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### **Serbia, Georgia, and their Breakaway Regions: Examining the Socio-political Mirror Imagery<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract.** The author examines various aspects of historical and socio-political developments in Georgia and Serbia with specific emphasis on their breakaway regions (Abkhazia and Kosovo, respectively). It is argued that Tbilisi and Belgrade have been facing some similar issues and dilemmas, which are correlated with their historical experiences, coupled with significant exposure to damaging external influences and shifting trends in international politics and law. Major parallels (and to a lesser degree, dissimilarities) are analyzed through historical and comparative methods, with additional contributions from political science theories and practice, while also bearing in mind that analogies cannot be made in absolute, but rather, relative terms. The author deploys the ambiguous “mirror image” concept to point out the interpenetration between these similarities and dissimilarities, that have ultimately resulted in certain comparable outcomes, not only regarding the unfavorable situation in the seceded regions but also, in the context of the two nations’ recent strategic paths.

**Key words:** Kosovo, Abkhazia, secession, Orthodoxy, history, international relations, strategy.

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### მილოშ პეტროვიჩი<sup>3</sup>

საერთაშორისო პოლიტიკისა და ეკონომიკის ინსტიტუტი,  
ბელგრადი, სერბეთი

#### სერბეთი, საქართველო და მათი სეპარატისტული რეგიონები: სოციალურ-პოლიტიკური ანარეკლის შესწავლა<sup>4</sup>

**აბსტრაქტი.** ნაშრომში განიხილულია საქართველოსა და სერბეთის ისტორიული და სოციალურ-პოლიტიკური მოვლენების სხვადასხვა ასპექტები, განსაკუთრებული აქცენტი გაკეთებულია მათ სეპარატისტულ რეგიონებზე (აფხაზეთი და კოსოვო). არგუმენტირებულია, რომ თბილისი და ბელგრადი დგანან მსგავსი საკითხებისა და დილემების წინაშე, რომლებიც დაკავშირებულია მათ ისტორიულ გამოცდილებასთან, გარე გავლენის მნიშვნელოვანი ზემოქმედებით და საერთაშორისო პოლიტიკასა და სამართალში ცვალებად ტენდენციებთან. ისტორიული და შედარებითი მეთოდებით, პოლიტოლოგიის თეორიებისა და პრაქტიკის გათვალისწინებით გაანალიზებულია ძირითადი პარალელები (და ნაკლებად განსხვავებები). შედარებითი თვალსაზრისით, აბსოლუტური ანალოგიების გაკეთება შეუძლებელია. ავტორი იყენებს „სარკისებური გამოსახულების“ კონცეფციას აფხაზეთისა და კოსოვოს პრევენდენტებს შორის მსგავსებისა და განსხვავებების შესასწავლად, რომლის შედეგები საბოლოოდ აისახა არა მხოლოდ სეპარატისტული რეგიონების არასახარბიელო მდგომარეობაში, არამედ ორი ქვეყნის სტრატეგიული გზების კონტექსტში.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** კოსოვო, აფხაზეთი, სეცესია, მართლმადიდებლობა, ისტორია, საშინაო ურთიერთობები, სტრატეგია.

**Introduction.** Broadly speaking, Serbia and Georgia are two relatively small countries, located in the two peripheral mountainous European corners, whose histories and cultures span many centuries. The two nations share many common features,

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<sup>3</sup> მილოშ პეტროვიჩი, ბელგრადის (სერბია) საერთაშორისო პოლიტიკისა და ეკონომიკის ინსტიტუტის მეცნიერ-თანამშრომელი.

<sup>4</sup> წინამდებარე კვლევა წარმოდგენილი იყო სოხუმის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტისა და კორნელი კეკელიძის სახელობის საქართველოს ხელნაწერთა ეროვნული ცენტრის მიერ ორგანიზებულ საერთაშორისო სამეცნიერო კონფერენციაზე „აფხაზეთის კულტურული ფასეულობანი: ენა, ლიტერატურა, ისტორია, სოციალური მეცნიერებები, კულტურის ძეგლები“ (2022 წლის 8-9 დეკემბერი). იგი წარმოადგენს კვლევის „აფხაზეთი: ქართული კოსოვო? პარალელები, განსხვავებები, პერსპექტივები“, ნაწილს, რომელიც წარდგენილი იქნა თბილისში, ხელნაწერთა ეროვნული ცენტრის მიერ ორგანიზებულ საერთაშორისო საგაზაფხულო სკოლის კონფერენციაზე (2022 წლის 24-31 მაისი).

ranging from Orthodox Christian faith to historical contacts with some great powers like the Byzantine, Russian, and the Ottoman Empires, over the more contemporary unfortunate experience with territorial integrity infringements<sup>5</sup> to, most recently, the ongoing intensifying ties with the European Union (Petrović, 2022a).<sup>6</sup> Apart from secular contacts throughout history, perhaps one of the most illustrative mutual experiences are those of the monastic communities of the medieval Georgian Iviron or “Iberian” and Serbian Chilandariou (Hilandar) religious grounds in Mount Athos that have been coexisting and cooperating for centuries, safeguarding the memory of the medieval Golden Age of their respective nations, outside their own homeland (Chkhikvadze, 2020: 38; Athanasiadis, 2017: 14-15)<sup>7</sup>.

However, while many analogies can be drawn, on the other hand, Serbia and Georgia in certain aspects appear to be like a *mirror image* of each other. According to the Collins dictionary (2023)<sup>8</sup> „if something is a mirror image of something else, it is like a reflection of it, either because it is exactly the same or because it is the same but reversed“. Considering the ambiguity of that phrase, Serbian and Georgian socio-political experiences can be analyzed and interpreted from both perspectives, both in terms of their affinities and parallels (as primary focus), and their numerous apparent distinctions (lesser emphasis), for which reason the author suggested the abovementioned equivocal research title. The author considers that the Georgian political experience with Abkhazia bears significant similarities to the Serbian situation, including that in Kosovo and Metohija (henceforth: Kosovo) from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The primary scope of this paper is intended to depict and put into the proper context the commonalities. However, some essential distinctions should not be overlooked: significant geographical distance, somewhat different geopolitical contexts, and some diverging political experiences. Dissimila-

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<sup>5</sup> Exemplified by the unilateral acts of secession by the authorities in Priština, Sokhumi, and Tskhinvali from the central governments in Belgrade and Tbilisi, respectively. In this paper, the short informal name forms “Abkhazia” and „Kosovo“ are used for greater comprehensibility purposes throughout the paper, while acknowledging the primacy of their constitutionally recognized names, under the respective provisions of international law.

