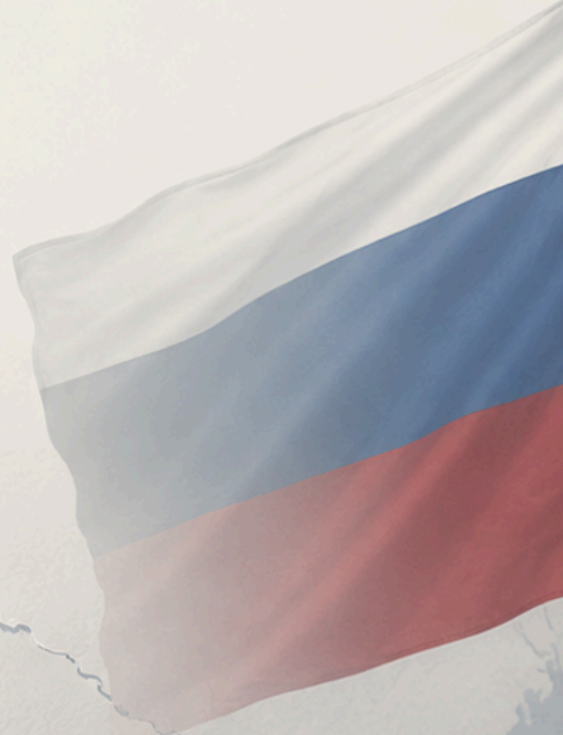


# From Separation to Leverage:

Abkhazia as Russia's  
Security Multiplier on  
the Black Sea



**Alberto Carrer**

Topchubashov Center (Baku)  
Report 2026

# **From Separation to Leverage: Abkhazia as Russia's Security Multiplier on the Black Sea**

## **Report**

Author: Alberto Carrer

Alberto Carrer is a Master's degree graduate in European and International Studies from the School of International Studies at the University of Trento. His main areas of expertise include security and geopolitics in the South Caucasus, ethnic conflicts, and regional cooperation. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy, International Studies, and Economics from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and has conducted field research in Georgia.

## **Disclaimer**

The views and analyses expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent the official positions of any government, international organisation, or institution with which the author is or has been affiliated.

## **About Topchubashov Center**

Topchubashov Center is an independent non-profit think tank based in Baku, Azerbaijan. It covers the spheres of international affairs, geopolitics, security and energy with the focus on Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia and Middle East. The Center aims to establish the standards of high-quality impartial research and create an international network of authors sharing similar values and worldview.

© Topchubashov Center 2026 All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

## Introduction: Abkhazia's Strategic Turn in the Black Sea–South Caucasus Continuum

### 2.0 Background

2.1 The Origins of Dependency: 1992 - 2008 and the Survival Patronage.

2.2 Building Patronage: Russian 2008 recognition.

2.3. Post-Crimea (2014) and the war in Ukraine: a transformation of patronage?

### 3.0 Is Abkhazia and its Patronage a security multiplier?

3.1. Stabilising effect: coercive stability at the local level

3.2. Destabilising effects: managed insecurity and strategic leverage in the Black Sea-Caucasus space.

### 4.0 From Frozen Conflict to Security Multiplier: Abkhazia and the Reordering of the Black Sea–South Caucasus Space

4.1. Georgia: Abkhazia as a Two-Level Security Stressor

4.2. Turkey: straits custodianship and escalation management

4.3. NATO–EU: The Eastern Rim Challenge

## CONCLUSIONS:FROM SEPARATION TO LEVERAGE

## **Introduction: Abkhazia's Strategic Turn in the Black Sea–South Caucasus Continuum**

Among all the post-Soviet de facto entities arising from the USSR's secessionist conflicts, Abkhazia stands out as one of the most developed and multidimensional cases of patron-client relationships and dependency. Since unilaterally declaring independence from Georgia in 1992, the political survival and territorial control of the region have heavily relied on Russian backing and financial assistance. Yet, the constant deepening of this relationship, spanning from military, economic, societal, and symbolic dimensions, has transformed Abkhazia from a dependent polity into a potential embedded node in Russia's regional power architecture. This transformation defines the mechanisms through which patronage structures sustain local statehood while simultaneously potentially projecting broader influence.

From a structural perspective, Abkhazia's dependency on Russia extends well beyond security guarantees. Moscow funds cover almost half of the de facto republic's state budget, pay pensions, provide energy subsidies, and issue passports that allow Abkhaz citizens to travel abroad. These asymmetric yet reciprocal ties have

gradually deepened Abkhazia's dependence on Russia, embedding its institutions and leadership within a hierarchical relationship in which agency is negotiated for stability and economic continuity<sup>1 2</sup>. Since Russia's recognition in 2008, the partnership has been institutionalised through multiple treaties that have gradually integrated customs, defence, and specific legislation, effectively transforming the republic into a deeply integrated client. This extent of engagement contrasts sharply with more limited or transactional arrangements in South Ossetia or Transnistria, where patronage is narrower and different objectives make these patterns less structurally entrenched, positioning Abkhazia as the most relevant case in this field.

The current war in Ukraine, Moscow's shifting influence and detachment in the region, and the potential geographic relevance of Sukhumi to the Kremlin have

---

<sup>1</sup> Blakkisrud, H. (2025). Abkhazia's 2025 Presidential Elections: De Facto State Patron-Client Relations and Russian Interference. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 142, 12-16. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000692533>

<sup>2</sup> Kolstø, P. (2020). Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 36(2), 140–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1712987> Moscow's simultaneous loss of influence in the region, and the potential geographical relevance of Sukhumi for the Kremlin have

heightened the significance of this dependency. Strategically situated on the eastern Black Sea coast, Abkhazia potentially occupies a corridor critical to Russia's projection of power toward both the South Caucasus and the wider Black Sea basin. The 2023 plan for a Russian 'technical support base' in Ochamchire, confirmed by satellite imagery and statements from both sides of the Inguri River<sup>3</sup>, illustrates how patronage can function as a security multiplier. Abkhazia offers Moscow both territorial depth and a maritime outlet less vulnerable than Sevastopol, whose exposure during the Ukraine war has compelled Russia to diversify its basing strategy. Thus, local dependency generates regional leverage that transcends its borders, linking micro-political loyalty to regional macro-strategic gain.

Yet, the increasing degree of dependency also coexists with resistance. The region has displayed notable resilience, with civil society repeatedly mobilising and engaging the defacto authorities on sensitive political issues. Domestic resistance to Russian influence, as recently seen in the 2024 protests against the

---

<sup>3</sup> Daly, J. C. (n.d.). *Russian Black Sea Fleet Intends to Establish Base in Abkhazia*. The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-black-sea-fleet-intends-to-establish-base-in-abkhazia/>

investment law, which would allow Russian citizens to buy property<sup>4</sup>, reveals a desire to preserve degrees of autonomy. Similar disputes also shape the discourse around the cited Ochamchire project, which Abkhaz officials have deliberately framed as a "logistical support facility" rather than a complete naval base complex<sup>5</sup>. This rhetorical distinction highlights the politics of negotiated dependency, where local actors seek to assert limited agency within an asymmetric relationship.

The Abkhazia-Russia dynamic illustrates how patronage actively reshapes regional equilibrium, creating a multiplier effect on security. Russian troops, economic dependence, and infrastructure in Abkhazia support broader strategies, affecting the Black Sea–Caucasus arena. The local agency, cultivating negotiated autonomy and symbolic sovereignty, seeks to balance subordination and independence, as evidenced by domestic protests and debates over several pro-Russian laws. By examining how the

---

<sup>4</sup> Agence France-Presse. (2024, November 15). *Protesters storm Abkhazia parliament over Russian investment deal*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/15/protesters-storm-abkhazia-parliament-over-russian-investment-deal>

<sup>5</sup> Gunba: Russia to Build 'Logistical Support Facility', Not Naval Base, in Abkhazia. (2025, June, 3). *Civil.ge*. <https://civil.ge/archives/684943-to-place>

Abkhazia–Russia relationship operates as a localised security multiplier, linking micro-level governance to macro-regional power projection, the analysis sheds light on the evolving interplay of coercion, consent, and strategic utility, and on how external patronage reconfigures security across the South Caucasus and Black Sea region.

