

Violation of territorial integrity as a tool for waging long-term hybrid warfare (against the backdrop of power games in the South Caucasus region)

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the violation of territorial integrity as a stage of hybrid warfare. Grounded in the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, this study analyses nations' foreign policy strategies considering both global and domestic factors. Employing primarily qualitative research, this study concentrates on a case study of the South Caucasus region. Against the backdrop of the war which broke out in the early 2022 between Russia and Ukraine, the preservation of territorial integrity emerges as an imperative aspect of national security policy. Despite the longstanding recognition of territorial integrity as a fundamental tenet of international law over the centuries, this war has galvanised all nations with regard to the violation of territorial integrity. The paper delineates the principles of territorial integrity vis-à-vis the national security of the South Caucasus countries, substantiating the assertion that violation of the territorial integrity of the particular countries in this region serves the interests of external actors, either directly or indirectly, and is employed as a strategic tool in the pursuit of protracted hybrid warfare.

Keywords

national security, hybrid warfare, territorial integrity, territorial violation

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Introduction

The world witnessed several confrontations in the last decade where different techniques were employed in pursuit of national objectives. However, these techniques fell far short of physical conflict. This strategy, while not escalating to the level of war, yields dire consequences. It highlights a critical period prior to overt conflict, where aggressors engage in preparatory measures. This period is also a part of political warfare, which is conducted in the “grey zone.” The ambiguity of international law creates “favourable conditions” for the uninterrupted continuation of this warfare because its impact does not justify a response. Different researchers have endeavoured to depict the conceptual construct of hybrid warfare since it was coined for the first time. Its stages of implementation are intriguing for any nation which wants to increase its resilience. It should be noted that in hybrid warfare, several tactics are employed simultaneously, while a hybrid threat itself might be used individually. Creativity, ambiguity, and non-linearity are central elements of hybrid warfare, but it is the perpetrator’s decision whether to employ them, which in turn necessitates a specific approach to every occasion.

The terminology for territorial protection that we still use today was formed in discussions regarding international law by the middle of the 19th century. [Heffter \(1844\)](#) refers to the territorial principle (*ius territorii*), which guarantees a “right to integrity or inviolability of states,” in his 1844 treatise on European public international law. The idea of territorial integrity was further formalised after World War I. US President Woodrow Wilson called for the establishment of a peaceful post-war Europe in his “Fourteen Points” speech, which was delivered in front of both houses of the US Congress in January 1918. Wilson mentioned, among other things, the need for “specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” The Covenant of the League of Nations was the fundamental piece of legislation that first introduced the idea. In accordance with Article 10 of the Covenant, all League members were required to safeguard and protect their existing political independence, as well as their territorial integrity, from external aggression. The protection of territorial integrity is now specifically referred to in the United Nations (UN) Charter as a crucial aspect of the prohibition of the use of force as stated in Article 2(4): “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations” ([Marxsen, 2014](#), p. 2).

Respect for territorial integrity is one of the guiding principles of participating states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), as stated in Article IV of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975: “Nation-states should not use force to impose a border change on another nation-state or attempt to support secessionist movements in other nation-states” ([Office of the Historian, 1975](#)). With regard to the implications of territorial integrity, the protection of a state’s international borders first and foremost ensures that the state continues to exist within its present borders and declares unilateral changes to the territory made with the use of force by third nations to be illegal under international law. Political independence is associated with territorial integrity in practically all legal documents. It is acknowledged that the territory is more than merely a prerequisite for statehood. Since the territory is acknowledged as the physical foundation and essential precondition for the accomplishment of political independence, the legislation as it exists closely links territorial integrity and independence from the government. The territory is the sole area in which a state’s political independence may exist and where, on moral grounds, outside governments are prohibited from interfering. As a result, preserving territorial integrity calls for more than just defence against long-term changes

to borders but also defence against other outside intrusions (Marxsen, 2014). There are numerous historical examples where the territorial integrity of a particular nation has been violated, yet it has not been fully substantiated as a hybrid tool employed by third-party actors. In this paper, we attempted to demonstrate it as a hybrid tool with concrete evidence, focusing on the South Caucasus region.

