



Critical Studies on Development Transition in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: SDGs Achievement Strategies in Territorial Disputed Countries

Adhiya Agmaradilla¹ and Henny Saptatia Drajadi Nugrahani²

¹ Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta 10430, Indonesia

² Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta 10430, Indonesia
adhiya.agmaradilla@ui.ac.id

Abstract. This research examines the development transition in the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in light of strategies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) amid the limited recognition of the international system. Despite both being recognized as de facto states following their declarations of independence in the 1990s, national development processes are still being carried out through adaptive approaches. This research uses qualitative description with literature exploration and relevant development report data. Combining Halford J. Mackinder's geopolitical Heartland theory and the concept of sustainable development, the struggle for influence between Russia, Georgia, and Western countries helps analyze the adaptive strategic position of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Eurasia. Results show that geopolitical dynamics, limited diplomatic access, and political support from external actors strongly influence development in the disputed territories. This study contributes to the discourse of sustainable development by expanding the scope of the study to politically unconventional regions.

Keywords: SDGs, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Geopolitics, Heartland, Sustainable Development.

1 Introduction

Regional disputes have become one of the major challenges in the discourse of global development and international relations. The rise of the de facto states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia represented the first major geopolitical challenge in the region in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, lasting until 1992. (Vzgliad 2016; Rukhadze & Duerr, 2016). The declaration came in mid-2008 when Russia won

the war with Georgia and gave international recognition to separatists, along with Venezuela, Vanuatu, Nauru, Syria, Nicaragua, and Tuvalu as United Nations member states (Sieniawski, 2024). Although only a few countries are internationally recognized, both countries continue to exercise self-government, grow economies, and international cooperation, utilize foreign policies, and implement development agendas (Gerrits & Bader, 2016).

The post-conflict situation escalated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War due to Russia's military involvement and economic support (Sieniawski, 2024). The war erupted as Abkhazia and South Ossetia held strategic significance in Eurasian geopolitics. During diplomatic isolation and limited access to external assistance, the two regions continue to navigate the development process through bilateral relations, foreign policy, and local strategies (Ambrosio & Lange, 2016).

This study examines how Abkhazia and South Ossetia navigate development transitions and adapt the SDGs agenda in the aftermath of the 2008 conflict. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, it applies Mackinder's Heartland theory and the concept of sustainable development to analyze their roles as non-traditional development actors amid political and legal uncertainty, with a focus on the geopolitical influence of Russian dominance. This study aims to address the following research question: How do Abkhazia and South Ossetia pursue and implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) despite limited international recognition and diplomatic isolation?

2 Methods

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the developmental transformation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within a geopolitical framework, employing Mackinder's Heartland theory and the Brundtland Commission's sustainable development paradigm. Based on the Heartland theory and the concept of sustainable development, the two disputed territories meet each other's national interests in geopolitical mastery and development adaptation strategies.

This study applies geopolitical analysis through the lens of Mackinder's Heartland Theory (1904), which positions Abkhazia and South Ossetia within a strategic

Eurasian core. Mackinder argued that Russia, replacing the Mongol Empire, assumed a central role in Eurasia, exerting pressure on Scandinavia, Finland, Turkey, Persia, India, and China, and establishing centrifugal dominance over Central Asia and Eastern Europe. During the Soviet period, this influence grew as Russia leveraged the region to project its power into the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Melvin, 2024). Today, these territories serve as a corridor and buffer zone, supporting Russia's strategic objectives over Georgia, Transcaucasia, and access to the Black Sea, especially in counterbalance to NATO presence (German, 2006).

The post-war Russia-Georgia territorial dispute in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has impacted both countries' development transitions. Russia's victory serves as a peacekeeping act, navigating complex state-building efforts to establish lasting social, economic, and political development (OECD, 2011). The Brundtland Commission defined sustainability as fulfilling current needs without sacrificing future generations' capability, promoting economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental management (United Nations, 1987).

The trajectory of sustainable global development depends on population size and growth, aligning with ecosystem productivity. This raises questions about international recognition and the ability of countries like Abkhazia and South Ossetia to achieve stability. By combining geopolitical interests with sustainable development objectives, this study examines the internal strengths and constraints of these states in pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals.

This study examines the impact of the Russo-Georgian war on Abkhazia and South Ossetia's development and the adaptive strategies implemented by Russia to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting the region's socio-cultural, economic, bilateral, and government benefits.

3 Literature Review

Although substantial research has examined Russia's role as a geopolitical pivot in Eurasia and the power dynamics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the post-Soviet context, a significant gap persists in combining classical geopolitical theories—such as the Heartland Theory—with sustainable development frameworks in the study of conflict-affected states. This literature review seeks to address this intersection by critically examining existing contributions from both geopolitical and development studies.

