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Southbound Russia: processes of bordering and de-bordering between 1993 and 2013¹

Russia's role in its neighbourhood has been widely scrutinised since the beginning of the post-Soviet period. While the first enquiries mostly focused on the role of its internal balance of power and the definition of its key foreign policy concepts (Mesbahi 1993; Lepingwell 1994), the 2000s witnessed a pronounced interest towards its geopolitical positioning in its near-abroad, on the basis of what was seen as a Russian comeback which began with Vladimir Putin's arrival to power (Perovič 2005; Mankoff 2009), or through the lens of its role in the protracted conflicts of the region (Cheterian 2008; Starr 2009). Overall, Russia's policy in its neighbourhood is seen as one of retreat in the 1990s, informed by its own domestic dynamics, and expansion in the 2000s. How this unfolded in the specific case of Abkhazia is the subject of this paper.

In the context of Russo-Abkhaz relations, in the post-Abkhaz-Georgian war (1992-3) period, Moscow was initially seen as avoiding siding with Sukhumi,² as a

1 We would like to thank Suzan Gibril for proofreviewing this article.

2 With relation to Abkhazia, denomination and spelling of place names is a bone of contention. This article adopts the generally accepted appellation in the English language. This preference is also applied to names of cities and regions, with the awareness that this choice tends to reflect Georgian appellations, although this is not

consequence of both its internal separatist movements and its neighbourhood policy.³ This was followed, in the 2000s, by a gradual reestablishment of Russia's position of strength in the Caucasus (and the former Soviet Union more en large), which occurred in tandem with the consolidation of its relationship with the separatist region of Abkhazia (as well as with South Ossetia). This article focuses on the trends and turning points of these policies through the analytical lens of border policies.

Looking at the implementation of Russian policies of bordering and de-bordering allows us to pinpoint and follow Russia's institutional policy towards Abkhazia and Georgia, which does not necessarily match its official discourse. While Vincent Artman (2013) has carried out a similar exercise by analysing the Russian policy of passportisation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia beyond its instrumental dimension, dissecting Russian border policies complements the existing picture. If, as it is argued below, borders are *loci* of power, tracing Russia's policies in terms of its bordering practices is to trace its advancement (or retreat) in its neighbourhood. Bordering practices were a key tool used by Moscow (and still uses)⁴ in the projection of its external power in the former Soviet Union, and that we can therefore use border studies in order to strengthen the analysis of its cycles of retreat and expansion.

always the case. Sukhumi differs from both the Georgian (Sokhumi) and the Abkhaz (Sukhum) pronunciations, similarly to the Inguri River (Ingur in Abkhaz and Enguri in Georgian). Most other appellations, however, are drawn from their Georgian form: Gali (Gal in Abkhaz), Tkvarcheli (Tkuarchal), etc. Georgian appellations are considered invalid in Abkhazia. This does not imply support for one position over another, although it is understood that the importance given to terminology in the region is directly linked to the dispute over sovereignty of all these localities. Similarly, the appellation of Abkhazia as *de facto* state does not reflect siding with a specific position regarding Abkhazia's claim for independence, but merely shows Abkhazia's claim to it, coupled with the widespread lack of international recognition in line with international law.

3 Russia's role in the conflicts of the early 1990s in the South Caucasus, including the 1992 Georgian-Abkhaz war, amounted to a positioning itself in order to acquire the most leverage over both sides (in this case Tbilisi and Sukhumi), but not to a willingly engineering of the conflicts (Zverev 1996). However, Silvia Serrano points out that the widely adopted perception in Georgia is that Russia created the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia to destabilize the newly independent Georgia (Serrano 2007). This explanation has the advantage of sidestepping Georgian responsibilities in the creation and mismanagement of internal tensions, while blaming an external party for the loss of territorial integrity and destabilization of the country. Framing the conflict in Russo-Georgian terms is also, in broad terms, what emerges from a more recent study of IDPs perceptions (Kabachnik *et al.* 2012).

4 A cursory look at the development of the situation after 2013 in Abkhazia shows that this is still the case. While it is not in the scope of this article, the mechanisms of mobilising bordering practices in function of geopolitical aims is widely observable in the case of the creation of separatist entities in Eastern Ukraine that started in 2014.

In the 1990s, the border between the Russian Federation and the separatist de facto state of Abkhazia was subject to strict control and limitations on the circulation of goods and people by the Russian authorities. While this began to change in 1999, the threat of re-bordering the international border weighted on Russo-Abkhaz relations throughout the 2000s, surfacing decisively during the Abkhaz elections of 2004. After the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, a new process of bordering took place along the Georgian-Abkhaz ceasefire line. Russian troops were in charge of patrolling the Inguri River, while the checkpoint at the bridge over the river remained under the control of the Abkhaz de facto border guards until 2012. This article argues that we witness a southbound procession of bordering processes that allowed for the encroachment of Russian presence in the South Caucasus, not only in South Ossetia, where the war in 2008 made it all the more apparent, but also on the Abkhaz front. While this does not mean that Abkhazia has been annexed by Russia, it nevertheless shows how it has gradually been incorporated in the Russian space, increasingly relinquishing control over its own external de facto borders.⁵

To make these points, the article explores this evolution by looking at processes of bordering and de-bordering that have characterised the region for the last 20 years. It tackles this topic from a macro perspective, looking at institutional policies and stances, as well as micro-dynamics such as on-the-ground border and checkpoint management, and local flows of goods and people. The combination of these two approaches allows for a complementary view of discourse, goals and tools employed with regard to border management, showing quite clearly the disconnect between official discourse and practice. Throughout the period under scrutiny (1993-2013), there are numerous instances where Moscow's official positions have either been at odds with its positions on the ground, or have served as justificatory mechanisms for policies that outlived the stated reasons. The period covered ends with one of these latter instances.⁶

5 The incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian political, security, and economic space, which cannot be comprehensively covered here, was a multi-dimensional and far from linear process. Artman (2013) argued that through its process of passportisation, Moscow expanded its sovereignty all the way to the Inguri River in the mid-2000s. I have showed elsewhere (Prelz Oltramonti 2015) how the process of including Abkhazia into the Russian economic space started in 1999 and progressively gained momentum throughout the 2000s.

