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Decoding Turkish Foreign Policy in Abkhazia (2008-2022)

A Theory-Testing Process Tracing Approach to Understanding Turkish Actions in Georgia's Contested  
Break-Away Region

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## **Authorship Declaration:**

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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This paper is dedicated to my loving and supportive wife Brynn. This paper would not have been possible without her constant support and encouragement throughout the process.

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, the foreign policy of Türkiye towards its near-abroad regions, consisting of the Caucuses, Black Sea, Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean, has taken on remarkably assertive characteristics. The interventionist turn has resulted in engagements and disputes with numerous neighbouring states, enmeshing Türkiye in conflicts with Libya (Harchaoui, 2020), Greece (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.), Nagorno-Karabakh (Yildiz, 2021), and Syria (Al-hilu, 2021) to name a few. While these conflagrations have absorbed a majority of scholarly attention in recent decades, Türkiye's increasing levels of engagement with the de facto state of Abkhazia has gone understudied and relatively misunderstood by regional scholars and experts alike. This has resulted in a gap in the scholarly record on why Türkiye behaves the way it does towards Abkhazia. The goal of this paper is to bridge the gap in scholarly knowledge on Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia. By applying a wide-angle hybrid theoretical lens, incorporating the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory & the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs, I examine key events transpiring between Türkiye and Abkhazia from 2008-2022. I apply Theory-Testing Process Tracing, alongside rigorous document analysis in an attempt to better parse out the motivations and rationales surrounding Türkiye's foreign policy towards this disputed region. The resulting causal mechanisms, tailor-made to map out each of the four events examined in this paper, reveal a partial explanatory match of my chosen theoretical lens and the behaviours exhibited by Türkiye in its dealings with Abkhazia. This forms a solid foundation from which to argue that Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia is driven largely by entrepreneurial and self-interested policies of extraction and influence-growing in Abkhazia.

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# Introduction

For the past three decades, the Republic of Türkiye has pursued an active and multifaceted foreign policy agenda in its near-abroad regions including in the Caucuses and Black Sea (hereafter the BSR) region. As a rising middle-power intent on expanding its footprint and influence in neighbouring states, Türkiye's engagement in these strategic regions comes as no surprise. Its actions have won Türkiye friends, strategic economic assets, and political influence in territories once dominated by the now-defunct USSR. Türkiye's advancement of its own interests, however, has also created new tensions in the regions and contradictions in its policies. One such example, drawing the attention of scholars, regional experts, government officials, and close allies alike, has been Türkiye's increasingly complex engagement with the de facto state of Abkhazia.

With the implicit approval of Russia, Abkhazia's long-time patron state, and stringent disapproval of Georgia, Türkiye has been covertly expanding economic, political, and cultural linkages with the de facto government of Abkhazia over the past three decades (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). While Türkiye is ostensibly a strong ally of the Georgian government and openly supports their claims for territorial integrity, its engagement with the breakaway region of Abkhazia has become a major sticking point in an otherwise cooperative bilateral relationship. This problematic disconnect has even resulted in diplomatic conflagrations and international incidents over the past several decades. Türkiye has employed a complex strategy during this period. This involves a careful rhetorical balancing act between officially adhering to Georgia's diplomatic red-line of recognizing Georgian sovereignty over the region of Abkhazia while simultaneously pursuing policies that flaunt this recognition in practice. This sometimes-cooperative and sometimes-undermining stance has complicated Turkish-Georgian relations. This leads to the question: What drives Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia?

Türkiye's policies in the region are further augmented by its rising international status as a recognized middle-power nation. According to scholars such as Jordaan (2003) as well as

Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1994), Türkiye is widely thought of as an ascendant middle power on the international stage, distinguished as such by its internationalism and robust foreign policy agenda. Its rising status has made its behaviour towards various conflict zones in the region all the more concerning to neighbouring states. Yet, previous attempts by scholars and regional experts to answer why Türkiye behaves the way it does in the BSR have yielded no practical consensus on the matter. Furthermore, their explanations for Turkish behaviour have generally been piecemeal in nature. Attempting to explain the motivations and factors influencing Türkiye's behaviour during specific events or crises while largely avoiding big-picture questions of what drives Türkiye to behave the way it does towards Abkhazia overall. While I cover these scholarly arguments in the following sections, the most commonly cited explanations for Türkiye's engagement with the region are attributed to:

1. Türkiye's sizable Abkhaz diaspora as the primary impetus for its engagement with the region,
2. Türkiye as a bridge-builder, acting to de-isolate the region and promote conflict de-escalation,
3. Türkiye as a self-interested world power, pursuing purely self-enriching geopolitical gains through engagement with the region.

While all of these motives have partial explanatory power when examining individual segments of Türkiye's interactions with Abkhazia, taken separately, each fails to explain the Turkish-Abkhaz engagement in full. To bridge this scholarly gap in knowledge, and in search of an approach that would offer a more comprehensive explanation, I set out to test a new theoretical lens in combination with a deep analysis of Türkiye's historical interactions with Abkhazia and Georgia to answer the question: **To what extent does the combined Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory & the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs explain Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia between 2008-2022?**

To answer this, I analyse Türkiye's unofficial policies on foreign direct investment, trade, diplomatic exchanges, and bilateral ties in relation to Abkhazia between 2008-2022. To narrow my focus, I analyse events encompassing three distinct aspects of Turkish and Abkhazian

relations while applying the dual-sided theoretical framework of Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory in combination with The Two-good Theory of Foreign Policy. This dual theoretical lens has never been applied to study the complexities of the Turkish-Abkhazia relationship, but both approaches have previously been utilised in scholarly works examining Turkish foreign policy more generally. By utilising Document Analysis and Theory-Testing Process Tracing, I use this theoretical framework to individually examine (1) Economic events, (2) Political events, and (3) Cultural events between Türkiye and Abkhazia between 2008-2022. Each of the events examined has been selected based on the impact (or importance) to the Turkish-Georgia and Turkish-Abkhazian relationship as well as the visibility and documentary depth of each event. This ensures my Theory-Testing Process Tracing methodology, which relies on robust documentation in order to conduct rigorous research, will remain of the highest quality. Ultimately, I have examined two economic events, one political event, and one cultural event to create detailed causal mechanisms to trace the sequence of each event, their outcomes, and the fit of my chosen hybrid theoretical lens for explaining Turkish engagement with Abkhazia.

### Turkish-Abkhaz Relations: Overview and Contradiction

Before proceeding to the main sections of this paper, it is crucial to provide a short overview of Turkish-Abkhaz engagement and elaborate on why this engagement could be seen as a contradiction in Turkish foreign policy. In the section after this, I follow this exploration of the disconnect between Türkiye's words and actions with an overview of the different approaches put forth in academic literature to explain Turkish-Abkhaz relations and related policies towards Georgia. Analysing every explanation and arguing why each, on its own, falls short of explaining the widening and deepening of Turkish-Abkhaz relations between 2008-2022. The aim of this exploration is to demonstrate that in light of the shortcomings of these narrower explanations, there is merit in testing alternative approaches that would be better suited to tackle the contradiction which lies at the heart of Turkish-Abkhaz relations and explain Türkiye's foreign policy in the region. Towards this end, I propose fusing two little-known theories known as the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory (Lemke, 2002) and The Two-good Theory of Foreign Policy (Morgan & Palmer, 1997) to form a new hybrid theory.

## The Contradiction of Turkish Foreign Policy

Since the conclusion of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Türkiye has systematically expanded economic, political, and cultural ties with Abkhazia to the dismay of Georgia, resulting in several high-profile international incidents over the years between the otherwise amicable allies (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). A majority of these incidents have emerged as a direct result of Türkiye disregarding Georgian laws outlining rules of engagement with its breakaway territories. These laws, laid out in the 2010 “State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation” document (Government of Georgia, 2010, Jan. 27), assert Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia and outline strict caveats regarding what kinds of international interactions with the territory are deemed acceptable.

Officially, Türkiye recognises Georgia’s territorial integrity and their territorial rights over Abkhazia. Türkiye also continues to claim that its actions are in line with core tenets of Georgia’s laws and policies towards its break-away region (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.<sub>a</sub>). A position that has been reiterated in various meetings and settings over the years. Furthermore, Türkiye’s official government line still adheres to the Commonwealth of Independent States’ 1996 economic embargo against Abkhazia (Zabanova 2016, as cited in Blakkisrud et al., 2021). Yet, Türkiye’s actual behaviour contradicts its proclaimed adherence to Georgian wishes (Agenda.ge, 2014, May 13), engaging in all manner of activities with Abkhazia that breach Georgian policies and laws. In other words, Türkiye’s formal statements regarding its position on Georgian policies do not align with its actions in the region. This begs the question: What explains Türkiye’s engagement with Abkhazia? Before addressing the potential theoretical lens which might be used to answer this question, an overview of the current scholarly arguments regarding this issue is necessary. In the following section, I cover some of the most prevalent scholarly arguments for why Türkiye behaves the way it does in Abkhazia and discuss their shortcomings.

# Literature Review

In the following section, I highlight the most prominent scholarly explanations for Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia and related policies towards Georgia. I then seek to highlight the current gap in scholarly understanding on the matter and reveal how the current understanding of Türkiye's relations with Georgia and Abkhazia is piecemeal, falling short of a comprehensive explanation for Türkiye's overall foreign policy strategy in the region.

## Türkiye's Abkhaz Diaspora

One of the most prevalent explanations for Turkish engagement with Abkhazia in the scholarly literature has been the influence of politically powerful Türkiye-based Abkhaz diaspora groups on Turkish foreign policy in the region. Authors and experts such as Punsmann (2009), Clayton (2014), Weiss & Zabanova (2016), Melikyan (interviewed in Avanesyan, 2014), and Eissler (2013) have repeatedly cited this perspective either directly or alluded to the outsized role that well-organised and politically powerful Abkhaz diaspora groups have in shaping Türkiye's relations with Abkhazia. Other authors, such as Kapanadze (2014), point to the influence of these groups in guiding Turkish policy but have refrained from claiming it as a primary factor shaping Türkiye's regional policies. The core of these scholars' explanations is that groups such as the Caucasus-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee (*Kafkas-Abhazya Dayanışma Komitesi* in Turkish, or KADK), Federation of Abkhazian Cultural Centres, and the Abkhaz Federation have gained outsized influence in Türkiye. Their widely-documented lobbying efforts for increasing societal, economic, and political ties with Abkhazia is the cornerstone of these groups' efforts. While Turkish recognition of Abkhazian independence is the ultimate goal of these groups, scholars argue their clear-eyed understanding of political realities have resulted in agitation for the reopening of direct transit routes between Abkhazia and Türkiye as an achievable secondary goal (Punnsman, 2009). These routes previously existed in the 1990s but were unilaterally closed by Türkiye following the government's official support of Georgian territorial integrity over the region in 1996 (Eissler, 2013). Increased connectivity has been seen as a bellwether for further

Turkish-Abkhazian engagement and diaspora groups. In addition, numerous Abkhazian officials have repeatedly pushed the Turkish government to negotiate with Georgia on reopening the routes (Eissler, 2013). Additionally, Turkish diaspora organisations have unilaterally engaged with Abkhazian government officials, building cultural and political connections to the region that technically exist outside of Turkish government's official channels of communication (Abkaz World, 2022, Jan. 22). This continuous pressure that diaspora organisations exert on the Turkish government (along with nonofficial linkages to the Abkhaz government) has led some scholars (e.g. Punsmann, 2014) to suggest that Türkiye's foreign policy is forced to contort to the actions of these powerful interest groups, resulting in a passive or reactive response to foreign policy in the region rather than a concerted state-led policy. Other experts, such as Melikyan (interviewed in Avanesyan, 2014), have argued that the alignment between Abkhazian government officials and Turkish diaspora organisations makes the diaspora proportionally more important on influencing the trajectory of Abkhazian foreign policy, not that of Türkiye's.

### Shortcomings of the Diaspora Explanation

While it is undeniable that Türkiye's diaspora groups hold great influence over the trajectory of the Turkish-Abkhaz relationship, it is not a sufficiently cohesive explanation to fully explain the nature of Türkiye's involvement in the region. The explanation has several pitfalls, the first of which being Türkiye's consistent official adherence to Georgia's territorial integrity and only cursory official efforts, in the form of negotiations between Türkiye and Georgia, to reopen direct transit routes between Abkhazia and Türkiye (Punsmann, 2009). Kapanadze (2014) acknowledges as much, noting that these efforts have fizzled over the years due to a purported lack of political will to reach a workable agreement. This is plausibly an indication of Türkiye's window-dressing response to the diaspora's political wishes. Türkiye may be nodding to their influence, which cannot be ignored. At the same time, these groups are not unilaterally steering Turkish foreign policy towards Abkhazia or influencing concrete changes that the state does not desire (Kapanadze, 2014). In this way, the Turkish diaspora's role in Turkish foreign policy is that of an influential and well organised force that can push the Turkish government to explore certain avenues. Yet, it has no power to enforce the realisation of policy changes. This is

evidenced by the legally unchanged nature of Turkish-Abkhaz relationship over the past three decades despite immense lobbying efforts on behalf of diaspora organisations.

A second point that undermines the diaspora groups' "guiding hand" explanation is the arguably self-interested nature of Turkish foreign policy towards Abkhazia and Georgia, noted by authors and regional experts such as Rukhadze (2015) and Kapanadze (2014). According to Aras & Akpınar (2011), the maintenance of robust official relations with Georgia is paramount to maintaining Türkiye's vast economic interests regarding energy transit routes in the BSR and Caucuses. These interests rely heavily on Georgian ports to export energy to EU markets, and thus keeping Georgia on-side has been a foundation of Türkiye's foreign policy calculus in the region. The lengths to which Türkiye goes to assuage Georgian fears is evidenced by fast reactions to strong Georgian *démarches* on several instances, such as the cancelled visa of ex-Abkhaz president Sergey Bagapsh in 2007 (Kapanadze, 2014) and the closing of an Abkhaz polling station in Istanbul in 2014 (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). The primacy of maintaining Georgian-Turkish relations forms the heart of Türkiye's policy in the region. Turkish engagement with Abkhazia largely comes second and has pursued economic and political connections to the region opportunistically. Türkiye has engaged and increased connections quietly and only when it is thought that such actions will not fundamentally endanger the overall relationship with Georgia. This opportunistic engagement has resulted in highly selective economic and political ties with the breakaway territory. Numerous Abkhazian officials have described Türkiye's connections as an exploitative "buy-sell" relationship (Clayton, 2014) where Türkiye simply takes advantage of its diaspora's connections to the region to purchase cheap commodities, while eschewing substantial investment in the region that is desperately desired. All the while, Türkiye has sidestepped Abkhazian efforts to achieve political recognition by Türkiye (Clayton, 2014). From this perspective, the wishes of the Turkish Abkhazian diaspora are minimised and come third after the state's main interests in maintaining strong ties with Georgia and exploiting economic and political benefits from low-level engagement with Abkhazia.

## Integration and Conflict De-escalation Explanation

Another common explanation presented by Warhola, (interviewed in Avanesyan, 2014), Aras & Akpınar (2011), and Kapanadze (2014) regarding Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia is that Türkiye is merely adhering to its official foreign policy with its neighbours abroad, seeking to promote greater integration of Abkhazia with the wider region and de-escalate a long unsolved conflict. This understanding fundamentally views Türkiye's interactions with the region as a direct offshoot of its post 2000s foreign policy of unrestricted engagement, both economically and politically, with neighbouring states regardless of pre-existing political issues concerning the regions. According to Aras & Akpınar (2011), it is primarily a policy geared at bridge building in much the same way as Türkiye engaged with Azerbaijan and Georgia to bring to fruition highly strategic and complex energy transit projects. Those authors argue that it is the embodiment of Türkiye's ruling AK party's foreign policy which stresses economic integration, high-level political dialogue, and incorporation of all parties' views in order to create a prosperous and safe security environment in the BSR. Some authors, such as Warhola (interviewed in Avanesyan, 2014), view Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia primarily as a vector to bring political stability to the historically conflict-ridden region. This strategy, he argues, doubly benefits Türkiye and the wider region by eventually creating and sustaining the conditions for continued economic growth. Both Aras & Akpınar (2011) and Kapanadze (2014) build upon this assumption by arguing that Türkiye is playing a long-game aimed at de-isolating the region in an attempt to eventually mediate a lasting peace between Abkhazia and Georgia. This understanding of Turkish engagement in the region is primarily an altruistic reading of Türkiye's complex and, at times, highly problematic balancing act in the region. It closely mirrors Türkiye's official explanations of its foreign policy in its near abroad, which places an emphasis on "protect[ing] Türkiye's interests in a volatile regional and global environment, while also shaping conditions for sustainable peace and development in our neighbourhood and beyond" (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.b, p. 1). Türkiye terms its approach as an "Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy", which aims to make Türkiye a bridge builder in its bordering regions.

