

FROM PEOPLE TO PAWNS

*A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO THE DEBATE ON INTERNALLY DISPLACED
PEOPLE IN ETHNICALLY DIVIDED GEORGIA.*



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ABSTRACT ¹

Georgia has struggled with frozen ethnic conflicts and protracted internal displacement for over thirty years. This thesis studies the different trajectories that the debate on internally displaced people (IDP) in Georgia, and the *de facto* states Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has taken. As the conflict plays in the common neighbourhood of Russia and the EU, it is often analysed from a grand geopolitical perspective. I argue that the different trajectories of the debate can best be explained through a constructivist approach to feminist geopolitical theory. With this theoretical framework, I show that the conflict and the IDP debate are best understood by studying the interaction and transformation between the international, national and local levels of discourse. To understand the different layers separately and in combination with each other, I used a collection of international reports, speeches, memos, and IDP testimonies. With this approach, we can notice that the influence spheres of Russia and Europe significantly outline the shape of how the IDP debate developed but that national and local levels at certain times have tremendous transformative power over the conflict, thus creating different trajectories.

Keywords: Internally displaced people, ethnic conflict, feminist geopolitics, constructivism, spheres of influence.

¹ The picture on the front page is by photographer Peter Schön, of the Tskhaltubo IDP collective centre in Georgia. Peter did a photo project for the Danish Refugee Council in 2011. The photo was later published in the *B&W Magazine 2012* Issue No. 88, in which the photo won a merit award. I want to thank Peter for allowing me to use this picture for my thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|--|
| ABL | Administrative boundary line |
| CIS | Commonwealth of Independent States |
| CSO | Civil Society Organisation |
| EaP | Eastern Partnership |
| EU | European Union |
| ENP | European Neighbourhood Policy |
| EUMM EU | Monitoring Mission in Georgia |
| GID | Geneva International Discussions |
| GoG | Government of Georgia |
| GPP | Geneva Peace Process |
| ICG | International Crisis Group |
| IIDMC | Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre |
| IDP | Internally displaced person |
| INGO | International non-governmental organisation |
| IO | International Organisation |
| IPRM | Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism |
| JCC | Joint Controlling Commission |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| NREP | Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy |
| MRA | Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation, and Refugees |
| OSCE | Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe |
| SOI | Sphere of Influence |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNGA | United Nations General Assembly |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Program |
| UNOMIG | United Nations Observer Mission Georgia |
| USA | United States of America |

INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2020, news of violent conflict in Nagorno Karabakh received international attention. Clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan marked a new episode of war since the previous conflict in 1988-1994. Nagorno Karabakh's situation is often seen as part of a larger group of so-called 'frozen conflicts' in post-Soviet states in the Caucasus region.² The Caucasus presents a unique geopolitical arrangement as with the break-up of the Soviet Union, conflicts between ethnic groups, especially those between ethnic populations without states, have become one of the leading security issues in the region.

The recent flare-up in Nagorno Karabakh can be interpreted as a sign that there might be no such thing as frozen conflicts. In the neighbouring republic of Georgia, two similar frozen conflicts with the *de facto* states Abkhazia and South Ossetia have also been protracted since the early nineties.³ Even though there is currently no direct violence between Georgia and the separatist states, there have been flare-ups in the last twenty years, and there is still much tension with lingering complications. However, behind the grand geopolitical conflict are large numbers of ethnic Georgian Internally Displaced People (IDP) who fled from Abkhazia and South Ossetia to *de jure* Georgia and live in constant anticipation of a possible return to their home regions. The political debate on the return of these IDPs to Abkhazia and South Ossetia remains a contested national and international topic.

In 2017, there were 273,765 registered IDPs in Georgia, constituting around 6,5% of its population.⁴ These are IDPs from the first conflict in the 1990s and the conflict from 2008.⁵ Although the Georgian national policy towards IDPs has evolved over the past three decades, it has always had a primary focus on territorial integrity and returning IDPs to their home region. In this regard, there has been little to no differentiation between the treatment of IDPs from Abkhazia or South Ossetia. It is largely accepted that any chance of real return of IDPs is connected to the creation of lasting peace in Georgia. However, the official peace process

2 Ruben Tavanier, 'Nagorno Karabakh: The Conflict in Perspective', *Global Risk Insights*, (25 October 2020), [<https://globalriskinsights.com/2020/10/nagorno-karabakh-the-conflict-in-perspective/>], accessed on 13 December 2020.

3 This thesis uses the terms 'Abkhazia' and 'South Ossetia' as this terminology is used in international literature. The terms 'breakaway regions' and *de facto* states are also used to refer to these territories. Terms such as 'de-facto authorities' refer to the leadership of the breakaway regions since the states are not internationally recognised.

4 United Nations General Assembly, *The Secretary-General's Report: Status of internally displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia*, (Geneva, 3 May 2017)

5, [<https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/status-internally-displaced-persons-and-refugees-abkhazia-georgia-and-tskhinvali-2>], accessed on 19 May 2021.

5 For a precise timeline of key events see Appendix I.

became entrenched as parties could not come together on the core issues of status and IDP-return. Nevertheless, the nature of repatriation with the two *de facto* states has evolved differently; whereas Abkhazia for a long time permitted some possibility of return of internally displaced persons, South Ossetia has opposed this much more harshly.⁶

This thesis investigates why this debate on IDP returnees between Georgia and the breakaway states has developed differently. I hypothesise that this can only be explained through the interaction of different levels of discourse and not only from the international geopolitical perspective. With a constructivist approach to the conflict, I show that although the influence spheres may limit the possible trajectories of the conflicts development, the breakaway states and even local communities still have the agency and transformative power to determine the outcomes. The goal of this thesis is to analyse the conflict in the European-Russian common neighbourhood and explain the different directions the IDP debate has taken between Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia. In doing this, I also address the following subjects: the context of the inter-ethnic conflict between Georgia and the two secessionist regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia; the situation of IDPs in Georgia; and the components of the geopolitical collision between European and Russian interference.

This research project is a relevant contribution to the existing literature for multiple reasons. It adds to the existing works on the two separatist states, such as Adam Lenton's 'Creating De Facto States', which looks at separatist states' state-building narratives.⁷ Furthermore, it contributes to the borderland research of this region, such as the works of Jussi Laine 'Reframing Political Space in post-cold war borders' and Minna Lundgren's 'Riskscapes'.⁸ However, more so than contributing to the research fields mentioned above, this research addresses the gap in research on ethnic conflict in Georgia. Research on the ethnic conflict of Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia mainly focuses on the political and military perspective of borderization and the larger geopolitical narrative.⁹ Articles that do pay attention to other subjects of the ethno-political conflict in Georgia often focus on the economic aspects

⁶ Andre W. M. Gerrits and Max Bader, 'Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution', *East European Politics* 32 (2016) 297–313.

⁷ Adam Lenton, 'Creating *de facto* States: Narrative Frameworks and State Autonomy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia', in: Thomas Krüssmann e.a., *Europe in the Caucasus, Caucasus in Europe Perspectives on the Construction of a Region* (Stuttgart 2019).

⁸ Minna Lundgren, 'Riskscapes: Strategies and Practices Along the Georgian–Abkhazian Boundary Line and Inside Abkhazia', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 33 (2018) 637–654.

⁹ Borderization is the process of restricting or closing off border mobility by economic, military or political means. See; Edward Boyle, 'Borderization in Georgia: Sovereignty Materialized', *Eurasia Border Review* 7 (2017) 1.

and problems of the borderization, such as Minna Lundgren's work on economic mobility along the Georgian–Abkhazian boundary line.

Social research on IDPs from the two secessionist regions exists. However, this research mainly addresses the IDPs' experiences in Georgia, for example, Lela Rekhviashvili's research on survival strategies of the group of IDPs in Georgia over the last twenty years.¹⁰ There is a gap in research regarding debate on the return of IDPs to the two secessionist regions and the role different actors have in this debate. This gap is problematic because research on this topic is highly relevant when designing policies based on understanding the deeper dynamics of population displacement.

The leading security issues in the Caucasus region stem from the conflicts between ethnic groups. These conflicts often have a transnational nature as they take place in the common neighbourhood of Europe and Russia who both have stakes in the region's development. This makes the Caucasus an essential subject of study for conflict researchers in the last thirty years.¹¹ Earlier geopolitical studies of the region focus primarily on the high-level political sphere of influence, specifically the clash of Russian and European influences in the post-Soviet era.

When looking at a topic such as the IDP debate in the ethnic conflict in Georgia, most research is conducted within one of three frameworks: international, national, and local/private level. However, this approach overlooks the reality of how the debate takes on different dimensions when the levels interact with each other. This thesis contributes to this geopolitical narrative in a so-called feminist geopolitical approach. Feminist geopolitics is based on the belief that geopolitical processes are shaped not just by the discourse at the international political level but also by national and local levels, apolitical and private levels.¹² As explained by Massaro and Williams, the benefits of a feminist geopolitical approach are that it dissects

¹⁰ Lela Rekhviashvili, 'Survival strategies of the poor and marginalised: The case of internally displaced people in Georgia', *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 15 (2012) 123–135.

¹¹ Tone Bringa and Hege Toje, (ed.), *Eurasian borderlands: spatialising borders in the aftermath of state collapse*. Approaches to social inequality and difference (New York, 2016); Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands* (Ithaca, 2019); Helena Rytövuori-Apunen (ed.), *Power and conflict in Russia's borderlands: the post-soviet geopolitics of dispute resolution* (2020); Emil Souleimanov, *Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict* (London 2013); Nina Caspersen, 'Separatism and Democracy in the Caucasus', *Survival* 50 (2008) 113–136; Donnacha Ó Beacháin (e.a.), 'Politics within de Facto States' (2017) 21.

¹² Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray, 'Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday: Popular geopolitics 2.0', *Geography Compass* 4 (2010) 1664–1677.

geopolitical power and shows the unique role of such power in interaction with state and local agency.¹³

A lot has been written about secessionist and *de facto* states. To avoid any misconception in this thesis, I clarify here which definitions I use. Secession is defined as 'the attempt by a group or part of a state to withdraw from that state's political or constitutional authority.'¹⁴ When this political entity has subsequently achieved internal 'sovereignty' and declared itself an independent sovereign state but has not (yet) acquired widespread external sovereignty and legitimacy in the international system, it is termed a *de facto* state.¹⁵

Two other concepts that need clarification are 'spheres of influence' and 'power'. Most scholars perceive spheres of influence (SOI) as a hierarchical structure where a foreign power has some degree of control over another state or region within a state and excludes other powers from influencing the same state or region.¹⁶ The term is often used in western politics as an exclusively undemocratic concept limited to powers like Russia and China.¹⁷ For this thesis' sake, I propose a constructivist approach towards spheres of influence. In contrast to realist or rational contractual approaches of international relations, the constructivist method prioritises the social nature of international politics. In this approach, states and their inhabitants are fundamentally social actors. Conflicts are shaped by social networks of interaction on different discourse levels. Constructivism problematises interests based on identities and group norms.¹⁸

Spheres of influence, according to the constructivist approach, are all about agency and actors. Secondary actors, in this case, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allow primary actors like Russia to exercise control and exclusion over their relations with third parties, such as Georgia and the European Union (EU) because they share a high degree of identity compatibility. Control and exclusion mechanisms consist of imposed discourses that convey and reinforce solidarity and attraction between primary and secondary actors.¹⁹ With this approach, it is not

¹³ Vanessa A. Massaro and Jill Williams, 'Feminist Geopolitics: Redefining the Geopolitical, Complicating (In)Security', *Geography Compass* 7 (2013) 569.

¹⁴ Gary Wilson, 'Secession and Intervention in the Former Soviet Space: The Crimean Incident and Russian Interference in Its 'Near Abroad'', *Liverpool Law Review* 37 (2016) 158.

¹⁵ John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal, 'Inside the post-Soviet de facto states: a comparison of attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55 (2014) 424.

¹⁶ Van Jackson, 'Understanding spheres of influence in international politics', *European Journal of International Security* 5 (2020) 255.

¹⁷ Iain Ferguson and Susanna Hast, 'Introduction: The Return of Spheres of Influence?', *Geopolitics* 23 (2018) 277.

¹⁸ Jackson, 'Understanding spheres of influence in international politics', 264.

