

WAR IN UKRAINE

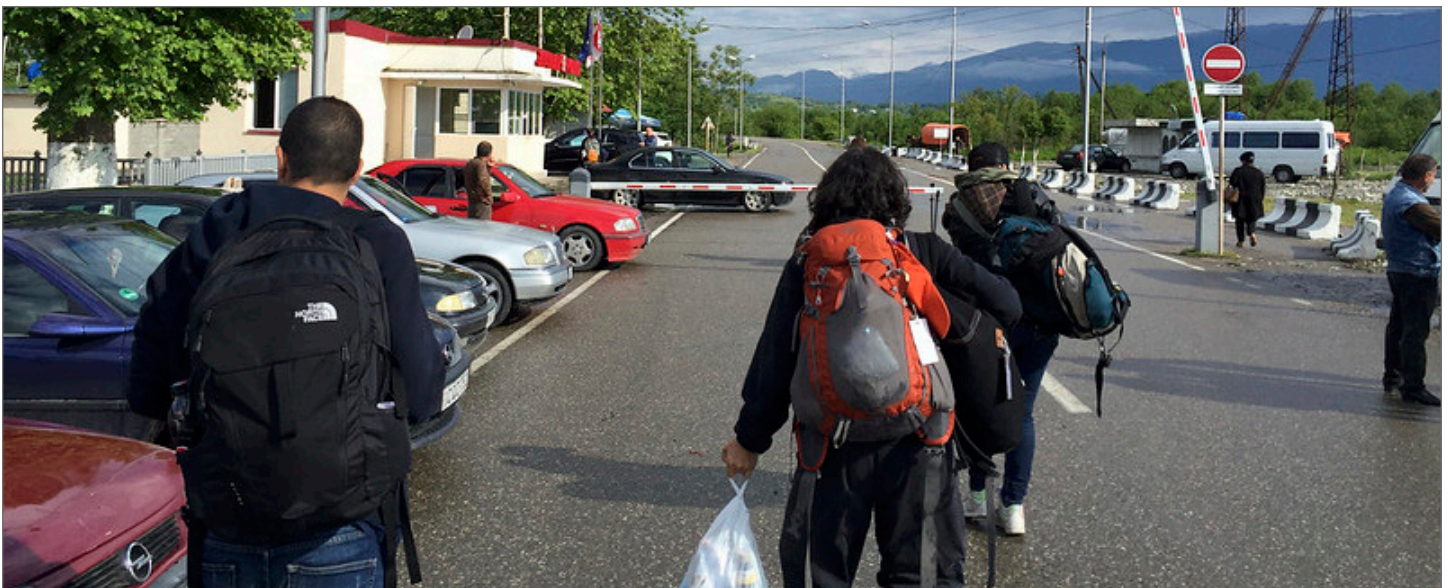
SOCIOCULTURAL RUNNING ESTIMATE

Peripheral Impacts: Abkhazia



In This Running Estimate...

- Putin’s popularity peaked at 87% in March, coinciding with the presidential elections, before dropping two points to 85% in April. Support for the SMO remained generally steady at 75% in April, while support for a negotiated end to the war climbed back to 51% after a slight dip to 48% in March.
- Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, some Ukrainian officials have intermittently, and unsuccessfully, tried to influence Georgia to retake its lost territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While this would in effect open a second front against Russia, most consider it to be a disastrous scenario for Tbilisi.
- The port at Ochamchira in Abkhazia is unlikely to be a significant base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet due to its geographic limitations for expansion. However, it could lead to the Russo-Ukraine war spreading if Ukraine was to attack Russian warships on “independent” or “Georgian” territory.
- Despite signals from Russia and pro-Russian elements within Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two “independent” states are not in lockstep with Russia. The vast majority of Abkhazians agree on independence from Georgia and would like to remain independent of Russia as well. However, there are some in Abkhazia who would like closer relations with Russia, including the possibility of joining the Russian Federation. The war in Ukraine further influences this desire.



Crossing the line of contact between Georgia and Abkhazia.