## Shortcomings of Integration and Conflict De-escalation Explanation

While this bridge-builder explanation has the potential to partially explain Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia, it fundamentally falls short of offering a comprehensive understanding of Türkiye's multifaceted interactions with both Abkhazia and Georgia. Fundamentally, it contradicts other stated elements of Türkiye's official foreign policy doctrine, which, as of 2004, placed a primary emphasis on "Zero Problems with the Neighbours" (Özcan, 2012). This Zero Problems policy forms one of the main pillars in Türkiye's current foreign policy, which Özcan (2012) argues reflects Türkiye's holistic ideological propensity to develop cultural and historical ties with Türkiye's Middle Eastern neighbours and sustain cooperation with all neighbouring states. While it could be argued that this policy is guiding Türkiye's decision on engagement with Abkhazia, it profoundly endangers the Zero Problems approach towards Georgia, which has been fundamentally shaken by Türkiye's unilateral and secretive ties to the breakaway region. This contradiction has led to what Kapanadze (2014) claims are increasingly distrustful views of Georgian officials towards Türkiye's interactions with Abkhazia and has created rifts that endanger the strategic relationship between the two neighbouring states. Additionally, Türkiye has shown little political will on negotiating concrete agreements with Georgia to open Abkhazia up to greater interaction with surrounding regions. While high-level bilateral negotiations have been held in the past, no agreements have been implemented. Furthermore, scholars such as Kapanadze (2014) have cited a lack of political will on the Turkish side to reach new agreements regarding Abkhazia as a primary reason for the negotiation's failures. These contradictions suggest that while Türkiye's stated aims of facilitating integration and conflict-de-escalation in the region may be partially true, they are not the guiding principles behind its actions in the region.

## Turkish Self-Interest Understanding

A last commonly cited rationale for Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia has been the self-interested Turkish foreign policy as the primary reason for why Türkiye engages with Abkhazia. In this explanation, scholars such as Rukhadze (2015) and Kapanadze (2014) argue

that Turkish foreign policy towards the BSR is a carefully choreographed tightrope walk, balancing Turkish policy between conflicting Abkhazian and Georgian interest in order to extract as much economic, political, cultural influence, and pay-outs as possible. This view is a highly self-interested reading of Turkish actions in which the sole goal is increasing Turkish leverage over Abkhazia and Georgia, while maintaining unblemished ties with both “states”. Kapanadze (2014) has evidenced this approach by highlighting the Turkish dual-sided political blitz with Georgia and Abkhazia. On the one hand, Türkiye seeks greater political engagement with Abkhaz authorities in an attempt to grant Türkiye a bigger role in conflict resolution in the region (i.e. increase political influence), while simultaneously reacting to Georgian objections with political assuagements in an attempt to keep Georgia on side (Kapanadze, 2014). This dynamic bleeds into the economic sphere as well, with Türkiye steadily increasing direct and indirect economic ties and trade levels within Abkhazia, while swiftly responding, and finding grey-zone workarounds, to Georgian protests on the matter (International Crisis Group, 2018). Rukhadze (2015) argues that this form of Turkish engagement boils down to Türkiye seeking “easy and fast profit” from its relations with Abkhazia. Minimising the role of other potential domestic, and foreign policy factors that could play into Tukey’s calculus regarding its engagement with Abkhazia.

### Shortcomings of Self Interest Explanation

While Türkiye’s delicate and contradictory balancing act in Georgia and Abkhazia surely encompasses aspects of political, economic, and social self-interest, the boiling down of the complex problem to such factors fails to take into account other domestic and regional concerns of Türkiye. Principally, it fails to account for the role of the powerful Abkhaz diaspora in influencing Turkish decision making on its relations with the region. It similarly discounts the powerful incentive that Türkiye has to uphold its paramount strategic relationship with Georgia, as such efforts at extraction harm its interests in that realm. Thus, the simplification of Turkish actions in the region to being that of purely self-interest also do not adequately explain the complex nature of the relationships.

## Falling Short

While all the scholarly explanations previously outlined have relevance in explaining Türkiye's interactions with Abkhazia and Georgia, they all fall short in sufficiently explaining the panorama of Turkish actions in the region. The fundamental issue at the heart of these scholarly explanations is their specific scope for examining individual segments, or events, concerning Türkiye's actions in the region. These localised explanations, however, do not hold up when applied at a macro level to encompass the broad range of Turkish activity in the region. They fundamentally fail to answer the "why" and "how" questions of Turkish behaviour in the region. This has left the field of scholarly literature on the matter fractured and only well equipped to partially explain Turkish engagement with Abkhazia. With the goal of bridging this segmented understanding of Turkish foreign policy in the region, I lay out a new hybrid theoretical lens in the next section of this paper. It is my hope that this new hybrid theoretical lens, never before applied to the study of Turkish-Abkhaz relations, will offer new insights into the behaviour of Türkiye in the region.

## Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I introduce the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory (Lemke, 2002) and the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Policy (Morgan & Palmer, 1997). I start by explaining their individual strengths, weaknesses, and past uses in scholarly works, and then show how they are used to form a new hybrid theory for this paper. Both theories have been used individually to conceptualise the foreign policies of middle power states in the past. I argue that the two theories are complementary and can thus be combined in an effort to better understand Turkish actions in Abkhazia. The following sections provide an overview of how these theories function and provide an explanation as to why I think they are uniquely positioned to provide new insights into Türkiye's foreign policy towards Abkhazia.

## Power Transition Theory

The Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory (Tammen, Kugler, & Lemke, 2017) is a recently developed offshoot of a well-known social science theory — Power Transition Theory — which was originally proposed by social scientist A.F.K. Organski in 1958 (Organski, 1958). At its heart, the original Power Transition Theory attempted to explain the interactions of superpowers in the international system. Its primary focus was to explain fundamental shifts in global power through examining connections between the increased likelihood of war and conflict amongst world powers when rising powers challenge the hegemony of an incumbent superpower. In his explanation of shifting international power dynamics, Organski created a model that segregated the international world order into layers of states with different power dynamics and agency on the international stage. This subdivided model ranges from colonies and small powers at the bottom of the international world order (with greater degrees of dissatisfaction with the status quo of the world order) to a grouping of great powers and a single dominant nation at the top of the power pyramid. In the middle of the model are middle powers, with increasing power on the world stage and incentives to shift the international world order in their favour. While the original Power Transition Theory only contended with the interactions between the dominant nation and the great powers section of this model, the offshoot Multiple Hierarchy Model, proposed by Douglas Lemke in his doctoral dissertation (1993) and developed further in subsequent works (2002), addresses the foreign policies, incentives, and behaviours of middle power nations specifically.

In his theoretical offshoot, Lemke (2002) argues that middle powers in the international community behave both similarly to great powers in the localised regions which they dominate and differently on the international stage in regard to their foreign affairs and policies. Lemke argues that middle powers have both the ability and agency to shift regional status quos in their favour through employing activist foreign policies. Importantly, Lemke's model addresses the key factor of middle-power dissatisfaction with regional and international status quos. His theory's model places great importance on the dissatisfaction that most middle-power states profess to have for the international and regional orders they reside within. This dissatisfaction is ascribed to the relative inability of such small-to-middle power states to advocate for

international and regional orders that represent their interests. As states increase in power, however, they benefit from an increased ability to implement change on these systems. His theory, however, does not address the specific ways in which middle-powers contest these unfavourable settings. Instead his theory goes on to address regional dynamics which result in conflicts erupting between incumbent regional powers and rising middle powers, drawing parallels to the clashes which characterise great power rivalry discussed in the original Power Transition Theory. These ideas and theoretical concepts put forward by Lemke have been applied to similar subjects to the ones covered in this paper. The most prominent example is Güneylioglu's (2017) analysis of conflicts in the South Caucasus. While the theory overall remains less well established than the original Power Transition Theory, it provides a robust theoretical approach from which to build a more complex hybrid theoretical lens.

### Grafted Theoretical Lens: Multiple Hierarchy Model & the Two-Goods Theory

One benefit of the Multiple Hierarchy theory is its ability to provide contextual background regarding middle-power behaviour on the international stage. At its core, Lemke's theory provides an answer to "why" rising middle powers pursue activist foreign policies on the international stage: they emulate great powers and aim to create a positive spiral (meaning that the more they are able to assert themselves, the more they gain further power and prominence to become even more assertive). They are also propelled by a wish to suppress the rise of localised challengers, or in the case with modern-day Türkiye, to forcibly alter a regional status quo that does not sufficiently represent their interests and their perceived status. The major drawback to the theory on its own, however, is its relative lack of explanatory prowess regarding "how" middle-powers actually behave when pursuing this form of foreign policy. The Multiple Hierarchy Model provides far more behavioural predictions regarding middle-power competition on a regional scale and interstate conflict than it does on middle power status quo remodelling. Despite these shortcomings, the Multiple Hierarchy model's "why" answer serves as a strong theoretical scaffolding with which to build a more complex model that addresses this paper's specific concerns. Toward the goal of crafting a theory that provides both the "why" answer to middle-power's foreign policy choices and the "how" answer regarding middle-power's

behaviour, I have grafted the core principles of Morgan & Palmer's Two-Good Theory of Foreign Affairs (Morgan and Palmer, 1997) onto Lemke's Multiple Hierarchy Model.

The Two-Good Theory is an entirely compatible theory that seeks to explain the driving goals that middle power nations seek out when adopting foreign policies, as well as, how such goals are achieved in practice. It is a fundamentally behaviour-oriented theory in which the authors argue that "states are motivated by two types of concerns in foreign policy: concerns about preserving what they already enjoy (security), and concerns about improving their situation by changing international interactions (proaction)" (Lemke, 2002, p. 61). The authors argue that incumbent middle power states, such as Türkiye, which are increasing in power will almost always seek out proactive benefits from their rising stature (Morgan & Palmer, 1997). That is to say, increasingly powerful middle powers will seek to entrepreneurially benefit themselves by expanding their influence in their localised region through exploiting conflicts, territorial disputes, or diplomatic openings in order to gain increased resources, influence, and stature. Morgan and Palmer state that while "proaction seek[ing] states have a range of... policy options available" to secure these benefits, they will most often choose conflict initiation as a preferred method of achieving proaction (Morgan & Palmer, 1997, p. 234). Rising middle powers that have only just begun their ascent, however, will seek out security benefits, focusing instead on basic necessities such as strengthening state control at home, territorial integrity, and general domestic concerns. Morgan and Palmer argue that these weaker security-oriented states are far more likely to "respond forcefully to a challenge issued against them...[potentially escalating] dispute[s] initiated against them" in order to protect what security they already enjoy from the preexisting status quo (Morgan & Palmer, 1997, p. 234). In the case of this paper, I am testing if Türkiye's behaviour mirrors that of a typical proaction-seeking state, according to Morgan and Palmer's behavioural predictions. An answer to this question is provided through behavioural observations of Türkiye during key events examined in this paper. If Türkiye is consistently shown to initiate conflicts or disputes with the purpose of overturning regional status quos to better represent their interests, the actions may be considered in-line with the behavioural predictions of the theory.

Taken as a whole, this combined theoretical approach amounts to an assertion that incumbent middle powers, with rising degrees of power at their disposal, will initiate all manners of disruptive and revisionist foreign policy agendas towards the aim of benefiting themselves economically, politically, and militarily in their regional backyard. It is a fundamentally Realist assumption that states behave in their own best interest, increasing their interventionist foreign policy agendas in tandem with rising power. Meanwhile, states only just increasing in power will seek to prevent changes to the status quo in order to preserve scarce security benefits provided by preexisting status quos. Overall, these two-goods of proaction and security, in Morgan and Palmer's theory, fill gaps in the logic of Lemke's Multiple Hierarchy Model by providing an answer to "how" middle-powers behave when seeking changes to an established regional status quo.

Unlike the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory, Morgan & Palmer's theory has been applied more readily in scholarly works. A prominent example of The Two-Good Theory of Foreign Policy in international relations literature includes Morgan & Palmer's (1999) conceptualisation of Chinese foreign policy in a changing era. Other works such as Machin and Morgan's (2012) impact analysis of US troop deployments on the foreign policies of foreign states, aims to use the theory to explain the complex foreign policy initiatives of states with varying degrees of autonomy and security assurances. Interestingly, the theory has even been used in a conceptual paper examining the pros and cons of utilising Organski's original Power Transition Theory over that of the Two-Good Theory. Palmer and Morgan's (2007) article examines the key strengths and differences between these two theories, highlighting theoretical divergences that are not present in Lemke's variation of the theory employed in this paper. It also discusses the compatibility of the two theoretical lenses. The importance of that paper for our ends is that it highlights previous scholarly efforts to experiment with and conjoin the two theories together. Revealing an inherently compatible nature of both theories (assuming theoretical tweaks are made such as those present in Lemke's Multiple Hierarchy variation). In another article, the Two-Goods Theory has even been used to examine Türkiye's international behaviour in Hatipoglu & Palmer's (2016) piece examining the changing nature of Turkish foreign policy. In that article's examination, the authors focused on applying the Two-goods Theory to explain the "increased [recent] activism [of Türkiye which] contrasts starkly with

Turkey's characteristically traditional status quo orientation evinced during the Cold War" (Hatipoglu & Palmer, 2016). Revealing a strong use case for applying the theory to Turkish foreign policy more broadly. In that article, however, the use of The Two-Goods Theory was applied to a general examination of Turkish foreign policy overall. Thus, my paper's use of the theory differ in that it incorporates a hybrid theoretical lens, including both the Multiple Hierarchy Model and the Two-Goods theory, as well as the specific scope of my paper. This paper seeks to test the hybrid theory's applicable fit for explaining Turkish foreign policy towards Abkhazia in particular. Setting this paper's findings apart from similar scholarly works of the past.

While the Two-Goods Theory promises an important window into the "how" of middle-power foreign policy projection, it does have some limitations. The authors themselves state that the theory "does not take into account the preferences of the [state] actors" (Morgan & Palmer, 1997, p. 231). This means that it is possible to observe states behaving in entirely contradictory manners to the theory's expected behavioural predictions. This is because the theory does not take into account domestic factors such as politics or leadership styles that often impact the foreign policy choices of states in unpredictable ways. Thus, the theory is primarily concerned with "the effect of power on states' views towards security and proaction" (Morgan & Palmer, 1997, p. 231) while seeking to analyse and predict the foreign policies of states predominantly based on their rising or falling power statuses. This theoretical blindspot, however, is partially addressed by the fusing of the theory with the Multiple Hierarchy model. Which provides a "why" answer to the question of middle-power behaviour, arguing that such states behave the way they do because they seek changes to be made in an unsatisfactory international and regional power system. This is a theoretical assumption that this paper embraces. Türkiye's own foreign policy documents provide documentary evidence for this "dissatisfied" middle power assumption in their revisionist policy themes (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.b). The details of which are discussed at greater length in the "Background on Turkish Foreign Policy" section of this paper.

Overall, the strength of utilising this grafted theoretical approach, as opposed to the segmented answers proffered in the previous literature review section, is that it offers a "why" as well as a

"how" answer to the questions surrounding the policies and behaviours of rising middle powers on the international stage. In short, this theoretical lens provides a wide-angle answer to why states such as Türkiye seek change in their regional backyards and how they can be expected to behave when pursuing such a foreign policy. This potentially provides a more complete understanding of Turkish behaviour in Abkhazia than has previously been provided by scholarly answers up to this point.

To better qualify this grafted theoretical approach as applicable to Türkiye's status and behaviour, however, it is necessary to briefly outline Türkiye's position on the world stage. Based on the principles previously outlined and Morgan & Palmer's classifications of nascent middle powers vs ascendant middle powers, which differentiates the former from the latter as being wracked by domestic instability and low-levels of security, Türkiye comfortably sits in the category of an ascendant middle power that enjoys reasonably-high pre-existing levels of security. Türkiye's widely recognized classification as a middle-power state is bolstered by both its own self-depiction as an engaged regional actor (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.b), and assertions of scholars such as Jordaan (2003) and Süssler (2019) who label Türkiye as an undisputed middle power nation. This scholarly consensus, regarding Türkiye's place as a middle-power nation goes back even further to the post-Cold War era. Scholars in the 1990s, such as Müftüler and Yüksel, (1997) presented the case for Türkiye's role as a middle-power state. All of this amounts to a generalised consensus that Türkiye is both a self-described, and externally regarded, middle-power nation whose long-term status as such a power remains undisputed by a majority of scholars. Its ascendant middle-power status, according to Morgan & Palmer, means that Türkiye can be expected to seek proactive benefits in its regional foreign policy dealings.

Before examining the explanatory fit of my hybrid social science theory when applied to Turkish engagement with Abkhazia, however, it is necessary to discuss the methodological tools that I plan to employ in my paper's research. The next section will detail my paper's hybrid methodological approach, relying on Theory-Testing Process Tracing and Document Analysis.

# Methodological Approach

In the following sections, I outline my paper's methodological approaches and provide deep background into the strengths, shortcomings, and practical uses of my chosen methodologies. First, I outline the case study credentials of this paper. Then, I provide a thorough overview of this paper's primary methodological tool: Process Tracing and, more specifically, Theory-Testing Process Tracing. Lastly, I will describe my supplemental use of Document Analysis and discuss the ways in which these two methods are well-suited to reinforce one another for the purposes of this paper's research.

## Single Case-Study Testing a Theory

My thesis is a qualitative single case-study analysis of Turkish-Abkhazian relations over the period of 2008-2022. In absence of a unified scholarly consensus, in both theoretical and explanatory terms, regarding why Türkiye behaves the way it does towards Abkhazia, I am attempting to bridge the gap in scholarly understanding by applying the combined theoretical lens of the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory and the Two-good Theory of Foreign Policy to the decades-long debate on Turkish engagement with the region. Due to the fundamentally theory-testing basis of this thesis, I have opted to employ a dual-sided methodological approach that enables me to both (1) analyse a narrative arc of events taking place over the period overlaid with the theoretical lenses previously outlined and (2) identify primary source documentation explaining motivating factors of the actors concerned.

