



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Georgia's Strategic Dilemmas: Russian Leverage and Secessionist Conflicts**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines Georgia's strategic vulnerabilities with focus on frozen and latent conflicts, specially delimiting its scope to Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Samtskhe Javakheti, and Adjara. Georgia's post-soviet security environment has been shaped by Russian influence through military occupation, passportization, and disinformation, which continue to obstruct Euro-Atlantic integration. Using a qualitative approach, the paper synthesizes historical events and academic literature to analyze the interconnection of explicit frozen conflicts and implicit socio-political vulnerabilities. Findings show that Russian hybrid strategies expand the frozen conflict theory by exploiting governance frailties, minority grievances, and socio-economic disadvantages, thereby sustaining structural control. Results further reveal that Georgia's strategic resilience depends on mitigating both visible and latent vulnerabilities. The study recommends multi-layered policy solutions, including institutional strengthening, minority inclusion, socio-economic development, and counter-hybrid strategies, to safeguard sovereignty and enhance integration prospects.

**KEYWORDS** Georgia, Frozen Conflicts, Latent Vulnerabilities, Russian Influence, Hybrid Strategies, Euro-Atlantic Integration

**Introduction**

The experience of the South Caucasus attributes of post-Soviet strategic environment in Georgia are influenced by the convergence of their historical backgrounds, their internal fragmentation and the continued Russian influence. Since 1991, the direction of the country has been symbolized by the ethno-political pressure, fragility of the governance, and the differences in socio-economic status, and all these paved the ways of crying foul to not only blatant exterior action, but of indirect influence as well (Cornell, 2001; Hewitt, 1999). These weak points are most easily seen in the frozen conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where the unresolved territorial claims and the Russian military force interfere with the Georgian sovereignty, impede further integration of Euro-Atlantic and structures reliance. At the same time, latent structural vulnerabilities are depicted in the regions where the armed conflict has not been directly, but Samtskhejavakheti and Adjara assess the rates. Grievances of minorities, semi-autonomous political management, and social-economic marginalization open the opportunities, which the external actors may capitalize on, using the strategy of hybrid influence such as economic leverage, political co-optation, and disinformation campaigns (Toal, 2017; De Waal, 2018).

The history of these territories gives a clue to the strategic problems that Georgia has to struggle with. The disputed inclusion of Abkhazia into the Georgian territory and the Soviet division policy of geodemography and georgianization (as well as the population division) were some of the causes of resentment that subsequently manifested through the secessionist activism (Hewitt, 1999; Cornell, 2001). Equally, the historical demands of South Ossetia towards independence combined with nationalist policies in early independent Georgia created situations that were pronounced to outside interference and creation of a de facto administration of the country being pro-Russian (Lynch, 2004; Wheatley, 2005). Samtskhe-Javakheti is a marginalised economy, limited political incorporation, ethnic

homogeneity with which the latent vulnerabilities that Islam can be tentatively exploited by Moscow without physical military intervention (Lohm, 2007; Øverland, 2009). The semi-autonomous position of Adjara, centralized political governance, overall unequal socio-economic conditions of the region also demonstrate the manner in which a periphery area, however, seemingly stable, is still susceptible to foreign manipulation (O'Brochta, 2017; Jones, 2013).

This paper seeks to analyze how the southern arrangement in Georgia meshes with Russian strategic penetration so as to generate a spectrum of vulnerabilities in frozen but as well as latent conflict segments. Drawing the history of the past and the present studies, the paper has shown how the open type of the military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia produces the tendency of the force of deeper means of control to be done in the periphery regions. It reveals that strategic dilemma in Georgia do not only cease along the contentious borders, but they rule in the peripheral territory of Georgia, where the vulnerabilities and the shortcomings of the administration, the dissatisfaction of the minority community, and the type of uneconomic inequalities are the clues to the access to the so-called hybrid influence.

Ultimately, this piece of research paper is intended to provide a vast analytical framework to the post-Soviet deficiencies in Georgia. The dependence between frozen conflicts and latent regional shortcomings as evidenced by the study indicates that the decisions used to restrain and gender the sovereignty of the state, internal consolidation and Euro-Atlantic orientation are responses strategies used in reaction to Georgia. The perception provides an educational recommendation to scholarly studies and policy architects concerning the significance of multi-level and combining tactics in a manner to warrant tactical hoodwink, enhance governance, and counter hybrid threats encompassing the South Caucasus.