<sup>6</sup> Petrović, M. (2022a). Miloš Petrović. Nepovoljna perspektiva Istočnog partnerstva u pojedinim zemljama „evropskog susedstva“. *Politikologija*, 1(1), 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> Iviron Monastery, established in the late 10th century, has historically ranked among the most important enlightenment centers of Georgian written culture, with specific and original stylistic contributions in areas of orthography and calligraphy. Consult: Chkhikvadze, N. (2020). *Nestan Chkhikvadze. Georgian Manuscript Book (5th-19th centuries)*. (Second revised edition). Tbilisi, Publisher: Korneli Kekelidze Georgian Centre of Manuscripts. Its relevance for the Georgian culture resembles the significance of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century monastery Hilandar for the Serbian culture. Consult: Athanasiadis, A. (2017). Athanasios Athanasiadis. Saint Sava Nemanjić as a Messenger and Founder of the Eastern Church Tradition in the Serbian Church. *Fragmenta Hellenoslavica* 4/2017, 9-25.

<sup>8</sup> Collins Dictionary. (2023). Mirror image. 2023 (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mirror-image>).

rities constitute a minor but important focus of this research, especially to provide deeper context when drawing correlations and parallels. This paper aims to contribute to the insufficiently studied evolution of the Serbo-Georgian socio-political contexts, whose analogies have so far attracted limited academic attention.

While explicating these aspects, the author provides a historical overview, using the comparative method, empirical examples from international political practice, and elements of international law and administration. The author stresses that major correlations and discrepancies should not be considered in absolute terms, due to the highly nuanced and differentiated nature of social science and its phenomena. Forasmuch as there is no such thing as „complete equivalence“ in social sciences, especially having in mind the importance of the broader international context that reflects differently on each case, the author implies that all findings in that regard may only be observed conditionally. This historical overview is not intended to cover the entire past nor its dominant parts, but solely to draw attention to some striking similarities that make some of these two nations' experiences socio-politically comparable and relevant. The author hypothesizes that Georgia and Serbia have been facing some similar challenges and dilemmas, which are associated with their recent and more distant historical past, coupled with high exposure to unfavorable external influences and circumstances and unfavorable trends (including those in the domain of international law that tend to put primary focus on „universality“ of human rights“ over the sanctity of borders). Georgian and Serbian perspectives are greatly affected by the political and geopolitical fault-lines, and the ongoing invasion of Ukraine adds to the strategic importance of this deeply complex and multifaceted issue.

As regards the more specific emphasis on Kosovo and Abkhazia,<sup>9</sup> the historically titular nations of those regions - Serbs and Georgians alike (who have chiefly influenced the socio-political, cultural, and other developments in those regions throughout many centuries), have gradually been „downgraded“ to demographically and politically marginal groups, despite the profound historical impact in shaping and directing the local culture, institutions, and heritage.<sup>10</sup> As a result of the reduced influence of the formerly dominant groups (Georgians and Serbs alike), the

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<sup>9</sup> In further text also: the breakaway/seceded regions.

<sup>10</sup> The official name of the southern Serbian autonomous province is Kosovo and Metohija. In Serbian language, *Kosovo* stands for „the field of blackbirds“, while *Metohija* is a Greek loanword signifying monasterial estates, which is highly indicative of the Orthodox Christian tradition in the area. During the socialist period, the word „Metohija“ was officially removed in 1969, as the autonomy of the local Albanian community legally evolved. Two decades later, the autonomy, which largely interfered with the competences of Serbia as a constituent Yugoslav republic, was stripped in the context of the demise of communism. As for the name, „Metohija“ was legally reinstated as part of the provincial name in 1990. At that time, the interethnic tensions between the two regional constituencies – Serbs and Albanians – were already palpable.

*de facto* control by the breakaway groups is being countered by the official backing from Serbia proper and Georgia proper, largely supported by some very dissimilar international actors. This backing implies use of a variety of arguments: legal, political, cultural and religious ones, including the contributions of Orthodox churches in that regard (Vučković & Petrović, 2022).<sup>11</sup>

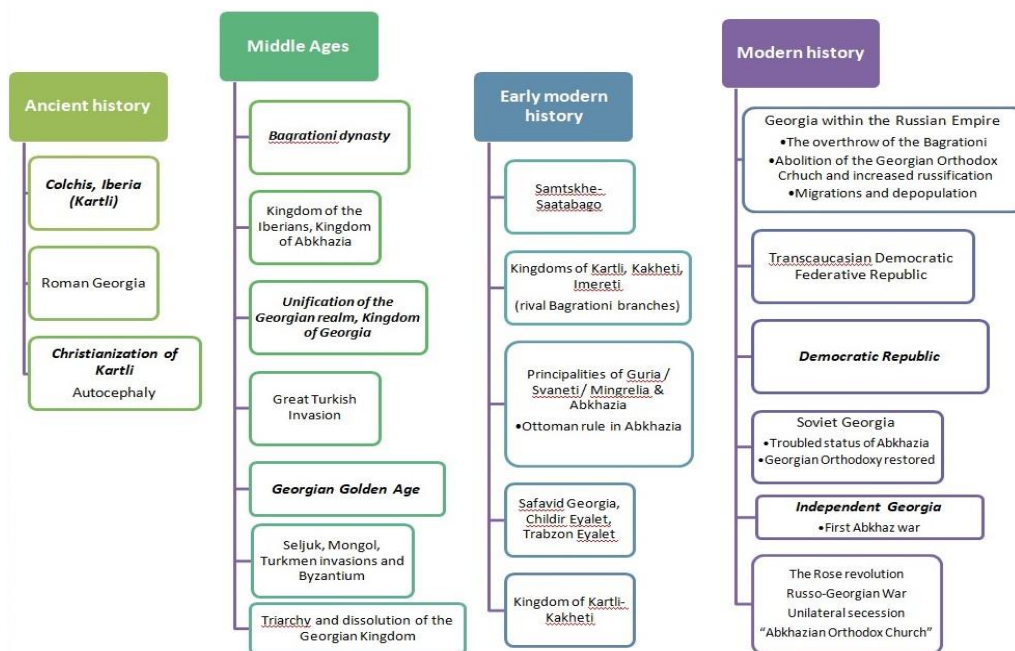
### **Mirror imaging throughout selected historical periods**

The depiction below serves a dual purpose: primarily, to depict the abundance of historical developments in Georgia (with an emphasis on the Abkhazian region), but also (indirectly) to serve as a reference point for considering certain juxtapositions in relation to Serbia (with the focus on Kosovo). The author is aware that each historical analogy should be made with great caution, in the proper context, and an objective manner, for instance, by focusing on some specific limited periods, events, or phenomena, rather than lengthy segments of history. In that regard, the subsequent aspects should be perceived in somewhat conditional terms, bearing in mind that there can be no such thing as absolute equivalence in the domain of social sciences. Considering the aforementioned, broadly and highly conditionally speaking, the parallels between Georgian and Serbian national experiences appear to be the most noticeable during some medieval intervals, and again, during this contemporary, modern period, illustrated by certain phenomena (like the international integrative processes). On the other note, very broadly speaking, the most apparent distinctions and discrepancies, depending on what is compared and to a which degree, can be spotted during the ancient and early modern periods.

