



Frozen Conflicts and Georgia's Security Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines how the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia affect Georgia's European integration process, with particular attention to the role of the Russian Federation in sustaining these dynamics. It addresses the following research question: To what extent do the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia constrain Georgia's European integration, and what role does Russian involvement play in sustaining these constraints?

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach based on the analysis of academic literature, official European Union documents, and relevant policy and institutional sources. Georgia provides an appropriate case for examining the relationship between frozen conflicts and European integration, as it combines pro-European political aspirations with unresolved territorial disputes and persistent external influence.

The article argues that the consequences of these frozen conflicts extend beyond the security dimension. The continued existence of the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, together with Russia's political, military, and diplomatic support for these territories, has created structural constraints that limit Georgia's domestic reforms, restrict its foreign policy options, and prospects for EU accession. While the European Union has strengthened its engagement with Georgia through political association and institutional cooperation, unresolved territorial conflicts continue to limit the country's integration trajectory by increasing geopolitical uncertainty and complicating the implementation of EU norms and policies.

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The article concludes that frozen conflicts should be understood not only as unresolved territorial disputes but also as enduring geopolitical instruments shaping the relationship among the European Union, Georgia, and the Russian Federation.

გაყინული კონფლიქტები და საქართველოს უსაფრთხოების დილემა

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სტატიის შესახებ	აბსტრაქტი
<i>საკვანძო სიტყვები:</i> გაყინული კონფლიქტები საქართველო აფხაზეთი სამხრეთ ოსეთი ევროპული ინტეგრაცია რუსეთის ფედერაცია დე ფაქტო სახელმწიფოები	სტატია განიხილავს, თუ როგორ მოქმედებს აფხაზეთსა და სამხრეთ ოსეთში არსებული გაყინული კონფლიქტები საქართველოს ევროპული ინტეგრაციის პროცესზე, განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა რუსეთის ფედერაციის როლს ამ დინამიკის შენარჩუნებაში. კვლევა პასუხობს შემდეგ საკვლევ კითხვას: რამდენად ზღუდავს აფხაზეთსა და სამხრეთ ოსეთში არსებული გაყინული კონფლიქტები საქართველოს ევროპული ინტეგრაციის პროცესს და რა როლს ასრულებს რუსეთის ფედერაციის ჩართულობა აღნიშნული შეზღუდვების შენარჩუნებასა და გაღრმავებაში? კვლევა ეფუძნება თვისებრივი შემთხვევის შესწავლის მიდგომას და მოიცავს აკადემიური ლიტერატურის, ევროკავშირის ოფიციალური დოკუმენტებისა და შესაბამისი პოლიტიკისა და ინსტიტუციური წყაროების ანალიზს. საქართველო წარმოადგენს შესაბამის შემთხვევას გაყინულ კონფლიქტებსა და ევროპულ ინტეგრაციას შორის ურთიერთკავშირის შესასწავლად, ვინაიდან იგი აერთიანებს ევროპული ინტეგრაციისკენ მიმართულ პოლიტიკურ მისწრაფებებს, მოუგვარებელ ტერიტორიულ დავებსა და მუდმივ გარე გავლენას. კვლევა ადასტურებს, რომ გაყინული კონფლიქტების შედეგები მხოლოდ უსაფრთხოების განზომილებით არ შემოიფარგლება. აფხაზეთსა და სამხრეთ ოსეთში დე ფაქტო ხელისუფლებების არსებობამ, აღნიშნული ტერიტორიების მიმართ რუსეთის პოლიტიკური, სამხედრო და დიპლომატიური მხარდაჭერის პარალელურად, შექმნა სტრუქტურული შეზღუდვები, რომლებიც ხელს უშლის საქართველოში შიდა რეფორმების სრულფასოვან განხორციელებას, ზღუდავს ქვეყნის საგარეო-პოლიტიკურ არჩევანს და ართულებს ევროკავშირში გაწევრიანების პერსპექტივების რეალიზებას. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ევროკავშირმა პოლიტიკური ასოცირებისა და ინსტიტუციური თანამშრომლობის გაღრმავების გზით

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გააძლიერა საქართველოსთან ურთიერთობა, მოუგვარებელი ტერიტორიული კონფლიქტები კვლავ ზღუდავს ქვეყნის ევროპული ინტეგრაციის პროცესს, ზრდის გეოპოლიტიკურ გაურკვევლობას და ართულებს ევროკავშირის ნორმებისა და პოლიტიკის განხორციელებას.