## **Literature Review**

The course of History, internal conflicts and the constant exercises of foreign power (with a designation of Russia mostly) have ruled the post-Soviet strategic scenario of Georgia with incredibly huge sway. In hindsight, when the Soviet Union broke apart in the year 1991, the ethno-political tensions previously crusting below the surface had been unveiled in the entire country, most visibly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although also unveiling in no mean time some more sinister drops in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara. Taken together, these regions illustrate the complex interplay of historical grievances, demographic engineering, and external leverage that continues to shape Georgia's security and political dilemmas (Cornell, 2001; Hewitt, 1999).

Abkhazia, located along Georgia's northwestern Black Sea coast, has historically been a contested space. Incorporated into the Georgian kingdom in 1008, the region later fell under Ottoman influence before entering Russian suzerainty in 1810. Large-scale Abkhaz migration to the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century significantly altered the demographic and religious composition, leaving a predominantly Christian population and creating long-term structural vulnerabilities in ethnic relations (Hewitt, 1999). During the Soviet period, Abkhazia's status oscillated between a Soviet Socialist Republic (1921) and an autonomous republic (1931) under Georgia, with policies of "Georgianization," including the closure of Abkhaz-language schools and demographic engineering, reducing the proportion of ethnic Abkhaz from 42 percent in 1886 to 15 percent by 1959 (Cornell, 2001; Hewitt, 1999). These measures entrenched grievances that later fueled secessionist mobilization. By the early 1990s, escalating Abkhaz demands for recognition coincided with Georgia's independence movement, culminating in the 1992–1993 conflict, ethnic cleansing, and the displacement of an estimated 230,000–250,000 ethnic Georgians (Cornell, 2001; Freedman, 1997; Hewitt, 1999). Scholarship highlights the paradox of Russia's dual role as both security guarantor and patron in Georgia's conflicts:

while presenting itself as a mediator, Moscow simultaneously armed separatist forces and controlled strategic corridors, thereby institutionalizing dependency and constraining Georgian sovereignty (Allison, 2008; Broers, 2019). Post-2008, Russian recognition of Abkhazia, the establishment of the 7th Military Base, and extensive passportization entrenched the region's political, economic, and security alignment with Moscow (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010). Abkhazia thus exemplifies the enduring challenge for Georgia: safeguarding territorial integrity amid externally enabled secessionist movements while also addressing historically rooted internal grievances.

South Ossetia, situated in the central Caucasus, mirrors Abkhazia's vulnerabilities but is shaped by distinct historical and demographic dynamics. Ossetians trace their ancestry to the Alans and Scythians, yet Georgian nationalist narratives historically framed them as recent settlers lacking legitimate claims to autonomy (Wheatley, 2005). During Georgia's brief independence (1918–1921), Ossetian attempts to unify with Russia were violently suppressed, and Sovietization later established an autonomous oblast in 1922 (Cornell, 2001; Lynch, 2004). By the late 1980s, Ossetians constituted approximately two-thirds of the local population, enabling secessionist mobilization. Rising nationalism under President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, coupled with anti-minority policies, led to the formation of the Ademon Nykhas Popular Front (1988) and violent clashes following the abolition of autonomy (Cornell, 2001; Wheatley, 2005). The 1992 Sochi Agreement established a trilateral peacekeeping mechanism; however, South Ossetia effectively operated as a de facto state under Russian protection (Lynch, 2004). The 2008 Russo-Georgian War further consolidated Russian influence through military deployment, borderization, and passportization (Kazemzadeh, 2019), thereby demonstrating a deliberate hybrid strategy that leverages secessionist territories to constrain Georgia's sovereignty, manipulate regional security, and secure Russian geostrategic interests.

Samtskhe–Javakheti, encompassing Meskheta and Javakheti, represents a region of latent vulnerabilities rather than overt conflict. Historical resettlement following the Russo–Ottoman War (1828–1829) introduced large Armenian populations, now constituting approximately 90 percent of the region (Cornell, 2001; Wheatley, 2005). Over time, chronic economic marginalization, infrastructural neglect, and limited integration into Georgian political life amplified ethnic grievances and created conditions conducive to external influence (Kapanadze, 2014). Russian engagement has sought to exploit these peripheral vulnerabilities by framing external threats—notably NATO expansion and alleged Turkish interference—through information and narrative campaigns that foster mistrust and latent instability without necessarily resorting to overt military force (Toal, 2017; Chikhladze & Shiukashvili, 2023). Based on that, Samtskhe–Javakheti emphasizes the larger strategic quandary that Georgia confronts: how to secure cohesion in the country and to have control over ethnically differentiated regions that could be easily exploited on external control (Toal, 2017).