## 2.0 Background

### 2.1 The Origins of Dependency: 1992 - 2008 and the Survival Patronage.

The Abkhaz crisis erupted forcefully in the post-Soviet vacuum: between August 1992 and September 1993, the instability of Georgia's political transition, amid Tbilisi's attempt to consolidate centralised authority, produced a volatile confrontation between competing nationalisms. In 1992, the Georgian State Council, led by Eduard Shevardnadze, sent troops into the Abkhazia region, officially to secure the Sochi-Tbilisi railways and to protect hostages<sup>6</sup>. Still, the operation quickly turned into an open warfare

---

<sup>6</sup> Chufirin, M. (Ed.). (2001). *The Georgian–Abkhazian conflict*. In M. Chufirin (Ed.), *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region* (pp. 262–277). Stockholm: Oxford University Press for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/books/SIPRI01Chufirin/SIPRI01Chufirin16.pdf>

between Georgian forces and Abkhaz military units, supported by North Caucasus volunteers and elements of the Russian apparatus.

By late 1993, Abkhaz forces had controlled most of the region, including the de facto capital, Sukhumi. The war not only culminated in the unilateral declaration of independence by the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, but also produced a profound humanitarian crisis with approximately 300,000 ethnic Georgians forced to displacement and marking the beginning of Georgia's long-protracted IDPs emergency<sup>7</sup>. The subsequent 1994 Moscow Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces<sup>8</sup>, brokered under UN and Western auspices, sought to foster the return of refugees. In practice, however, it paralysed the status quo, consolidating Abkhazia's de facto separation from Georgia and institutionalising the frozen conflict under the supervision of Russian peacekeepers.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ferris, E., Mooney, E., & Stark, C. (2011, November). *From responsibility to response: Assessing national approaches to internal displacement* (Project on Internal Displacement). Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/From-Responsibility-to-Response-Nov-2011-Georgia.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> United Nations. (1994, May 14). *Agreement on a ceasefire and separation of forces (Georgia/Abkhazia)*. United Nations Peacemaker. <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9371>

From that peace agreement, the region's isolation and dependence on the Kremlin crystallised. Besides presenting a double monitoring architecture, granted by the presence of UN military and civilian observers, a massive deployment of Russian troops under the CIS peacekeeping mandate was established. As a consequence, the Russian ruble began to circulate in the region as a de facto currency, and the opening of humanitarian channels strengthened ties between Abkhaz survival and Kremlin structures<sup>9</sup>.

This period subtly marked the foundational stage of Abkhazia's patron-client dependency, in which security guarantees and basic governance capacity were mainly maintained through Russian mediation and military and material support. The international community's limited engagement, constrained by non-recognition policies and the never-questioned territorial integrity of Georgia, left Moscow as the sole external arbiter and guarantor of the fragile status quo.

---

<sup>9</sup> NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. (2017). *Humanitarian aid in the Russo-Georgian conflict: Case study on Abkhazia and South Ossetia* (Thematic Area: Lawfare). NATO StratCom COE. [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploborderads/pfiles/humanitarian\\_aid\\_rus\\_geo.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploborderads/pfiles/humanitarian_aid_rus_geo.pdf)

## **2.2 Building Patronage: Russian 2008 recognition.**

A decisive turning point in the consolidation of Abkhaz patronage with Moscow was marked by the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict. In the aftermath of the brief five-day conflict, the Kremlin's unilateral recognition on 26 August 2008 transformed the existing relationship into an evolved, institutionalised patron-client structure. The previous pragmatic reliance on survival evolved into a more detailed and structured framework of political, economic, and military integration under Russian supervision, fostered by the signing of a series of binding bilateral agreements.

The most notable pillars in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Moscow and Sukhumi have been, in order of signing, the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (2008)<sup>10</sup> and the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership

---

<sup>10</sup> Presidential Press and Information Office of the Russian Federation. (2008, September 17). *Russia signed Treaties on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia*. Kremlin.ru. <https://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1439>

(2014)<sup>11</sup>, which entrenched the Russian role as the primary guarantor of Abkhazia's security and external viability. Since the 2008 war and the subsequent Russian recognition of Sukhumi's independence, security patronage, especially in the military sphere, has become the most profound and visible dimension of Russian influence in the region, as testified by the stationing of Russian troops from the 7th Military Base in Gudauta<sup>12</sup> and the concurrent deployment of military defence systems and border patrolling by the FSB border guard service across the Inguri boundary line<sup>13</sup>.

The legal architecture of the Kremlin's security patronage in Abkhazia is grounded in a series of bilateral treaties

---

<sup>11</sup> Russian Federation. (2014, November 24). *Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership*. Presidential Executive Office of the Russian Federation (Kremlin). Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20141203093816/http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/47288>

<sup>12</sup> Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). (2015, March 10). *Abkhazia's 'creeping' incorporation: The end of the experiment of a separatist state?* Warsaw: OSW. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-03-10/abkhazias-creeping-incorporation-end-experiment-a-separatist>

<sup>13</sup> Russian Federation & Republic of Abkhazia. (2009, April 30). *Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on common efforts in protection of frontier of the Republic of Abkhazia*. CIS Legislation. <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=28517>

signed after 2008 by the Russian presidency and the de facto authorities of Abkhazia, the most decisive of which are the above-mentioned 2008 and 2014 ones. These instruments create a dense, asymmetric web of minor agreements on security, in which Russia's disproportionate military capabilities implicitly and unilaterally place Sukhumi within Moscow's sphere of influence<sup>14 15</sup>.

In parallel with Russia's military foothold, economic dependency also intensified, driven by the structural provisions of the 2008 and 2014 agreements. These bilateral partnerships not only provided long-term financial support through subsidies, pensions, and infrastructure investments, but also bound key economic sectors to Russian regulatory and administrative frameworks. Russian budgetary support, achieved through the consolidation of the ruble position and technical standards in industries such as customs, taxation, and public administration, gradually came to align with Russian practice. Beyond state finances, Russia's economic penetration

---

<sup>14</sup> Russian Federation - President. (2011, August 8). *Agreement on a Russian military base in Abkhazia has been submitted to the State Duma for ratification*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/12221>

<sup>15</sup> Russian Federation – President. (2016, July 15). *Draft law ratifying Russia–Abkhazia agreement on joint forces group submitted to the State Duma*. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/91/events/copy/52531>

extended to currency and financial regulation: on the one hand, the ruble became Abkhazia's de facto currency, with Russian-linked banks mediating most liquidity and transaction flows.

The capillarity of economic integration is also reflected in labour mobility across the boundary. Thanks to Russian citizenship, a significant share of Abkhaz households that relied on seasonal or permanent employment in Russia were granted access to social benefits and income opportunities unavailable domestically. This process made individual well-being, not only state capacity, directly contingent on continued Russian patronage<sup>16</sup>.

### **2.3. Post-Crimea (2014) and the war in Ukraine: a transformation of patronage?**

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 additionally redefined the logic of patronage in Abkhazia. If the phase before 2022 was devoted to consolidating control, the ongoing war and loosening of influence in the Russian near

abroad have elevated Abkhazia's role into one of strategic utility. From serving as a simple guarantee of Abkhazia's survival, patronage has now become an instrument of political leverage, possibly turning Sukhumi into a platform for the Kremlin's military and geopolitical repositioning in the eastern Black Sea.