6 In the run-up to the Sochi Olympic Games, Russian authorities argued that a tightening of borders was necessary in order to increase security for the major international sporting events that took place in 2014. A cursory look at the post-2014 developments show that the securitization of the Abkhaz-Georgian ceasefire line, carried out since the beginning of the post-2008 war period, was not to be rolled back after the end of the Games.

This article looks at the 20 years following the end of high intensity hostilities of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, which took place in 1993. It relies on the material gathered during extensive fieldwork carried out in Abkhazia in November 2012 in order to triangulate between discourse and practice, the latter including both policy implementation and impact. It proceeds as follows: it first reviews the theoretical perspectives on bordering practices and identifies the specific geographical areas scrutinized here. It then covers Tbilisi's policies in terms of bordering practices and trade restrictions, as well as their effectiveness. In fact, trade restrictions are mostly branded in Abkhazia as the "Georgian embargo", and the economic hardships that residents of the de facto state have experienced since the early 1990s are also branded as sole consequences of Tbilisi's policies. As argued elsewhere (Prelz Oltramonti 2015) this is far too reductive and, in order to distinguish between discourse and practice, it is necessary here to trace which barriers to the circulation of goods and people were a consequence of Tbilisi's decisions and which ones were not. Following this analysis of Tbilisi's hand in the game, the article covers the evolution of Russia's policies in the 1990s and 2000s, looking first at the developments along the border crossings of the Psou River, and then at the dynamics taking place on the Inguri River. All along, it shifts between official policies and on-the-ground developments, testing one against the other and identifying the cleavages.

1. Bordering and de-bordering: from a theoretical perspective to specific geographical areas

Tackling the definition and significance of borders and boundaries would be an exercise on its own. I have elsewhere discussed the topic in relation to conflict settings (Prelz Oltramonti 2013). Traditionally, the debate has centred on the link between state border and state sovereignty and, although the classical interpretation of the Westphalian state model is broadly considered obsolete, many scholars still consider borders as lines that contain a certain territory over which sovereignty is exerted (Brenner 2003). The approach to borders as containers of the state and protection from the outside is also widely adopted by state actors (or, in this case, de facto state actors)⁷

7 This is not the place to explore the lengthy implications of the various appellations of entities such as Abkhazia, evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches. The two main bones of contention, when using the word 'state' in relation to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, are recognition and government. In the literature, the appellation 'de facto state' is understood as a state-like entity that lacks international recognition (Pegg 1998; Lynch 2004; Francis 2011). There is no absolute consensus on the characterization of these political entities. They are alternatively called 'quasi-states' (Kolstø 2006), 'unrecognised states' (King 2001), and 'pseudo-states' (Kolossoff & O'Loughlin 1998).

who seek to enforce control over their external borders as proof of sovereignty. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly independent recognised and de facto states, national border guards and customs personnel gradually took control of their countries' external borders throughout the former USSR. It is worth noting that, reflecting the weak internal projecting capacity of a number of newly independent countries, including Georgia among others, Russian troops continued to man former Soviet borders well into the 1990s and 2000s (Dawisha and Parrott 1997).

There are shortcomings in looking at borders solely as physical and political legal demarcation lines between the different territories of sovereign states. While borders are above all social constructions, they themselves create dense social relations as the loci of power implementation. Leaving aside the identity producing function of borders (Donnan and Wilson 1999; Paasi 1998), which can be skillfully exploited by state actors and others, the process of creating or reinforcing borders can lead to an array of additional outcomes. To understand what these outcomes are, it is necessary to focus on the dynamics governing the border itself, together with its adjacent border areas, instead of looking at them in terms of peripheries.

Furthermore, the scrutiny that has been recently paid to the phenomenon of globalisation and enhanced communication technologies has also led to an additional understanding of borders, morphing from "space of places" to "space of flows" (Castells 2011). While the argument that, in a globalised world, flows and mobility across borders transcend territorial borders may not be applicable to the cases under scrutiny here (Rumford 2006), as they have remained for the most part outside of the globalised routes of information and exchange, this approach has the advantage of drawing the attention on the element of flows. Instead of merely dividing the two sides, whoever controls a border regulates the passage of people and goods between the two sides, thus yielding considerable power.

This article looks at two main border areas, which are here listed and qualified. This exercise is fraught with controversies and, as will be apparent below, immediately confronts the reader with the practices and discourses that constitute this case. The qualifications initially expounded here do not reflect a personal position on the disputed territories, but rather how they are regarded in international law.⁸ It is worth noting that none of these borders existed as external borders before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Instead, they were, respectively, administrative boundaries between the Russian and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), and between the Georgian SSR and the Abkhaz Autonomous SSR.

8 It is useful to point out that this approach, which rests on the link between state border and state sovereignty, is increasingly being challenged (Elden 2006).

The first area under scrutiny is the de facto border between the Russian Federation and Abkhazia, a portion of the internationally recognized de jure Russo-Georgian border, running along the Psou River in its Western and less mountainous stretch. After Moscow's recognition of Abkhaz independence in 2008,⁹ Russia claims that it is to be considered as a border between two independent countries, namely Russia and Abkhazia, and has upgraded its border facilities to reflect this. With the exception of a handful of countries, the international community has rejected this claim, and continues to consider it a portion of the Russo-Georgian border, although Tbilisi has been unable to assert its control over it since the 1992-3 war. Until 2008, Russia had also officially considered it as part of the Russo-Georgian international border, albeit a section over which Georgia had no control. Its management by Russian authorities is explored further in the article, with a special attention given to the cleavage between official positions and practice.

