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Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: implications for conflict resolution

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ABSTRACT

This article applies the concepts of linkage and leverage as developed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way and elaborated by Gwendolyn Sasse in the introduction to this special issue of *East European Politics* to Russia's involvement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two quasi-independent states in the South Caucasus. Through this re-conceptualisation of the developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, combined with new empirical insights, the article aims to increase our understanding of the conflicts in the region, of the involvement of the Russian Federation in particular, and consequently of the prospects of international conflict resolution. Compared to other political entities in the former Soviet Union, Abkhazia and South Ossetia represent an extreme case of Russian linkage and leverage. This article focuses on the period after the Russian–Georgian war in 2008, when Russia recognised the regions' independence and effectively turned them into Russian protectorates. The economic, intergovernmental, technocratic and social linkages between Russia and the two regions are extraordinarily deep, and they directly undermine the autonomy of the regions. The post-war delegation of Russian cadres and institutional and legislative diffusion creates additional linkages underpinning Russian leverage.

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Introduction

In *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* Levitsky and Way (2010) highlight linkage and leverage as two major dimensions of international influence on regime change in the post-Cold War world. Linkage refers to the density of a country's ties with the West; leverage denotes a government's vulnerability to external democratising pressure. Where linkage is high, democratisation is expected to be more likely to ensue. Where linkage is low, political change is more exclusively shaped by domestic factors, and especially by the incumbent government's organisational strength. In this article we apply the concepts of linkage and leverage to Russia's involvement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, especially after it recognised the regions' independence in August 2008. The third unresolved territorial dispute in South Caucasus, surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, is excluded from our analysis. Russia's engagement with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is fundamentally different from its involvement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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While Russia acts as the patron state in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regarding Nagorno-Karabakh this position is taken by Armenia. Russia's linkages with the two break-away Georgian regions are far more extensive than its involvement in the Armenian-dominated enclave in Azerbaijan.

We will first establish the nature and density of the ties and cross-border flows (linkage) between Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the Russian Federation. This is still largely unexplored terrain. Little research has been done on how Russia has actually tied the two break-away parts of Georgia to the Russian Federation – which policies are followed, which instruments are used? Additionally, we will discuss the extent to which these linkages translate into leverage Russia exercises over these regions. Given Russia's dominant position in the region and the level of dependence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia Russia's leverage must be considerable. Still, it seems not completely unchallenged. Russia's relationship with the ruling elites of Abkhazia and South Ossetia does not lack friction. The combination of Russia's recognition of the regions' formal independence and the massive influence it exerts on their internal development has created serious potential for discord. And finally, we will draw conclusions on the implications of Russia's involvement in Ossetia and Abkhazia for political transformation and international conflict resolution. Russia's involvement with the two breakaway regions, especially when set off against the lack of engagement by other powers, arguably has profound implications for the political dynamic inside the regions, including the prospects of conflict resolution. The conclusion considers the implications of Russian linkage and leverage in the two regions for the prospect of conflict resolution and further international (Western) involvement.

Russia has been the biggest supporter of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the emergence of separatist conflicts in the two regions in the late 1980s. The article focuses on the latest part of the conflict-cycle in southern Caucasus. We will concentrate on mechanisms of linkage, leverage and control that have been expanded, built and sustained after the five-day war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 and after Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence. Following the war and the declaration of independence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia further intensified its involvement with the two regions. Russia has built a number of military bases in the two regions, protects their borders, promotes their international recognition as independent states, restores damaged and builds new infrastructure, covers virtually all of South Ossetia's and most of Abkhazia's state budgets and it carries out part of public administration in the two regions. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been effectively turned into Russian dependencies.

We discuss five types of linkages in particular. Economic linkage, trade and investment and other ties have gradually integrated Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian economy. Intergovernmental linkages refer primarily to diplomatic, administrative and financial assistance by Russia to the governments of the two regions. Technocratic linkage mostly takes the form of the education and training of the elites of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Social links concern contacts at the level of societies. And finally, we discuss the diffusion of institutions, a type of linkage that is not included in Levitsky and Way's analysis, and which relates primarily to the "export" of specific legislation and political and administrative institutions from Russia to Abkhazia and Ossetia.

Russian linkages

Levitsky and Way (2010, 43–44) differentiate between six different types of linkages: economic linkage, intergovernmental linkage, technocratic, social, information and civil society linkages. Before we investigate the nature and the extent of each of these linkages between Russia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this section describes the larger context of Russia's relations with the countries in its neighbourhood, the countries of the Former Soviet Union with the exception of the Baltic States.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia occupy a unique position in the post-Soviet area. No other political entities in the region have deeper and more extensive linkages with Russia. And in combination with the relatively weak organisational power of their governing elites, Russia's linkages probably result in stronger leverage than elsewhere in its neighbourhood. That being said, Russia's ambitions and strategies towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not seem fundamentally different from those in other parts of the post-Soviet area.

