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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37458/ssj.1.2.5>

Review Paper

Received: November 10, 2020

Accepted: December 17, 2020

**REGIONAL SECURITY-THE DYNAMICS OF THE RUSSIAN
FEDERATION MILITARY AND BUDGETED SUPPORT PROVIDED TO
ABKHAZIA IN 2008 -2019**

Abstract: *Both the Georgian-Abkhazian War of 1992-93 and the five-day War of 2008 led to the subsequent presence of the Russian Federation Armed Forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both de jure internationally unrecognized states without any Georgian governmental administration executive power over them present a major conflict seemingly frozen in time. „Status quo“ is represented on the Abkhazian and the South Ossetia side supported by their Russian patrons and by Georgia on the other side. The Russian Federation military presence prevents Georgia to execute any rights and functions over breakaway states under the Russian protectorate. The military power of the Russian Federation projected in Abkhazia, including aid provided by Russia since 2008 until 2019, is the topic of the following article. Russia is ensuring its dominance over both regions not only through its military presence but also by providing financial and material aid. Approximately 45% of the state budget of Abkhazia provided by Russia in 2019 excluding material support is self-explanatory to understand the strategic importance of both territories located in the Southern Caucasus. Abkhazia is located next to the Black Sea and both close to the Caspian Sea, considered by the Russian Federation the predominant sphere of its strategic interests in this region.*

Key Words: *The Georgian-Abkhazian War, The Russian Federation Southern Military District, conflict, independence, security actors, aid.*

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental changes in the global security environment, emerging after the end of the Cold War and the fall of bipolarity, have brought, besides their uncontested positives, also numerous negatives (Kazanský, Andrassy, 2016). The development of the security environment is very dynamic, turbulent and is marked by the efforts of the powers to maintain or even increase their influence in regions where they have political, economic, security and military-strategic interests (Ivančík, 2019, Marek, 2017). One of such regions in which the Russian Federation has its interests is Abkhazia. The authors, therefore, in the article, deal with the military and financial support of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation in the years 2008 to 2019. The Russian Federation Southern Military District is the smallest but it contains some of the most capable military formations. In its organizational structure it has three Combined Arms Army, Air and Air Defence Army of three aviation divisions; and two naval formations – the Black Sea Fleet, with its two naval bases, and the Caspian Flotilla – in their respective seas. With at least 190 fixed-wing and 210 rotary-wing aircraft, the Southern Military District has the largest operational-tactical aviation assets in Russia, especially due to a large amount of attack and ground-attack capabilities. With the illegal annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the naval infrastructure disposed of by the Black Sea Fleet improved considerably. This has enabled the fleet to take a leading role in the Russian permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea. The Caspian Flotilla is also relocating its base 300 kilometres south from Astrakhan to Kaspijsk, which provides quick access to the central parts of the Caspian Sea.

In 2019, there were 34 battalion-size task groups (24 000–31 000 personnel) available in the Russian Federation Southern Military District except forces might be generated from the Russian Federation Armed Forces bases deployed in Armenia, or bases in the occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russian military presence in Georgian occupied territories destabilize the overall security situation in Northern Caucasus and both are subjects of significant military aid provided from the Russian Federation to these internationally not recognised states.

THE GEORGIAN – ABKHAZIAN RELATIONSHIPS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We can understand dimensions of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict through emancipation and self-identification efforts made by both nations as well as through their historical background, which has been the subject of research and many political or social analyses during the various phases. Both sides interpret this ethnic conflict differently in modern history, according to the situation and their national interests. Despite some parallels with South Ossetia, the territory of Abkhazia was more culturally distinct, developed and relatively even more independent. Historically, Abkhazia has seen Russia as its protector against Georgians, despite their turbulent relationship starting with the reign of the Tsar during the Russian Empire, Lenin during the Soviet Russia era as well as Stalin's Soviet Union times or Putin's Russian modern history. The Abkhazian principedom was once part of the medieval Georgian kingdom and later became a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, most of the Abkhazians converted to Islam. In the early 19th century, the Russian troops displaced the Ottomans from the South Caucasus and on February 17, 1810, Abkhazia became a Russian protectorate. Until 1864, Russian rule in Abkhazia was nominal, but after suppressing resistance by Chechen, Dagestani and Circassian Muslim rebels in the Northern Caucasus, Abkhazia was brutally annexed and its autonomy abolished. The Abkhazians rebelled in 1866 and in 1877 – 1878 supported by the Ottoman troops during the war with Russia that ended with Ottomans defeat in 1878. Massive slaughter and ethnic cleansing of the Circassian and Abkhaz population was followed after the Russian military victories. Finally, Muslim survivors were forcefully sent by sea to the Ottoman Empire and the Russians resettled cleansed lands including Sochi, which became a Russian city. Since that time, the term "*Muhajirs*" (The Report, 2019) refers to about 150 000 forcefully exiled population living in abroad. Numbers represent status in 1950.