კვლევის შედეგები აჩვენებს, რომ გაყინული კონფლიქტები უნდა განიხილებოდეს არა მხოლოდ როგორც მოუგვარებელი ტერიტორიული დავები, არამედ როგორც ხანგრძლივი მოქმედების მქონე გეოპოლიტიკური ინსტრუმენტები, რომლებიც მნიშვნელოვან გავლენას ახდენენ ევროკავშირის, საქართველოსა და რუსეთის ფედერაციას შორის ურთიერთობების ფორმირებაზე.

1. Introduction

Frozen conflicts have become one of the defining features of the post-Soviet space. They are generally understood as conflicts in which active military confrontation has ended without a comprehensive political settlement, leaving unresolved territorial disputes that continue to affect state sovereignty, regional stability, and international security. In Georgia, the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia) extend beyond territorial integrity, influencing the country's security environment, foreign policy, and European integration. At the same time, the Russian Federation has played a central role in maintaining these conflicts, making them a key factor in Georgia's relations with the European Union.

Although previous studies have examined frozen conflicts, regional security, and Georgia's relations with the European Union, less attention has been paid to the relationship between unresolved territorial conflicts and the country's European integration.

This article examines how the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia shape Georgia's European integration by analysing the political, security, and geopolitical mechanisms through which the Russian Federation influences this process.

The article addresses the following research question: To what extent do the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia constrain Georgia's European integration, and what role does Russian involvement play in sustaining these constraints? It argues that these frozen conflicts are not merely unresolved territorial disputes but also structural geopolitical constraints that limit Georgia's strategic choices, affect its security environment, and complicate its path towards closer integration with the European Union.

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach based on the analysis of academic literature, official European Union documents, and other relevant policy and institutional sources. Georgia was selected as the case study because it provides a valuable empirical framework for examining how unresolved territorial disputes and external influence affect the European integration of post-Soviet states.

The article is organised into two sections. The first examines the concept of frozen conflicts from a theoretical perspective, while the second analyzes the Georgian case, focusing on the role of the Russian Federation and the implications of frozen conflicts for Georgia's European integration.

2. Literature Review

The concept of frozen conflicts has become a central element in the study of post-Soviet security and regional geopolitics. Although the term is widely used in both academic literature and political discourse, there is no universally accepted definition. Most scholars agree that frozen conflicts refer to situations in which large-scale hostilities have ceased without resulting in a comprehensive political settlement. Rather than representing a stable peace, frozen conflicts occupy an intermediate position between war and peace, generating long-term political and security challenges for the states involved.

Several authors have sought to identify the defining characteristics of frozen conflicts. Smetana and Ludvík (2017) argue that these conflicts share four common features: they have an international dimension, involve prolonged post-war situations, entail unresolved political issues, and lack a sustainable peace settlement. This approach emphasises that the absence of active warfare should not be interpreted as conflict resolution but as the continuation of political disputes under conditions of relative military stability. At the same time, the literature reflects an ongoing debate over the appropriateness of the term itself. While many scholars continue to use the expression frozen conflicts, others prefer the concept of protracted conflicts, arguing that these disputes are far from static. Political institutions continue to develop within the disputed territories, negotiations remain active despite limited progress, and external actors continue to shape the evolution of the conflicts. From this perspective, the term protracted conflict more accurately reflects the dynamic nature of these disputes (López Jiménez & Morales Hernández, 2018).

The literature also increasingly links frozen conflicts to broader debates on contested sovereignty and de facto states. Pegg (1998) argues that de facto states exercise effective territorial control and perform many of the functions associated with sovereign states despite lacking widespread international recognition. Expanding this perspective, Caspersen (2012), emphasises that such entities develop their own political institutions and governance structures, challenging traditional understandings of sovereignty and statehood.