Russia's overall goal in the former Soviet area is to strengthen its hegemonic position based on extensive political, economic and security ties, which link the neighbouring countries to Russia, without denying their formal sovereignty. This ambition includes traditional security interests as the stabilisation of its borders and the capability to project its military powers into and beyond the region. To contain outside, mostly Western presence in the region and to support its aspired global role, Russian leaders have repeatedly emphasised that Russia enjoys "privileged interests" in its neighbourhood. Russia's ambitions also embrace economic interests. The close intertwining of political and economic power in Russia motivates and enables its leadership to engage widely in multiple forms of economic statecraft (Wallander 2007). And finally, Russia's ambitions include the protection of Russia's internal political order against outside threats. Russia not only seeks to insulate itself from undesirable external influences, especially of a democratic kind, but it also aims to thwart them beyond its borders.

Despite the fact that the Former Soviet Union is home to a vast array of international initiatives and organisations, the region in a sense is under-institutionalised. Intergovernmental organisations generally fall short in terms of coordination and investment of resources. Membership and degree of participation fluctuate over time, and no two states in the region have an identical history of memberships (Cameron and Orenstein 2012, 35). Due to its arguably hegemonic position and the volatility of the region's intergovernmental organisations, the Russian Federation generally prefers bilateral over multi-lateral ties (Stewart 2010, 7). These bilateral ties, including those with Abkhazia and Ossetia, build on historical legacies and new realities. Political, intergovernmental linkage mostly takes the form of diplomatic and financial support to friendly governmental or non-governmental individuals and organisations. Military linkage is a particularly powerful subset of intergovernmental ties. The Russian military has intervened in the neighbourhood on several occasions, especially in the conflict regions. The purpose of these interventions has variably been to end violence and ethnic conflicts, to evacuate or protect Russians or Russian citizens, to strengthen borders and to contain foreign threats, or to secure control over natural resources. The Russian military has interfered on the orders of the Kremlin leadership but also on those of local politico-military or economic elites. From the early 1990s, Russia has pulled every conceivable military lever, from

security alliances and arms deliveries to peacekeeping operations and open and covert military intervention (German 2012; Hedenskog and Larsson 2007).

Economic interests are another major driver of Russian foreign policy, especially in its neighbourhood. Russia's economic activities towards the countries of the post-Soviet area seem as much aimed at integration at the state level as at the expansion of Russia's private and state-owned companies (Wallander 2007). Russia's economy is by far the largest in the region, providing an important market, though not necessarily the largest market, for goods and labour for most of the bordering countries. The levels of economic dependence on Russia vary considerably. For the European and Caucasian states in the region (with the exception of Belarus) trade volumes with the European Union (EU) exceed those with the Russian Federation. For the Central Asian states, China is becoming a major trade partner (Górecki 2014). Trade embargos, targeted subsidies, differential energy pricing, credits and debt cancellation are among the levers of Russian regional economic statecraft. Russia's economic relations with its neighbouring countries are often non-transparent and difficult to untangle. "[E]conomic relations are networked rather than rules-based", as Sherr (2013, 74) observes

Ownership structures are difficult to unravel, and networks can be ruthless when crossed. Contracts have less sanctity than "understanding" [...] Formal institutions count for little. The legal order is, for those without connections, arbitrary, and for those who have them, negotiable.

Finally, social and cultural linkages can be thought to have an important impact on Russia's neighbouring countries. The presence of Russian minorities, the position of the Russian language and more generally the popularity of Russian culture and media provide Russia with additional levers of influence. The following sections will explore how these linkages are constituted in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and how and to what extent they are translated into leverage over these territories?

In much of the post-Soviet area, Russia is one of several relevant external actors, including also Western states and the EU. However, what sets Abkhazia and South Ossetia apart from other political entities in the former Soviet Union and what constitutes the essence of their geopolitical position is the near-exclusive nature of their links with Russia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have no significant economic relations with any other state. Since their independence, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have only been recognised by five remote and smaller states (Nauru, Nicaragua, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Venezuela) in addition of course to Russia. Abkhazia and Ossetia have substantial intergovernmental linkages only with Russia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia also have no serious social linkages, information linkages or civil society ties with other states, let alone with Western states. The near-exclusive linkage, and the leverage that results from it, gives Russia the opportunity to have an extraordinary degree of influence in Georgia's breakaway provinces. There is no reason to expect that this situation will change anytime soon. Russia will continue to monopolise the international linkages of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Economic linkage

Russia supports the economies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by acting as their main trading partner. Russia is by far the biggest trade partner for Abkhazia, and virtually the

only one for South Ossetia. According to one source, 80% of what is consumed in Abkhazia is imported from Russia (ICG 2010a, 6). According to another source, 64% of Abkhazian imports (mainly fuel and food products) in 2011 were from Russia (Gogua 2012). At 18%, Turkey is Abkhazia's second largest source of imports, while Abkhazia imports smaller amounts of goods from Germany, the Baltic States, Moldova and China. Russia (71%) and Turkey (27%) are also the main destinations for Abkhazia's exports, which consist for the biggest part of food products and coal. Abkhazia runs a significant trade deficit. In 2011, the value of Abkhaz imports was roughly eleven times bigger than the value of its exports (Gogua 2012).