The establishment of a border along the Psou River in 1991 meant that what happened south of the Soviet former administrative boundary with Georgia became a matter of foreign policy. It is worth noting that a number of researchers have underlined that post-Soviet states have, in Moscow's eyes, a diminished sovereignty or, in other words, are not fully treated as foreign states (Blank 2007; Trenin 2011). Others, however, have pointed out that in the immediate post-Soviet period and throughout the 1990s, a withdrawal from its neighbourhood is evident in Moscow's foreign policy, either as a strategic retreat or a loss of interest in the region (Baev 1997; Tinguy (de) 2008). It is only with Putin's arrival to power, first as Prime Minister in 1999 and then as President, that Russia's external policy increasingly verves towards re-assessing its position in its neighbouring region.

The second area under scrutiny, further south, is the ceasefire line established in December 1993 along the Inguri River, which became, throughout the years, an entrenched de facto border; the process accentuated after the 2008 war and the Russian recognition of Abkhaz independence. The border along the Inguri was established as the result of the Abkhaz-Georgian war of 1992-3. From its onset, then, it reflected the tactical results of the conflict between Sukhumi and Tbilisi, which is the Abkhaz victory on the ground and their control over the entire territory of the former Abkhaz ASSR with the exception of the Kodori Valley.

It also reflected the key role played by the Russian Federation in brokering the ceasefire agreement and as a key player of the diplomatic efforts of resolving the

9 After the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independences were recognized by the Russian Federation, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and, intermittently, Vanuatu and Tuvalu. For an assessment of post-2008 dynamics, see the report by International Crisis Group (2013).

conflict in the following years. The return of refugees and displaced persons¹⁰ was a pillar of the quadripartite agreement signed by Georgia, Abkhazia, Russia and the UN in December 1993, which also included the pledge to not use force and the establishment of a UN Monitoring mission (UNOMIG) (Diasamidze 2003a). However, the decision to deploy a UN Peacekeeping mission was made dependent on the progress in the talks between the two sides, and hence never came into being. Instead, a CIS peacekeeping operation was established in April 1994, manned mostly by Russian personnel (Diasamidze 2003b). Crucially, Blank notes that in 2008 the CIS peacekeepers acted as the vanguards of the Russian troops advancing through Abkhazia (Blank 2007: 5).

The Inguri ceasefire line can then be seen, since 1994, as a locus of power for both the Abkhaz army, which had pushed its military campaign in 1993 all the way to it, and manned it until 2008, *de facto* guaranteeing the southern *de facto* border of the Abkhaz *de facto* state, and for the Russian one, with its presence on the ground reflecting its role as the powerbroker. How the balance between the two evolved in the 20 years following its establishment is described further in the article.

2. Sanctions, restrictions and isolation in Abkhazia: Tbilisi's hand in the game

Abkhaz-Russian relations do not exist in isolation, but should be seen in relation to Abkhaz-Georgian ones. As of 2012, in the eyes of most Abkhaz residents sanctions and isolation came from Tbilisi; closer scrutiny, however, reveals that various bouts of isolation were also a consequence of Moscow's policies. It is therefore necessary to differentiate between Georgian and Russian roles in attempting to insulate Abkhazia. This section reviews Georgian policies towards Abkhazia with regard to the management of borders and ceasefire lines.

Sanctions banning trade, financial (including banking), transportation, communications, and other ties with Abkhazia at the state level were imposed on Abkhazia in January 1996 by the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Civil Georgia 2008). The heads of state of CIS countries agreed in 1996 on all-encompassing trade restrictions. While the 'Decision by the Council of the CIS Heads of state on Measures to Settle the Conflict in Abkhazia – Georgia' covered a range of topics, it focused on limitations on "trade-economic, financial, transport or other operations with authorities of the Abkhaz side", as well as on military

10 The displaced populations are referred to IDPs by Georgians and refugees as Abkhaz, reflecting the differences in how they regard the ceasefire line: an internal administrative boundary for the former, an international border for the latter.

equipment.¹¹ Initially, however, both Georgian and Russian authorities expanded the interpretation of the terms of the agreement to include an array of goods: chemicals used in agriculture, which could potentially be used by the military, as well as white goods and medicines.¹² At the same time, Georgia insisted throughout the 1990s and 2000s that trade restrictions should be also respected by Turkey (not a member of the CIS). It did so on the basis of a presidential decree, adopted on 31 January 1996, stating: “Sukhumi, seaport, port points, sea border and Georgian-Russian border in the territory of Abkhazia will be closed for any kind of international transport except the transportation of humanitarian cargoes carried out according to this decree” (Punsmann 2009).

The main hurdle, however, remained that of implementation. Having no control over the Russian-Georgian border in Abkhazia, Georgia had to rely on the willingness of its northern neighbour to enforce the sanctions. Similarly, in the 1990s, it lacked the capacity to effectively patrol the Black Sea and stop maritime trade. It is only from the early 2000s onwards that it was able to repeatedly detain ships bound for Turkey and originating from Abkhazia, creating significant diplomatic rifts with its main business partner, namely Turkey (IWPR 2002). At the same time, trade restrictions did not seem to enhance the prospects for conflict resolution, leading to increasingly strained relations and distrust from the population of Abkhazia. As early as 1997, international observers pointed out that isolation brought about by the CIS-imposed trade restrictions had created additional hardship, leading to “frustration” (Security Council 1997) among the local population.