Methods

The purpose of this paper is to examine the violation of territorial integrity as a stage of hybrid warfare. The authors therefore delineate hybrid warfare from a different perspective, in which a violation of the territorial integrity of a country serves the interests of external actors, rather than the violator itself. While this paper cannot present empirical evidence on analysing nations' foreign policy strategies concerning both global and domestic issues, it can be concluded that independent states act in pursuit of their national interests and engage in power struggles, and cooperate and compete with other states as is necessary to best accomplish their goals. These states are primarily concerned with maintaining their security. This paper therefore seeks to answer the following questions: (1) Is the violation of territorial integrity a tool for third parties in hybrid warfare? (2) If the violation of territorial integrity is carried out using conventional means, how can it serve as a tool in waging hybrid warfare? (3) Do ethnic minorities (Karabakh Armenians) have the right to self-determination on Azerbaijan territory? (4) Which countries exploit tensions in the South Caucasus region to advance their own agendas? The authors draw on the perspectives of numerous scholars and conduct a comprehensive review of international literature to test the hypothesis that interstate interactions are inherently competitive and antagonistic within the framework of realist international politics. In situations where the threat or use of actual force is absent, the typical economic, diplomatic, and informational methods employed in interstate competition are typically not categorised as warfare. The lack of unity in the South Caucasus region renders these nations vulnerable to external manipulation.

The current study adopts a case study approach, as this method allows for an in-depth analysis of complexities in the South Caucasus region, providing a thorough understanding of the underlying dynamics. The importance of achieving the greatest accuracy prompted the authors to use theoretical research methods focusing on the case study of the South Caucasus region. The research was founded on the theory of case study to fully describe the situation in the region. The paper has been divided into four sections and an important activity was the skilful and reliable collection of consistent data. The first section discusses the violation of territorial integrity as a tool for third parties in hybrid warfare. The second section looks at South Caucasus as a region of hybrid war in violation of territorial integrity. In the third section, the authors focused on South Caucasus as an arena of clashing interests of diverse ethnic and religious groups. In the final section, readers can find conclusions on South Caucasus as a geopolitical arena of clashing interests. This paper aims to provide readers with a deeper understanding of how the violation of territorial integrity is used as a tool of hybrid warfare by actors outside the immediate conflict seeking leverage in the region.

Violation of territorial integrity as a tool for third parties to wage hybrid warfare

Even though the South Caucasus region occupies a small space on the world map, interest in the area is considerably greater than its actual size. The geopolitical dynamics

of South Caucasus was dramatically transformed by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, as each of the successor governments worked to define their own national interests and policy goals. Other powers have grasped the opportunity to compete for influence in the former Soviet republics, something they had previously been unable to accomplish due to the presence of the strong hegemonic authority of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. The region has long been at the forefront of the foreign policies of major international powers because of its geopolitical and strategic importance (Baev, 2017). It has been used historically by hegemonic nations to exert their control over nearby regions. The South Caucasus region was once thought to be on the periphery of global affairs, but after the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent creation of newly independent republics, it gained considerable significance for both its neighbours and powerful non-regional actors. The South Caucasus region is a diversified geopolitical area today and plays a key role in the transportation of Caspian oil and gas (Iskandarov *et al.*, 2019). Simultaneously, South Caucasus is a region where nations are not united. The so-called “frozen conflicts” in the region that jeopardise regional and global security are rife. Armenia had occupied 20% of Azerbaijan until the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War broke out in late September 2020, but Georgia has been struggling for decades to regain its territorial integrity (Cornell, 2017). The lack of trust between the nations leaves the entire region vulnerable to outside interference. This makes it necessary for any nation to build a long-term deterrence plan against both regional and non-regional threats (Blank, 2014; Guner *et al.*, 2022; Iskandarov *et al.*, 2022).

In examining the South Caucasus region in the post-Cold War era, we can discern two distinct phases. The first phase spans from 1991 (following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]) to 2000 (Vladimir Putin’s ascension to power). The second stage extends from the early 2000s to the present day. During the initial stage, Russia’s posture was not as intransigent as it is today (Broers, 2020). Putin’s early endeavours were oriented towards fostering an equitable integration with the West. Even NATO’s former secretary-general, George Robertson, attests to Putin’s aspiration for Russia to join the Alliance, albeit with a unique caveat—the avoidance of the customary application process and queuing alongside “countries that don’t matter” (Rankin, 2021). According to Tsygankov (2005), three core elements of Putin’s policies were examined at that time: the consolidation of state power, cooperation with the West, and the projection of Russia’s influence in the former Soviet sphere. Consequently, the South Caucasus states were more inclined towards strengthening their ties with the West. A discernible shift in the geopolitical landscape emerged, paralleling the unfolding conflict in Ukraine, reminiscent of the post-World War II rivalry between the western liberal vision for the region and the more traditional “Russian Europe.” Subsequent developments underscored Putin’s heightened focus on the first and third elements. The Baltic States should consider themselves fortunate to have joined NATO early in the resurgence of Russian revanchism. As a result, these nations avoided Russian hostility while applying to join NATO. Estonia and Latvia would have undoubtedly had another “Crimea” crisis had their entry into NATO been delayed by a few years.