¹⁹ *Ibidem* 269.

only understandable how the separatist states are situated within the Russian influence sphere, but also how Georgia is situated within the European influence sphere. The analysis the debate concerning the return of IDPs can therefore be analysed in this theoretical context and can help us understand why Abkhazia and South Ossetia have taken two different trajectories in this debate. The social aspect of the constructivist approach is also in line with the previously mentioned feminist geopolitical theory. I explain the relevance of these concepts in the first chapter.

In the debate and the influence spheres different forms of power are at play. Many scholars have attempted to define the different kinds of power in international relations, creating a plethora of typologies. According to Barnett and Duval power is ‘the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate.’²⁰ Power is often seen as notion exclusive to the realist theory of international relations, however constructivist also have different notions of power ranging from Joseph Nye's ‘soft power’ versus ‘hard power’ and Walter Russel Mead’s sweet, sticky and sharp power to Peter van Ham’s concept of social power.²¹

Social power is based on the notion that power is fluid and non-linear; moves through relationships and interaction; and that the exercise of power always takes place in a specific social situation, ultimately depending on the perception of others.²² The EUs influence on Georgia can be seen as a form of social power. This notion of power is essential for this research because it shows the importance and value of researching discourse and debate on different power levels which helps explain different developments in the IDP debate.

The sources are limited to English and Russian literature. Whereas most Georgian policy is translated to English, this is unfortunately not the case for the Abkhazian and South Ossetian perspective.²³ Here, I rely on literature or reports from NGOs and international organisations. Because of this, the scope of this research is more focussed on the Georgian perspective.

I focus my research on three levels of political communication or discourse. The first is the grand geopolitical level of regional authorities such as the UN, EU and Russia. This level

²⁰ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, ‘Power in International Politics’, *International Organization* 59 (2005) 42.

²¹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* by Joseph S. Nye. (New York 2004); Irina Busygina, *Russia-EU Relations and the Common Neighborhood : Coercion vs. Authority* (London, 2017); Peter van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics* (Amsterdam 2010).

²² Ibidem 3.

²³ The official language in the *de facto* Republic of South Ossetia - the State of Alania, known in Georgia as the Tskhinvali region, is Ossetian, but most citizens also speak Russian or Georgian. In the *de facto* Republic of Abkhazia (“Apsny”), the official recognised languages are Abkhazian and Russian, but large minority groups also speak Georgian, Armenian and Mingrelian.

is primarily supported by reports from international organisations and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Secondly, I look at the sources that give insight into the discourse on the national level. For my research on the IDP debate and conflict between Russia and Georgia, I use selected speeches and memos from the presidents and governments of the different states. Finally, I focus on the level of civil society and the IDPs themselves. For information on the IDPs living in Georgia and the chances of repatriation, I use several NGO reports and reports from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and United Nations. I also use a series of IDP testimonies to colour the narrative sketched by the reports named above and support the feminist geopolitical approach. There is a source limitation here as the IDP discourse, when not institutionalised in local grassroots and NGOs, is predominantly informal and therefore leaves little paper trail compared to the official discourse on national and international level. It is therefore harder to highlight the discourse in this local level. I overcome this by focusing on partially institutionalised IDP participation such as local IDP NGOs and drawing on pre-existing literature and surveys.

More IDPs living in Georgia come from Abkhazia than South Ossetia, because it is a larger region with a larger population, but also because it had a more heterogenous population and a larger part of its population was ethnic Georgian. Even though ethnic Abkhazians are a narrow majority in Abkhazia, there is a considerable group of ethnic Georgians, Armenians and Russians living in the region, even after the majority of ethnic Georgians fled the region in the early nineties and in 2008. On the other hand, South Ossetia is much more ethnically homogenous and has a smaller ethnic Georgian population. Because of the larger region and the scale, IDPs from Abkhazia have been favoured in both the political and academic world. The sources such as analysis reports of national and international organisations focus primarily on Abkhazian IDPs. Because of this, my comparison of the IDPs from the regions is also asymmetrical.

When handling the various sources named above, political bias is considered. The selected speeches and documents from the Russian and Georgian states have a particular political agenda supporting or rejecting the status of the *de facto* states. The UNHCR reports, even though they are meant to be a more factual representation of the situation, also have a political bias to a certain extent as they represent a western institutional influence. This bias means that they measure situations such as the Georgian conflict along western norms and standards. Furthermore, sources betray bias by the use of certain names and terms for the regions and IDPs.

Before diving into the different discourse levels which entail this conflict, I elaborate on the analytical framework for the comparison. The first chapter focuses on the constructivist approach and feminist geopolitical theory to spheres of influence in international relations. This framework is a roadmap for analysis in later chapters. The subsequent chapters look at the comparison from three different levels starting at the supranational level in chapter two, following the national level in chapter three and finally the IDP/civil society level in chapter four. The comparison centres on the developments in the twenty-first century with a historical retrospection where necessary. This together serves to answer the question as to why the debates on IDPs between Georgia and the *de facto* states have developed differently and why this is best through interaction of different levels of discourse.

1 CONSTRUCTIVISM & FEMINIST GEOPOLITICS

This chapter focuses on the theory and method utilised in this research project. The conflict between Georgia and the separatist states is not just domestic; it is deeply connected to the spheres of influences of regional actors and is therefore best understood as a transnationalist issue. In the introduction, I proposed researching not just one of these levels of conflict but all of them in connection to each other. Before doing so, I explain why a constructivist approach is best suited for this research; why I use the distinctions ‘social power’ and ‘spheres of influence’; and why a feminist scholarly approach to this geopolitical conflict is the most effective approach to understand all scales of power discourse in the *de facto* state conflict in Georgia.

A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

As stated in the introduction, the conflict between Georgia and the *de facto* states is often studied from a geopolitical perspective. Classical geopolitics studies how power is strengthened or weakened by geographical arrangements such as human-made or natural boundaries, spatial networks, or natural resources.²⁴ However, critical and feminist geopolitics argue that scholars should not limit their analysis to the macro-level of political power but rather all scales of the conflict to truly understand geopolitical conflicts.

Critical geopolitics emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to classical geopolitics. This critical research method emphasises political texts and speeches related to the spatialisation of international politics by elites. Spatialisation entails the role of geographical context in explaining political behaviour.²⁵ The study of political elite discourses represented a significant step away from classical geopolitical practices. Critical geopolitics evolved over the next twenty years, and adaptations to this method took form in the shape of popular geopolitics and feminist geopolitics.

²⁴ Gertjan Dijkink, ‘Geopolitics and Religion’, *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Amsterdam 2009) 453.

²⁵ Julian Clark and Alun Jones, ‘The great implications of spatialisation: Grounds for closer engagement between political geography and political science?’, *Geoforum* 45 (2013) 306.

Feminist geopolitics does not reject critical geopolitics but complements it by arguing that the shaping of international politics occurs both in formal and elite discourses and in apolitical and private ones.²⁶ This is why it is relevant to look at the conflict in Georgia not just on the political and international levels but also at the private and local levels. According to Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray, it is the fact that feminist geopolitics challenges the masculinist public-private binary that sets it apart from critical or popular geopolitics.²⁷ However, feminist scholars are not necessarily concerned with the female perspective or other traits attributed to feminism in geopolitical research. As political scientist Steve Pickering explains, feminist geopolitics unpacks geopolitical power by highlighting the role of individuals and communities that are influenced by, push back against, and rewrite geopolitical relations.²⁸ The feminist approach aims to spotlight the of level of local agency, community, and (in)equality to the traditionally power-focused geopolitics. I argue that through the lens of feminist geopolitics, I can perceive the Georgian conflict on all scales: political and apolitical, public, and private – all inherently connected.

A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

This thesis uses the definition of constructivism as the understanding that social reality and knowledge are constructed, and that actors' identities and interests are changeable and created.²⁹ The feminist lens to geopolitics can only be understood if one approaches international relations (IR) in a constructivist manner. For example, realist interpretations of IR are not complementary with the feminist geopolitical notion of agency and the role of informal and apolitical discourse in power relations. Constructivism, on the other hand, matches well with the feminist framework.

Even though there are many definitions of constructivist theory, constructivist scholars in IR agree on Wendt's explanation: 'an ontology that depicts the social world as

²⁶ Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray, 'Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday: Popular geopolitics 2.0', *Geography Compass* 4 (2010) 1666.

²⁷ Dittmer and Gray, 'Popular Geopolitics 2.0', 1666.

²⁸ Steve Pickering, 'Feminist Approaches to Geopolitics: Beyond the Geopolitics of Gender', in: Steve Pickering ed., *Understanding Geography and War: Misperceptions, Foundations, and Prospects* (New York 2017) 74.

²⁹ Stefano Guzzini, 'A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 6 (2000) 149.

intersubjectively and collectively meaningful structures and processes'.³⁰ In IR, constructivism concerns itself with the role of identities and norms in the constitution of national interests and social constructions of new territorial and non-territorial transnational regions.³¹ Constructivist theories in IR agree on the critical notion that 'ideas and discourse matter' and that norms, values, and identity have a strong influence on political relations.³² Furthermore, these identities and collective memories are themselves constructed. This notion is what makes IR constructivism essential to the feminist geopolitical approach.

A contribution of constructivism to IR that is relevant to the understanding of the IDP debate in Georgia is the notion that social communication and practical rationality in politics depend on language. As a socially constructed phenomenon, language is a tool for spreading and institutionalising ideas and can thereby help clarify social (and political) life.³³ An example of this is visible in how the separatist states use the term 'refugees' and Georgia uses the term 'internally displaced'. Language extends beyond the mere transmission of information; through discourse we construct social meanings.³⁴ The words that someone uses inevitably imply and evoke specific meanings and perceptions. This is why it is crucial to look at language and discourse on the different power levels of the Georgian conflict and the IDP debate.

IR Constructivism goes beyond the primary ontological position that (global) politics are socially constructed because it emphasises identity and collectively shared norms. When looking at the IDP debate, which includes international, national and local discourses, all levels interact and must be understood individually and as a whole. The constructivist approach helps with understanding the construction of discourse in the levels of debate. The following paragraph shows the different mechanisms of power in this conflict that need to be considered while researching this.

³⁰ Alexander Wendt, 'Constructing International Politics', *International Security* 20 (1995) 73.

³¹ Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, *Handbook of international relations* (London 2013) 136.

³² van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, 47.

³³ Carlsnaes, Risse and Simmons, *Handbook of international relations*, 125.

³⁴ Franco Zappetini, 'Transnationalism as an Index to Construct European Identities: An Analysis of 'Trans European Discourses' in: Christian Karner and Monika Kopytowska, *National Identity and Europe in Times of Crisis: Doing and Undoing Europe* (Bingley, 2017) 19.

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

A large part of the geopolitical conflict in Georgia and the plight of the IDPs in Georgia has to do with influence and power. Power can take many forms: the *de facto* states enforce power when restricting or loosening border passage, while Georgia can enforce power with economic restrictions or support. However, there is also the power of larger regional actors to consider in this conflict. Examples include the European Union promising economic or political support to Georgia when they assimilate to EU norms or Moscow offering pensions and passports to South Ossetian citizens. These examples show the often-ignored interaction between the local individual level, national and international level. The boundaries between local, national, and international are not closed and enmeshed but open, porous and interactive; they are shaped and transformed by different configurations of power relations.³⁵ It is vital to the understanding of this transnationalist notion that these various strands of power on the different levels interact with one another, and through this interaction, they transform and cease to be just the sum of their components.

That power travels between the many planes in the Georgian conflict is testimony to the complexity of power relations. Over the last twenty years, scholars have unpacked many different forms of power; the traditional notion of hard power based on economic or military means has been challenged by scholars from multiple disciplines. This does not mean that the notion of hard power has been discarded; the restricting and militarising of borders by the *de facto* states is a form of hard power. Yet, with the growing importance of less territorially and state-based power systems comes the need to recontextualise and transpose power.

A vital contribution to this process of recontextualization is the concept of social power. For this research, I use the definition proposed by sociologist and political scientist Peter van Ham. As explained in the introduction of this thesis, social power is ‘the ability to set standards and define norms and values that are considered legitimate and desirable, without resorting to coercion or payment’.³⁶ It goes beyond Nye’s notion of soft power because it involves communicative power and thus draws attention to the power of norm advocacy, framing, agenda-setting, and the influence of communication.³⁷

³⁵ Patricia Clavin, ‘Defining Transnationalism’, *Contemporary European History* 14 (2005) 439.

³⁶ van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, 8.

³⁷ *Ibidem* 8.