Tbilisi, however, soldiered on in its support for trade restrictions, notwithstanding the more generalised shift which had taken place since the early 1990s in the field of conflict resolution, away from support for all-encompassing economic sanctions, as they were generally deemed ineffective in bringing about major changes in policy (Hufbauer 1990: 94). It disregarded the fact that, in some cases, all-encompassing sanctions proved to be counterproductive, generating a ‘rally’ ‘round the flag’ effect (Cortright 2007: 392). It further implied that the failure to implement them consistently altered their effectiveness, while undermining the legitimacy of the sender (Pugh and Cooper 2004: 227). The rationale behind the Georgian stance was twofold. First, it considered sanctions as a mechanism to exert pressure on Abkhazia and one that had a relatively low cost, as opposed to incentives of various kinds,

11 “States-members of CIS will prevent sale or supply in the zone of conflict by their citizens or from their territories or through use of vessels or airplanes flying their flag, of the arms, relevant technical devices of all types and spare parts, ammunition, military transports and equipment” (Civil Georgia 2008).

12 “There was no formal way to import medicines, even for NGOs, only MSF could” (interview Pierre Vischioni).

including financial, which, especially in the early 1990s, Georgia could not afford. Second, sanctions contained an element of retaliation, which clearly emerged when various actors attempted to craft a more effective policy of boundary de-activation along the ceasefire line.

In fact, Tbilisi had no control over the border that it wanted to harden, and this became all the more apparent in the early 2000s, when Russian policy with regard to Abkhazia changed radically. The only dividing line on which it could exert a larger influence was the ceasefire line along the Inguri River. Officially, no limits on the passage of people were imposed by the Georgian side, which claimed that, as Abkhazia was part of Georgia, transiting between Abkhazia and Samegrelo should be regarded as internal movement.¹³ In addition, crossing the Inguri River outside of the official checkpoint at the bridge (where Abkhaz de facto authorities always checked papers, but the Georgian authorities did only alternatively, showing that they did not consider the Inguri River Georgia's border) was common practice, as the river could be easily crossed on foot or with vehicles when the water level was low upstream or downstream from the bridge.

Trade was in fact a reality along the ceasefire line between Abkhazia and Georgia, as a consequence of the weakness and the incapacity (and/or the unwillingness) of both parties to enforce control over the dividing line. Decried by Abkhaz officials, who openly admit they were unable to stop it, exports of hazelnuts from the Gali district¹⁴ were a key component of the coping economies of Eastern Abkhazia (interview Stranichkin). Other goods, such as cigarettes, petrol, and wood, were also traded from Abkhazia to the rest of Georgia. Timber was carried across the Inguri River on trucks and sold in Poti; counterfeited cigarettes were made in a factory in Gudauta and found their way to Georgia; Russian petrol was delivered to the military bases in Gudauta. The petrol was in turn sold by Russian soldiers to Abkhaz who sold it onwards across the Inguri (interview Areshidze). Trade of such a scale was heavily informally taxed by both the Georgian and the Abkhaz de facto authorities who controlled access to the informal crossings and extolled bribes to allow passage

13 Samegrelo, or Mingrelia, is a Georgian region in the West of the country bordering the Abkhaz-Georgian ceasefire line.

14 The Gali district is the district of Abkhazia bordering the ceasefire line along the Inguri River. A reference to the district of Gali is fraught with dangers, as its boundaries were redesigned in 1995 by the de facto authorities. Part of the former district of Gali was included in the newly-established district of Tkvarcheli, reducing the territory of the Gali district but also of the Ochamchira district. Both Gali and Tkvarcheli districts are inhabited by Georgian/ Mingrelian majorities, though in the case of Gali almost exclusively so. Hence, when referring to the district of Gali, there is an understanding that phenomena affecting it do not stop at the de facto administrative border between the two districts, but often involve the neighbouring areas of the Tkvarcheli district too.

(interview local Mingrelian and Abkhaz aid workers). Finally, some trade might have flowed in the opposite direction, with basic foodstuff being traded from Zugdidi to Gali and then westwards to the rest of Abkhazia.¹⁵

With a change of power in Tbilisi in December 2003 and a clampdown on corruption and on organized crime starting from 2004, the key political referents in Samegrelo and Tbilisi fell out of power. Transporting goods through the ceasefire line became more difficult – and hence more costly – with the result that goods of scarce value were no longer traded. On the other hand, trade did not stop outright: if on the one hand it became more problematic to trade contraband goods through Abkhazia, on the other hand, the developments related to South Ossetia made the Abkhaz route increasingly appealing.¹⁶ The incentive to exploit the topographically advantageous *de facto* border was hence immense, while the burden of stopping traffic rested on Georgian authorities only – as neither Abkhaz *de facto* authorities, nor peacekeepers, had altered their policies.

For all the discourse of confrontation, it is worth mentioning a singular case of cross-ceasefire line cooperation between the two sides, regarding the management of Inguri Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP). With the power plant on the Abkhaz side of the ceasefire line, and the water reservoir on the Georgian side, coordination was needed throughout the 1990s and 2000s to allow the HPP to operate. While the power plant was indeed operational and informal agreements were reached – such as allowing Georgian technicians and operators to cross the ceasefire line daily in order to work in the facility – the power plant suffered from a lack of maintenance and investments. Also, the distribution of the produced electricity and the revenues that it generated remain a bone of contention (Garb and Whiteley 2001). It is worth noting that the Inguri HPP case finds very little space in the official Abkhaz discourse and that it is minimised and dismissed (interview Stranichkin). It does not in fact fit the

15 “For many years Abkhazia survived on the Gali market in terms of basic products, it fed all of Abkhazia because the embargo was so strongly implemented by Russia” (interview Areshidze).