Putin’s second presidential term, which commenced in 2004, was marked by increasingly persistent claims that a “new Cold War” was on the horizon. In his 2005 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin called the collapse of the USSR the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” This statement, now frequently referenced in western discourse on Russia, implied Putin’s ambitions to resurrect the USSR and presaged the events of 2014. Subsequent incidents, from the energy crises involving Russia, Ukraine, and Europe in 2006 and 2009 to the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, culminating in the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, appear to corroborate this trajectory, notwithstanding Putin’s earlier disavowal of anyone advocating

the restoration of the USSR as lacking wisdom. The “new Cold War” narrative, which is gaining popularity, perceives this rivalry as a rekindling of the Cold War era. Vladimir Putin is allegedly seeking to reverse the passage of time and potentially reconstruct the USSR. Consequently, the lessons of the Cold War retain relevance for contemporary politicians, as suggested by numerous western political figures and analysts ([Sadiyev and Iskandarov, 2018](#)).

There are numerous weaknesses in the South Caucasus region that foreign actors might take advantage of. The South Caucasus region might be considered a new frontier for both West, particularly NATO, and Russia, and therefore an integral part of the whole European security structure. The South Caucasus region is the gateway to Central Asia. The area was used for air transit of the US and NATO forces in Europe. Another factor is the US policy that is focused on oil and gas transit routes from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The region plays a crucial role as a transport and energy corridor ([Yepremyan, 2021](#)). Today, Europe relies heavily on Russian oil and natural gas and only a few European countries, as among them Poland, have declared themselves energy-independent from Russian energy resources. Therefore, the Azerbaijan–Georgia–Türkiye corridor is a key strategic connection between Europe and Central Asia, allowing it to challenge Russia’s current control over energy resources ([Nasirov et al., 2017](#)).

In a significant development, Finland became the 31st member of NATO on 4 April 2023, marking a profound transformation in the security landscape of Europe. This accession has doubled NATO’s border length with Russia, thus presenting a pivotal shift in regional dynamics. It represents the most substantial setback for Moscow since the Baltic States’ accession to NATO, notwithstanding the complex challenge it poses for NATO due to its extensively shared border with Russia. The Kremlin’s articulated warnings of “countermeasures” currently appear to lack substantive substance, primarily resonating as simple rhetoric. However, the prospect of such countermeasures cannot be entirely discounted. Finland’s inclusion in NATO holds significant implications for the alliance, and Sweden’s potential accession further consolidates the security posture of member states. These nations, by aligning themselves with NATO, contribute to the alliance’s overall capabilities, enhancing its influence over the Baltic region and reinforcing support for existing members, notably Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This shift serves to diminish Moscow’s standing in north-eastern Europe. The Nordic region has often been regarded as a “strategic gap” where NATO’s defensive capabilities confront a notable numerical inferiority when juxtaposed with Russian military forces. Had these countries pursued NATO membership a few months or even weeks prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, such a move would have likely precipitated a confrontation with Moscow.

Since the institutions of both countries are well in line with western democratic and economic principles, it is unlikely that Russia can use a similar strategy to the one it applied in Ukraine and Georgia. It should be highlighted that the war in Ukraine prompted these nations to apply for NATO membership. For instance, according to a survey conducted some years before that war broke out, not even half of the Finnish population was in favour of a closer defence cooperation with NATO, with only 17% supporting full membership ([Heissler, 2018](#)). In Sweden, historical memory, especially the trauma of losing the Baltic Sea Empire through wars with Russia, plays a significant role in debates on potential NATO membership ([Simons et al., 2019](#)). Even in January 2022, a mere 28% of respondents supported the idea of Finland’s membership of NATO. However, in February 2022, the figure in support of joining NATO was 53%, in March 2022, 62%, and in May 2022, already 76%. At the same time, the share of opponents to NATO membership dwindled to less than 15%. Although Sweden’s trajectory did not witness as a dramatic shift, it remained below 50% in favour of NATO membership following the

Ukraine war. In March 2022, 47% of Swedes supported the idea of NATO membership, while in April 2022, the figure rose to 53% (Forsberg, 2022). By May 2022, nearly 60% of Swedes expressed support for their country's NATO accession, a trend that persisted into 2023 (Statista, 2023).

