

## RUSSIA'S GRAND GEOPOLITICAL PLAY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

by  
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The breakaway Georgian territory of Abkhazia has faced political turmoil throughout the summer. The separatist parliament blocked the “[Apartment Law](#),” which would have allowed Russian and foreign citizens to purchase real estate in Abkhazia. This decision, motivated by the fear of Abkhazians becoming a minority, sparked a response from Russia. The Kremlin summoned Abkhazian leader Aslan Bzhania to negotiate with Dmitry Kozak, leading to Russia’s Ministry of Finance deciding to [cut off financial support to Abkhazia starting September 1, 2024, and revoke Russian citizenship](#). Given Abkhazia’s heavy reliance on Russia, this event could be considered classic state-client dynamics, where a dominant power punishes a disobedient vassal. However, the Georgian Dream party’s pre-election promises to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity have sparked widespread debate both within Georgian-controlled and in the occupied territories on whether there is a secret agreement between the Georgian government and the Kremlin.

### Russian Strategy

Since Georgia’s independence, Russia has consistently destabilized the country. Moscow financed separatists and mercenaries, such as the Confederation of Mountains People of Caucasus, orchestrated the [ethnic cleansing](#) of Georgians in Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia. In 2008, Russia officially intervened in Georgia and recognized these regions’ independence to maintain its military bases there. Years later, President Putin revealed that this invasion was a premeditated move, [preplanned as early as 2006](#) in the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Despite this history, 16 years after the Russo-Georgian War, there are signs of rapprochement in Georgian-Russian relations. Recently, Russia [lifted its visa regime for Georgians](#), opened its market to Georgian goods, minimized incidents on the

occupational borders, and witnessed a surge in Russian tourism to Georgia. Despite the Kremlin’s firm stance against revoking its recognition of Georgia’s occupied territories, [speculation about the reintegration](#) of these regions began circulating on social media in the spring of 2024. This topic soon became a key element in the [Georgian Dream Party’s list of pre-election promises](#).

### The Confederation Lure

In response to the promises of the Georgian ruling party, the first deputy chair of the Russian State Duma Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, [Konstantin Zatulin announced](#) that Georgia has already missed the chance of restoration of territorial integrity. He argued that Russia would not sacrifice the independence of those two republics in favor of improving relations with Georgia.

Since the onset of ethnic conflict in Georgia, the Kremlin has consistently promoted the concept of a confederation and sought to persuade the Georgian side up until 2008, but [Tbilisi viewed it as a dangerous plot](#). The confederation model required recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states before any unification, which Georgia feared would maintain the disintegration process or ultimately lose its sovereignty, as having two pro-Russian regions enabled the Kremlin to exert influence over its domestic and foreign affairs. According to separatist leaders [Sergei Shamba and Inal Jioey](#), the Kremlin kept advocating for a confederation after the negotiations with Nicolas Sarkozy. The Kremlin offered Abkhazians and Ossetians to create a confederation despite the lack of a physical border between those two regions. However, this confederation would be open to other states to join. The separatist leaders believed that it was a deceptive attempt to draw the breakaway regions into a confederation with Georgia.

In summary, the confederation is not innovative in the “resolution” of Georgia’s territorial problems. It has always certainly served Russia’s strategic interest to solidify its foothold in the South Caucasus as a key node of its geopolitical strategy. [According to leading Russian geopolitical theorist Alexandr Dugin](#), the (South) Caucasus plays a crucial role in reshaping the

Eurasian space – involving the Middle East and South Asia – which aims to integrate the Eurasian Empire against the common enemy “Atlantic,” which implies the USA and the United Kingdom.

### The Trade Imperative

During the Soviet period, the Trans-Caucasian Railway passing through Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan created important transport infrastructure, which after the collapse of the Soviet Union could serve as a major trade artery for [Russia to connect with Turkey and Iran](#). However, the occupation of Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia undermined this potential.

After the initiation of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects India through the Persian Gulf (Chabahar Port) to Iran and Russia, the existing Trans-Caucasian transit corridor gained further [strategic importance](#). Russia several times tried to negotiate with different Georgian governments to open this railway but the fact that a significant part of this railway passes through occupied Abkhazia, accepting this proposal for Tbilisi would be [an indirect recognition of the independence of Georgia's breakaway region](#). Despite the exciting financial and economic offers made by Russia to Georgian governments, none of the rulers of Georgia accepted them so far due to the sensitivity of this topic for Georgian society.

In the context of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, its need to diversify trade routes has become urgent. Moscow is keen to strengthen economic ties with the Eastern powers, particularly Iran, Turkey, the Gulf monarchies, and India. In addition to economic and trade dimensions, reviving the Trans-Caucasian Railway and developing large regional transit infrastructure is strategic, as it could facilitate the supply of arms from Iran. Moreover, from a geopolitical standpoint, after the West imposed the sanctions against Russia and Iran, Georgia alongside Azerbaijan remains a critical terrestrial link in the transport chain between Europe and Asia. If Georgia falls back under Russian influence, the Kremlin along with Iran would control all major terrestrial routes between Europe and Asia.

### Conclusion

Russia's unexpected punitive actions against Abkhazian separatists, along with the Georgian Dream Party's pre-election discussions of territorial reintegration, fuelled speculation about the possible existence of a secret deal between the Georgian Dream Party and the Kremlin to restore Georgian territorial integrity. However, considering Russia's strategic interest in the South Caucasus, relinquishing Abkhazia and South Ossetia freely seems overly optimistic. Russia's hold on Georgia's breakaway territories allows it to maintain its military presence in the South Caucasus and manipulate Georgia. Thus, the only condition Russia might allow the reunification of breakaway territories with Georgia is returning Tbilisi into the Russian political orbit.

In light of Russia's war against the democratic world, controlling Georgia and the South Caucasus has gained further importance for Russia. In mitigation of Western-imposed sanctions, the South Caucasus transit potential allows Russia to diversify its trade affairs toward the Middle East and South Asia. The control of Georgia would also provide Russia with strategic influence over global economic and security dynamics as along with Azerbaijan, Georgia represents an alternative to Russian and Iranian transit corridors between Europe and Asia. On top of that in case of the full control of South Caucasus, its transit corridor can be used for building military supply chains from Iran to provide the front with Iranian weapons in Ukraine.

Due to the potential far-reaching consequences for regional and global security, preventing Georgia from falling back under Russian influence should be a top priority for the democratic world. Ensuring Georgia's continued sovereignty and territorial integrity is not only a regional issue but also a crucial element in the broader struggle between democratic and authoritarian systems of governance.

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