***Depiction 1:*** Simplified account of some segments of Georgian socio-political history, including Abkhazia. Source: Author's own elaborations.

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<sup>11</sup> The role of Serbian Orthodoxy has continuously served as an important identity marker in Serbia and elsewhere in the region. Consult: Vučković, V. & Petrović, M. (2022). Vladimir Vučković, Miloš Petrović. Colliding Western Balkan Neighbors: Serbia and Montenegro in Post-Yugoslav Context –Identity and Interest Representation. Contemporary Southeastern Europe 9(2), 54-80.



### *Assessing certain discrepancies*

The territory of Abkhazia has been closely tied with the Georgian space in cultural and political terms since antiquity. The Abkhaz ethnos has at least for centuries been included in Georgian political, cultural, and religious states, processes and interactions (Papaskiri, 2020: 23-24).<sup>12</sup> Arguably, this aspect might also be observed in the case of some Albanian communities in different parts of the Balkans. Nonetheless, the traces of Georgian self-identification and ethnogenesis date back to the prehistoric era, the Colchis culture being the precursor to the gradual nation-building process. Subsequently, the Georgians joined ranks among the first Christian nations in international terms (Metreveli & Dallen, 2010: 238).<sup>13</sup> Unlike the Kartvelian groups that had been associated with the Caucasus throughout recorded history, the Serbs populated the northwestern corner of the then-Eastern Roman Empire in various migratory waves significantly later, since the beginning of the medieval period (6th and 7th centuries) (Živković, 2010: 117-119).<sup>14</sup> Territories that have formed part of Georgia and Serbia had been associated with the Roman Empire

<sup>12</sup> Papaskiri, Z. (2020). Zurab Papaskiri. On the national, political, ethnical and cultural identity of contemporary Abkhazia. Tbilisi, Publisher: Sokhumi State University.

<sup>13</sup> Metreveli, M. & Dallen, T. (2010). Marina Metreveli & Dallen Timothy. Religious heritage and emerging tourism in the Republic of Georgia. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 5 (3), 237-244.

<sup>14</sup> Živković, T. (2010). Tibor Živković. Constantine Porphyrogenitus' Source on the Earliest History of the Croats and Serbs. *RADOVI* 42, 117-131.

in ancient times, while both peoples were highly exposed and partially shaped by the Byzantine influences during the middle ages, which constitutes a correlation between the two peoples.

As regards the other ethnic groups, whereas the late medieval presence of Albanians in the Balkan historical records seems to be attested outside Kosovo, their ancient origin claim is a subject of a historiographical controversy (Malcolm, 2020; Sotirović, 2018)<sup>15</sup> perhaps relatively comparable to the one concerning Abkhazians. As regards the presence of both these ethnic groups in the modern breakaway territories *per se*, the official Serbian and Georgian historiography tends to attribute them to the late medieval, early modern, or even contemporary, migrations, or political takeovers. Papaskiri (2020, 44-45)<sup>16</sup> states that „by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Abkhazs acquired the territory of contemporary Abkhazia”, which illustrates a period of political and social upheaval. On the other hand, Bataković (2017, 107) places the demographic shift in Kosovo in the broad timeframe between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which the Serbian community decreased from a demographic majority to a small minority.<sup>17</sup> The early modern and contemporary history of all these peoples appears to be marked by significant migrations (although over different periods, and under distinctive circumstances), albeit the Georgian political and ethnic presence, including that in Abkhazia, may contain fewer discontinuities (at least up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

Whereas the profession of Christian Orthodox faith represents a shared feature, the Christianization of Georgians had preceded that of the Serbs for centuries. The Georgians had accepted Christianity during the classical era, while the Serbs embraced it during the early middle ages, following their migration to the Balkans. The Kartvelians seem to have started embracing Christianity on a larger scale and more frequently since the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Saint Nino and her followers), making it an official, state religion (including the established church structure, towards the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century). Contrastingly, the first organized conversion of Serbs dates to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, while the state officially embraced it in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign

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<sup>15</sup> Some of these myths have been addressed by: Malcolm, N. (2020). Noel, Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of the Albanians*. Oxford, Publishing House: Oxford University Press; Sotirović, V. (2018). Vladislav, Sotirović. *The Fundamental Misconception of the Balkan Ethnology: The ‚Illyrian‘ Theory of the Albanian Ethnogenesis*. Hellenic Institute Foundation Policy Journal 9, 1–12.

<sup>16</sup> Papaskiri, Z. (2020). Zurab Papaskiri. *On the national, political, ethnical and cultural identity of contemporary Abkhazia*. Tbilisi, Publisher: Sokhumi State University, 44-45.

<sup>17</sup> Bataković, D. (2017). Dušan, Bataković. *The case of Kosovo: Separation vs. Integration Legacy, Identity, Nationalism*. *STUDIA ŚRODKOWOEUROPEJSKIE I BAŁKAN-ISTYCZNE XXVI*, 105-123.

of Prince Mutimir Vlastimirović (Komatina, 2015: 711-713).<sup>18</sup> The ecclesiastical separation of Abkhazia from Constantinople bears some resemblance to the rise of Serbian Peć Archbishopric in Kosovo since the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Throughout most of the middle ages, Georgian and Serbian kingdoms and their respective churches have dominated the regions in question not only politically, but also ethnically, culturally, and linguistically, and there is abundant material and other evidence supporting these claims. Many artifacts like political documents, charters, gospels, icons, and other material evidences are scattered across Georgian and Serbian museums, collections and sacral objects, which are safeguarded as to maintain collective memory and proper interpretation. However, while the Nemanjić dynasty gradually became extinct as the Serbian Empire fragmented, being gradually absorbed by neighboring powers like the Ottomans, the Bagratians continued to rule through different branches of various Georgian kingdoms for centuries to come.

An additional great general dissimilarity can be spotted during the early modern era. The rival Georgian dynasties have ruled in different parts of modern Georgia while frequently being in a nominal vassal status towards their Persian and Ottoman neighbors. While Georgian regions managed to preserve significant amounts of self-rule and their administrative and political identity following the middle ages, in the Balkans, the Serb-populated areas have been divided into many administrative units governed directly by the Ottomans up until the early modern times.<sup>19</sup> The local dynasties and ethnic correlations to those territories were largely erased as the Ottoman conquest progressed as a consequence of wars, uprisings, assimilation, and outward migrations, with the Church remaining the most influential identity guardian (Pavlovich, 2004: 24-29).<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the Ottoman rule was frequently challenged not only through popular uprisings, but also externally, by other powers, such as the Habsburgs and the Republic of Venice, depending on the region. To deepen its grip over territories like Kosovo, Ottomans encouraged the Islamisation process, which, in the context of that region, gradually led towards the Albanisation of many local Serbs (Pavlovich, 2004: 36).<sup>21</sup> The assimilation, coupled with migrations northwards and westwards, progressively worsened the situation of the Serbian Christian community in that region.