Adjara, located on Georgia's southwestern Black Sea coast bordering Turkey, presents a distinct set of dynamics. Historically part of Colchis, the region fell under Ottoman rule (1614–1878), and Islamization differentiated its cultural and religious identity from other Georgian territories. The Soviet establishment of the Adjarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1921) codified religiously based autonomy, unique within the USSR (Cornell, 2002). In the 1990s, Aslan Abashidze consolidated power in Adjara through patronage and control over local revenues and external ties. Although the Rose Revolution led to the reassertion of central authority, Adjara's institutions remain shaped by elite networks and regional geopolitical pressures (Jones, 2013; Nodia, 2005). The region thus exemplifies the ongoing balancing act for Georgia: preserving autonomy to maintain stability while preventing external penetration that could exacerbate strategic vulnerabilities.

Across Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Samtskhe–Javakheti, and Adjara, a consistent pattern emerges: historical grievances, demographic engineering, and legacies of external domination intersect to produce structural vulnerabilities. At the same time, Russia's ability to exploit these dynamics—through military, political, and hybrid mechanisms—illustrates its persistent strategic leverage over Georgia. Consolidating these historical narratives within the literature review not only contextualizes the persistence of Georgia's internal divisions but also provides a solid foundation for subsequent analytical chapters. In this way, the later sections can move beyond descriptive background to focus exclusively on evaluating Russian influence, assessing policy implications, and examining Georgia's strategic responses without repeating historical context.

This study employs Secessionist Theory and Frozen Conflict Theory to analyze Georgia's post-Soviet strategic dilemmas in the South Caucasus. Together, these frameworks provide a structured lens for understanding how internal divisions, historical grievances, and external interventions interact to sustain both overt and latent conflicts across the country.

Secessionist Theory explains the emergence and persistence of autonomous or separatist movements within Georgia. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, historical grievances, demographic shifts, and ethno-political mobilization created fertile conditions for separatist aspirations. Abkhazia's fluctuating political status during the Soviet period, combined with Georgianization policies that restricted language, education, and political representation, fueled enduring discontent among the ethnic Abkhaz population (Cornell, 2001; Hewitt, 1999). Similarly, South Ossetia's historical autonomy, coupled with marginalization under Georgian nationalist policies, intensified Ossetian demands for independence (Lynch, 2004; Wheatley, 2005). These dynamics demonstrate how identity, territorial claims, and collective mobilization drive secessionist tendencies, challenge central authority, and create enduring political tensions.

Building on this, Frozen Conflict Theory elucidates how secessionist movements evolve into institutionalized instruments of external leverage. Abkhazia and South Ossetia now function as *de facto* independent regions, maintaining local governance structures, hosting foreign military bases, and remaining largely unrecognized internationally (Allison, 2008; Broers, 2019). This unresolved status enables external actors—particularly Russia—to exercise sustained political, military, and economic influence without resorting to full annexation. Mechanisms such as borderization, passportization, and selective citizenship exemplify the deliberate maintenance of frozen conflicts to maximize leverage, constrain central authority, and secure long-term geopolitical advantages (De Waal, 2018; Toal, 2017).

These frameworks also illuminate latent vulnerabilities in regions without active armed conflict, such as Samtskhe–Javakheti and Adjara. Rather insignificant economically marginalized and having historical grievances, the majority population of Samtskhe–Javakheti makes the area vulnerable through manipulation by the use of disinformation campaigns, co-optation of the elite and economic dependence (Lohm, 2007; Øverland, 2009). The example of semi-autonomous governance in Adjara adopted one by the Ottoman-Islamic culture and geographical location of the city contribute to the Black Sea to abruptly become the centre of local instability, without a direct military intervention through military roles (O'Brochta, 2017; Jones, 2013). These examples depict that frozen conflict mechanisms are not confined in active separatist entities only, but latent vulnerable areas, which can be implemented on strategic grounds under certain circumstances.

Combining the Secessionist and Frozen Conflict Theory, the given work receives the socio-political mechanisms of its micro elements, such as the ethnic mobilization, the demographic changes, and the elite manipulation, and the strategic utility of unresolved conflicts at the macro level. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are clear examples of endogenous

locked conflicts to build external pressure, and Samtskhe–Javakheti and Adjara are clear instances of latent weaknesses, which accompany the visible ones. This theoretical synthesis provides a wholesome view of interaction between internal rifts, historical grievances and interventions towards the continuation of the territorial, political and socio-economic problems faced in Georgia and can explain why the strategic quandary of Georgia has remained involving as much more complexity.

