

**4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts**

**21-23 April 2023**

**Athens, Greece**

**Russian imperialist interests in the South Caucasus  
in the XVI-XVII centuries (according to the  
questionnaires of the Russian ambassadors)**

**Tamriko LekiaSvili**

*The University of Georgia, Georgia*

**Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to examine Russia's imperialist ambitions in the South Caucasus during the XVI-XVII centuries. During this period, the region was under the control of two powerful eastern countries, Persia and the Ottomans, which posed a threat to the stability of the region. However, by the mid-sixteenth century, a new political landscape began to take shape, with Moscow State emerging as a third power with its own strategic interests in the area. Unlike Persia and the Ottomans, Russia adopted a more diplomatic approach to its involvement in the region, avoiding military confrontation whenever possible.

Within the frames of the study, we employed the historical-comparative method, analyzing various historical facts and conducting a systemic analysis to draw relevant conclusions. Our research included an examination of written instructions and questionnaires from Russian ambassadors who were sent to the Georgian principalities during the XVI-XVII centuries. Through this analysis, we discovered that Moscow's primary objective during this period was to maintain its position in the Caucasus by establishing its influence among individual Caucasian sovereigns.

Our research also revealed that the Georgian kings and princes had an incomplete understanding of Russia's foreign policy objectives, despite their desire to be liberated from Persia and the Ottomans. This lack of understanding was due in part to the complexity of Russia's strategic goals in the region. Nevertheless, the common faith shared by Russia and Georgia provided a "good bait" for Russia to expand its influence in the region.

In preparation for its eventual attack on the Caucasus, Russia collected various types of political, economic, and statistical information to ensure its success. This information was critical to the success of Russia's imperialist ambitions in the South Caucasus during the XVI-XVII centuries.

**Keywords:** Diplomacy, Economics, Religion, Observation, Policy.

# **4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts**

**21-23 April 2023**

**Athens, Greece**

## **1. Introduction**

The South Caucasus, due to its strategic location, has been the subject of interest of great empires since ancient times. During different periods of time, Achaemenid Persian Empire, Rome, Sassanian Empire, Byzantium, Arab Caliphate, Seljuk Empire, Mongols, Safavid Persia, Ottomans, and Russia fought for dominance in this region.

In this regard, the 16th century turned out to be very difficult, because Georgia, divided into kingdoms and principalities, had to confront two aggressive Islamic states. The first war between Safavid Persia and Ottomans lasted for 40 years (1514-1555) with breaks; According to the truce, Persia and the Ottomans divided their spheres of authority. (Eastern Georgia and the eastern part of Samtskhe remained under the control of Persia, and Western Georgia and the western part of Samtskhi were under Ottomans). Accordingly, by the middle of the 16th century, the Caucasus region was controlled by two aggressive countries of the East – Persia, and the Ottomans.

In the 60s-80s of the XVI century, a new political climate began to form; A third power with its own strategic interests appeared in the region - the Moscow state.

## **2. Methods**

The aim of our work is to gather and scrutinize the written directives and surveys submitted by Russian envoys dispatched to the Georgian principalities during the XVI-XVII centuries. Drawing from these documents, we aim to explicate Russia's imperialistic aspirations in the region. The methodological framework of our study comprises of both general-scientific and private methods, such as the historical-comparative, systemic analysis of events, and in-depth study. Primarily, we employ logical analysis in our work, which encompasses informative-cognitive and comparative-legal aspects.

The historical-comparative method is employed to create purposeful and lucid understandings of historical facts, documents, and their interpreters, and to reconstruct and establish the argumentation of the historical facts. We rely on this method to draw relevant conclusions regarding Russia's imperialist interests in the South Caucasus.