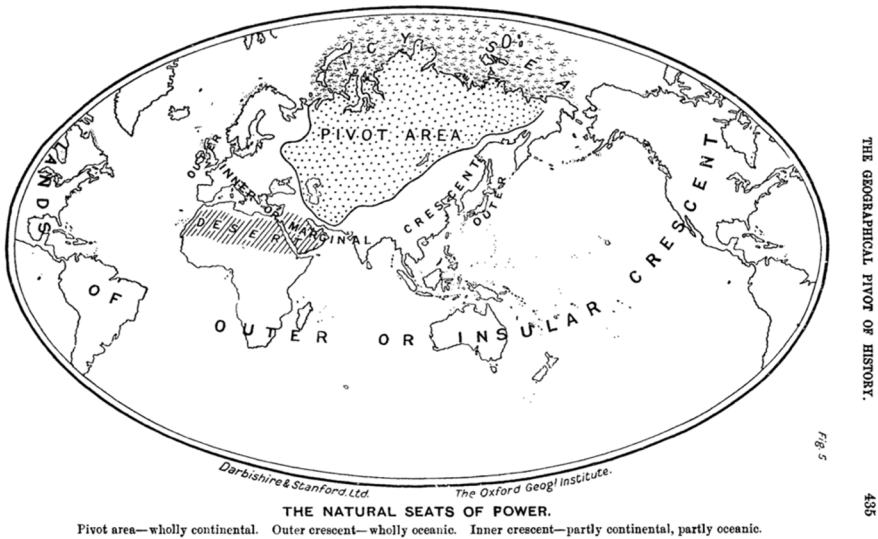


Fig. 1. The Natural Seats of Power by Mackinder's (1904) concept of the "Pivot Area."

Halford J. Mackinder's Heartland Theory, influenced by the discovery of the Caperoad to the Indies, has shaped post-Soviet geopolitical analysis. This led to the rise of New Europe, expanding access to coastal lands and seas, and reshaping historical power dynamics. Countries like Britain, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and Japan became key players in trade. However, the significance of land power increased after Russian power expanded through Siberia with railways spanning 6000 miles from Wirballen to Vladivostok, demonstrating mobile land power and vast territories, isolated from seas occupied by the British Army. The extensive territories of the

Russian Empire brought potential in wheat, cotton, fuel, metals, and population. As a result, Russia's military presence, mobility, and vast spaces have made it the geopolitical pivot of the Eurasian region until today.

Geoffrey Sloan (2008) and Mark Bassin et al. (2006) have both emphasized the importance of Heartland theory in understanding the relationship between geography and international relations. Sloan highlights the theory's relevance in the twenty-first century, as it aligns with the transport and weapon technology trends, world domination, and the geopolitics legacy or *long durée*. Bassin argues that the geopolitical legacy of Heartland logic is relevant for Russia in Eurasia, particularly in the South Caucasus, but also criticizes its paradoxical interest. Mackinder's ideas and geopolitical models, while valuable in post-Soviet Russia, lack engagement with how Heartland-centered strategies intersect with development agendas or territorial governance in disputed states like Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Piotr Sieniawski (2024) and Alexander Kurtskhalia (2020) have contributed to the understanding of Russia's patron-client relationship in the South Caucasus region. Sieniawski argues that Russia's support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two *de facto* states, aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, potentially guiding them towards independence. However, Kurtskhalia and Coppieters critique the legitimacy of these states, highlighting their lack of international recognition and legal obligations. They argue that these regimes are self-proclaimed republics. Their research raises questions about whether external support fosters progress or embeds dependency in these disputed territories.

Scholars such as Dembinska and Campana (2017), Ó Beacháin (2020), Ahluwalia & Miller (2022), and Kosienkowski and Dembinska (2024) (as cited in Sieniawski, 2024) frame Russia as a dominant patron in the South Caucasus, shaping developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Sieniawski (2024) argues that Russia's comprehensive support—across political, economic, military, and cultural domains—may align with UN SDGs, facilitating state-building in these *de facto* regions. O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov (2017) document how Russian symbolic support, including the use of national symbols, language, and institutional backing, has been instrumental in legitimizing the *de facto* regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In contrast, Kurtskhalia (2020) and Coppieters (2018) reject their legitimacy, referring to

them as self-proclaimed entities lacking international recognition. Though the literature outlines Russian influence, it largely neglects how this patronage shapes internal governance or whether it fosters sustainable development or entrenches dependency.

The Brundtland Commission (1987) emphasizes sustainable development in post-conflict regions, balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. Mary Elizabeth Smith (2018) argues that Abkhazia and South Ossetia's strategies for sustainable development are shaped by ethnic nationalism, historical narratives, and geographic differences. Stylianos A. Sotiriou (2017) emphasizes that Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both regions with deep-rooted historical memories, have been characterized by divisions and grievances, hindering reconciliation and inclusive governance. Museyib Shiraliyev (2023) critiques the European Union's conflict resolution approach, highlighting its limited effectiveness due to Russia's dominant role as a mediator and lack of coordination with local actors. Collectively, these scholars show that sustainable development in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is shaped by both internal identity politics and external geopolitical dynamics.