## **Material and Methods**

This paper has a qualitative research design that a combination between historical analysis, comparative case studies and policy review were used to study how Russia employs hybrid influence approaches in the South Caucasus. The qualitative approach in particular fits the abovementioned research rather well since, learning assumes a vast array of variables, which cannot be exhaustively examined through the Quantitative approach. The paper provides a comprehensive account of the construction of the strategic environment in Georgia by Russians looking both at historical trajectories, case studies of the locale conceptualized, and evaluation of relevant policy regimes.

This paper relies on the comparative version of a case study and focuses on four territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Abjara, and Samtskhe-Javakheti. These cases have been selected and carefully picked to explain the different manifestations of the Russian leverage. Cases of secession conflicts that involve direct military intervention by Russia and are defined by deep seated instability are seen in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Adjara is the opposite of that, as central reintegration with its historical external pressure was reached. Samtskhe -Javakheti identifies weaknesses to which the Armenian minority people and socio-economic marginalization are vulnerable and resulting in the exploitation of latent structural ineptitudes without engaging in open-ended military conflict. Collectively, these cases can be used as a comparison prism to evaluate the discrimination of Russian hybrid policy application to both visible and invisible conflict zones. The sources of data involve peer-reviewed academic literature, historical documents, databases of conflicts, and reports on the international policies, with additions of the evaluation of international organizations and NGOs. Cross subjectivity among these resources promotes the credibility of the results especially considering that the information about the researched areas is controversial and is easily politicised.

Limitations are learnt of in the study as well. Primary data of region occupied or in conflict is heavily limited and both official reports by Russia and Georgia are highly politicized. To avoid possible source biasing the research is critically assessing many external sources, the primary focus is on cross-checking and attaching importance to evidence of peer-reviewed and reputable publications. Lastly, the research design is based on ethical considerations. The sensitive nature of the issues discussed in the research like armed conflict, uprootedness, and ethnic sense makes the study not follow partisan accounts and attempts to blame the victimised peoples. It is also more accurate, inclusive, and supportive of other viewpoints, in addition to using only publically available and ethically verified information, as opposed to field interviews, to reduce risks to this vulnerable group of people.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Georgia's Internal Divisions and Secessionist Conflicts**

The internal vulnerabilities of Georgia reveal the long-lasting structural and strategic weaknesses of the state that fractures its consolidation. The example of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Samtskhe–Javakheti and Adjara show that the lack of governance, socio-economic inequalities and foreign influence interacted effectively to undermine the authority of Tbilisi. Comparative analysis of these areas not only makes apparent specific

patterns but also highlights some gaps in policy that have been ongoing and still influence the long-term security progress of Georgia (Cornell, 2001; Toal, 2017).

Weakness in government is one of the sources of instabilities. Small Nations and Great Powers, authored by Cornell (2001), demonstrates that both the administrations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are provided on the de facto level by Moscow, and they are under the institutional dependence and under the control of Georgian administration. De Waal (2018) also explains the effect of this conflict mediation in promoting the external domination whereby the focus is no longer on local well-being, but rather on geopolitical approaches. This trend is continued in Javakheti, where Toal (2017) records the poorly collaborative efforts of the native minority in the political set up of Georgian NARs, and Lohm (2007) outlines how neglect of administration contributes to lack of confidence. There is evidenced weak governance even in Adjara which may be generally regarded to be stable. O'Brochta (2017) describes how accountability is lowered because of the dependence on informal elite networks and how it allows bargaining with the outsiders. Combined, these examples show that the lack of governance is always exposed to corruption of the government (Kazemzadeh, 2019).

These weaknesses are supported by socio-economic disparities. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia strongly depend on the Russian subsidies, something that Cornell (2001) and De Waal (2018) find purposeful since they want Moscow to have a leverage factor. Chronic unemployment, poor infrastructure and dependency on remittance are among of the sources of grievance and alienation in Javakheti as explained by Lohm (2007) and Øverland (2009). Adjara offers a case both ways: Jones (2013) writes about urbanization of Batumi on the background of tourism and investments made there, but O'Brochta (2017) writes that poverty has left rural areas vulnerable to other interpretations. These results are consistent with those of Toal (2017) and De Waal (2018) who point out that deprivation increases the vulnerability to hybrid strategies, such as disinformation campaigns and patronage networks.