Source: Clay Gilliland, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/26781577@N07/33669173640>

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

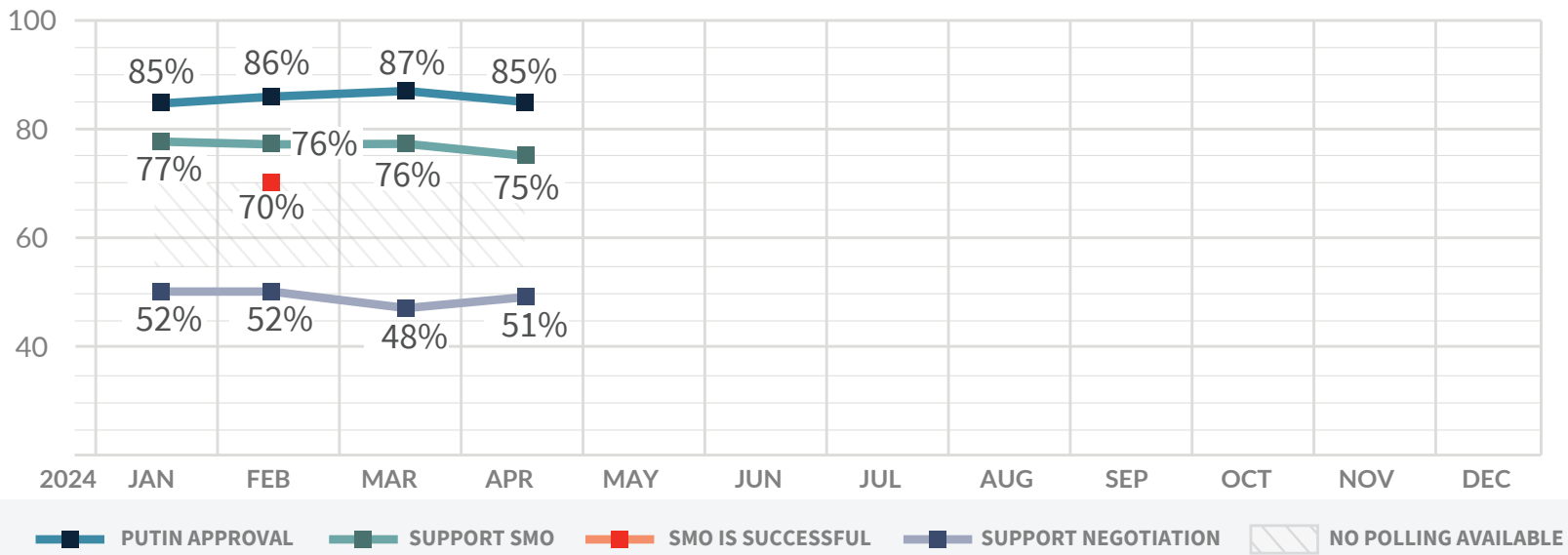


Figure 1. *Domestic Russian Perceptions*, GCKN.¹

NOTE: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

PUTIN APPROVAL

From January to March 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s popularity surged to its highest level since September 2019, increasing from 83% in December 2023 to 87% in March, before slightly receding to 85% in April.² Concurrently, regime approval rose from the high 60th percentile in 2023 to between 70% and 73% from January to April 2024. Putin’s peak in popularity coincided with the controversial Russian presidential elections held March 15-17, in which Putin secured 88% of the vote—the highest ever in a post-Soviet presidential race.³ The timing of the election, only a month after the death of Putin’s chief rival, Alexey Navalny, in an Arctic prison,⁴ led to minimal protests and cleared the path for Putin’s dominant victory amid weak opposition. ***With this result, Putin surpassed Joseph Stalin to become Russia’s longest-serving leader in over two centuries.***

SUPPORT FOR THE SMO

Support for the Special Military Operation (SMO) remained robust in early 2024, but trended down slightly from 77% in January to 76% in February and March and then to 75% in April.⁵ The consistently high approval rating was likely influenced by Putin’s re-election campaign, which highlighted military successes in Ukraine and asserted that the conflict was essential to defend Russian Orthodox civilization against Western aggression.⁶ This narrative, reinforced by patriotic Kremlin messaging, helped sustain solid public backing for the SMO despite its repercussions on Russian communities. Demographic analysis reveals distinct patterns: higher approval continues to be among older individuals, state TV viewers, and Putin supporters, while younger people, YouTube viewers, and Putin critics generally exhibit lower levels of support.⁷