Dominant normative expectations also exist on international level and can be understood as spheres of influence. I understand spheres of influence from a constructivist perspective which rejects the realist conception of spheres of influence. Realism views spheres of influence as the geographical extent of a great power's military dominance for the purpose of control and exclusion.³⁸ In this perspective influence is maintained on secondary actors through fear and coercive power.³⁹ In contrast, the constructivist approach to spheres of influence assumes an imbalance in the relationship between primary and secondary actors that is maintained through consent and coercion, but it also considers attraction and agency. The influence the EU and Russia have over Georgia and the separatist states is largely based on social power. Although hard power in the form of military and economic power are also present.

The Gramscian concept of "hegemonic socialisation" allows us to better understand the spheres of influence in this study. Although Antonio Gramsci's concept mainly focussed on cultural dominance and was intended for domestic society, his notion of hegemony is very similar to how the spheres of influence work in IR, specifically how Russia and the EU operate in their common neighbourhood and concerning the Georgian conflict. This hegemony uses subtle, less recognisable means that closely resemble what we recognise as social power. Gramsci presents us with the notion that acceptance by the masses of the ethics, norms, and behavioural rules of the society in which they live is the most profound manifestation of dominance.⁴⁰

In the following chapters, I argue that the *de facto* states and Georgia can be seen as connected through different spheres of influence. By understanding SOIs as modern-day Gramscian hegemony, one rejects the notion that the interests of a group or state are solely derived from the distribution of military power or economic domination and instead accept that the group or state is also contingent on agency, norms and social power.⁴¹ In other words, spheres of influence are shared transborder identities between the primary dominant actor, for example, Russia, and the secondary actor, South Ossetia.

³⁸ Van Jackson, 'Understanding spheres of influence in international politics', *European Journal of International Security* 5 (2020) 257.

³⁹ Amitai Etzioni, 'Spheres of Influence: A Reconceptualization', *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 39, nr. 2 (2015) 119.

⁴⁰ van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics* (London 2010) 48-49.

⁴¹ Jackson, 'Understanding spheres of influence in international politics', 262.

CONCLUSION

In the conflict between Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the associated debate on the IDPs, power relations play a decisive role. These power relations interact through the international and political level and the local and public level. Power is constructed and takes place in social transactions; therefore, it is essential to look at discourse between the different actors connected to the conflict. To best interpret the debate on the IDP situation in Georgia, it is vital to look at all layers of the discourse. At the international scale of this debate the power is played out between spheres of influence. These SOIs set the rules of the game within which local and national discourse transform and interact. The following three chapters zoom in on the power relations in the IDP debate in Georgia.

2 THE COMMON NEIGHBOURHOOD

To highlight the interconnectedness between layers of discourse, I first treat each layer separately before analysing where the transformation and interaction took place and discussing its significance for the IDP debate. This chapter focuses on how international politics became increasingly important in the peace negotiations and how colliding spheres of influence impacted the IDP debate in Georgia. I show how international discourse had different impacts on Abkhazia than South Ossetia. Because of the characteristics of international politics, this chapter focuses primarily on formal political, social and economic power relations in official diplomacy.

A PROTRACTED TIME FRAME

This thesis distinguishes between three distinct phases from 1992 to the present, in which different *modus operandi* amongst the international and national actors are discernible. Through the progression of these phases, the peace process and the IDP debate became increasingly entrenched and unproductive. The first phase, spanning the nineties until 2003-2004, is characterised by a relatively unstructured, somewhat contradictory approach by the different parties; the conflict negotiations are unproductive but not yet entrenched. From 2004-2008, the second phase was one of hardening positions, growing polarisation, and haltering dialogue. Finally, from 2008 until now, the third phase is dominated by well-defined positions, full-fledged polarisation, and minimal progress. The influence of international diplomacy in this conflict becomes increasingly important and entrenched. First, I study the two influence spheres of Russian and the EU. Then, I look at the communication methods and actions international actors have used to impact the debate.

INFLUENCING THE COMMON NEIGHBOURHOOD

Although the IDP problem is a domestic subject, there are many international stakeholders involved. Leading international stakeholders in the Georgia conflict are the Russian Federation supported by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the EU partnered with the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the US. The conflict in Georgia became the battleground of two colliding influence spheres connected to the two sides of the debate about ethnic conflict. On one side, we have the Russian dominated sphere with the two separatist states as secondary actors. On the other side is the European sphere with multiple primary western actors but mainly the EU, and Georgia as the secondary actor. The European influence sphere promotes normative democratic expectations and standards, which has increasingly pulled Georgia towards the EU over the last thirty years. On the other side, the Russian Federation promotes dominant normative, ethnic, and cultural expectations and standards that have increasingly attracted the breakaway states over the last three decades. This division into transnational spheres directly impacts the IDP debate, as the more fixed the conflicting parties became in their spheres of influence, the more they polarised, and thus the more unsuccessful the IDP negotiations became.

EUROPEAN UNION AS NORMATIVE POWER

This section shows the interaction between Georgia and the European influence sphere. The relationship between the Georgian government and the EU and its allies has developed over time, but, at least until 2008, both parties considered the unification of Georgia and the return of the IDPs as crucial for a prosperous, democratic constitutional state. Concerning the conflict, the EU favoured a long-term stabilisation approach.⁴² Therefore, various organs of the EU were involved in developing new legislation, elections, and civil society improvement programs towards this goal.⁴³ I argue that these institutions have significantly influenced Georgia's domestic policies, including its policies towards IDPs.

⁴² Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFMCG), *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Volume II (September 2009), 56, [https://www.mpil.de/en/pub/publications/archive/independent_international_fact.cfm] accessed on 14 May 2021.

⁴³ Pamela Jawad, 'Conflict Resolution through Democracy Promotion? The Role of the OSCE in Georgia', *Democratization* 15 (2008) 612.

In the first phase, 1990s to early 2000s, the EU considered Georgia a ‘post-Soviet state of strategic importance’.⁴⁴ During this first period, the USA and Europe were bent on acquiring Georgia’s political loyalty. This sometimes caused the “eyes-shut” approach towards Georgia’s actions in the ethnic conflict.⁴⁵ Western support for Georgia before 2004 was mainly economic and political but excluded direct involvement as they remained wary of unpredictable national governance.⁴⁶ While the EU and USA provided Georgia with more funding than any other post-Soviet state, they seemed to have no structured approach towards conflict resolution and appeared content with Russia taking the lead in peacekeeping.⁴⁷ However, over this period, the EU also increasingly solidified its dominant democratic standards over Georgia through measures such as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (2004) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative (2008).

After the Georgian Rose Revolution in 2003 and the rise of a new western democracy-oriented government under Mikheil Saakashvili in 2004, the political climate was more favourable for strengthening relations with the EU. With the implementation of the ENP, EU’s influence on Georgia grew stronger. The ENP required Georgia to show a ‘credible and sustained commitment towards democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and progress towards developing a market economy’.⁴⁸ The EU, in turn, stated that it was:

[...] firmly committed to its policy of supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders as well as engagement with the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in support of longer-term conflict resolution.⁴⁹

The relationship between Georgia and the EU consists of support from the EU for Georgia’s territorial integrity in exchange for conforming to the European normative standards. This relationship has influenced Georgia’s attitude towards the secessionist conflict and IDP

⁴⁴ Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the commission to the European Parliament and the Council: Eastern Partnership*, (Brussels 3 December 2008) 2, [<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52008DC0823&from=EN>] accessed on 2 June 2021.

⁴⁵ IIFFMCG, *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, 10.

⁴⁶ Commission of the European Communities, *European Neighbourhood Policy: Recommendations for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and for Egypt and Lebanon* (Brussels 2 March 2005) 5, [<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0072:FIN:EN:PDF>] accessed on 17 May 2021.

⁴⁷ Bruno Coppieters, Robert Legvold (eds.), *Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution*, (Cambridge 2005) 37.

⁴⁸ Commission of the European Communities, *European Neighbourhood Policy*, 6.

⁴⁹ Commission of the European Communities, *Eastern Partnership (EaP): Facts and Figures About EU-Georgia Relations*, (Brussels 2020) 3, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eap_factsheet_georgia.pdf] accessed on 18 May 2021.

question. In 2004 the European Commission recognised the IDP situation and the conflict with the separatist states as an *impediment to democratic development in Georgia' and contributing to regional instability*.⁵⁰ Because of the EU's support of Georgia, they did not recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I reason that by not recognising the states, centrifugal forces pushed the states more towards the Russian sphere of influence. At the national level, the EU's stance gave the Georgian narrative of territorial integrity more validity. However, after Russia recognised the separatist states in 2008, the EU adopted a slightly milder Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allowing the EU to interact with separatist states without compromising its adherence to Georgia's territorial integrity.⁵¹ Arguably this was too late for the separatist states, especially for South Ossetia, because any trust in Europe as a neutral actor and mediator had severely diminished by its continued support of Georgia.

To sum up, the EU's social power constructed Georgia's national interest and identity. EU's influence had more of an effect when national sentiment was geared to a pro-European state from 2004 onwards. The growing bond between Georgia and the EU changed national rhetoric and outlook and stoked polarisation against the *de facto* states that did not connect with the regional actor. It created a stronger idea of the 'other' which negatively impacted discussions on the return of IDPs. The strong support for Georgia's territorial integrity by the EU and other international actors in the first twenty years of the debate both attracted Georgia towards the European influence sphere and had a centrifugal effect on the two separatist states, pushing them away from Europe and the west.

RUSSIA'S ATTRACTION AND ISOLATION

This section focuses on how the Russian sphere of influence has shaped Abkhazian and South Ossetian rhetoric and perceptions on the IDP debate. Although Russian and CIS economic and military support play a role, especially after 2008, and more for South Ossetia than Abkhazia, I show in this paragraph that social power mechanisms of attraction and isolation have also been significant. The Russian influence sphere became important from the second phase of conflict negotiations. Scholars agree that Moscow's approach in the 1990s, while largely positive towards the secessionist movements, was still mixed and inconsistent – sometimes supporting the secessionist regimes, while in other cases, the territorial integrity of Georgia.⁵²

⁵⁰ Commission of the European Communities, *Facts and Figures About EU-Georgia Relations*, 3.

⁵¹ Sabine Fisher, 'The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia', Presented at: *Seminar of the European Union Institute for Security Studies*, (Brussels 2010) 2.

⁵² Jawad, 'Conflict Resolution through Democracy Promotion?', 615.

I recognise two reasons for this non-committal attitude. Firstly, Russia did not want the breakaway entities to set a successful precedent in becoming independent because of its own separatist tensions with Chechnya at the time. Secondly, Russia's predominantly prioritised domestic economic growth and strengthening statehood above foreign relations during this period.⁵³ Whereas in the first phase, its policy was mainly aimed at domestic progress, it was only from 2004 onwards that Russia showed stronger foreign orientation.⁵⁴ In his annual speech in 2005, President Vladimir Putin stated that it was '*certain that Russia must continue its civilising mission on the Eurasian continent*'.⁵⁵ In the second phase, Moscow started to reassert itself in the peace negotiations and began to use different political, economic and cultural measures to support the *de facto* states and strengthen its role as their guardian.⁵⁶

Russian influence took various forms, arguably the most far-reaching of which was the 'passportisation'. Until 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had not been recognised by any country. However, many Abkhazians and South Ossetians did not want to apply for a Georgian passport because this went against their secessionist ideals. As such, Russia established a system whereby *de facto* citizens could acquire a Russian passport. Besides 'passportisation', Moscow also invested in educational exchanges for South Ossetians and Abkhazians. This was called '*Rosstrudnichestvo*' and effectively promoted the Russian language, education, and culture to young Russian patriots in neighbouring countries.⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, against the backdrop of these measures, most South Ossetians and Abkhazians connected to Russia, which is reinforced by Russia's role as a security guarantor and economic patron.

Apart from the attraction to the Russian influence sphere, isolation also plays an important role. The previous section discusses the centrifugal forces of the western support for Georgia and the subsequent isolation of Abkhazia. The active Russian presence enforced this isolation for the *de facto* states by being the main peacekeeping, humanitarian and mediating actor. This isolation became even more evident after 2008 when the Russian Federation recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. After Russia used its veto power

⁵³ President Vladimir Putin, *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation* (Moscow 8 July 2000) 17, [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480>] accessed on 10 June 2021.

⁵⁴ President Vladimir Putin, *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation* (Moscow 8 July 2000) 5-6; Putin, *Annual Address* (3 April 2001) 20; Putin, *Annual Address* (16 May 2003) 18; Putin, *Annual Address* (26 May 2004) 17, [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/>] accessed on 4 June 2021.

