

## Issue of Abkhazia and ShidaKartli (South Ossetia) in ecclesiastical relations between Russia and Georgia in the Post-Soviet period

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### Abstract

*Ecclesiastical relationship is one of the most essential between neighboring countries, especially if they adhere to the same conviction. As history shows up religion is not always a spiritual issue, but it may also be quite an earthly matter – like remedy of fulfilling state's aims and interest, wherever politicians are powerless. The history of coreligionist countries – Georgia and Russia is full of political difficulties – Orthodox Churches were part of these political relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Georgia and Russia became independent countries, but Russia's political and economic interests towards Georgia (especially some parts of the country) remained. In this article there is discussed the role that the Orthodox Church played in the post-soviet period relations between the states.*

**Keywords:** Ecclesiastical relations, Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Orthodox Churches, Post-Soviet

### Introduction

Official relations between the two countries include many areas. Often, they may not agree on certain issues, but there may be other areas of cooperation, such as science, culture, religion (in case of common belief) and so on. In this paper there is discussed the relationship between the two neighboring countries, Georgia and Russia in issues of religion. During the history, in hard times, Georgia chose its ally or protector large countries as Byzantium or Russia by the sign of common belief (Christian Orthodoxy).

The political-diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia are more or less known to the public, but not the Church diplomacy so far. It's notable that for Russia the Church has always been the means of influence or reaching difficult goals at politics in or out of the country, in occupied territories. The real politics was best covered by the feature of common belief by Russia towards the countries under threat. Though, it was not a secret for Georgia, still it was the only way out while being without choice (during the Georgian history there were situations of making choice among Turkey, Iran and Byzantium, lately Russia. Among these three powerful countries little Georgia, situated at the meaningful geopolitical place, was mostly choosing a partner on the common religion base, to avoid cultural and religious degeneration).

### 1.ShidaKartli

Shida (Inner) Kartli is the central part of Georgia, which played a significant role in forming common Georgian culture and language. In the 2nd half of the 1st millennium BC there was formed one of the first Georgian states – Iberia on this territory. The Karts were aborigine Georgian tribes after whom name of Georgia (in Georgian “Sakartvelo”) was formed. The Capital of Georgia – Tbilisi is situated in Kartli region (concretely, on the border of three regions: Shida (Inner) Kartli, Kvemo (Lower) Kartli and Kakheti). On the historical territory of Georgia, concretely, in ShidaKartli region, a new administrative unit "South Ossetia" appeared in the last two centuries. Nothing similar had ever occurred in the previous history of the country. By emergence of this new division, new domestic-political and ethnic problems were caused in Georgia. The foundation of "South Ossetia" was the act of Russia's imperial political principle “divideand rule”. (Kvirikashvili,2010)

#### 1.1. History and ethno genesis of Ossetians (Alans)

The ancestors of modern Ossetians - Alans, were descendants of Indo-European (North Iranian race) Skvith-Sarmats. They appeared in the North Caucasus in 8-7<sup>th</sup> cc BC.

They managed assimilation of local Caucasian, so-called Kubanian cultural tribes. Linguistically, the Ossetian language belongs to the North-Iranian group of Indo-European language family. There apparently seems a trace of centuries-old linguistic relations and assimilation with Iberian-Caucasian language family - Georgian, Nakh, Daghestanian, Abkhaz- Adyghe. (Jalabadze, 1987:45)

Since 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD the Ossetians often assaulted people of Kartli. In response the Georgian kings' punishing campaigns were followed. After such several facts, Ossetians were not mentioned in Georgian historical sources for several centuries. In 13<sup>th</sup> century - in the era of Georgia being without King, the Ossetians took advantage of domestic turmoil and began arriving to eastern Georgia through Daghestan and attacked the population.