Always more isolated, even from its historical CIS and CSTO allies, which have kept a neutral stance about the war in Ukraine, Moscow was able to count on hosts of volunteers who have joined the front fighting alongside Russian soldiers<sup>17</sup>. From a practical perspective, the progressive transformation of Abkhazia into a consolidated military outpost has been sealed by its integration into the Southern Military District of the Russian Federation<sup>18</sup>. The core of this security apparatus lies in the 7th Russian Military Base in Gudauta. This military facility, despite Russia's early commitments to withdraw its forces from both the Gudauta and Vaziani bases under the 1999 OSCE

---

<sup>17</sup> Commonsplace. (2025, June 8). *70 Abkhaz killed fighting for Russia in Ukraine since 2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.commonspace.eu/news/70-abkhaz-killed-fighting-russia-ukraine-2022>

---

<sup>16</sup> Blakkisrud, H., & Kolstø, P. (2012). Dynamics of de facto statehood: The South Caucasian de facto states between secession and sovereignty. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45 (3–4), 281–291. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.07.004>

<sup>18</sup> Rogozińska, A., & Olech, A. K. (2020). *The Russian Federation's military bases abroad* (Report). Institute of International Affairs (INE). <https://ine.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/THE-RUSSIAN-FEDERATIONS-MILITARY-BASES-ABROAD-1.pdf>

Istanbul agreement <sup>19</sup>, remains fully operational. Over the years, the base has become a key training and deployment hub in the region, housing around 3,700 soldiers. It also hosts armoured units, artillery systems, and air defence assets, making it one of the most important strategic positions on the Eastern Black Sea coast.

Not by chance, in parallel, the Kremlin, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has initiated a new phase of militarisation in the naval port of Ochamchire. Long at the centre of Russian interests, as demonstrated by the deployment in the area of the Russian coastal guard's Black Sea-Azov Sea division<sup>20</sup>, the complex is now moving into a higher level of securitisation and militarisation to work as a complement to the maritime infrastructures and bases in Sevastopol, Crimea, which are severely exposed due to the Ukrainian conflict. Once again, the

---

<sup>19</sup>OSCE. (1999). *Istanbul Document 1999: Annex 14 – Jointfavour Statement of the Russian Federation and Georgia*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/5/39569.pdf>to influenceenvironment

<sup>20</sup> Ratchev, V. (2008, September 26). *Russian military digs in for the long haul in Georgian territories*. The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/russian-military-digs-in-for-the-long-haul-in-georgian-territories/#:~:text=The%20military%20cooperation%20agreements%20with,along%20the%20respective%20demarcation%20lines.>

stark asymmetry in military power and capabilities solidifies Moscow's dominant role in security governance, leaving Sukhumi with limited influence over territorial control or military decisions.

Economic integration and control projects have also increasingly deepened, formally translating into the renewal, in July 2025, of the Russian-Abkhaz agreement on social and economic cooperation<sup>21</sup>, and the reopening of the Sukhumi airport with the establishment of direct flights to Moscow. The removal of Georgian language in education systems, substituted by Russian<sup>22</sup>, and the easier access to passports for the region's residents<sup>23</sup>, despite questioning the boundaries of independence inside Abkhaz society, demonstrates how, for Moscow, the maintenance of Russian influence and stability in the region is both a security

---

<sup>21</sup> Government of the Russian Federation. (2025, July 21). *Alexander Novak: Russia and Abkhazia continue to strengthen their strategic partnership* [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://government.ru/en/news/55717/>

<sup>22</sup> Shonia, T. (2021, November 3). *Abkhazia: Georgian now only taught as a foreign language*. Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR). <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/abkhazia-georgian-now-only-taught-foreign-language>

<sup>23</sup> Presidency of the Russian Federation. (2025, May 17). *Указ Президента Российской Федерации № 328 «О приеме в гражданство Российской Федерации граждан Республики Абхазия и Респуб»*. <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202505170012?index=2>

priority and a political matter. The combination of Moscow's growing international isolation and its need to secure loyal footholds across the Black Sea pushed Abkhazia into a new phase of dependence marked by accelerated harmonisation, institutional convergence, and expanding Russian oversight, also in military terms. The increased activity around the Russian military bases in the region, the expansion of border infrastructure along the Enguri River, and the naval potential of Ochamchire all signalled that Abkhazia was being more firmly integrated into Russia's strategic architecture, at a moment when its influence elsewhere in the post-Soviet space faced unprecedented challenges.

By the beginning of the 2020s, the cumulative effect of these economic, social, and military dynamics had produced a patronage structure distinct from that of the immediate post-recognition period. Dependency and patronage structures no longer revolved solely around financial subsidies or military guarantees but also extended into long-term governance patterns, identity-formation processes, and infrastructural planning. In this context, the war in Ukraine did not simply intensify Russian patronage: it transformed it into a comprehensive system that tied

Abkhazia's institutional evolution directly to Moscow's broader geopolitical priorities.

### **3.0 Is Abkhazia and its Patronage a security multiplier?**

#### **3.1. Stabilising effect: coercive stability at the local level**

The first effect of Russian patronage in the region is stabilisation. The coercive stability imposed by the Kremlin through the controlled and reasoned penetration of Sukhumi has brought the area to a durable local equilibrium in which escalation is unlikely. This balance, more than settlement mechanisms, has been made possible by the tight management of external variables in both security and governance. In practice, Abkhaz-Russian patronage has, as its first and most visible effect, turned an unresolved sovereignty dispute into a predictable day-to-day governance, in which abrupt military revelations have been and remain highly unlikely.

The first pillar of this stabilising mechanism rests on predictability, achieved through the transformation of wartime dynamics into a solid, organised ceasefire environment, formalised by the 1994 *Agreement on a Cease-Fire and*

*Separation of Forces*<sup>24</sup> and the establishment of a peacekeeping component that serves as a central reference point for the conflict-management framework. This order was further and decisively reinforced by the Kremlin's formal recognition of Abkhazia in 2008, which, besides granting a more explicit grantor role to both Abkhazia, brought a deterrence-based environment to the table. Since this moment, the plausibility of escalation has decreased sensibly, and Moscow's commitment to preserving a preferred equilibrium has narrowed the scope of large-scale threats. This stabilising trajectory is well consistent with a broader pattern highlighted in the literature on de facto states, in which, once separation is recognised and institutionalised, external backing can also facilitate the creation of workable governance environments in which state-like routines can develop despite non-recognition<sup>25</sup>.

The stabilising mechanism of patronage is also mirrored in boundary-governing practices. The 2009 agreement on “joint

efforts to protect the state border” is unusually explicit. Thanks to the spillover effect beyond the Abkhaz borders, the arrangement delegates border-protection powers to the Russian side. It extends their application to maritime spaces, embedding the management of the primary friction line, land and coastal, within Russia's security apparatus. This border security speaks to a more controlled boundary environment, which consequently reduces ambiguity and limits the escalation of incidents into a broader confrontation with Georgia. Especially in a region where ethnic conflicts tend to erupt abruptly, and escalation is likely when strategic costs are traded, routine boundary control can serve as a form of risk containment for the broader Black Sea and Caucasus security space.

Another stabilising effect flowing into the regional security mechanism lies in the integration of the Abkhaz forces into Russia-led operational planning. The agreement on a Joint Group of Armed Forces, ratified under Russian Law<sup>26</sup> and subsequently addressed at the OSCE

---

<sup>24</sup> United Nations. (1994, May 14). *Agreement on a ceasefire and separation of forces*. UN Peacemaker. <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9371>

<sup>25</sup> Florea, A. (2020). Rebel governance in de facto states. *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(4), 1004–1031. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120919481>

---

<sup>26</sup> President of Russia. (2016, November 22). *Law on ratification of Russia–Abkhazia agreement on joint group of forces*. <https://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/53291>.