South Caucasus as a region of hybrid war in violation of territorial integrity

The nature of activities to counter hybrid threats is strongly affected by the perception of hybrid warfare, since it does not have a watertight definition. Not only are hybrid threats diverse but they are also tailor-made to exploit specific vulnerabilities of specific targets and create ambiguity to hinder swift and effective decision-making in particular regions. Thus, through familiarising itself with its own vulnerabilities, every nation has its own understanding of hybrid threats. Based on the understanding of the environment and the tools at hand, hybrid warfare tactics and strategies are applied in many contexts. The characteristics of modern hybrid threats are generalisations that require nuanced application to different scenarios for a clearer understanding and effective response formulation. In international law and international relations theory, territory is a principal attribute of a state. The protection of inhabited territories is recognized as an instinctive right of all living beings, including humans (Popjanevski, 2017). Modern international law, whose basic principles are reflected in the UN Charter, prohibits the use of military force against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and considers armed aggression as a serious international crime (Sari, 2018).

One significant aspect of hybrid warfare in the South Caucasus region has been the violation of territorial integrity—the encroachment of a state's territory by another state or non-state actor. This violation can occur through direct military aggression, such as the use of force to annex territory or establish de facto control, or through more subtle means, such as supporting separatist movements or sponsoring proxy conflicts. If the violation of territorial integrity is carried out using conventional means, then can how it become a tool in waging hybrid warfare? It is important to note that conflicts, especially those involving violence and human suffering, do not inherently benefit any country or its people. Confrontations between Armenia and Azerbaijan or the separatism in Georgia have resulted in loss of life, displacement, and strained relations in the region. It is not a secret that there are some other countries which have their interests affected by such conflicts, although it does not necessarily mean that they are directly benefitted from them. The involvement or support of external actors in conflicts can vary and their motivations may be driven by geopolitical considerations, economic interests, alliances, or historical factors. However, it is crucial to emphasise that these involvements should be examined with respect to their impact on the region and global stability. Ultimately, the best resolution to conflicts is through peaceful negotiations and diplomatic efforts, ensuring the well-being and security of all parties involved, but which have not yet taken place between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the last 3 years.

In the context of hybrid warfare, violation of territorial integrity can be used as a tool to destabilise any state, weaken its government, and advance the goals of third parties. There are several ways of violating territorial integrity as a tool of hybrid warfare, such as annexation and proxy conflict. In terms of the South Caucasus region, the most blatant form of violating territorial integrity, annexation, which involves the outright occupation of any country or part of it (as in Crimea), does not exist. In this region, proxy conflicts are more prevalent and it is crystal clear that the separatist movements in the region are supported

and encouraged by some other actors that try to undermine the territorial integrity of the target state, creating a sense of instability and weakening the central government's control over its territory.

Any violation of territorial integrity in South Caucasus leads to political instability and regional conflicts. It undermines the peaceful coexistence and relationships between countries and potentially escalates tensions between nations. As a result, the region is divided and it is considerably difficult to establish a unified state. Russia benefits from establishing itself as a power broker or intermediary during these confrontations and pretends to work towards de-escalation, stability, and peaceful resolutions, enhancing its regional reputation and potentially increasing its significance in the region. Arms sales and military alliances (Armenia becoming a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation [CSTO], and Georgia's aspirations to join NATO) often increase during times of confrontation. Countries that produce military equipment or have strong defence industries benefit economically by supplying weapons, technology, or military assistance to one or both sides involved in the conflict.

The most prominent example of territorial integrity violation as a tool of hybrid warfare in the South Caucasus region was the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenian armed forces. Even though Azerbaijan managed to restore its territorial integrity by launching the counter offensive operation in 2020 and its sovereignty by conducting counter insurgency operations in 2023, there is a danger of escalation if an ironclad ceasefire is not established. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and counter insurgency operations were conventional using modern techniques; however, the ongoing confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a tool for some other actors to advance their interests in the region ([Bivainis, 2022](#)).

Another example is the Russia–Georgia conflict in 2008, in which Russia violated Georgia's territorial integrity by invading and occupying the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia supported separatist movements in these regions and provided military assistance to them, using hybrid warfare tactics to undermine the Georgian government's control over its territory. Long before that invasion, [Tsygankov \(2006\)](#) contended that Moscow's claims exercising a form of soft power imperialism in the former Soviet region lacked definitive substantiation. However, Russia's actions in 2008 underscored its willingness to employ hard power at the expense of its international reputation within the post-Soviet sphere.