First, Ossetians settled in the beginning of the rivers Big and Small Liakhvi, while later their settlements appeared at the beginnings of the river Ksani. Finally, in 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries the Ossetian population gathered in the central part of Caucasus mountain range densely and so the distribution of the Ossetians began to the mountain roots and lower lands. (Gvasalia, 1967:15)

### **1.2. Establishing the Autonomous Republic of South Ossetia in ShidaKartli Region**

On April 20, 1922, Communists, on the basis of the order received from Moscow, granted Ossetians central northern part of main Caucasus range, natural part of ShidaKartli region, where there was fabricated "the South Ossetian Autonomous District"<sup>1</sup>. It is not a secret that before that, history does not note any "South Ossetia" - neither as a geographical, nor as a political unit. Ossetians historic homeland was renamed as "Northern Ossetia", against the background of the new "Southern" unit, it is located in the North Caucasus till present days and the border between Georgia and Ossetia has always been ensured by nature – stretched along the verge of Great Caucasian range. Standing behind the South Ossetians, Russia strengthens separatists' movements and has launched so-called "South Ossetian" project for gaining the control over Georgians.

The term "South Ossetia" is as new, as the autonomous region itself.

It is fact that until 19<sup>th</sup> century in Georgian, Russian and other written sources there is not observed a single case where the term "South Ossetia" would be used and, in general, the division of Ossetia in southern and northern parts would be mentioned. Such prejudice was first written in 30's of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it was very rarely used even then. (Kvirikashvili, 2010).

Despite the fact that the South Ossetian Autonomous Region in ShidaKartli has never been Ossetians' motherland, they still had all the conditions of national culture and economic development in Georgia.

### **1.3. History of the Orthodox Church and establishment of diocese in so-called South Ossetia**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ossetians tended to return to the religion – and together with paganism the Orthodoxy was also revived. First, the leader of Christian parish of so called South Ossetia – Alexander Pukhaté wanted to join Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), as in 1990-1993, there was the acute process of ethnic tensions between Georgia and South Ossetia. The reason for the conflict was South Ossetia's desire to be separated from Georgia. These events finished with South Ossetia having declared its state sovereignty without the consent of Georgia. Georgia rated this move as outside the constitutional framework, which not only deprived the self-announced republic of opportunity becoming subject of international law, but also the prospect entering the Russian Federation by Ossetian's own desire. In 1992, A.Pukhaté made a request to the ROC to make South Ossetia part of the Moscow Patriarchate, but he was refused on the grounds that the Church cannot interfere in the affairs of a second local Church. That same year Ossetians addressed the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) with the same request. Their request was satisfied.

In 2001, when the Emigrant Church (*same ROCA*) split and was divided into two, the diocese of South Ossetia separated from ROCA, as there was the danger that the Diocese would be legally given to the Georgian Orthodox Church on the basis of negotiation between the discord parties. In 2003, the negotiations between the representatives of "Synod of Resistant" in Greece and South Ossetia's Diocese started.

As a result there was reached an agreement receiving the diocese as a part of this Old Style Christians' grouping. South Ossetians estimated this fact as a revival of the Diocese. (Slesarev, Noncanonical Orthodoxy)

<sup>1</sup>By that period **there lived 60 000** Ossetians were only 13% of the population in ShidaKartli Region **on that territory**.

Legally, the "South Ossetia" belongs to the Georgian Orthodox Church's Tskhinvali and Nikozidiocese under the leadership of Bishop Isaiah Chanturia. Consequently, according to Georgian church and state constitutional agreement, all of the Orthodox Churches in the territory of Georgia are under the control of the Georgian Patriarchate.

## **2. Abkhazia**

### **2.1. History of Abkhazia – the territory and nations living there**

History of Abkhazia causes a great difference in scientists' opinions, but the one thing all agree is that this region played undoubtedly an important role during the entire existence of Georgian state. Since ancient times the territory of Abkhazia was a part of Georgia. The history of tribes and nations living on this territory is the issue of endless polemics. As a general characteristic of the Caucasus mountain regions, volume and frequent migration, tribal relations with the neighborhood was also an ordinary event in Abkhazia. During the history, Georgian was the leading element in the region; but various tribes' relations, temporary migrations or fusion was a joint process. Abkhazia was the part of the ancient Georgian states: Colchis (15-14<sup>th</sup> cc BC), and later, Egrisi (Lazika) (6<sup>th</sup> c. BC – 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD). In AD 8<sup>th</sup> century on the territory there was formed Georgian Principality of Abkhazia, which became one of the leading participants in creation united Georgian state. In the title of Whole Georgia's Kings, first Abkhazians were named: "The King of Abkhazians, Karts, Rans, Kakhs, Armenians, Shirvan Shah and Shahan Shah and all the East and West". In the next centuries the name "Abkhazia" was spread and was called not only on one region of Georgia, but the whole West part of the country<sup>2</sup>. Quite not rarely the Georgian Kings' title was shortened and was named only "King of Abkhazians" where Abkhazians stood for the whole Western Georgians. (Ingorokva, Kingdom of Abkhazia)

