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Russia's Commitment "to Protect its Citizens" within the Post-Soviet Space: A Case of Georgia

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ABSTRACT

The problems raised in the article relate to Russian foreign policy and decision-making and correspond to its policy of "protecting its citizens" in the post-Soviet space. For this purpose, the thesis explores a case study of Georgia and examines the consequences of the given policy for the region more generally. The major finding of the research is that the commitment "to protect the citizens" by force is an essential instrument for compelling a country to shape its foreign policy strategies in relevance with Russian political objectives. Further, the research demonstrated that Russia seeks to extend its geopolitical influence over the post-Soviet region by maintaining its grip on Russian passport holders.

These findings suggest that Russia's policy of protecting its citizens abroad operates less as a humanitarian commitment and more as a strategic instrument of foreign policy. Using the Georgian case, it demonstrates how passportisation, separatist mobilization, and selective intervention are interlinked components of a broader coercive mechanism. By distributing citizenship in separatist regions and invoking protective obligations, Moscow creates legal and political justifications for intervention in neighbouring states. The findings show that these practices are embedded in a wider geopolitical contest with the West over the post-Soviet space, where unresolved conflicts are used to limit sovereignty, obstruct Euro-Atlantic integration, and sustain Russian influence regionally.

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რუსეთის ,,თანამემამულეთა დაცვის პოლიტიკა“ პოსტსაბჭოთა სივრცეში: საქართველოს მაგალითი

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სტატიის შესახებ

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

პასპორტიზაცია
დაცვა
მოქალაქეობა
რუსეთი
საქართველო

აბსტრაქტი

სტატიაში წამოჭრილი პრობლემატიკა უკავშირდება რუსეთის საგარეო პოლიტიკას, გადაწყვეტილების მიღების პროცესს და ამ კონტექსტში განიხილავს ,,თანამემამულეთა დაცვის პოლიტიკას“ პოსტსაბჭოთა სივრცეში. ამ მიზნით, ნაშრომი იკვლევს საქართველოს მაგალითს და განიხილავს პასპორტიზაციის პოლიტიკის შედეგებს უფრო ფართოდ რეგიონში. კვლევის ძირითადი მიგნება არის ის, რომ რუსეთის ,,თანამემამულეთა დაცვის პოლიტიკა“ წარმოადგენს მნიშვნელოვან ინსტრუმენტს სახელმწიფოთა იძულებისთვის, დაუახლოვონ თავიანთი საგარეო პოლიტიკა რუსეთის პოლიტიკურ სტრატეგიას. გარდა ამისა, კვლევამ აჩვენა, რომ რუსეთი ცდილობს გააფართოოს თავისი ტერიტორიული გავლენა პოსტსაბჭოთა სივრცეზე რუსული პასპორტების მფლობელებზე კონტროლის შენარჩუნებით.

ეს მიგნებები მიუთითებს, რომ რუსეთის პოლიტიკა საზღვარგარეთ საკუთარი მოქალაქეების დაცვის შესახებ ნაკლებად მოქმედებს როგორც ჰუმანიტარული ვალდებულება და უფრო მეტად როგორც საგარეო პოლიტიკის სტრატეგიული ინსტრუმენტი. საქართველოს შემთხვევის გამოყენებით, ის ცხადყოფს, თუ როგორ არის პასპორტიზაცია, სეპარატისტული მობილიზაცია და შერჩევითი ინტერვენცია ერთმანეთთან დაკავშირებული, როგორც იძულებითი მექანიზმის შემადგენელი კომპონენტები. სეპარატისტულ რეგიონებში მოქალაქეობის გავრცელებით და მათი დაცვის ვალდებულებების აქტუალიზაციით, მოსკოვი ქმნის სამართლებრივ და პოლიტიკურ დასაბუთებას მეზობელ სახელმწიფოებში ჩარევისთვის. მიგნებები აჩვენებს, რომ ეს პრაქტიკა უკავშირდება დასავლეთთან უფრო ფართო გეოპოლიტიკურ კონკურენციას პოსტსაბჭოთა სივრცეში, სადაც მოუგვარებელი კონფლიქტები გამოიყენება სუვერენიტეტის შეზღუდვისთვის, ევროატლანტიკური ინტეგრაციის ხელის შეშლისთვის და რეგიონში რუსეთის გავლენის შესანარჩუნებლად.