South Ossetia's economic output in 2009 was worth some three million euros. Practically all imports to South Ossetia come from Russia. South Ossetian exports only consist of modest amounts of fruits to Russia.¹ It stands to reason that South Ossetia has an even bigger trade deficit than Abkhazia, but data on the volume of South Ossetian trade are not available. Abkhazia and South Ossetia arguably can afford their trade deficits due to the inflow of financial aid from Russia in addition to, in the case of Abkhazia, a large tourism sector. According to then President Sergei Bagapsh, 99% of foreign direct investment in Abkhazia in 2009 came from Russia (ICG 2010a, 6). Turkish investment in Abkhazia in recent years apparently has also been on the rise (Clayton 2011). There is no indication that there are other investors in South Ossetia but Russia.

Russian economic activity in Abkhazia goes beyond trade and investment. In recent years major economic and infrastructural assets have been transferred to Russian ownership or control and, in different respects, the Abkhaz economy gradually becomes integrated with the Russian economy. Among other things, Abkhazia has adopted Russian technical and commercial standards, and its electricity grid has been united with that of the Russian Federation. In addition, Russian state company Russian Railways controls the rail network of Abkhazia, and other Russian companies oversee the development of Abkhaz sea infrastructure. Furthermore, state-owned Rosneft, Russia's largest oil company, looks for oil off the Abkhaz coast.²

Economic integration of Russia with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is also achieved through a series of economic arrangements. Economic agreements signed in 2009 and 2010 indicate that Russia and Abkhazia and Russia and South Ossetia have taken steps to lift trade barriers and cooperate in customs affairs.³ Russian trade with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is also facilitated by the fact that the regions continue to use the Russian ruble as their primary currency.

Intergovernmental linkage

Russia was already Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's main international partner before it unilaterally recognised the independence of the regions in 2008. Before 2008, Russia had peacekeepers stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the flag of the Commonwealth of Independent States, engaged in the controversial practice of issuing passports to the inhabitants of the two breakaway regions, and it was instrumental in organising summits of the four unrecognised states of the post-Soviet area – Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria (Popescu 2006). Directly following the armed conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia and between Georgia and Russia, however, Russia's involvement with the two regions reached a qualitatively new level. On 26 August 2008,

President Medvedev signed decrees according to which Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Two allies of Russia in Latin America – Nicaragua and Venezuela – as well as three small island states in the South Pacific Ocean – Nauru, Tuvalu and Vanuatu – have since declared their recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence. Russia has failed to persuade other countries to equally support the independence of the two regions. As a result, Russia remains the only significant power to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Weeks after the recognition of independence, on 17 September, Russia signed an "Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Support" with both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In these agreements, the two sides, among other things, pledge to defend each other's sovereignty, grant each other the right to construct and use military bases on their respective territories, and announce the intention to work towards a high level of economic integration.⁴ In 2014 (Abkhazia) and 2015 (South Ossetia) Russia signed new treaties with the two regions that promise a new level of integration and that, following the annexation of Crimea earlier in 2014, have been criticised for amounting to "de facto annexation".⁵ The two treaties provide for a "coordinated foreign policy" and a "single space of defence and security" of Russia with the respective regions. The treaties also contain provisions about the simplification of rules for obtaining Russian citizenship for citizens from the two regions, and about the increase of average salaries to a level comparable to that in the Southern Federal District of the Russian Federation.

Following the signing of the Agreement of September 2008, Russia started to construct a number of military facilities in both regions, including a new naval base in Abkhazia, and the 4th Military Base in South Ossetia, which has been operational since 2009 with up to 4000 troops. According to Russian officials, in 2013 there were around 3500 military and 1500 border guards and Federal Security Service officers in Abkhazia alone (ICG 2013, 3). Most prominently, Russian troops assist the authorities of the two regions in guarding their borders with Tbilisi-controlled territory and, in the case of Abkhazia, the Black Sea coast line. The construction of new military facilities and the setting up of new security institutions suggest that Russia aims to have a military presence in the two regions for the long haul.

In addition, Russia provides direct financial aid to the regions. As such, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are among the few places worldwide to which Russia dispenses direct development assistance (Wierzbowska-Miazga and Kaczmarek 2011). Russia also carries out infrastructural development and post-conflict reconstruction in the two regions: in recent years, it has, among other things, built and renovated new roads, railways and government buildings. The infrastructural development of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is largely delegated to the Ministry of Regional Development, whose official mandate concerns the development of the subjects of the Russian Federation rather than foreign territories.