Rather than viewing these conflicts exclusively through a military or territorial lens, scholars also argue that they give rise to political entities that exercise effective control over territory without obtaining broad international recognition. This perspective is particularly relevant in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where local authorities have developed governmental institutions, security structures, and administrative systems despite their limited international status. Consequently, frozen conflicts are understood not only as unresolved territorial disputes but also as challenges to the principles of sovereignty and statehood that underpin the international system.

Another important strand of the literature focuses on the role of external actors, particularly the Russian Federation, in the persistence of frozen conflicts. Although scholars differ in their interpretations of

Russia's motivations, there is broad agreement that Moscow has played a decisive role in shaping the evolution of conflicts in the post-Soviet space through political, military, economic, and diplomatic support for the separatist territories. De Waal and Nikolaus von Twickel (2020), argue that these conflicts should not be understood as isolated territorial disputes but as components of a broader regional security order in which Russia maintains significant influence over neighbouring states. In this context, Moscow's support for the de facto authorities contributes to preserving unresolved conflicts while simultaneously limiting the foreign policy choices of countries pursuing closer ties with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Additionally, other experts emphasise security considerations and the protection of Russian strategic interests in its so-called "near abroad". Despite these different interpretations, the literature consistently recognises that Russian involvement has become a key factor in understanding both the persistence of frozen conflicts and the broader regional security environment.

While frozen conflicts have been extensively analysed from the perspectives of conflict resolution, regional security, and Russian foreign policy, comparatively less attention has been devoted to their implications for European integration. Existing studies have examined Georgia's relationship with the European Union and the evolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia largely as separate issues. However, fewer studies have explored how unresolved territorial disputes, together with sustained Russian influence, affect Georgia's European integration process.

Although the literature has extensively examined frozen conflicts, de facto states, and Russian foreign policy, comparatively less attention has been devoted to analysing how these factors jointly influence Georgia's European integration. This article contributes to this debate by examining the interaction between unresolved territorial conflicts, Russian influence, and Georgia's relationship with the European Union.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to provide an in-depth understanding of the relationship between frozen conflicts and Georgia's security dilemma within the broader context of regional and international security. Given the complex political, military, and geopolitical dimensions of the issue, qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to exploring the underlying dynamics, perceptions, and strategic implications that quantitative approaches cannot adequately capture.

The research primarily employs a descriptive and analytical approach to examine Georgia's security environment and assess the impact of the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region on the country's national security. This method enables the identification and interpretation of the political, military, and geopolitical consequences of frozen conflicts, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how these conflicts shape Georgia's strategic position and security challenges.

To achieve a more detailed and context-specific analysis, the study utilizes the case study method. The conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are examined as individual cases that illustrate the broader phenomenon of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The case study approach allows for an exploration of the historical development of these conflicts, the role of external actors, and their long-

term implications for state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security policy. Through this method, the research seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which frozen conflicts influence Georgia's security environment and constrain its foreign and security policy choices.

Document analysis constitutes another key component of the research methodology. A wide range of primary and secondary sources are examined, including Georgia's National Security Concept, strategic documents and reports produced by international organizations, as well as publications issued by the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations. Academic literature on frozen conflicts, regional security, and international relations is also analyzed. This method provides the empirical and conceptual foundation for the study by enabling the systematic examination of official policies, security assessments, and scholarly interpretations relevant to the research topic.

In addition, the study employs comparative analysis to place Georgia's experience within a broader regional context. By comparing the cases of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region with other frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet area, particularly Transnistria in Moldova and the conflict in Donbas, Ukraine, the research identifies common patterns, differences, and security implications. This comparative perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that sustain frozen conflicts and their varying effects on state security and regional stability.

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in the realist tradition of International Relations theory, with particular emphasis on neorealism. From a neorealist perspective, states operate within an anarchic international system in which security and survival constitute primary objectives. This theoretical lens is especially relevant for explaining Georgia's security challenges, as frozen conflicts create persistent vulnerabilities that affect the state's ability to ensure its sovereignty and security. Furthermore, the study applies the concept of the security dilemma to analyze how efforts by Georgia to strengthen its security and deepen cooperation with Western institutions may be perceived as threatening by other actors, particularly Russia, thereby contributing to tensions and instability in the region. The combination of these theoretical and methodological approaches allows for a comprehensive examination of frozen conflicts as a central factor shaping Georgia's contemporary security dilemma.

