It is astonishing as well how on both occasions Russia distributed its passports to the populations of the breakaway regions to tighten its grip over ordinary people and legitimize its efforts (Seskuria, 2022).

Kremlin's Rhetoric

Now let us examine how similar Putin's rhetoric was regarding Georgia and Ukraine. It must be stated that his most notable method of political propaganda is to frame historical occurrences in a way suitable to Kremlin's interests. In July 2019, Putin offered his version of the Georgian history:

“When the Russian Empire was crumbling after World War I, Georgia attempted to engulf Abkhazia. An independent Georgian state was formed that occupied Abkhazia in 1918, assisted by German troops. And the occupants behaved brutally (Agenda.ge 2019),”

The language in this example is directly framed so that Georgians are shown as historical “occupants” within the lands recognized by international society as its own. He added:

“At Joseph Stalin's request, the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs headed by Lavrenti Beria took a few steps regarding the Abkhaz people, very brutal, I don't even want to draw examples now, for Georgia to absorb this territory and its people (Agenda.ge 2019),”

One can observe vague information in this statement that showcases Georgia as a brutal project of the ethnic Georgian Soviet elite, legitimizing the Kremlin's belligerency against Tbilisi. Such historical framing is seen concerning Ukraine. In 2021 president Putin's official website published his article that explains why Ukraine and Russia are the same countries and justifies Moscow's claim on its neighbor's lands. The article itself is written in a rather old-fashioned manner of 19th century “concert of Europe” type of international law, with a pinch of fabricated historic events (Putin, 2021).

Just before an outbreak of a major invasion, Vladimir Putin addressed his nation and the world with an hour-long lecture on why Moscow's position in regard to Ukraine was justified. This is what he had to say about Ukraine:

“Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, communist Russia. This process began immediately after the revolution of 1917... (Reuters, 2022)”

Ukraine's history is framed in a way as if it never was a real nation-state. Compared to Georgia, Kyiv is not only being “punished” for its “aggressive” posture, but it does not even deserve to exist, in Putin's mind. He added:

“As a result of Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose, which even today can with good reason be called 'Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's Ukraine'. He is its author and architect. This is fully confirmed by archive documents ... And now grateful descendants have demolished monuments to Lenin

in Ukraine. This is what they call decommunisation. Do you want decommunisation? Well, that suits us just fine. But it is unnecessary, as they say, to stop halfway. We are ready to show you what real decommunisation means for Ukraine (Reuters, 2022)."

If Georgia is presented as Stalin's and Beria's project, credit for Ukrainian statehood is given to Lenin and heavily criticized for weakening "mother Russia" in the long run. Thus, Putin frames himself as a "restorer" of the Russian dominion that "rightfully" belongs to it. Such methods of propaganda serve not only international purposes of the process of legitimization but the domestic ones concerning Putin's popularity and his regime's long-lasting nature.

Conclusion

Russian methods can be summed up in several categories: ambiguous use of military power, which we saw in Crimea; intervention through separatist regions, which we observed both in Donbas and Georgian breakaway regions; cyber-attacks on governmental websites and critical infrastructure, to damage one's defensive, social capacities and discredit their cause; and propaganda through the method of framing that can be seen when Moscow accuses its rivals of being "Nazis" or falsifies their histories. These tools put Kremlin's targets (Georgia and Ukraine for this instance) and their respective regions in danger for several reasons:

- The Black Sea and South Caucasus regions, where Georgia and Ukraine are situated, do not have any collective defense architecture, thus an intervention of a foreign power cannot be answered in a united manner;
- Georgia and Ukraine lack the capacity to win a long-term war with Russia without foreign assistance;
- These are nascent democracies with a post-soviet past, therefore tools of hybrid warfare are more efficient, as societies are at their most vulnerable at a formative stage;
- Russian ambiguities, such as "Little Green Men" create a pretext for some elements of the international community to debate, whether Moscow is to blame at all in some instances (Amaro, 2022) [see, for instance, how Germany's vague position after 2014 left Merkel's legacy in question]. As a result, the window of opportunity is disregarded;
- Framing serves as a deadly method if utilized appropriately. It can to a lesser extent convince some elements of International society to take the aggressor's positions for granted or, to a more sophisticated extent, convince the belligerent's own population that its position is justified – an instance we observe in today's Russia (Yaffa, 2022).

Russia effectively counters the recent international system and its laws, based on liberal-democratic practice. Its 19th-century style of *Realpolitik* seems to reasonably be unfit for a modern playbook of international relations. Kremlin's proclivity to denounce a nation's existence is alarming. To counter threats towards the fragile or non-existent structure of the Black Sea and Caucasian regions and Georgia itself, two main steps must be made. First, Georgia ought to focus on its own self-reliant defense, so that its northern enemy can be deterred with higher proportions. Although, that will not be enough without foreign support. Consequently, NATO must expand in the region and introduce its own solid security structure in Turkey's adjacent territory for Georgia, which would seem reasonable enough, given the proximity of the issue.

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