⁵⁵ President Vladimir Putin, *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation* (Moscow 25 April 2005), 14, [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>] accessed on 10 June 2021.

⁵⁶ Marabyan Karen Pargevovich, 'Sovremennaya politika Rossii na Yuzhnom Kavkaze', [*'Contemporary Russian Policy in the South Caucasus'*], *Vestnik MGIMO Universiteta* 37 (2014) 96.

⁵⁷ Iskra Kirova, *Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, (Los Angeles 2012) 20.

at the OSCE and the UN to terminate their missions in the breakaway entities, the international presence in South Ossetia, and partially in Abkhazia, was severely curtailed.⁵⁸ Since only a handful of countries followed suit in the recognition, Russia automatically became even more critical to the separatist states. Ironically, after recognition by Russia, the *de facto* states have become more dependent on Russia than before.

I argue that Russian influence served to shape specific national interests and identities. The interaction within the Russian sphere of influence gave the opportunity for Abkhazia to develop its identity separately from Georgia and for South Ossetia to become more unified with the Russian and Ossetian identity; either way, the result was that the separatist states distanced themselves from Georgia in terms of identity and interest.

DEBATE ON THE INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM

Spheres of influence not only affect the direct actors within their locus, but they also interact with other spheres and thus strengthen, weaken and transform each other through their interaction. The following sections analyse the impact of the spheres of influence in international interference and mediation.

DIPLOMACY IN THE ABKHAZIA-GEORGIA CONFLICT BEFORE 2008

Several international actors have been involved in conflict resolution, and IDP-return talks in the Abkhazia-Georgia conflict. During the negotiation period in the first two phases, some progress was made on the return of IDPs. During the first 13 years, only about 45.000 internally displaced Georgians spontaneously returned to the Gali region in Abkhazia.⁵⁹ The various international peace talks were often the only platform of interaction due to distrust and Georgia's reluctance to validate *de facto* authority with bilateral meetings. Most of the conflict resolution was mediated by Russia and the UN during the Geneva Peace Process (GPP).⁶⁰

The GPP made particular progress in its early years resulting in the progressive 2001 'Yalta Declaration' and accompanying 'Program of Actions on Confidence Building'. In this

⁵⁸ Kirova, *Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution*, 11.

⁵⁹ The Gal/i region is a specific area within Abkhazia that has been the only region Georgian IDPs have been allowed to return. Before the conflict in the civil war in the 1990s, this was the area in Abkhazia where the most ethnic Georgians lived. Georgians and Abkhazians use the term differently. Georgians use the term 'Gali' while Abkhazians use the new spelling 'Gal'.

⁶⁰ UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General Concerning the Situation in Abkhazia, Georgia* (New York 19 January 1998), IX, [<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6aed01c.html>] accessed 2 June 2021.

declaration, particular emphasis was put on ‘reaching mutual understanding’ and ‘confidence-building measures’ as crucial elements of the peace process and a steady and safe return of IDPs.⁶¹ Unfortunately, the agreements were thwarted by a military-political crisis at the border between Georgia and Abkhazia. This brought the trust-building process to a halt, and the parties questioned the reason and necessity for peace negotiations in the first place.⁶² I argue that in the development of the IDP debate, the military factors only play a secondary role in the increasing polarisation and distrust between the conflicted parties and that the social interactions within and between influence spheres were more influential.

That national and international levels of discourse transform each other became clear in phase two. During phase two, the success of the GPP was negatively impacted by Russian-Georgian bilateral relations. Although, Russian-Georgian relations were relatively good in the first phase of conflict negotiation. By 2004, relations had reached a turning point. On the Georgian side, Saakashvili's Europe-oriented and NATO-aspirated government increasingly distanced itself from the Russian worldview.⁶³ On the other side, the Russians became bolder in their foreign policy and actively spoke out their support.⁶⁴

Increasingly, Georgians expressed less confidence in Russia's integrity as a mediator in the GPP and began to see Russia as an actor perpetuating the conflict rather than a third-party mediator. The negotiation process became contested because of the absence of a collective voice and vision from the mediating actors. The significant deterioration in Russian-Georgian relations since mid-2004 has negatively affected the peace process and the prospect of a return for the Abkhazian IDPs reaching its climax in the 2008 August War. This deterioration and clashing of viewpoints between Russia and Georgia support the argument that the spheres of influence transformed but also were formed by interaction within and outside their spheres.

⁶¹ UN Security Council, *Yalta Declaration of the Georgian and Abkhaz Sides* (Georgia 19 March 2001) 7, [https://peacemaker.un.org/georgia-yaltadeclaration2001] accessed on 17 May 2021.

⁶² UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, *Report of the Secretary-General concerning the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia*, UN Security Council, (New York 24 October 2001), 3, [https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/report-secretary-general-concerning-situation-abkhazia-georgia-s20011008] accessed on 18 June 2021.

⁶³ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Annual address to the Parliament* (Tbilisi 15 March 2007) 5-6, [http://www.parliament.ge/en/media/axali-ambebi/georgian-president-mikheil-saakashvili-delivers-annual-address-to-parliament-12947.page] accessed on 11 June 2021.

⁶⁴ President Vladimir Putin, *Press Conference with Russian and Foreign Media* (Moscow 23 December 2004), 19, [http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22757] accessed on 10 May 2021.

In contrast to the consultations with Abkhazia, a strong predominant Russian influence was already evident in international discourse from the 1990s. The Joint Control Commission (JCC) for South Ossetia was established immediately after the ceasefire agreement between South Ossetia and Georgia in 1992. The JCC was primarily established to contribute to the peaceful resolution of the conflict and produce a safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs.⁶⁵

In phase one, the JCC created the possibility for some incidental refugee and IDP-return.⁶⁶ However, the pace of return was languid; only about 3,500 IDPs could return as many affected citizens chose to wait since the conditions after the conflict were still poor.⁶⁷ In the second phase of the conflict, from 2004 onwards, the commission was relatively successful in direct conflict tempering but was negotiating deadlock on the topic of IDP-return for the second part of its tenure. The deadlock is closely linked to the parties' inability to agree on the conflict's root causes and, similarly to the Abkhaz process, to diminish trust in the integrity of the negotiations from the Georgian perspective.⁶⁸

The format of the JCC is an example of how South Ossetia has been geared towards Russia from early in the conflict. Part of the South Ossetians had fled to neighbouring Russian North Ossetia. Consequently, this region was also included in the JCC. The commission had a skewed Russian-led composition, including four parties: the Georgian government, the South Ossetian separatist authorities, Russia's North Ossetia, and Russia itself as administrator. The '3+1' membership resulted in the isolation of Georgia as it dealt with three incarnations of Russia and little other international involvement.⁶⁹ The Georgia mission of the OSCE and representatives of the EU did attend meetings, but only as observers. Taking into account Georgia's perception of Russia as an actor in the conflict rather than a mediator, Tbilisi proposed a new negotiating format in March 2008, in which the OSCE and the EU would

⁶⁵ 'Vermitteln in erstarren aber akuten Konflikten im Südkaukasus', *Swiss Peace Supporter Journal* 2 (2016) 15, [<https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/de/home/dienstleistungenundpublikationen/publikationen/alle-publikationen.html/content/publikationen/de/eda/sicherheitspolitik/swiss-peace-supporter/swiss-peace-supporter-2-2016>] accessed on 30 May 2021.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Ferris, Erin Mooney, and Chareen Stark, *From Responsibility to Response: Assessing National Approaches to Internal Displacement* (Washington 2011), 179.

⁶⁷ Francis Deng, *Addendum to the Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons on Profiles in Displacement: Georgia*, (New York 25 January 2001) 26, [<https://www.refworld.org/docid/45377ab70.html>] accessed on 11 May 2021.

⁶⁸ United Nations Association of Georgia, *Georgian negotiator ignores JCC meeting with Kokoity* (Tbilisi 27 December 2006), 2, [<https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/georgian-negotiator-ignores-jcc-meeting-kokoity>] accessed on 12 May 2021.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Socor, 'South Ossetia Joint Control Commission Ingloriously Mothballed', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. The Jamestown Foundation: Global Research & Analysis 5 44 (7 March 2008) 3.

participate fully.⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, the South Ossetian and Russian representatives rejected this idea.⁷¹ However, after the escalation of the 2008 August War and the subsequent recognition of South Ossetia by Russia, the new format of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) was as the Tbilisi government had proposed earlier that year.

DISCOURSE AND DIPLOMACY AFTER 2008

The balance between the spheres of influence drastically changed after the August War in 2008. In the third phase, or as the Russian Federation calls it 'the new reality', the two SOIs have become completely locked in their respective positions.⁷² The five-day war had further damaged what little trust was left between the parties, and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was highly disapproved by the majority of the international community. The GID became the only body in which Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia interacted, making the international actors' role more important. However, where before 2008, there were some signs of progress on the return of IDPs, especially to Abkhazia, now there was a complete standstill.⁷³ From 2008, there is little difference between the South Ossetian and Abkhazian progress in the IDP debate in the official negotiations. In the GID Abkhazian and South Ossetian stances are often similar and linked to Russian viewpoints.

In the GID, the EU, the OSCE and the United Nations mediate talks between Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.⁷⁴ There are two working groups at the GID. The first deals with security issues, while the second focuses on the humanitarian aspects of the conflict, mainly the IDPs. However, whenever IDP-return is approached, it continually circles back to the central issue of territorial integrity and status, which has become a zero-sum game after Russia recognised the two breakaway states.⁷⁵

Emotions at the GID have often run high and walkouts, where a delegation leaves the room to avoid talking about the IDP topic, are common.⁷⁶ Because Abkhazia and South Ossetia consider themselves independent, they construct their narrative using 'borders' whereas

⁷⁰ Jean-Christophe Peuch, 'Georgia seeks to modify South Ossetian peace negotiation format', *EurasiaNet* (2008), 1, [<https://www.refworld.org/docid/47ea258028.html>] accessed on 2 June 2021.

⁷¹ United Nations Association of Georgia, *Georgian negotiator ignores JCC meeting with Kokoity*, 3.

⁷² Vitaly Churkin, 'Press Conference by Russian Federation', *Press Conference United Nations* (New York 26 August 2008), 3, [https://www.un.org/press/en/2008/080826_Russia.doc.htm] accessed on 30 May 2021.

⁷³ Julian Bergmann, 'The EU as a Co-mediator in the Geneva International Discussions on South Ossetia and Abkhazia', *The European Union as International Mediator* (Cham 2020) 178.

⁷⁴ French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. *Protocole d'accord*. (Moscow 2008), 2, [<https://peacemaker.un.org/georgia-protocol-abkhazia-ossetia2008>] accessed on 12 May 2021.

⁷⁵ OSCE, *Press Communiqué of the Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions (52nd round)*, (Geneva 2020), 2, [<https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/473550>] accessed on 23 May 2021.

⁷⁶ Bergmann, 'The EU as a Co-mediator in the Geneva International Discussions on South Ossetia and Abkhazia' 183.

Georgia and the western forces refer to 'administrative boundary lines' (ABL's). A border is a specific barrier that forms a physical and symbolic demarcation of a politically controlled area. Contrastingly, boundaries are drawn around groups and symbolic entities. This linguistic distinction is essential and reveals bias. The use of the term boundaries reduces the importance of the demarcation, whereas the term border presupposes a legal territory.⁷⁷ Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia consider the civilians who fled from the conflict as refugees, not IDPs.⁷⁸ The notion of IDP implies Georgian sovereignty, which is something that the *de facto* states do not want to consider.

Success on IDP debate within the GID is further hampered by the different roles of being either a participant, mediator or observer. The GID is co-chaired by the OSCE, the EU and the UN. Russia also regards itself as a mediator in this process, while Georgia considers Russia to be a participant in the conflict.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Georgia disagrees that the breakaway states should participate in the discussions since, in Georgian rhetoric, they are part of Georgia.⁸⁰ On the other hand, Russia and the *de facto* states are sceptical about the supposed neutrality of the EU and the UN, which operates from the precondition of Georgia's territorial integrity. In this sense, there is no perceived neutral mediating actor. With both *de jure* and *de facto* states questioning the integrity of the negotiations and doubting the partiality of the mediating forces, the conflict resolution in the GID has become a contested place.

⁷⁷ Bringa and Toje, *Eurasian borderlands*, 4.