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<sup>18</sup> Komatina, P. (2015). Predrag Komatina. The church in Serbia at the time of Cyrilo – Methodian mission in Moravia, Cyril and Methodius: Byzantium and the World of the Slavs (pp. 711-718). Thessaloniki, publishing house „Thessprint S.A.”.

<sup>19</sup> The sole exception was Montenegro, whose Christian Orthodox tribes successfully resisted the *de facto* subjugation to the Ottoman Empire for centuries, evolving their theocratical state largely independently from any direct foreign rule.

<sup>20</sup> Pavlovich, S. (2004). Stevan Pavlovich. Srbija: istorija iza imena. (English original print: Serbia: The History Behind the Name). Belgrade, Publishing House: Clio.

<sup>21</sup> Pavlovich, S. (2004). Stevan Pavlovich. Srbija: istorija iza imena. (English original print: Serbia: The History Behind the Name). Belgrade, Publishing House: Clio.



Since the beginning of the modern period, the regions populated by Kartvelians and Serbs had been experiencing diverging tendencies. The (re)establishment of the Serbian and the Georgian nation-state had been unfolding under different circumstances (the Russo-Ottoman wars in the Balkans, and the Russian Civil War and World War One in the case of the Caucasus). During the process known as the Serbian revolution (Ranke, 2004; Maretić, 1987),<sup>22</sup> the two rival dynasties mobilized popular support towards restoring independence and ecclesiastical autonomy of Serbia since the early 1800s. While the Georgian kingdoms have been progressively absorbed by the Russian Empire, stripped from their traditional autonomies, the Serbian revolution raged between 1804-1815, ultimately leading to the restoration of Serbian Principality, its *de facto* (1867) and *de iure* (1878) independence. In Georgia, the gradual process of absorption into the Russian Empire progressed, with the decreasing privileges for the Bagrationis, the abolition of the Georgian Patriarchate in 1811, and other forms of subjugation of various Georgian regions to St. Petersburg (Kokrashvili, 2020).<sup>23</sup> The derogation of statehood prerogatives of Georgian regions in favor of the Russian Empire was accompanied by the narrowing of the official use of the notion of “Georgia”, which began to designate solely the former Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, while other territories beyond Tbilisi, like Abkhazia, Imereti, Guria, and Svaneti were treated and perceived separately (Kokrashvili, 2020: 7).<sup>24</sup> Whereas Serbia had historically not been exposed to governance by St. Petersburg/Moscow (direct or indirect),<sup>25</sup> the Georgian lands have been highly associated with the Russian

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<sup>22</sup> Ranke, L. (2004). Leopold Ranke. (Reprinted historical edition). Istorija srpske revolucije. Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga; Maretić, G. (1987). Gedeon Maretić. Istorija srpske revolucije (1804-1813). Beograd: Filip Višnjić.

<sup>23</sup> Kokrashvili, K. (2020). Khatuna Kokrashvili. Beginning of the Russian Occupation of Georgia: Abolition of Kartli-Kakheti and Imereti Kingdoms. In G. Cheishvili (Ed.), *Russian expansion in the Caucasus and Georgia*. (Series of articles). Tbilisi: Rondeli Foundation.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 7. The Kingdom of Imereti soon followed suit. Likewise, Svaneti, Samegrelo, and Abkhazia were absorbed and abolished into Russia as administrative units following the Crimean war.

<sup>25</sup> Although the Soviet Union had assisted the Yugoslav partisans in liberating the occupied territories and Belgrade had been exposed to the influence of USSR for several years, since 1948, Yugoslavia abandoned the Cominform and started developing its own socialist, „non-aligned“ course, independently from Moscow. By the early 1960s, Yugoslavia became the first Eastern European country that initiated cooperation agreement talks with the precursor of the contemporary European Commission. However, the escalation of the war in the 1990s resulted in the termination of cooperation between Belgrade and Brussels until the democratic changes in 2000. Consult: Đukanović, D. 2015. Dragan Đukanović. SFR Jugoslavija i Evropska ekonomska zajednica: od uspešne saradnje i potencijalnog članstva do suspenzije svih sporazuma. *YU Historija*. Retrieved February 1, 2023, from [http://www.yuhistorija.com/serbian/medj\\_politika\\_txt00c1.html](http://www.yuhistorija.com/serbian/medj_politika_txt00c1.html).

geopolitical interest for at least two previous centuries, which forms an additional conspicuous difference.

Another example of discrepancy is the period of the outward migrations of Abkhazians in the late 19th century, which somewhat matches with the decades of increased migrations of the Kosovo Serbs (under Ottoman rule) into the lands of the young Serbian monarchy since the early 1800s onwards. However, these migrations have been occurring across all groups and in various directions depending on the observed period. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Albanians have constituted a simple majority in the Ottoman vilayet of Kosovo (Radovanović, 1991: 78),<sup>26</sup> whereas in Abkhazia the situation seems to have been less clear, with both sides claiming a relative plurality depending on the period and source. However, this contention would continue for another century, and the demographic shift would represent a chief aspect in securing a political power shift in Abkhazia, especially following the war in the 1990s and the forced migrations of Georgians from the region. This aspect can be compared to the migrations of the Kosovo Serbs, including the largest recent exodus in 1999 (Yannis, 2009: 162).<sup>27</sup> As for the Albanians, their migrations intensified since the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but were not linear, passing through different periods and stages (Bataković, 2017: 106-107).<sup>28</sup> However, the dynamics of the conflicts in Yugoslavia, the cross-border distribution of Serbs and other Western Balkan peoples in that area, are not so comparable to the Caucasus; in addition, Serbo-Montenegrin union which protracted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century represents an additional point of divergence.<sup>29</sup>

### *Re-visiting the similarities*

Some easily associated commonalities include the centuries of the reign of the Bagrationis, with their Serbian counterparts - the Nemanjić dynasty – ruling in the central Balkans. Both dynasties are venerated by their respective churches.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Radovanović, M. (1991). Milovan Radovanović. Antropogeografske i demografske osnove razvoja naseljenosti u Srbiji. In M. Zeremski (Ed.), *Zbornik radova Geografskog instituta "Jovan Cvijić"* 43 (pp. 57-91). Belgrade: SANU.

<sup>27</sup> Yannis, A. (2009). Alexandros Yannis. The politics and geopolitics of the status of Kosovo: the circle is never round. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9(1–2), 161–170.