In 2009, direct aid amounted to 60% of the Abkhaz budget (ICG 2010a, 5). In 2012, direct financial aid fell to 22% of the Abkhaz budget. When infrastructure development is taken into account, the Russian subsidy to the Abkhaz budget in 2012, according to one calculation, was closer to 70% of the 287 million dollar state expenditures (ICG 2013, 6). For South Ossetia, which lacks a significant source of self-generated income, almost the entire budget is made up of Russian financial aid. According to one calculation, Russia contributed around one billion dollars to South Ossetia in the form of financial aid and infrastructure development between 2008 and 2013.⁶ Not included in these figures, and in the

figures for Abkhazia, are pension payments to holders of Russian passports in both territories. The issuing of Russian passports to the inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the consent of the regional authorities (“passportisation”) is one of the most widely publicised forms of Russian involvement. Russia started this practice in the early 2000s when Soviet passports expired. For people in the two regions, the benefits of holding a Russian passport included eligibility for receiving Russian social benefits, and the ability to travel across borders as Abkhaz and South Ossetian passports would not be recognised (Littlefield 2009). A large majority of the inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia now hold Russian passports. For the Russian government, two benefits are associated with issuing passports to inhabitants of the two regions. First, it is seen as an effective means to strengthen the loyalty of Abkhazian and South Ossetian citizens to Russia and by extension to weaken their affiliation to Georgia. Moreover, the issuing of passports has made it possible for Russia to invoke a responsibility-to-protect argument, as it did during the conflict with Georgia in August 2008 (Littlefield 2009).

Technocratic linkage

Considering that the Soviet Union had one integrated educational system, it was fairly common for people to move to other republics of the union for a university education. It was generally accepted that the most prestigious universities of the country were in Moscow. For post-Soviet elites, education in Russia, and especially in Moscow, remains a matter of some status today, although in certain circles, it is now equally or more prestigious to study in the West. Regarding the political elites of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is, however, hard to find examples of a university education in a Western country, while a large share of elite members have studied in Russia.

Of the 19 highest-ranking persons holding positions in executive power (the Head of State and cabinet ministers), 12 have studied in either post-Soviet Russia or the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Nine of these 12 functionaries have studied in Moscow.⁷ This includes President Ankvab, who graduated from the Academy of Social Sciences of the Communist Party in 1987, Vice President Logua, who graduated from the Moscow State Automobile and Road Technical University in 1995, and Prime Minister Lakerbaya, who is a graduate from the same Moscow institution. None of the nineteen officials graduated from a university outside the post-Soviet area.

Information is available about the university education of 27 Members of Parliament of Abkhazia, from a total of 35 MPs. Of these 27 MPs, 12 have studied in Russia or the RSFSR, including seven in Moscow. The higher share of education in Russia or the RSFSR among persons holding executive power provides some indication of the prestige that is attached to education in Russia. Of the seventeen highest-ranking persons holding positions in executive power in South Ossetia, twelve hold degrees from universities in Russia or the RSFSR, including eight from Moscow universities.⁸ Information about the university education of members of the South Ossetian legislature could not be retrieved, and there is no evidence of any member of the South Ossetian political elite who has studied in the West.

Arguably, the main rising stars of Abkhaz and South Ossetian politics are, respectively, Vice President Mikhail Logua (1970) and Foreign Minister David Sanakoyev (1976). Both men are affiliated with the Russian Academy of State Service, which typically prepares

only Russian citizens for positions in the state bureaucracy. Sanakoyev is said to have started work on a dissertation at the Academy in 2008, while Logua graduated from the Academy in 2012 while already serving as Abkhazia's Vice President.⁹

Many Abkhaz and South Ossetian officials have spent years at Russian institutes of higher education. A number of high-ranking officials in the two regions, at least in recent years, were in fact from Russia and did not have a previous connection with the regions. It has been common for the security institutions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be headed by Russian officials who had been delegated from the "sister" security institutions of the Russian Federation (Popescu 2006). South Ossetia, moreover, has seen a succession of three Prime Ministers from Russia: Yuri Morozov (2005–2008), Aslanbek Bulatsev (2008–2009) and Vadim Brovtsev (2008–2011). Brovtsev also served as Acting President for four months after disputed presidential elections in December 2011 had left the position of President vacant. None of these three Prime Ministers had previously been related to South Ossetia. Other departments, including the crucial Ministries of Defence and Economic Development, have also been headed by officials who had been delegated to the republic from Russia (ICG 2010b, 9–10).

Social linkage, information linkage and civil society linkage

The main form of social linkage of Abkhazia with Russia concerns the large number of Russian tourists who visit the region. Abkhazia hosts up to one million tourists annually, a majority of whom are Russians (Kuchuburiya 2010). Russian tourists benefit from a visa-free travel regime with Abkhazia, which has retained some of its attraction as a holiday destination since the Soviet years. The main form of social linkage of South Ossetia with Russia is the large diaspora of Ossetians. Across the border from Russia, the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania is home to some 460,000 ethnic Ossetians, roughly ten times the number of ethnic Ossetians in South Ossetia. South Ossetia has a sizeable Georgian minority but is otherwise relatively mono-ethnic. Abkhazia, by contrast, has large minorities of Armenians, Georgians and Russians. It stands to reason that many of the Russians of Abkhazia have relatives and acquaintances in Russia. In addition, Russia is home to a small Abkhaz diaspora of some 11,000 people.¹⁰ Social linkage between Russia and the two regions, finally, is promoted by educational exchange. The Russian government each year offers scholarships to a significant share of high school graduates from Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Kirova 2012, 19).