Some 90% of the Abkhaz population (<https://jamestown.org>) were killed or forcibly exiled by the Russians. According to some Abkhazian historians, also Georgians Armenians, Greeks and other nations besides the Russians were benefitting from it with the perspective to move and to occupy the Abkhazian land. There are a lot of grievances towards Mingrelians from the Abkhazian side because of it. The Russian oppression turned the Abkhaz nation into a tiny minority in their land. Abkhazians were notoriously unsatisfied with the situation for decades,

even during the Soviet era, blaming the Georgians for lack of understanding and preventing them to gain independence or autonomy, which would satisfy their national interests. Even some respected Abkhazian communistic party authorities (f. e. Nestor Lakoba, who was. poisoned by Lavrentij Pavlovich Berija and died in Tbilisi on December 28, 1936.) (<https://jamestown.org>) were trying to bring Abkhazia into an independent position within USSR, but finally, according to Abkhazian historians, they were facing Joseph Stalin's and Lavrentij Berija's lack of will to provide them with any independence. Following repression in 1936-1953 is the subject of criticism on how the Georgians were implementing their national interests against Abkhazians in Moscow's state policy during the Soviet era (<https://jamestown.org>). "Georgization" which presents the term occupation of the Abkhazian territory by the Georgians (<https://abkhazworld.com,1941>) is among Abkhazians a notoriously well-known term and prevents them from having any future political dialogue with the Georgians.