Permanent Council <sup>27</sup>, further formalised Russia's military component in the region, including Russian bases in Abkhazia. Leaving aside the political narrative associated with such arrangements, the stabilising outcome is concrete: it reduces the strategic autonomy of Sukumi, increases predictability from Moscow's standpoint, and consolidates a unified operational logic in a theatre that has produced rapid escalation since 2008. In regional-security terms, this is stabilising because it aligns command expectations and reduces the space for unilateral moves that could trigger wider escalation.

This stabilisation is therefore primarily comprehended as a security outcome rather than a political resolution: it results from enforcement capacity and the institutionalisation of control, rather than reconciliation or negotiated legitimacy. The principal policy implication is that stability becomes quantifiable through the predictability of command expectations, boundary interactions, and escalation thresholds rather than through advancement towards conflict resolution. Precisely because this predictability is

---

<sup>27</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2016, November 25). *Statement by Mr. Alexander Lukashevich, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, at the 1120th Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council (PC.DEL/1633/16)*. [hthe Kremlin's, ttps://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/fdocuments/1/8/285526.pdf](https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/fdocuments/1/8/285526.pdf)

externally anchored, it can be maintained over time; however, it remains structurally conservative, as it enforces separation as the default condition.

The stabilising effect, then, can be stated strictly in security and centred policy terms: Russian patronage hardens, first of all, the Abkhaz status quo through deterrence, a long-term military presence, boundary security delegated to Russian structures (including maritime spaces), and joint-force integration. The stabilisation in this sense can be interpreted in a regional dimension framework, not in the context of conflict resolution, but rather in a dynamic of regional risk management in Kremlin interest: if allegedly lowers the likelihood of an unexpected long-term acute escalation, at the same time, the inherently conservative stability, entrenching separation, locks in Russia's security role, and sets the conditions for the following subsection how a locally stabilised outpost can also generate leverage and spillovers at the regional level.

### **3.2. Destabilising effects: managed insecurity and strategic leverage in the Black Sea-Caucasus space.**

This coercive stability, however, is not strategically neutral. Importantly, this “leverage” in this context does not require

constant escalation. It is instead generated by the ability to calibrate pressure, blackmail, and tighten constraints to shape the operating environments of neighbouring actors, especially that of the local civil society. The management, distribution and instrumentalisation of instability allow, in this way, the destabilising regional effect and local stability to be compatible with the Kremlin's interests.

By hardening separation and embedding key security functions within Russian structures, the patron–client relationship does more than prevent the aforementioned escalation locally: acting as a precondition, it creates a controllable outpost through which Moscow can manage pressure and shape outcomes beyond Abkhazia's borders. The following subsection shows how the same stabilising architecture becomes a source of regional leverage, linking Abkhazia to Russia's wider Black Sea posture through maritime basing developments and connectivity projects centred on Ochamchire and Sukhumi.

The potential of Abkhazia as a corridor where the Black Sea's military balance, connectivity routes, and broader regional order intersect becomes even more relevant when integrated into Russian

ambitions to dominate Black Sea trade and energy corridors and to resist Western (EU/NATO) influence in the region<sup>28</sup>. In practice, Abkhazia's coastal geography becomes a critical asset for this purpose, positioning Sukhumi beyond local deterrence. For Moscow, this is precisely where Sukhumi's value shifts from status-quo management to regional positioning, and it is most evident in the maritime and connectivity domains that map directly onto Russia's broader Black Sea posture under wartime constraints.

In policy terms, the maritime pillar can also be better understood as a diversification move, adding redundancy to the eastern Black Sea. At the same time, Russia's historical Crimea basing environment remains under sustained pressure and severely vulnerable to Ukraine strikes. Several sources reported that in October, shortly after the full-scale invasion, Russia had struck a deal for a permanent naval base in Abkhazia's coast, prompting Georgia's reaction that denounced it as a “gross violation” of sovereignty, reinforcing the Kremlin's ambition in the region and in the occupied

---

<sup>28</sup> Sabanadze, N., & Dalay, G. (2025, July 28). *Understanding Russia's Black Sea strategy: How to strengthen Europe and NATO's approach to the region* (Research paper). Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-07-28-russias-black-sea-strategy-sabanadze-dalay.pdf>

territories of Georgia<sup>29</sup>. Despite repeated statements by the de facto president of Abkhazia, Badra Gunba, affirming that Moscow's plan for the occupied city of Ochamchire does not involve establishing a naval base, but rather a "logistical support facility" for the Russian Black Sea Fleet<sup>30</sup>, open-source imagery-based reporting has then strengthened the evidentiary basis that Ochamchire is not merely rhetorical. Satellite imagery analysis found a rapid acceleration of construction since early 2024. It situated Abkhazia within a broader pattern of Russia's observable expansion of its strategic footprint and infrastructure development in early 2025, reinforcing the inference that the maritime component is being translated into material consolidation<sup>31 32</sup>. Even if the Ochamchire complex cannot be considered, at this

---

<sup>29</sup> Civil.ge. (2023, October 7). *Reactions to the plan to open Russian navy base in occupied Abkhazia*. Civil.ge. <https://civil.ge/archives/562405>

<sup>30</sup> Civil.ge. (2025, June 3). *Gunba: Russia to build 'logistical support facility', not naval base, in Abkhazia*. Civil.ge. <https://civil.ge/archives/684943>

<sup>31</sup> Williams, L. (2024, July 30). *Construction accelerates at planned Russian Navy base in disputed Abkhazia*. Bellingcat. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2024/07/30/construction-accelerates-at-planned-russian-navy-base-in-disputed-abkhazia/>

<sup>32</sup> Atlantic Council DFRLab. (2025, April 17). *Russia expands its strategic footprint in occupied Abkhazia*. DFRLab. <https://dfrlab.org/2025/04/17/russia-expands-its-strategic-footprint-in-occupied-abkhazia/>

point, a Sevastopol substitute for strategic purposes, the symbolic presence and connectivity potential can increase Moscow's option set for dispersion and signalling a corridor that advances connectivity ambitions in the wider Black Sea security balance. The significance lies less in the facility's absolute scale than in the option value it creates: even limited nodes can increase redundancy, complicate adversaries' planning, and strengthen signalling capacity in a contested theatre. This reinforces a key multiplier dynamic: once the outpost is stabilised, infrastructure choices acquire regional weight because they can be sequenced and combined with other instruments of control.