4 Results

4.1 Post-Conflict Statehood and Russia's Strategic Patronage

In November 1989, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region (Oblast) proclaimed its autonomy from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, well before the Soviet Union's dissolution on December 26, 1991 (Markedonov, 2015). In contrast, in March 1921, the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic (Abkhaz SSR) operated as a semi-republic, maintaining relative independence until it signed the Union Treaty and became part of the Trans-Caucasus Soviet Socialist Federative Republic through the Georgian SSR (Jasutis, 2018). Following the five-day Russo-Georgian war, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were recognized as independent by Russia and a handful of other UN member states, including Venezuela, Nauru, Nicaragua, and Syria, marking the beginning of their state-building efforts.

Table 1. Source: Compiled by the author based on data from CES (2008), O’Loughlin et al (2014), Geneva Academy (2019), Smith (2018), O’Loughlin et al (2011), and Sebestsov et al. (2022).

Pro- file	Total Surface Area	Popula- tion	Eth- nicities	Gov- ernment	Interna- tional Rela- tions	Economic Situations
The Repub- lic of Abkha- zia	8600 km ²	240.100	Ab- khaz, Arme- nian, Russian, Geor- gian, and Mingre- lian	Semi- Presi- dential Republic	The Rus- sian Federa- tion, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nauru, Ven- ezuela, Tur- key, and Georgia.	GDP per capita around \$1.400-\$2000 USD (2011)
The Repub- lic of South Osse- tia/The State of Alania	3900 km ²	70.000- 90.000	Osse- tian and Geor- gian	Presi- dential Republic	The Rus- sian Federa- tion, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nauru, Nic- aragua, Ven- ezuela, and Syria.	GDP 40% (2015-2019)

In their nation-building efforts, Abkhazia and South Ossetia recognize the necessary conditions for legitimate statehood. According to the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, both meet the essential criteria: a permanent population, a clearly defined territory, an effective government, and the ability to engage in diplomatic relations with other states (Montevideo Convention, 1933). According to **Table 1**, both entities’ existence can be assessed as actual “states”, including their capacity to interact with the international community.

Furthermore, the EU’s commitment to state-building under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is grounded in its founding treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the rule of law, and the principle of states’ right to self-determination, emphasizing democratic self-governance and sovereignty within the framework of EU law (European Union, 2012). This highlights their right to statehood through self-determination, supported by EU law—namely Article 21(1) and 21(2) of the Treaty on European Union regarding the CFSP and the EU’s external action principles, as well as Article 2, which establishes the EU’s founding values of democracy, rule of law, and

human rights. Furthermore, the UN's SDG 16 focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions. Following the SDGs 2030 Agenda, this highlights the significance of universal and peaceful communities, universal access to justice, effective, responsible, and inclusive institutions, all of which are essential for the development and functioning of a state's "right to self-determination."

Although these treaties are legally valid, some scholars argue that they are either overinclusive or underinclusive, leading to the conclusion that recognition alone does not constitute statehood (Coppiters, 2018). Independence and international recognition are often regarded as the most crucial factors in the debate over the legal definition of statehood. In the context of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's post-conflict statehood, the EU adopted a policy of non-recognition and engagement in December 2009. However, the Georgian government formed a strategy of occupation and de-occupation concepts to reclaim the lost territories (Coppiters, 2018). The Commission and the EU Special Representative state that the strategy could strain relations and hamper the reconciliation process with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian communities. In addition, the EU's Special Representative Peter Semneby pointed out that the EU hopes to avoid unjustly limiting foreign engagement in the separated territories (Semneby, 2011).

All the scholars' arguments based on legitimate treaties concluded that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are arguably considered legal states, yet being overinclusive according to the Montevideo Convention critiques. In comparison to other partially recognized states, in 2012, Palestine was voted in 138 of 193, which allowed it to become a permanent non-member observer of the United Nations despite the ongoing territorial dispute (UN News, 2024). Moreover, the Vatican City or Holy See is the only independent nation that has chosen not to apply for membership in the United Nations, but was granted permanent observer state status. Internally, this response to the Montevideo Convention for being underinclusive, which international recognition could still become a nation even if it does not meet the criteria. On the other hand, Taiwan, as a founding member of the United Nations, once held full UN membership, representing a distinctive historical case of a *de facto* state until it was replaced by the People's Republic of China in 1971. Among the various factors to consider, the patron-client relationship stands out as a key geostrategic aspect of Russia's ties with Abkhazia and

South Ossetia. Following the 2008 conflict, Russia's patronage of these regions resulted in numerous agreements covering financial aid, political alignment, military cooperation, and socio-economic development (Sieniawski, 2024).