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1. Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor, the Russian Federation, has been actively exercising the rhetoric of "protecting its citizens" abroad, especially within the post-Soviet space. The notion of "citizen" is a rather difficult phenomenon, as in the 90ies, the category of "citizens" included ethnic-Russian residents, while afterward it referred to the holders of Russian passports. So, both the ethnic-Russian and foreign residents of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries were subject to the so-called passportisation policy, which granted them access to Russian citizenship and undermined the state sovereignty.

Passportisation came to the fore, especially after the breakup of the Soviet Union, when Russia had to deal with large masses of stateless persons in the separatist regions of the former Soviet Union who refused to accept the citizenship of their respective countries. This resulted in the fact that people living in separatist regions had no recognised citizenship and were denied the possibility of travelling abroad. Accordingly, the Russian Federation responded to this uncertainty by issuing Russian passports to stateless persons (Littlefield, S. 2009).

The policy of "protecting its citizens" remains controversial, as the Customary International Law does not permit a state to defend its citizens by force, but only through diplomatic protection by peaceful means. Russia legitimised its military action in Georgia based on the UN (United Nations) norm "The Responsibility to Protect." However, in the case of Georgia, the adherence to this norm was not compatible, as it authorises the states to protect their citizens against "genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing." Further, the principle only applies to a state's own territory and is thereby inapplicable to expatriate citizens (Allison, 2009, pp. 173-200).

The passportisation policy has become a tricky issue and subject to political manipulation, as it infringes on the right to exercise sovereignty over the state's own territory. So, Russia supported the right of stateless people to citizenship, whereas it threatened the sovereignty of its neighbours to consolidate a civic national identity over its territorial holdings (Allison, 2009). The issue has become thornier, as later the Russian Federation has embarked on a rhetoric of protecting its citizens, i.e., holders of Russian passports abroad.

The research period includes 2006-2009. Based on the analysis of this period, the article compares the policy outcomes for Georgia and the wider post-Soviet region.

The case study of Georgia is important because here, Russia's emphasis on the "protection of citizens" was predominant. In addition, Georgia possessed compact groups that did not want to be identified with the titular state in the separatist South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia. The importance of the research topic is motivated by the fact that the given policy was materialised in August 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia with one of the pretexts of "protecting its citizens" in the separatist region of South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region. This action spurred further fears that other countries populated with holders of Russian passports may also come at risk of military warfare with Moscow. The situation has

become particularly interesting after August 2009, when the State Duma amended the legislation, which enabled Russia to intervene abroad in defence of Russian citizens (Larrabee, 2010).

The research question addresses the pretext for the military aggression against Georgia, particularly why Russia became in need to use the excuse of "protecting its citizens." The causes of the Russian invasion of Georgia require an in-depth analysis of the pre-war situation and the years-long process of conflict resolution, which is not the aim of the article. The research examines the motives behind Russia's commitment to protect its citizens and examines whether this study can help explain Russia's military intervention.

2. Literature Review

In its analysis of the topic, the research makes use of several materials. The main source of the research is the report by the "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," or the so-called "Tagliavini Report." The report conducts a comprehensive investigation into the 2008 Russian invasion, providing a useful summary of the timeline and final consequences. The report also places remarkable attention on Russia's passportisation policy in Georgia's occupied regions and examines the effect it had on aggravating tension in the conflict zone that has led to the military escalation of the conflict.

The research explores the material covered by Nicole J. Jackson in her book "Russian Foreign Policy and the CIS: Theories, Debates and Actions." The book provides interesting insights into the evolution of Russian foreign policy in the CIS countries from 1991 to 1996 and differentiates political debates on different layers of the Russian government that led to the formation of key foreign policy ideas in Moscow. The author reviews political discourse and relates it to the three conflicts, including on the territories of Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan. In its analysis of foreign policy, the book searches for the relation between the political debate and Russia's response to the conflicts, distinguishing between policy debates and Russia's political action towards the conflicts (Jackson, 2003).