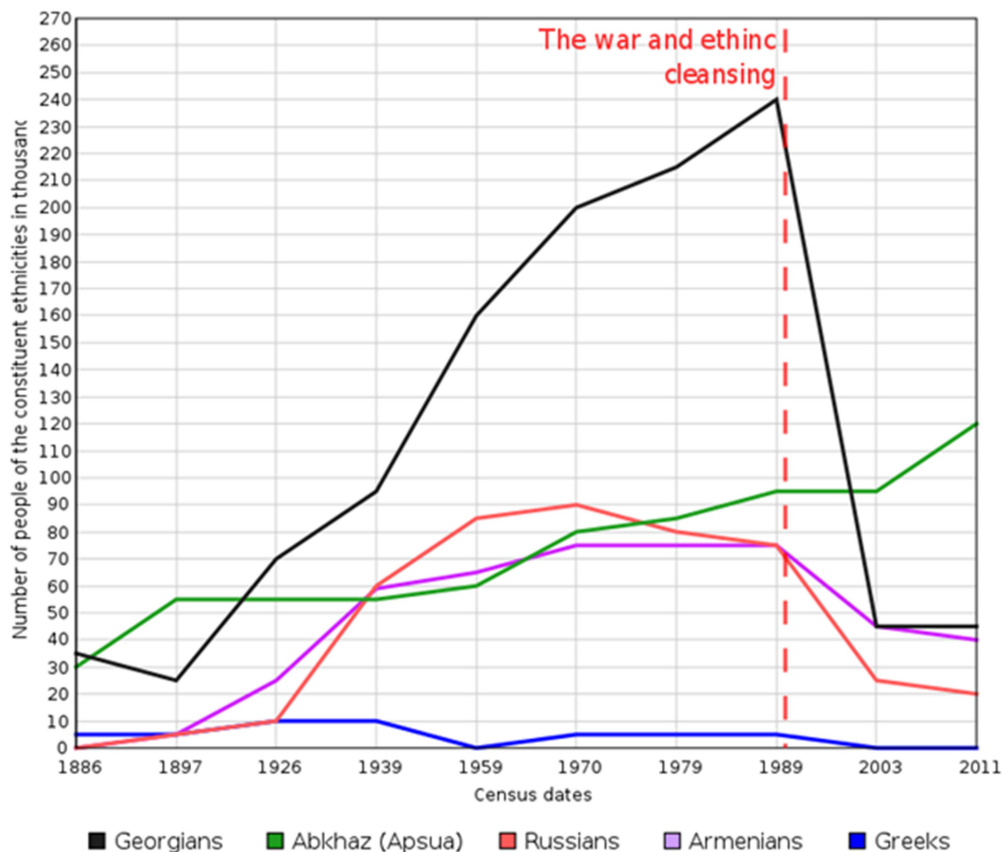


Chart 1: Demographic changes in Abkhazia (1886-2011) (<https://web.archive.org>)

The present Abkhaz elite rules by suppressing the majority of the populace consisting mostly of Armenians and some sources claim also of ethnic Georgians who are familiar with the history of their tribe and remember Russia's guilt. The bureaucrats in Moscow are ignorant, remembering only Soviet censored historical facts not admitting the existence of any Russian imperial interests in Southern Caucasus. Nowadays, even Abkhazians are frustrated by the Russian efforts of ongoing assimilation and understand their situation and past mistakes. The Abkhazians are caught helplessly between the past and the future living unrecognized in the Russian puppet state, slowly assimilated by its protector, without the future, with no light at the end of the tunnel.

Currently, Abkhazia is a country deprived of any opportunities to defend its national interests in the international arena. The only valid international format, in which the representatives of Abkhazia equally participate, remains the Geneva International Discussions on Security and Stability in the Trans Caucasus. This platform was created on the initiative of the presidents of Russia and France through the mediation of international organizations such as the UN, EU and OSCE. Many socio-political figures of Abkhazia are sceptical of this international format, referring to the fact that there are no significant shifts. However, the main task of the Geneva Discussions is to find compromising solutions for the subsequent signing of an agreement between Abkhazia and the Republic of Georgia on international guarantees of the non-use of force against each other.

Abkhazia is an impoverished land with Soviet-built infrastructure and the capital Sukhumi remains in poor condition. Abkhazia needs massive investment for basic restoration. Pre-war Abkhazia had 550,000 inhabitants in 1990; half of them were ethnic Georgians, with some 17% of the Abkhazian population. The population has declined to 243,000 in 2014 (<https://web.archive.org>) because of ethnic cleansing of the Georgian majority and the emigration of others from the poverty-stricken region (<http://mf-ra.org>).

ABKHAZIAN ARMED FORCES

Abkhazian Armed Forces were established on October 11, 1992, during the first Georgian-Abkhazian war (August 14, 1992- September 27, 1993) with approximately 2,200

active troops and reserve forces comprising approximately up to 40 000 reservists. Abkhazian Armed Forces consist of three branches comprising of Army, Air Force and Navy responsible for three operational areas (West, Central and East). Open-source information is limited; therefore, organisational structures and real size of the Abkhazian Armed Forces units including the real status of military equipment of the Abkhazian units are not clear. Based on the past findings, there are significant differences between the Russian Federation Armed Forces and the Abkhazian units in their size and real staffing, including equipment availability. Abkhazia is executing drafts for the males' compulsory service between the ages of 18 to 27. Compulsory service for the Abkhazian citizens lasts 18 months (up to secondary education) and 12 months (for those with higher education).

Table 1- Defence Budget of Abkhazia during the years 2015 -2019 (<https://abkhazworld.com>, 1936)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
MILL RUB	314	348	346	348	356
MILL EUR	4,6	5	5	5	5,1
% of ABK totally budget	4,6%	3,3%	2,9%	3,6%	3,6%

Even though it is intended to provide well-trained and experienced personnel for the reserve forces (40 000), the numbers of drafted males were too low to provide enough personnel for different active units and to sustain reserve forces from the long-term perspective.

THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION MILITARY IN ABKHAZIA AFTER AUGUST 2008

Upon the completion of the second five-day war in August of 2008, before Russia withdrew its troops from Georgian territory, the Russian Federation announced its recognition of the independence of two breakaway regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

By the end of August 12, 2008, following units of the 58th RF AF Army were deployed in the ABK region (BARBANOV, M. S., LAVROV, A.V., TSELIUKOV, A. A., 2008):

- 43th Independent Motorized Rifle Battalion of the 15th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade (without heavy equipment),

- 526th and 558th Independent Motorized Rifle Battalions of 131st Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade (without heavy equipment),
- Two battalions from 108th Air Assault Regiment, two battalions from 247th Air Assault Regiment and 1141st Artillery Regiment of 7th Air Assault Division,
- Two battalions from the 31st Independent Air Assault Brigade,
- One company from 45th Independent Reconnaissance Spetznaz Regiment,

Totally: 6500 troops, 20 Special Purpose Guns, 100 Armoured Personnel Carriers and 100 Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicles were deployed in Abkhazia at that time. After the five-day war, the Russian Federation's 7th Military Base was formed in Abkhazia based on the 131st Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 58th Army. Before the conflict with Georgia, selected units of the Russian 131st brigade had performed peacekeeping functions in Abkhazia, but after the five-day war, the brigade was deployed in Abkhazia in full strength permanently. The brigade's redeployment began already in August 2008 and completed by the end of September 2008. The brigade was based at an old Soviet military airfield, Bombora, near the town of Gudauta. On November 17, 2008, the Abkhazian parliament allotted land (about 150 hectares) for the Russian military base. Initially, the permanent strength of deployed contingent at the Russian base was set at 3,800 troops. During the first few post-war months, the actual strength of the Russian troops in Abkhazia was even higher and their composition was different than it was planned initially.

In the autumn of 2008, the territory of Abkhazia began to be integrated into Russia's air defence system. In November 2008, Russia sent to Abkhazia *S-300PS* surface-to-air missile systems from the Cadre Air Defence Missile Regiment based near Moscow and deployed their radar formations equipped with *Fundament* automated systems for *Elint* company control posts and other equipment.

In March 2009, the tank battalion of the 131st Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade was fully equipped. Its *T-72B* battle tanks were replaced with new *T-90A* tanks produced in 2008. The new tanks have been widely used in the brigade's exercises since April 2009. Besides, the military base had over 150 *BTR-80* armoured personnel carriers (these were planned to be replaced with better-armed *BTR-80A*); two battalions of 152-mm self-propelled *2S3 Acacia*

howitzers; one battalion of 122-mm *BM-21 Grad* multiple launch rocket systems; *Osa-AKM*, *3SU-23-4 Shilka* and *2S6M Tunguska* air defence missile systems; and other weapons.

Immediately after the recognition of Abkhazian's independence, plans were announced to establish the Russian naval base at the port of Ochamchira, which in Soviet times hosted border guard ships and naval ships training detachment. After coastal infrastructure restoration, the port was able to host permanently from three to five small warships of Russia's Black Sea Fleet (these may include small-size missile or antisubmarine ships, or missile boats), ten patrol ships and boats of the Russian Coast Guard. Such a force would reliably defend the Abkhazian coast.



Fig.1- The Russian Federation Military bases in Abkhazia (2011-2016)

THE DYNAMICS OF THE RF BUDGETARY AND MILITARY AID FOR ABKHAZIA DURING 2009-2015

On August 12, 2009, the Russian Federation Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Abkhazia first time and he promised to provide from 15 to 16 billion ruble (from 465 to 495 million USD) aid for ABK military base and border crossing (<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com>). According to Putin's statement, despite the financial

crisis, in 2009 the RF allocated USD 80 million to Abkhazia in the form of budgetary support (<http://kremlin-roadmap.gfsis.org/visits/display/1>).

Other open sources reported that Russia declared to spend some \$489 million to reinforce Abkhazia's borders and strengthen Russian military operations in the breakaway Georgian republic Abkhazia. The Russian Prime Minister added that some \$76 million had been sent to Abkhazia for the 2009 year to support the republic's budget. Putin said that Moscow will provide Abkhazia with the same amount next year (2010) as well and will also aid the Abkhaz government in making pension payments. Russia had 3,636 military soldiers deployed in Abkhazia at that time according to the RF MoD Anatoly Serdyukov statement on August 12, 2009.