This connectivity role and strategic hub potential have been enhanced by the resumption of passenger flights from Sukhumi to Russia for the first time in 30 years, following the restoration of the airport, which had been inactive since the 1990s conflicts<sup>33</sup>. The Georgian response, echoed by the EU and the Western world in general, clarifies the political-security meaning attached to this step, with the EEAS explicitly deploring the unilateral decision by Moscow to launch regular

---

<sup>33</sup> Civil.ge. (2025, February 11). *Russian passenger jet lands at Sokhumi airport as official Tbilisi remains silent*. Civil.ge. <https://civil.ge/archives/661explicitly501>

commercial passenger flights to Sukhumi in Georgia's breakaway region, underlining the violation of the territorial sovereignty and integrity of Georgia<sup>34</sup>. The concern was then further bundled at the Geneva Discussion Roundtable, where the EU stated that Sukhumi flights are part of a wider "continued attempts to de facto integrate Georgia's occupied breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia's regulatory and security space, as well as the ongoing borderization activities"<sup>35</sup>. The statement indicates that Brussels perceives these measures as components of a broader consolidation effort, with rail, maritime, and air passenger traffic measures being elements of a comprehensive consolidation package rather than merely a simple transportation initiative. What makes these two infrastructures strategically usable is the governance dimension of patronage and Moscow's ability to keep the client space politically aligned enough to host infrastructure choices with regional

---

<sup>34</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS). (2025, May 3). *Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on Russia's latest violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia*. European Union. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/452071\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/452071_en)

<sup>35</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS). (2025, November 27). *EU statement on the 65th round of the Geneva International Discussions*. European Union. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna-international-organisations/eu-statement-65th-round-geneva-international-discussions\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna-international-organisations/eu-statement-65th-round-geneva-international-discussions_en)

implications. Different reports on Abkhazia's 2024-2025 crisis cycle describe the post-2014 and 2022 scenarios, underlining a deeper involvement in leadership outcomes and the use of economic pressure to discipline political resistance and ensure that Abkhazia's internal politics remain compatible with different priorities. Particularly, citing Olesya Vartanyan, since Crimea, the pretence of partnership has vanished, and Moscow now treats Abkhazia as just another Russian-controlled territory<sup>36</sup>.

Overall, the evidence supports a policy-centred net assessment, in which Russian patronage functions as a security multiplier, transforming a deterrence-based local equilibrium into regionally applicable leverage. The stabilising influence diminishes escalation pathways and enhances predictability; however, the destabilising influence arises when such predictability is exploited to expand Moscow's strategic options and to shape the surrounding operational environment through posture and connectivity decisions. Consequently, this results in a dual effect: while stability is reinforced at the local scale, separation becomes more entrenched, and Russia's capacity to

---

<sup>36</sup> Vartanyan, O. (2025, February 13). *Moscow has run out of patience in Abkhazia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/russia-abkhazia-new-pressure?lang=en>

influence the broader Black Sea–South Caucasus security domain is strengthened.

#### **4.0 From Frozen Conflict to Security Multiplier: Abkhazia and the Reordering of the Black Sea–South Caucasus Space**

Having established Abkhazia as a domestically governed, separation-related crisis entity with strategic utility directed outward, this chapter analyses the territory as a fault line between the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. As the Russian peacekeeping presence gradually diminishes- due to the Ukrainian front's emergence and Azerbaijan's consolidation in the 2023 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War- the region is entering a transitional period wherein the outcomes of conflict, connectivity, and external retrenchment are redefining the operational landscape.

In this context, the deepening of patronage in Abkhazia should be regarded less as a static “Georgian issue” and more as an embodiment of Russian influence in the region. This influence, resulting from the restructuring of the historical regional partnership, has the potential to generate regional externalities and extend the Kremlin's strategic projection in the area. Given the exploitation of patronage conditions and Sukhumi's

over-dependence on the Kremlin, Moscow can link local “stability” to value, creating tools to shape the wider environment without forcing an escalation. Evidence of accelerated construction at Ochamchire since early 2024 is therefore significant not merely as a symbolic base narrative, but as a practical indicator of Moscow's search for additional in-basin support capacity as it adapts to a more hostile maritime operating environment.

In other words, Abkhazia should be considered a security multiplier within a transitioning region, specifically a locally governed separation crisis, to be evaluated in the context of external sponsorship and the reorganisation of the Black Sea-South Caucasus continuum. Connectivity initiatives and infrastructure developments in Sukhumi are not isolated endeavours but rather signals of intent aimed at transforming coercive stability on the ground into strategic value at the regional level, by enhancing redundancy and flexibility in Russia's posture.

#### 4.1. Georgia: Abkhazia as a Two-Level Security Stressor

Regarding Georgia, the evolution of Russian patronage in Abkhazia is increasingly becoming a dual-layered security challenge: an external theatre where Russia consolidates its posture and strategic value, and an internal stressor that impacts political resilience, cohesion, and strategic alignment. The region's transitional nature amplifies this duality, with the Black Sea's operational environment being continually reshaped by Ukrainian long-range strikes and the shifting alignment choices of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia itself.

A visible indicator of this external modification is the establishment of a naval-support function in Ochamchire, which potentially alters Abkhaz strategic access to the Black Sea as a layer for survivability and dispersion under wartime conditions. For Georgia, this security impact is immediate in two respects. Firstly, externally, a functional naval base in occupied Abkhazia reduces the distances between Russian-based maritime assets and Georgia's coastal facilities, thereby creating potential pressure on the strategic ports of Poti and Batumi. This operates within a domain where Georgia's deterrence capabilities are inherently

limited, following the post-2008 downsizing of naval capabilities into a restricted patrol-and-coast-guard formation<sup>37</sup>. Conversely, external pressures converge with Georgia's internal vulnerabilities. The dispute over the legitimacy of governance and the diminishing influence of the long-standing Euro-Atlantic alliance in Georgia provides Moscow with opportunities to exert more cost-effective influence in the region, due to the state's reduced capacity to mobilise international support, maintain resilience, and control escalation narratives<sup>38</sup>. This coupling of external exposure and internal vulnerability is further reinforced by the borderisation occurring along the borderline, which, going far beyond the mere restriction of movement, institutionalises separation, normalises coercion at the micro-level, and gradually converts the ABL into a managed security interface under Russia-backed control structures<sup>39</sup>. In parallel, the

<sup>37</sup> Georgia Today. (2021, November 4). *Black Sea security and Georgian coastal defense*. Georgia Today. <https://georgiatoday.ge/black-sea-security-and-georgian-coastal-defense/>

<sup>38</sup> (2024, June 24). *EU to downgrade Georgia ties and mull finance freeze, Borrell says*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-downgrade-georgia-ties-mull-finance-freeze-borrell-says-2024-06-24/>

<sup>39</sup> Council of Europe. (2025, November 7). *Consolidated report on the conflict in Georgia (April–September 2025)* (SG/Inf(2025)37). Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/pdf/0912594880293c83>

already-mentioned “creeping annexation” mechanism, pursued through legal harmonisation, security integration, and the deepening of Russia's role in the Sukhumi region, consolidates Abkhazia’s dependence while reducing Tbilisi’s room for manoeuvre<sup>40</sup>.

The recent developments in the conflict and the influence of the “Ukraine factor” further obscure the distinction between Georgia’s declared neutrality and the actual regional targeting strategies. With Russian military assets in Abkhazia potentially involved in supporting operations or offering sanctuary, Ukraine has both political and operational motivations to regard such nodes as legitimate military targets, a stance publicly indicated by Kyiv in response to the Ochamchire plans<sup>41</sup>, targets which are, however, considered integral parts of Georgian sovereign territory by international law and the overwhelming majority of sovereign states. Despite

---

<sup>40</sup> EADaily. (2026, January 2). *Russia has changed its policy on Abkhazia and South Ossetia: results and trends*. EADaily. <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2026/01/02/russia-has-changed-its-policy-on-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-r-esults-and-trends>

<sup>41</sup> Ostiller, N. (2024, September 24). *Russia continues construction of a naval base in occupied Abkhazia, Ukraine hints it will be a legitimate target*. *The Kyiv Independent*. <https://kyivindependent.com/russia-continues-construction-of-naval-base-in-occupied-abkhazia-ukraine-hinted-it-will-be-a-legitimate-target/>

creating a non-trivial risk of spillover (considering miscalculations, debris incidents, or escalation dynamics), Russia’s use of occupied space can import the war’s targeting logic into Georgia’s immediate neighbourhood<sup>42</sup>. Furthermore, domestic politics amplifies the dilemma. Georgia’s political polarisation and the deterioration of the EU/Western relationship, sealed by the 2024–2028 accession freeze decision and the ensuing protest cycle<sup>43</sup>, have made the “second front narrative” as one of the most powerful tools in the agenda-setting of the government. This narrative, frequently articulated by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze<sup>44</sup>, reframes Georgia’s refusal to align with Western sanctions as a necessary measure to avoid being dragged into a 'second front' of the Ukraine war, a rhetorical strategy that effectively