16 Having identified black market trading as the main factor driving the lack of conflict resolution in South Ossetia, starting from spring 2004 the Georgian police and army effectively sealed the Georgian-South Ossetian ceasefire line, closing a trade corridor that had connected the South and the North Caucasus since the end of the Soviet Union. When the Russian authorities also decided to close the only official custom point between Russia and Georgia at Zemo Larsi, in 2006, the route through the Inguri literally became the only viable road between North and South in the Eastern and Central Caucasus (i.e. between the North and South Caucasus, aside from the road connecting Dagestan to Azerbaijan, along the Caspian sea). High mountains prevent passage throughout the rest of the mountainous chain, aside from a Dagestan-Azerbaijan crossing and, by comparison, the Inguri River is easy to cross.

narrative that Abkhaz authorities have so successfully established, namely one that focuses mainly on the negative consequences of the “Georgian embargo”.

3. Tinkering with bordering processes along the Psou River in the 1990s

As a consequence of the Georgian discourse on sanctions and isolation, and the Government of Georgia’s intended policies, when speaking with residents of Abkhazia about the 1990s, one is constantly reminded of what they referred to as the Georgian embargo. This is irrespective of whether travel limitations on people were actually imposed by Georgia or Russia. In fact, in the 1990s the most burdensome restrictions were a consequence of Moscow’s decision to close its southern border with Abkhazia to all men between the ages of 16 and 60 in relation to the unrest in the north Caucasus. This took place in 1994, independently from the limitations to trade imposed by the CIS. Far from the close relations between Abkhazia and Russia that we have come to know in the 2000s, journalists reported tense relationships between Abkhaz and Russian officials from 1994 to 1997, with numerous examples of clashes and tensions in Sukhumi (interview Sheets). In fact, Frear points out that between 1993 and 2013 Abkhaz-Russian relations were dependent on the state of the Russian economy and on Russo-Georgian relations (Frear 2014). Hence, in the 1990s, Moscow focused on a consolidation of its ties with Georgia and of the CIS security framework, as a consequence of its internal security problems and weak economy, and to the detriment of Russo-Abkhaz ties.

As Russia agreed on CIS trade restrictions on Abkhazia in 1996, it had already imposed its own travel restrictions to Abkhazia’s male population. The first Chechen War (1994-1996) prompted the Russian authorities to close the Russo-Abkhaz de facto border to males of fighting age, fearing that, as combatants from the North Caucasus had provided support to Abkhazia in 1992-3, Abkhaz combatants could head to Chechnya. Twenty years later, all these measures are bundled in what is generally seen in Abkhazia as a Georgian embargo, while the Abkhaz official discourse promotes this position and underlines the fraternal relationship between Abkhazia and Russia (interview Stranichkin).

The picture shows even more complexity when looking at the micro-dynamics of on-the-ground border management, and flows of goods and people. A few journalists and members of the Abkhaz civil society still point out how the relationship was and is far from straightforward, and how divisions within the Russian camp provided a lifeline for Abkhazia’s residents (interview Akaba; interview Venedictova; interview Sheets). In the 1990s, both the Russian Parliament and the authorities in Krasnodar, bordering Abkhazia, had a more pro-Abkhaz policy than the Russian president’s, to which we can attribute some leeway in the management of the de facto border,

allowing for some passage of goods and produce. Shuttle trade was a crucial survival strategy throughout the period of isolation, as well as acquiring in the 1990s specific gender traits that had profound societal repercussions. As a consequence of the restrictions on the circulation of men, the burden – literally – of exporting agricultural produce across the border with Russia and selling it to middlemen or in the markets of the Krasnodar region fell on the shoulders of women. At the same time, this reliance on women had a strong impact on Abkhaz society. Men could not partake in this activity and, from 1996, were factually not allowed to leave Abkhazia and work in the neighbouring Krasnodar region, leading, according to some observers, to alcohol and drug problems, as well as to the degradation of the family as an institution (interview Akaba).

However, the so-called embargo – trade sanctions – was far from being uniformly enforced. Passenger ferries travelled to Trabzon in the mid-1990s, connecting Abkhazia with its vast diaspora in Turkey and with its markets (interview Sheets). Some shuttle traders travelled as far as Istanbul to buy cheap consumer goods – such as clothes – that they carried back to Abkhazia and, when ferries were unable to sail from Abkhazia to Turkey, women traders reached Istanbul via Sochi (interview Gumba). According to the terms of the trade sanctions, many items could not legally be brought into Abkhazia, including school books and medicine; trade, including agricultural produce, was barred, and mandarins and other fruits could not be carried out of Abkhazia. For this small-scale trade to continue as it did, an extensive network of corruption developed along the Psou border and at the checkpoints between Abkhazia and Russia, benefiting middlemen and Russian customs guards.

Political support of a much larger scale was needed for more substantial exchanges. Scrap metal, Abkhazia's main export in the early 1990s, was carried out through its damaged ports, needing no particular facilities to be loaded on ships (interview Bardon). The de facto government relied on the income of the sale of dismantled factories and facilities to fill its coffers with a minimum of liquidity, being unable to raise revenues through taxation (as productive activities had collapsed) or customs, due to its lack of control of its de facto borders (interview Gagulia).¹⁷ With these revenues, basic food imports from Russia and Turkey were paid for – providing, inter alia, the daily loaf of bread to state employees (interview Gagulia). In addition, some financial support was coming from Krasnodar – but not from Moscow – in the 1990s, reflecting the lack of uniformity in the position adopted by the various Russian actors.¹⁸

17 Note that the official version, as of 2012, is that: “Budget revenues in the first post-war years derived from customs duties and taxes. By the late 90s, internal taxation began to exceed customs revenues” (interview Stranichkin).