Social and information linkages between Russia and the two regions are bolstered by the fact that Russian is nearly universally spoken by the Abkhaz and the South Ossetian populations. Russian is the lingua franca in both regions, and it is argued that most inhabitants of the region speak better Russian than Abkhaz and Ossetian (Kirova 2012, 21). The Abkhaz and Ossetian languages are state languages, but in both regions Russian is recognised as an official language in which, next to the state language, state affairs are conducted. In practice, Russian is the dominant language in state affairs, as exemplified by the fact that many government websites are not available or only partially available in Abkhaz and Ossetian. The position of the Russian language in the two regions is strengthened through its active promotion by the Russian government and through the dominance of Russian media, especially broadcast media. Russian television can be universally received in Abkhaz and South Ossetia. The two regions have national

broadcasting companies who broadcast television in the state languages, but given the smaller number and lower production values of these broadcasts compared to Russian equivalents, it seems likely that the Abkhaz and South Ossetia watch more Russian-language television than television in the state languages.

The active promotion of the Russian language is organised by a range of Russian government agencies and government-organised non-governmental organisations, foremost the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, also known as *Rosstrudnichestvo*, and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation. *Rosstrudnichestvo* has set up offices in both Sukhum and Tsinkhval, from which it organises events around Russian culture. The *Russkiy Mir* Foundation supports a number of local organisations that promote the Russian language and culture.

Diffusion of institutions

The Russian influence in Abkhazia and Ossetia is also visible in an area that is not captured by Levitsky and Way's conceptualisation of linkage: the design of institutions based on Russian examples. When institutions across countries are similar, this does not yet mean that there has been a process of diffusion. In the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however, the institutions are not just similar, but also the legislation that established them is often identical to the original Russian legislation. Authoritarian states, such as Russia, are believed to benefit from the presence of similar authoritarian states in their neighbourhood (Bader, Grävingsholt, and Kästner 2010). An implication of the diffusion of institutional design from Russia to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is that the political systems of the regions are to a large extent similar to Russia's. The borrowing from Russian legislation extends to many areas (ICG 2010b), but is demonstrated here on the example of some of the institutions that actually shape the politics of the regions.

Like Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are semi-presidential republics, that is, with a popularly elected president alongside a prime minister and a cabinet of ministers who are responsible to the legislature. Also like in Russia, the semi-presidential arrangements of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian political systems grant significantly more power to the president than to either the government or the legislature. Some of the provisions in the constitutions of Abkhazia (1994) and South Ossetia (2001) that define the semi-presidential arrangement, including provisions that specify the relative powers of the different branches of government, are identical to provisions in the Russian constitution of 1993.¹¹

The diffusion of institutions is also apparent with regard to electoral legislation. South Ossetia's current election laws have been adopted between 2006 and 2011. Abkhazia's election laws were adopted earlier, in 2004. The difference in the moment of adoption is reflected in the content of the laws. The South Ossetian laws are nearly verbatim copies of the equivalent Russian laws that were in place at the time. Consequently, the South Ossetian law on parliamentary elections, adopted in 2009, puts in place the same electoral system that was used in Russia between 2005 and 2012: the 34 members of the parliament are elected from one district according to proportional representation and with a 7% electoral threshold. The Abkhaz law on parliamentary elections, by contrast, is based on a combination of late-Soviet election laws and early post-communist laws.

With regard to the electoral system, the law copies provisions from Soviet legislation: all 35 members of parliament are elected from single-member districts.¹²

The rules for the composition of election commissions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia resemble the rules in Russia. In all three polities, the Central Election Commission comprises fifteen members. In Russia, five members are selected by the president, and five members are selected each by the lower and upper chambers of the legislature. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have a unicameral legislature, the seven members are selected by the legislature, and eight by parliament. Lower-tier election commissions, in Russia as well as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are, unlike elsewhere in the post-Soviet area, for the biggest part put together by higher-tier election commissions.

Finally, the political party laws of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are restrictive with regard to the registration of new parties in the same way as the Russian political party law was between 2006 and 2012.¹³ During these years, new parties in Russia were required to have at least 50,000 members with at least 500 members in more than half of the 83 regions. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in order to be registered, new parties are required to have even larger numbers of members – 1000 and 300, respectively – as a share of the population than in Russia. As in Russia, the members of the parties need to be dispersed across a majority of the region's administrative districts.¹⁴

Russian leverage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Levitsky and Way define leverage as a government's vulnerability to external democratisation pressure. Irrespective of the actual leverage that Russia has in its neighbourhood, we can safely assume that it rarely translates into democratisation pressure. But is the opposite true? Does Russian influence necessarily encourage and sustain authoritarian rule?

Russia's hard power resources and extensive linkage in the region do not automatically translate into leverage. This is also true for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where social, information, civil society and technocratic linkages are incomparably stronger than in any other part of the post-Soviet area. An important variable is the organisational power of the target state's leadership, which Levitsky and Way discuss within the context of linkages with the West and international pressure for democratisation. Organisational power can also be seen as an important variable in relations between authoritarian states, including those between Russia and the countries in the former Soviet area. If organisational power is defined as the combined effect of a ruling regime's political preferences and administrative capabilities, it could either facilitate or frustrate a larger power's ambitions, irrespective of the latter's democratic or authoritarian leanings. The weak organisational power of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has made it possible that these regions have been transformed into protectorates.