4. Research Results

The findings indicate that the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia influence Georgia's European integration through three interrelated mechanisms: they undermine the country's security environment, strengthen the Russian Federation's geopolitical leverage, and complicate the implementation of political and institutional reforms required for closer integration with the European Union.

First, the persistence of the conflicts remains one of the most significant challenges to Georgia's national security. The unresolved status of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region affects not only the country's territorial integrity but also its political stability, economic development, and foreign policy orientation. The absence of a comprehensive political settlement creates a permanent source of instability that influences both domestic governance and Georgia's external relations.

Second, the findings demonstrate that the Russian Federation plays a central role in maintaining these constraints. Through its political, military, and diplomatic support for the de facto authorities, as well as its military presence in the occupied territories, Russia reinforces the persistence of the frozen conflicts and limits Georgia's strategic autonomy. Consequently, the conflicts function not only as territorial disputes but also as instruments of geopolitical influence that complicate Georgia's efforts to strengthen its relations with the European Union.

Finally, the analysis shows that frozen conflicts increasingly generate hybrid security challenges. Disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, information warfare, and social polarisation weaken public trust in state institutions and create additional obstacles to democratic consolidation and institutional reform. These dynamics become particularly visible during periods of heightened regional tension and further complicate Georgia's European integration by increasing political uncertainty and reducing the state's capacity to implement reforms effectively. This assessment is consistent with the European Council's (2024) position that Georgia's progress towards EU membership depends on continued reforms and compliance with the Union's accession criteria. (European Council, 2024)

Overall, the findings suggest that the impact of frozen conflicts extends beyond the security dimension. Rather than representing merely unresolved territorial disputes, they constitute structural geopolitical constraints that shape Georgia's domestic development, foreign policy, and prospects for European integration.

4.1. Frozen Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space

Frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space refer to a set of ethnic and territorial disputes that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The term “frozen conflict” is primarily used in the context of Russian security policy. Accordingly, many scholars of international relations, as noted above, employ this term to describe conflicts that have remained latent in the post-Soviet region.

According to the international relations scholar Onaciu, the status of the Russian Federation as a great power significantly declined after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He further argues that the 1990s were marked by political humiliation, military weakness, and economic hardship, and it was within this context that frozen conflicts emerged. These conflicts became an instrument for the Russian Federation, through which, despite its weakened position, it was able to project influence across the territories of its former empire. (Onaciu, 2022, p.60).

Some scholars argue that the concept of frozen conflict is not limited exclusively to post-Soviet space and that there are cases predating the collapse of the Soviet Union. For example, Cyprus and Kosovo are sometimes considered partial examples of frozen conflicts due to certain structural similarities. In both cases, armed violence began within unitary states, whereas in other instances such conflicts developed in states with elements of federalism, often in the form of autonomous regions.

Another important point to note is that the Russian Federation uses frozen conflicts in former Soviet republics to maintain its sphere of influence. According to Lachert, a scholar of international relations, since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, Russia's foreign policy has been oriented toward preserving

the former Soviet republics within the Kremlin's sphere of influence. Russia's foreign policy objectives toward post-Soviet states in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have largely aimed at limiting their rapprochement with Western political and military structures (Lachert, 2019, p.4).

The Russian Federation pursues an active, albeit highly adaptive, foreign policy aimed at protecting its interests abroad to reinforce its status as a great power and to be recognized as a major geopolitical actor. At the same time, it seeks to prevent former Soviet republics such as Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO and the European Union, thereby maintaining its influence in the Caucasus region, which has become a key zone of strategic importance for Russia. Meanwhile, Serbia and Kosovo have made the most progress in the peaceful management of their disputes and have, in recent years, significantly reduced their classification within the category of "frozen conflicts" (Bebler, 2015, p.11).

The instruments employed by the Russian Federation in frozen conflicts particularly in Transnistria and Georgia serve a common objective: to undermine any attempts by these states to move closer to the West and to regional international political, economic, and security organizations such as the European Union and NATO, with the longer-term aim of redirecting them toward Moscow and its regional integration projects (López Jiménez & Morales Hernández, 2018, p.54).