18 Similarly, bodies such as the Russian defence ministry openly disagreed with the official Russian position on Abkhazia and promoted a more friendly policy (interview

4. Far from de-bordering: changing bordering practices

The radical switch in Russian policy towards Abkhazia, brought about by V. Putin's ascent to power in 1999 became apparent almost immediately by looking at the changes in border management that were promoted by Moscow. In 1999, V. Putin cancelled by decree most restrictions on crossing the Psou River. While repeatedly claiming to uphold the blockade, Putin expressed in 2004 the belief that this commitment did not include curtailing commercial activities and private investments (Sepashvili 2004). This meant that a go-ahead was granted to the rehabilitation of the railway between Russia and Sukhumi, scheduled rail and cargo services established in 2004, and lorry cargo at the Psou checkpoint across the de facto border was vastly eased up. The process of boundary de-activation had in fact been set in motion, in parallel, by granting Russian passports to Abkhaz residents, allowing them to easily cross the de facto border, seek employment in the Russian Federation and increase business opportunities among the two sides.

This is not to say that Russia abandoned using the threat of isolation as an effective tool of political pressure, as it most evidently did in 2004 to influence Abkhaz domestic politics. After 12 years of an V. Ardzinba presidency, both charismatic and marred in corruption scandals, the presidential post was up for grabs due to Ardzinba's health problems, and mounting opposition. Vladislav Ardzinba was elected as Abkhazia's first president in 1994 and re-elected in 1999 through elections in which participated the residents of Abkhazia.¹⁹ By the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, opposition parties and civil society groups began to emerge, such as Aitaira (Revival) and Amtsakhara, an association of war veterans.

Elections were fought between two (out of five) main candidates, Sergei Bagapsh and Raul Khadjimba. Having served in various ministerial positions under V. Ardzinba, R. Khadjimba was widely seen as a continuation of the previous state of affairs, and received Moscow's endorsement. Far from being an outsider,²⁰ Bagapsh was the leader of the main opposition coalition, campaigning for a change in the management of state affairs. S. Bagapsh's supporters were not asking for a war on corruption, which was so pervasive as to constitute a *modus operandi* for the vast majority, but a move away from the overall control of economic activities by V. Ardzinba's family (interview

Sheets).

19 In 1999, V. Ardzinba ran unopposed (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008). He had previously been a deputy to Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet since 1989, and its Chairman since 1990, as well as deputy to the USSR Supreme Soviet.

20 S. Bagapsh was de facto Prime Minister of Abkhazia from 1997 to 1999.

Baratelia). The results of the elections were contested by both parties, leading to demonstrations and violence in Sukhumi. The dispute dragged on for a few months, until the two candidates decided to rerun the elections on the same ticket, Bagapsh as president and Khadjimba as vice-president.

The difference between the two candidates had little to do with mere opposition to Russia in Abkhazia. As it clearly emerges from interviews among Abkhaz, the war with Georgia, and the tense relations that followed, left no space for overt antagonism towards their only other neighbour.²¹ Khadjimba, however, had been branded as the pro-Moscow candidate as a consequence of the support that he received from Russian high officials. Accordingly, Moscow pressured Abkhaz voters to cast their ballot for its designated candidate, hinting at serious problems in case of a Khadjimba's loss. As a demonstration, Russian authorities closed the de facto border for two days, allowing no passage of either people or goods (interview Baratelia). Russia's display of force, which was eventually only partly successful in determining the outcome of the election, consisted in showing that it could unilaterally, and dramatically, affect the flows on which Abkhazia relied.

This episode is indicative of two dynamics. First, the vitality of the campaign and the subsequent results suggest that, in the 2000s, the political realm in Abkhazia "displayed a certain measure of pluralism" (Trier *et al* 2010: 11).²² In fact, the vibrancy of Abkhazia's internal political processes has been increasingly explored, and established, through studies on electoral politics and surveys on attitudes towards institutions and the political system of Abkhazia (Ó Beacháin 2010; O'Loughlin *et al.* 2015). Second, this episode shows that, notwithstanding the large degree of independence (and of aspiration of independence), which was reflected by the first result of the elections, Russia could in fact put pressure on Abkhazia and dramatically influence its internal developments, not only covertly but also overtly.

The process that was taking place in the 2000s was that of an apparent partial de-bordering. This trend was emphasized after 2008, with the upgrade of border facilities on the Russian side of the Psou River, in Adler, which were able in the summer to process the passage of large numbers of Russian holidaymakers as of the early 2010s (interview residents of Gagra). Similarly, the flow of goods, which, after 2008,

21 However, there is a strong debate, in Abkhazia, on the meaning of Abkhaz independence, its need for autonomy and how to calibre relations with Moscow. This issue has become particularly salient after the Georgian-Russian war of 2008, which entailed an increased presence of Russian military personnel, financial support and businesses in Abkhazia.

22 One has to bear in mind, however, that no elections in Abkhazia can be considered as free and fair, as about half of the pre-war population has been displaced, and that Georgian residents of the Gali district encountered endless hurdles in registering and voting.

Russian authorities treated as full-fledged exports, proceeded unhindered, allowing consumer goods to easily reach the Abkhaz market. This went hand in hand with the policy of passportisation of the Abkhaz population, which mainly took place between 2004 and 2008, facilitating the flow of people through the border.

In other words, as by 2008 most of the Abkhaz population had Russian passports, the border along the Psou River became, to a large extent, the border between two territories where almost the entire population was Russian citizens. In this regard, the border enclosing Russian citizens shifted south of Sukhumi, towards the Inguri River, between 2004 and 2008.²³ As convincingly argued by Artman, Russia “was doing more than simply acquiring new citizens: it was establishing a sovereign relationship between itself, the naturalised populations, and the land upon which they lived” (Artman 2013: 692).