The article is also based on the book by Ronald D. Asmus, "A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West," describing a pivotal episode in the evolution of post-Cold War Europe, Russia, and American foreign policy. The former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ronald D. Asmus puts the "little war" into a big picture of geopolitics, arguing that the war emerged from Georgia's aspiration to pursue closer integration with Western institutions, whereas Russia's actions reflected a broader challenge to the existing international order, contributing to a global environment in which Western values, norms, and influence were increasingly contested. To explain the origins of these tensions, the author traces developments back to the 1990s, examining the deterioration of relations between Moscow and the West and considering whether alternative Western policies might have altered the course of events (Asmus, 2010).

The research also examines the book "The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia" by Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr. The book aims to provide a detailed account of the events of August 2008 while offering a comprehensive analysis of the historical and political factors that shaped the

conflict. The authors argue that Russia's military intervention was preceded by a period of escalating tensions, not only in Russian-Georgian relations but also in Russia's broader relationship with the West. They describe how developments in the separatist region of South Ossetia quickly evolved into the most serious European security crisis of the preceding decade, analysing the measures adopted by the Russian leadership in response to the Western recognition of Kosovo's independence in February 2008 and the outcomes of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) Bucharest Summit in April 2008, both of which are presented as critical turning points that significantly intensified tensions in the South Caucasus (Cornell & Starr, 2009).

Apart from books and reports, the research is based on scholarly articles about Russian foreign policy and its implications. In this regard, the research focuses on Scott Littlefield's "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia's Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia," in which the author investigates how the distribution of passports and the conferral of citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia contributed to separatism in Georgia. Littlefield elaborates on the argument of Russian leaders that the August 2008 intervention was necessary to protect the rights of Russian citizens. In doing so, the study highlights the controversial conditions under which citizenship was extended to populations in the two regions and questions this justification, particularly in light of Russia's disregard of human rights among non-ethnic Russian communities both within its borders and in neighbouring states (Littlefield, 2009).

The research also draws on Roy Allison's article, "The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation." The article explores the legal, political, and normative arguments for Russia to justify its intervention against Georgia. In particular, it examines responsibility to protect its citizens and compatriots abroad, as well as the broader possibility that Russian policymakers were challenging interpretations of international norms they viewed as being shaped by Western powers predominantly. Allison further considers the implications of these arguments for Russia's future actions in the post-Soviet region, including its approach toward Ukraine (Allison, 2009).

Together, the applied literature on Russia's passportisation policy provides an important foundation, as it allows a comprehensive analysis of how citizenship policies have been employed as instruments of influence in the post-Soviet space and helps identify vulnerabilities these policies create.

3. Research Methodology

The article adheres to the Neorealist perspective, with a particular emphasis on the theory of Kenneth Waltz (1979), defining the international system as analogous to a market, where states, much like firms, need to shape strategies for ensuring survival. Just as businesses risk failure if they do not pursue profit-oriented strategies, so do states seek to maximize power to avoid decline. Under this theoretical framework, the Russian move is deduced to the interplay between its aspiration to increase its relative power and its willingness to cement its influence over its neighbourhood.

Other theories may explain this phenomenon through a different approach. The Realists, for example, would see Russia's involvement in the post-Soviet space as a 'window of opportunity' – an attempt to

recompense the power vacuum in the region from taking advantage of the state's weakness (Jackson, 2003, p.15). However, with its focus on portraying the international order as an anarchic system, where states struggle for power and engage in conflict, the Realist Theory explains this struggle solely by the chaotic character of the international system and puts little emphasis on any other justification. In a comparison of Realist Theory with Neorealist perspective, the latter correlates the struggle for power with states' willingness to keep alive, whereas the former explains the behaviour of the states by the anarchic international system, instead of judging the states according to their behaviour.