These vulnerabilities are variously subjected to the influences of the external. Russia actively participates in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: military occupation, passportization and media activities formalize the dependency and restrict the Euro-Atlantic ambitions of Georgia (Nilsson, 2018; Marandici, 2022). Javakheti is a reflection of the dynamics that are almost less obvious. As it has been mentioned by Øverland (2009), the indirect leverage was maintained within cross-border networks even after the withdrawal of the Russian base, and as Lohm (2007)'s text focuses on the role that diaspora relationships play in maintaining alternative identities. Another dimension is exemplified in Adjara, as both O'Brochta (2017) and Toal (2017) demonstrate the role of elite covert channels of control that media and successfully used such kind of influence. All of them put together show how susceptibilities exist down a spectrum of frozen conflicts to latent instability that Moscow uses in a systemic way (Cornell, 2001; De Waal, 2018).

These divisions have strategic implication. Marandici (2022) asserts that frozen conflicts of the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia impede the sovereignty of Georgia and block its adhesion to the Euro-Atlantic institutions. And Wheatley (2009) cautions about unaddressed minorities complaints in Javakheti blowing up during external pressure but Jones (2013) and O'Brochta (2017) emphasize how the adverse system of administration and economic inequality in the area creates a platform where back door, indirect influence can take root. Combining these views, Kazemzadeh (2019) finds the reinstatement of weak state authority and constant external pressure as reproducing the effect of strategic insecurity in the state of Georgia.

Policy responses have been narrowly confined on security. De Waal (2018) also criticizes Tbilisi to rely on coercive policies to deal with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Cooley and Mitchell (2010) contend that the failure to integrate minorities as well as abandon

societal-economic growth capable of producing non-hegemonic democracies making Georgia powerless against hybrid threats. According to Toal (2017) and Marandici (2022), the external influence is most successful when the instability in the governance transitions with the and lack of deprivation and dissolved conflicts. To solve these issues, it is necessary to employ multidimensional measures to promote the strength of institutions, inclusion of minority groups, and gain resistance towards disinformation. Both Cornell (2001) and De Waal (2018) emphasize the idea that only with the assistance of holistic reforms, Georgia will be able to overcome the structural weaknesses and proceed towards the imagery of sustainable national unity.

### **Russian Leverage and Geopolitical Pressures**

The light of Russian influence on Georgia through a prolonged series of methods of creating initial military presence in threat zones merged with indirect forms of socio-political and economic means in the peripherallies permeate the post-Soviet levels of security and politics in Georgia. Scholars have described this as a multi-layered approach to coercion, where Moscow exploits governance weaknesses, ethnic fragmentation, and economic marginalization to generate persistent challenges to Georgian sovereignty and regional stability (Toal, 2017; De Waal, 2018).

Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia demonstrates a deliberate effort to embed authority through hard power. In his book *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, Toal (2017) argues that the 2008 Russo-Georgian War marked a decisive shift in Moscow's ability to entrench itself militarily in Abkhazia, with the establishment of the 7th Military Base housing approximately 5,000 soldiers and 3,000 security personnel under a 49-year agreement. Nilsson (2018), in *Russian Hybrid Warfare and Its Implications for Europe*, similarly documents how Russian security infrastructure in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia—coupled with control over strategic corridors and maritime approaches—ensures rapid projection capability in the Black Sea littoral. In South Ossetia, the Russian 4th Guards Military Base in Tskhinvali, fortified checkpoints, and sustained troop deployments serve not only defensive purposes but also extend coercive capacity into adjacent Georgian regions, including Samtskhe-Javakheti (Toal, 2017; Nilsson, 2018). By maintaining entrenched military infrastructure while sustaining frozen conflicts, Moscow effectively deters Georgian reintegration efforts and secures a systematic strategy of coercive deterrence.

Military dominance is further reinforced through administrative and legal mechanisms. Cooley and Mitchell (2010), in *Engagement Without Recognition: A New Strategy Toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's De Facto States*, show how "passportization" became a central tool of Russian influence. In Abkhazia, Russian citizenship was distributed from 2002 onward and accelerated after 2008, integrating tens of thousands of residents into Russian legal frameworks and undermining Tbilisi's sovereignty. De Waal (2018), in *Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories*, highlights how in South Ossetia, passports were selectively issued to ethnic Ossetians while displaced Georgians were excluded, reinforcing local dependence on Moscow and constraining Georgia's political options. Complementing this was the process of "borderization" after 2008, where fences, checkpoints, and de facto boundaries physically restricted movement, commerce, and governance across affected areas (Toal, 2017; Nilsson, 2018). Collectively, these legal and administrative mechanisms sustain frozen conflicts and extend Russian leverage beyond conventional military control.