⁷⁸ Kozulin, V.N, 'Separatizm i yego rol v mirovom politicheskom protsesse', ['Separatism and its Role in the Global Political Process'], in: J.G Chernyshov ed., *Dnevnik Altaiskoi shkoly politicheskikh issledovaniy* 32 (Barnaul 2016) 6.

⁷⁹ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Annual address to the Parliament* (Tbilisi 12 February 2009), [<http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/en/PressOffice/Documents?4953>] accessed on 23 April 2021.

⁸⁰ Heidi Grau, (ed.), 'Mediating in entrenched but acute conflicts in the South Caucasus', *Swiss Peace Supporter Journal*. (2016) 14.

CONCLUSION

The conflict negotiations between Georgia and the separatist states can be divided into three phases of increasingly protracted conflict resolution and IDP debate. Centrifugal forces of attraction and isolation have pulled the Abkhazian and South Ossetians towards Russia and Georgia towards Europe. The strengthening relations in the spheres created further diverging perceptions of reality and resulted in othering by the conflicted parties. In 2008 this centrifugal pull culminated with the recognition of the two separatist states by Russia. Both *de jure* and *de facto* states were distrustful of the perceived bias of the mediating international actors. Concurrently, the predisposition of the different international actors created a lack of common voice in the mediation. The international level of influence spheres gives insight into why the debate became protracted. The following chapters will show that the agency or lack thereof of national and local actors influences the different trajectories of the IDP debate.

3 INTERNALLY DISPLACED POLITICS

This chapter considers the Georgia conflict from a national standpoint to discover the influence of this level of discourse on developing the IDP debate. The previous chapter showed the importance of the international dynamics to the conflict, especially in the second and third phases. On the one hand, the national narrative is shaped by international dynamics, while, at the same time, the national level has transformative power on the influence spheres and shapes the conflict and debate. Following the UN guiding principles on displacement, the national authorities are ultimately responsible for protecting and assisting IDPs and providing them with lasting solutions.⁸¹ Therefore, the primary concern of this chapter is the national narrative and its influence on the debate regarding IDPs.

THE GEORGIAN NATIONAL NARRATIVE

In Georgian politics, the same three phases of conflict are visible. The first phase (1992-2003), alike the international level, is characterised by an inconsistent and slow approach towards the conflict and plight of IDPs.⁸² This is mainly due to the corrupt and disordered government under President Eduard Shevardnadze. Although Shevardnadze strived for democratic European rule and was supported by the EU and other actors, there was no consistent approach to the IDP problem. Georgia's rhetoric toward the conflict stayed similar during the first two phases but got more defined and forceful after 2004. The leading narrative of the Georgian government during the first two phases was constructed around territorial integrity. This emphasis included the notion that the return of IDPs was the only durable option. This was in line with international IDP guidelines.⁸³ After the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the new government of President Saakashvili in 2004, the national narrative was associated with the government's pursuit of a democratic European rule of law. In this second phase, relations

⁸¹United Nations, *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (2004 reprint; New York 1998) 3.

⁸² Jawad, 'Conflict Resolution through Democracy Promotion?', 615.

⁸³ Coppieters and Legvold (ed.), *Statehood and security*, 3.

between Georgia and the EU became more important. The European Neighbourhood Policy was influential for the state narrative of Saakashvili's government of state-building, democracy, and territorial integrity.⁸⁴

Essential in understanding Saakashvili's government is that territorial integrity was seen as a prerequisite for becoming a democratic European nation. Saakashvili stated in his inaugural speech that reintegration of the breakaway territories would be the priority of his presidency.⁸⁵ This goal was evident in all governmental communication and was reflected in the popular opinion of the Georgians. It was a widespread view amongst Georgians that the reconstruction of the state could not be separated from the more complex issue of territorial integrity.⁸⁶ Here the national rhetoric transforms the norms of democratisation promoted in the European influence sphere and converts them to fit the national interests. This shows the important transformative power and agency of the national level.

This perceived link by Georgia between democratisation and territorial integrity sometimes led to disagreements within the European influence sphere. For example, in Saakashvili's speech on 5 January 2008, he criticised international aid organisations for advocating the integration of IDPs into local communities and promised IDPs at the meeting that they would 'spend the next winter in a warmer climate; we [the Georgian IDPs] will return home'.⁸⁷ Tbilisi was concerned that support from IOs would give the IDPs too much autonomy and minimise their desire to return. It is evident from this interaction that while the European sphere of influence played a normative role in Saakashvili's government, the nation itself was not a passive actor and feedback occurred between the different levels.

Nevertheless, Tbilisi altered its rhetoric from 2007 onwards because of external pressure by the EU and other international actors within the European influence sphere and domestic challenges. Although the EU supported Georgia's territorial integrity, it was simultaneously critical of Georgia's lack of effort towards IDP-integration. On the domestic front, Saakashvili faced elections in 2008. The ruling party felt pressure to adhere to the 2004 election promises. The lobbying by the EU and UNHCR and the domestic perspective of re-

⁸⁴ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Presidential Speech at the Independence Day of Georgia* (Tbilisi 26 May 2004) 8, [<http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements?p=2777&i=1>] accessed on 10 June 2021.

⁸⁵ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Inauguration Speech*, (Tbilisi 2004) 2, [<https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26694>] accessed on 19 May 2021.

⁸⁶ Lincoln A. Mitchell, 'Compromising democracy: state-building in Saakashvili's Georgia', *Central Asian Survey* 28 (2009) 177.

⁸⁷ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Inaugural speech of the President Mikheil Saakashvili* (Tbilisi 2008), National Archives of Georgia, 3, [<http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/en/President/Inauguration>] accessed on 10 May 2021.

election created a slight policy shift and changed the rhetoric from territorial integrity and 'return as the only durable option' to 'rehabilitation until return is possible'. This was reflected in the 2007 IDP State Strategy, which laid out conditions for dignified and safe return, and included improvement of IDP socio-economic conditions as one of its key goals.⁸⁸ However, the accompanying policy changes were postponed because of the 2008 August War.

After the August War, the Georgian government felt the pressure of implementing their State Strategy. I argue that this policy shift was due to internal and local pressure of the arrival of new IDPs from South Ossetia and because Georgia received considerable international backlash for their actions in the war.

Although the primary focus on 'return' changed to 'rehabilitation until return is possible', and the state strategy was implemented, the political communication still primarily voiced the temporality of the issue and the prospect of return as the preferable durable option. This is visible in Saakashvili's 2009 annual speech for the parliament, where he states:

Our pain and an issue of special care are internally displaced persons; nothing can replace homes they have been deprived of. [...] Until Georgia is united and all IDPs are not back to their legal houses, areas of origin, city or village, the priority of our government will always be to take sufficient care of them.⁸⁹

Saakashvili's government constructed the narrative that territorial conflicts hampered democratic progress.⁹⁰ In Georgian political and public opinion, this threat did not come from the *de facto* states but from the Russian Federation. While in the first phase, under the Shevardnadze presidency, Georgia still believed that Russia could resolve the conflicts to Georgia's advantage, this idea was abandoned by the Europe-oriented Saakashvili government. In the second phase, the Georgian administration became convinced that Russia was the main obstacle to a solution. As a result, Georgia began to redefine Russia's role so that it was not seen as a mediator but as an actor that sustained the conflict. An example of this narrative is

⁸⁸ Government of Georgia, Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia, *State Strategy on Internally Displaced Persons - Persecuted* (Tbilisi February 2007) 15, [<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a268c564.pdf>] accessed 22 May 2021.

⁸⁹ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Annual address to the parliament*, (Tbilisi 12 February 2009), 7, [<http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/en/PressOffice/Documents/AnnualReports?p=4953&i=1>] accessed on 16 May 2021.

⁹⁰ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Annual Address to the Parliament*, (Tbilisi 15 March 2007), 2, [<http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/en/PressOffice/Documents/AnnualReports?p=4952&i=1>] accessed on 16 May 2021.

Saakashvili's 2010 'Annual address to the Parliament', where he talks about the country's survival after the August War.

Despite these dramatic complications, despite the threats that Georgia faced, our country survived as an independent and democratic nation. [...] We managed to defend the sovereignty and independence of our country. Despite brutal attacks by our aggressive neighbour to the north, we maintained Georgia's statehood. This, my friends, is not credit only to our government or the parliament or to any one party or leader. It is the product of the tireless efforts of all our people and your unwavering loyalty to the motherland.⁹¹

This narrative of territorial integrity and the portrayal of Russia as an aggressor is vital for the IDP debate because it demonstrates the nature of political interests within the debate. It also shows why Georgia reacts so strongly to the strengthening relationship between Russia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In this rhetoric of Russia as the aggressor, Georgian authorities deprive the *de facto* states of legitimacy and try to make them second fiddle in the conflict. This national narrative transformed modes of conduct on the international platform as Georgia bypassed the *de facto* states in peace negotiations. But also in the state-to-state communication, Tbilisi often sent lower-level government officials to bilateral talks with the separatist states instead of the president.⁹²

IDP POLICY: RETURN OVER REHABILITATION

Georgia's attention to IDPs showed no legislative differentiation between persons from South Ossetia or Abkhazia, although the latter, especially until 2008, seemed to get more public and political attention because of their numbers. In all phases, the issues of IDPs have had a high priority on the Georgian government's agenda. However, the rhetoric of return by Tbilisi has directly and indirectly disadvantaged the IDP community and invertedly kept them at the edge of society. The national administration used several measures to support the rhetoric of return.

Until 2009 legislation did not allow IDPs to own land or vote within their municipality unless they officially moved to that area. However, this meant giving up their IDP classification and benefits.⁹³ In the second phase, between 2004 and 2009, these restrictions were slowly lifted, but as IDPs remained poorly informed about the changes, it was only after 2009 that

⁹¹ President Mikheil Saakashvili, *Annual Address to the Parliament*, (Tbilisi 26 February 2010), [<http://www.saakashviliarchive.info/en/PressOffice/Documents/AnnualReports>] accessed on 29 March 2021.

⁹² United Nations Association of Georgia, *Georgian negotiator ignores JCC meeting with Kokoity*, 2.

⁹³ Ferris, Mooney, and Stark, *From Responsibility to Response*, 195.

IDPs began voting more frequently.⁹⁴ This was characteristic of Tbilisi's focus on the repatriation, as they wanted IDPs to continue seeking to return to their original homes. The government also tried to nurture the IDPs' identity by encouraging them to send their children to IDP schools run by Abkhazians and South Ossetians.⁹⁵ After Georgia's policy shift in 2007, these schools were partially phased out.⁹⁶

Georgia used the IDPs as strategic pawns in their larger pursuit for territorial integrity. The different measures to strengthen or construct the IDPs collective feeling of belonging and want for return were clear social power measures from Tbilisi. The government's primary focus on IDP-return for at least 25 years of the conflict strengthened its pursuit of territorial integrity. As far as Tbilisi was concerned, the more IDPs living in Georgia who felt some form of belonging to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the stronger their territorial claim to the *de facto* states. From this perspective one could say that Georgia has had a smaller claim on South Ossetia because its conflicts resulted in fewer IDPs.

One of Georgia's tactics of strengthening its territorial claim has been gaining international attention for IDPs by reaching out to IOs and NGOs.⁹⁷ This is done for humanitarian reasons but has a political and strategic value, as it reminds the relevant actors of the ongoing conflict. An example is that, since 2008, Georgia has actively put the IDP question on the UN General Assembly (UNGA) agenda, which has resulted in resolutions on the status of IDPs where international actors support Georgia's territorial integrity and IDP-return.⁹⁸ The permanent Russian representative criticized Georgia's actions saying:

In the absence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia representatives, Georgia's propaganda activities on international platforms regarding the refugee problem make it impossible to discuss this issue objectively in Geneva.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ World Bank, *Georgia, Transitioning from Status to Needs Based Assistance for IDPs: A Poverty and Social Impact Analysis*, (Washington February 2016) 58.

⁹⁵ Sean Loughnan, Tamar Bregvadze and Nino Partskhaladze, *Not Displaced, Out-of-Place: Education of IDP children in Georgia* (Tbilisi 2010) 6.

⁹⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia: A Gap Analysis* (New York July 2009) 11. [<https://www.unhcr.org/4ad827f59.pdf>] accessed on 17 May 2021.

⁹⁷ Francis Deng, *Addendum*, 9.