SMO AS SUCCESSFUL

Public perception of the SMO as successful increased to 70% in February from 66% in November 2023, marking a continued rise from 55% in June 2023. Despite unclear war objectives and timelines, this uptrend in positive views may reflect a combination of heightened patriotism, effective state propaganda, and resignation to the war's perceived inevitability. Additionally, Putin's re-election campaign likely boosted this perception by emphasizing the SMO's achievements. However, views on the SMO's success are not uniform across Russian society. Russians who are most likely to see the SMO as successful primarily watch state TV (82%) and approve of Putin (76%). In contrast, those less optimistic about the success of the SMO access their news through alternative platforms like *Telegram* (23%) and *YouTube* (27%) or disapprove of Putin (50%). The perception variation correlates strongly with different information sources and attitudes toward national leadership. Notably, the proportion of non-respondents in surveys also ticked up by 1% from 14% in November to 15% in February, which may have impacted the overall increase in favorable perception.⁸

SUPPORT FOR NEGOTIATION

Support for a negotiated resolution to the war declined from 53% in December 2023 to 48% in March 2024,⁹ continuing a downward trend from a November high of 57%. This suggests a possible influence from Putin's re-election campaign. By April, support for negotiation increased slightly to 51%, similar to levels in January and February (both at 52%). The persistent majority for negotiation indicates widespread war fatigue. During his campaign, Putin emphasized Russian military achievements in the SMO to soldiers, their families, and the public. His primary challenger, Boris Nadezhdin, did not significantly impact public opinion, securing only about 4% of the votes.¹⁰ Independent polls indicate that ending the war remains a top priority for Russians, a sentiment strongly echoed during Putin's December 2023 press conference. Notably, support for negotiation is particularly strong among women, young adults, rural residents, Internet and *YouTube* news followers, Putin critics, and those pessimistic about Russia's future.¹¹

BACKGROUND: ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are ethnic enclaves within Georgia that unsuccessfully petitioned to become independent at the end of the Soviet era in the late 1980s. From 1990 to 1991, South Ossetia fought Georgia for its independence. One year later, war also broke out between Abkhazia and Georgia (1992-1993). Georgia lost both conflicts, and the territories became effectively independent. Since then, Abkhazia's de facto southern border on the Inguri River has been the scene of numerous attacks and acts of sabotage thought to be the work of Georgian military and para-military forces.^{a,12} Georgia has always maintained that it was defeated by Russia in both ethnic enclaves and not

merely by local forces.^b In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia under the premise of Georgian oppression of Russians and "Compatriots" in Georgia, but stopped short of the capital of Tbilisi and withdrew to the borders of Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states,^c even though Russian "peacekeeping" forces continue to be stationed in both regions. Georgia has vowed to retake the separatist territories but has made no real military effort to retake either since it tried to regain territory in South Ossetia, which led—in part—to the 2008 Russia-Georgia War.^{d,13}



Independent regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georgia,_Ossetia,_Russia_and_Abkhazia_\(en\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georgia,_Ossetia,_Russia_and_Abkhazia_(en).svg)

a There has been much speculation and rumor as to the nature of the Georgian paramilitary individuals and units raiding Abkhazia. While many believe the Georgian government is behind the low-grade Georgian insurgency on Abkhazia territory, there are many individuals and groups that appear to be operating on their own initiative—a characteristic of Georgian forces during the war for Abkhazia 1992-1993. SOURCE: Dodge Billingsley, "Georgia's Lingering Border Security Issues," *OE Watch*, August 2019. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/315067>

b When Georgian forces advanced into Abkhazian territory in August 1992, they were not organized and lacked efficient command and control. With the help of hundreds of volunteers from the North Caucasus, most notably Chechens led in part by a young and at the time unproven Shamil Basayev, Abkhazia pushed Georgian ad hoc forces out of Abkhazia and secured the territory in the fall of 1993, ending the war in Abkhazia's favor. The conflict took place at a time when Georgia was experiencing significant internal strife. When the war began Georgia was ruled by a State Council headed by former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Members of the council included Tengiz Kitovani, head of Georgia's National Guard, Tengiz Sigua, a former dentist and politician opposition leader, and Jaba Ioseliani, leader of a paramilitary organization known as the Mkhedroni, which was often characterized more as an organized crime entity. There is ample evidence that Russia meddled in the conflict but played both sides providing, weapons and even conducting missions for both Georgian and Abkhazian forces. Source: Dodge Billingsley, FMSO.

c Abkhazia and South Ossetia are currently recognized by only five countries: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Syria, and Nauru. SOURCE: David Brennan, "Satellite Images Reveal Work at Russia's New Black Sea Port," *Newsweek*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/satellite-images-russia-black-sea-port-georgia-ochamchire-1895509>.

d While Abkhazia and South Ossetia are different, they are interconnected in their territorial conflicts with Georgia. For more information on this interconnectedness and the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, see essays 8 and 9 in "The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War In Georgia," *Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Edited by Svante E. Cornell & S. Frederick Starr, M.E. Sharpe, 2009.