The primary methodological strategies that I employ in my analysis of the Turkish-Abkhaz relationship will be the qualitative tools of Document Analysis and Process Tracing. In terms of Document Analysis, I primarily rely on English language versions of Turkish, Georgian, and Abkhazian governmental documents to analyse each state's positions on foreign policy initiatives in the Caucasus and Black Sea regions. Due to the largely secretive nature of Turkish-Abkhaz engagement, I primarily rely upon Process Tracing to test the explanatory fit of my combined theoretical lens of the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory and the Two-goods Theory of Foreign Policy when it comes to Turkish-Abkhaz relations. For this reason, my

methodology relies primarily on Process Tracing, reinforced by supplemental use of Document Analysis in key sections.

## Process Tracing

Process Tracing is a widely accepted and employed tool of qualitative social science research that dates back to the 1980s. Its origins can be traced to Alexander George and Timothy McKeown (1985) who defined Process Tracing (henceforth referred to as PT) as a method of case analysis used to evaluate causal processes and explain the relevance of abstract social science theories to real world historical events. Alexander George utilised this nascent methodology to “describe the use of evidence from within case studies to make inferences about historical explanations” (Bennett & Checkel, 2012, p. 6). Put differently, PT began as a qualitative methodology used by scholars to explain historical narratives within highly abstract theories and explanations in the social sciences (Falleti, 2006). Since its inception, PT has developed several unique branches of methodological research that encompass Theory-Testing, Theory-Building, and Explaining Outcome Process Tracing. Each of these branches has unique methodological components that are specifically designed for a variety of research and theory focused explanations of case studies. For my study, I utilise the Theory-Testing division of Process Tracing which I explain in the subsequent section. I have consciously chosen a simplified version of Theory-Testing PT due to its methodological approaches being most suitable for my research purposes. Before covering this ideal methodological approach, I will briefly cover two of the most common variations of Theory-Testing PT to show their unsuitability for my purposes.

One of the most commonly employed sub-methods of Theory-Testing PT is known as “analytic narrative” PT. This sub-branch is primarily used to account for the outcomes of circumstances or historical events by identifying and exploring mechanisms that generate them (Bates et al., 2000). This branch of PT combines elements of Game Theory and is widely thought to be a weak methodological approach when examining numerous events transpiring over a long period of time. This weakness is primarily due to changing circumstances and fluctuating incentives of

actors which may change and adapt over time (such as governments changing or new policies being implemented) (Bates et al., 2000). Given the long timeline of my study, such an approach is inadequate to examine the incentives and rationales behind Turkish-Abkhaz relations.

Another sub-branch of Theory-Testing PT is known as “historical narrative” PT. The main method behind this approach is to “provide support for a theoretical argument [that] can be viewed as simplifications of reality [which] depict[s] a deductively sound, systematic, regular relationship between variables” through proffering historical narratives as explanatory causes of events (Büthe, 2002, p. 482). This branch is similarly unsuitable for my purposes, given the method’s emphasis on seeking to provide support to theoretical explanations of historical events that generally simplify complex compounding factors and influences that impact the decision-making processes of relevant actors. This simplification is highly unsuitable given the complex and multi-vectored environment influencing Turkish-Abkhazian relations. The general unsuitability of these specialised branches of Theory-Testing PT, for my case-study analysis, are contrasted with the highly suitable original variant of Theory-Testing PT.

### Theory-Testing PT (TGPT)

For my study, I utilise the Theory-Testing division of Process Tracing, a method sometimes referred to as Theory-Guided-Process-Tracing (TGPT) in some literature (Falleti, 2006). This branch is employed in social science research to “test whether a causal mechanism exists in a research area where a well-established empirical correlation between a given X and Y has been found (e.g. democracy and peace), or testing whether a well-developed theoretical conjecture actually exists in reality” (Pedersen, 2012, Apr. 10-15). In order to properly employ Theory-Testing PT, sociologist Ronald Aminzade (1993) states that researchers must create “theoretically explicit narratives that carefully trace and compare the sequences of events constituting the process” (p. 108; as cited in Falleti, 2006) of the event under study. In short, it is an attempt to analyse distinct events, transpiring over a period of time, where dissecting the various interactions and decisions made throughout the event is the main objective. By

identifying key events, mapping their progression from one stage of the event to the next, dissecting the various contributory elements which resulted in the events' outcomes, and overlaying theoretical background in order to test their explanatory power, scholars are able to employ Theory-Testing PT to test whether specific social science theories explain actions and decisions taken during historical events. Put differently, Theory-Testing PT occurs when “hypotheses about the observable manifestations that a theorised mechanism might leave are tested empirically in a case” and examined in great depth at every stage of an event's progression (Beach, 2017, pp. 1-2). The complex narrative arc that is generated from carefully applying this process is organised via a simplified (and generally high-level) cause-and-effect chart known as a **causal mechanism**. These causal mechanisms serve as markers with which scholars lay out the step-by-step narrative progression of key events from inception, or “cause”, to “outcome”. These causal mechanisms and Theory-Testing PT, or TGPT more generally, enables scholars

to capture the unfolding of social action over time in a manner sensitive to the order in which events occur. By making the theories that underpin [such] narratives more explicit, [it] avoid[s] the danger of burying explanatory principles in engaging stories. By comparing sequences, [scholars] can determine whether there are typical sequences across [cases] ... and can explore the causes and consequences of different sequence patterns (Aminzade, 1993, p. 108; as cited in Falleti, 2006).

Put simply by PT scholar Derek Beach, causal mechanisms “link a cause (or set of causes) with an outcome [of an event]” and enables researchers to “trace’ the process [unfolding during an event] by observing the empirical fingerprints, or traces, left by the operation of a causal mechanism in a case” (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 2). An additional benefit of the method is its ability to illustrate how social science theories operate in the real world and is widely regarded as a preferable methodology for explaining phenomena characterised by complex causality (Falleti, 2006). Some scholars, such as “Hall (2003) maintain that TGPT is an epistemologically superior method in that it can map the ontological complexity of the social world and also rule out competing theories. It can generate and test theories” (Falleti, 2006, p. 5). For these reasons, I have constructed four distinct causal mechanisms related to the four events examined in my study.

Despite the numerous benefits of employing Theory-Guided PT, several downsides to the method do exist. According to Lustick (1996), scholars with an incomplete understanding of the political, social, and historical backgrounds of the regions being studied run a heightened risk of selection bias when selecting which events and cases will be utilised in the narrative creation process. Issues of selection bias can lead to diminished quality of narrative creation that can fundamentally undermine the theoretical testing capacity of Theory-Testing PT. For these reasons, I have aimed to be as thorough as possible in casting a wide net of economic, political, and cultural events concerning Turkish-Abkhaz relations across my paper's period of interest. In line with many prominent social science scholars who utilise TGPT (e.g. Collier, 1991), my narrative arc begins in 2008 when the Turkish-Abkhaz relationship reached a critical new juncture following the Russo-Georgian war. It should be noted that in order to avoid biased narrative building, I will discuss other variables and explanations that could potentially explain Turkish actions during each unique event that exist outside of my theoretical lenses. I have already discussed many prominent examples of these explanatory factors in my literature review section, and many are surely partially applicable in the events in my PT narrative arc. In order to successfully build my narrative arc, I have examined and incorporated the key sources proposed by George & Bennett (2005): "histories, archival document, [primary source documents], and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesises or implies in a case is in fact evident in the sequence" (p. 6). By taking these precautions and thoughtfully focusing my PT narrative on a crucial historical period for Turkish-Abkhaz relations, I help ensure that a thorough and unbiased narrative can be constructed testing the reliability of my chosen theoretical lenses on explaining Turkish actions in the region. Thus, while Theory-Testing PT (or TGPT) does contain some potential weaknesses as a methodological tool, its strengths far outweigh its weaknesses for the purposes of my single case-study analysis. This makes Theory-Testing PT an ideal primary methodological tool for me to untangle the complex web of causal connections and factors that impact Turkish-Abkhaz engagement, while simultaneously testing the explanatory fit of my theoretical lens. In the following section, I outline the nature of my paper's secondary methodological process: Document Analysis.

## Document Analysis

As previously mentioned, my paper's primary methodological approach will rely on Theory-Testing PT (or TGPT). A large component of this approach, however, requires that I examine primary source documents, interview transcripts, speeches, and governmental statements that will necessitate a supplementary use of Document Analysis. As a Qualitative methodological tool, Document Analysis entails thorough and detailed analysis of source documentation in the form of "books, newspaper articles, academic journal articles, and institutional reports" (Morgan, 2022, p. 64). According to Patton (2014), any document containing text is a potential source for qualitative analysis. For my purposes, however, I am mostly concerned with analysing primary source documentation in the form of interviews, official statements from government officials, government reports, as well as foreign policy papers. These sources come predominantly from government archives, official ministerial websites, and interview segments directly quoting government ministers. However, due to limitations imposed by the generally secretive nature of Turkish-Abkhazian relations, the number of these documents, interview transcripts, and official government reports are few and far between. That being said, the documents that do exist are crucial to my research. I rigorously employed Document Analysis to carefully analyse the wording, sentence structure, posture, and framing of events relating to Turkish-Abkhazian relations. It should also be noted that many of my secondary sources, such as news articles and scholarly works, contain direct quotes from governmental officials and governmental statements that feature heavily in my analysis. The dissection of these sources will enable me to make stronger deductions regarding the role of my chosen theoretical lens in explaining Turkish actions in the region. Thus, careful implementation of Document Analysis serves as a crucial methodological tool to peel apart the complex and multifaceted events surrounding Turkish-Abkhazian economic, political, and cultural engagement between 2008-2022. Such Document Analysis has allowed me to make informed observations regarding the events, positions of the actors involved, and contextual backgrounds. It also supports the creation of my Theory-Testing PT causal mechanisms.

Lastly, before applying these methods to construct my Theory-Testing PT causal mechanisms, however, some contextual background regarding Türkiye's foreign policy and relations with

Georgia and Abkhazia is necessary. To this end, the following section provides a broad-based historical overview of Türkiye's foreign policy and its relations with both Abkhazia and Georgia over the past three decades.

## **Historical Overview**

### **Background On Turkish Foreign Policy**

Over the past century, Turkish foreign policy has undergone a series of evolutions and rebirths culminating in its current assertive and outward facing strategy on both the international and regional stages. The starting place of this policy evolution was the Cold War era. During that period, Türkiye's primary foreign policy outlook was that of a buffer state separating the communist East from the NATO-aligned West. This period saw very little engagement between Türkiye and its communist-aligned states in the Caucus and BSRs (Aras & Akpinar, 2011). This buffer period, however, ended abruptly with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. With the emergence of numerous newly independent states, with underdeveloped institutions and ridden by political instability, Türkiye adopted a new foreign policy stance that sought to become the regional "Model State" (Aras & Akpinar, 2011). By establishing economic, political, and cultural connections to these states, Türkiye sought to establish a foothold of influence in a region that had long been under Moscow's sway. Its efforts to project its largely Western-focused institutions and model of development, however, was hampered by internal political instability and severe economic problems during the 1990s. Thus, its tentative engagement, and attempt to present itself as a regional model to emulate, largely failed to achieve widespread success.

In the early 2000s, however, the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development party (the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or the AK party) coincided with a robust economic turnaround. This political-economic overhaul resulted in the rise of what would become Türkiye's current foreign affairs approach. Under Erdoğan, Turkish foreign policy transformed from a strategy of

“Model State” to what scholars have come to call the “Central Country” policy (Aras & Akpinar, 2011). Under this new strategy, Türkiye came to view the Caucasus and BSR as a “land of opportunity and influence” (Aras & Akpinar, 2011). Accordingly, the 2000s and 2010s witnessed a flurry of robust economic, political, and cultural connections flowing between Türkiye and the various countries in the region. Effectively resulting in the emergence of a strong multi-vector Turkish foreign policy (Aras, 2009). A lynchpin of this full-throttled engagement became the development and interconnection of the region’s energy infrastructure. Türkiye embarked on several large-scale pipeline construction projects, such as the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, which connect energy rich Azerbaijan to the strategic Black Sea transit hubs of Georgia and Türkiye (Aras & Akpinar, 2011). These efforts succeeded in cementing Türkiye’s role as a bridge between the energy-rich former soviet states and the energy consuming EU market. This increasingly influential role in its regional backyard coincided with a conscious turn towards cooperation with Türkiye’s centuries-old enemy in the BSR, Russia. For centuries, Türkiye and Russia had largely been opposing forces, battling one another with soft and hard power for territorial control and influence in the regions. With the emergence of Türkiye’s new foreign policy, however, it became necessary to scrap centuries of hostility in order to become a more effective and influential regional actor (Başol, 2020). By shelving conflict in favour of mutually beneficial cooperation, Türkiye insulated a majority of its outreach in the region from potentially powerful Russian pushback and opened up space for outreach in regions (such as Abkhazia) largely beholden to Russian influence.

These two policies, of cooperation with Russia and robust engagement with the Caucasus and BSR, form the foundational pillars of modern-day Turkish foreign policy. According to the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs, Türkiye views its foreign policy as a mission to “shape the conditions for a sustainable peace and development in their neighbourhood and beyond” (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.<sub>b</sub>). It labels its current strategy an “Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy” that seeks to be “strong on the ground and at the table”, revealing the government’s prominent thinking of a need for robust military and political activism in its regional backyard (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.<sub>b</sub>). More importantly, Türkiye’s government outwardly projects revisionist themes that seek to reorder the international and regional status quos to better suit Turkish interests. Turkish policy documents

describe “the international setting [as being] shaped by the inadequacy of the current global governance mechanisms, fragilities that are increasing globally but especially in our region” (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.<sub>b</sub>). Türkiye’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has at times rallied against an international system which he views as unsuitable to Türkiye’s rising power and influence in its regional backyard and on the international stage. He publicly complains that the UN underrepresents the interests of rising middle powers such as Türkiye and has called for a fundamental revision to the UN charter, stating that “the world is bigger than five”, a stab at the status of permanent member states residing over the UN security council (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.<sub>b</sub>). While such posturing and revisionist stances regarding the current world order could be dismissed as rhetoric, Türkiye’s actions in its near abroad reveal a more concrete effort to overturn long-established status quos to better favour its interests. From conflicts in Syria (MedyaNews, 2022), Libya (Yüksel, 2021), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Yalçinkaya, 2021), to disputes with Greece over maritime borders (Stamouli, 2022, Dec. 29), Türkiye has forcibly been upending regional status quos for its own benefit. It is amidst this assertive “Central State” policy that Türkiye’s engagement with Abkhazia has been developing over the past three decades to the consternation of Georgia’s government.

## Turkish-Georgian Relations

### **Policy Background**

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Türkiye and Georgia have pursued an increasingly close strategic partnership that began with Türkiye’s near instantaneous recognition of Georgia’s sovereignty on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1991 (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.<sub>a</sub>). In the first decade of Georgian independence, cooperation between Georgia and Türkiye remained minimal when compared with today’s standards. This was primarily due to economic and political instability within Türkiye, which resulted in a more domestic focus and vast political and territorial instability within the newly independent Georgia. In the early 2000s, however, the

rise of the Turkish Justice & Development party (AK party) to power and rapid economic growth birthed a vastly new Turkish foreign policy that sought widespread engagement with the newly independent states of the BSR and the Caucasus (Aras, & Akpınar, 2011).

### Economics

Economically, Türkiye sought to connect the energy rich Caucasus region with European markets, transforming the region into an energy bridge to the EU, forming an East-West energy corridor (Göksel, 2013). Türkiye took the helm of this regional initiative and developed several transformative projects between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye such as the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline (Başol, 2020). The economic partnership between the two states progressively grew. And, in 2007, Türkiye became the main trading partner of Georgia which it remains to this day, with some \$2.8 billion in trade volume in 2022 (Civil Georgia, 2023, Jan. 20). Turkish investment in the Georgia economy similarly grew apace with bilateral trade. Today, Türkiye is a chief investor in the Georgian economy, helping spur economic development and connectedness to regional markets. Major development projects, infrastructure projects, and modernization projects have been heavily sponsored by Turkish investors (Vindimian, 2010). Among which, the Batumi international airport renovations (Aras & Akpınar, 2011) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.<sub>a</sub>) are major examples. In general, the robust economic connectedness between the two states has formed a foundational pillar for further social and political engagement between the states.

### Social

Socially, Türkiye and Georgia are highly dissimilar societies. Türkiye is a majority Muslim nation with distinct cultural practices that differ enormously from Georgian society. Georgia is a majority Orthodox Christian nation that continues to share cultural similarities to Russia. At times, the cultural and religious differences of the strategic partners, as well as Türkiye's

perceived role in Georgia as a “Merchant Hegemon” (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016) have caused friction in Georgia. This has resulted in recent rises in anti-Turkish sentiment (Göksel, 2013) over the expanding footprint of Türkiye’s Muslim minority population and the expanding influence of Türkiye in the nation’s economic affairs. This has previously led to anti-Turkish political campaigns by both local and national Georgian politicians in 2012 and 2016 (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016) and reveals an underlying unease within Georgian society towards their nation’s robust partnership with the culturally alien neighbour next door. This unease persists in widespread negative stereotypes of both Muslims and Turks within Georgia. These sentiments are shown by a 2015 survey poll which revealed that while some 61% (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2015a) of Georgians approved of doing business with Turkish individuals, only 27% (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2015b) approved of Georgian women marrying Turkish men. Despite these cultural differences and Georgian prejudices, Türkiye and Georgia continue to share robust cultural ties. This is partially due to the large numbers of Turkish expatriates residing and working within Georgia, as well as the shared Ottoman history of several Georgian regions. Prior to the pandemic, Turkish visitors to Georgia had been rising every year (Kapanadze, 2014). Overall, these culturally alien societies have worked largely in harmony with one another, suffering few problems from their social and cultural differences.