It is also noteworthy that one of the main arguments the Russian Federation uses to justify its interventions in these territories is the principle of protecting populations. In fact, Article 82 of the Russian Constitution establishes the Russian Federation's obligation to protect its population, while the president is regarded as the guarantor of human rights and civil liberties both within the state and beyond its borders.

At present, there are four major frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet region, commonly referred to as protracted conflicts.

- Nagorno-Karabakh: One of the oldest frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, it represents a territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict was in an active armed phase from 1988 to 1994. Despite the ceasefire agreement reached in 1994, no final political settlement was achieved, leaving the conflict in a frozen state until the 2020 war. Following that war, Azerbaijan regained part of the previously lost territories.
- Transnistria: A conflict between Moldova and an unrecognized pro-Russian entity that emerged in 1990, when the Transnistrian region on the eastern bank of the Dniester River declared independence from Moldova. The Russian Federation continues to play a central role in maintaining the status quo through both military presence and economic support, turning this conflict into a geopolitical instrument in the Black Sea region (Beacháin & Sheridan, 2018).
- Abkhazia: A region of Georgia that declared independence in 1992. It is recognized by Russia and a few other countries.
- South Ossetia: An autonomous region of Georgia that also declared independence in the early 1990s.

Although these four conflicts are considered the most significant in the post-Soviet space, some scholars argue that certain regions of Ukraine also exhibit characteristics of frozen conflicts, albeit at a lower intensity; for example, the Crimean Peninsula and the two separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. In particular, between 2015 and 2022, Donbas displayed classic features of a frozen conflict, such as an agreed but not definitive ceasefire, Russian military and economic support, and a lack of international recognition.

All these frozen conflicts differ in scale, historical background, and modes of governance, yet they share structural similarities. Contributing factors such as state weakness, economic crises, and the support of external actors are present in each case.

Overall, frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space continue to pose significant challenges. The ongoing war in Ukraine has further intensified expert interest in this issue. Resolving frozen conflicts remains a difficult and complex task, shaped by the specific political and cultural factors of each country.

4.2. De Facto Statehood and Frozen Conflicts: An analysis of their Interrelationship

De facto states and frozen conflicts are closely interconnected, even though each concept originates from a different theoretical framework. While a frozen conflict is a concept rooted in the field of international relations, a de facto state is a concept of international law used to describe entities that exercise effective control over a territory and population but lack formal recognition from the international community.

A de facto state is a political entity that controls a defined territory and performs state functions yet is not widely recognized by the international community as a sovereign state (Caspersen, 2012, p. 12).

At present, three entities in the Caucasus may be considered de facto states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. These entities emerged as a result of conflicts that developed during the period of political transition following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The scholar Scott Pegg (1998), in his work *International Society and the De Facto State*, introduced the academic study of de facto states, distinguishing them based on their effective territorial control and performance of state functions despite the absence of international recognition. He describes separatist entities that have achieved de facto independence, exercise effective control over territory, and possess governing institutions, yet are not recognized as sovereign states at the international level.

On the other hand, Dov Lynch uses the concept of the de facto state to analyze entities emerging from frozen conflicts, such as Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, which exercise territorial control but lack full international legitimacy. He further emphasizes territorial stability and temporal durability as fundamental criteria, arguing that de facto states “maintain effective control over a territory for a prolonged period of time, allowing them to develop administrative, military, and political structures similar to those of recognized states” (Lynch, 2004).

Finally, Nina Caspersen highlights that de facto states should not be viewed merely as legal anomalies but as functional political orders, noting that they “have established functioning political institutions and

seek both internal legitimacy and external recognition, despite their non-recognized status” (Caspersen, *Unrecognized States*, 2012).

The relationship between these two phenomena is reciprocal. On the one hand, the persistence of a frozen conflict protects a *de facto* state from dissolution or forced reintegration, thereby ensuring its long-term survival.

Overall, *de facto* states are active agents that contribute to both the persistence and stabilization of frozen conflicts, while these conflicts themselves create the structural framework that enables the existence and continuity of such entities. This interdependence is of fundamental importance for understanding the durability of contemporary territorial disputes and the constraints of the international system in managing secessionist processes and contested sovereignties.