On January 28, 2010, the Russian ambassador in Abkhazia said that Russia will provide to Abkhazia over 10 billion roubles (\$330 million) financial assistance in the next three years and Abkhazia would receive about 1.9 billion roubles (\$62 million) in the 2010 year. Under mutual assistance treaties signed in November 2008, Russia pledged to help to protect ABK borders (<https://web.archive.org/web>).

On June 2, 2011, the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin paid his second, unplanned visit to Abkhazia. During a meeting with Abkhazian acting president, he announced that Abkhazia could count on 10 billion roubles (360 million USD) assistance allocated in 2011.

On October 6, 2011, during the talks between the Russian Federation Minister of Foreign Affairs and Abkhazian Finance Minister held in Moscow, Russian President Medvedev told his Abkhazian counterpart that he had signed the law on ratification of the agreement between the two countries about the Russian military base in Abkhazia. The military base should secure the safety of Abkhazia and Russia as well as the Russian aircraft, navy ships, ground transport and communication lines. Moreover, it should also help to defend the state border of both Russia and Abkhazia and conduct the border-crossing procedure. The agreement between Russia and Abkhazia secured diplomatic immunity status for all Russian service members stationed at the base including their family members. It was also agreed that Abkhazia transfers the Russian military base's real estate sites to the Russian Federation for free using within the next six months. Both parliaments had already had ratified the corresponding agreements. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2008 until that time, the Russian Federation and Abkhazia reportedly had signed 60 agreements on co-operation and 30 more documents were in

the works at that time. The trade turnover between the two countries had doubled and amounted to over US \$ 225 million (<https://www.rt.com>).

On August 25, 2013, the RF President Vladimir Putin paid his third visit to Abkhazia since 2008 but topics of discussion with Abkhazian counterparts were not reported in the media.

On November 24, 2014, the framework agreement “On Alliance and Partnership” was signed between Russia and Abkhazia. The deal had obligated RF and ABK to conduct the modernization of the ABK AF no later than three years from the date of entry into force of this agreement. This effort was to include the phased unification of the standards of a military command, logistics, cash allowance and social guarantees of military personnel. It also called the signatories to jointly organize the training of the Abkhazian and equip them with modern weaponry.

The RF government further delayed undertaking any activities about specific cooperation in the military sphere with Abkhazia for two years. The Russian State Duma (lower chamber of parliament) ratified the framework of a bilateral agreement in 2015 and the Russian Federation Parliament approved this bilateral agreement only in 2016.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION BUDGETARY AND MILITARY AID PROVIDED FOR ABKHAZIA DURING 2015-2019

On November 2, 2016, the Russian Federation State Duma ratified the framework of the Russian-Abkhazian bilateral agreement about specific cooperation in the military sphere signed in 2014.

On August 9, 2017, Vladimir Putin visited for the last time the breakaway Abkhazian region (only for 2 hrs) (<http://kremlin-roadmap.gfsis.org/visits>) to meet regional officials and reaffirmed the Kremlin’s support of Abkhazian territorial separatist ambitions. Putin also said that Russia would invest 6 billion ruble (\$100 million) in the Abkhazian economy by 2019 (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com>).

Finally, on August 23, 2019, the Russian Federation Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and his Abkhazian counterpart Mirab Kishmariya, signed an agreement on financing the costs of modernizing the breakaway Abkhazian Armed Forces. The following month, on September 12, 2019, the Russian Federation Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev approved the document. Ten days later (September 22), the Russian President ordered the government to finance the

Abkhazian Armed Forces modernization. The details of the Russian-Abkhazian military modernization agreement are unknown from the official sources. The Russian Federation did not reveal how much money will be allocated from the Russian budget or what types of weapons will be delivered to the Abkhazian Armed Forces.

On September 23, 2019, the media reported that Moscow already had provided large-scale financial assistance for the development of Abkhazia. The volume of the investment programme to support Abkhazia for 2017-2019 amounted to about 6 billion rubles (\$93 million) (<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/2544#>).

Finally, on September 30, 2019, the Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin has ordered his government to undertake the modernization of the Abkhazian Armed Forces and to equip its military with additional weapons. He also ensured all possible support for the “national security” of Georgia’s occupied Abkhazian region in his letter sent to the president of the region Raul Khajimba on the occasion of the “national holiday of Abkhazia - the Day of Independence and Victory.” Mr Putin also promised his support for solving social and economic problems in this letter (<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/2619>).