---

<sup>42</sup> Goncharova, O. (2025, February 1). *Russia's new naval base raises fears of Georgia's involvement in Ukraine war*, *WSJ reports*. *The Kyiv Independent*. <https://kyivindependent.com/russias-new-naval-base-raises-fears-of-georgias-involvement-in-ukraine-war-wsj-reports/>

<sup>43</sup> *The Government of Georgia has frozen the process of EU accession negotiations*. (2024). *Newshub Georgia*. <https://newshub.ge/en/news/world/the-government-of-georgia-has-frozen-the-process-of-eu-accession-negotiations>

<sup>44</sup> Imedi News. (2025, December 3). *Georgian PM alleges external calls for “second front” amid war in Ukraine*. <https://info.imedi.ge/en/politics/7864/georgian-pm-alleges-external-calls-for-second-front-amid-war-in-ukraine>

delegitimises the opposition while justifying the 2024–2028 EU accession freeze.

The nexus between military posturing and connectivity initiatives constitutes the most crucial domain, particularly in relation to tangible economic risks. As Eurasian trade experienced a substantial rerouting away from Russian territory following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Middle Corridor through the South Caucasus emerged as a pivotal strategic alternative<sup>45</sup>. However, this transit opportunity risks simultaneously functioning as a profound vulnerability, as the militarisation of occupied Abkhazia allows Moscow to calibrate pressure on Georgia's gateway ambitions without resorting to overt escalation. The examples within these terms are numerous, including projects such as the Constanta-Poti ferry line<sup>46</sup>. While these projects are presented as practical measures to potentially enhance EU-Georgia relations, they remain highly sensitive to regional

---

<sup>45</sup> World Bank Group. (2023). *Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and investments to triple freight volumes and halve travel time by 2030*. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/content/bitstreams/7e6a216e-eb56-4783-ba1b-b7621abdcd9/content>

<sup>46</sup> Civil.ge. (2023, June 29). *Romania, Georgia launch ferry service*. Civil.ge. <https://civil.ge/archives/549979>

perceptions of security. The mere presence of Russian naval assets in adjacent areas exerts a significant deterrent influence, evidenced by increased war-risk insurance premiums and a general reluctance among Western long-term investors, who fear the potential transfer of Ukrainian targeting strategies into Georgian waters<sup>47 48</sup>.

This friction is also best illustrated by the trajectory of the Anaklia deep-sea port. Positioned as the potential anchor in East-West connectivity, Anaklia development has become inextricably entangled in geopolitical signalling and domestic frictions. Particularly, the physical proximity of the Russian naval expansion at Ochamchire, located only thirty-five kilometres from the port site, casts a further permanent shadow over the project's viability<sup>49</sup>.

---

<sup>47</sup> Saul, J. (2025, December 4). *War insurance costs spike for ship owners as Black Sea threats grow, sources say*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/war-insurance-costs-spike-ship-owners-black-sea-threats-grow-sources-say-2025-12-04/>

<sup>48</sup> OECD (2011), *Development in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264113039-en>.

<sup>49</sup> Caspian Policy Center. (2024, July 22). *Georgia's Black Sea coast: The changing tide of Russian and Chinese presence*. <https://caspianpolicy.org/research/georgia/georgias-black-sea-coast-the-changing-tide-of-russian-and-chinese-presence>

The decision to cease Western-led developments in Anaklia effectively exemplifies a scenario in which Georgia relinquishes its competitive advantage to Russian pathways, thereby facilitating a substantial inflow of Chinese investment, as evidenced by the registration of nearly 300 Chinese companies in the country by late 2024<sup>50</sup>. This proximity-driven deterrence elucidates the recent transition towards non-Western investment partners, as Tbilisi progressively perceives Chinese capital not merely as an economic imperative but as a prospective geopolitical safeguard against Russian interference that Western security assurances have been unable to neutralise<sup>51</sup>. By destabilising infrastructural projects and rehabilitating less visible routes, such as the Kodori Gorge and secondary airfields, like the Pskhu corridor, Abkhazia remains, in this way, a deeply integrated Russian bastion, effectively stripping Tbilisi of its ability to treat the occupation as a bounded local issue.

---

<sup>50</sup> JAM News. (2024, July 17). *What did Georgia lose by halting Anaklia Port project?* <https://jam-news.net/what-did-georgia-lose-by-halting-anaklia-port-project/>

<sup>51</sup> Menabde, G. (2024, June 6). *Georgia's Anaklia deep-water port becomes Chinese geopolitical project.* *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/georgias-anaklia-deep-water-port-becomes-chinese-geopolitical-project/>

## 4.2. Turkey: straits custodianship and escalation management

Regarding Ankara, Abkhazia is of lesser concern concerning recognition and sovereignty issues; instead, it is more entangled in a basin architecture problem that risks challenging Ankara's preferred order in the Black Sea, where limited escalation, restrained reinforcement, and maritime stability are maintained through manageable legal instruments<sup>52</sup>. That order is anchored in Turkey's custodianship of the Montreux Convention<sup>53</sup>, which has turned the post-2022 Black Sea into a straits-governed theatre where the ceiling on non-littoral naval presence functions as an escalation-management tool as much as a legal regime<sup>54</sup>.

However, Russia's intensified military presence along the Abkhazian border,

---

<sup>52</sup> Üstün, Ç. (2022). *Turkey in the Black Sea: Is a balancing act still possible?* (JOINT Brief No. 18). CIDOB – Barcelona Centre for International Affairs. <https://www.cidob.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/JOINT%20Brief%20n%C2%BA%2018.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). *Implementation of the Montreux Convention.* <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-the-montreux-convention.en.mfa>

<sup>54</sup> Brooks, T. A. (2022, March). *Turkey, the Montreux, Convention, and Russian Navy transits of the Turkish Straits.* *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, 148(3). <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/march/turkey-montreux-convention-and-russian-navy-transits-turkish>

marked by the operationalisation of Oчамchire, enhances the Kremlin's strategic options in the region. By establishing facilities in Sukhumi, Moscow secures maritime redundancy and dispersal capabilities that obviate the need to transit through the Turkish Straits, thereby effectively circumventing the restrictions imposed by Turkey on non-littoral and belligerent naval forces. This shift risks dragging Ankara into a Montreaux Dilemma, in which Russia's incremental expansion along occupied coastal spaces makes Ankara's neutrality and careful escalation management harder to sustain as policy. If Moscow achieves a de facto naval monopoly in the eastern Black Sea via Abkhazia, Turkey's role as the regional balancer is diminished.

Regarding Turkey, beyond the naval theatre, Abkhazia indirectly poses a security concern to Ankara, as it creates a corridor security risk. Tbilisi serves as Turkey's vital gateway to the South Caucasus and Central Asia within the framework of the "Middle Corridor." The proximity of Russian-controlled Abkhazia to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway renders the territory a geopolitical choke point. Any destabilisation spillover from Abkhazia into "mainland" Georgia jeopardises the credibility of these

east-west energy and trade routes, which are crucial for Turkey's aspiration to establish itself as a global energy hub.