The situation has changed since 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Ottomans conquered vast territories of the Black Sea coast and came to Georgia from the South and the North. Encouraged North Caucasian tribes: Abazians, Djiks, Adyghe, Circassians and others massively began coming down to the south, on Abkhazia's territories, they intensified attacks on the entire West Georgia, kidnapped the local population and were selling them in the Crimea for the Ottomans. From the same time the alienation from Christianity of Abkhazian population is observed. (Rogava, 2007:196)

During these processes the North Caucasians settled in Abkhazia. Wherever their population appeared, there were canceled holy services at Orthodox cathedral centers and monasteries. As a result of such deliberate raids, in a consciousness of Georgians, the term "Abkhaz" was identified as alien, enemy. Adyghe-Abaza volumes, to whom Georgians mechanically moved in ancient Georgian population's name – "Abkhazians", massively settled on the territory between riv. Kelasuri and riv. Ghalidzga. Abaza families gradually gained prevailing conditions at feudal society, however, the main population and lord's house remained Georgian (Abkhaz-Megrelian). (Pipia, Ethnicity of Apshil-Abazgs)

### **2.2. Russia and Abkhazia**

This way Abkhazia have survived until the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. From the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia was involved in the process, which had held an eye on the territory of Georgia, especially Abkhazia for a long time. In 1810 Russia seized Sukhumi<sup>3</sup> and released it from the Ottomans. In 1864, when the Russian Empire ended obedience of Caucasia, Abkhazia became the first in the near future plans' list.

Empire was planning entire Russification of the region.

As a result of establishment the Russian colonial regime in Abkhazia, the discontent grew from day to day. In 1866 in connection with the preparations of intended peasants' reform, a great rebellion broke out in Abkhazia. The defeat of the population caused resettlement (exile) from Abkhazia of its significant part to the Ottoman Empire (so called Muhajiroba). Muhajiroba (exile) of Abkhazians to Turkey was a result of Russia's colonial policy.

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<sup>2</sup> Geographically Georgia is divided into two main parts – Eastern and Western Georgia. The Likhi (Surami) range lays in the middle of the country.

<sup>3</sup>Sukhumi – administrative center of Abkhazia

Russian Empire contributed resettlement of the Abkhaz population to Turkey; on the other hand it widely spread colonization practices on empty lands and allowed settlement on the land to everyone, but Georgians. The aim was canceling the Georgian-Abkhazian identity by their alienation from each other and finally rid of Abkhazia from Georgia. For this purpose in the beginning of 1860's Russian linguist and Caucasiologist P. Uslar invented Abkhazian alphabet on the basis of the Russian one<sup>4</sup>. (Labyrinth of Abkhazia, 1999:5)

In 1917 the Abkhaz people elected People's Representative Council in Abkhazia. Its delegation arrived to Tbilisi in 1918 and conducted negotiations on the status of Abkhazia with National Council of Georgia. By the agreement, Abkhazia was granted by the autonomous self-government within Georgia. The autonomy of Abkhazia was approved and officially announced by the Democratic Republic of Georgia<sup>5</sup> in a few days after declaration of independence (June 1918).

In 1919, there was elected the Abkhazian People's Council, which adopted an act about the entry of Abkhazia, as an autonomous unit, within Democratic Republic of Georgia. On May 7, 1920, by the contract concluded between Soviet Russia and the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Russia unconditionally recognized the independence of Georgia and Abkhazia's presence within it.