### Political

Politically, Türkiye and Georgia benefit from a highly cooperative bilateral relationship. Türkiye is the only neighbouring state of Georgia that has delineated maritime and terrestrial borders and has no outstanding territorial claims against one another (Kapanadze, 2014). Since Georgia’s pivot to the West following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Türkiye has been a steadfast supporter of Georgian efforts to integrate into Western institutions -- specifically, Georgia’s desperately desired admission into NATO. This has primarily played-out through Turkish lobbying on behalf of the Georgian government for membership in NATO and connected efforts to modernise and train the Georgian military (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). To facilitate the growing strategic partnership, Türkiye developed a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSC) mechanism with the Georgian government (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.)

Semi-regular meetings are held between the two using this mechanism to discuss high level strategic planning and cooperation. The overall picture of political relations is of largely positive cooperation (Sayin and Dogan, 2017; Kapanadze, 2014; Weiss and Zabanova, 2016). This robust partnership, however, has been continuously plagued by one highly sensitive topic since the mid 2000s: Türkiye's increasingly vigorous extra-legal political, economic, and cultural engagements with the Georgian de facto state of Abkhazia.

As I discuss in the next section, Türkiye has pursued increasingly close connections and multifaceted forms of engagement with Georgia's breakaway province of Abkhazia during the past two decades. As laid out in Georgia's 2008 "Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories", any and all engagement with the region is considered illegal unless otherwise approved by the Georgian government (Parliament of Georgia, 2008). Türkiye, however, has constantly flaunted this legal framework and has spent decades cultivating secretive ties to the region. While Türkiye has officially remained steadfast in supporting Georgia's territorial claims over the region, its actions in the territory have not matched its rhetoric. Various economic, political, and social disputes have thus flared over the past two decades, with Georgia denouncing and even taking unilateral legal action against various forms of Turkish interaction with Abkhazia. In recent years, a general consensus has emerged among experts and scholars of Turkish-Georgian relations. This view is that while Georgia relies heavily on the strategic partnership with Türkiye, both politically and economically, it does not trust Turkish intentions with Abkhazia (Kapanadze, 2014). This has resulted in a situation where Türkiye has lost its reputation, in the eyes of the Georgian government, as a potentially constructive broker for de-isolating Abkhazia (Kapanadze, 2014). This mistrust has fuelled a highly defensive posture from Georgia leading to aggressive gatekeeping of all interactions between Türkiye and the breakaway region. For Türkiye, its primary goal remains securing its political and economic interests in both Georgia and Abkhazia. A delicate balancing act that has potentially large ramifications given the lack of sufficient guard rails in the relationship.

# Turkish-Abkhaz Relations

## Policy Background

The relationship between Türkiye and Abkhazia has been complex and fraught since the region obtained de facto self-governance from Georgia in 1993, after fighting a brief but violent war of succession marked by ethnic cleansing and war crimes (Shankar, 2022, Aug. 5). Türkiye's relationship with Abkhazia dates back centuries to when Abkhazia was a province of the Ottoman Empire between 1578-1804 (Eissler, 2013). After which point the territory was absorbed into the Russian Empire and was conquered, incorporated, and re-administered by various regional powers over the following century. The roots of modern-day Turkish engagement with Abkhazia, however, have their start in the aftermath of the Georgian-Abkhaz war. In the wake of de facto independence officially proclaimed by Abkhaz authorities in 1999, Türkiye adopted a strong policy position of supporting the territorial integrity of Georgian rule over the region. Experts on the region proffer conflicting rationales for why Türkiye refused to recognize the territory's independence, but they generally agree it was in part out of economic considerations with maintaining good relations with Georgia (Aras & Akpınar, 2011) and partly due to fears that recognizing an ethnic breakaway state could embolden calls by Kurdish secessionists in Türkiye for independence (Başol, 2020). In the decades that have followed, Türkiye's official policy has not changed on Abkhazia recognition. Numerous Turkish officials have reiterated this policy over the years. In 2008, Türkiye's president at the time, Abdullah Gül, issued a strong statement proclaiming "we attach importance to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty" (Today's Zaman, 2008, Aug. 13; as cited in Kapanadze, 2014). Since then, numerous Turkish officials and Turkish ambassadors to Georgia have echoed that sentiment repeatedly. Despite this, Türkiye's economic, political, and cultural connections to Abkhazia have continued to blossom, especially since Türkiye implemented its major foreign policy shift towards active engagement with the BSR and the Caucasus in the early 2000s. This has given rise to an increasingly contorted and contradictory Turkish foreign policy that attempts to keep both Türkiye's Georgian and Abkhazian interests in play.

## Economics

Economically, Türkiye and Abkhazia enjoy robust unofficial ties that have been continuously growing over the past three decades. Due to the unofficial nature of the trade relationship, which is forced into the grey economy due to its illegal nature, hard data on Turkish-Abkhaz trade is hard to come by. What is apparent through interviews with locals (Kotova, 2022, Aug 4), reports from regional experts (Punsmann, 2009), and data provided by the Abkhazian Chamber of Commerce (Clayton, 2011), is that unofficial Turkish trade with Abkhazia is booming and is estimated to be growing every year (Kapanadze, 2014). Although contradictory data has emerged, a 2013 report by Turkish Policy Quarterly stated that roughly 60 percent of imports going to Abkhazia come from Türkiye, while 45 percent of Abkhazia's exports go to Türkiye (Saakashvili, 2013). The primary dimension of this trade is commodities with Türkiye importing large quantities of coal and timber, and exporting oil, food, textiles, and construction materials to Abkhazia (Eissler, 2013). The majority of this happens via Black Sea maritime routes connecting the Turkish cities of Istanbul, Samsun, and Trabzon with the Abkhazian capital city of Sukhumi. These cargo ships employ a plethora of subversive tactics to avoid detection by Georgian authorities, such as turning off their automated identification systems, sailing under foreign flags, and falsifying trade documents to reflect trade with Russia instead of Abkhazia (Kapanadze, 2014). Despite this, between 1999-2009, Georgia detained some 60 Turkish merchant vessels after illegally engaging in trade with Abkhazia (Kapanadze, 2014). This event culminated in a 2009 international incident that I will examine in great detail as one of my four events analysed using Theory-Testing PT later in this paper.

Aside from maritime trade, a growing number of Abkhaz from the Turkish diaspora have been returning to Abkhazia since the 2008 Russo-Georgia war. These returnees have had an outsized impact on the local Abkhaz economy, setting up businesses and forming subsidiary, officially internationally registered, companies of Turkish brands in the breakaway territory (International Crisis Group, 2018). Again, official numbers and statistics on these businesses are hard to come by given their illegal nature, but their propagation can be witnessed in the few incidents in which Türkiye did not actively attempt to hide its investments. An example of which comes from a 2009 incident in which the Turkish branch of the Italian fashion company, Benetton, attempted to

directly establish an outlet in Abkhazia. Fierce Georgian pushback resulted in the company reorganising its structure and officially opening the outlet as a subsidiary of the company's Russian branch (International Crisis Group, 2018). Such examples are demonstrative of both the increasing economic connectivity between the region and Türkiye, as well as Turkish attempts to subvert Georgian laws against economic engagement through disguising their investments in the region. For its part, Türkiye has continued to claim that it respects the territorial integrity of Georgia and that such economic connections are purely the result of private initiatives not endorsed by the government (Eissler, 2013). This plausible claim is undermined by the Turkish government's refusal to sanction Turkish entities doing business in the region (Eissler, 2013).

Despite the significant level of hidden economic engagement, however, Abkhaz officials generally view Turkish trade as largely self-interested and even exploitative in nature. According to regional journalists, the Abkhaz de facto government remains frustrated that Türkiye is focused on building self-interested economic ties, exploiting cheap Abkhaz commodity prices, while eschewing desperately desired recognition and official political ties (Clayton, 2014). The region's former de facto Prime Minister, Raul Khajimba, was quoted in an interview stating "Russia remains Abkhazia's only true economic partner, while Türkiye exploits Abkhazia for cheap commodities" (Clayton, 2014). This points to a fundamentally self-interested Turkish economic policy towards the region.

## Social

Socially, Türkiye and Abkhazia enjoy deep connections through centuries of shared history, people-to-people contact, religion, and familial ties. It is estimated that some 500,000 ethnic Abkhazians reside within Türkiye (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016), with some estimates placing the number as high as 750,000 (Berg & Sarioğlu, 2021, Mar. 22), far more than the estimated total population of 244,000 residing within Abkhazia proper (BBC, n.d.). The majority of this community formed centuries ago in the 1800s, with a mass exodus from Abkhazia triggered by forced incorporation into the Russian Empire and resulting unrest (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). Thus, the majority of Abkhaz Turks are 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation immigrants and have full Turkish

citizenship. The community has established robust and politically potent organisations such as the Caucasus-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee and the Abkhaz Federation within Türkiye to advocate for greater political, economic, and cultural connections between the two “states” (Eissler, 2013). Additionally, Turkish Abkhaz organisations regularly host Abkhaz cultural events within Türkiye (Eissler, 2013), help establish business connections in Abkhazia (International Crisis Group, 2018), and even host de facto state representatives (Kapanadze, 2014). They additionally facilitate visits to Abkhazia by Turkish journalists, businessmen, and municipal officials (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). In essence, the Türkiye’s diaspora community forms the beating heart of economic, political, and cultural interaction between the two “states”. While no direct transit routes exist between Türkiye and Abkhazia, numerous Abkhazian and Turkish citizens travel to-and-from each other’s territories via the international airport in Sochi Russia. Interviews with Abkhazian locals reveal a robust exchange in people-to-people contact (Kotova, 2022, Aug. 4). Additionally, recent years have seen a steady stream of Turkish Abkhazians resettling in Abkhazia, estimated to be about 50 families a year, to open businesses. A 2016 estimate placed the number of Turkish-Abkhaz re-settlers between 3,500-7,500 individuals (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). This migration and cross border interaction further increases cultural and economic interaction between the two societies (Weiss & Zabanova, 2016). In general, experts agree that cultural ties between the two entities have been increasing since the end of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war (Eissler, 2013).

## Political

Politically, Türkiye and Abkhazia have clandestinely developed deep unofficial ties that have continued to grow over the past three decades despite frequent and intense Georgian objections. The core of this political connection has taken the form of numerous unofficial visits and receptions by both Turkish and Abkhaz de facto officials, ministers, MPs, and even presidents to one another’s territories. Turkish MPs and ambassadors have made several high-profile trips to the breakaway territory. In 2009, Türkiye’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA's) then-Deputy Undersecretary Ünal Çeviköz visited Sukhumi and held meetings with Abkhaz government

officials with the aim of strengthening economic ties between the two “states” (Kanbolat, 2009, Sep. 17). This meeting was followed by a larger delegation in 2010, with the head of Türkiye’s MFA’s Caucasus Department, Nurdan Bayraktar, and Türkiye’s ambassador to Georgia, Levant Murat Burhan, visiting Abkhazia with the stated aim of “showing a willingness to keep relations between Türkiye and Abkhazia alive” (Kapanadze, 2014, p. 58). The resultant meetings with Abkhaz officials reportedly aimed to “establish direct trade relations between Abkhazia and Türkiye” (Kapanadze, 2014, p. 58). Despite official Turkish claims that underplayed the visits as rudimentary attempts to keep lines of communication open, the exchanges embodied a rapid expansion of political connections between the two “states”, underpinned by mutual desires for increased bi-lateral trade. Abkhaz news sources cited the visits as evidence of Türkiye “enter[ing] into an unstoppable multidimensional integration process with Abkhazia” (Kanbolat, 2009, Sep. 17). Turkish delegations to the region have continued in recent years, with a 2014 delegation of Turkish MPs and a separate delegation of Turkish journalists visiting Abkhazia. Both visits instigated large protests within Georgia and official Georgian rebukes (Civil Georgia, 2014, Jun. 9). Aside from official Turkish delegations, numerous trips by representatives of Turkish-Abkhaz lobbying and community groups have been made to Abkhazia over the past decades. A recent visit by leaders of Türkiye’s Federation of Abkhazian Cultural Centres in 2022 embodies the encroaching nature of non-governmental representatives pushing political connections of the two states ever closer. That meeting supposedly resulted in discussions between the civil society group and Abkhaz officials over the possibility of a Turkish referendum on Abkhaz political recognition (Abkhaz World, 2022, Jan 22). While it remains highly unlikely that Türkiye will break with its decades-old policy of recognizing Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia, the growing political links are clearly visible through these governmental and civil society ties. Some scholars and regional experts believe that Türkiye’s ultimate goal is to boost the overall influence of Türkiye in conflict resolution in the region (Kapanadze, 2014; Rukhadze, 2015, Sep. 16). These connections, however, work both ways. And in the past several decades, Abkhazian authorities have similarly worked to cultivate political connections on Turkish soil.

In Türkiye, Abkhaz’s de facto officials have made several prominent attempts to visit and cultivate political ties over the past decades. The two most notable occasions involved Abkhazia’s ex de facto president, Sergey Bagapsh. In 2007, Bagapsh came exceedingly close to

securing a political visit to Türkiye on the grounds of meeting with community leaders of the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora. The trip was scrapped at the last minute, only after serious démarches were made by Georgia demanding Türkiye deny the leader a visa (Uslu, 2009). This abortive attempt at diplomacy, however, was potentially realised in 2011 when Bagapsh and an entourage of high-level Abkhaz officials (Abkhaz World, 2011, Apr. 9) allegedly made a highly secretive trip to Ankara on a “business visit” that was subsequently downplayed by Türkiye’s foreign ministry as being a “private visit on health grounds” to receive medical treatment for a herniated disk. Abkhaz news sources, however, cited the true reason for the visit as an attempt to “soften Turkish policies towards Abkhazia” (Abkhaz World, 2011, Apr. 9). This successful attempt at visiting Türkiye set off protests in Georgia. It also served as evidence to scholars that, in principle, Türkiye does not object to informal visits by de facto government officials from Abkhazia (Kapanadze, 2014). The importance of this event to the overall relationship between Türkiye and Abkhazia makes it one of the four events I examine using Theory-Testing PT in the subsequent chapters of this paper.

Abkhazia also employs a plenipotentiary representative of the Abkhaz Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Türkiye, who is tasked with maintaining and promoting Abkhaz interests, and maintaining political connection with the Abkhaz diaspora population in Türkiye (Abkhaz World, 2021, Mar. 18). This official diplomatic posting is unusual for an unrecognised state to operate in a foreign country and further represents the grey-zone stance of Türkiye on its political connections to the region. Aside from this, perhaps no single event better represents the contradictory nature of Türkiye’s unofficially political recognition of Abkhazia than the nearly successful opening of an Abkhaz polling station in Istanbul during the 2014 Abkhaz presidential election. The establishment of the Turkish polling station was primarily a product of vigorous lobbying efforts by politically powerful Abkhaz diaspora organisations who succeeded in getting Turkish permission to open the station in Istanbul prior to the election in August of that year (Abkhaz World, 2014, Aug. 14). The opening of the station, however, was strongly condemned by Georgian officials who reportedly succeeded in pressuring Türkiye to close the station (Kapanadze, 2014). Despite Turkish assertions that it closed the polling station, Abkhaz governmental sources claimed that votes had indeed been cast in the election from Türkiye, as well as two polling stations located in Russia (Kapanadze, 2014). The importance of this event to

the overall relationship between the two “states” similarly sets it apart as an event worthy of examination later in this paper.

### Explaining the Contradiction: Analysis of Turkish-Abkhaz Relations

Ultimately, these numerous and varied forms of political engagement between Türkiye and Abkhazia paint a picture of a Turkish foreign policy riddled with contradictions. Scholars and experts rationalise one-off visits and diplomatic exchanges through a variety of explanations that fail to explain the disconnect between Türkiye’s unchanged official rhetoric, officially eschewing connections with the de facto state in favour of supporting Georgia’s position, and their appetite for increasingly risky and clandestine forms of engagement with the region. It is a contradiction that bleeds across all sectors of Türkiye’s interactions with the region. Pointing to an unanswered question at the heart of scholarship that focuses on the relationship between the two “states”. If Türkiye’s confusing foreign policy in the region cannot be wholly explained by employing the lens of domestic factors (i.e. the Abkhazian diaspora), adherence to Georgia’s laws and policies, or a Turkish desire to mediate a solution to the conflict, it is time to examine their actions through a new lens. I propose that Türkiye’s actions in the region are not a result of any individual explanation or theoretical lens commonly employed in existing scholarship on the matter but instead come from a purely self-interested foreign policy outlook of a rising Turkish middle power flexing its muscles in its regional backyard. This newly invigorated Türkiye views its policy in the region through a lens of maximum extraction and self-benefit, attempting to balance the opposing foreign policy objectives of Georgia and Abkhaz to walk a tight-rope between the two. This leads to extractive economic and political dividends from a self-interested policy of selective (and often secretive) engagement in a bid to boost Turkish economic and political influence in both regions. Its contradictory messaging and at times seesawing actions are the symptomatic manifestations of this delicate balancing act. If one side pushes too hard (i.e. Georgia fiercely condemns Abkhaz or Turkish political visits), Türkiye is forced to react and counterbalance its foreign policy position to maintain balance. All the while, Türkiye has been able to boost its power and influence in both of the “states”. The theoretical framework which I

believe best encapsulates this behaviour is the combined Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory & the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs.