The strategic scenario is then further complicated by the profound influence of the Abkhaz diaspora in Ankara. With hundreds of thousands of citizens of Abkhaz descent, Ankara performs a delicate balancing act, in which domestic pressure pushes for maintaining informal "backdoor" connectivity to Sukhumi, establishing itself as the second commercial partner in the region beyond Russia<sup>55</sup>. The friction point of this policy is "seizure diplomacy" with the recurring cycle of Georgian authorities detaining Turkish-linked vessels accused of violating the Law on Occupied Territories<sup>56 57</sup>. The challenge for Ankara is to navigate these incidents with high-level pragmatism, depoliticising the seizures to sustain the

---

<sup>55</sup> Rukhadze, V. (2015, October 1). *Defying Georgia, Turkey gradually cultivates its influence in separatist Abkhazia*. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/defying-georgia-turkey-gradually-cultivates-its-influence-in-separatist-abkhazia/>

<sup>56</sup> Işık, Y. (2021, October 29). *A storm brews over the Black Sea: Turkey's contradictory maritime policy*. Middle East Institute. <https://mei.edu/publication/storm-brews-over-black-sea-turkeys-contradictory-maritime-policy/>

<sup>57</sup> Parliament of Georgia. (2008). *Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories* (Document No. 431). LEPL Legislative Herald of Georgia. <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/19132?publication=6>

broader Turkey-Georgia strategic alliance while managing domestic outcry from the diaspora. Furthermore, the late 2025 resumption of the Tranzon-Sochi ferry link functions as an additional crucial proxy for this connectivity, offering a controlled conduit for movement while avoiding direct legal confrontation over Abkhaz waters, yet simultaneously acknowledging the region's socio-economic significance.

Ultimately, while the Montreaux Convention remains nowadays Ankara's primary instrument of regional stability, Russia's pursuit of in-basin influence, anchored in the maritime node of Ochamchire, threatens to circumvent the legal ceilings Turkey uses to prevent naval escalation. The concrete policy response to this structural dilemma is Turkey's pivot to functional risk governance. The leading role in Initiatives such as the MCM BLACK SEA Task Group moved Ankara to operationalise maritime security through a strictly littoral format, without providing a pretext for non-regional naval intervention<sup>58</sup>. Finally, by considering Sukhumi as a regulated grey zone, Ankara utilises its diaspora as a soft-power

stabiliser. This enables Turkey to sustain the "seizure diplomacy" backchannel with Tbilisi—de-escalating maritime detentions while ensuring that the Russian-supported enclave remains a commercial and cultural dependency of the Turkish Black Sea rim rather than a purely military outpost for Moscow.

### **4.3. NATO–EU: The Eastern Rim Challenge**

NATO and Western involvement in the Abkhaz issue began with the 2003 Rose Revolution and expanded following the 2008 Russian conflict, when commitments were made to confer membership prospects on Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit. The accession of Bulgaria and Romania, coupled with the consequent diminution of Russian influence in the Black Sea region, alongside the growing interest from Kiev and Tbilisi in NATO membership, has inevitably led to confrontations with the Kremlin in both Georgia and Ukraine.

However, due to the wartime contingency and the increasing significance of the South Caucasus, Abkhazia has transitioned from being primarily regarded as a “Georgian file” to being recognised as a matter of strategic importance for the Black Sea region. Notably, both the 2024

---

<sup>58</sup> Daily Sabah. (2026, January 12). *Turkish Navy begins Black Sea mission amid Russia-Ukraine war*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkish-navy-begins-black-sea-mission-amid-russia-ukraine-war/news>

Washington Summit <sup>59</sup> and, more explicitly, the 2022 Strategic Concept <sup>60</sup> have reaffirmed the necessity of making significant efforts to secure and uphold both security and freedom of navigation. This is why, as Russian involvement evolves and regional interests expand, Ochamchire is where the fault line becomes operationally relevant. With the freezing of progress on the Ukrainian front and the annexation crisis related to it, Abkhazia enters the NATO threat picture through its coastal value option. With the Black Sea military campaigns conducted through Ukrainian long-range strikes and the Black Sea Fleet being pushed away from Sevastopol, the significance of the eastern rim is augmented.

The operational relevance of the Abkhazian coastline for NATO must not be overlooked, given the Montreux Convention, which, in addition to serving as the primary legal framework governing Black Sea security, underscores the region's substantial interconnectivity. As the war in Ukraine has resulted in the

closure of the Straits to non-litoral naval forces, the Black Sea has effectively become a “bounded basin” in which organic naval endurance constitutes the principal strategic asset. Accordingly, the importance of Ochamchire, rooted in the 49-year military agreement signed in September 2023, is not merely that it provides a new station for the Russian fleet, but that it establishes permanent infrastructure that impairs the Alliance’s capacity to monitor and constrain Russian assets<sup>61 62</sup>.

Moreover, through deep economic and military patronage, Russia has secured a logistical platform to sustain its Mediterranean Squadron, serving as a secondary conduit for the "Syria Express" and ensuring that Russia remains a Mediterranean power despite the closure

---

<sup>59</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2024, July 10). *Washington Summit Declaration*. NATO. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2024/07/10/washington-summit-declaration>

<sup>60</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2022, June 29). *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*. <https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>

---

<sup>61</sup> Tamer, C. (2025). The effects of Russia’s naval base in Abkhazia on Black Sea geopolitics. *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları*, 22, 1557–1569. <https://doi.org/10.56694/karadearas.1700962>

<sup>62</sup> Civil.ge. (2023, October 5). *Bzhania readies to host the Russian Navy, wants to join the Union State*. Civil.ge. <https://civil.ge/archives/562121>

of the Straits<sup>63</sup> <sup>64</sup>. By establishing this depth, Russia seeks to complicate NATO's Southern Flank planning, possibly prompting the Alliance to divert surveillance and deterrence resources from the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean to monitor a coastline that was once considered a stagnant peripheral concern<sup>65</sup>. Analysts suggest this expansion creates a 'double-front' surveillance burden, where NATO ISR assets must account for new Russian A2/AD capabilities on the Black Sea's eastern rim while simultaneously managing threats in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>66</sup> <sup>67</sup>.

---

<sup>63</sup> Baev, P., Galeotti, M., Gorenburg, D., Herd, G. P., & Rácz, A. (2024). *Russia's end state: Assad deposed; What are the implications for Russia?* (SCSS FY25 #03). George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-series/strategic-competition-seminar-series-fy25/russias-end-state-assad-deposed-what-are-implications-russia/>

<sup>64</sup> Baev, P., Gaber, Y., Gorenburg, D., & Herd, G. P. (2024, March 12). *Russia end state: Battle for the Black Sea* (FY24 SCSS#6 Summary). George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2024-03/C%20-%20FY24-SCSS%236-Summary-FINAL-PDF.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> Tsereteli, M. (2024, February 6). *US Black Sea strategy: The Georgian connection*. Center for European Policy Analysis. <https://cepa.org/article/us-black-sea-strategy-the-georgian-connection/>

<sup>66</sup> Harangozo, T. (2025). *The war in Ukraine and mounting economic challenges in the greater Black Sea region* (017 ESCTD). NATO Parliamentary Assembly. <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-black-sea-report-harangozo-017-esctd>

<sup>67</sup> Lancaster, M. (2023, October 7). *Troubled waters – How Russia's war in Ukraine changes Black Sea*

Furthermore, as in the cases of Georgia and Turkey, the Abkhazian fault line is increasingly influencing energy corridors and the trans-Caspian trade artery that NATO and the EU have identified as essential assets for Western strategic autonomy. Patronage models in Abkhazia allow Russia to deliberately destabilise these purposes by weaponising the area's geography, placing naval and electronic warfare assets just 30 kilometres from the Anaklia deep-sea port. This poses a permanent threat to the security of energy and critical minerals supplies <sup>68</sup>. For NATO, this presents a quintessential “gray zone” challenge wherein Russia may leverage its Abkhazian platform to apply sub-threshold pressure on international commerce without provoking a formal military response. As the conflict progresses, the harmonisation of legal and transport regimes diminishes transaction costs for the Kremlin, whilst simultaneously complicating international oversight and legal attribution.