To examine the causal relationship between the Russian coercive diplomacy and passportisation, the research poses a central question: why did Russia need to use the excuse of "protecting its citizens" for its intervention in Georgia? The research seeks to explore the extent to which Russia makes use of the given policy for exerting its geopolitical influence over the post-Soviet space by maintaining a grip on Russian passport holders.

This research employs a qualitative research design that is based on the assessment of political, historical, and geopolitical contexts surrounding Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008. Given the study's objective of examining the relationship between Russia's policy of protecting its citizens abroad and its broader foreign policy goals, qualitative methods provide the most suitable framework for exploring the motivations, narratives, and strategic calculations underlying state behaviour.

The study relies on two principal methodological approaches: the case study method and qualitative content analysis. The research employs a single-case study approach, focusing on the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008. Georgia represents a particularly relevant case since it combines several factors identified in the literature as significant determinants of Russian foreign policy: separatist conflicts, the conferral of Russian citizenship in the respective separatist regions, and aspirations for closer integration with Western institutions, particularly NATO and the European Union (EU).

The case study method enables an in-depth examination of the causal mechanisms linking Russia's citizenship policy to its military intervention. Rather than treating the conflict as an isolated event, the study analyses it within the broader context of post-Soviet regional politics and Russia's relations with the West. The case serves as a critical example for understanding how the discourse of protecting citizens serves as a justification for intervention and how separatist conflicts can be instrumentalised to advance geopolitical objectives. Furthermore, the case study enables the examination of complex interactions between domestic political developments, regional security concerns, international legal arguments, and great-power competition.

The second methodological component consists of qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary sources. This method is used to identify recurring themes, narratives, and patterns in official statements, policy documents, academic literature, and expert assessments concerning Russia's foreign policy.

Primary sources include international agreements, official government statements, reports of international organisations, and policy documents relevant to the conflict, such as the Helsinki Final Act and the Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. These materials provide insight into the legal and political justifications advanced by the Russian government.

Secondary sources consist of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and analytical studies on Russian foreign policy, separatist conflicts, and post-Soviet geopolitics. Particular attention is devoted to works by Ronald D. Asmus, Roy Allison, Svante Cornell, Scott Littlefield, and other scholars whose research addresses the causes and consequences of the 2008 war.

The qualitative content analysis focuses on several topics: Russia's interpretation of the Responsibility to Protect and the protection of citizens abroad; the role of passportisation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region; Russia's perception of NATO and Western expansion; the strategic importance of the South Caucasus; and the relationship between separatist conflicts and regional influence. Through systematic comparison of these sources, the research identifies divergence in Russian political behaviour and assesses the extent to which the protection of citizens doctrine functioned as a genuine security concern or as a mechanism of geopolitical influence.

The research acknowledges several limitations. First, the study relies primarily on publicly available documents and secondary literature, which may reflect differing interpretations of events. Second, as a single-case study, the findings cannot be generalised to all instances of Russian intervention in the post-Soviet space. Nevertheless, the Georgian case provides valuable insights into broader patterns of Russian foreign policy and contributes to understanding the strategic use of citizenship policies, separatist conflicts, and military intervention in Russia's near abroad.

Overall, the combination of a case study approach and qualitative content analysis allows for a comprehensive examination of the political, legal, and geopolitical dimensions of Russia's intervention in Georgia, while situating the conflict in the wider context of Russia-West relations and the contested post-Cold War order.

4. Results and Discussion

On October 29, 2004, the North Atlantic Council approved Georgia’s Individual Partnership Action Plan, marking a transition to the second phase of NATO integration. The plan addressed a broad range of defence and security reforms, including defence policy, counterterrorism efforts, relations with neighbouring states, defence planning, budgetary and financial management of the armed forces, crisis response mechanisms, and civilian oversight of defence structures. In 2005, a state commission was established by presidential decree to oversee the implementation. This body functioned as an interagency coordination group led by the Prime Minister, reflecting the institutional effort to align domestic defence reforms with NATO standards. The Commission coordinated the implementation of the Individual Partnership Action Plan. On February 14, 2005, the agreement on the appointment of a PfP (Partnership for Peace) liaison officer between Georgia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization came into force, and thereby a liaison officer for the South Caucasus was assigned to Georgia (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies n.d.).