According to the 2015 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation and the 2021 National Security Strategy, the key areas of Russian foreign policy were 'the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation relations with the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States' and deepening bilateral cooperation between Russia and Abkhazia-South Ossetia (Kremlin, 2015, 2021). Both documents have deep significance for Russia's foreign policy interests, the desire to embed both entities, the former USSR countries, as *near abroad*, and at the same time, protecting their rights and interests of Russian citizens abroad. The 2021 National Security Strategy states that the West's ambition to maintain its global hegemony could worsen Abkhazia and South Ossetia development process, widen social inequality, and undermine the effectiveness of international institutions and the global security system. The development transition process to fully independent states is crucial in gaining international recognition.

Russia's primary objective in the post-Soviet space is to reinforce its hegemonic influence by establishing six types of linkages, as outlined by Levitsky and Way: economic, technocratic, social, informational, intergovernmental, and civil society linkages (Gerrits & Bader, 2016). These linkages to Abkhazia and South Ossetia placed them in a unique position since the post-Soviet era, and with a combination of relatively weak organizational power, they became Russia's significant leverage in the South Caucasus. The leverage acts as a geopolitical tool for Moscow to deter Georgia's foreign policy orientation toward "de-occupation", Western reconciliation efforts, and their presence in the region, particularly those led by the European Union and NATO (Pizzolo, 2020).

Without denying the formal sovereignty, Russia's patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia comes with several benefits for both regions, above which include Russia as their main trade, investment, and infrastructural partner. Then, aid infrastructural development and post-conflict reconstruction, such as renovating and building

new railways, roads, and government buildings. The two regions also got issued Russian passports by the Russian government with the consent of the regional authorities, a phenomenon called passportisation.

Across the border in Russia lies the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, home to approximately 460,000 Ossetians—around ten times the ethnic Ossetian population of South Ossetia. In Abkhazia's case, the Abkhaz diaspora in Russia is relatively small, numbering about 11,000 people. Social ties between Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia have been strengthened through educational exchanges, with the Russian government annually providing scholarships to a significant proportion of high school graduates from both regions (Kirova, 2012, as cited in Gerrits & Bader, 2016). Arguably, maintaining strong relations with Russia may be strategically beneficial for Abkhazia and South Ossetia's development transformation, as their political survival, economic support, and security guarantees are heavily reliant on Russian backing.

4.2 Development Aligned with SDGs: Adaptive Strategies Under Isolation

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), achieving development transitions requires strong participatory governance structures that share responsibilities among government, civil societies, media, and other relevant groups. In Eurasia, UNDP considered this supercontinent in the midst of a *polycrisis*, where conflicts, disasters, inequalities, economic instability, and geopolitical tensions reinforce each other (UNDP Just Transition, 2025). As such, the adaptive strategies are by strengthening Abkhazia and South Ossetia civil societies, media tools that engage top to bottom or bottom-up approaches, the government, and external actors.

Civil Society and Media Tool

Since the termination of the United Nations missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 15 June 2009, the only organization that was allowed by the State Ministry for Reintegration is the International Committee of the Red Cross. This organization does not need to be approved by Georgian authorities under the Rules for the Conduct

of Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia (Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 2010). The special law made for Abkhazia and South Ossetia implicates Georgia in trying to control the NGO movement going on in the regions.

In Abkhazia, civic organizations often face hostile criticism due to disinformation about NGOs, claiming that they have no tangible results (Abkhaz World, 2024). However according to OKNO, the Abkhazian Telegram Channel media tool, when addressing social and infrastructure The public organization АМИЛАТТӘ ресурскәа (National Resources), in collaboration with the Joint EU-UN Programme for Rural Development, carried out various initiatives, including the renovation and provision of equipment for urban and rural kindergartens, the Gudauta District Hospital, and Gudauta's Third Secondary School; the construction of a physical therapy center for persons with disabilities; the development of a tree nursery; the building of a mini-stadium and sports facilities; the establishment of a horse stable; among other projects (Abkhaz World, 2024). These tangible social projects are built not only by members of National Resources organizations partnering with international organizations, but also by initiative groups, school leadership, local communities, activists, and civic-minded citizens who make it happen.

Abkhazian civil society organizations also participate in peacebuilding initiatives, including the Center for Humanitarian Programs (CHP), World Without Violence (WWV), and the Association of Women of Abkhazia (AWA). Among them, CHP engages with the broadest network of peacebuilding partners, collaborating with organizations such as Conciliation Resources, International Alert, and Germany's Berghof Foundation. Meanwhile, the Association of Women of Abkhazia partners with the Swedish organization Kvinna till Kvinna (Hoch et al, 2016). Although civil society in Abkhazia has been instrumental in supporting statehood, in the post-2008 conflict period, Abkhazian civil society representatives stated that the government had provided no funding for peacebuilding initiatives and lacked support from Russia, leaving contributions to come primarily from the West (EU) (Hoch et al, 2016).