Importantly, Russian influence is not confined to territories under direct occupation. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, long-term economic marginalization and limited political integration create structural vulnerabilities. Lohm (2007), in *Javakheti After the Withdrawal of Russian Bases*, and Øverland (2009), in *Javakheti in Transition*, document how high unemployment, infrastructural neglect, and dependence on remittances deepen

minority grievances. These conditions have been instrumentalized by Russian disinformation campaigns that exploit fears of NATO encroachment or regional interference to undermine trust in Tbilisi (Chikhladze & Shiukashvili, 2023). Cornell (2001), in *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, shows that local political actors such as Javakhek and Virk function as indirect channels of Russian leverage, aligning minority interests with Moscow's strategic objectives while avoiding overt confrontation.

Adjara, though often portrayed as stable, presents another dimension of indirect leverage. O'Brochta (2017), in *Autonomy and Authoritarianism in the Post-Soviet Periphery*, demonstrates how weak oversight and elite bargaining have allowed external actors to exercise influence through networks of patronage and narrative shaping. In *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence*, Jones (2013) also demonstrates that, in urban Batumi, there were urbanization and a corresponding increase in population, rural Adjara at geographical point remained impoverished, thus communities remained open to alternative stories. These processes demonstrate that social and economic inequalities, semi-autonomous politics can be exploited without actual occupations, and supports the idea that Russia can influence political outcomes based on soft power.

The blending of these mechanisms brings out the issue of twofold coercive power approach. In his study, *Hybrid Warfare in the Post-Soviet Space in Russia*, Marandici (2022) points out that the incumbent military position in not only Abkhazia but also South Ossetia turns the frozen conflicts into a weapon of strategic presence, whereas economic and informational networks in Javakheti and Adjara only keep the latent vulnerabilities. According to De Waal (2018), these hybrid measures represent a continuation of frozen conflict theory, demonstrating that passportization, disinformation, and legal-institutional entrenchment enhance the ability of Russia to shape the sphere of inner governance without going to war.

Such complementary strategies have very high strategic costs to Georgia. Cooley and Mitchell (2010) point out that the Russian leverage discourages both NATO and integration in EU by intensifying the instability whereas in *The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti Provinces of Georgia*, Wheatley (2009) gives warnings that any unresolved minority grievance than an eruption under external pressure is eminent in Javakheti. In a manner that points to the overlap of poor governance with the foreign exerting itself, Kazemzadeh (2019) in *Russia and Its Near Abroad: Strategic Leverage in the Post-Soviet Space* contends that it is this coming together of bad governance and the manipulations of the foreign which result in resounding resultant Georgia in its strategic insecurity.

In the western reaction, there have been difficulties in counterbalancing the dynamics. According to Cooley and Mitchell (2010) the Western involvement has mostly involved diplomacy and monitoring missions as opposed to direct strike of security thus Georgia suffers by insidious Russian troops and insurgency infiltrations. Marandici (2022) also demonstrates how despite a progressive impact of partnerships programs and institutional reforms on meeting normative goals, they cannot do much in terms of overcoming the engrained systems of control in Moscow. This imbalance puts Tbilisi in a stressful position of having few political means to restrict and with a persistent problem of territory and strategy.

The failure to settle the long-standing conflicts in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia also helps Russia to maintain leverage and makes introducing Georgia into the revised Euro-Atlantic construct possible only partially (De Waal, 2018; Marandici, 2022). At the same time, the unspoken weaknesses of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara help to identify the necessity to learn that frozen conflicts are not the only ways to be externally influenced. Both Lohm (2007) and O'Brochta (2017) highlight that any attempts at governance that is

semi-autonomous, minority feelings, and socio-economic marginality are all key locations of manipulation.

Collectedively, the case of Georgia shows the extent to which Moscow is requesting a place with coercive, legal, economic, and informational instruments and forming a multi-layered strategy of influence. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia the concept of hard power is accompanied with the notion of soft power in Javakheti and Adjara, which create an overall trend of strategic choices that represent a dilemma over time. This study seeks to add to the more finely-tuned appreciation of post-Soviet regional security as it explains how hybrid approaches can be used to accomplish more of the frozen conflict theory and how Euro-Atlantic integration triggers even greater leverage by Russia.