The new aspirations set off alarm bells in Russia. Moscow especially despised the joint military drills in its neighbourhood and regarded these relations with the EU and NATO as a destabilising factor in the so-called zone of its ‘privileged interests’ (Klussmann, 2009). The deeper these relations with NATO

went in Georgia, the sharper the response was in Moscow, which did not attempt to hide its irritation with the closer NATO engagement in the post-Soviet space.

In March 2008, before the invasion, Putin declared that Russia would "agree with any choice of Georgian peoples", rather than of their "political elites" (Civil Georgia, 2008). However, 77% of Georgian citizens voted for Georgia's integration into NATO in a plebiscite (Civil Georgia, 2008). In such circumstances, Russia accelerated its pressure on separatist regions, making it clear that it would not turn a blind eye to the recent rise of Trans-Atlantic aspirations in its neighbourhood and would try to remind these countries that their breakaway regions were something on which Moscow asserted a high level of influence. The "reminder" was gaining its momentum forcefully and went off as a warning, conveying the message that Russia would exercise considerable power over the separatist regions, forcing the neighbouring states to reconsider their Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The situation in the separatist regions of Georgia provided a fertile ground for political destabilisation in which the Russian Federation seized the momentum by supporting de facto authorities. The turmoil reached its climax, especially in the pre-war period, when on March 6, 2008, Russia announced its withdrawal from the 1996 CIS sanctions treaty, which banned trade, economic, financial, transport, and other links with Abkhazia (Cornell et al., 2008). Subsequently, on April 16, 2008, a Russian presidential decree signed by outgoing President Vladimir Putin instructed the Russian government, as well as different Russian regions, to open political, social, and economic relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region (Cornell et al., 2008). Before that, on July 14 2007, Russia declared a moratorium on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), which was designed to diminish and control the conventional weaponry in Europe. Further, on 15 July 2008, without any binding sanctions, Russia launched a military drill, Kavkaz-2008, in Dagestan, close to Tskhinvali, and kept the equipment levels close to it after completion (Eliadze, 2018).

In parallel to aggravating tensions in the separatist regions of Georgia, the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region were intensively involved in the so-called 'passportisation policy.' The new Russian Law on Citizenship, which entered into effect in 2002, regulated admittance to Russian citizenship in a simplified procedure and opened broader avenues for thousands of new applicants from the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia. Since then, the population of Georgia's breakaway regions has been massively naturalised as Russian citizens. However, one of the requirements for other states to recognise such conferrals of citizenship under international law is the adequate "factual connection between the applicant and the receiving country, which must not be arbitrary" (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, Volume I, p.18). In addition, "explicit consent of the home country" is required. Georgia's law, however, does not recognise dual citizenship. Therefore, the vast majority of naturalised persons from the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia have not been regarded as Russian nationals in the light of International Law (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, Volume I, p.18).

Taken as a whole, Russia rapidly reacted to the much-troubled situation in the separatist regions of Georgia by mobilising its political and military capabilities in support of the local separatists. The provision of such massive assistance and passportisation of the local population created a situation in

which Russia prepared a justification for the ‘protection’ of its citizens – according to Russian legislation, these people were regarded as Russian nationals, even though they had no recognised Russian citizenship internationally.

The debate on involvement in post-Soviet conflicts has long been a subject to thorough analysis among Russian decision-makers. Since the early 90-ies, when the first signs of separatism emerged, many ideas have been discussed about whether Russia should be militarily involved in the conflicts.

Between 1991 and 1996, Russian political thought was shaped by competition among three main ideological debates: “liberal Westernist,” “pragmatic nationalist,” and “fundamentalist nationalist.” Liberal Westernists adopted a broad understanding of security that extended beyond military concerns to include economic and political stability (Jackson, 2003). They viewed conflicts within the post-Soviet space as only one component of Russia’s wider security agenda and generally favoured limiting Moscow’s direct involvement in such disputes.