<sup>28</sup> Bataković, D. (2017). Dušan, Bataković. The case of Kosovo: Separation vs. Integration Legacy, Identity, Nationalism. *STUDIA ŚRODKOWOEUROPEJSKIE I BAŁKANISTYCZNE XXVI*, 105-123.

<sup>29</sup> Following the democratic changes in 2000, the last remnant of the Yugoslav state - Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (comprised of Serbia and Montenegro) gradually dissolved, through the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (since 2003), and independence of each republic (2006).

<sup>30</sup> The ties between the Georgian state and church authorities have been established long before their Serbian counterparts, due to the ancient character of that nation's political and religious systems. On the other hand, before the state-church relations in Serbian lands acquired "harmonious" character, they had been exposed to some divergent trends like the

Georgian Golden age (11-13th century) significantly overlapped with the rise of the Serbian kingdoms and their evolution into the Serbian Empire, before disintegrating into numerous regions in the wake of the Ottoman conquest (which constitutes an additional common point). The late medieval and early modern periods record intensified migrations of both Abazs (also mentioned as Abkhaz, Apsua) and Albanians into respective territories following the Eastern invasions (Mongol, in the case of Georgia, and Ottoman, in the case of Serbia).

The lengthy and burdensome Ottoman rule left a deep mark on Abkhazian society, which is somewhat comparable to the situation in Kosovo. Both these groups that are associated with Kosovo and Abkhazia, respectively, are historically Muslim (although the Abkhaz community in that region nowadays appears to be less religiously homogeneous, with significant Orthodox, Muslim, and folk faith sub-groups (Toft, 2003).<sup>31</sup> Also, the outgoing migrations of Orthodox peoples worsened the demographic situation. For instance, the two Serb migrations from Kosovo in 1689 and 1739 into the areas ruled by the Habsburgs marked the beginning of a major demographic shift in the region's history and the progressive rise of the Albanian ethnos, due to their incoming migrations into depopulated areas over the next centuries. Similar tendencies occurred in Georgian lands in other periods.

Another parallel refers to the late early modern period when Kartvelian kingdoms were tributaries to different regional powers. This bears some comparison with the Serbs who at one point lived within three realms, the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg monarchy, and the Republic of Venice (Kosovo being the region ruled the longest by the Ottomans).<sup>32</sup> However, the low or rather non-existent level of Serbian self-rule during those periods cannot be matched by the internal semi-independence, depending on which Georgian region and period we scrutinize.

Georgia managed to break away and obtain recognition of independence following the Russian civil war, permitting Abkhazia a certain degree of self-rule (Petrović, 2021: 42-43).<sup>33</sup> However, before long, the Soviet system recognized Abkhazia as a

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Catholicism vs. Orthodoxy dilemma, the meddling of neighbors like Byzantium and Hungary, etc. However, since the Nemanjić period, and especially since the autocephaly of the Serbian Church in 1217, Orthodoxy has been lastingly established. That aspect forms an important link with the Georgian medieval and contemporary culture.

<sup>31</sup> Toft, M. (2003). Monica D. Toft. *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory*, pp. 87-106. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Kosovo was conquered by the Ottomans in the mid-15th century, remaining under their rule until 1912. Most parts of central Serbia were liberated by the beginning of the 19th century, while northern Serbia (Vojvodina) passed to Habsburg rule since the end of the 17th century, until 1918, when it joined Serbia.

<sup>33</sup> However, some parts of modern Georgia, like the area adjacent to Batumi, was at the time claimed by the Ottoman/Turkish side, in the context of the Russian withdrawal from World War One. Consult: Petrović, M. (2021). Miloš Petrović. *Vek od završetka Velikog rata: ana-*

republic largely independent from Tbilisi, which was revoked only in 1931, causing frustration among Abkhazians who had to accept increased dependence on the Georgian central government. The introduction of autonomy in an ethnically heterogeneous region also occurred in socialist Serbia (not only in Kosovo but also in Vojvodina, both of which have gradually been given *de-facto* federal competencies, which interfered with Belgrade's oversight and control over those areas for decades). However, the *differentia specifica* here is that in the case of Serbia that process occurred during the Cold war, rather than the *interbellum* period.

Nonetheless, Kosovo and Abkhazia were both granted a significant amount of self-rule during the socialist period. Throughout the communist era, we observe some resemblance when it comes to ethno-federalist tendencies as ways to appease (colliding) nationalisms, enable multiculturalism to function, and decentralize administration (Roeder, 1991).<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, while such form of pluralism perhaps benefited the socialist federations like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, they caused problems for Serbia and Georgia as their "mother republics", in terms of enabling their protracted internal political, social, economic, and administrative fragmentation. Efforts to restore constitutional order once the Iron Curtain fell turned unsuccessful and led to a confrontation between the competing ethnic groups in these regions, each of whom sought to be recognized as dominant. The ethnofederal makeup experienced a crisis once the socialist order collapsed, which resonated both in Georgia and Serbia.

By the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tbilisi was faced with secessionist attempts in the Tsingvali region or South Ossetia (since 1989) and Abkhazia (since 1992), with Russian support, which coincided with the malfunctioning of the Georgian independent state. As in Serbia, these conflicts initially occurred in the context of the collapse of socialism, increased nationalism, and normative restrictions of provincial statuses. The 1990s were marked by the increased separation of the autonomous governments from their mother-republics, as well as forced migrations. US State Department report (1993)<sup>35</sup> in the context of the war in Abkhazia documented the violent removal of the previously largest ethnic group in Abkhazia (Georgians), with over 200,000 displaced persons and over 1,000 deaths by Abkhazian separatists, aided by combaters from various Russian republics.

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litički osvrt na odabrana dokumenta iz istočnoevropske diplomatske istorije. Beograd: Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu.

<sup>34</sup> For academic insight into the Soviet form of ethnofederalism consult: Roeder, Ph. (1991). Philip Roeder. Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization. *World Politics* 43(2), 196-232.

<sup>35</sup> United States Department of State (USDS). (1993). Georgia Human Rights Practices (1993). Washington, 1994 [https://web.archive.org/web/20150621060939/http://dosfan.lib.ui-c.edu/ERC/democracy/1993\\_hrp\\_report/93hrp\\_report\\_eur/Georgia.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20150621060939/http://dosfan.lib.ui-c.edu/ERC/democracy/1993_hrp_report/93hrp_report_eur/Georgia.html).