⁹⁸ For example: UN General Assembly (UNGA) *Resolution 65/287 on the status of internally displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia*, (New York 29 June 2011), [<https://undocs.org/>] accessed on 10 May 2021.

⁹⁹ Alexander Lukashovich, 'Statement by the Permanent Representative Mr Alexander Lukashovich of the Russian Federation', *125th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council* (Moscow 11 April 2019) 2, [<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/6/481405.pdf>] accessed on 17 May 2021.

The Abkhaz and South Ossetian parties feel that since they are not represented in international organisations, their viewpoint is unheard, and Georgia gets an unfair advantage by using the UNGA platform. Because of this, the de facto states are wary of the mediators' neutrality in the GID.

ABKHAZIAN & SOUTH OSSETIAN NARRATIVE

Even though no clear differentiation in the treatment of IDPs by Tbilisi, the attitude of the two breakaway entities has been different. For both regions, the return of the primarily ethnic Georgian IDPs would mean a severe threat to their (now) ethnic majorities.¹⁰⁰ Although both breakaway entities committed to facilitating safe and voluntary return and signed multiple agreements confirming this, in practice, many obstacles exist that impede progress towards this end.¹⁰¹ The separatist governments' primary measures to prevent IDPs from returning is through legislation, segregation and borderization.¹⁰²

The change in development has preexisting internal and external causes. First, the consistency of ethnic groups differs in the two states. Before the wars in 1992 and 2008, South Ossetia had a large majority of ethnic Ossetians, which has only grown. In contrast, Abkhazia only gained a narrow majority of 45% ethnic Abkhaz through the exodus of ethnic Georgians during the 1990s war.¹⁰³ Secondly, Abkhazia has a larger population. They have created a relatively functioning government, whereas South Ossetia, as the smaller entity, has struggled with internal strife and governmental crises since their independence claim.¹⁰⁴ This explains the larger reliance on Russian economic and strategic support in South Ossetia. Finally, their alignment within the Russian influence spheres and their attitude towards IDPs can be explained by the long-term goals of South Ossetia and Abkhazia concerning their political status. The main goal of Abkhazian political elites has always been complete independence

¹⁰⁰ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation* (Brussels 10 April 2013) 12, [<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/abkhazia-georgia/abkhazia-long-road-reconciliation>] accessed on 14 June 2021.

¹⁰¹ The agreement of facilitating IDP-return was written in the two ceasefire agreements in 1992 (South Ossetia) and 1993 (Abkhazia). These efforts were reiterated by Abkhazia in the 2001 'Yalta Declaration' and again by both *de facto* states in the 'Protocole d'Accord' after the conflict in 2008.

¹⁰² UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Compilation Report: Universal Periodic Review: Georgia* (Georgia July 2010), [<https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c4d2bfa2.html>] 4, accessed on 4 June 2021.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem* 5.

¹⁰⁴ Arch Puddington, Sarah Repucci, Jennifer Dunham, Bret Nelson, and Tyler Roylance. *Freedom in the World 2015: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. (New York 2016) 804-5.

from Georgia and Russia, whereas South Ossetia, who strives to reconnect with their brother-state North Ossetia, has been open to the possibility of integration into Russia from the beginning.¹⁰⁵

The separatist states reacted to the changing Georgian rhetoric and policies and changing balance in the international sphere. During the first phase, the two separatist states applied rhetoric of independence but did not have a developed policy. From phase two onwards, the rhetoric and actions start to differ. South Ossetia rejects IDP-return early on in rhetoric and in actions. On the other hand, Abkhazia's narrative was more open to IDP-return, although their policies contradicted this and created increasingly complex obstacles for return.

ABKHAZIA: COMMUNICATIVE BUT UNWILLING

Abkhazia arguably has more to lose with the return of ethnic Georgian IDPs, than South Ossetia, as the IDPs will unbalance the small majority of Abkhazians this is a severe threat to Abkhazia's ethnic nationalist identity. Abkhazian authorities have therefore opposed return and set up hurdles to make IDP-return less attractive but at least till 2008 they had relative open borders and facilitated return of about 50.000 IDPs.¹⁰⁶ However authorities only permitted IDPs to return to the Gal/i district, where ethnic Georgians already constituted 85% of the area in the 1990s.¹⁰⁷ This geographical segregation of IDPs contributed to its virtual absence from domestic political debate. The problem was permanently on the agenda in official discussions, but internal politics directed little attention.¹⁰⁸ The probable explanation is that the authorities tried to distance themselves as much as possible from the Georgian problem to limit return migration and thus keep the public debate focused on an independent Abkhazia.

From phase two onwards, Abkhazia attempted to curb Georgian settlers' so-called 'colonisation' by implementing multiple laws.¹⁰⁹ The first was the 2005 Abkhaz citizenship law, which prohibited dual Abkhaz-Georgian citizenship. As a result, returnees who renounced their Georgian citizenship risked statelessness and loss of their IDP payments from Georgia. However, without Abkhaz citizenship, persons cannot open a bank account or buy real estate or vote outside the Gal/i region.¹¹⁰ In 2006 and 2007, new housing laws and identification laws further hindered IDP-return and movement. After the 2008 war, Abkhazians chose more hard

¹⁰⁵ Lenton, 'Creating *de facto* States' Ossetia' 3.

¹⁰⁶ UNHCR, *Compilation Report*, (2010) 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ Natella Akaba and Iraklii Khintba, *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: rethinking the paradigm*. (London 2011) 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem* 12.

¹¹⁰ UNHCR, *Compilation Report*, (2010) 4.

power measures to prevent IDP-return actively.¹¹¹ The Abkhazian officials restricted all border passage for periods at a time, and they limited places people could cross. The official account for doing this was to prevent "criminals and contraband goods seeping into the country".¹¹² These travel restrictions created significant problems for many returned IDPs dependent on support and public goods in Georgia. While creating increasingly difficult hurdles, the Abkhazian government communicates that they have no restrictions for return although they are hesitant on total return, stating:

The Abkhazian government has not prevented refugees from returning, and to the contrary, has overseen the largest peaceful resettlement of refugees in history. However, to ensure its population's safety and economic security, the Abkhazian government insists that certain preconditions be met before it opens its door to thousands of additional people.¹¹³

These preconditions were Georgia pledging non-violence, something that Georgia as of yet has refused to do.¹¹⁴ In contrast to South Ossetia, Abkhazia seemed willing to discuss return, be it on their terms, but only as the military threat of Georgia was diminished.

The Abkhazian interests and identities are constructed through constant interaction with Georgia, Russia and IOs. Tbilisi's aggressive rhetoric and policies in phase two increasingly threatened Abkhazia, which resulted in a stronger anti-Georgian sentiment.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, Georgian and EU policies isolated Abkhazian forces. Although Abkhazia was interested in cooperation with the EU and other western states, the widespread international support for Georgia's territorial integrity prevented this and left Abkhazia with Russia as the only option. While remaining firmly anti-Georgian, Abkhazia has actively tried to reach out to possible

¹¹¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Compilation Report Universal Periodic Review: Georgia* (New York January 2015) 11, accessed on 14 June 2021 [<https://www.refworld.org/docid/5638630f4.html>].

¹¹² President of the Republic of Abkhazia Raul Khadzhimba, *Vystupleniye Raulya Khadzhimba na sobranii aktiva partii 'Forum narodnogo yedinstva Abkhazii'* [Speech on the Assembly of the Party 'Forum of the National Unity of Abkhazia'] (Sukhum 2015) [http://presidentofabkhazia.org/doc/rechi/?ELEMENT_ID=7076] accessed on 11 June 2021.

¹¹³ *Fact Sheet on the Republic of Abkhazia's Refugee Program*, (Sokuhm September 2009), 2, [http://www.abkhazworld.com/Pdf/Abkhazian_Refugee_Situation.pdf] accessed on 17 June 2021.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem* 3.

¹¹⁵ Zuhba Madina Ivanovna, 'K probleme vozvrashcheniya gruzinskikh bezhentshev: Vzglyad iz Abkhazii' [Towards the problem of repatriation of Georgian refugees: view from Abkhazia], *Teoriya i praktika obshchestvennogo razvitiya* 3 (2011) 305.

Western partners.¹¹⁶ Former Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh stated that Abkhazia ‘must rely on Moscow because the West will not cooperate’.¹¹⁷

Abkhazia made the choice of Russian cooperation and influence out of necessity rather than attraction. Abkhazia has shown public disinterest towards Russia for example in 2004 when Abkhazians unanimously voted for an anti-Russian pro-independence presidential nominee instead of the Russian backed presidential candidate.¹¹⁸ I consider that the actions of Georgia and the EU pushed Abkhazia toward Russian influence sphere. Abkhazia choose Russian support out of necessity rather than political or ideological alignment. Possibly, with a different role of the EU, earlier on in the conflict, isolation and polarisation could have been reduced.

SOUTH OSSETIA: RETURN UNLIKELY

South Ossetia was relatively open to the return of IDPs in the early years; however, the process was slow. On multiple occasions, the authorities declared that they were committed to return guided by international principles, but President Eduard Kokoity stated that in 2001 this would not be automatic and that returnees would be examined individually.¹¹⁹ In South Ossetia, the Ossetian majority was larger than in Abkhazia. Consequently, their ethnic territorial claim was more dominant in domestic politics. This ethnic majority was culturally, socially, and religiously linked to their North Ossetian neighbours. I argue that identification with North Ossetia and Russia was powerful and influenced the way South Ossetia handled the IDP-return.

In 1999, the South Ossetian authorities adopted a state law concerning refugees. The law considered IDPs from Georgia the same as refugees, and both fall under the same state regulations. While legally they had similar rights, South Ossetian authorities promoted refugee return from North Ossetia while limiting ethnic Georgian IDPs attempts to return. Furthermore, the authorities encouraged North Ossetian refugees to settle in the South Ossetian border region previously populated by IDPs.¹²⁰ Until 2005 around 5700 refugees, and IDP returned to South

¹¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia, *Commentary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia*, 2 (Sukhum 2019) [http://mfaapsny.org/en/allnews/news/statements_speeches/commentary-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-abkhazia/] accessed on 17 June 2021.

¹¹⁷ Kirova, *Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, 25.

¹¹⁸ O’Loughlin, Kolossov and Toal, ‘Inside the post-Soviet de facto states’, 435.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Hammarberg, *Report on Human Rights Issues Following the August 2008 Armed Conflict in Georgia*, (Strasbourg 2010) 4, [<https://rm.coe.int/16806db812>] accessed 18 June 2021.

¹²⁰ Deng, *Addendum*, 12.

Ossetia. However, most of these returns from Georgia were seasonal or temporary.¹²¹ The domestic situation was unstable, and hostile activities directed at ethnic minorities were common.¹²²

The 2004 Saakashvili government had similar effects on South Ossetia as it had on Abkhazia. However, where Abkhazia primarily focused on legislative hurdles, South Ossetia increased border control and military presence near the borders. Consequently, during the second phase of the conflict, the IDP return was negligible. I argue that the identification with and the Russian influence sphere was instrumental in this. Where Abkhazia was pulled towards Russian sphere of influence rather reluctantly, South Ossetia sought it out. With its connection towards Russia, South Ossetia can be understood as strengthening the emphasis of Georgians as the ‘other’ early on in the conflict.

After the 2008 escalation, South Ossetia physically and legally closed for IDPs.¹²³ Since then, any safe return is nearly impossible.¹²⁴ All communication, apart from the GID-platform, on the topic of return has been halted and in the GID they refuse to discuss the IDP-topic.¹²⁵ Furthermore, South Ossetia rejects any presence of non-Russian international actors and has agreed to far-reaching resolutions with Russia, and effectively giving Russia power over defense and economic decisions.¹²⁶ In the past five years, Russian involvement has increased even more. In this, the Russian-Ossetian relationship differs significantly from the Abkhazian-Russian relationship. This supports my hypothesis that there are preconditions for advancement in the Georgian-Abkhazian debate, whereas due to the attraction to the Russian sphere of influence, especially after 2008, this is highly unlikely for Ossetia.

¹²¹ UN General Assembly, *Status of internally displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia* (New York 22 May 2012) 6, [<https://www.refworld.org/docid/55c1cade4.html>] accessed on 7 May 2021.

¹²² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Situation Report: Georgia Information Bulletin* (Tbilisi 30 November 2004) 3, [<https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/ocha-georgia-information-bulletin-nov-2004>] accessed on 2 June 2021.