By 1993, many who had initially aligned with liberal Westernist views shifted toward a pragmatic nationalist position. This approach emphasized the protection of Russian-speaking populations abroad and supported a more active Russian role in the former Soviet Union, including the potential use of force when deemed necessary to stabilize conflicts. At the same time, it sought to frame Russia’s actions as peacekeeping efforts that would gain international legitimacy.

In contrast, fundamentalist nationalists interpreted post-Soviet conflicts in zero-sum terms. They argued that unilateral military force was essential both for resolving these conflicts and for safeguarding the Russian diaspora, rejecting the idea of compromise or shared outcomes (Jackson, 2003).

In Georgia, the ideas of fundamentalist nationalists were vigorous. Correspondingly, Russia perceived the instability in its neighbourhood in 90-ies as a threat to its national security, for which it became involved militarily in the separatist conflicts.

However, the official position was that it had the right to protect Russians abroad, but the essential requirement was that the Diaspora should be integrated into their countries of residence (Jackson, 2003). From the 2000s, this policy was abandoned, and the priority was shifted towards protecting citizens by force rather than soft power efforts to integrate them into their countries of residence.

Russia embraced the policy of “protecting the Russian citizens” abroad since the early 90-ies, which became dominant 8 years onward. This means that the comparison of the early 90-ies with the 2000s demonstrates a shift in foreign policy. A major change was caused by several factors: first of all, during 90-ies the situation in Russia was marked by severe economic problems, which were attributed to its military spending. The Russian army was unfit to carry out military operations, and its capabilities were lagging. Also, with its two wars with Chechnya and with its military bases stationed in neighbouring countries, the Russian army was scattered. This was not an issue in the 2000s, when the Russian military was combined. Also, owing to rising oil prices, the Russian economy expanded, further attributed to its military spending. As a result, the Russian Federation was resource-fit and capable of performing full-scale military operations.

Much depended on individual factors – President Yeltsin was relatively western-oriented and sought to incorporate liberal values in its foreign policy. He did not necessarily prioritize military power to defend citizens abroad. The major approach was to prevent the adjacent conflicts from spilling over into the North Caucasus, rather than to use force in defence of its citizens. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia's policy was more oriented toward distancing itself from Western institutions and ideals, and it sought to employ a hard-power approach in its relations with CIS countries, in this case, with Georgia.

Taken as a whole, the evolution of Russian foreign policy has increasingly oriented toward force, which has contributed to the transformation into a coercive approach, becoming a basis for the expansion of its political attributes. The case of Georgia demonstrates that, in subverting Georgia's attempts to join NATO, Russia opted in favour of force to contain these aspirations. The irritation with Georgia's membership bids sparked the first signs of deterioration in Russo-Georgian relations and pushed Russia to seek other ways of making Georgians aware that Russia would not bear the re-orientation of Georgia's policy towards the West in its neighbourhood.

'The other way' was shaped by the passportisation policy and the support of separatists, just as by fuelling tensions in Georgia's breakaway regions. Correspondingly, Russia intensified its support of the separatist leaders and launched the mass conferral of passports to the local population in the conflict zone. In such circumstances, even when the worsening situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region has not prompted Georgia to give up its membership aspirations, Russia opted in favour of a military option. The foreground for military intervention was already prepared – the residents of South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region were seen as naturalised Russian citizens according to the Russian domestic law, and Russia was having enough motives for invasion in 'defence' of its co-nationals.

The fact that Russian policymakers were looking for the justification of military intervention is proved by several authors, among whom is Ronald D. Asmus, who asserts that "yet for months – indeed, years before Russian tanks rolled through the Roki Tunnel, powerful players in Moscow were looking for a pretext for an invasion, occupation and virtual if not literal annexation of Georgian territory. For many in Russia, this outcome would serve both as an assertion of their claim to a 'sphere of privileged interest' in the former Soviet space and as payback to the international recognition of Kosovo as an independent state"(Asmus, 2010, p.8).