Frozen or unresolved ethnic and geopolitical conflicts continue to pose primary threats to security and stability in the South Caucasus region. Two out of three countries in the region have faced contravention of international law, and this situation has been manipulated by external powers. The so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," which ended in a 44-day war and resulted in Azerbaijan's victory, was the net result of the Soviet Union's "divide and rule policy." Egregious mistakes were made in politics in 1991, when Azerbaijan regained its independence, which in fact resulted in the loss of the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh" and seven surrounding regions. When Heydar Aliyev came to power, he managed to control the situation, achieved a ceasefire, forestalled the civil war, and managed to avoid a precarious disaster but without finding a peaceful solution to the "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict."

It took Azerbaijan approximately 27 years to prepare to liberate its occupied territories ([Anglim, 2021](#)). It is not a secret that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan was influenced by external actors with discernible biases. Russia has established a military base in Gyumri, Armenia, until 2044, concurrently augmenting its armed forces in the

Caucasus region—allegedly in fear of potential threats from Iran. However, a more plausible explanation lies in Russia's response to a perceived NATO threat and its overarching agenda to assert regional dominance (Blank, 2014). Similar dynamics unfolded in Georgia, albeit through different mechanisms but yielding similar outcomes. The “divide and rule” strategy, which swiftly emerged as a central tenet of the Kremlin's military and diplomatic approach, necessitated real-world testing. To this end, a suitable testing ground was required, and a territory was chosen as an experimental arena. Recognising that all new European Union (EU) members are also NATO members, it became strategically advantageous for the Kremlin to explore these tactics in a country under the eastern partnership umbrella. Unlike the scenarios witnessed in Crimea in 2014 and Donbass in 2015, there was no imperative for the Kremlin to create a new separatist territory in Georgia. The country had already harboured two such entities since 1992: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is more a question of strengthening these separatist trends and pushing the government of Georgia to make a strategic mistake by attacking these de facto states (Lambert, 2017a). Georgia made the expected “mistake” and “justified” Russia's large-scale military intervention, which ended up with the loss of Georgian control over these regions and ushered in the next step for Russia to establish a military base in the separatist regions for cementing its claim to the territory. Former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, recounted a meeting in Tbilisi with then Georgian President Saakashvili before the war broke out: “He's proud and can be impulsive, and we all worried that he might allow Moscow to provoke him to use force. In fact, he himself successfully provoked conflict in another breakaway part of the country, Adjara, and benefited when it had been reintegrated into Georgia through domestic and international pressure. The precedent, we feared, might make him think he could get away with a repeat performance in the territories located closer to Putin's beloved Sochi” (Kucera, 2011).

South Caucasus as an arena of clashing interests of diverse ethnic and religious groups

The South Caucasus region comprises diverse ethnic and religious groups. Violations of territorial integrity exacerbate existing ethno-national tensions and pose a threat to the stability and social fabric of the affected countries. This leads to internal conflicts, terrorism, and radicalisation of certain groups. Azerbaijan and Georgia have experienced it since the very beginning of their independence. To understand the complexity of the situation, it would be useful to reflect on Table 1 that shows the approximate percentage of ethnic groups in the region.

As delineated in the table, the percentage of Armenians residing in Georgia significantly surpasses those settled in Azerbaijan. Does this demographic disparity inherently imply the so-called “independence” in the territory of Georgia? The answer is an absolute “No.” However, it would be feasible if there were no minorities to be manipulated, such as Abkhazians and Ossetians, in Georgia. It remains an open secret that external actors have consistently manipulated these minorities, constituting a primary impediment to regional cohesion and unity. Consequently, discussions surrounding confrontations among various actors are far from straightforward, given that the fate of the region is inextricably intertwined with external forces exerting influence beyond the immediate region. Even though there were four UN resolutions (822, 853, 874, and 884) which demanded immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from the territory of Azerbaijan, these resolutions remained unimplemented for nearly three decades until the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War. While this may appear as a straightforward instance of territorial violation involving two parties, a nuanced analysis reveals a landscape of remarkable complexity.

Table 1. Ethnic groups in the South Caucasus region.

Source: Own research is based on the data from the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples (<https://minorityrights.org/country>).