In the following sections, I examine several key economic, political, and cultural events which have transpired between Türkiye and Abkhazia between 2008-2022. I also construct step-by-step causal mechanisms that will outline the unfolding of key incidents and the decision making processes of Türkiye in its engagements with Abkhazia. The resulting narrative arcs allow me to carry out Theory-Testing Process Tracing. While there are countless potential events worthy of examination with many events containing mixed aspects of economic, political, and cultural undercurrents, I have carefully selected my events based upon their relative importance to the overall Türkiye -Abkhaz relationship as well as those which provide particularly revealing insights into the dynamics of Turkish decision making in the region. Lastly, each event was selected due to their relatively deep documentary trails which enabled Theory-Testing PT to be thoroughly conducted. Events which were important to the Turkish-Abkhazian relationship, but which lacked sufficient documentation were not analysed due to the difficulty of examining such events through Process Tracing methods. With these criteria in mind, I opted to examine: (1) the 1999-2009 series of Georgian detentions of Turkish tanker vessels, an event which resulted in an international incident between the two allies and led to drastic changes in the regional status quo between Türkiye and Abkhazia. (2) The 2020 Expansion of Abkhazian APRA bank cards to Turkish Banking systems, an event which embodied Turkish strategy in reshaping regional status quos for its benefit while providing sufficient documentary evidence to examine using PT. (3) The 2007-2011 diplomatic saga regarding Sergey Bagapsh's visit to Türkiye, an event that fundamentally broke long-standing regional taboos, reshaped the BSR's status quo regarding diplomatic norms, and produced robust documentary evidence for evaluation. (4) The 2014 opening of an Abkhazian presidential election polling booth in Istanbul, a cultural event that threatened the non-recognition of Abkhazia which Türkiye has long upheld, while also producing strong documentary evidence for examination.

It is my hope that the subsequent sections and their distinct causal mechanisms will provide greater insight into the motives and driving rationales influencing Turkish engagement with Abkhazia, and help answer the question: **To what extent does the combined Multiple**

**Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory & the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs explain Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia between 2008-2022?**

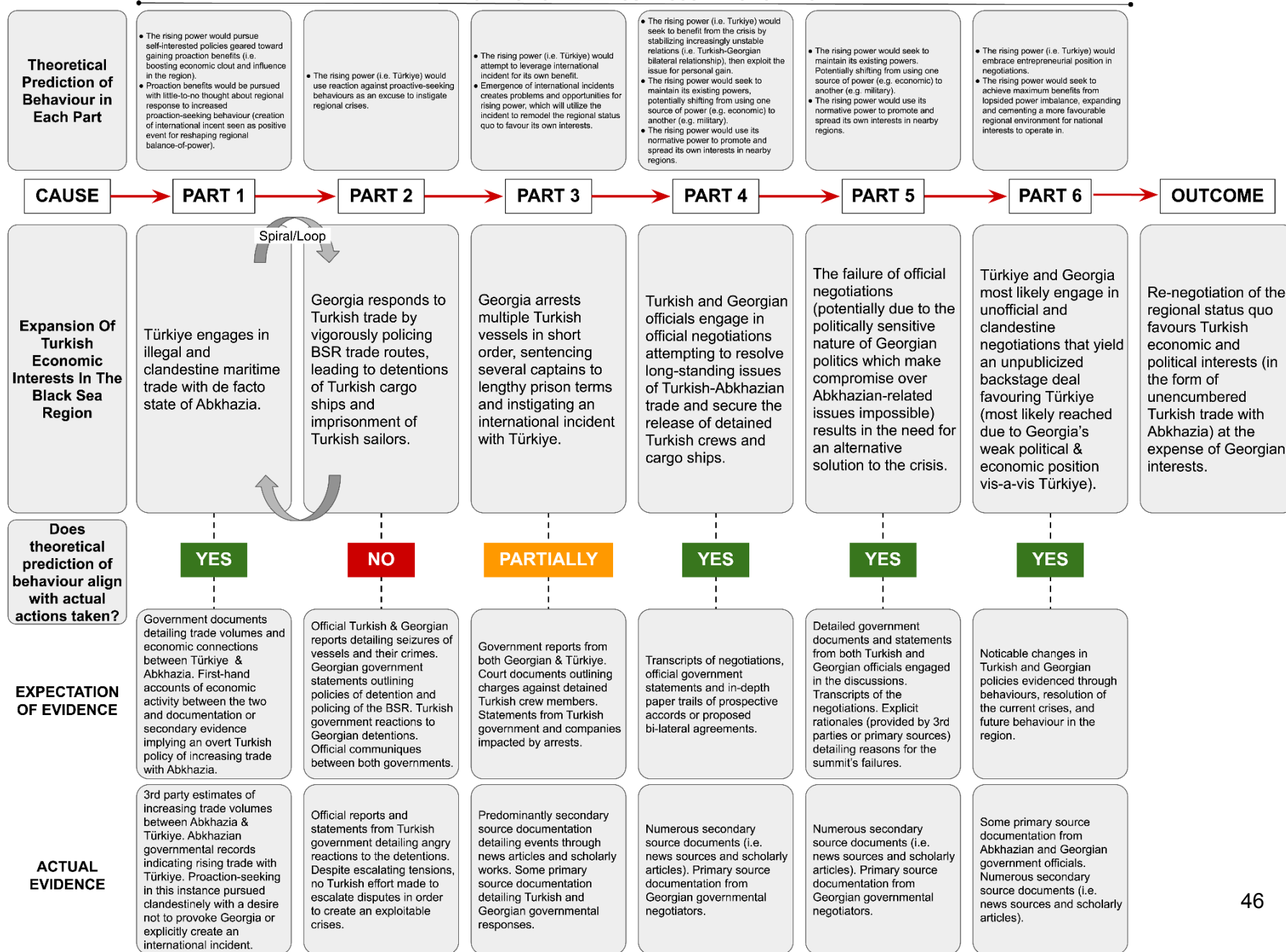
## Economic Events Through the Lens of Process Tracing

### Event #1: Detentions of Turkish Cargo Ships (1999-2009)

Perhaps one of the best documented economic events in the Turkish-Abkhaz relationship is the series of escalatory policing actions taken by the Republic of Georgia against Turkish “smuggling” operations to Abkhazia throughout the 2000s. The series of increasingly assertive Georgian actions and counter-actions by Türkiye offers a rare glimpse into the otherwise clandestine nature of Turkish-Georgian-Abkhazian relations. Additionally, the decade-long saga provides an unusually transparent opportunity to thoroughly apply the methodological principles of PT to examine the actions and steps taken by the various groups in the lead up to two political explosive detentions of Turkish trade vessels and the arrest of their captains by Georgian authorities in 2009. In the resulting negotiations and unpublicized back-room dealings between Georgia and Türkiye, the edges of a budding Turkish foreign policy strategy, which has since come to dominate Turkish policy towards the region, can be gleamed.

# Causal Mechanism #1

## EXPECTATION OF BEHAVIOUR ACCORDING TO THEORY



As mentioned in earlier sections, the volumes of trade between Türkiye and Abkhazia have historically been highly speculative due to the grey-zone (or at times outwardly illegal) nature of the trade relationship. Scholars in the region, however, have occasionally attempted to estimate volumes of Turkish-Abkhaz trade at various points in time. Perhaps one of the most important periods of the Turkish-Abkhaz economic relationship, came in the late 2000s when Georgian detentions of Turkish cargo ships accused of illegally trading with Abkhazia spiked, resulting in an explosion of previously clandestine tensions into the open. The fallout from these detentions were made more explosive as evidenced by scholarly estimates of trade volumes at the time. These estimates, compiled by Abkhaz economist Beslan Baratelia, estimated Türkiye to be responsible for some 60% of imports into Abkhazia with the Turkish market accounting for some 45% of Abkhazian exports in 2009 (Punsmann, 2009). It was amongst this backdrop of clandestine economic activity that Georgian officials initiated a policy of enhanced maritime policing of Georgian coastlines in the 2000s in an attempt to prevent “illegal crossings of Georgian territorial waters” by Turkish cargo ships and levy fines for illegally shipping goods to Abkhazia (Punsmann, 2009, p. 85). Thus, in an attempt to enforce laws concerning Georgian territorial sovereignty over Abkhazia and clamp down on rampant and rapidly expanding Abkhazian economic connectivity to Türkiye, Georgia launched a sweeping campaign to patrol Georgia’s Black Sea coastline, detain Turkish and other foreign vessels suspected of illegally trading with Abkhazia, and sometimes sentence their Turkish crews to lengthy prison sentences for what Georgian authorities viewed as smuggling (Punsmann, 2009). This policy was defended by Georgian claims that the state had the right to “restrict the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea within Georgia’s Exclusive Economic Zone” (Kapanadze, 2014, p. 61) and “retained a special interest in protecting its sovereignty [which] justify[ed] the arrest of vessels otherwise precluded by the exclusive jurisdiction of the flag state during the exercise of freedom of navigation” (Kvinikhidze, 2012, pp. 176-177). The Georgian authorities further defended the ambitious and legally precarious policy by claiming that their policies were “further reinforced by the special circumstances deriving from Russian occupation” (Kvinikhidze, 2012, pp. 176-177). Türkiye adamantly refused this Georgian position, viewing the Black Sea as akin to the high seas and claimed that Georgian detention of any vessels in the region was unlawful under international law (Kapanadze, 2014). The resulting interactions form the basis of what is depicted in my causal mechanism above, labelled “Causal Mechanism #1”.

## The Causal Mechanism Loop: Connecting Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3

The resulting cat-and-mouse game between Georgia and Türkiye played out over the course of 1999-2009 as follows: from 1999-2003, the Georgian coast guard and Border Protection agency detained over 40 ships (Punsmann, 2009). In 2002 alone, 11 ships were detained. In 2003 a further seven ships were detained, with the captains of eight ships given official warnings (Punsmann, 2009). Between 2004-2006, a further 22 ships were detained (Punsmann, 2009). The most politically explosive moves, however, came in 2009 when 5 Turkish cargo vessels were detained, their cargo confiscated, crews fined, and several of their captains sentenced to prison sentences in Georgia (Kapanadze, 2014). The most serious of these detainments, which is widely regarded as instigating a temporary meltdown in Georgian-Turkish relations, occurred on August 15<sup>th</sup> 2009 when the Turkish-owned Buket tanker, flying the Panamanian flag, was seized by Georgian coast guard authorities outside of Georgia's EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone). The tanker was en-route to the Abkhazian capital city of Sokhumi with 2,000 tons of gasoline and 700 tonnes of diesel on board (Civil Georgia, 2013, Jul. 16). The Turkish operator of the cargo ship, Densa Tanker Operators, claimed the Buket had made five trips to Sokhumi over the course of the prior twelve months (Civil Georgia, 2009, Aug. 25). For their part, Georgian authorities cited the "multiple unauthorised entries into the Abkhaz port" as grounds for the detention (Civil Georgia, 2009, Aug. 25). On August 24<sup>th</sup> 2009, just days after the seizure of the cargo vessel, the Azeri-born captain of the Buket, Ilgar Imanverdiev, was arrested (Civil Georgia, 2009, Aug 25) and subsequently sentenced to 24 years in prison for violating the blockade of Abkhazia (Clayton, 2014). In the months that followed, Türkiye's ministry of foreign affairs issued denunciations of the Georgian move, claiming that the ship's seizure occurred in international waters and violated the sovereignty of detained Turkish sailors as well as international law (Kapanadze, 2014). Georgian authorities firmly denied these accusations and maintained that the operation started (and was completed) all within Georgia's EEZ. In the months that followed, Turkish and Georgian relations entered into a downward spiral, as Georgia held 5 Turkish cargo vessels with two captains facing lengthy prison sentences — a situation that Türkiye adamantly protested against.

## Turkish-Georgian Official Negotiations & Their Failure: Part 4 & Part 5

The first signs of a thaw in relations, however, came on September 4<sup>th</sup> when the imprisoned captain of the *Buket* was freed from Georgian captivity after an emergency visit of the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to Tbilisi (Punsmann, 2009). According to a Georgian regional expert and one-time government negotiator for the Georgian authorities during the tanker crisis, Türkiye and Georgia next entered into a series of urgent negotiations (some of which occurred clandestinely) during the first months of 2010. The beginning of these negotiations took the form of “several conversations [that] took place...between then-Prime Minister of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvil” (Kapanadze, 2014, p. 63) regarding the crisis. The diplomatic blitz was followed by two high-level summits which occurred in Ankara, in the Spring of 2010, and Batumi, in the Summer of 2010. The primary goal of which was to negotiate a permanent resolution to the issue of technically-illegal Turkish trade with Abkhazia and end the decade-long phenomenon of Georgian detentions of Turkish tankers. According to a government negotiator who represented Georgia during these talks, both summits were fundamentally unsuccessful at reaching a transparent and official resolution to the issue of Turkish trade with Abkhazia due to a lack of political will from both sides to reach an agreement (Kapanadze, 2014). While little information is publicly available about the substantive dialogue at the two summits, it is clear that they played a fundamentally transformative role in the dynamics of Turkish-Georgian, Turkish-Abkhazian relations in the region.

## Hidden Agreement & New Status Quo: Part 6 & Outcome

In the months and years that followed these “failed” discussions, Georgian detentions of illegally trading Turkish cargo ships practically ceased. While an estimated 100 Turkish ships were detained by Georgian authorities between 1991-2009 (Sea News, 2010, Dec. 29), the practice of

naval detentions after the conclusion of the summits practically vanished. While some rare detentions continued to periodically occur, such as three detentions in 2013 (Civil Georgia, 2013, Jul. 16), the crux of the issue was seemingly resolved during the Turkish-Georgian diplomatic summits despite the lack of an official agreement being reached. Furthermore, the status quo following the summits appears to have shifted dramatically in favour of Turkish interests. Turkish traders and tankers no longer faced stringent anti-smuggling enforcement by Georgian authorities and seemingly no new regulations or procedures being placed on them to limit their economic activities with Abkhazia. In fact, the one major take-away from the tanker incident appears to be a drastic strengthening of Turkish economic and political interests in both Georgia and Abkhazia. Newly freed from messy and attention-grabbing headlines, previously produced by Georgian detentions of Turkish vessels, the still illegal Turkish trade with Abkhazia has only continued to grow throughout the past decade. According to Abkhazian government sources, trade with Türkiye in 2022 grew some 142% from 2021 levels (Abkhaz World, 2023, Mar. 3), a level indicative of the overall growth in trade during the past decade. Articles attesting to this increasing trade published since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine reveal the sustained growth of Turkish trade with Abkhazia as a primary avenue for Abkhaz citizens to receive international imports (Kotova, 2022, Aug. 4). Other publications, citing interviews with Abkhazian businessmen, reveal the expanding nature of Turkish trade with Abkhazia throughout the 2010s as Abkhazia searched for alternative trade partners to its dominant Russian patron (International Crisis Group, 2018). In short, the Turkish government was able to successfully leverage the 2009-2010 tanker crisis to drastically increase its self-interested economic and political positions vis-à-vis Abkhazia, while seemingly avoiding any compromises being made to the Georgian government. The highly lopsided outcome, seemingly negotiated during the officially “unsuccessful” summits, follows a pattern of Turkish back-room negotiations that seem to achieve favourable outcomes for Turkish interests away from the prying eyes of the public.