The NATO assault on Yugoslavia in 1999 without the UN Security Council approval was being justified by the humanitarian concerns, to prevent the persecution of the Albanians in Kosovo. However, this assault ultimately resulted in the expulsion of most Kosovo Serbs from their ancient homelands, which bears similarity with the Georgian dispute with its breakaway regions. According to UNHCR estimates, around 200,000 internally displaced persons (constituting most of the pre-war local Serbian community) fled to central Serbia from Kosovo in 1999 (UNHCR, 2022).<sup>36</sup> The humanitarian intervention doctrine, that was first embodied during the NATO attack on FR Yugoslavia, violated the UN charter and international law, constituted an unfortunate precedent that continued to echo further, and caused international discord (Charney, 1999: 1231-1232).<sup>37</sup> The humanitarian argument was used to bypass the UN guarantees regarding the primacy of territorial integrity and sovereignty, which caused further transnational disturbances. Both Serbia and Georgia inherited these territorial disputes following their respective pro-Western shifts in the early 2000s, from which point their strategic paths have started to increasingly converge.<sup>38</sup>

### **Secessions, great power strategies and violations of international law**

The geostrategic (or, more specifically, transatlantic context) is very significant in both Serbian and Georgian cases. While neither of them joined NATO, the expansion of that military bloc has deeply affected both countries. For instance, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined the North Atlantic Alliance less than two weeks before the bombing campaign against the then-Yugoslavia (over the issue of Kosovo) officially began in 1999 (NATO, 1999).<sup>39</sup> To additionally illustrate this aspect: Czech president Miloš Zeman issued an official apology to Serbian authorities in 2021 for the NATO bombing campaign, stating that his recently-admitted country had been “the last” member to agree to air strikes, adding that Czechia had “despera-

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<sup>36</sup> UNHCR. (2022). UNHCR in the Republic of Serbia. Belgrade, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/rs/en/unhcr-in-the-republic-of-serbia>.

<sup>37</sup> Charney, J. (1999). Jonathan Charney. Anticipatory Humanitarian Intervention in Kosovo, *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 32(5): 1231-1248.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolutions that acknowledge the territorial integrity of Serbia and Georgia are 1244 (regarding Kosovo) and tens of resolute acts (from 849 in 1993, to 10708 in 2008, in relation to Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions). Consult: UNSCR. (2023). Search engine for the United Nations Security Council Resolutions. New York, 2023, <http://unscr.com/>.

<sup>39</sup> NATO. (1999). The accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Brussels, 1999, <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/1999/9904-wsh/pres-eng/03acce.pdf>.

tely" sought partners in the alliance to oppose the campaign, but that failed, which he qualified as the "lack of courage" (Euronews, 2021).<sup>40</sup>

Be that as it may, some authors argue that the *primary* motivation for the bombing was not humanitarian, but the intent of the United States to preserve superpower status, by constructing the largest military base since the Vietnam war – Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, in order to counter Russian influence in the region (Cohn, 2002: 81).<sup>41</sup> That does not imply that the persecutions of Albanians or their human rights violations during the late 1990s did not occur, but rather that that specific aspect was instrumentalized in order to provide a cause for intervention, to achieve other, broader strategic goals.<sup>42</sup> To some extent, that bears comparison to the more recent role of "independent" Abkhazia as the seat of the Russian military base that oversees and covers the Russian south, the Black sea, and the Caucasus regions (Anjaparidze, 2022).<sup>43</sup> Back in 2014, Russian and Abkhazian authorities signed a strategic alliance treaty, which *de facto* integrated the latter with Russia in the fundamental domains like defense, border control, customs, social policy, and internal affairs (Falkowski, 2014).<sup>44</sup> The disproportionate use of force, mass exodus, and deaths of hundreds of civilians have constituted an additional tragic aspect in both instances.

Nonetheless, by the time war in the Caucasus again re-escalated, NATO had already admitted additional seven countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania (NATO, 2004).<sup>45</sup> During the Bucharest Summit in 2008, Albania and Croatia officially joined, while Georgia and Ukraine were promised NATO membership, although without more definite guarantees (Petrović,

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<sup>40</sup> Euronews. (2021). Czech President Milos Zeman apologizes to Serbia for 1999 NATO bombing. 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/19/czech-president-milos-zeman-apologises-to-serbia-for-1999-nato-bombing>.

<sup>41</sup> Cohn, M. (2002). Marjorie Cohn. NATO bombing of Kosovo: humanitarian intervention or crime against humanity? *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 15: 79–106.

<sup>42</sup> A similar claim could be made for Russia instrumentalizing the secession of Kosovo for its own interests. See: Axboe Nielsen, C. (2009). Christian Axboe Nielsen. The Kosovo precedent and the rhetorical deployment of former Yugoslav analogies in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9 (1): 171-189.

<sup>43</sup> Anjaparidze, Z. (2022). Zaal Anjaparidze. *Russia Redeploys Troops From Its Bases in Georgia to Ukraine*. *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19(42). Date of Access on February 3, 2023, and available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-redeploys-troops-from-its-bases-in-georgia-to-ukraine/>.

<sup>44</sup> Falkowski, M. (2014). Russia's "Neighbourhood Policy": the case of Abkhazia. Warsaw, 2014, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-11-26/russias-neighbourhood-policy-case-abkhazia>.

<sup>45</sup> NATO. (2004). Seven new members join NATO. Brussels, 2004, <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2004/03-march/e0329a.htm>.

2022b: 81).<sup>46</sup> Several months before that, Serbian government collapsed once the authorities in Priština unilaterally declared independence (for the second time since the 1990s), triggering mixed international response and recognition by the dozens of (mostly Western) nations, some of which have been revoked over the past years (Stojanović, 2023).<sup>47</sup>

Both these developments (the enlargement of NATO and the „Kosovo precedent“) were used against Georgia when Russia engaged in war in the breakaway regions and recognized their secession from Tbilisi, followed by a limited number of countries, mostly those considered to be „non-Western“ (Pender, 2018).<sup>48</sup> From the viewpoint of Serbia, Georgia, United Nations resolutions, Helsinki Final Act, and other normative stipulations, these secessions are perceived as contrary to law and international order, and thus invalid. What distinguishes these two countries regards the perception of an aggressor – NATO in the case of Serbia, while Georgia considering it to be Russia. What additionally sets them apart are the geopolitical consequences related to the fact that the breakaway cases experienced by Georgia and Serbia are perceived through different geostrategic lenses, as a consequence of the crisis in Russian-Western relations, especially since the onset of the invasion of Ukraine. Interestingly enough, also geo-strategically speaking, Tbilisi and Belgrade are oriented in the same direction – deepening integration with the European Union.<sup>49</sup> The frozen conflicts in their territories pose a major problem in that regard.

Serbia has been a front-runner candidate in joining the European Union alongside Montenegro for almost a decade, being in the pre-final stage of the process (accession negotiations since 2014). It applied for EU membership in 2009 and was granted candidacy in 2012, while Georgia followed suit in 2022, triggered by the assault on Ukraine. Serbian experience with the European integration process,

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<sup>46</sup> Petrović, M. (2022b). Miloš Petrović. European Union and Ukraine: the strategic partnership leading to (some)where? *Međunarodni problemi/International Problems* LXXIV(1): 75–101.