When on February 21, 1921 the Red Army of Soviet Russia occupied Georgia, Abkhazia was taken into the Soviet empire as a part of Georgia. During the Soviet rule, Abkhazians (mostly migrated North Caucasians are implied) were encouraged by the Russians and they held most of high positions in all areas of Abkhaz government, despite the fact that they were less than fifth of the population of Abkhazia of those times. Thus, during the whole existence of the Soviet Union in Abkhazia, there was discrimination of other nationalities at the cost of Abkhaz ethnocracy. (Tsintsadze, 1998:56)

### **2.3. War in Abkhazia in 1992-3**

Nomenclature of Abkhazia, which since the end of 1980's took the course of isolation from Georgia and connection to Russia, provoked ethnic hatred against Georgians in Abkhazia and called the government of the Soviet Union, for secession of Abkhazia from Georgia. Published requests were almost daily and published slanderous accusations against Georgia and Georgian people, which since 1989 were followed by the provocations of the separatist who killed many innocent people.

In 1991, the Abkhaz ASSR Supreme Council, which comprised the majority of Abkhazian separatists, intensified the allocation of lawmaking and practical activities toward separating from Georgia. In protest to a separatist course, the Georgian and other nationalities' representatives left the Council. In summer of 1992, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia illegally obtained several legislative acts, which announced the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia.

Improving the situation on August 10, 1992, the government of Georgia decided to send police and later, military units to Abkhazia, for protection the railway and highway. On this move preliminary agreement was reached with the Abkhaz leadership. On August 14, 1992, after this agreement, Georgian state moved police and limited contingent of military task force on its own territory of Abkhazia.

The same day, separatist leaders of Abkhazia, opened fire to Georgian troops in Gulripshi and Ochamchiré districts, causing loss of life. Separatists reported through mass media that Georgia attacked Abkhazia and announced a general mobilization of population. Thus began the war of 1992-1993 in Abkhazia<sup>6</sup>. (Labyrinth of Abkhazia, 1999:69)

<sup>4</sup> Until that Georgian language and writing was used in Abkhazia. The situation changed when Russians came and Russian language became leading in official relations. It should be noted that except Georgian there was also used Adyghe language as a colloquial but not official one.

<sup>5</sup> After collapse of Tsarist Russia, Georgia released from frames of the Empire and movement to independency began. In 1918 Democratic Republic of Georgia was established, which existed only three years, until Soviet Red Army conquered Georgia.

<sup>6</sup> By January 1, 1992, 535 061 people lived in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. By 1997 this number has been reduced to 145 586 - (i.e. by 72%). On January 1, 1992, there were 45.76% of Georgians among Abkhazia's populations. In 1997 their number was decreased by 200 000. As for the Abkhaz people, by same 1992, they were 17.73% of the entire population. Now Abkhazians are about 36.98% in Abkhazia, but it is not the rate of growth of their quantity, but only percentage indicator on the empty places of the region.

From the very first day of the conflict in Abkhazia, the third party became the Russian Federation, which assigned as a mediator.

On September 3, 1992 in Moscow was held the meeting of leaders of Georgia and the Abkhazian with the participation of the Russian Federation and representatives of the North Caucasus republics. In adopted final document was said:

“Article 1. The first section: "Ensure the territorial integrity of Georgia";

Article 9: “The Russian Federation's armed forces, which are temporarily on the territory of the Republic of Georgia, including Abkhazia, observe strict neutrality and do not take part in internal conflict. The state government and management bodies of Georgia, including Abkhazia, respect neutrality of located Russian Federal armed forces, and, if necessary, prevent illegal acts to military servers, their family members and military property.”

Article 11. The first section: “Being part of Russia, authorities of North Caucasus Republics and districts will effectively arrange prevention of any action from their territories – disuniting this agreement. They will assist in its implementation and the establishment of peace in the region ”, etc. (Tsintsadze,1998:56)

On October 1, 1992 was violated the agreement of September 3 and by the use of heavy equipment the Abkhaz side moved to an attack on the direction of Gagra.