## **Discussion**

The relationship between frozen conflicts with the Russian trials in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on one hand and latent weaknesses of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara on the other hand defines the presentation of dilemmas in Strategic Planning in Georgia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The ice-cold conflicts are characteristic of outright secessionist issues where Russian political leverage is a direct limitation to access to the sovereignty of Tbilisi and its prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration is curtailed. Mostly in such areas military occupation, borderization, and central institutionalization with Moscow reinforced by passportization and dependence in terms of economy have placed formidable *de facto* governments, presentationally independent of the central administration. These processes demonstrate how frozen conflicts are acted as the tools of coercive power and create long-term impediments of consolidating states and determine the strategic choices of Georgia.

The hidden vulnerabilities in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara will similarly cost a lot, even though the localities are not as obvious. The regions are vulnerable to indirect effects due to the nature of socio-economic marginalization, political underintegration, and weakness in political governance. The disinformation exercises, economic amphibians and elite bargaining, which are available in Russia, take advantage of these infirmities and carry the latent instabilities of housing or conditioning political behavior without causing a full blown confrontation. The two are leverages with vulnerabilities and proven is the fact that the force exerted by Russia goes beyond the areas where it is apparent that it is waged and invades the areas where the governance systems appear to be intact.

The way frozen conflicts connect with the latent vulnerabilities preconditions a system of pattern of strategic constraint across Georgia. The seemingly non-stable state of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is a precursor of the limitations of the central government in the country, legitimization of the alternative means of political organization, and enhances peripheral doubts. Meanwhile, permitting the establishment of fragrance, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara hinder the process of reforms, unification of the state, and social cohesion and set the range of weakness in the country. This interconnection has highlighted the fact that dilemmas of strategic interests in Georgia do not exist anywhere in the zones of conflict alone but exist on the periphery though the Russian influence is realized, both directly and indirectly.

The frozen warlord in Georgia is an indicator of a mixture peculiar to both the hard and soft power. The local dependence on Moscow is not only formally bonded in the frozen conflict zones by military occupation, legal-administrative forces but also by economic dependence, limiting Tbilisi sovereignty and reintegration choices. In outer circles, power becomes less evident: influence is exercised using disinformation, bribes, and the system of favors, accessing the vulnerability of the structure can influence the thinking and political course of action. Following combination, these measures indicate a continuation of the frozen conflict theory, in which the administration of the aim at administrative,

informational, and even socio-economic resources in order to remain in the freeze stage through leniency of external leverage.

This picture is complicated by the Euro-Atlantic dynamics of integration. An approach to NATO and EU membership, albeit aimed at strengthening the security and state apparatus, tends to arouse new subsidiary activity on the part of Russia, in particular in the frozen conflict regions, as well as trigger a dwelling on dormant characteristics in the periphery. This paradox is evident in the fact that the means of demonstrating, that western oriented strategies tend to increase the leverage of the Russians in inducing retaliation which maximized the manifested as well as the latent vulnerability of structure. Georgia must have a balancing performance persistently thus: establishing their center strength, overcoming the periphery feebleness and operating within the pressurizing external influence, by the working of multi-layered influence facilities.

These dynamics synthesized elucidated the outlines of the strategic dilemma of Georgia. Frozen conflict prevents both sovereignty and AI barrier of Euro-Atlantic integration and latent vulnerability prevents internal unification and reforms of government. All the variables that can easily interrelate in a feedback loop and limit autonomy, as well as harden policy response, includes the external leverage, structural weaknesses, and historical grievances. In dealing with them, multi-dimensional approaches involving institutional empowerment, socio-economic growth, the integration of minority groups, and control of counteractions to hybrid influence would all be required. All the security-oriented aspects are not satisfactory, and the portions of the latent vulnerabilities will keep being used as entrance points by external agents.

The given analysis is valuable to the research as it expands the conceptualization of the frozen conflict theory to cover the latent conflict areas, indicating that the factors of influence and vulnerability must act in open conflict areas and marginal ones. Through drawing the correlation of the frozen and latent conflicts under one analytical prism, the discussion elucidates that the power of the Russians restrains the sovereignty, sabotages the internal consolidation and the motion of Georgia direction towards Euro-Atlantic integration. The results once more emphasise the necessity of coherent and multi-layered policies that respond to both direct and indirect threats to the stability of states and are also of critical concern to policymakers, academics as well as foreign investors who work in the South Caucasus.