POTENTIAL WIDENING OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINE WAR

Ukraine officials have often expressed a desire for Georgia to open a second front against Russia by attempting to retake Abkhazia and South Ossetia; however, most believe this would be disastrous for Tbilisi. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian officials have intermittently called on Georgia to open a second front against Russia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in hopes of diverting Russian forces and attention from Ukraine. The proposal is concerning to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, may or may not help Ukraine, and could be a military disaster for Georgia, as it is based on a questionable presumption that Abkhazia could only defend itself with the help of Russian forces.¹⁴

- Surrounded by a formidable mountain range, the

Black Sea, and the Inguri River, Abkhazia is easy to defend geographically, and Georgia has no amphibious capability.¹⁵

- Abkhazia maintains its own military forces and holds regular military exercises, in part to serve as a deterrent and demonstrate to Georgia that Abkhazia can and will take care of itself, regardless of current nationalist and regional pressures to reignite a conflict between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.¹⁶
- Russian maintains up to 5,000 military and Federal Security Service “peacekeeping” forces in Abkhazia, although some of these forces have deployed to Ukraine.¹⁷



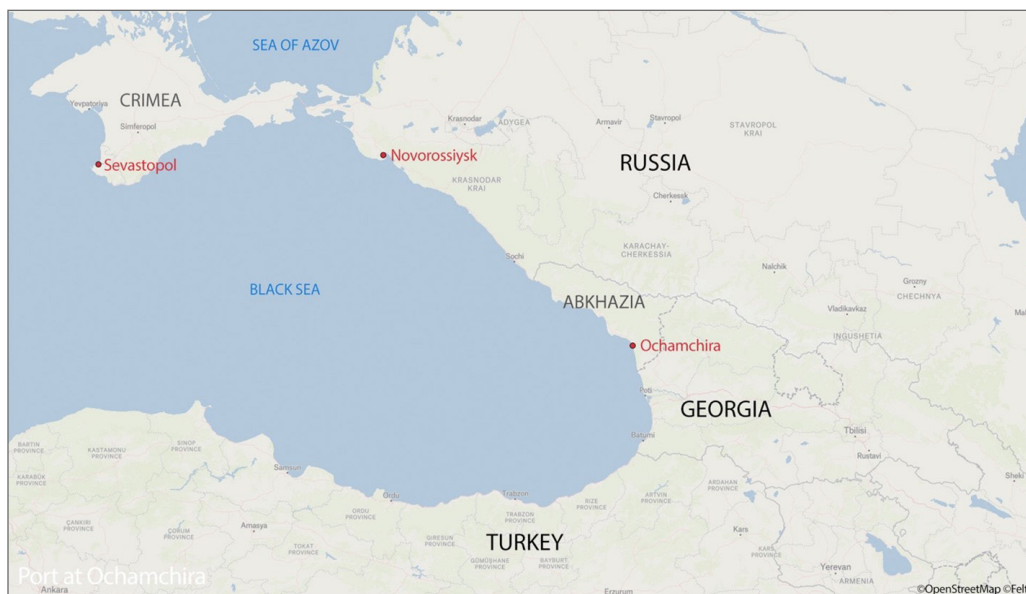
Abkhazian Flag.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abkhazia#/media/File:Flag_of_the_Republic_of_Abkhazia.svg

ABKHAZIAN VOLUNTEERS IN DONBASS

Abkhazian volunteers have fought for Russia in Ukraine, with fighters arriving as early as 2014 following Russia’s takeover of Crimea. Abkhazians are not obligated under Russian draft laws, yet Abkhazian volunteers formed into at least one battalion and have been active in the Avdiivka area since the 2022 invasion. While Abkhazian volunteers have not been present in Ukraine in large numbers, several hundred have likely rotated in and out of the front lines. By comparison, there have been far more Georgians fighting on the Ukrainian side of the conflict than Abkhazians fighting alongside Russian forces.¹⁸

RUSSIA'S BLACK SEA FLEET IN ABKHAZIAN PORT?



Russian naval bases at Sevastopol and Novorossiysk, and the proposed base at Oчамchira on Abkhazia's southern coast. SOURCE: Combat Films and Research, used by permission.