According to the chapter by Aleksanyan (2020), post-Soviet civil society has its value with a focus on human rights and has significant stabilizing potential. NGOs act as an organizing interaction between the state and civil society. However, civil society in post-Soviet countries can also be seen both as a threat and as a guarantor of

national security. South Ossetia's CSOs are mostly controlled by the government and are highly influenced by Russia. The Russian CSOs themselves, who run through anti-government movements, civil disobedience, social networks, and encourage the activation of opposition political parties, made President Putin grant CSOs the status of foreign agents (Aleksanyan, 2020). Abkhazia's civil society played a few roles in achieving the development transformation by gaining financial support from abroad. Compared to Abkhazia, the term foreign partners in South Ossetia reflected from Russia's CSOs situation; thus, seven NGOs of South Ossetia receive funding outside the country. The NGOs are the Children's Fund of South Ossetia, the Charitable Foundation "Creation", the International Women's Society "Nika", the Wrestling Federation of the Republic of South Ossetia, Journalists for Human Rights (JHR), the Charitable Foundation for Children with Cancer and Other Serious Diseases "Give Wings", and "BARS" (Vladikavkaz, 2019).

These organizations received the new status, mostly supported by Russia, except the Republican public organization "Journalists for Human Rights," whose projects are funded within the framework of the UNDP (Vladikavkaz, 2019). JHR acts as a media tool promoting South Ossetia, and in 2024, this media was awarded as the winner for the best journalistic work in the local media sphere from the Head of the Republic of South Ossetia-Alania (Sputnik, 2024). When involving development transformation in South Ossetia, it is tightly controlled or monitored by the President and Russians, with very slim implementation of development roles partnering with their CSOs (Freedom House, 2025; Foreign Policy Centre, 2019). The lack of information regarding the transition process of the human rights situation because the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, and UN entities are prohibited from visiting South Ossetia. This will impact their process of independence and their development strategies, interacting with CSOs.

Government and External Actors

After the ceasefire that ended the Russia-Georgia war under the 2008 Sochi Agreement, Abkhazia and South Ossetia began their pursuit of international recognition alongside their state-building processes. While it is widely acknowledged that the level

of trust in the leadership of the Russian Federation is higher than in the respective leaders of their *de facto* states among the inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both regions' governments have made several foreign policy efforts to become recognizable despite their limited diplomacy and the patron state's desire to maintain the status quo (O'Loughlin et al, 2014). According to both of the residents, they recognized massive economic assistance from Russia by realizing that their state's budgets and fully dependent on social policy from Russia's aid. Another support is from Russian tourists visiting resorts in the northern part of Abkhazia, which has become a major source of income (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin, 2011). Further down, Moscow has used three instruments, such as passportization of residents for both *de facto* states, military deployment, and responsibility to protect, which are part of their geopolitical strategy to pressure the government in Tbilisi (Souleimanov et al, 2017). Abkhazia and South Ossetia treated this aid as a means to support their national development transitions and reinforce their identity as sovereign 'states'.

Since 2017, Abkhazia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has implemented a strategy of advancing diplomatic soft power through cultural outreach to attract international backing, while South Ossetia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has remained comparatively inactive in this sphere. This demonstration highlights the importance of diplomatic soft power and social moves from both regions. According to Mary Elizabeth Smith (2018), Abkhazia and South Ossetia developed social moves as a new strategy in their interaction with the international community. Smith's evidence showed that Abkhazia's foreign policy of social moves is dedicated to developing youth, rebuilding a tourism-based economy, and preserving culture and language.

In its pursuit of legitimacy, the Abkhazian MFA engages in various activities and declarations tied to development transition efforts, such as involvement in international academic networks, cultural exchange initiatives, participation in global diplomatic and conflict resolution forums, and fostering relations with the diaspora. Emphasizing the role of education, Abkhaz students are urged to pursue studies at universities in Turkey or Russia and later return to support Abkhazia's development. Additionally, Russia has reserved five positions for Abkhaz students at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. In Turkey, the Abkhaz organization's International Fund Ap-sny founded Abkhaz student unions in four cities in July 2015. Additionally, Turkey

and the Abkhaz diaspora maintain strong connections with Abkhazia through active cultural exchange initiatives. Abkhazia's Cultural Attaché to the European Union organized a photography exhibition by Tengiz Tarba at the Abkhazia Cultural Centre in Berlin. In addition, the Embassy of Abkhazia in Venezuela participated in the *Feria Internacional* with the embassies of China, Cuba, Egypt, France, Indonesia, India, Peru, South Korea, and Syria, presenting Abkhazian cuisine, wine, and traditional dances. Such cultural exchanges serve as external legitimacy-seeking initiatives and enhance Abkhazia's foreign policy strategy by fostering a more favorable image within the international community.