Nations’ clash, war and as a result – Georgians’ forced abandonment of their land, is a great tragedy and pain of Georgian people up today. Russia has been consistently acted for this aim for two centuries. Now it is actively carrying out the policy of accession of Abkhazia with Russia.

Such was political background of Abkhazia and the Abkhaz ethnic group. Now I will introduce you, the way the history of the Diocese of Abkhazia developed and how did Russia use the Orthodox Church for its goals in Abkhazia.

#### **2.4. History of Diocese of Abkhazia**

As well as rest of Georgia, Abkhazia also was walked around and preached Christianity by the apostles of Christ in 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The holy apostle’s Simon from Canaan - grave is in Abkhazia, near Sokhumi. Due to its close location to Byzantium, the Christian groups had been quite a lot since the very beginning of Christianity on the territory of Abkhazia. A lot of Christians were exiled in Abkhazia from the Roman Empire during oppression of Christians in the 1-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. At the First World Church Meeting in Nicaea in 325 Bishop Stratophil from Bichvinta<sup>7</sup> is mentioned. This fact approves the existence of strong Christian groups on the Black Sea East coast since the very first centuries of spreading Christianity.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali was able to unite the country, eliminate Byzantine influence and gain Autocephaly for Georgian Orthodox Church. Centuries later one of the main Chairs of Georgian Catholicosate was founded in Bichvinta that included whole Western Georgia – Abkhazia, Samegrelo, Guria, Adjara, Imereti, Lechkhumi–Svaneti’s episcopate Chairs.

United Georgia collapsed in 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. There were formed small principalities and kingdoms. North Caucasian tribes, especially Adygea–Circassians took the opportunity of political crisis in Georgia, occupied territories neighboring them and settled in Abkhazia with their families.

In 1533, because of these invasions, Catholicosate throne was moved from Bichvinta to Gelati monastery but the rest of Abkhazian temples’ riches were seized by the tribes. Since 17<sup>th</sup> century due to invasions of mountain people, divine service had completely stopped in churches of Abkhazia. Abkhazia's Episcopacy had been restored in 50’s of 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was ruled by Georgians until 1885. Since 1885 the leadership of Sokhumi Diocese was seized by Russian bishops of anti-Georgian orientation. So, through the church the active encouragement of the national opposition occurred.

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<sup>7</sup>Bichvinta – ancient city on the Black Sea coast in Abkhazia region, Georgia.

In September, 1917, after the restoration of the autonomy, the first church meeting was invited. On the meeting the Diocese of Abkhazia had been restored and its leader was called Bishop of Tskhumi<sup>8</sup> and Bedia (in regard of main temples of Abkhazia). (Gugushvili, 2004)

During the existence of the Soviet Union, propaganda of Georgian and Abkhaz conflict continued, but as for church reforms or some changing movements in this sphere have not been mentioned, mostly because of Soviet atheist ideology. Also because that Abkhazia and Georgia were already parts of the Empire and its government did not intend to let them go.

During the Abkhazian war, the separatists and aliens unleashed special brutality towards clergy; they destroyed churches - aimed directly on Sokhumi Annunciation Cathedral during artillery bombardments, knowing that priests lived there.

During the war, priests and nuns were often going to the front line, baptized non-baptized soldiers, were giving Last Sacrament to the wounded and encouraged fighters with the word of faith.

### ***3. Georgia and the Autonomous Republics in the Post-Soviet period***

In the previous period of Soviet Union's collapse, when movement towards independence started in Georgia, President M. Gorbachev openly declared: "Georgia will leave the Soviet Union, but without Abkhazia and South Ossetia" (Kvirikashvili, 2006). The aspiration for independence and territorial integrity of Georgia, and therefore, Russia's state policy and imperial appetite was the reason of arising conflict between Abkhazians, Ossetians and Georgians.

Interesting is the issue of Russian government's attitude towards the processes taking place in Georgia. By the 1992-3 war years, the Russian government has violated the territorial integrity of Georgia and established his control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. ROC<sup>9</sup> chose a different way. In ecclesiastical relations, it continues to recognize the unity of Georgia's canonical territory (*Short History of the conflict* <http://www.parliament.ge>). Since 1993, the Abkhazian and South Ossetian Dioceses remained without spiritual food. Russia's violent policy does not give the right and opportunity to the Georgian Church to perform its function and commitment there. On such circumstances the Abkhazians' and Ossetians' desire had greatly affected.