4.3. Factors of Frozen Conflicts in Georgia

Through the two conflicts existing in Abkhazia and the so-called “South Ossetia,”³ Georgia faces significant challenges to its territorial integrity and sovereignty, characterized by Russian military intervention and the unilateral declaration of independence of these regions.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia became involved in several secessionist conflicts, particularly in Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia. Although these conflicts reached ceasefires in the 1990s, no final peace agreements were ever achieved, which led to what are now known as frozen conflicts.

On April 9, 1991, Georgia declared independence, ending its decades-long membership in the Soviet Union. Georgia’s independence triggered internal conflicts, especially in Abkhazia and the so-called “South Ossetia,” where both ethnic and territorial disputes emerged. These conflicts became prolonged over time and complicated the process of consolidating Georgia’s sovereignty.

Accordingly, after the dissolution of the USSR, the international community recognized Georgia as a sovereign state, which allowed it to open up to economic cooperation and establish diplomatic relations with other countries.

The main factors of the frozen conflicts in Georgia, particularly in Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia, are complex and include historical, political, ethnic, and geopolitical dimensions. Looking at the origins of each conflict, it can be noted that the historical background of the so-called “South Ossetia” conflict dates to at least 1922, when Joseph Dzhugashvili, the newly appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, incorporated so-called “South Ossetia” into the territory of

³ Former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, which includes historical Inner Kartli. In 1922, with the creation of the USSR, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was established. In December 1990, the Supreme Council of the Georgian SSR adopted a resolution abolishing the oblast and renamed it the Tskhinvali region. Separatist forces in the same year declared independence and called the state the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic. In the Constitution of Georgia, the term “former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast” is used to refer to the region, while in other official documents it is referred to as the “Tskhinvali region.”

Georgia. After the collapse of the USSR, Ossetians found themselves in a difficult situation, divided between two sides: the Russian Federation and Georgia.

The so-called “South Ossetia” is a region mainly populated by the Ossetian ethnic group, which differs from Georgians and has cultural and linguistic ties with North Ossetia (part of Russia). The South Ossetian region is located in the South Caucasus, and its capital is Tskhinvali.⁴ It is a mountainous region that was established in 1922 within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, while two years later the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic was created. During the Soviet period, Ossetia constituted an autonomous region within Georgia, and between 1989 and 1992 it became the scene of a bloody conflict (Altemir, 2004: 244).

Regarding the political factors of the so-called “South Ossetia,” the region first declared independence on September 20, 1990, coinciding with the election of Georgia’s national leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. During this period, the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali quickly became the epicentre of armed confrontation between Ossetians and Georgians. The conflict escalated when Gamsakhurdia sent the Georgian National Guard to fight against Ossetian militias, which were in turn strengthened by weapons and infantry supplied by Russia.

All these events became disputed, and the Supreme Council of Georgia annulled South Ossetia’s decision and dissolved its representative institutions, which led to a civil war between Georgians and Ossetians. The war lasted from December 1990 to June 1992, when Russian President Yeltsin and Georgian leader Shevardnadze signed a ceasefire agreement known as the Sochi Agreement.⁵ In January 1992, a referendum on independence was held (considered illegitimate by Georgia), which clearly showed support for independence and possible future unification with Russia. Following this referendum, South Ossetia declared independence on May 29, 1992. This conflict caused thousands of deaths and the mass displacement of the civilian population (Bárcenas Medina & López Jiménez, 2011, p. 71)

At the same time, the South Ossetian Republic gradually developed under pressure and aggression from the Georgian side, including months before the war, when various provocations aimed to test the Ossetians’ response capacity and Russia’s commitment to ensuring peace in the region, where it maintained peacekeeping forces under the post-1992 agreements (Tamayo & Iñiguez, 2015, p. 32).

After the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, the South Ossetian conflict has been considered a frozen conflict, while Russia maintains a significant military presence in the region. Currently, the so-called South Ossetia remains a source of tension between Georgia and the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, Abkhazia is a region located on the Black Sea coast. Before joining the Soviet Union, it was an autonomous republic within Georgia. The Abkhaz war lasted until 1994, and the United Nations established a monitoring mission (UNOMIG), which cooperated with Russian peacekeeping forces. This conflict resulted in approximately 280,000 internally displaced people. In comparison, the 1992 South

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “South Ossetia”

⁵ Agreement on Principles of Settlement of the Georgian–Ossetian Conflict (Sochi, 24 June 1992)

Ossetia war produced a much smaller number of displaced people, mainly Ossetians who chose to move to North Ossetia (Arnanz, 2015, p.126).