From this perspective, the Turkish tanker incident is emblematic of the behaviour expected of rising middle-powers, as theorised in the combined Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory with the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs. The theory predicts that rising middle powers, with increasing levels of economic, political, and military control, will seek to change the power balance of status quos in their regional backyards often through disruptive

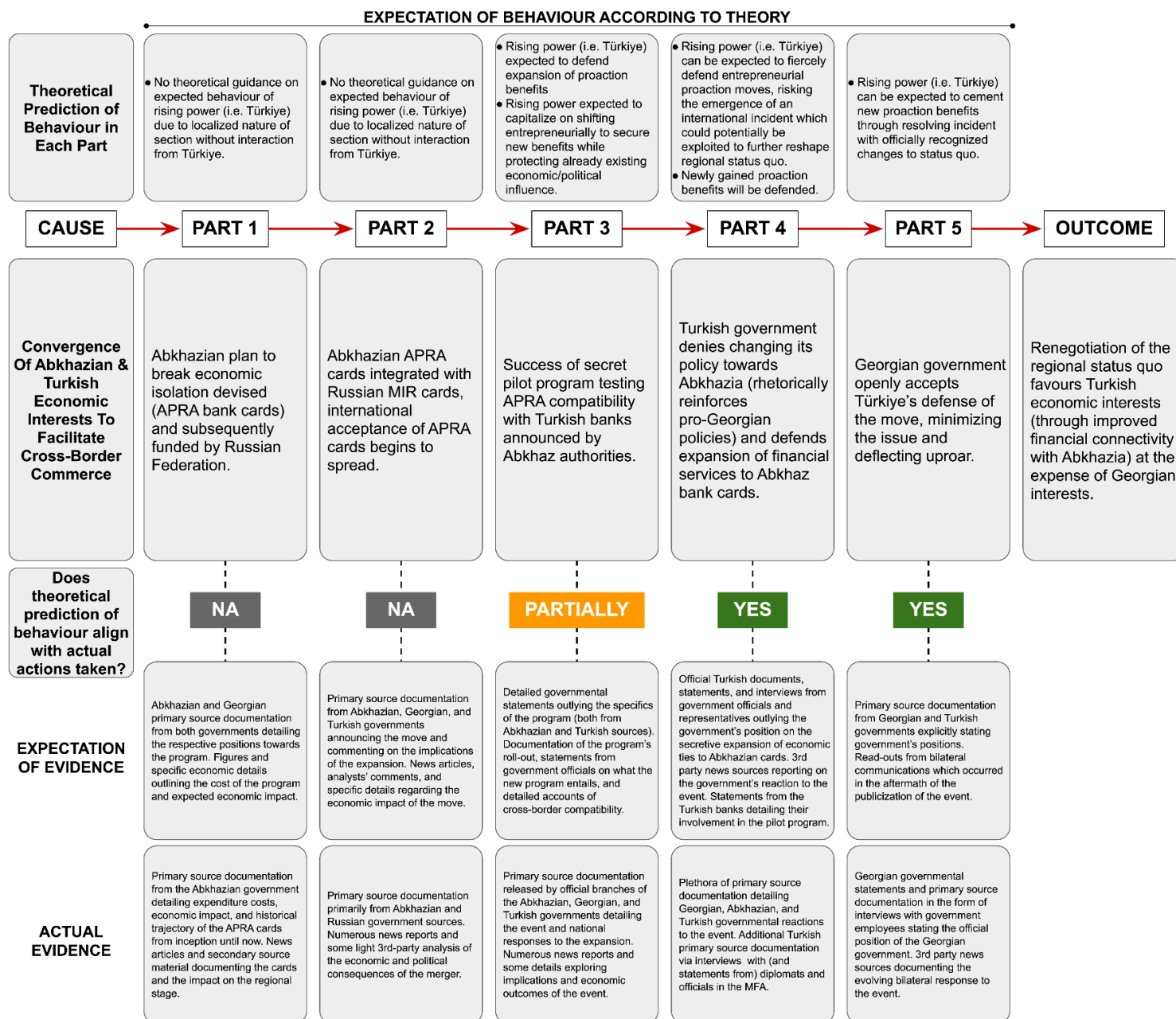
incidents and disputes (Lemke, 2002) to further their own interests at the expense of their neighbours. From this perspective, the outcome of the tanker incident achieved just this.

It is important, however, to leave room for other explanatory rationales that diverge from the self-interested middle-power explanation proffered by my chosen theoretical lens. While any number of additional factors or explanations could potentially explain the outcome of the tanker incident, some of the most probable include: (1) an influencing of outcomes by back-room horse trading, in which Türkiye secretly made compromises on other political or economic issues (such as promising more robust support for Georgian desires to integrate into Western multilateral institutions or promises of increased investment in key Georgian sectors) in exchange for Georgia halting its policy of seizing Turkish tankers. (2) Secondly, it is plausible that Turkish and Georgian negotiations during the crisis resulted in an evolution of Georgian thinking regarding Turkish economic engagement with Abkhazia, coming to view the engagement as a net positive for draining away Russian influence over the region. Due to the fiercely unpopular domestic political view in Georgia toward making any concessions when questions concerning Abkhazian independence are at hand, it would have been politically unfeasible to sign a public statement allowing Turkish trade to continue unhindered moving forward. These are but two alternative explanations. And, while little is publicly written about the course of negotiations between Georgia and Türkiye in 2010, the outcome of the meetings clearly indicates an unannounced shift in regional power dynamics that favoured Turkish interests in every visible aspect, at the expense of Georgian enforcement of laws regarding its territorial integrity. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the theoretical behaviour prescribed by the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory and the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs is highly applicable to the self-interested approach taken by Türkiye in its leveraging of an international incident to create manoeuvre room for renegotiating the regional status quo in its favour. This behaviour laid the groundwork for future increases in trade with Abkhazia, while seemingly securing assurances that Georgian harassment would cease. With no indication of Turkish compromises during this outcome, it is reasonable to claim that my chosen theoretical lens explains the actions and outcomes of the tanker incident quite accurately.

## Event #2: Abkhazian APRA Bank Card Expansion (2020)

While few incidents are as well documented and as clearly indicative of expanding Turkish self-interest as the 2009-2010 Tanker incident, the expansion of Abkhazian international bank cards to the Turkish banking sector in 2020 reveals an additional economic event that points to Türkiye's skilled employment of diplomacy and international manoeuvrings to expand Turkish interests while forgoing potential consequences. In the following sections, I cover the interactions of the event that form the basis of what is depicted in my causal mechanism below, labelled "Causal Mechanism #2".

## Causal Mechanism #2



## Abkhazian Bank Card Plan: Parts 1 & 2

First envisioned in 2000 by Abkhaz de facto authorities, the APRA bank card system was dreamed up as a policy response to overcome Abkhazian financial isolation from the international finance sector. This system would enable locals and tourists alike to access bank accounts within the financially isolated territory of Abkhazia and beyond. According to the Abkhaz authorities, this idea was put on hold due to a lack of funds to implement the system (JAM News, 2016, Sep. 28). This stalled plan, however, was reawakened following Russian recognition of the region after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, which saw a \$11 Million Russian loan to the National Bank of Abkhazia in 2011 to develop an indigenous, internationally compatible, bank card system (JAM News, 2016, Sep. 28). In January of 2015, the system was officially launched to much fanfare. For years, however, the only foreign state to recognize the cards was the Russian Federation. Its advent enabled Russian tourists and Abkhazian expats to make withdrawals from one another's banking systems and was hailed as a breakthrough moment by Abkhazian authorities (JAM News, 2016, Sep. 28). In 2019, this Russian funded APRA system took a transformative step by completely integrating with the Russian Mir card payment system, effectively granting Abkhazian APRA card holders access to some foreign markets where Russian Mir cards were already accepted (notably the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Republic of Armenia) (Abkhaz World, 2020, Dec. 14). While becoming completely integrated with the Russian Mir system, the APRA cards retained their local Abkhazian branding as an indigenous project promoting Abkhazian independence and potentially furthering the region's dreams of increasing foreign recognition of the territory. Despite these advances and expansions into foreign markets, however, the APRA cards largely remained unnoticed and regarded as a Moscow-backed ploy to increase Abkhazian recognition on the international stage.

### **Surprise Integration With Turkish Banking System: Part 3**

In December of 2020, however, this long underreported subject burst forth into the centre of international focus when the Abkhazian de facto authorities released a surprise announcement that Abkhazian APRA cards were being integrated into the processing systems of two of Türkiye's largest banks (National Bank of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2020, Dec. 21). According to the announcement, a secret pilot program had been agreed to between Turkish authorities and Abkhaz officials to run test "industrial operations of cross-system" operability with an emphasis on testing the "clearing and settlements [abilities] for transactions performed in the terminal network of the two largest banks in Türkiye" — the İş Bank" and Ziraat Bank (National Bank of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2020, Dec. 21). The announcement further stated the success of the pilot program and the imminent operability between the APRA cards and the estimated one million service locations of the banks located nationally in Türkiye and internationally (National Bank of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2020, Dec. 21). These newly compatible Turkish banks also had minor footprints in Georgia proper, granting Abkhazian APRA card holders access to financial services in the heart of Georgian controlled territory (Kochiashvili, 2020, Dec. 23). A great setback for Georgian officials who had actively attempted to curb the expansion of Abkhazian financial instruments internationally.

### **Turkish Response to Backlash & Georgian Reaction : Parts 4-5**

In the furor that followed the announcement, Türkiye reacted with what has become its characteristic response to incidents concerning engagement with Abkhazia: aggressive diplomacy paired with deflective messaging seeking to downplay the significance of the event at hand. On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, just two days after the Abkhazian announcement, Fatma Ceren Yazgan, the Ambassador Plenipotentiary of Türkiye to Georgia at the time, issued a confusing statement reasserting Türkiye's unchanged policy of "recogniz[ing] the territorial integrity of Georgia" and

claiming that “there is no room for the provision of financial services to Georgia’s occupied regions by Türkiye” (Dobordjginidze, 2020, Dec. 23). Despite this reassuring and pro-Georgian Turkish messaging, the Turkish government did not deny the accusations of expanding financial access to Abkhazian APRA cards in Türkiye. Instead, the Turkish government attempted to deflect blame for the move by claiming the expansion of financial operability was nothing more than the expansion of operability to Russian Mir-card services with Turkish banks (InterPress News, 2020, Dec. 22). This forged a clear defence for the move by claiming the APRA cards were nothing more than a re-skinned version of Russia’s Mir cards. This Turkish defensive tactic was seized upon by Georgian officials who quickly mimicked the argument and defended the Turkish position on the matter. The Georgian Foreign Ministry’s Press and Information Department echoed the Turkish defence on December 22<sup>nd</sup> stating that “In fact, the APRA card is nothing more than a Russian MIR tax card, which is called APRA in Abkhazia” (InterPress News, 2020, Dec. 22). The Georgian side further provided diplomatic cover for Türkiye by stating that Türkiye had already explained the situation and “continue[ed] to work closely with all partner states on [the] issue” (InterPress News, 2020, Dec. 22). Georgian officials further ceded ground on the incident by stating that “our strategic partners [i.e. Türkiye], strongly support Georgia’s...territorial integrity [while continuing to] purs[ue] a policy of nonrecognition of the occupied territories” and were continuing to work with Georgia to prevent the expansion of “illegal attempts” by Russia to expand Abkhazian recognition (InterPress News, 2020, Dec. 22).

### Renegotiation of the Status Quo: Outcome

These multi-layered statements, which both exonerated Turkish actions while elevating Türkiye’s position as a key enforcer of Georgian policies towards the occupied regions, reinforced a regional change in the balance of power. The moves completely shelved potential Georgian grievances over the event, enabling the self-interested reshuffling of the status quo in favour of Turkish interests. Furthermore, the actions taken by Türkiye represented a direct undermining of Georgian interests in containing the homegrown Abkhazian financial system. This contradicted

the reality of a Turkish move that fundamentally hurt Georgian interests while reshaping an aspect of the regional status quo to benefit Türkiye.

In examining the background and outcome of this incident, it is important to understand the guiding rationales behind Turkish behaviours. At its heart, Türkiye most likely initiated the expansion of banking services to Abkhazian card holders due to its economic, political, and cultural interests in facilitating more seamless trade and connectivity between Türkiye and Abkhazia for the estimated 500,000-750,000 members of the Abkhazian-Turkish diaspora population. By successfully enabling the interoperability of the Abkhazian banking system with that of Türkiye's, the Turkish government stood to benefit economically by drastically improving financial connectivity between the two "states", socially by easing bureaucratic burdens on the diaspora's financial operations transnationally, and politically by winning political points with the politically influential diaspora voting bloc in Türkiye. In short, the logic for pushing Abkhazian bank operability heavily advantaged the Turkish government and helped increase its influence in the region. What is noteworthy, however, is not just that Türkiye pursued this policy without Georgian permission (a direct contradiction of its official policy on non-recognition of Abkhazia and its institutions), but the degree to which Georgia quickly submitted to ostensibly damaging Turkish actions.

The end result was an event that fundamentally undermined Georgian interests while promoting Turkish ones. While not every step outlined in my causal mechanism related to theoretical predictions of Turkish actions, notably steps 1 and 2, the behaviours exhibited by Türkiye from steps 3 until the outcome largely overlap with my theoretical prediction of expected Turkish behaviour. Furthermore, the two economic events retain many similarities that suggest a self-interested Turkish foreign policy approach to the region — a perspective that aligns with the behavioural predictions proffered by my combined Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory with the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs. In both events, Türkiye took calculated risks that reformed the regional status quo of non-engagement with Abkhazia in favour of redrawn rules that aided Turkish interests at the expense of Georgia's. All the while calculating the extent of boundary-pushing so as not to risk a rupture with Georgia. It is this playbook that Türkiye has continued to employ in the region that aligns so closely with the

self-interested predictions of my chosen theoretical lens. One deviation from my predicted theoretical behaviour, which I also discuss in my “Assessing the Fit” section, is the degree to which Türkiye engaged in strong diplomatic undertakings to prevent crises from taking root with Georgia. Türkiye employed robust diplomatic responses during both of the economic events examined, relying on both covert and secretive forms of negotiation to defuse the crises and smooth the transition to a negotiated status quo in its favour. While highly successful, this form of constructive diplomatic engagement is not a form of predicted behaviour outlined in my combined theoretical lens.

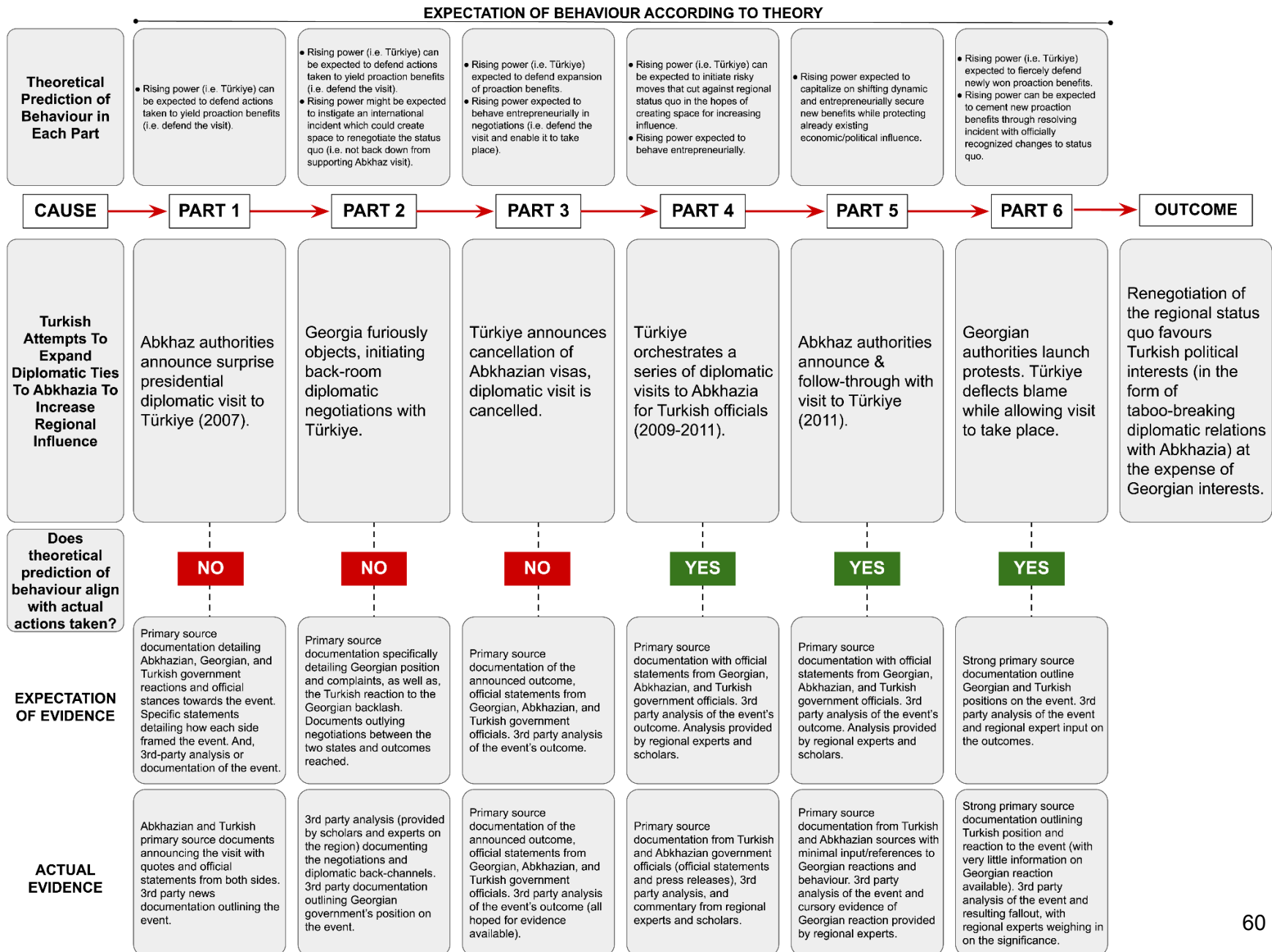
While it seems probable that the outcome of the APRA bank card expansion to Türkiye was at least partially the result of a self-interested foreign policy move, it is important to leave room for additional explanatory factors which deviate from my chosen theoretical lens. While numerous factors could potentially explain the incident’s outcome, the most probable supplementary explanation remains that Abkhazia exaggerated the APRA card expansion to falsely associate the rollout with an expansion of foreign recognition of the territory’s independence. When in reality the expansion simply reflected a Turkish acceptance of all variations of Russia’s Mir card program. In this scenario, the explanations of Türkiye and Georgia are more realistic and the political fallout from the move is less straightforward (i.e. the move had more to do with Turkish-Russian financial relations than Abkhazian-Turkish). While it is possible that the impact of the expansion was exaggerated by Abkhazian authorities, the spread of the Abkhazian card system to the Turkish financial sector still fundamentally represented a clear erosion of Georgian control over the territory and a bolstering of mutual Turkish-Abkhazian interests. Thus, regardless of the reasons or factors considered the event marked a bolstering of Turkish interests and a recrafting of the regional status quo to benefit its national desires.