¹²³ Pargevovich, ‘Sovremennaya politika Rossii na Yuzhnom Kavkaze’, [‘Contemporary Russian Policy in the South Caucasus’] 97.

¹²⁴ IIFMCG, *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, 5.

¹²⁵ United States Mission to the OSCE, *The 47th Round of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) on the Conflict in Georgia*. (Vienna 11 April 2019) 2, [<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/7/417941.pdf>] accessed on 10 May 2021.

¹²⁶ Nicu Popescu, ‘Outsourcing’ de facto Statehood Russia and the Secessionist Entities in Georgia and Moldova’, *Centre for European Policy Studies: Policy Brief* 109 (2006) 6.

CONCLUSION

National narrative and policy followed the same three phases of conflict as at the international level. International influence spheres had a substantial impact on the development on the domestic level. But the national narrative translates and transforms international influence to fit domestic interests. Especially in Georgia and Abkhazia, feedback, and interaction with the dominant actors in the influence spheres, are visible. The narrative of return and territorial integrity prevailed in Georgia. Although Georgia often drew attention to the IDP issue, the continuous focus on return harmed IDPs chances for a durable solution.

Nonetheless, Georgia continued to receive fairly unwavering support from the EU and the UN. Abkhazia and South Ossetia felt the territorial pressure and attempted to distance themselves from the IDP responsibility to justify their sovereignty. In addition, they tried to dampen IDP inflows through segregation, borderization and legislation. It is Abkhazia's relative independence from the Russian sphere of influence and its interest in maintaining good relations with the West that have created a different trajectory for Abkhazia creating preconditions for progress whereas South Ossetia has gotten so entrenched in the Russian influence sphere that it is less likely.

4 POLITICS IN THE LOCAL AND APOLITICAL

This chapter focuses on the role of (local) IDP communities and civil society in Georgia in the IDP debate. At this level, political and public opinion interact with and transform individual and community opinions and ideas about identity and belonging. In the previous chapters, I showed how the IDP community had been used as a political playball the conflict. Extensive focus on international and national discourse can sometimes lead to excluding the genuine human factor in the topic. The feminist geopolitical approach exposes the IDP discourses and thereby shows the influence of the private and apolitical power on national and international politics. As shown in the previous chapters, the different levels of discourse are shaped and transformed through their interaction with each other. Showing private, apolitical discourse is hard given the limitation of sources nevertheless the semi-institutionalised IDP grassroots and local NGOs can give some indication of the private discourse.

Two critical contradicting processes happen on this level. On the one hand, the marginalized, vulnerable community is influenced and shaped by the constructed national dialogue of territorial integrity and return. On the other hand, the lively IDP NGO and civil society community interact and communicate over state boundaries and with international actors. Both are equally important in understanding the IDP debate and the diverging developments between Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This chapter highlights the porous boundary between political and private discourse represented in society and specifically in the IDP community.

THE IDPs: VOICE AND IDENTITY

As shown in the last chapter, in the first two phases of conflict, the main political narrative of Tbilisi was territorial integrity and IDP-return. Although this rhetoric was present in public and political domestic discourse, in a practical sense, little return happened. It could be that this rhetoric of return was not as existent in the IDP community or that it differed between the Ossetian and Abkhazian IDPs, but this was not the case. Several research projects that

conducted surveys amongst the IDPs found similar responses on the perception of identity, belonging within the IDP community.¹²⁷ Overall, there was and still is a dominant sense of belonging to Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The vast majority of IDPs considered return to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the only solution. However, this sense of belonging is connected with the overarching feeling of the Georgian identity. Consequently, the actual willingness to return depends primarily on if the separatist states ultimately fall under Georgian control or not. In a survey held amongst IDPs in 2011, 87% of the IDPs responded that they would consider returning if Abkhazia and South Ossetia would reunite with Georgia.¹²⁸

This community identity is based upon constructed social, historical and geographical feelings of belonging to Georgia and the two separatist states.¹²⁹ I argue that the Georgian's national rhetoric strengthened these connections. In general, both IDP groups feel a sense of belonging based on idealized memory of the time before the war. For example, they refer to a harmonious inter-ethnic past in Abkhazia and South Ossetia before the conflicts.¹³⁰ When asked about returning, IDPs often emphasize their roots and ancestry. This sentiment is reflected in the testimony of a 58-year-old Abkhazian IDP:

I have only one dream which I want to come true... I learnt from my ancestors, the ones I knew, that in the past, mkvakhi [pumpkin in Georgian] grew well in a place where our house has been burnt down... What if I get back to my burnt-down home...? My pumpkins would provide food for a year. There are so many burnt-down places there now, but they are ours, at least they were. Yes, my only dream is to return. What other dream can I have...?¹³¹

The feeling of belonging seems to be just as strong with the IDPs from Abkhazia as South Ossetia. In this sense, they do not offer a reason for different development in the IDP debate. In IDP responses, expressions as 'broken bridges between brothers', 'shared homeland' and are predominant with IDPs when discussing the *de facto* states.¹³²

¹²⁷ Guy Hovey, *Supporting the Livelihoods of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia: A Review of Current Practices and Lessons Learned* (Washington 2013); UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia: A Gap Analysis*; Ketevan Sulava, 'At the Crossroads of Identity, Belonging and the Myth of Return: A Case Study of Georgian Internally Displaced Persons' (Amsterdam 2010); Magdalena Frichova Grono, *Displacement in Georgia IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice* (London 2011).

¹²⁸ Grono, *Displacement in Georgia IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice*, 6.

¹²⁹ Linn Maree Miller, *Being and belonging* (Hobart 2006) 96.

¹³⁰ Grono, *Displacement in Georgia IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice*, 10.

¹³¹ Anne-Sophie Lois (e.a.), *A heavy burden: Internally displaced in Georgia. Stories of people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, (Geneva 2008) 59.

¹³² Lois, *A heavy burden*, 13, 34, 54.

Unsurprisingly, these feelings of shared identity and belonging were not reciprocated by the breakaway states. In a set of interviews held amongst Abkhaz civilians in 2009-2010 about the conflict, interestingly, only a few respondents talked about the 'refugee problem'. In Abkhazia, IDP-return is always on the political agenda, however much less in the public's eye. Abkhazian respondents who talked about the IDPs used terms as 'settlers' and 'refugee colony' when discussing ethnic Georgian IDPs.¹³³ In the Ossetian narrative, a respondent in 2017 talked about the 'IDP-invasion of Ossetia' and stated, 'You are Georgians, and we are Ossetians'.¹³⁴

These testimonies show the identities that are constructed through community discourse and national political narrative. They demonstrate a substantial divergence between the IDPs feeling of belonging, created partly by Georgia's continued emphasis on IDP-return, and the experience of the *de facto* citizens. The South Ossetians seem much more openly hostile towards the Georgians and IDPs than the Abkhazians. However, it is essential to remember that most of these responses were given after the 2008 August War when Georgian-Ossetian relationships had severely deteriorated already; even memories could be perceived through the glasses of recent hostilities.

ACTIVE IDP PARTICIPATION

Given the apparent effects Georgian rhetoric has had on the fragile IDP community, it is logical to dismiss this group as mere passive recipients. I argue, however, that just perceiving IDPs as passive recipients and political playballs would do injustice to their autonomy.

According to the UNHCR, there has been a lively IDP-NGO and civil society network since phase one of the conflict.¹³⁵ These organizations were first set up to support the immediate humanitarian needs of IDPs but gradually became more about IDP advocacy in local and national governance. A good example is the 'Synergy Network', a group of 19 IDP-NGOs working on IDPs in Georgia.¹³⁶ Synergy has been working to increase the IDP participation in the Georgia and encourages IDP-return. This is done through advocacy on television, and in

¹³³ Akaba and Khintba, *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*. 12.

¹³⁴ 'Cost of Conflict' is a series made by OC Media of personal recollections by Ossetian and Georgian civilians: 'Voice from the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict', *Open Caucasus Media*, (Tskhinvali 15 May 2018) [<https://oc-media.org/voices/voice-from-the-georgian-south-ossetian-conflict-what-has-always-been-and-will-always-be-is-the-hatred-towards-armed-people-on-the-other-side/>] accessed on 14 June 2021.

¹³⁵ UNHCR, *Compilation Report*, (2010) 6.

¹³⁶ Conciliation Resources, *Local First: Synergy network, Georgia*, (London 2014) [<https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/local-first-synergy-network-georgia>] accessed on 6 June 2021.

newspapers and by communicating with political parties. This advocacy platform is meant for all IDPs, but most NGOs within the network have Abkhaz origins.

In general, IDP organizations were often created by IDPs from Abkhazia and had an explicit or unintended focus on the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. From the twenty local NGOs and IDP grassroots I researched, I have found that 15 were Abkhaz founded and 7 were explicitly geared towards Abkhazian-Georgian problems.¹³⁷ Most IDP projects focus on housing, IDP allowance and public goods. These improvements within Georgia were beneficial for both groups, but this Abkhazian bias in local representation means that Abkhazian IDPs could have a more notable role in agenda-setting for other organizations and politics and have more opportunities for dialogue. This supports my hypothesis that however protracted the official IDP debate is, conditions for possible progress are more significant in Abkhazia.

A HISTORY OF OVERLOOKING THE IDP LEVEL

Problematic in the participation on IDPs is has been the little attention from Georgian national politics, who at least until 2008 preferred a top-down approach whereby the participatory methods were interpreted as the involvement of NGOs and international donors, rather than actual IDPs. Since the Georgian narrative was that conflict would soon be resolved and that, therefore, even after decades without progress, the IDPs could soon return to their homes, it was no surprise that they acted accordingly. Even more, during phases one and two of the conflict, legislation actively prevented IDPs from voicing their opinions. Nevertheless, when relations with the EU became more substantial, the pressure to include IDPs in the official policy grew stronger. Again, this shows the interaction between multiple levels of conflict resolution and the extent of the social power within the European sphere of influence. The government of Georgia affirmed in their State Strategy that there was no actual structure for political participation or official representation of IDPs.¹³⁸

The UNHCR and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights advocated for more inclusion of IDPs in the debate and negotiations at multiple times.¹³⁹ The importance of strong IDP and civil society representation in national and local politics was one of the EU

¹³⁷ See the list of IDP NGOs in Appendix II.

¹³⁸ Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia, *State Strategy on Internally Displaced Persons: Persecuted* (Tbilisi 2007) Chapter III-2, [<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a268c564.pdf>] accessed on 2 June 2021.

¹³⁹ Ferris, Mooney, and Stark, *From Responsibility to Response*, 210.

stipulations in the ENP from 2004.¹⁴⁰ This pressure from Georgia's European partners became increasingly conspicuous after the ENP was enforced, which is why in 2006 and 2007, with the development of the Georgian State Strategy for IDPs, there was extensive IDP involvement in the policy process.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, the strategy itself laid out plans for IDP participation. However, this process of inclusion got disrupted by the 2008 War. In the period right after the war, the Georgian government again chose efficiency over inclusion. Thus, although Tbilisi has made strides in including IDPs, establishing their role in amendments to the State Strategy in 2011 and 2015, it could still be improved. Within Georgia, national policies curtailed institutionalised IDP influence. There might have been unofficial streams of influence, but these are hard to analyse given the current availability of sources.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF UNOFFICIAL DIPLOMACY

Apart from advocating IDP rights within Georgia, IDP-NGOs have also promoted inter-community dialogue. This shows how political and private discourse intertwine and transform multiple levels. International official diplomacy and bilateral meetings have as of yet not succeeded in reducing polarisation and othering in the ethnic conflicts. On the international level, polarisation and distrust in the actors' mediators and negotiation process became increasingly limiting, eventually preventing any progress. In unofficial people-to-people dialogue, there seemed to be more room for progress.

A benefit of these processes organized by IDP, and civil society organizations is that people participating do not have a specific mandate or official state agenda to follow. This gives them more flexibility and removes the pressure of creating binding results. The people-to-people exchanges between the ethnically divided parties often focused on finding cultural, social and religious common ground and creating shared experiences. An example of this is the organization of combined study trips for kids from Abkhazia and Georgia.¹⁴² Another example is an IDP project that brought together children from the Ossetian and Georgian sides in a Sunday school. Focusing on language, religion and culture, the organization tried to

¹⁴⁰ Commission of the European Communities, *European Neighbourhood Policy*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia, *State Strategy on Internally Displaced Persons*, Chapter IV-3.