Underlined by irritation with Kosovo recognition and by its increasing discontent towards Georgia's Trans-Atlantic aspirations, Russian decision-makers did not see the solution in diplomatic negotiations. Reversal of a neighbouring state's foreign policy choice could not fit into the framework of diplomatic negotiations, as each of the negotiating parties defends the interests of its own country. In the case of Georgia, the diplomats carried out their foreign policy agenda through intensifying the integration process into Euro-Atlantic institutions, which derived from the national interest of their country. The clash of Georgia's national interests with Russian security concerns was limited in its capabilities to be negotiable in a diplomatic platform, as the problem lay in Russia's reluctance to see the West in its neighbourhood.

In the meantime, Russia has also prevented any extension of either the UN or OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) missions on the ground at a time when such missions needed to be significantly strengthened rather than abandoned. Some 200 EU monitors on the ground as a result of the ceasefire agreement constitute a thin red line between Moscow and Tbilisi (Asmus, 2010). Considering that these 200 EU monitors are disabled with the possibility of having access to the Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region, Russia finds itself alone to build military towns and capacities in Georgian territories, where the security situation is increasingly worsened, with the cases of arbitrary arrest and prosecution taking place to a greater extent (US State Department Report on Georgia, 2009).

Through its military intervention on the territory of Georgia and its subsequent recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence, Russia challenged the principles of the Helsinki Accords (1975), which required the signatory states to respect the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of signatory states. Even though the Helsinki Accords were not binding, they formulated the key guidelines for the international community and therefore defined a new political reality in the Cold War. Accordingly, any non-compliance with treaty obligations might be seen as a violation of internationally recognised norms and standards. Furthermore, the endeavour to challenge these norms and regulations might be seen as a challenge to the political status quo, which shaped the world order established during and in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Considering that paragraph 6 of the Helsinki Accords (1975) calls on the signatory states to refrain from intervention in the internal affairs, Russia challenged this principle by denouncing Georgia's attempts to join NATO and used coercion to contain these aspirations. Through its use of force on the territory of Georgia and subsequent recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence, Russia also reminded the West of the so-called 'red lines' in the region. Finally, the current Russian military presence in the occupied regions of Georgia is the manifestation of a power-seeking approach, which again puts pressure on Georgian political decision-making and its sovereign foreign policy choices.

Through its war in Georgia, Russia was not only subverting Georgia's attempt to go west. By asserting its claim to a "privileged sphere of interests," Russia was also expressing disagreement with the principles underpinning the European security architecture. From the Russian point of view, these rules enabled the eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union, and were now facilitating NATO's continued advance toward Russia's borders (Asmus, 2010).

Traditionally, the Russian understanding of security in the North Caucasus depended much on the security to the South. For this reason, Russia showed the inclination to enforce security in the South Caucasus. However, the security dimension was limited to the military presence, which, according to the Russian political thought, would establish order and prevent the region from having spillover effects over its instability to the north. The notion of "instability" for Russia is a rather different phenomenon. Before the August War, for example, the internal situation in Georgia was relatively stable, and it became tense only after Russia decided to support the local separatists and conferred Russian passports to the local population. Therefore, the instability in Russian understanding derives from the NATO enlargement to the South, which explains the willingness to construct and maintain stability all by itself, rather than

sovereign countries or their independent policy choices. The other side of the issue is how this Russian-enforced stability works in the North Caucasus.

Several factors shape the willingness to centralise power. One of them is the desire to control Caucasian and Central Asian energy resources, to have an impact on transit zones and natural resources. The war in Georgia was not only about the age-old dilemma that Russian perceptions of security have often been linked to the extent of control exercised over its border regions, with stability traditionally understood in terms of direct influence over adjacent spaces. This vision has also intersected with energy exports as a central aspect of Russian foreign policy. In this context, Moscow has sought to maintain a dominant position over regional energy resources and transit routes supplying Europe. Georgia, particularly through its role as a transit state, became part of broader efforts to develop alternative energy corridors from the Caspian region to Western markets that would bypass Russian-controlled routes (Asmus, 2010, p.9). Through the Russian military in Abkhazia, Russia maintains its grip over the vast natural resources of the Black Sea. If Russia achieves full control of these resources, it will be able to distort diversification, which is an essential goal of various Trans-Caucasus pipelines.