Russian economic and intergovernmental linkage with Abkhazia and South Ossetia has created a strong one-sided dependence. Russia does not stand to lose much, except for reputation costs and possibly a weaker position towards Georgia, were the linkages with Abkhazia and South Ossetia to break down. In addition to being one-sided, the dependence is greatly enhanced by the circumstance that the Russian leverage is near-exclusive: Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not maintain significant relations with any other states. In terms of economic linkage, Russia is the only trade partner for South

Ossetia and by far the most important one for Abkhazia. If Russia would decide to impose a boycott, close a border crossing or raise tariffs, the regions would be heavily hit. Intergovernmental linkage, in the form of the recognition of the regions as independent states, military and financial assistance, equally creates one-sided dependence. Russia is the only major power that recognises Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Without this recognition, the claim to independence of the regions would arguably seem even less legitimate. The ruling forces of Abkhazia have been adamant about gaining international recognition ever since the region managed to de facto break away from Georgia. The claim to independence of South Ossetia, which has a small and shrinking population and a lack of viable economic resources, seems less assured. In 2014, the region's biggest political party requested President Tibilov to hold a referendum on the region's possible accession to the Russia Federation (Farniev 2014).

The military assistance that is provided to the regions by Russia is crucial to their survival. Without this support, it is unlikely that the military forces of the regions would be able to hold back Georgian armed forces in a renewed conflict, especially since the Georgian military has received training and other assistance from the United States since the Rose Revolution of 2003. Russia's military involvement also may be the biggest obstacle to Georgia gaining a serious prospect of membership in NATO (Fuller 2014).

Given that most of the Abkhazian budget is made up of Russian financial aid, the authorities of the region would probably be unable to pay public-sector wages, maintain government institutions and provide public services at a level comparable to the current one, if it would not receive the financial aid. This is even more extreme in the case of South Ossetia. Nearly the entire South Ossetian budget is Russian financial aid; the regional state apparatus would not exist without that aid. The strong dependence on Russian financial assistance in Abkhazia and South Ossetia likely creates a form of rent addiction. Russian aid enters the regions irrespective of the productive capacities of their economies. It has no explicit conditionality element, but it shapes expectations regarding future income. Next to the regional governments, the citizens in the regions also depend directly on Russian financial aid. A majority of the people in the regions hold Russian passports, making them eligible to receive Russian pensions and other benefits at much higher levels than could be afforded by the governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Especially economic and intergovernmental linkage, then, translates into Russian leverage over the regions. At the same time, Russia's influence over political processes in the regions is more limited than might be expected. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have a larger degree of political pluralism and contestation (albeit with limited freedoms and differing levels of repression) than Russia. In Freedom House's influential Freedom in the World index, Abkhazia scores 4 on Political Rights,¹⁵ indicating a political rights situation that is slightly less favourable than in Georgia and Moldova, roughly as favourable as in Ukraine but more favourable than in all other post-Soviet states. The relatively positive score for political rights is a reflection of the fact that the region has organised several competitive elections. South Ossetia, by contrast, has the least favourable possible score for Political Rights (7) in Freedom House's index, apparently because of Russia's influence in South Ossetian politics. At the same time, the November 2011 presidential elections in South Ossetia were heavily contested. In these elections, the majority of votes in the first round was evenly split between a candidate seen as Moscow's favourite (Leonid Bibilov) and an opposition candidate (Alla Dzhiyoeva). When it seemed that Dzhiyoeva would

win in the run-off against Bibilov, the results were annulled, and repeat elections were announced for March 2012. The repeat elections were subsequently contested by four new candidates, and they were won by current President Tibilov. The 2011 elections in South Ossetia were an echo of the 2004 presidential elections in Abkhazia. In those elections, the official results of the first round were not acknowledged by the runner-up Raul Khadjimba, who was openly supported by Russia. After a stand-off that lasted two months, Khadjimba accepted the post of Vice President. The fact that Khadjimba lost the popular vote despite open support from Russia was seen as a sign of the limited grip of Russia on regional politics.

Levitsky and Way emphasise that linkage does not directly translate into leverage. A crucial variable is the “organisational power” of the target state’s incumbent leadership. In the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia this power is weak. As we argued, Russia has effectively reduced Abkhazia and especially South Ossetia to the status of protectorates. Still, Russia’s relationship with the ruling powers of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not devoid of friction. The circumstance that Russia on the one hand recognised the independence of the regions, but on the other hand exerts massive influence, creates much potential for discord. As noted, Russia has sought to manipulate electoral processes, most visibly in Abkhazia in 2004 and in South Ossetia in 2011. In Abkhazia in particular, there is opposition from the regional population to what is viewed as Russia’s exploitation of the region. Russia and Russians have been, among other things, accused of trying to annex land (Whitmore 2011) and buying up large amounts of property (ICG 2010a, 2010b, 7). There is also friction between Moscow and the regional authorities over how Moscow’s financial assistance is disbursed. With regard to both regions, allegations have emerged of large-scale embezzlement by the regional authorities (Gogoryan 2011; Krivitsky 2013). Probably because there is no alternative to Russia’s patronage for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however, there is no disagreement among political forces in the two regions regarding Russia’s role. All major political forces and politicians welcome Russia’s involvement, and none of these forces envisions a future return to the Georgian state. As a consequence, there is no urgency for Russia to greatly interfere in electoral processes or micro-manage the politics of the regions. In a sense, it matters little to Moscow who wins elections in the regions, as all major candidates and parties will depend on Russian financial aid and other forms of assistance if they win the elections (Skakov 2011; Sukhov 2009).