## **Conclusion**

Preexisting ailments in Samtskhe-Javatskhe or in iPados in Adjara, the South Soviet-Aught conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are connected to form Georgia post-Soviet strategic dilemmas. The freezing and passportization of way of life by the Russian military forces as well as the institutionalization of these two factors in the frozen conflict zones have established the de facto government of the states depriving Georgian sovereignty and hindering the Euro-atlantic integration. At the same time, latent weaknesses of peripheral areas, who lack socio-economic marginalization, fragile rule, and grievances on the part of minorities, enable Russia to have an Influence by proxy by using disinformation, influence chains, and economic extraversion.

The sum of the overt and latent vulnerabilities develops a spectrum of strategic restraints throughout Georgia. Frozen conflicts are indicators of the boundaries of central power and ones that legitimize other forms of governance as well as latent vulnerabilities as barriers to reforms, loss of social cohesion and hemolines as prospects of hybrid influence. Russian leverage is therefore effective on various levels, fueled by coercion, administrative, and informational pressure on maintaining the long-term effects in the direction of political and security decisions in Tbilisi.

Furthermore, these processes are contradictory in the sense that, although NATO and EU ambitions contribute to enhancing the Augustinian power and martial safety of Georgia, on the contrary, they can provoke the retaliatory efforts, which can uphold the vulnerabilities of the frameworks evidently and invisibly. This bi-polarity outlines that the singleton view of western oriented approaches themselves cannot address the strategic vulnerable factors of Georgia without defeat by the use of multi-dimensional domestic transformation.

The paper adds to the literature by bringing the frozen conflict theory out to the latent conflict zones and explains that frozen conflict may be perpetuated through external leverage not only when the carotid of the area is occupied then by an open force but also through hybrid systems in the peripheral areas. By connecting the frozen and latent conflicts in one line of analytical approaches the study clarifying the reasons why historical grievance, structural inefficiencies and environmental influence come together to limit the autonomy of the Georgia, a difficult effort to come up with a consolidated State and Euro-Atlantic evolution. These are some of the insights about why it is important to implement integrated policy countermeasures responding to direct and indirect threats with combining institutional fortification, social-economic growth, minority incorporation, and counter-hybrid policies to become more resilient and strategic in agency.

### **Recommendation**

To respond capacitively to the complex post-Soviet strategic issues in Georgia, the multi-layered and integrated approach is necessary to address the governance weaknesses, socio-economic imbalance, minority dissatisfaction, and the external pressure. The frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, alongside latent vulnerabilities in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara, demonstrate that security-focused measures alone are insufficient. Sustainable solutions must combine institutional strengthening, inclusive development, and strategic resilience against hybrid threats. According to the analysis and literature, the following policy recommendations can be formulated in the SMART format:

- **Strengthen Governance and Institutional Capacity:** Enhance administrative control and responsibility in outside and conflict areas. Clear performance metrics and monitoring should be set up in order to ensure effective governance and minimize possibilities of external manipulation.
- **Encourage Socio-Economic Development:** Construct the infrastructure, labor, education and health especially in isolated locations. Measurable variables should be used to measure the outcomes to eradicate structural deprivation and reduce socio-economic resentment that may be stolen by the external gameplay.
- **Strengthen Minority Proliferation and Political Inclusion:** enhance minority representation in the local government, implement the participatory decision making processes and support minority rights. The results of such actions include further development of social cohesion and reduced presence of tensions under the carpet which could otherwise result in instability.
- **Counter Hybrid Influence:** Establish general strategies to respond to manipulation of exterior accounts about identification and detection of disinformation initiatives. Resistance to unconscious influence: publicity of media literacy and awareness events.
- **Strategically maneuver the involvement of the Euro-Atlantic partners:** coordinate the NATO and EU unions in order to continue the governance, security, reform without causing apprehensive spiraling to the Russian minded nations.
- **Coordinate across sectors:** Have a cross sector task force between the defense, interior, and regional development and foreign affairs portfolio to execute the reforms as one and to guarantee mutually supporting policy impacts.

With such a combination of efforts taken, Georgia will be able to strengthen its strategic resilience, decrease the strength of foreign forces, reinforce the focal power and advance towards the sustainable balance of Euro-Atlantic integration. Such recommendations include practical, quantifiable and circumstantial undertakings allowing acknowledgment of both overt and covert vulnerability to highlight an active contention of dealing with the long term strategic matters in the nation.

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