While the Kremlin is eyeing Abkhazia's Oчамchira port as a possible Russian Black Sea Fleet base, it is unlikely to support a large number of naval assets due to its geographic limitations for expansion. However, any increased Russian presence on the base could make it a target that would further complicate and possibly expand the Russo-Ukraine war. In October 2023, Abkhazian President Aslan Bzhania signed a bi-lateral agreement to host a Russian naval base near the coastal Abkhazian city of Oчамchira.¹⁹ Russian media suggests the agreement is intended to increase defense cooperation between Russia and Abkhazia.^{e,20} Positioning significant Russian naval assets in Abkhazia could impact the operational environment of the whole eastern Black Sea region and create a security dilemma. Ukraine has shown it is capable of effectively attacking Russian naval vessels in Novorossiysk, Russia, and Sevastopol, Crimea.²¹ However, an attack on the Russian navy in an Abkhazian port is an attack on an independent state as Russia and four other countries consider Abkhazia to be independent. Georgia, a U.S. partner and EU candidate, considers Abkhazia to be its sovereign territory, even though it has been autonomous and has hosted Russian military “peacekeepers” for years.

- According to Giva Kvarchia, an ex-deputy of the Abkhazian parliament, a Russian naval base in Abkhazia would be provocative and be “a protection and a potential threat.” The Oчамchira base would be an economic boon to Abkhazia, give a military advantage to Russia, and would serve as a deterrent to Ukraine and future military action by Georgia to take back Abkhazia. However, Oчамchira is within the reported 620-mile range of Ukraine’s Marichka submarine drone as well as various armed UAS aerial drones.²²
- The port at Oчамchira is unlikely to be a significant naval base for Russia due to physical capacity limitations. Russian coastal patrol boats have always used the port at Oчамchira, but the port is miniscule in comparison to other Black Sea ports, such as Novorossiysk. Abkhazian political figure and Hero of Abkhazia, Aslan Kobakhia, noted that there has been talk of an expanded base in Oчамchira for years, but “no matter how deep you go... It’s a small port. Only a few ships can be there at a time... There is no place to base large ships there.” Kobakhia conceded that

^e Although Russian media outlet *Izvestia* broke the story of the proposed Russian naval base at Oчамchira, there was very little follow up coverage of the topic in Russia. In a separate article from *Izvestia* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov deferred on the topic, noting that it was a military issue and inferring that questions about the basing agreement should be directed to the Russian Ministry of Defense. SOURCE: “Песков переадресовал вопрос о размещении ВМФ в Абхазии в Минобороны (Peskov forwarded the question about the deployment of the Navy in Abkhazia to the Ministry of Defense), *Izvestia*, 5 October 2023. <https://iz.ru/1584547/2023-10-05/peskov-pereadresoval-vopros-o-razmeshchenii-vmf-v-abkhazii-v-minoborony>

an expanded port at Ochamchira could be used as a vital refueling hub for Russia's navy. Recent satellite imagery shows new construction and dredging at the Ochamchira port, which should allow deeper draft ships to use the facility. However, because of noted capacity limitations, it may be useful at most for

refueling and easing congestion at the current port at Novorossiysk in southern Russia. Andrii Ryzhenko, a retired Ukrainian naval captain and current defense consultant, claims that Ochamchira could "accommodate only around 5% of vessels from Sevastopol, and some 20% of those from Novorossiysk."²³

MEDVEDEV EXACERBATES TENSIONS BY SUGGESTING ANNEXATION OF ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA, ABKHAZIANS DIVIDED



Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Head of the Security Council of Russia (2020-present).
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dmitry_Medvedev

Despite signals from Russia and pro-Russian elements within Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two "independent" states are not firmly aligned with Russia.

In a 22 August 2023 interview, Deputy Head of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev suggested that Abkhazia and South Ossetia may become part of the Russian Federation "if there are good reasons" and that the idea was "still popular" in the two states.²⁴ His comments received a mixed response across the region, undercutting any signal he may have intended about solidarity between the "independent" regions and Russia. Instead, the varied responses revealed that the two regions are not popularly in line with Russia despite continued Russian presence and repeated calls for referenda on joining the Russian Federation. Medvedev serves a role as "chief agitator" for Russian President Vladimir Putin with his public statements intended to ignite controversy and raise concerns for the West and internationally, with little or no clarification issued by Putin or the Kremlin.