In legitimacy consolidating social moves, Abkhazia fastened its foreign affairs strategy to occur within Abkhazia's border by welcoming foreign journalists and encouraging foreign tourism. As a result of the 1993 and 2008 wars, Abkhazia's tourism industry was devastated; consequently, efforts are now underway to revive the sector as a central element of its cultural promotion strategy, utilizing foreign journalists to support this objective. Abkhazia's main target is to invite Russian journalists to the Chamber of Commerce for press tours because the most common tourist is the Russian. Abkhazia's foreign policy aims to achieve a non-violent resolution to its international legal status, advance its development strategies, and has made modest efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian influence.

South Ossetia pursued a foreign policy approach similar to that of Abkhazia. However, the actions and statements of the South Ossetian MFA undermined attempts to reduce Russia's growing influence, weakening efforts to gain external legitimacy. A significant example of this is the facilitation of the Russification of Ossetian society. The actions make sense because Smith's categories on South Ossetia's social moves foreign policy in legitimacy seeking consist of conflicts and damage its reputation in the international community. Key examples include provocative official statements from the South Ossetian MFA, referring to Georgia as "deceitful," "absurd," and "Nazi Georgia." South Ossetia also maintains strong anti-NATO, anti-Western, and anti-UN rhetoric, considering NATO and U.S. military support to Georgia as direct threats to its security and sovereignty. Georgia's response to the statements delegitimizes the government of South Ossetia to only its capital city as "the Tskhinvali region" or "the occupation regime of Tskhinvali". However, South Ossetia's social moves would not only

damage its reputation in the international system but also would not increase support for its desire to become a *de jure* Russian region.

These legitimacy-fracturing social moves are evident in South Ossetia's foreign policy. Allowing Russification into the Ossetian Society would risk the Ossetian language with distinct dialects such as Iron and Digor (Endangered Language Alliance, n.d.). The situation in North Ossetia is the same in experiencing a decrease in the Ossetian northern dialect. Due to the widespread presence of Russian speakers, Russian serves as the lingua franca in the regions. The Ossetian government hosts its official websites using Russian-associated domain extensions such as .ru and .su, reflecting its alignment with Russian digital infrastructure. The Russification strategy would jeopardize the Ossetian language, cultural heritage, and cultural autonomy. Smith points out in contrast to Abkhazia's more active involvement through developmental transitions, South Ossetia's foreign policy is still passive and lacks the social outreach element required for legitimacy seeking. This contrast implicates Abkhazia's use of adaptive strategies in an attempt to construct legitimacy through state-building, social-cultural diplomacy with the international community, and selective international engagement. Both regions' motivations rely on their goals; Abkhazia aims for independence, and South Ossetia aims for reintegration with North Ossetia, which are expressed in their foreign affairs strategies. These efforts reflect a broader development transition, positioning Abkhazia as more than a Russian client, while South Ossetia's limited diplomatic efforts serve to strengthen their ties to Moscow while obstructing their ability to pursue independent legitimization strategies.

5 Discussion

Abkhazia and South Ossetia's development transition demonstrates the state's ability to implement development and adaptive strategies without international recognition, thanks to Russia's patronage in social-cultural, economic, security, and political support (Toal, 2017). The patron-client relationship aids in forming local government structures and basic public service infrastructure, and meeting the SDGs principles (UNDP, 2022). However, international cooperation limitations and geopolitical interests influenced the development process has made Abkhazia and South Ossetia pursue

different paths in independence. This research aims to take a more inclusive approach to development in the disputed area and re-evaluate the conditions for development that meet international recognition. The study aims to contribute to sustainable development studies by considering disputed areas and re-evaluating the global approach to unrecognized territories. Future research should focus on comparisons with other unrecognized international regions to expand the field of development in a geopolitical context.

6 Conclusion

The development transitions process in Abkhazia and South Ossetia involves different paths to sovereignty, showing that with a considerable amount of Russian support. Both regions were able to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda process, although they are not widely recognised internationally. This support involves civil society, media tools, government, and external actors collectively creating an adaptive strategy from fundamental state-building to development transition. In terms of the goal of legitimacy seeking, both regions have different motivations between Abkhazia and South Ossetia that hinder the long-term nations' sustainable growth, due to their historical backgrounds. Abkhazia has a progressive adaptive building by being able to defy the patron state's wishes and pursue its own agendas. Member of the Abkhazian Parliament, Major General Aslan Kobakhiya trying to implicate the Russians by threatening Abkhazia to obey their foreign and domestic policy accordingly, as this is a reciprocal relationship (Kolstø, 2020).