Ethnic group	Country		
	Armenia (MRG, 2023a)	Azerbaijan (MRG, 2023b)	Georgia (MRG, 2023c)
Armenians	97.9	1.3	4.5
Azerbaijanis		91.6	6.3
Georgians		0.1	83.8
Lezgins		2.0	
Russians	0.4	1.4	0.7
Talysh		1.3	
Avars		0.6	
Tatars		0.3	
Ukrainians		0.2	0.2
Tsakurs		0.1	
Kurds	0.1	0.1	0.1
Tats		0.3	
Jews		0.1	0.1
Udins		0.04	
Yazidis	1.2		0.3
Assyrians	0.1		0.1
Ossetians			1.3
Greeks			0.3
Abkhazians			6.1
Kists			0.2

The deep analysis of the cases proves that even though it was Armenia that occupied the territories, the regional actors, such as Russia and Iran, and actors far beyond the region, such as France and the United States, played the game. Therefore, it becomes a tool for these actors to exploit in advancing their national interests. At the highest political level (prime minister), the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan has been recognised by Armenia ([Armenpress, 2023](#)); so why do other international actors remain dissatisfied? The answer lies in the prioritisation of their own interests over Armenian dividends. It is crucial to recognise that neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan harbours a desire for continued conflict. For example, the Armenian Prime Minister's statement that the Russian peacekeepers leaving Karabakh region should not come to Armenia (Gyumri military base) but go directly to Russia, and the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan's statement that "we will return to Zangezur but not with tanks, with cars." These are telltale signs of future peace in the region. One might claim that Azerbaijan's retaliation and restoration of its territorial integrity accrued benefits for Türkiye. While this assertion holds merit, it is imperative to state that Türkiye's efforts are fundamentally geared towards fostering regional unity and enduring peace. This observation acquires particular significance in the context of Georgia, where state actors instrumentalise non-state actors as instruments of hybrid warfare. This corroborates [Markedonov's \(2017\)](#) hypothesis that Russia is not taking a universal approach to all post-Soviet space. Each situation demands an individual response from Moscow, as it weighs and pursues its own interests. Russia has always recognised the

territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, while it engaged in a strategic alliance with Armenia and helped it throughout the conflict, while it recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and officially denied Georgia's territorial integrity (Markedonov, 2018).

Armenians always refer to the right of self-determination for Karabakh Armenians. It is apparent from the international law that self-determination is a right that belongs to peoples but not to minorities. Armenians had this right and they used it in the early 1990s and established their own country—the Republic of Armenia. Now, they do not have any right to create the second Armenian “republic” in the territories of another country. There are 2 million Armenians in the United States and 2.5 million in Russia. More than 750,000 Armenians live in France (Tahirov *et al.*, 2020). Why don't these people use their “right of self-determination” and create the third, the fourth, etc. Armenian “republics” in these countries? They cannot do it, because this is intolerable, since they are ethnic minorities. However, Armenians tried to do it with less than 100,000 minorities in Azerbaijan's territory (Sterio, 2018). In other words, a group seeking self-determination is one which feels that it has been unjustifiably excluded from the community of states recognised by international law (Batistich, 1995). It is an indisputable fact that Armenians had never been marginalised in Azerbaijan. They even occupied the most prestigious positions not only in Karabakh but also in different regions of the country, including Baku. However, they were exploited by external actors in the political battle. Meanwhile, it is important to touch upon the views of Levon Ter-Petrosyan—an Armenian politician and historian who served as the first president of Armenia (1991–1998) on the “Nagorno-Karabakh problem.” Ter-Petrosyan speaking about the creation of a “system of security guarantees” and the demilitarisation of the Karabakh region, at the beginning of March 1992, proposed the following option: “Full autonomy of Nagorno-Karabakh, lifting its blockade and ensuring the normal life of Nagorno-Karabakh. (...) I think that the status of an autonomous republic within Azerbaijan would completely satisfy all parties, because at the same time Karabakh remains a part of Azerbaijan, the territorial integrity of the republic is preserved, and the people of Karabakh, in turn, have guaranteed livelihoods” (Aliiev, 2018). In 1997 too, Ter-Petrosyan gave a clear answer to his political opponents, who had received populist promises with regard to the Karabakh issue. He warned them of the possible catastrophic consequences for Armenia, including the Armenians of Karabakh: “If we do not agree with what Azerbaijan is now proposing (full autonomy), the strengthened Azerbaijan in future will not offer us that either” (1news.az, 2018; Tahirov *et al.*, 2020; Ter-Petrosyan, 2022). Today, Ter-Petrosyan's rational prediction has already come true (Piriyevev *et al.*, 2023).

Thomas De Waal has drawn attention to the persistent failure of the entities that make up South Caucasus to act as a region. Today, the most obvious sign of the territorial violation is seen in Georgia, because it has lost control over two breakaway regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Smith, 2015). Azerbaijan had the same problem until 2020, when it decided to restore its territorial integrity. Although Azerbaijan maintained its territorial integrity, the continuing lack of diplomatic relations between Erevan and Baku forms the most immediate barrier to regional integration.