# Political Event Through the Lens of Process Tracing

## Event #1: Sergey Bagapsh's Visit to Türkiye (2007-2011)

Some of the most important and best documented political events that have occurred between Türkiye and Abkhazia over the course of the past several decades took the form of high-profile diplomatic visits made by Turkish and Abkhazian officials to one another's territories in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Out of these numerous exchanges, perhaps the best documented was the saga of the Abkhazian de facto president Sergey Bagapsh's attempts to visit Türkiye for an "unofficial" diplomatic visit. While the episode in question actually occurred in 2011, the roots of the event date back to early 2007 and reveal the long-game strategy at times employed by Türkiye when navigating sensitive diplomatic matters regarding engagement with Abkhazia. The event transpired during a period when an observable increase in Turkish political engagement with Abkhazia was taking place, potentially indicating an increased Turkish desire for political influence in Abkhazia. The actions taken by Türkiye during the event were also emblematic of Turkish strategy towards political engagement with Abkhazia over the past several decades (with only some events and behaviours showing drastically different strategies and outcomes). For this reason, as well as practical constraints limiting the number of events able to be examined in this paper, I have chosen to employ Theory-Testing PT to examine the saga of Sergey Bagapsh's 2007-2011 visit to Türkiye as a representative example of Turkish strategy when engaging politically with Abkhazia. The actions taken during the course of the event form the basis for the causal mechanism depicted below, labelled as "Causal Mechanism #3".

### Causal Mechanism #3



## Abkhazian Announcement of Diplomatic Visit: Part 1

The saga began in early 2007 when the then president of Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, released an official statement announcing his intention to lead a delegation of high-level Abkhazian governmental officials and businessmen to Türkiye from April 21st-25th, 2007. According to scholars, citing Abkhazian government sources, the multi-day unofficial diplomatic visit was formally aimed at forging closer relations with the robust Abkhaz diaspora residing within Türkiye (Kapanadze, 2014) and was instigated by an official invitation extended to Bagapsh by the Türkiye -based Federation of Abkhaz Associations (ABHAZFED) and the Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED) (Kanbolat, 2011, Apr. 5). While Abkhazia's stated aim of the visit was to strengthen ties between the de facto government and the sizable Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora, the underlying political implications of an Abkhazian government delegation freely visiting Türkiye, with the implicit permission of the Turkish government, was quite different. In reality, the visit presented a strong signal of deepening Turkish-Abkhazian political ties that negated Georgia's long standing objections to such unfettered engagement.

## Georgian Objections & Türkiye's Reversal: Parts 2 & 3

In the months after the Abkhazian announcement of the impending visit, a series of secretive diplomatic actions took place between Türkiye and Georgia. While information regarding the diplomatic exchanges is hard to come by, it is widely believed that Georgia issued a series of strong *démarches* against Turkish complicity in abetting the visit (Kapanadze, 2014). While these discussions were ongoing, Bagapsh suffered a hospitalisation on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007 and announced a postponement of the Türkiye visit on April 21<sup>st</sup>. While the cause of this postponement, officially the ill-health of Bagapsh (Civil Georgia, 2007, Apr. 12) was unilaterally announced and decided upon by the Abkhazians, Georgian protests and government *démarches* eventually forced a reversal by Turkish policymakers. In November of 2007, Türkiye's then president, Abdullah Gül, announced a refusal of Turkish authorities to issue Bagapsh with a visa

to enter Türkiye (Civil Georgia, 2007, Nov. 21). The surprise announcement was issued during a joint news conference with Georgia's then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, in Tbilisi on November 21. Gül justified the visa cancellation by stating "I can only reiterate in this regard that Türkiye supports Georgia's territorial integrity" (Civil Georgia, 2007, Nov. 21), referencing the oft-repeated verbal support for Georgian sovereignty over Abkhaz lands that Türkiye has frequently employed when implementing damage control during Georgian-Abkhazian crises. For its part, Georgia warmly greeted the Turkish announcement with president Saakashvili stating that Türkiye "plays a positive role in resolving conflicts in the region" (Civil Georgia, 2007, Nov. 21) indicated a resolution to the incident that retained Türkiye's cosy pre-existing relationship with Georgia while foregoing the potential deepening of political ties to Abkhazia. This public cancellation of the 2007 visit, however, was just the beginning of what would become a years-long saga of increasingly inflammatory diplomatic exchanges between Türkiye and Abkhazia.

#### Türkiye Breaks Diplomatic Norms: Part 4

Starting in 2009, Türkiye's self-imposed diplomatic restraint with respect to Abkhazian exchanges gave way to robust diplomatic engagement with the region. Arguably the first step on this path occurred on September 8th-9th of 2009, when the Turkish then-Deputy Undersecretary Ünal Çeviköz visited Sukhumi and held a series of meetings with Abkhaz officials to discuss the prospective for further cooperation, specifically along economic dimensions (Kapanadze, 2014). This provocative visit was followed up by a second high-profile diplomatic visit in 2010 by the head of Türkiye's Caucasus Department, Nurdan Bayraktar, and Türkiye's Ambassador to Georgia Levent Murat Burhan (Kapanadze, 2014). This time, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly proclaimed the purpose of the visit to be the maintenance of Turkish-Abkhaz relations through "discuss[ions on] establishing direct trade relations with Abkhazia" (Kapanadze, 2014, p. 58). These highly contentious visits marked a reordering of Türkiye's previously unambitious stance on diplomatic engagement with Abkhazia and reopened the door for reciprocal visits from Abkhaz politicians to Türkiye.

## Bagapsh Visit Round Two: Part 5

In September of 2010, Türkiye's newfound commitment to engagement with Abkhazia was tested as Sergey Bagapsh announced the "planning [of a] visit [to] Türkiye [to] meet the Abkhaz diaspora there" (Abkhaz World, 2011, Apr. 5). Similar to the abortive visit in 2007, Bagapsh outlined a broad delegation of both Abkhazian officials and businessmen who would accompany him on the multi-day diplomatic mission to Türkiye. The significance of the diplomatic exchange was highlighted by the inclusion of high-level members of Abkhazia's government, including the then Foreign Minister Maxim Gvinjia, Minister of Economics Kristina Ozgan, and the President of the National Bank Ilarion Argun (Abkhaz World, 2011, Apr. 7). With a date set for April of 2011, the visit was clearly a pre-planned event that required prior authorization from Turkish authorities to take place. Yet unlike the hostile, yet effective, diplomatic rejoinder that Georgia mustered during the proposed 2007 visit, the Georgian public outcry in the lead up to the April 2011 visit was wholly unsuccessful in derailing the exchange. Thus, on April 7<sup>th</sup> 2011, Sergey Bagapsh's entourage landed in Türkiye. Over the course of the next four days, Bagapsh and the Abkhazian delegation held numerous meetings with various Abkhazian diaspora organisations and business groupings across several Turkish cities (Civil Georgia, 2011, Apr. 7a). And while unofficial in nature, meaning no known meetings were held between the Abkhazian entourage and Turkish officials (Civil Georgia, 2011, Apr. 7b), the trip was a breakthrough moment for Turkish-Abkhazian diplomacy. It forged new connections between the de facto government and the Turkish Abkhazia diaspora, while boosting cooperation between the two "states" on matters concerning trade and connectivity.

## Türkiye's Enablement & Reshaping the Status Quo: Part 6 & Outcome

While this visit did serve the practical interests of Türkiye by boosting diplomatic and economic connectivity to Abkhazia, it also presented difficulties for the Turkish-Georgian relationship. The Georgian reaction to the visit was defined by characteristically harsh protests against the expansion of diplomatic connections to Abkhazia (Kapanadze, 2014). For Türkiye, the wholesale change in policy, which allowed sitting members of the de facto Abkhazian government to visit

Türkiye, warranted a strong defence that could satiate Georgian anger over the episode. Thus, on April 7<sup>th</sup>, the day of Bagapsh's arrival to Türkiye, the Turkish Foreign Ministry released an official statement aimed at quieting Georgian unease over the visit. The statement downplayed the Abkhazian diplomatic visit stating that "The visit of Mr. Sergey Bagapsh to Türkiye will take place purely on medical grounds upon the invitation by the civil society associations founded by Turkish citizens under their sole responsibility. The visit has by no means an official character" (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011, Apr. 7). This stance both underplayed the significance of the visit, by playing on Bagapsh's past medical issues, and washed the Turkish government's hands of any complicity in the trip by refusing to accept blame as a party to the visit. This sidestepping of culpability was reinforced by Türkiye's employment of rhetorical support for the status quo in the region, once again supporting Georgian control over Abkhazia, stating "Türkiye perfectly shares the sensitivity of Georgia concerning her territorial integrity. In that respect, Türkiye respects and supports the territorial integrity of Georgia within her internationally recognized borders, a policy that remains a fundamental position" (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011, Apr. 7). This dual-sided message, which was delivered in the rarely-employed format of a public governmental press release, showcased the lengths that Türkiye was prepared to go to in order to protect its economic and political interests with Georgia while simultaneously expanding diplomatic ties to Abkhazia. Its suspect rationale, claiming the visit to be purely medical in nature, was both contradicted by the Abkhazian government and members of the Abkhazian diaspora organisations (Kanbolat, 2011, Apr. 5), all of whom stressed the importance of the trip for building economic and diplomatic connections. And, while the diplomatic visit stoked protests by Georgia, the momentarily inflamed tensions were extinguished by Türkiye's efforts at diplomatic damage control (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011, Apr. 7). This resulted in a diplomatic event that fundamentally reshaped the regional status quo, concerning Turkish political connections with Abkhazia, to the benefit of Türkiye.

While Turkish decision making in 2007 was much more timid and responsive to Georgia *démarches*, the tacit endorsement of Bagapsh's visit in 2011 marked a reversal of Turkish policy and strategic doctrine on matters pertaining to political relations with Abkhazia. This positional change is reflected in the divide between the first three parts and the last three parts of the event's

causal mechanism. In the first three parts, Türkiye's behaviour was far more timid and ultimately resulted in a reversal of policies that had originally aimed to alter the regional status quo. Parts 4, 5, 6, and the outcome, however, all strongly aligned with my theory's behavioural predictions of Turkish actions under the prescribed circumstances. This alignment began with Türkiye explicitly permitting the unofficial diplomatic exchange to take place despite Georgian protests. More importantly, it provided robust political cover and defence for the visit in its immediate aftermath. The visit also aided and expanded Turkish interests in the region by satiating the robust domestic political bloc of Turkish-Abkhazian diaspora voters, who long sought greater support for political connectivity with Abkhazia and potentially boosted Turkish political influence in Abkhazia through greater cooperation and connection to the political elites of the region. The defiance of Georgian protests in favour of altering the regional status quo to its benefit thus suggests an implicitly self-interested Turkish foreign policy that at least partially aligns with the behavioural predictions of my chosen theoretical lens.

While my causal mechanism of this event suggests a corresponding partial match with the predicted behaviour of my theoretical lens, it is important to leave room for other explanations. In particular, it is plausible that the reshaping of the status quo regarding Turkish-Abkhazian political connections was the result of a secretly agreed upon settlement between Georgia and Türkiye. In this settlement, Georgian officials may have tacitly granted permission for Türkiye to increase their influence in Abkhazia as a means of proportionally weakening Russia's iron-grip over the region. The politically unsellable nature of such a hypothetical back-room deal to the Georgian populace, however, would necessitate an official Georgian protest and Turkish response to any events concerning Turkish-Abkhazian political engagement. Under these circumstances, however, the protests would potentially be window-dressing only (as potentially was the case with the Sergey Bagapsh visit). In this scenario, Türkiye would still be reshaping the regional status quo to its own benefit, but with the covert approval of Georgia. Such a scenario, however, is extremely difficult to prove and outside the scope of my argument or research (although it does potentially align with alternative explanations for the tanker incident examined in my previous section). Regardless of alternative explanations or additional guiding theories for Turkish actions towards political engagement with Abkhazia, the outcome of the Bagapsh visit incident fundamentally resulted in the breaking of regional taboos against

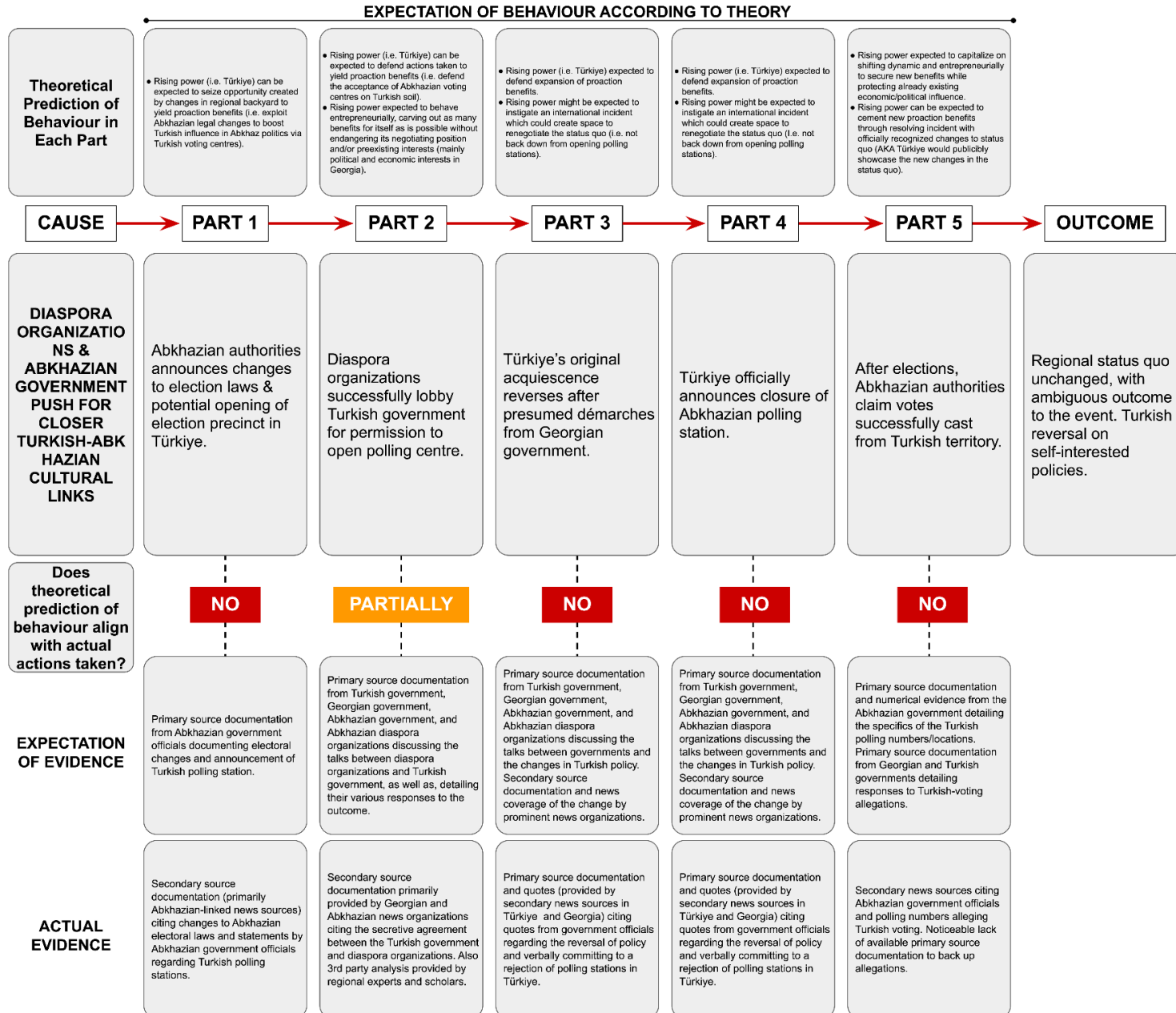
Turkish-Abkhazian political engagement and provided a springboard for Türkiye to boost its influence in the region. The outcome was a fundamentally favourable one for Türkiye, having retained both its robust political and economic partnership with Georgia and expanded its political ties with Abkhazia. Thus, we can confidently say that while not every action taken during the incident aligns with the behavioural predictions of my chosen theoretical lens, the self-interested, and status quo-reshaping result of the political incident broadly aligns with my theory. Revealing a behavioural pattern of self-interest that cuts across both economic and political dealings between Türkiye and Abkhazia.

## Cultural Event Through the Lens of Process Tracing

### Event #1: 2014 Abkhazian Presidential Elections (2014)

Since 2008, a majority of economic and political events between Türkiye and Abkhazia have left relatively visible paper trails conducive to conducting Theory-Testing PT research. The people-to-people nature of cultural events and interactions, which largely exist outside the realm of bilateral government relations, have left comparatively scant documentary trails. Making such events more difficult to analyse utilising PT methods. Despite these documentary difficulties, several cultural events between Türkiye and Abkhazia have burst forth from the relatively hidden realms of people-to-people interaction to rise to international prominence over the past few decades.