At the same time, far from de-bordering the Psou River, Russian authorities were changing the practices of managing the border. Having recognised Abkhaz independence in 2008, they coupled it with the establishment of what they called an international border between two sovereign states. Border facilities were built to reflect this, being able to process entry/exit visas and a legal flow of goods, whether exports or merchandises from a third country on transit to Abkhazia. Passage was hence eased for people and goods but, far from disappearing, the border was simply regulated differently.

Part of the difference was that this new arrangement highlighted the fact that the management of the border should rest on bilateral relations between Moscow and Sukhumi and that, according to Russia, who had until 2008 recognised Georgia’s sovereignty over Abkhazia, it was no longer a matter concerning Tbilisi.²⁴ Also, the Russo-Abkhaz border was to be securitised through the upgrade and modernisation of border facilities, while softened by allowing smoother transit (which was made possible by the higher processing capacity at the border crossing and to the almost universal ownership, by the vast majority of the people transiting, of Russian passports). For all intents and purposes, a securitisation process took place, a process which was argued as necessary to ensure Russian internal security in view of the Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014 hidden behind the appearance of de-bordering and modernisation.

23 Although not all the way to the Inguri River, as the district of Gali is mostly inhabited by Georgians/ Mingrelians, few of whom have acquired Russian passports.

24 This became clear in 2011, when a territorial dispute arose out of the attempt to delimitate the mountainous stretch of the territorial border. Moscow’s challenge of the old Georgian-Russian border, established during the Soviet Union, would have led to the annexation of up to 160 square km in the vicinities of the Olympic venues at Krasnaya Poliana (Suleimanov 2011).

5. Settling down along the Inguri River

Following the 2008 war and Russia's recognition of Abkhaz independence, an agreement was found between Moscow and Sukhumi for what they regarded as the border management of the northern side of the ceasefire line. During the 2008 war, Russian troops had pushed much further into Georgian territories. When they retreated behind the Inguri River, following a ceasefire agreement brokered by the EU presidency, they consolidated their positions there. The construction of a church within Russian military compounds in the Gali district clearly shows that these are no temporary installations, and this is not lost on the local population (interview hazelnut traders; interview residents of Gali district).

Officially, this emanated from a bilateral agreement between Russia and Abkhazia, though most doubt whether Sukhumi could have asked the Russians to leave. On the other hand, the presence of the Russian troops along the ceasefire line sealed the de facto border much more effectively than the Abkhaz de facto border guards were ever able to do before 2008. Trading across the Inguri River, outside of the official checkpoint, became extremely difficult; the circulation of residents between Samegrelo and the Gali district, which previously took place with the assent of Abkhaz de facto border guards and was facilitated by the payment of small bribes, ended. This forced all those who wanted to cross from Abkhazia to Samegrelo, or vice versa, to take long detours to reach the bridge on the Inguri River (interview residents of Gali district).

Denoting the importance of the symbolism of maintaining the control over the de facto border, Abkhaz de facto authorities and border guards manned the checkpoint on the bridge over the Inguri River until October 2012. When Russian troops took over, the event received no coverage in the Abkhaz press and residents of Sukhumi and northern Abkhazia remained unaware of the shift for a few weeks. They would argue, as late as early November, that the control of the checkpoint over the Inguri bridge was a clear sign of Abkhaz independence vis-à-vis Russia, and that the stationing of Russian troops along the ceasefire line was no more than the result of a bilateral agreement, which increased Abkhaz security (interview residents of Gagra). In other words, manning the main, and increasingly sole, point of passage along the Inguri River, and therefore controlling one's de facto borders, was presented as a proof of Abkhaz sovereignty.

In fact, the replacement of Abkhaz de facto border guards with Russian military personnel dramatically changed the lives of the residents of the district of Gali, as well as the ability of Abkhaz de facto authorities to regulate the flow of people and goods across the ceasefire line. Abkhaz de facto authorities had been unable to do so before 2008, as a consequence of their inability to secure the whole stretch of

the de facto border along the Inguri River, which allowed for uncontrolled passage between Samegrelo and the Gali district; they were once again, though in a different fashion, unable to do so after 2012, as the ceasefire line was effectively sealed and the checkpoint managed by Russian troops.

To understand the dichotomy between discourse and practice, it has been useful to observe the micro-dynamics of the de facto border post management. Officially, Russian troops and de facto Abkhaz border guards were to man the checkpoint jointly starting from October 2012, with no changes to be made to schedules and operating principles of the checkpoint (interview Stranichkin). Passage of people and goods was to be granted on the basis of valid documents (whether Abkhaz IDs or foreign passports, requiring visas, with the exception of a few nationalities). However, changes in the implementation of the rules of transit, as well as changes in the management of the de facto border facilities meant that the difference between pre-2012 and post-2012 was as stark as ever. Abkhaz de facto authorities and border guards had previously applied a large margin of discretion in their management of their de facto border post, while informal transactions (i.e. bribes) and personal relationships eased the passage of both goods and people (interview hazelnut traders; interview residents of Gali district). Russian military personnel, on the other hand, clearly distanced itself from the civilians that wanted to cross. The physical layout of the checkpoint was altered, as to create more distance between the various parts of the checkpoint. Incoming civilians were stopped as they stepped off the bridge across the Inguri by a Russian soldier who communicated by radio with the main area of the checkpoint, further afield, and who seemingly had no discretionary power to let them proceed. Civilians could then be left waiting for long periods of time, unable to establish for how long or why. When workers of international organisations crossed the bridge by car, they would be given priority to go through the checkpoint, while the processing of on foot civilians stopped for up to an hour. The reason offered for such stoppage was that of “processing the paperwork of the cars”, though the passage of the cars themselves and checking the papers of vehicles and officials took an average of 10 minutes.²⁵ Once permitted to proceed, in small groups, civilians walked through a fenced tunnel all the way to the window, in the main area of the checkpoint. There, Russian officials checked documents, and allowed or barred entrance. Abkhaz de facto authorities, while present, did not take part in the process.