<sup>47</sup> In January 2023, the President of Serbia stated that nine more countries have recently withdrawn their previous recognition of Kosovo’s unilateral secession (Somalia, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Eswatini, Libya, Guinea, Antigua and Barbuda, St Lucia, and the Maldives), clarifying that currently „106 countries do not recognize Kosovo’s independence, only 84 unequivocally recognize it, [and about] three countries are not clear“. See: Stojanović, M. (2023). Serbian President Claims ‘Nine More Kosovo Recognition Withdrawals’. Belgrade, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/01/05/serbian-president-claims-nine-more-kosovo-recognition-withdrawals/>.

<sup>48</sup> As opposed to the case of Kosovo, the secession of Abkhazia has been recognized only by a handful of countries, including Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Syria. See: Pender, K. (2018). Abkhazians appreciate Syrian recognition, no matter the circumstances. New York, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/abkhazians-appreciate-syrian-recognition-no-matter-the-circumstances>.

<sup>49</sup> However, unlike Georgia, Serbia has been pursuing a policy of military neutrality.



including the very challenging matter of Kosovo, may provide useful lessons for the government in Tbilisi, especially considering what appears to be the exact matching of their priorities: to integrate into the European Union, while insisting on their rights in the breakaway territories. While these coinciding elements contribute to a greater bilateral understanding, Tbilisi and Belgrade are also expected to deepen their collaboration through the intergovernmental forum European Political Community, established in response to the threat caused by the attack on Ukraine (European Council, 2022).<sup>50</sup>

**Cultural and social affinities as cornerstones for deeper collaboration.** The author has grouped the parallels between the Georgian and Serbian situations as depicted below.

*Depiction 2:* Overview of some broadly categorized similarities between Serbian and Georgian socio-political contexts with special emphasis on the breakaway regions. Source: Author’s own elaborations.



The broadly-set Serbo-Georgian commonalities in this context include: the conflicting claims and clashes among the two leading ethnic groups in both instances; the voluntary and forced migrations across different periods; the history of foreign rule in an ethnically heterogeneous environment; the uneven overall effects of foreign rule between the two groups in each region; the collapse of the Cold war system (including ethno-federal solutions) which ultimately sparked disagreements and

<sup>50</sup> European Council. (2022). Meeting of the European Political Community, 6 October 2022. Prague, 2022 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/>.



clashes; the large interest of the Orthodox churches for safeguarding the Christian identity and community in those regions; the secessionist attempts and unilateral independence proclaimed by both (2008) contrary to law and with limited international support; the importance of geopolitics in both regions (albeit the Caucasus appears to be more prone to the geostrategic turmoil) and the pro-European path of Serbia and Georgia, burdened with infringed territorial integrity and sovereignty issues.

As regards the diverging points, in general terms, they include aspects such as the „timing“ of the demographic shift, which seemed to have occurred somewhat earlier in Kosovo (before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied by the increased political power change); the position of Georgia within Russian/Soviet states differed from Serbia within Yugoslav states (although, with certain visible similarities, especially when it comes to the treatment of the breakaway territories); the „timing“ of modern national sovereignty of Georgia and Serbia differs; the ancient character of the Georgian culture; the impaired status of the Georgian Orthodox Church until the 1940s which contrasts with the dominant status of the Serbian Church as the leading Orthodox institution in Yugoslavia (at least during the monarchy); the „timing“ of the socialist revolutions (three decades earlier in Georgia); the physical usurpation of the Georgian temples by the so-called „Abkhazian Orthodox Church“ (Conroy, 2015);<sup>51</sup> relying on different powers in maintaining territorial claims over the breakaway regions; non-existent dialogue between Georgia and the breakaway authorities as opposed to years of (limited) contacts between Belgrade and Priština under EU mediation; the plurality of disputes in Georgia vs. a single dispute in Serbia, notwithstanding their particularities and difficulties, etc.

The usurpation of Christian Orthodox and other heritage in the breakaway regions constitutes a major point of concern (Ahaladze, according to: Osmanova/Oсманова, 2016).<sup>52</sup> The author will briefly mention only a few pressing aspects which illustrate both some commonalities and divergencies when it comes to that domain. In the case of Georgia, the Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi safeguards a rich collection of manuscripts and other artifacts

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<sup>51</sup> Although the poor state of political relations between Russia and Georgia since 2008 seemed to have lagged behind at least some degree of dialogue between the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches, the activities of the self-proclaimed Orthodox church in Abkhazia, coupled with the altered circumstances since the invasion of Ukraine, constitute additional aspects of misunderstanding and contention between the two sides. Consult: Conroy, K. (2015). Kristina Conroy. Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches: The Orthodox Church in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. *Journal of Church and State* 57(4): 621-639.

<sup>52</sup> Османова, Т. (2016). Тико Османова. Российская компания в монастыре Тири стёрла грузинские фрески. 2016, <https://www.kavkazplus.com/news.php?id=2067#.Y-Sq3Xb-MK3A>.

from Abkhazia and elsewhere, and presents them to various target groups in interactive and innovative ways (Gogonaia, 2018: 62).<sup>53</sup> Visitors have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the medieval Bichvinta Gospels (Gogonaia & Kekelia, 2019: 46-49),<sup>54</sup> a richly decorated manuscript originating from the Pitsunda Cathedral, built by the Abkhaz-Georgian King Bagrat the Third one millennium ago. Unfortunately, those religious grounds are currently seized by the canonically-unrecognized Abkhazian Orthodox Church, serving as its *de facto* seat. Ties with the Georgian Church and its religious followers have been severed and visits have been restricted, apart from other unfavorable activities. The role of the National Centre of Manuscripts thus surpasses the role of a mere physical guardian of the Bichvinta Gospel; it also preserves collective memory, straddling domains like education, culture, and science.

On the other hand, the Visoki Dečani monastery is one of the four UNESCO World Heritage sites of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, which is included on the World Heritage in Danger list, due to security and other threats surrounding its physical location. The Monastery accommodates the Founding Charter of Dečani (dated to the 14th century), the founder being King Stefan Uroš the Third (of Dečani, “Dečanski”), the father of Stefan Dušan, the first Emperor of Serbia. Visits to this religious site are also limited and its everyday functioning is challenged not only by the need for international peacekeeping forces, but also by the attempted confiscation of 24 hectares of the church land (Kossev, 2021), among many other things.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper highlights several important socio-political elements that constitute areas of concern for both Belgrade and Tbilisi, especially with respect to their breakaway regions. The author finds that the identitarian importance and symbolism of Kosovo and Abkhazia for Belgrade and Tbilisi is mutually comparable, while distinctions also persist. Kosovo has served as a traditional spiritual seat of the Serbian Patriarchs (Patriarchate of Peć), and its relevance remains significant, similarly to the fact that Abkhazia has for centuries been the religious and cultural nucleus of the

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<sup>53</sup> For additional information regarding the overview of activities conducted by the Centre of Manuscripts consult: Gogonaia, I. (2018). *Irina Gogonaia. „Lifelong learning“ and opportunities of non-formal education in the National Centre of Manuscripts.* p. 62. Date of Access on January 25, 2023. and available at: <https://ceca.mini.icom.museum/publications/confERENCE-proceedings/>.