---

*security* (020 DSCFC). NATO Parliamentary Assembly. <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2023-black-sea-security-report-lancaster-020-dscfc>

<sup>68</sup> Lezhava, N. & Hartwell, L. (2024). *Russia and China at Odds Over Black Sea Ambitions in Georgia*. Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). Available at: <https://cepa.org/article/russia-and-china-at-odds-over-black-sea-ambitions/>

This dynamic also reinforces the “Russian veto” over Georgian accession, as the Alliance remains particularly cautious about absorbing members with active territorial disputes that could trigger Article 5 obligations<sup>69</sup>. By maintaining a permanent military presence in Abkhazia, Moscow effectively weaponises NATO's collective defence clause, turning occupied territories into an "Article 5 tripwire" that deters Western integration through the threat of immediate, large-scale escalation.

Taken together, the geography of the Abkhaz fault line transforms a formerly “managed” sovereignty crisis into a dynamic factor influencing NATO's regional posture and strategic interests. This zone witnesses the intersection of basing redundancy, ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) demands, and sub-threshold coercive measures. Moreover, this geographical positioning enables sustained endurance and pressure on connectivity and energy corridors without provoking overt escalation, thereby raising the cost of engagement. Consequently, by maintaining a permanent military platform within an unresolved territorial dispute, Moscow reinforces a

structural constraint on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, effectively converting occupation into a predictable deterrent against accession. In this context, Abkhazia functions as a fault line, not solely in operational terms but also within the long-term calculus of NATO's enlargement and deterrence strategies.

## **CONCLUSIONS:FROM SEPARATION TO LEVERAGE**

The evidence presented in this report substantiates the unequivocal conclusion that the Abkhazia-Russia patronage relationship has advanced significantly beyond a mere post-secessionist survival agreement, evolving into a phase characterised by strategic utility as projected. In this emerging configuration, Sukhumi can no longer be classified merely as a “frozen conflict” nor viewed solely as Georgia's domestic concern.

The region has fundamentally transitioned into a new stage, serving as a logistical and military hub, demonstrating its capacity to enhance security for Kremlin interests across the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. Additionally, it serves as a flexible outpost through which Moscow can influence the broader operational environment while effectively managing the risks of escalation. This shift aligns with Russia's broader wartime posture and

---

<sup>69</sup> Coffey, L., & Mrachek, A. (2020, October 14). *End the Russian veto on Georgian accession*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/nato-20-2020/end-the-russian-veto-on-georgian-veto-on-georgian-accession/>

necessities, from the flexible transformation under pressure in Ukraine to selective reconfiguration along the post-Soviet periphery after the Nagorno-Karabakh regional readaptation.

The essence of this dynamic resides in the paradox of coercive stability. Through both official and unofficial deepening of military, legal, and institutional integration, Russia has established an entrenched separation while concurrently stabilising borders and command expectations. By employing this predictability regime as an initial measure, the Kremlin has created a condition that enables it to calibrate pressure, thereby transforming Abkhazia into a manageable platform from which it can influence regional risk perceptions and shape Georgia's strategic decisions without resorting to escalation. The multiplier effect is most evident in maritime infrastructure and connectivity. Particularly, developments around Ochamchire and the reopening of Sukhumi Airport signify the consolidation of Russia's presence and endurance in the region. The resulting pressure is dual-faceted: on one hand, it solidifies territorial insecurity, while, simultaneously, imposing economic constraints that undermine confidence and restrict the policy space underpinning the

Euro-Atlantic integration, thereby reinforcing occupation as a de facto veto over long-term projects.

For Turkey and NATO as well, Abkhazia has shifted from a peripheral issue to a fundamental one. While Ankara confronts a so-called "Montreux dilemma", where Russian consolidation along the occupied de facto coastline diminishes the effectiveness of Turkey's legal constraint framework and complicates efforts to manage escalations, the Alliance is consequently drawn into a gray zone challenge. This unresolved territorial dispute hampers enlargement and mandates ongoing risk management.

From a political perspective, international analysis should therefore cease treating the Russian presence in Abkhazia as a static element and instead focus more on risk-governance strategies aimed at reducing Abkhazia's utility as a strategic amplifier and simultaneously curbing the risk of escalation. In scenarios involving deeper integration, such consolidation would likely accelerate and become increasingly irreversible. Practically speaking, this would not necessarily manifest as a single pivotal moment but rather as a gradual establishment of permanence, driven by sustained momentum around coastal strategic nodes

and more routine logistical activities. This trajectory would also be evidenced by the stabilisation and densification of civil connectivity through the aforementioned logistical infrastructures. Durable routes and institutionalised mobility would integrate Abkhazia more closely into broader administrative and economic networks. Over time, legislative harmonisation and command integration would represent the threshold at which dependence transforms into operational interoperability within Russia's security framework, thereby enhancing Abkhazia's utility as a platform for nuanced regional pressure. In a context of maintaining the status quo, where coercive stability remains preserved and integration advances incrementally without significant shifts, Abkhazia is at risk of continuing to generate option value through accumulation rather than expansion. The strategic impact would still be regionally significant, as even limited patronage consolidation can result in ongoing uncertainty for Georgia and, more broadly, for the region's connectivity agenda, particularly where proximity may be exploited through market reactions, risk perception, and the gradual normalisation of a de facto constraint on sovereign development options.

A different and less likely pathway involves instead a renewed destabilisation, driven either by domestic frictions within Abkhazia, as resistance to sovereignty-sensitive measures (as happened recently due to energy shortages and extremely pro-Russian laws), or by broader Black-Sea volatility stemming from wartime spillover dynamics that reintroduce crisis cycles. Crucially, instability here would not contradict the logic of patronage; rather, it could serve to reinforce it. Incidents of unrest, elite fragmentation, or governance stress may justify implementing tighter security measures and deeper integration, articulated within the framework of restoring "stability." In such a trajectory, the regional effects are likely to manifest less through direct interdiction and more through increased risk premiums, elevated insurance costs, investor hesitations, and delays impacting critical strategic nodes. These dynamics would amplify the multiplier effect precisely at moments when the region's policy domain is most susceptible.

Ultimately, the evolution of the Abkhazia–Russia patronage model serves as a stark reminder that de facto states are no longer peripheral anomalies, but central instruments in the contestation of the regional order. By successfully

operationalising this 'security multiplier,' Moscow has effectively turned a localised territorial dispute into a structural lever of regional hegemony. Consequently, addressing the Abkhazian node is no

longer merely a matter of conflict resolution, but a prerequisite for restoring the strategic integrity of the Black Sea and the wider Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

# **From Separation to Leverage: Abkhazia as Russia's Security Multiplier on the Black Sea**

## **Report**

Author: Alberto Carrer

Alberto Carrer is a Master's degree graduate in European and International Studies from the School of International Studies at the University of Trento. His main areas of expertise include security and geopolitics in the South Caucasus, ethnic conflicts, and regional cooperation. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy, International Studies, and Economics from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and has conducted field research in Georgia.

## **Disclaimer**

The views and analyses expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent the official positions of any government, international organisation, or institution with which the author is or has been affiliated.

## **About Topchubashov Center**

Topchubashov Center is an independent non-profit think tank based in Baku, Azerbaijan. It covers the spheres of international affairs, geopolitics, security and energy with the focus on Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia and Middle East. The Center aims to establish the standards of high-quality impartial research and create an international network of authors sharing similar values and worldview.

© Topchubashov Center 2026 All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.