¹⁴² Peace insight, "Alaneli" *International Association of Ossetian Women Living in Georgia*, [<https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/alaneli-international-association-of-ossetian-women-living-in-georgia/?location=georgia&theme>] accessed on 11 June 2021.

prevent the next generation from continuing the cycle so that ‘the children would not hate each other’.¹⁴³

The different levels of discourse came together in informal diplomatic panels and meetings between IDPs, civil society activists and NGOs of the different sides of the conflict. During the first and second phase of the conflict, there were incidental meetings where the IDPs, Civil Society organizations would discuss the South Ossetian and the Abkhazia conflict. A more explicit example of the interaction between the different levels of discourse is the Schlaing process between Abkhazia and Georgia. During the period 2000-2007, “informal” peace talks took place, where the IDP community and broader civil society groups met with the political elite complementing official negotiations. Although it yielded no significant results, a crucial outcome of these initiatives was confidence-building and improved mutual understanding. A senior Georgian official said that through his participation, he understood why specific proposals during official peace talks were not conducive to progress.¹⁴⁴

Right after the 2008 War Tbilisi refused any form of bilateral communication with the separatist states. Indicative of the strength of their connection within their spheres of influence, meetings with Abkhazia were slowly picked up again from 2012, but any inter-community dialogues with South Ossetia are still suspended.¹⁴⁵ IDP and civil society organizations are still trying to create dialogue, but the national political environment severely limits the possibilities. This section illustrated that the difference between the two regions exists in both political and apolitical domains but that the influence of local and civil society level on the conflict is limited by the dynamics of national interests and spheres of influence.

Having established in the previous chapter that distrust and polarization are the main reasons why official negotiations like the GID fail to deliver results, this notion that these informal talks can create some level of mutual understanding is crucial. Therefore, it is even more poignant that after 2008 Georgian and Abkhaz officials were no longer willing to participate in the informal talks.

¹⁴³ ‘Voice from the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict’, *Open Caucasus Media* (Karaleti, 7 February 2018), [, <https://oc-media.org/voices/voice-from-the-georgian-south-ossetian-conflict-nobody-is-going-to-make-me-believe-that-ossetians-hate-us/>] accessed on 20 May 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Jonathan Cohen, *Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus* (London July 2012) 67-68.

¹⁴⁵ Magda Lorena Cárdenas, ‘Women-to-Women Diplomacy in Georgia: A Peacebuilding Strategy in Frozen Conflict’, *Civil Wars* 21 (2019) 396.

CONCLUSION

Just as at the national and international level, there is a difference recognizable between the development of the IDP level in the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict and the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict. In both cases, the polarisation and othering seemed to be surmountable on a people-to-people level, but significant results were still dependant on the larger political dynamics that were less favourable in the South Ossetia conflict than in Abkhazia.

There is a divergence between the ideas on return by IDPs in Georgia and by the civilians of the *de facto* states. In the separatist states' civilians perceive their identity as fundamentally different from the Georgians and the Georgian IDPs. There seems to be more hostility towards IDPs from South Ossetia than Abkhazia. The previous chapters showed that official dialogue has not been successful in reducing polarization and distrust. Although unofficial inter-community dialogue, in theory, has much influence, it is limited in its possibilities and outreach by the political dynamics on the national and international level.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have set out to analyse and explain the various paths that the debate on internally displaced persons in Georgia has followed over the past thirty years. Since the early 2000s, there has been little to no IDP return to either region. However, this does not mean that the IDP debate between Georgia and the two *de facto* states has been the same. The case studies of the Abkhazia-Georgia and the South Ossetia-Georgia conflict show us that although the two *de facto* states are considered to be in the same sphere of influence, their trajectories in the conflict resolution and IDP debate have evolved differently.

This can best be explained by a constructivist approach to the feminist geopolitical framework. The feminist geopolitical framework is based on the belief that geopolitical processes are shaped not just by the discourse at the international political level but also by national and local levels, apolitical and private levels. The constructivist approach to feminist geopolitics supports the idea that these levels communicate and transform through their interaction, constructing specific identities and feelings of belonging.

When looking at a topic such as the IDP debate in the ethnic conflict in Georgia, most analysis is conducted within three frameworks: international, national, and local/private level. However, this approach overlooks the reality of how the debate takes on different dimensions when the levels interact with each other. For example, on the international level, Georgia was heavily influenced by the EU using democratisation as an enticement for better relations. However, the Georgian government's translation of democratisation in the domestic sphere emphasised the prerequisite of territorial integrity to the creation of a legitimate democratic state. In this manner, we can see how ideas introduced at the international level are converted to meet national needs and desires, thus taking on a new meaning. Therefore, it is not the question of whether one level impacts the debate/conflict more than the other; what is more relevant is how the different levels' interactions transform the discourse around the conflict.

Although the international spheres of influence greatly outline the shape of how the IDP debate develops and have shown to be instrumental in protracting the IDP debate and creating distrust and polarisation between the different conflicted parties, this does not mean that the (*de facto*) states are without their own agency. At first glance, it may seem like both as breakaway states would have the same or at least similar stances in terms of which sphere of influence they would be most aligned with. While true that both clearly share anti-Georgian sentiments, their subsequent orientations towards Russia were not motivated by the same reasons. As we have seen, South Ossetia shares linguistic, cultural, and religious similarities

with its neighbours in the north. However, this foundation for stronger links to the Russian sphere is not shared with Abkhazia. Instead, Abkhazian alignment with the Russian sphere of influence is better understood as a reaction to its rejection from the Western sphere of influence, which does not recognise Abkhazian legitimacy as part of its support for Georgia. This is evidenced in how Abkhazian officials have framed their partnership with Russia as necessary evil. As a result, Abkhazia's position within the Russian sphere of influence is not necessarily a result of political or ideological alignment with Moscow. On the contrary, it would seem that anti-Russian sentiment can be detected in Abkhazian politics. It is precisely within this tension between its rejection from the West and somewhat forced partnership with Russia that the Abkhazian agency can be detected.

Although both separatist states were strongly opposed to the repatriation of IDPs and both used various measures to limit this, South Ossetia adopted a stricter stance from earlier on. Abkhazia also resisted the return of Georgian IDPs, only here the debate was, at least until 2008, more conducive to the prospect of a solution. After 2008 by recognising the breakaway states, Russia inadvertently became more important to the *de facto* states. In both cases, even after 2008, the polarisation and othering seemed to be surmountable on a people-to-people level. However, significant results were still dependent on the larger political dynamics that were less favourable in the South Ossetia conflict than in Abkhazia. The difference lies in Abkhazia's relative independence from the Russian sphere of influence and its interest in maintaining good relations with the West. More importantly, the combination of these different conditions provided by the different levels makes that Abkhazia has some potential for progress while South Ossetia has gotten so entrenched in the Russian influence sphere that it is a lot less likely.

This research contributes to the literature on conflicts in the common European-Russian Neighborhood as the thesis shows that although the two case studies have different preconditions, they fall into the same influence sphere. While the impact of influence spheres is clearly felt on a macro-level and are vital in shaping how the conflict can progress, national and local actions still determine the specificities. If the realist notion of spheres of influence as the only meaningful player in the conflict had been correct, the trajectories of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be expected to be the same as they both fall under Russian patronage. However, as this thesis has shown, that is not the case. Instead, we can turn to the constructivist perspective of international relations to better understand how this conflict has developed. In particular, we can appreciate how the local level of discourse at times plays a formative role in how the dialogue within IDP communities has been shaped. For example,

after 2008, it would be expected that both South Ossetia and Abkhazia to curtail discussions on the question of IDP return. Although this is certainly observable in the South Ossetian case, we find that in Abkhazia, local IDP and civil society actors have actually restarted conversations on the matter. In this manner, we can detect the power of local and unofficial dialogue within the different states, which highlights the agency of discourse on the micro-level.

To test my hypothesis and theoretical framework, I used a selection of English and Russian literature and sources which provided a comprehensive picture of the complexity of power relations and discursive interactions between the levels of conflict. However, there have been a few challenges in writing and researching this thesis that should be addressed. Firstly, due to the limitations of the word count, the scope of this thesis has focused on the period from the 1990s to the early 2010s. It would be interesting to research how the interactions between the different discourse levels have developed since then.

Secondly, even though language has not been as significant barrier to finding sources as initially expected, the lack of digitised sources from Abkhazia and South Ossetia has posed another challenge to showcasing a balanced analysis of the conflict as a whole. Thirdly, a challenge to executing the framework was the lack of sources on the IDP and civil society level. Although following the feminist geopolitical framework, there should have been evidence of interaction between private IDP and the national and international levels, the sources confirming this are limited. This is not because it is not there, the plethora of local IDP organisations are testament to this, but because these contributions are informal and often leave a limited paper trail, it is harder to prove. In this thesis, I used NGO reports, literature and surveys to show some of this discourse level. However, further sociological or field research would be necessary to develop this part of the framework fully.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this thesis are still salient to understanding the IDP issue in the Georgian conflict because it showcases the complexities and possibilities of how the conflict can and has developed. To further substantiate the framework set up in this thesis and show that the developments are not exclusive to the Georgian IDP conflict, I suggest subsequent research into similar ethnic conflicts in the Russian-European Neighbourhood.

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APPENDIX I: CHRONOLOGY

Key events in the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| January 1991 | Escalation of Georgian–Ossetian tensions into war |
| June 1992 | Signing of ceasefire agreement in Georgian–Ossetian conflict |
| August 1992 | Escalation of Georgian–Abkhaz tensions into war |
| December 1992 | Establishment of OSCE Mission to Georgia |
| July 1993 | Signing of ceasefire agreement in Georgian–Abkhaz conflict |
| November 1993 | Establishment of UNOMIG |
| April 1994 | Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons |
| June 1996 | Adoption of the Georgian Law on Forcibly Displaced– Persecuted Persons |
| 16-18 October 1998 | Athens Meeting of the Georgian and Abkhaz Sides on Confidence-Building Measures |
| 7-9 June 1999 | Istanbul Statement of the Georgian and Abkhaz Sides on Confidence-Building Measures |
| 1999 | Adoption of <i>de facto</i> Law on IDPs and a Law on Refugees by the republic of South Ossetia |
| 15-16 March 2001 | Yalta Declaration of the Georgian and Abkhaz Sides |
| November 2003 | Rose Revolution in Georgia and resignation of President Shevardnadze |
| January 2004 | Election of President Saakashvili |
| October 2005 | Adoption of <i>de facto</i> Law of the Republic of Abkhazia on Citizenship of the Republic of Abkhazia |
| February 2007 | Adoption of the Georgian State Strategy on Internally Displaced Persons |
| 8–12 August 2008 | Five-Day War |
| 15–16 August 2008 | Ceasefire agreement (Six-Point Plan) signed by Russia and Georgia |
| 26 August 2008 | Russia officially acknowledges the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia |
| 8 September 2008 | Implementation Six-Point Plan/Protocole D’Accord |
| 15 September 2008 | Council of the EU decides to establish EUMM Georgia |
| 25 September 2008 | Council of the EU appoints Pierre Morel as new EU Special Representative for the Crisis in Georgia |
| 15 October 2008 | First round of the Geneva International Discussions |
| 23 October 2008 | Adoption of the Georgian Law on Occupied Territories |
| 27 January 2009 | Implementation of Georgian State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation |
| 2009 | Implementation of Georgian Action Plan on Internally Displaced People |
| December 2014 | Russian-Abkhaz Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership |
| March 2015 | Russian-South Ossetian Treaty on Alliance and Integration |

APPENDIX II: LIST OF IDP-NGOS

1. Association “Atinati”
2. Association "Merkuri"
3. Association of Young Economists of Georgia (AYEG)
4. Charity Humanitarian Centre Abkhazeti (CHCA)
5. Civil Development Agency (CiDA)
6. Civil Forum for Peace
7. For Better Future "Uketesi Momavlisatvis" (Previously known as The Youth Association of Akhagori)
8. Fund Sukhumi
9. Georgian Association for Social Workers (GASW)
10. IDP Women’s Movement for Peace “Imedi”
11. International Association of Ossetian Women Living in Georgia “Alaneli”
12. Internally Displaced Women Association “Consent” (IDPWA)
13. International Executive Service Corps (IESC)
14. Kartlosi (Bridge of Friendship)
15. Saunje
16. Synergy Network
17. Union-Association “Agora”
18. Union 'Momavlis Tskhinvali'
19. Union of Wives of Invalids and Lost Warriors (UWILW)
20. Women’s Information Centre (WIC)