## Causal Mechanism #4



## Growing Diaspora-Abkhazian Connection: Cause

Out of these incidents, the opening of an Abkhazian polling station in Istanbul during the de facto state's 2014 presidential election proved to be one of the most important events of recent decades. The event, which contained strong undercurrents of a political incident, was a fundamentally culturally-driven phenomenon that emerged as a result of robust lobbying efforts from the well-organised Abkhazian diaspora community in Türkiye. This diaspora community attempted to use the polling station as a means to enable voting amongst the Abkhazian diaspora population residing within Türkiye, as well as for forging closer cultural and political links between Abkhazia and Türkiye. The resulting diplomatic dispute between Georgia and Türkiye also generated sufficient coverage of the event to make it a strong candidate for examination using PT methods (although this event still remains the weakest causal mechanism scrutinised in this paper). For these reasons as well as practical considerations regarding the feasibility of examining too many events in this paper, I have elected to examine the opening of the 2014 Abkhazian polling station in Türkiye as my paper's single cultural event. The event's individual parts are conceptualised by the causal mechanism outlined on the previous page, labelled "Causal Mechanism #4".

### Abkhazian Election Law Changes: Part 1

While the documentary trail leading up to the opening of the Abkhazian presidential polling booth in Istanbul is sparse and relatively obscure due to the back-door nature of diaspora organisation's preparations, the event's origins can be traced to a month before the August 24<sup>th</sup> 2014 date of the election. On July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, third party news organisations focusing on Abkhazian politics reported a move by Abkhazia's de facto Parliament to pass an amendment to the region's election laws (InterPress News, 2014, Aug. 15). The amendment purportedly aimed to enable polling booths to be established in third-party nations that did not recognize the independence of Abkhazia (InterPress News, 2014, Aug. 15), a clear effort to expand voting centres outside of the limited geographic areas of Russia and Abkhazia proper. In particular, the

move appeared aimed at expanding voter access, political linkages, and connectivity with the 500,000-750,000 strong Abkhazian diaspora population living in Türkiye. While little is publicly known as to the nature of cooperation between Turkish and Abkhazian government officials on enabling the legal overhaul, it is widely assumed that the Turkish government had no part in facilitating the changes. Evidence for this is found in the strong denunciation of the election issued by Türkiye's then ambassador to Georgia, Irakli Koplatadze. Koplatadze claimed that Türkiye had no desire to aid in the Abkhaz elections and wished to "alienate themselves from these elections and support Georgia's territorial integrity" instead (InterPress News, 2014, Aug. 15). It is thus probable that the changes in the Abkhazian electoral laws originated from the strong cultural linkages between Abkhazia's diaspora population in Türkiye and the de facto authorities. Evidence pointing to this cultural foundation of the event appeared in the immediate aftermath of the Abkhazian legal overhaul. On July 24<sup>th</sup>, just days after the passing of legal reforms, Abkhazia's Central Election Commission issued a statement raising the possibility of polling stations opening in Türkiye (APSNYPRESS, 2014, Jul. 24).

## Abkhazian Diaspora Lobbies Turkish Government: Part 2

This was almost immediately seized upon by Abkhazian diaspora organisations in Türkiye, who in early August, launched an intense lobbying effort with the Turkish government, pushing the authorities to authorise the opening of a polling station in Türkiye proper (InterPress News, 2014, Aug. 15). The specifics of the backdoor wrangling, between the politically powerful diaspora groups and the Turkish government, are not known. What is clear, however, is that on August 14<sup>th</sup> the chairman of Abkhazia's Central Election Commission, Batal Tabagua, officially announced the scheduled opening of a polling station in Istanbul (Abkhaz World, 2014, Aug. 14). Scholars, regional experts, and Turkish government officials all attributed this tacit breakthrough of Abkhazian political recognition to the lobbying and organisational efforts of Türkiye's Abkhazian diaspora groups (Kapanadze, 2014). The fact that the breakthrough was predominantly spearheaded by private nongovernmental institutions also provided the Turkish government with a tacit defence for their authorisation of the polling station's opening. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Georgian news sources quoted the Turkish government's official position as

“refus[ing] to support [the Abkhazian election], however, they are toeing the line and, thus, they cannot ban the representatives of Abkhazia from opening polling stations in unofficial private institutions” belonging to Abkhazian diaspora groups in Türkiye (InterPress News, 2014, Aug. 15). Thus, the strong culturally-based connection between Abkhazian diaspora groups and the de facto government provided Türkiye’s government with a shield of deniability. This was a strategy that Türkiye previously employed to defend its consistently increasing levels of Turkish-Abkhazian trade over the years, minimising such trends as the “result of private initiatives not endorsed by the [Turkish] government” (Kapanadze, 2014, p. 59). While at times successfully in deflecting blame, the government’s employment of this distancing tactic failed to appease Georgian anger during the polling station incident.

### Georgian Pushback & Turkish Reversal: Parts 3 & 4

While documentary evidence detailing the scale of Georgia’s pushback to the event is scant, regional experts have insinuated that Türkiye’s subsequent moves were heavily influenced by Georgian démarches and fears over a deterioration in Turkish-Georgian relations (Kapanadze, 2014). On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, just days before the Abkhazian election, Georgian news sources cited Türkiye’s then ambassador to Georgia, Levent Gumrukcu, as stating “the Turkish government does not recognize the upcoming so-called presidential election in Abkhazia...taking this into account, the Turkish authorities must not give official permission for opening polling stations or installing the ballot boxes” (Trend News Agency, 2014, Aug. 22). While ambiguously worded, the statement portended an official shuttering of the planned Abkhazian polling centre in Istanbul (Kapanadze, 2014). Officially, Türkiye had decided to interfere in the plans of the independent Abkhazian diaspora organisations, renegeing on their initial permittance of the polling station ostensibly in favour of preserving relations with Georgia.

## Abkhazian Claims of Active Turkish Polling Station: Part 5

Documentary evidence detailing the events of the next few days are hard to come by. What is clear, however, is that from the 22<sup>nd</sup> onward, Türkiye claimed to have taken Georgia's side in the dispute and closed the Istanbul-based Abkhaz polling station. Abkhazian sources, however, claimed that no such move had been made. On election day, Abkhazian authorities cited Istanbul as one of three official international electoral districts alongside Cherkessk and Moscow where votes had been cast (Interfax, 2014, Aug. 24), an allegation that represented a murky twist in a saga spearheaded by culturally-driven Abkhazian diaspora groups. Unfortunately, the practically non-existent documentary trail makes confirming or debunking the claims of electoral activity in Istanbul impossible. For their part, regional scholars who have examined the event have similarly been unable to confirm or deny the involvement of Türkiye in the Abkhaz elections (Kapanadze, 2014).

### An Unchanged Regional Status Quo: Outcome

In the absence of substantial documentation, three distinct scenarios remain the best explanations for what potentially transpired. (1) Türkiye followed its word and closed the polling station, only to have Abkhazia falsely claim votes originated from Türkiye-proper in order to boost the election's legitimacy. Or, (2) Türkiye misled Georgia (and the international community) claiming to have shuttered the Abkhazian election precinct only to secretly enable voting in an effort to boost domestic political clout with the Turkish Abkhaz diaspora community and increase Turkish influence in Abkhazia proper. Or, (3) Türkiye followed its word and shuttered the polling booth, only to have Abkhazian diaspora groups secretly organise illegal polling stations in an effort to circumvent Turkish governmental authority over the matter. While additional explanations are plausible, out of the three scenarios detailed above, only the outcome of the second truly aligns with expected behaviours predicted by my chosen theoretical lens. Furthermore, nearly every action taken by Türkiye at each part of the causal mechanism did not align with the expected

behaviours predicted by my theoretical lens (the one exception being part 2 where Türkiye timidly granted permission for a polling station to open). The relative disinterest of Türkiye, which quickly capitulated officially and backed Georgia's position on the event, represents a clear break with the self-interested and defensive positioning taken by Türkiye on other economic and political events examined in this paper. The end result was most likely a Turkish position that did not seek to rearrange the regional status quo for its own benefit. But instead attempted to preserve pre-existing relations and interests with Georgia. We can thus claim with reasonable confidence that in regards to this cultural event and potentially additional cultural events between Abkhazia and Türkiye more generally, Turkish behaviour does not match the predicted behaviour of my chosen theoretical lens.

## Assessing the Fit: Theoretical Lens & Explanatory Power in Turkish-Abkhaz Relations

While this paper only examined four unique events across the economic, political, and cultural realms of Turkish-Abkhazian engagement, their unique circumstances and dispersed timelines makes them highly suitable candidates for extrapolating the explanatory fit of my chosen theoretical lens to the broader Turkish-Abkhazian relationship. While I previously explained each event's individual alignments to the expected behaviours according to my chosen theory, it is important to address the results of my Theory-testing PT analysis in a more general way. Out of the four events examined, it can confidently be said that the two economic events and one political event broadly aligned with the core behavioural expectations predicted by the hybrid Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory and with The Two-goods Theory of Foreign Policy. When examining the unique causal mechanisms created for each of these three events, it is clear that the outcomes of each event resulted in a fundamental re-orientation of the regional status quo in the BSR. Türkiye had exploited each of the events in question to challenge a pre-existing status quo (i.e. challenge an undesired norm in the region that did not adequately benefit Türkiye) in order to reforge a new consensus (through both clandestine and transparent

means) that favoured Turkish interests over those of other regional actors (i.e. Georgia). This kind of revisionist behaviour is precisely what my theoretical lens predicts to see in the foreign policies of rising middle powers. It is the combined outcome of a dissatisfaction with the pre-existing status quo (which Lemke argues arises when middle powers feel such regional arrangements underrepresent the interests of these increasingly powerful nations) and a desire to seek proaction benefits from boarding regions and states (which Morgan and Palmer argue middle power states seek in order to entrepreneurially exploit neighbouring regions with the goal of increasing their own regional power and wealth). At its core, Turkish behaviour in the first three events generally matched these predicted behaviours, outlined in detail in each event's causal mechanism. With these three outcomes matching the expected behaviour of Türkiye, we can thus reason that our chosen theoretical lens does a good job at partially explaining Turkish behaviour in its engagement with Abkhazia when examining our chosen economic and political events.

While these first three events generally align with the behavioural predictions of my theoretical lens, the fit is not perfect. Notably, the theoretical prediction that rising middle power states would actively seek to ignite international incidents and disputes with the goal of creating opportunities for reforging regional status quos is a theoretical prediction that did not occur during any of the events examined (including the fourth cultural event). While Türkiye took provocative actions in each of the events analysed, its robust diplomatic response to each event (which sought to placate Georgian fury and denunciations) represented a fundamentally different approach to that of the unconcerned conflict initiation behaviours prediction outlined by my theoretical lens. Instead, Türkiye appeared to behave in a highly calculated manner, initiating provocative moves that attempted to reshape the status quo for its own benefit, while assiduously working to avoid any ruptures with its ally Georgia. Its fluid approach to rebalancing, on each event examined, reflects a self-interested foreign policy approach tempered by rationalist desires to maintain robust relations with Georgia. Overall, this reflects a more constrained variation of the behavioural predictions originally outlined in the theoretical texts. The rationales behind this careful diplomacy-centred approach to reshaping regional status are potentially innumerable. What is clear, however, is it represents a distinct divergence from the predicted behaviour of my

theoretical lens. It is this primary disconnect between the theory and real behaviour that differentiates Türkiye's behaviour during all four events examined.

Lastly, while the first three economic and political events largely aligned with the behavioural predictions of my chosen theoretical lens and the outcomes in particular, the single cultural event that I examined drastically differed from the self-interested and status quo reshaping predictions of my theory. In the cultural event, Türkiye's behaviour was entirely divorced from the predicted behaviour at nearly every step of the causal mechanism. While Türkiye briefly flirted with a path that would have potentially aligned with expected behavioural predictions, it swiftly reoriented away from controversial moves at reshaping the status quo for its benefit. While the rationales for why Türkiye behaved so differently during this one event are outside the scope of my research, it points to a potentially interesting Turkish strategy towards the region that warrants future research. This is the potential that Türkiye places different levels of importance on reforging different aspects of regional status quos in its favour. It is possible that Türkiye simply places more importance on economic and political scenarios which more immediately and directly boost the wealth and influence of Türkiye in the region. At the same time, concerns over rearranging cultural events to Türkiye's favour are often not worth the diplomatic headaches or potential breaches of the relationship with Georgia. Regardless of the reason, the flexible and highly differentiated outcomes of the economic and political events from the cultural event warrants a deeper look to parse out if Türkiye takes an entirely different approach towards self-interested policies in the cultural realm than it does in the immediately beneficial economic and political realms. Additionally, further research may be required to understand why Georgia so readily accepted the overturning of advantageous status quos for more Turkish-centric regional authority.

Overall, the result of my broad-based Theory-Testing PT research provides a partial explanatory fit, for why Türkiye behaves the way it does in Abkhazia. Let's revisit my research question: **To what extent does the combined Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory & the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs explain Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia between 2008-2022?** At this point, we can confidently answer that the hybrid theoretical lens results in a partial explanation of Turkish behaviour towards Abkhazia between 2008-2022 with

some questions left unanswered. After examining the four events, the three-for-four result, which saw the regional status quo entrepreneurially altered for Türkiye's benefit, reveals a Turkish foreign policy towards the region built upon core aspects of extraction and a self-interested remoulding of regional power balances to favour itself. This partial explanation still falls short of explaining why Turkish behaviour varies so much case-to-case. Türkiye's highly diplomatic approach to relations with Georgia also warrants further examination. In the meantime, my hybrid theoretical lens consisting of the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory and The Two-good Theory of Foreign Policy provides a partial explanation that Türkiye behaves the way it does in Abkhazia due to an entrepreneurial and self-interested foreign policy that is aimed at reshaping regional status-quo's to its favour in a step-by-step (and case-by-case) fashion whenever such moves are deemed to be achievable without risking a rupture with Georgia.

## Conclusions

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Abkhazia has been a region beset by conflict, uncertainty, and foreign meddling that has generally centred on Georgian-Russian power struggles over the breakaway region. Since the brief 2008 Russo-Georgian war, however, a new player has continuously increased its engagement with the region in an ambiguous bid to alter the long-time regional dynamics present in Abkhazia. Türkiye, a long-time Georgian ally and sometimes partner of Russia, has increased its economic, political, and cultural engagement with Abkhazia in an often clandestine manner. Its behaviours have left regional experts, scholars, governmental leaders, and allies all guessing at the intentions of the Turkish government in its engagement with Abkhazia. Its policies have at times resulted in international incidents, between Türkiye and Georgia, while testing the limits of diplomacy and good will between an increasingly irritated Georgian government. An increase in diplomatic conflagrations and international incidents between Türkiye and Georgia in the late 2000s and early 2010s spawned a renewed interest in Türkiye's role in the region amongst scholars. A resulting wave of papers, analyses, and documents largely argued that Turkish engagement with the region stemmed from one of three distinct explanations:

1. Türkiye's sizable Abkhaz diaspora as the primary impetus for its robust engagement with the region,
2. Türkiye as a bridge-builder, acting to de-isolate the region and promote conflict de-escalation,
3. Türkiye as a self-interested world power, pursuing purely self-enriching geopolitical gains through engagement with the region.

While each of these explanations partially helped explain one-off events transpiring between Türkiye and Abkhazia, they fundamentally failed to capture the complex decades-long pattern of Turkish behaviour in the region. Toward the goal of better explaining this long-term pattern in Turkish foreign policy towards Abkhazia, I applied a new hybrid theoretical lens, which fused the social science theories of the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory with The Two-Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs, to be utilised in this Theory-Testing PT paper. The four events which were selected for my research, from economic, political, and cultural events which transpired between 2008-2022, represented a microcosm of Turkish behaviour towards the region over the past several decades and provided detailed document trails for me to examine the actions and outcomes of Turkish policy in the region.

In my original research, which saw the construction of four unique Theory-Testing PT causal mechanisms, through which I examined the actions and outcomes of Türkiye's engagement with Abkhazia, a more focused view of Turkish engagement with the region came into contrast. While not a perfect fit, my Theory-Testing PT approach revealed a connection between Turkish behaviour in three of the four events examined and the behavioural predictions proffered by my unique hybrid theoretical lens. In other words, the outcomes of three of the four events examined displayed a Turkish tendency to engage with Abkhazia for the purpose of altering the regional status quos, piece by piece, to better favour Türkiye's own interests at the expense of other regional states (i.e. Georgia). While the outcomes of these events correlate heavily with my theory's behavioural predictions, they do not account for the immense importance which Türkiye

placed on diplomatic manoeuvrings and damage control with Georgia. This diplomatic approach, observed in each of the events, largely played a role of placating Georgian governmental concerns and preventing the emergence of international incidents from occurring. It formed a crucially important soothing element of Turkish foreign policy towards the region (i.e. Abkhazia and Georgia) that was not predicted by my theoretical lens. Nonetheless, its prominence in Turkish policy towards the region makes it a key ingredient in the overall policy which cannot be ignored. Overall, my research concludes that the answer to this paper's central question is that the Multiple Hierarchy Model of Power Transition Theory & the Two Goods Theory of Foreign Affairs offers a partial explanation for why Türkiye behaves the way it does in the region. While key elements of Turkish diplomacy are not well explained by my theory, it is my hope that future research can build on this wide-angle approach to one day fully answer why Türkiye engages with Abkhazia the way it does.

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