#### **3.1. Searching spiritual shelter**

After the August War<sup>10</sup>, relations between Russians and Ossetians became little closer and nobody recalls past provocations. As for Abkhazia, the situation here is distinguished. After the war in Abkhazia in 1992-3 Abkhazian Archbishop Daniel of Georgian Orthodox Church had to leave the Diocese.

The Diocese was headed by the priest Besarion Apliaa, who appealed to the neighboring Patriarchates for help and soon broke off the Eucharistic connection with Patriarchate of Georgia. The diocese still has no official legal status up to present days, but uses benefit from the Moscow Patriarchate.

On October 6, 2008, session of the Russian Orthodox Synod was held, where eventually revealed that the Kremlin was left without a church support at Abkhazian and South Ossetian issue. In official statements of Russian Patriarchate is clearly heard, that there is no conversation about taking South Ossetia and Abkhazia in borders of Russian dioceses.

Practically, where the Russian influence was established, especially with military units, there Russian Church was included as well. But in case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it happened not exactly that way. As a rule, the ROC had to recognize the states, whose independence was recognized by Russia. But Moscow Patriarchate has its opinion, despite the fact, that it can give shelter to the Dioceses and easily find the reason for justification of this action. In this case, symphony between Russian church and state has not come out - Russian priests did not follow Russian tanks (Khramov, 2008). But, it is noteworthy, that this is only an official part. Actually, together with Russian policy Russian priests, architect-restorers and therefore, the parish appeared in Abkhazia.

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<sup>8</sup>Tskhumi - Old Georgian name of Sokhumi

<sup>9</sup> ROC - Russian Orthodox Church

<sup>10</sup> War between Russia and Georgia in August 2008

#### **4. Instead of Conclusion**

Getting acquainted with these materials, the following question arises: Is this because of such love and obedience to the canons, Russian church went contrary the state policy? That would be too unusual for Russia. The answer is - Of course, no. The case is an entirely different thing. First of all, the Moscow Patriarchate uses the term "canonical territory" to plea its policy to the Ukrainian and the Estonian Orthodox churches. So, by the recognition of these Georgian dioceses, it will immediately lose the rights to claim on these states' parishes, as Georgia also uses the same term towards Abkhazia's and Shida Kartli dioceses.

On the other hand, Georgian Orthodox Church is one of a few allies of Russian Orthodox Patriarchate in the international relations, while other Orthodox churches are clearly holding pro-Constantinople position<sup>11</sup>. So, loss of this kind of ally is not of Moscow Patriarchate's interest. Besides, recognition of two, territorially small and economically vulnerable dioceses will cause loss of rather greater and stronger churches of Ukraine and Estonia for Russia. Moreover, announcement of these dioceses under Russia's protection is related to big expenses, as there are to be carried out a lot of restoration proceedings that the Russian Church cannot manage for lots of damaged temples located on its own territory (Khramov, 2008).

So, obedience of the Russian Church to the canons is only formality that is caused by great economic and political estimations.

Summing up, we can say that Russia's historical interest to Abkhazia, has not changed. Economic and strategic calculations did not give Russia a moment's rest when considering Abkhazia within Georgia. Russia's interest and goal towards Georgia has always been the same, neither methods have changed much for centuries. As for Shida Kartli, as it seems, it does not matter as much as Abkhazia - located at the sea, but instead, by controlling the Shida Kartli region, Russia will create an important bridgehead on entire Transcaucasia. But Russian church has its calculations. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russian secular and religious authorities were acting together in carrying out internal and external policy. In case of Abkhazia and Shida Kartli, the Russian Orthodox Church chose a different position from the government, for getting hold of greater benefit as are churches of Estonia and Ukraine. However, Russia would not refuse violation of Georgian dioceses' borders and hence, the Orthodox Canons at the convenient times and it would find justifying documents for his moves by all means.

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<sup>11</sup> This fact is caused by political (territorial) interests

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