Territorial conflicts disrupt trade routes, particularly in the case of transport infrastructure passing through the disputed territories. For instance, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan created opportunities for Russia and Iran to fill the trade void and capture new markets. Economic gains can be achieved by exporting goods and services, acquiring new trade partners or attracting foreign investment. Economic interdependence in the region can be severely affected by such violations, leading to economic downturns and instability. The EU, the United States, China, Russia, and Türkiye are the top five trading partners

of the countries in the region. Iran likewise is trying to increase its regional market share. For Tbilisi, the US factor is extremely significant but the EU and Russia stand in direct opposition to each other. The EU can fund initiatives that support the promotion of European values in the area via the eastern partnership initiative, which was established in 2009. This would mean the loss of control of the Black Sea for Moscow, the existence of a European outpost in the Caucasus region, and the possibility of access to Azerbaijani hydrocarbons for the EU (Sherr, 2017).

Violations of territorial integrity often result in forced displacements, causing a significant humanitarian crisis. The influx of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) can strain the resources and capacities of the affected countries, affecting their national security. Approximately one million people with the status of refugees and IDPs live in Azerbaijan. Some of them are ethnic Azerbaijanis who were forced to leave the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) (200,000 people), including nearly 500,000 people who were forcibly displaced from the previously occupied territories. Now, while the construction of the infrastructure in the liberated territories is moving pretty fast, it will take years for their complete resettlement, which will cost billions of dollars.

The South Caucasus region: A geopolitical arena of clashing interests

As mentioned previously, violations of territorial integrity in the South Caucasus region attract the attention and involvement of external powers. Increased interference of external actors seeking to exploit the conflicts for their own interests further complicates the situation and poses a threat to national security. Some other countries exploit tensions between two nations to advance their own agendas. They align themselves with one side, offering support, mediating, or proposing solutions that are in line with their interests. It increases their influence and secures advantageous agreements with one or both nations. The historical analysis of the processes that took place in the South Caucasus states after the demise of the USSR proves that the “New Great Game” has already started and continues today with different actors, albeit with the same purpose. Regional and global actors, such as Russia, Türkiye, Iran, China and the United States, and leading organisations, such as the EU, NATO, EEU, and CSTO, are the actors involved in this struggle. The United States–EU approach of trying to change the values and norms of the region is perceived as provocative by Moscow. China is engaged economically, refraining itself from associating with political issues. Nonetheless, its potential for the future processes cannot be ignored. Iran is enthusiastic to be represented in regional processes and tries to exclude other external actors, highlighting the 3+3 model. Türkiye does not have as strong a clout as Russia has; however, its presence offsets Iran’s dominance (Caspersen, 2017).

In the context of globalisation, there is no one-size-fits-all model for addressing national challenges in polyethnic states. International documents only set a general direction. Polyethnic states can achieve higher living standards if they ensure comfortable conditions for all ethnic groups, a factor closely related to the state’s economic situation. Every state should become a common home for ethnic, religious, and national minorities living there. However, in the current era, solving problems by creating mono-ethnic semi-states, segregated for each ethnic group and “cleaned” from others, is not feasible. As a rule, administrative divisions do not provide for the distribution of these groups by territory. Therefore, the issue of “historical borders” of ethnos, by itself, only causes the emergence of new centres of conflict.

In the evolving landscape of international relations, the principle of sovereign equality and territorial integrity of states once again demonstrates that the principle of sovereign equality constitutes a foundational element for fostering partnership and constructive mutual relations between countries as well as international stability. This proves the unacceptability of attempts to change borders, whether through peaceful methods or by force (Piriyev *et al.*, 2023).

The South Caucasus region, as previously stated, is a complex region with interwoven relationships in terms of affiliation and governance, security and conflict, trade and energy, and conflict resolution. The current hostilities between the West and Russia also put this region in danger and have an impact on domestic problems. If Georgia progressively integrates into Euro-Atlantic structures, the potential of Russian intervention in Georgia remains present and the threat of manipulating the Armenian minority in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan is still worrisome. It should also be considered that Russia's strategic, economic, and ideological capacities to influence security in post-Soviet countries are immensely stronger than that of Sweden and Finland (until its membership of NATO) (Iskandarov *et al.*, 2023).