The impact of these two frozen conflicts on Georgia's integration process into the European Union is significant, as they directly affect the country's European integration prospects. The European Union places particular importance on territorial integrity, state sovereignty, and internal stability, while these conflicts hinder full compliance with these criteria. In this context, unresolved territorial disputes and the influence of the Russian Federation in these regions create additional political and security challenges, slowing down Georgia's EU integration process despite the country's clear pro-European orientation. (European Council, 2024)

4.4. De facto reality within Georgian statehood

Georgia is an internationally recognized sovereign state and a member of organizations such as the United Nations, the OSCE, and others. However, it faces a significant territorial challenge due to the existence of two separatist regions that are effectively known as de facto states: Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are two de facto entities that unilaterally declared independence from Georgia. Although they have their own governing structures and security forces, their autonomy is largely dependent on Russian support. Both regions exercise effective control over their territories, yet their international recognition remains extremely limited. Despite declaring independence from Georgia in the 1990s and later receiving recognition from Russia following the brief war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, they are still not widely recognized as independent states. The international community, including organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the OSCE, continues to regard Abkhazia and South Ossetia as integral parts of Georgia.

Georgia maintains a policy of non-recognition and refuses any dialogue that could imply legitimizing the independence of these two regions. At the same time, the militarization of both territories reinforces the perception of a frozen conflict, while ongoing tensions between Georgian, Abkhaz, and Ossetian ethnic groups further complicate processes of dialogue and reconciliation. Russia's refusal to allow international mediation significantly limits the possibilities for negotiation and peaceful conflict resolution, effectively preserving the situation as a frozen conflict.

In conclusion, Georgia cannot be considered a de facto state, as it meets the formal and substantive criteria of a sovereign state under international law, such as a defined territory, a permanent population, an effective government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. (Montevideo Convention, 1933). However, two separatist entities exist within its territory Abkhazia and South Ossetia which function similarly to de facto states. As noted above, despite the lack of broad international recognition, these regions continue to pose a persistent challenge to Georgia's territorial integrity and reflect the complex geopolitical reality of the post-Soviet space, where frozen conflicts continue to weaken the principle of state sovereignty.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined how the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia influence Georgia's European integration, with particular attention to the role of the Russian Federation in shaping these dynamics. The findings demonstrate that these conflicts extend beyond unresolved territorial disputes and constitute structural geopolitical constraints that continue to affect Georgia's security environment, domestic political development, and foreign policy.

From the perspective of the security dilemma, the Georgian case illustrates how unresolved territorial conflicts generate persistent insecurity that shapes both domestic and international political choices. Georgia's efforts to strengthen cooperation with the European Union and NATO are perceived by the Russian Federation as a challenge to its strategic interests, while Russia's political, military and diplomatic support for the separatist territories contributes to the persistence of the conflicts. As a result, the interaction between both actors reinforces a security environment characterised by mutual distrust and heightened geopolitical competition.

The analysis further demonstrates that frozen conflicts significantly constrain Georgia's European integration. Beyond the loss of effective territorial control, they complicate the implementation of political and institutional reforms, increase geopolitical uncertainty, and provide the Russian Federation with continued leverage over Georgia's strategic orientation. Consequently, Georgia's European integration cannot be analysed independently of the broader regional security context.

This study contributes to the literature by bringing together debates on frozen conflicts, security dilemmas, and European integration. not merely see frozen conflicts as unresolved territorial disputes but also as enduring geopolitical instruments through which Russia maintains influence in the South Caucasus and shapes Georgia's strategic choices.

Overall, the findings suggest that Russian involvement is not simply one factor among many but a central mechanism through which the frozen conflicts continue to constrain Georgia's European integration. The Georgian case therefore demonstrates that the resolution of frozen conflicts remains closely connected to broader questions of regional security, international cooperation, and the future of the European security order.

Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation of this article, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to improve the language, grammar, style, and overall clarity of the text. The artificial intelligence tool was not used to generate the research, develop the arguments, or formulate the conclusions. The authors reviewed, verified, and take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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