• Medvedev's suggestion drew considerable criticism from many Abkhazian officials and intellectuals. In one rebuttal using Medvedev's own words, "if there are good reasons," about the possibility of inclusion, Irakli Bzhinava, an associate professor of law in Sukhumi,

wrote that "in the event of a 'good reason,' we will fight for our freedom." Abkhazian President Aslan Bzhania took a much softer tone by praising Russia as an ally in Abkhazia's quest for independence when he met with Medvedev in Moscow days after the op-ed was published.²⁵



Aslan Bzhania, President of the Republic of Abkhazia (April 2020-present).
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aslan_Bzhania_\(2020-06-24\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aslan_Bzhania_(2020-06-24).jpg)

- Georgian media were quick to disseminate Medvedev's comments to their audiences and capitalized on the language used. The Georgian government and opposition parties quickly condemned Medvedev's remarks, apparently attempting to out-do each other with their opposition to joining the Russian Federation.²⁶
- Abkhazians are split between those who want to closely align with Moscow and those who want to maintain independence from both Georgia and Russia. Bzhania and other officials signal they are pro-Russian; however, other officials and public figures chafe at Moscow's heavy handedness in the region,

especially its “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine, and disapprove of their own government’s acquiescence towards Russia. Several issues illustrating the internal domestic conflict in Abkhazia over Russia include the selling or assigning of land to Moscow, a

proposed “Foreign Agents” law banning or restricting western NGOs, and immunity of Russian National Guard personnel serving on Abkhazian territory.

SOUTH OSSETIAN SILENCE

South Ossetian officials have remained silent on Medvedev’s comments for multiple reasons. South Ossetia needs Russia’s military support more than Abkhazia does in the event Georgia tries to reclaim South Ossetia by force. South Ossetia’s geography and proximity to Georgian bases of power necessitate a strong deterrence, which only Russia can provide. Also, South Ossetia and the neighboring Russian Republic of North Ossetia share a geographically close historical homeland kinship, while Abkhazia has no ancestral lands shared across its Russian border.



EU FUTILE EFFORTS AT PEACE

According to Toivo Klaar, the EU’s Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia, the EU’s long-standing work to find a peaceful solution to the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict has “never translated into substantial dialogue between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.” The Russo-Ukraine War has hardened the situation as Abkhazia supports Russia and Georgia supports Ukraine and the West.^f Klaar blames Russia’s war with Ukraine for the Abkhazian “foreign agent” restrictions against Western non-profits and humanitarian organizations that have operated in Abkhazia for years and even decades. He stated, “Abkhazia’s relative openness should not become a casualty of Russia’s war against Ukraine... When I started in my position in 2017, I was encouraged by the pragmatism and openness of Abkhazia, by the vitality of its civil society, and by the willingness of our interlocutors to engage with representatives of the international community... Today we have, however, arrived at a situation where Abkhazia seems to be closing down.”^{g,27}

^f A recent article in *Sputnik-Abkhazia* supports Klaar’s perspective on reconciliation between Abkhazia and Georgia, and strongly supports the restricting of NGOs in Abkhazia as a result. The article notes that the collective West is trying to use NGOs as soft power tools to eventually reunite Abkhazia with Georgia. According to the article, “the first signs of driving a wedge into Abkhaz society’s perception of the Russian Federation are already visible – the West is trying to make the most of it in the current circumstances.” SOURCE: “Прикрываясь благими делами: зачем Запад на самом деле финансирует абхазские НПО (Hiding behind good deeds: why the West actually funds Abkhaz NGOs),” *Sputnik-Abkhazia*, 30 January 2024. https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/20240130/prikrivyayas-blagimi-delami-zachem-zapad-na-samom-dele-finansiruet-abkhazskie-npo-1050003353.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

^g NGO work in Abkhazia has included the “clearance and disposal of explosive ordnance,” (a legacy of the Georgian Abkhazian war 1992-1993), support to small businesses, immunizations against disease, and “promotion of the Abkhaz language and multilingual education,” to name a few. SOURCE: “Toivo Klaar, «Абхазия не должна стать жертвой войны России против Украины» - Тойво Клаар (Toivo Klaar, ‘Abkhazia’s openness should not become a casualty of Russia’s war against Ukraine’),” *Jam News*, 26 January 2024. <https://jam-news.net/ru/отношения-абхазии-с-ес-тойво-клаар/>

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ENDNOTES

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