To cut a long story short, the western organisations, such as NATO and the EU, are reluctant to accept countries with a question of territorial integrity that is all grist to the mill for Russia and Iran in the case of the South Caucasus region. This helps to explain why, of the six member states of the EU's eastern partnership, only Belarus has no territorial dispute and enjoys cordial relations with Russia (Lambert, 2017b). Russia, therefore, has gained enough leverage by positioning itself to reactivate the conflicts in the region at any time if any of these countries try to contradict Moscow, such as by aspiring to join NATO or the EU. In this scenario, all three countries remain susceptible to conventional wars under different contexts, where other actors will exploit the situation. However, there are still foreign actors who want to sabotage and prevent these developments. Table 2 displays the results derived from analysing these multiple dimensions.

Having included the amount of money spent on the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and counter insurgency operations in 2023, the second dimension of fiscal would swell remarkably. Then, who gained an advantage from this conflict? Of course, other actors capitalised on it and tried to fill the gaps left by the confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For instance, the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia had made the territory of Iran as a transit route more important than ever. Therefore, the establishment of the Zangezur corridor will present chances for the region's nations, increasing mutual confidence and fostering greater regional cooperation. In the end, this will improve economic and trade ties between the West and the East as well as between

Table 2. The estimated impact of the Armenia–Azerbaijani conflict on the parties (modified from Saha *et al.*, 2018).

Category	Effect on Armenia	Effect on Azerbaijan
Fiscal	Large (+++)	Large (+++)
Goods trade	Moderate (++)	Small (+)
Services trade	Small (+)	Insignificant (0)
Energy and water	Electricity: large (+++)	Electricity: moderate (++)
	Gas: moderate (++)	Gas: small (+)
	Water: insignificant (0)	Water: large (+++)
Financial markets and investments	Large (+++)	Large (+++)

the nations in the region. Armenia can benefit from the Zangezur corridor. Otherwise, it will lose a clear opportunity to improve and integrate its overall economy, which in turn increases its dependence on some other actors, such as Russia and Iran ([Gawliczek and Iskandarov, 2023](#)).

Conclusions

The aim of the paper was to examine the violation of territorial integrity as a stage of hybrid warfare, offering an analysis from the perspective of how such violations impact the territorial integrity of a country. The study successfully addressed the research questions and positively confirmed the hypothesis, leading to the following conclusions:

1. A country's territorial integrity is a fundamental aspect of its sovereignty. Any violation of this sovereignty by a foreign entity is seen as a direct challenge to the country's authority and can lead to diplomatic, economic, and military consequences.
2. The violation of territorial integrity compromises a country's border security, allowing unregulated movement of people, goods, and services. This can result in an influx of illegal immigrants, smuggling of contraband, and other criminal activities.
3. The violation of territorial integrity sooner or later leads to other military conflicts, which have severe consequences for national security. This includes loss of life, destruction of property, and long-term political and economic instability. For instance, during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia managed to occupy Azerbaijani territories and devastated all the cities they captured, and 27 years later during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan liberated its territories from Armenian occupation. However, all the cities have to be rebuilt again, which will cost billions of dollars.
4. The violation of territorial integrity disrupts economic activities, leading to loss of revenue, trade, and investment. It has long-term implications for a country's economic growth and development. In conclusion, the violation of territorial integrity poses a significant threat to national security and can have severe political, economic, and military consequences. It is crucial for countries to take measures to protect their territorial integrity and prevent any unauthorised entry or occupation of their territory. These are the most visible aspects of the violation of territorial integrity. When it becomes a tool for the third, fourth, etc. parties, the restoration of territorial integrity becomes a formidable challenge (for Azerbaijan, it took 27 years) or an intractable problem with no end in sight (in Georgia's case) and an ironclad peace deal between the parties seems to be a pipe dream. Overall, violation of territorial integrity allows the actors beyond the region to exert long-term control, foster internal divisions, weaken institutions, and create conditions of instability that serve their strategic interests. Georgia plays an important role as a transit artery of the South Caucasus region. Unblocking communication may have an impact on this. Russia controls the Armenia–Azerbaijan land route but is not a significant power in the region. After three decades of supporting the Azerbaijani army, Türkiye has become the second player in the region. Additionally, it opened transit to Azerbaijan and Central Asia through Meghri, without ending diplomatic relations with Armenia. Iran borders Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh, but Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation is contrary to its interests and may limit Iran's influence in the South Caucasus region ([Shaffer, 2017](#)). Brussels is expanding its influence through economic and humanitarian aid to Armenia, including Nagorno-Karabakh, under the “EU4 Regions” programme. The United States has provided humanitarian, economic, and military financing to Armenia and Azerbaijan, including through its naval presence in the Caspian Sea in the fight against drugs. The United States is trying to limit Russia's role in the region ([Petrosyan, 2021](#)).

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