The switch from an Abkhaz managed checkpoint to a Russian managed one completed the progression of acquiring control over the de facto border by Russian troops. Aside from the presence of Russian peacekeepers along the ceasefire line before 2008, this process had started after the war in 2008 with the positioning of

25 Own observations, October and November 2012.

Russian troops along the Inguri River. That had led to an end to the crossing between the two sides outside of the official checkpoint. As of 2012, having taken over the management of the checkpoint, the process of bordering along the ceasefire line was complete.

Conclusion

What surfaces from the discussion in this paper is the importance of understanding border management as a policy tool, instead of limiting the appreciation of borders to symbols of sovereignty, seen in terms of external limits to one's peripheries. The successive Governments of Georgia, sticking to the symbolism, failed to recognise the formation of a *de facto* border along the ceasefire line. In other words, they failed to acknowledge and act upon the creation of a locus of intense power relations along the Inguri River, insisting instead that the focus should remain on the old Georgian-Russian border. As a consequence, Tbilisi attempted to exert influence over a border where it had no role to play aside from a nominal one, unable to regulate flows and unable to control the places and the actors that governed it. It is somewhat ironic that, in Abkhazia, the population recalls the rhetoric that accompanied the attempt to imposed CIS-sanctions, leading them to be labelled as the "Georgian embargo", notwithstanding the mismatch between the discourse and the ability to implement them. The discrepancy between discourse, policy and practice is no less stark in the Russian case, but tilted differently. In the 2000s, Moscow employed the control that it had over borders, whether *de facto* or *de jure*, to consolidate its influence. Instead of blaring announcements, it used border personnel and installations (checkpoints, border facilities) to show its predominance, while hiding the process behind a pretence of an apparent partial *de-bordering*.

This article also illustrates the importance of the implementation component of border regimes. Declarations of intent and legislating activities cannot compensate for a lack of effectiveness on the ground. Russia's failure in regulating the flow of people and goods across the Psou River in the 1990s stemmed not so much from a lack of policy, but from poor coordination among various branches of government and law implementing agencies. Moscow's threats of isolation became effective only in the 2000s when, in a context of apparent *de-bordering*, Russian authorities were able to stop the movement from one side of the *de facto* Abkhaz-Russian border. This is why it is so important to look at border micro-dynamics. Through the micro-management of border areas and posts, Russia was able to position itself strategically, using its forces and its infrastructure on the ground to emphasize the policy choices of its centre. While the replacement of Abkhaz *de facto* border guards by Russian military personnel in 2012, first along the ceasefire line, and then at the checkpoint on the Inguri bridge, was a direct consequence of Russian increasing influence over

Abkhazia, it provided Moscow with the ability of weighting in on everyday life in the borderlands, as well as relations and trade across the ceasefire line. This can be seen as the culmination of a southbound procession that started in 1999 and that, geographically, shifted Russia's ability to bordering from the Psou River to the Inguri.

This paper has shown how these various changes in border policies, linked to more extensive policies of retreat and expansion in the Russian neighbourhood, came about, as well as what impact they had on the flow of goods and people. It has also illustrated how, on the backdrop of a traditional discourse on borders as demarcation lines, different actors influenced the flows of goods and people across these lines and how these processes reflect the fact that borders (whether de facto or de jure), as well as administrative boundaries and ceasefire lines, are dense condensations of power relations, and not only mere peripheries of territory. Russia's gradual southbound advancement of its bordering practices is, at the same time, a reflection of its encroachment on Abkhazia, and one of the many tools that it employed in this process.

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List of interviewees

- Interview Akaba: Natella Akaba (Head of the Abkhaz Women Association and secretary of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia), Sukhumi, October 2012.
- Interview Areshidze: Mamuka Areshidze (Analyst and Director of Kavkasus center), Tbilisi, November 2012.
- Interview Baratelia: Beslan Baratelia (Dean of the Economics Department at Sukhumi's Abkhaz State University), Sukhumi, November 2012.
- Interview Bardon: Antoine Bardon (President of the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie française en Géorgie), Tbilisi, November 2012.
- Interview Gagulia: Gennady Gagulia, Head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (previously Abkhazia's de facto Prime Minister 1995-7, and 2002-3), Sukhumi, November 2012.
- Interview Gumba: Yulia Gumba, Head of the Association "Business women of Abkhazia", Sukhumi, October 2012.
- Interview Hazelnut traders: Hazelnut traders, Gali, October 2012.
- Interview Inal-Ipa: Arda Inal-Ipa (member of the Centre for Humanitarian Programme), Sukhumi, October 2012.
- Interview Local aid workers: Local aid workers (Mingrelian and Abkhaz). 2012, Gali district, November 2012.
- Interview Residents of Gali district: Residents of district of Gali (along the Inguri River), Gali district, November 2012.
- Interview Residents of Gagra: Residents of Gagra, Gagra district, November 2012.
- Interview Rimple: Paul Rimple, journalist, Tbilisi, December 2012.
- Interview Sheets: Lawrence Sheets (Senior analyst at International Crisis Group), Tbilisi, November 2012.
- Interview Stranichkin: Alexandr Stranichkin (De facto Vice-premier minister of Abkhazia), Sukhumi, October 2012.
- Interview Venedictova: Nadezh Venedictova (journalist), Sukhumi, October and November 2012.
- Interview Vischioni: Pierre Vischioni (former chef de mission of Première Urgence in Gali), Tbilisi, October 2012.