Table 1: The Russian Federation Assistance to the Abkhazian state budget from 2015 – 2019 (<https://abkhazworld.com, 1936>)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
RF Assistance (Rubles (Bill))	3,369	5,26	4,716	4,293	4,410
RF Assistance as % of total budget	49%	51%	46%	45%	45%
ABK Budget Totally (Rubles (Bill))	6,875	10,234	10,158	9,502	9,745

CONCLUSION

Occupation of Georgian territory and *de jure* illegal presence of the Russian Federation Armed Forces on the breakaway Georgian territories is the most imminent security threat towards Georgian territorial integrity. Militarisation through the presence of the Russian Armed Forces in Abkhazia and the Georgian population discrimination on the ethical principle as well as freedom of movement restrictions between Tbilisi administrated territory and Abkhazia presents the most significant security challenge for Georgia and the Southern Caucasus region

(The Report of the State). The Russian approach to the occupied areas in Abkhazia is gradually implemented by the unofficial policy of a slow annexation. Any socio-political and socio-economical events in Abkhazia are under the absolute control of the Russian occupying security forces and the Abkhazian state security actors. Georgian territorial integrity cannot become reality in the short or long term. Georgia has been struggling for years to bring the changes to the “status quo”, and it is concentrating its efforts to bring splintered territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia back under its administration. The only result of this effort for today is the international isolation of both splintered-out administrative territories but still out of control of Tbilisi. Even though Abkhazia and South Ossetia became in all aspects more existentially dependent on Russia, the Russian Federation masterfully controls both territories through expanding its power and using the legacy of the socialistic national and ethnic experiment with which it has such experience coming from the former Soviet Union era.

History is full of this kind of paradox. We can just look at the former colonies in Africa or even in the Arab world in the context of the current unpleasant heritage left by the former colonial powers exploiting their natural resources for centuries.

This is not about the Russian Federation only; neither it is about the black and white point of view.

This research was supported by the outcome of the project “Analysis and Simulation of Information and Security Threats Workplace (PASIBO)”, which has received funding from the European Union's Grant Agreement Number OPVaV-2015/1.1/03-SORO, ITMS code 26210120044 and of the project “Support for creating the security and defence capabilities of the state by preparing crisis management actors”, IM_4200513, which has received funding by MOD SR.

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Regionalna bezbednost - Dinamika vojne i budžetske podrške Ruske federacije pružene Abhaziji u periodu 2008–2019

Rezime:

I Gruzijско-abhaški rat 1992-93. i petodnevni rat 2008. doveli su do naknadnog prisustva oružanih snaga Ruske Federacije u Abhaziji i Južnoj Osetiji. Obe *de jure* međunarodno nepriznate države bez izvršne vlasti gruzijske vladine uprave nad njima predstavljaju veliki *zamrznuti sukob*. „Status kuo“ je predstavljen na abhaškoj i južnoj Osetiji, a podržavaju ih njihovi ruski pokrovitelji i Gruzija na drugoj strani. Vojno prisustvo Ruske Federacije sprečava Gruziju da izvršava bilo koja prava i funkcije nad otcepljenim državama pod ruskim protektoratom. Vojna moć Ruske Federacije projektovana u Abhaziji, uključujući pomoć koju je Rusija pružala od 2008. do 2019. godine, tema je ovog rada. Rusija osigurava svoju dominaciju nad oba regiona ne samo svojim vojnim prisustvom već i pružanjem finansijske i materijalne pomoći. Približno 45% državnog budžeta Abhazije, koji je Rusija obezbedila 2019. godine, isključujući materijalnu podršku, dovoljno je za razumevanje strateške važnosti obe teritorije smeštene na Južnom Kavkazu za Rusiju. Abhazija se nalazi pored Crnog mora i u blizini Kaspijskog mora, koju Ruska Federacija smatra pretežnom sferom svojih strateških interesa u ovom regionu.

Ključne reči: Gruzijско-Abhaški rat, Ruska Federacija –Južni vojni odsek, sukob, nezavisnost, bezbednosni akteri, pomoć.