The Russians have been fighting for their independence, and yet, Abkhazia's roads to sovereignty led it to renegotiate its bilateral agreement "On Alliance and Integration" to "On Alliance and Strategic Partnership". The outcome is that Abkhazia successfully negotiated a change of clause with Russia to simplify Russian citizenship for Abkhazians, while Abkhazia would not have to reciprocate (Kolstø, 2020). In the economic aspect in Abkhazia's economy would suffer if not for Russian support, but Abkhazia is reluctant to sell land to Russia despite the fact that it would save its economic development. This peculiarity relies on the ethnic anxiety, developing a dilemma where Abkhazian wants to live sustainably, but they would become a minority again. South

Ossetia, on the other hand, remains fully dependent upon economic support from Russia as the patron state due to its ambition of reunification with the Russian Republic of North Ossetia since 2008 (German, 2016).

Other de facto states such as Transnistria are not recognized by Moscow; however, they have more stronger economy and diversified foreign policy than Abkhazia. During the Ukrainian crisis in the spring of 2014, over 75 percent of Transnistria's exports were directed to the EU and Moldova, leaving the region heavily reliant on EU trade preferences that remained in effect until the end of 2015 (O'Loughlin et al, 2014). In 2024, the exports increased to 83% 2024 highlighting the stable economy while implicating their economic integration to the EU despite political ties with Russia (Anisimova, 2024). Thus, stable economy or economy dependence and desire for integration vs independence have no clear correlation (Kolstø, 2020). While often viewed through the lens of geopolitical dependence, Abkhazia and, to a lesser extent, South Ossetia have taken on adaptive strategies toward sustainable development transitions. These efforts, particularly in Abkhazia, reflect a combination of grassroots community initiatives and selective engagement in foreign policy by their Ministries of Foreign Affairs despite the limited international status. External actors such as Russia, UNDP, and, to a more informal degree, the EU and Turkey, have indirectly played varying roles in supporting the processes.

Disclosure of Interests. The authors declare that they have no competing interests relevant to the content of this article.

References

1. Abkhaz World: How civic organisations are visibly transforming Abkhazia despite criticism. Abkhaz World (Blog). <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/blogs/2807-how-civic-organisations-are-visibly-transforming-abkhazia-despite-criticism>, last accessed 2025/07
2. Ambrosio, T., Lange, W.A.: The architecture of annexation? Russia's bilateral agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. *Nationalities Papers* 44(5), 673–693 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1203300>
3. Anisimova, A.: Moldova's EU integration and the special case of Transnistria. Policy Network Brief Series #AcademicsStandWithUkraine, Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) (2024). <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2024/10/14/moldovas-eu-integration/>, last accessed 2025/07
4. Bassin, M., Aksenov, K.E.: Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in post-Soviet geopolitical discourse. *Geopolitics* 11(1), 99–118 (2006). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500524129>

5. Caucasian Knot, Parastaev, A.: South Ossetia: Rights and freedoms in an unrecognised state. The Foreign Policy Centre (2019). <https://fpc.org.uk/south-ossetia-rights-and-freedoms-in-an-unrecognised-state/>
6. Coppieters, B.: 'Statehood', 'de facto Authorities' and 'Occupation': Contested concepts and the EU's engagement in its European neighbourhood. *Ethnopolitics* 17(4), 343–361 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1495361>
7. El Alliance: Ossetian. El Alliance. <https://www.elalliance.org/languages/ossetian>, last accessed 2025/07
8. European Union: Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union. Off. J. Eur. Union C 326, 13–390 (2012). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ%3AC%3A2013%3A353E%3AFULL>
9. Freedom House: South Ossetia. Freedom in the World 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-ossetia/freedom-world/2025>, last accessed 2025/07/03
10. German, T.: Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Collision of Georgian and Russian interests. *Russie.Nei.Visions* 15, 1–17. Institut français des relations internationales (2006). <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/enotes/russieneivisions/abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-collision-georgian-and-russian>
11. German, T.: Russia and South Ossetia: Conferring statehood or creeping annexation? *South-east European and Black Sea Studies* 16(1), 155–167 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1148411>
12. Gerrits, A.W.M., Bader, M.: Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Implications for conflict resolution. *East European Politics* 32(3), 297–313 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2016.1166104>
13. Hoch, T., Kopeček, V., Baar, V.: Civil society and conflict transformation in de facto states: The case of Abkhazia. *Problems of Post-Communism* 64(6), 329–341 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1184982>
14. Jasutis, G.: Georgia–Abkhazia: The predominance of irreconcilable positions. War Report 2018, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (2018). <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatoools-files/docman-files/War%20Report%202018.pdf>
15. Kolossov, V., O'Loughlin, J.: After the wars in the South Caucasus State of Georgia: Economic insecurities and migration in the “De Facto” states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 52(5), 631–654 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.2747/1539-7216.52.5.631>
16. Kolstø, P.: Biting the hand that feeds them? Abkhazia–Russia client–patron relations. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36(2), 140–158 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1712987>
17. Kremlin: National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation. Presidential Decree No. 683 (2015); National Security Strategy (2021). <http://en.kremlin.ru>, last accessed 2025/07
18. Kurtskhalia, A.: Aspects regarding the application of the norms of international humanitarian law in the settlement of the Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia conflicts. *Moldos-copie* 1(88), 55–67 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3921853>
19. Mackinder, H.J.: The geographical pivot of history (1904). *Geogr. J.* 170(4), 298–321 (2004). <https://doi.org/10.2307/3451460>
20. Markedonov, S.: The South Ossetia Conflict. In: Bebler, A. (ed.) “Frozen Conflicts” in Europe, pp. 71–106. Verlag Barbara Budrich (2015). <https://doi.org/10.3224/84740133>
21. Melvin, N.: Retying the Caucasian knot: Russia's evolving approach to the South Caucasus. RUSI Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute (2024). <https://rusi.org/explore->