<sup>54</sup> Gogonaia, I., Kekelia, V. (2019). *Irina Gogonaia, Vladimer Kekelia (Eds.). The Repousse Metal Covers of Georgian Manuscripts (second revised edition).* Tbilisi, Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts.

<sup>55</sup> Kossev. (2021). State Department report on religious freedom: Decision on V. Decani’s land still ignored, 57 incidents targeting religious sites. Kosovska Mitrovica, 2021, <https://kossev.info/state-department-report-on-religious-freedom-decision-on-v-decanis-land-still-ignored-57-incidents-targeting-religious-sites/>.

Georgian state, and still contains many religious and cultural monuments. The current usurpation of religious grounds like the Bichvinta Cathedral contradicts the historical evolution of that area, apart from being damaging in terms of restricted access to the believers. The author finds the role of national Orthodox churches and cultural-scientific institutions, apart from the other ones, to be indispensable in terms of safeguarding collective memory and identity claims. The cultural domain complement the legal argumentation used by Belgrade and Tbilisi in international affairs. For instance, the inclusion of Serbian monasteries in Kosovo on the UNESCO World Heritage in Danger list contradicts the intention of the so-called Kosovo authorities to secure membership in UNESCO and their ability to meet even minimal standards in that domain, while also being highly symbolic in terms of illustrating the endangered status of Orthodox community in the region. In the international arena, Georgia supported the Serbian campaign to prevent Priština from joining UNESCO, which is illustrative, considering that the authorities in Tbilisi are facing similar challenges in terms of access and securing of their heritage in their own breakaway regions. This cooperation transcends the boundaries of cultural diplomacy and extends into other domains, legal, political and identitarian.

Both Georgia and Serbia have long been pleading for greater respect of norms of international law, especially the aspect of securing territorial integrity and sovereignty as cornerstones of predictability in international relations. The violation of their rights in their regard and attempts to bypass or blur these provisions through some humanitarian arguments are not only faulty and selective in legal terms, but are also dangerous, as they generate unfavorable precedents. The tendency in international law and politics to provide greater room to interventionism (based on humanitarian concerns) disregards the primary purpose of international norms – to secure stability in the international order and to discourage fragmentation. This unfortunately brings us to the next aspect – the invasion of Ukraine. The „Kosovo example“, used by many Western countries to recognize the unilateral secession of Priština authorities, has been countered and used by Russia not only in the case of Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia in 2008, but again in 2022, in recognizing the secession of several Ukrainian regions (Sampath Kumar, 2008: 24; Bloomberg News, 2022).<sup>56 57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sampath Kumar, R. (2008). Rama Sampath Kumar. From Kosovo to Georgia: The US, NATO and Russia. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(36): pp. 24-25, 27.

<sup>57</sup> In his speech on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the Russian president referred to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. The symbolism of the NATO military attack, from the perspective of Moscow, is two-fold. Primarily, it is perceived as a useful precedent for humanitarian interventionism elsewhere, like in Ukraine or Georgia. Secondly, it illustrates the Russian perception about NATO, whose expansion, as argued, constitutes the cause of international problems. The transcript of the speech made by President Putin is available here: Bloomberg News. (2022). Transcript: Vladimir Putin’s Televised Address on Ukraine. 2022, <https://www->

The author of this paper largely agrees with the perception that the mentioned precedent has evolved into a political or quasi-legal argument used by Russia to legitimate its assaults in the Caucasus and in Ukraine, while he disagrees that the “Western military-political action in Kosovo was radically different (Kalichava, 2021: 269)<sup>58</sup> in nature from that of Moscow in its neighborhood“, instead suggesting the phrase „somewhat different“. The author considers that both these situations were used to shift the political dominance of one group in favor of the non-titular group (Abkhaz and Albanian alike), by military and political means, with both situations also possessing a prior history of interethnic clashes and mistrust. Likewise: both are illegitimate, including from the viewpoint of international law (Helsinki act, UN charter, etc), and damaging in terms of reflecting on other disputes. The fact that the so-called secession of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali have been proclaimed under some (pseudo)humanitarian pretexts only months following Priština’s unilateral action adds to the similarities, despite large differences which most certainly persist. In addition, the author of this paper agrees with the observations that, with Kosovo, the West has *de facto* elevated the right for self-determination of the autonomous entity to the level of the precedent, which already resonates worldwide, while the Western community tended to disregard the danger of Russia using Kosovo as a useful precedent (Kalichava, 2021: 270).<sup>59</sup>

Although the mentioned conflicts differ in many aspects, from the perspective of international norms designated to preserve sovereignty and territorial integrity, they appear to point to the same issue: the use of political and military force in opposition to the legal order, or using narrow, selective and/or misplaced legal arguments to build a case of some sort of „exceptionalism“. For many experts, the ‘humanitarian intervention’ phenomenon correlates with the evolution of the postmodern argumentation of warfare, which prioritizes the „universal nature“ of the protection of human rights over some basic norms of national and international law (Petrović, 2018).<sup>60</sup> The violations and selective interpretations of international law have caused fundamental problems, not only for countries like Serbia, but also Georgia, and unfortunately, others. While the two countries today seem to be headed in the same direction – towards eventual EU membership – the aspect of Kosovo will likely have some ramifications on Georgia’s own territorial claims, including that in Abkhazia. Henceforth, the possibilities for more extensive cooperation between Tbi-

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[w.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24).

<sup>58</sup> Kalichava, K. (2021). Kakhaver Kalichava. Kosovo, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali region: The Historical and Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Conflicts. Tbilisi, Shota Rustaveli's Georgia National Science Foundation.

<sup>59</sup> Kalichava, K. (2021). Kakhaver Kalichava. Kosovo, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali region: The Historical and Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Conflicts. Tbilisi, Shota Rustaveli's Georgia National Science Foundation.

<sup>60</sup> Petrović, M. (2018). Precedents - entering an unstable era. Belgrade, 2018, <http://www.tranconflict.com/2018/11/precedents-entering-an-unstable-era-211/>.

lisi and Belgrade seem to be not only rational, but perhaps also necessary, considering a multitude of analogies and matching interests, especially during the geopolitically turbulent times. In that regard, the diverging political and other experiences, features and distinctions might be transcended by numerous and extensive similarities, affinities, shared concerns, and evolving bilateral understanding between Georgia and Serbia.

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