According to Ronald D. Asmus (2010), the Russian Federation eventually has to integrate into the international community, which means "playing by its rules, not breaking them." Russians may come to regret their support for separatism in Georgia in 2008 when that same force raises its head again inside Russia, including the North Caucasus. Asmus contends that Russia's military intervention in Georgia did not intimidate separatists within Russia's own border – indeed, it may have done the opposite (Asmus, 2010, p.10). This might be interpreted in a way that Russia has this increasingly tough task to undertake in its troubled North Caucasus region after the August War, where the separatist-minded groups will be motivated to worsen the security situation in the region. However, Russian leadership might be convinced that a centralised power in the region will help with security dimensions, but it remains questionable whether it helps to provide security to the North.

5. Conclusion

The research has identified that Russia's military intervention in Georgia was inspired by its power-seeking approach, which is caused by several reasons, including but not limited to Cold War thinking and rivalry with the West for regional domination. The research has also illustrated the mechanism for gaining control over the country, arguing that through instigating division among the states on the most sensitive issues and shaping the atmosphere of constant rivalry, Russia seeks to establish order and control in the region where it will be the sole guarantor of peace and security.

The research has also paid particular attention to the violation of the Helsinki Accords and emphasised Russia's desire to change the state borders and the political status quo established back in the Cold War. Although the analysis does not suggest that Russia was redefining the world order back in 2008, it does argue that Russia challenged the norms and principles that defined the world order in the 20th century.

This research has demonstrated that Russia's policy of protecting its citizens abroad should not be understood primarily as a humanitarian or legal commitment to the welfare of Russian passport holders.

Rather, the Georgian case suggests that the doctrine functions as a strategic instrument through which Moscow legitimises intervention, manipulates separatist conflicts, and exerts coercive influence over neighbouring states. The presence of Russian citizens in disputed territories creates a pretext that can be activated whenever political developments threaten Russia’s national interests.

The principal contribution of this research lies in demonstrating the relationship between passportisation, separatism, and military intervention. Instead of treating these phenomena as separate processes, the study argues that they form part of a broader mechanism of influence. By supporting separatist entities, distributing citizenship, and subsequently invoking the obligation to protect Russian citizens, Moscow creates the political and legal justification necessary to intervene in the domestic affairs of neighbouring states.

The Georgian case also illustrates that the conflict cannot be explained solely through local ethnic tensions or regional security concerns. Rather, it reflects a broader geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West over the future political orientation of the post-Soviet space. The findings suggest that Russia's intervention was motivated not only by the desire to maintain influence in the South Caucasus but also by a determination to prevent the further expansion of Western political, security, and democratic institutions into its neighbourhood.

Consequently, the policy of protecting citizens should be understood within the wider context of Russia's resistance to the spread of Western influence and democratic governance in the Former Soviet Union. The evidence presented in this study indicates that separatist conflicts are not merely security problems but also geopolitical instruments that can be employed to obstruct democratic consolidation, weaken pro-Western governments, and maintain strategic dependence on Moscow. The Georgian case, therefore, reveals a broader pattern in Russian foreign policy: the use of separatist conflicts and citizenship policies as mechanisms of coercion designed to constrain the foreign policy choices of neighbouring states.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the doctrine of protecting citizens serves as a sophisticated instrument of power projection rather than a purely defensive or humanitarian policy. The novelty of this argument lies in highlighting how citizenship protection, separatist mobilisation, and geopolitical competition are integrated into a single strategy aimed at preserving Russian influence in the post-Soviet space and preventing the emergence of a democratic, Western-oriented neighbourhood beyond Russia's borders. The approach is only an elaborate, altered version of the desire to gain geopolitical influence over the post-Soviet region by keeping the loyal groups in these countries.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The use of artificial intelligence tools such as Grammarly is permitted for the purposes of stylistic refinement and improving the clarity of the text.

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