- our-research/publications/occasional-papers/retying-caucasian-knot-russias-evolving-ap-proach-south-caucasus
22. Montevideo Convention: Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States. 165 L.N.T.S. 19 (1933). https://www.ilsa.org/Jessup/Jessup15/MONTEVIDEO_CONVENTION.pdf
 23. O'Loughlin, J., Kolossov, V., Toal, G.: Inside the post-Soviet de facto states: A comparison of attitudes in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55(5), 423–456 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2015.1012644>
 24. O'Loughlin, J., Toal, G., Kolosov, V.: Who identifies with the “Russian World”? Geopolitical attitudes in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2017.1295275>
 25. OECD: Supporting statebuilding in situations of conflict and fragility: Policy guidance. OECD Publishing (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264074989-en>
 26. Pizzolo, P.: Eurasian versus Euro-Atlantic integration in the South Caucasus: Successes, failures, and stalemates. *Small Wars Journal* (2020). <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/eurasian-versus-euro-atlantic-integration-south-caucasus-successes-failures-and-stalemates>, last accessed 2025/07
 27. Rukhadze, V., Duerr, G.: Sovereignty issues in the Caucasus: Contested ethnic and national identities in Chechnya, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa / Nationalities Affairs New Series* 48, 30–47 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2016.003>
 28. Semneby, P.: Statement by the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Ambassador Peter Semneby, at the OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, 10 February 2011. OSCE PC.DEL/128/11 (2011). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/dsca/dv/dsca_20110315_10/dsca_20110315_10en.pdf
 29. Shiraliyev, M.: The European Union’s conflict resolution policy in the South Caucasus: Successes and failures in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. *Caucasus Survey* 11(1), 23–44 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2023.2168750>
 30. Sieniawski, P.: Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the foreign and security policy of the Russian Federation. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 24(3), 515–536 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2387476>
 31. Sloan, G.: Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland theory then and now. *J. Strateg. Stud.* 22(2–3), 15–38 (1999). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437752>
 32. Smith, M.E.: De facto state foreign policy “social moves” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. *Iran and the Caucasus* 22(2), 181–205 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1163/1573384X-20180208>
 33. Sotiriou, S.A.: The irreversibility of history. *Problems of Post-Communism* 66(3), 172–185 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1406310>
 34. Souleimanov, E.A., Abrahamyan, E., Aliyev, H.: Unrecognized states as a means of coercive diplomacy? Assessing the role of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Russia’s foreign policy in the South Caucasus. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 18(1), 73–86 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2017.1390830>
 35. Sputnik Ossetia: Журналиста из Южной Осетии стали лауреатами премии главы РСО-Алания. Sputnik Ossetia, 12 January 2024. <https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/20240112/zhurnalista-iz-yuzhnoy-osetii-stali-laureatami-premii-glavy-rso-alaniya-27600336.html>
 36. Toal, G.: *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2017)

37. United Nations Development Programme: UNDP Strategic Plan 2022–2025. UNDP (2021). <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/publications/undp-strategic-plan-2022-2025>
38. United Nations Development Programme: Just transition: People at the center. UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS (2023). <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/publications/just-transition-people-center>
39. United Nations: Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015). <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>, last accessed 2025/06
40. United Nations: How Palestine became a non-member Observer State at the United Nations. UN News, 11 April 2024. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148351>
41. United Nations: Academic impact: Sustainability. <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability>, last accessed 2025/06
42. Vladikavkaz News: Как НКО Абхазии поддерживают общественный порядок (How Abkhazian NGOs maintain public order). Vladikavkaz News, 13 April 2019. <https://vladikavkaz-news.net/society/2019/04/13/8694.html>
43. World Commission on Environment and Development: Our common future. Oxford University Press, Oxford (1987)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