The question remains what the level of Russia’s engagement with the regions will be in the long run. Despite Russia’s diverse and heavy involvement of recent years, it does not seem likely that the two regions are a major priority area for the Russian leadership. One indication for this is that the officials who have been delegated to staff the state apparatus especially in South Ossetia are relatively low-ranking in the Russian state apparatus. The regions may even be viewed as a diplomatic burden for Russia. The fact that international recognition of the two regions has not been more forthcoming strengthens Russia’s relative isolation on the international scene, and its involvement in the regions makes it more difficult for Russian foreign policy to stress the values of sovereignty and non-interference. The financial and military assistance also cost the Russian budget hundreds of millions of dollars per year. The expenditure, according to one calculation, amounts to only 0.016% of the state budget (Nixey 2012, 3). As insignificant as this may seem, the assistance may

come under closer scrutiny when there is a perception that the money is not well worth spending.

Conclusion: implications for international conflict resolution

Russian linkages with Abkhazia and South Ossetia are denser than the linkages between the West and undemocratic or competitive authoritarian states as discussed by Levitsky and Way. The economic and intergovernmental linkages between Russia and the two regions are not just extraordinarily deep, but they directly undermine the autonomy of the regions. There are also additional forms of Russian influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, such as the delegation of cadres and the carbon copying of legislation and institutions that are not captured by Levitsky and Way's categories.

These forms of linkage have been present in relations between Russia and the breakaway regions since the 1990s. In August 2008, Tbilisi attempted to re-establish control over South Ossetia after an escalation of hostilities on the border between South Ossetia and Georgia-controlled territory. Russia reacted by sending in its armed forces to push the Georgian troops out of South Ossetia, and by destroying military installations in Georgia-controlled territory. Following the 2008 conflict, Russia has in particular increased its financial aid to the regions, as well as its military presence. Moreover, Russia has taken the highly symbolic step of recognising the independence of the regions, a position from which it cannot easily retreat. The post-2008 developments have placed the regions more squarely in Russia's orbit than before. This confirms the final hypothesis of the introduction of this Special Section, which posits that conflict dynamics change linkage structures and shape the next phase in the conflict-cycle. Linkage structures, however, have not been changed in a way that would facilitate conflict resolution: by contrast, the strongly increased linkage between Russia and the two regions after 2008 has made conflict resolution a distinctly more remote prospect. Since the departure from power of former president Saakashvili and his United National Movement, there have been signs of détente in the relations between Georgia and Russia. This circumstance, however, has not yet led to notable changes in the status quo surrounding the regions and the conflict resolution dynamic. Practically all ties between Georgia and the breakaway regions have remained severed.

The term "de facto independent states", frequently applied to the regions, is a misnomer. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are independent from Tbilisi, but dependent on Moscow to an extent that is rarely observed between states that recognise each other's independence. The regions have all of the attributes of independent states, including political institutions, but autonomous policy-making is constrained, whether directly as a result of Russian interference, or indirectly as a consequence of the dependence on Russian funding. Moreover, the protection of the regions' borders is carried out by Russian troops. Especially since 2008, the regions have been essentially protectorates of the Russian Federation, and Russia's role towards the regions has been that of a powerful patron. This reality is partly an outcome of the 2008 armed conflict. It is, at the same time, also the result of the relative non-engagement of the West with the regions since the separatist conflicts of the early 1990s. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent support for separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine are a sign that the Russian government is willing to go far in violating the territorial integrity of its

neighbours. Since the onset of the Ukraine crisis Russia has signed new treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, signalling its commitment to keep the two regions outside Georgia's control.

Russia's involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is linked with larger interests too. Russia uses its leverage over the two regions to not only sustain dependence on their protector, but also to defend its interests in the Northern Caucasus, and to exert influence over the international negotiations aimed at conflict resolution. If the EU, the United States or other external powers are interested in changing the status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they would need to alter the international political dynamic in the region. Russia practically monopolises external involvement in the two conflict regions. Other international linkages are either weak or non-existent, as is the leverage of other outside powers. While the West has established close ties with the Georgian government especially since the Rose Revolution of 2003, Russia has invested heavily in the two break-away regions. This has resulted in a largely exclusive linkage of both the conflict regions and Georgia with the outside world. Because linkages were so mutually exclusive, actors on different sides of the conflict have developed undivided and opposite incentives, a circumstance that has been a major enabling factor of the military escalation of the conflict in South Ossetia in 2008. Therefore, we find strong support for the second hypothesis formulated in the introduction to this Special Section, which argues that diverse and cross-cutting linkages mitigate the new conflict by maintaining a balance between the incentives and constraints faced by relevant elites. The existence of near-exclusive linkages between Russia and the breakaway regions is still one of the main obstacles to conflict resolution today.

The range of activities that the EU has initiated in the region, including a cease-fire agreement between Russia and Georgia, a Monitoring Mission, Eastern Partnership negotiations with Georgia and Armenia, and energy deals with Azerbaijan has provided the EU with a variable degree of leverage with the three countries in the South Caucasus, but it has achieved little in terms of conflict resolution in the region's three disputed areas. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the EU has funded a small number of humanitarian and emergency aid projects (ICG 2010a, 11–12). Other than that, the EU, with the OSCE and the UN, is one of the drivers in the Geneva Discussion on Security and Stability in the South Caucasus that deal primarily with humanitarian and security issues resulting from the 2008 conflict. Nearly all Western involvement with the regions, then, is within a context of conflict resolution and dealing with the consequences of conflict. Other forms of engagement are practically impossible given that Western governments and intergovernmental organisation do not recognise the independence and statehood of the regions, and the legitimacy of their institutions and leaders. After Saakashvili came to power as a result of the Rose Revolution in 2003, the West put its full weight behind Georgia at the expense of engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For international conflict resolution to be effective, changes "on the ground" would first need to create incentives for the parties to engage in negotiations. International negotiations are often the final rather than the first stage of conflict resolution.

In order to create a new reality, the linkages of the conflict regions would need to be diversified. The lack of contacts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia make it impossible for the West to exert influence on the leaders of the regions. Criticising the prevailing approach of Western governments and intergovernmental organisations, a range of

authors have argued that more engagement, including direct engagement with the leaders of the two regions, is necessary in order to make progress towards conflict resolution (Cooley and Mitchell 2010; Mankoff 2012, 27; Whitman and Wolff 2010). The EU in particular would need to relax its legalistic approach to the regions, and engage more extensively with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The current lack of a viable alternative to Russia for the two regions is one of the main factors standing in the way of even the beginning of a conflict resolution process. This situation could change: Russia's commitment to the regions may wane, the EU may yet establish relations with the leadership of regions and the new Georgian government may seek rapprochement with the regions. The evolution of the conflict dynamic over the past twenty years, in any event, provides lessons about how conflict resolution is not achieved.

Notes

1. See <http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-reuro.nsf/348bd0da1d5a7185432569e700419c7a/be2d70933881fb75c32579270040e8a1>.
2. See http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/ab/ab_ru_relations/ab_rus_projects/.
3. These agreements can be found at http://www.mid.ru/spd_md.nsf/twowebcant?openview&RestrictToCategory=%D0%90%D0%91%D0%A5%D0%90%D0%97%D0%98%D0%AF and http://www.mid.ru/spd_md.nsf/twowebcant?openview&RestrictToCategory=%D0%AE%D0%96%D0%9D%D0%90%D0%AF%20%D0%9E%D0%A1%D0%95%D0%A2%D0%98%D0%AF.
4. The agreements can be found at http://www.mid.ru/BDOMP/spd_md.nsf/0/945AD6B8157EAE144257C3C003D349B and http://www.mid.ru/BDOMP/spd_md.nsf/0/7F53CA428C3CC37B44257C3C003D349D.
5. The treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be consulted at <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4783> and <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4819>.
6. See <http://www.newsru.com/finance/19jul2013/sosetiaramoney.html>.
7. Information available at <http://www.abkhaziagov.org/>.
8. Information available at <http://cominf.org/persons>.
9. About Sanakoyev, see <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/202525/>. About Logua, see <http://www.abkhaziagov.org/firstpersons/vicepresident>.
10. See http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm.
11. The constitutions of Abkhazia, Russia and South Ossetia can be found at, respectively <http://apsnypress.info/constitution>, <http://www.constitution.ru/>, and <http://cominf.org/en/node/1127818105>.
12. The law of Abkhazia on parliamentary elections can be found at <http://apsnypress.info/docs/3442.html>. The law of Abkhazia on presidential elections can be found at <http://apsnypress.info/docs/3443.html>. The general electoral law of South Ossetia can be found at <http://cominf.org/node/1166489241>, while its laws on parliamentary and presidential elections can be found at <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/154259/> and <http://cominf.org/node/1156937977>, respectively.
13. 2006 amendments to the Russian law on political parties raised the number of members required for registration from 10,000 to 50,000. Subsequent amendments adopted in 2012 lowered the number to 500.
14. The laws on political parties of Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be found at <http://apsnypress.info/docs/144.html> (Abkhazia) and http://cik.ru.su/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=69:-q-q&catid=36:zakonodatelstvo&Itemid=57 (South Ossetia).
15. On a scale between 1 and 7, 1 indicating the highest degree of political rights. The Freedom in the World index can be consulted at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world#.UuAVWRA1iHs>.

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