## **3. Results and discussion**

At the end of the XVI-XVII centuries, Russia, unlike Persia-Ottoman, was active on the diplomatic front and tried not to bring the matter to a military confrontation. At the end of the XVI century, the Russian-Persian-Ottoman conflict entered a new phase. The Ottomans defeated Persia (1578-1590) and captured the entire South Caucasus. Due to the created situation, Persia and Russia were temporarily brought closer by the hostility of the Ottomans and turned into partners. The proof of this partnership was that from 1588 to 1676, 35 embassies were exchanged between these two countries - 20 of them were Russian, and 15 – were Persian (Zhuzhunashvili, 1995, p.284). Naturally, Russia's trade-economic and political

## 4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts

21-23 April 2023

Athens, Greece

interests precluded Georgia's military assistance against Persia. Throughout the XVII century, both Russia and Persia tried to maintain good relations. However, at the same time, Russia tried to ideologically dominate the South Caucasus in order to have a reliable base in a favorable situation in the distant future.

By the end of the XVI-XVII centuries, three political groups emerged in the Caucasus: I. Ottoman-Shirvani-Sashamkhlo-Imereti; II. Russia-Circassians-Kabardo-Kakheti; III. Persia-Ganja, Karabakh-Kartli. However, none of them were tightly bound. The specificity of the political situation created in the Caucasus also appeared in diplomatic negotiations. For example, the king of Russia in his title to the element that emerged after the treaty with Kakheti - „Государ иверской земли грузинских царей“ - wrote only in the documents sent to the Christian authorities, but he did not advertise it in front of the Persian-Ottomans, so as not to cause their irritation. (Datuashvili, 2001., p. 114).

Domination in the Caucasus was vitally necessary for Russia. By gaining influence in this region, it was gaining an important springboard for access to the Black and Caspian seas. From here, it could easily expand towards the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf, and India.

In the 80s of the XVI centuries, diplomatic relations between Russia and the kingdoms of Kakheti became active, which continued with varying intensity in the XVII century and gradually involved other units of Georgia. The following kings tried to establish diplomatic relations: King Teimuraz I of Kakheti, King Alexander III of Imereti, and Chief Levan II Dadiani of Samegrelo... Mainly Georgian kings and princes asked Russia for help in the fight against the Ottomans and Persia. But in the XVI century, Russia pursued a two-faced, ruthless policy with the kings and princes of Georgia. The essence of such a policy can be clearly seen from the instructions given to Koribin and Kuvshnov, who were sent as ambassadors to Persia. They had to declare to the Shah of Persia: “For the sake of the king’s majesty Teimuraz, the friendship with his brother, the Shah’s majesty, will not be broken.” (Meaning Teimuraz I). (Kacharava., 1997., p.316).

It is very interesting what instructions were given to the Russian ambassadors before leaving for Georgia; In world diplomatic practice, the practice of mandatory instructions to ambassadors comes from ancient times. As Mikhail Polievktov notes, written instructions appear in Russia since the end of the 16th century; And for the beginning of the intense diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia, it is found in a rather established form.

Initially, "Nakazi" <sup>1</sup> was established in the form of separate instructions - according to the issues raised as a result of negotiations and represented a document consisting of several documents. These were mostly general guidelines, for the more specific issues there were created the “letters” – Памяти – предписания.

In the second half of the 16th century, the regulation takes a unified form. It included the issues to be discussed by the ambassadors, and special tasks remained in the "letters".

---

<sup>1</sup> (In Georgian historiography, the term "Nakazi" can be found in several forms: employment, distribution, regulation, and instruction; we use the term regulation)

## **4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts**

**21-23 April 2023**

**Athens, Greece**

Sophisticated forms and precision of tasks have already been revealed. Based on the experience and material obtained in different ways, they compiled several types of questionnaires, where almost every detail was taken into account. The regulation was structured in a rather interesting Q/A format. It included the topical questions asked by Russian diplomats simultaneously who gave the optimal answers as well; At the same time, they tried to guess the counter moves of the opposite side. Such detailed instructions were very convenient for the ambassadors. It was written in the second person.

The main part of the regulation consisted of several paragraphs: 1. The first audience of the ambassadors with the Georgian kings and princes - a welcome speech with a presentation of letters, deeds, and gifts. 2. General instructions on the course of direct diplomatic negotiations. Here, in many cases, the probable answers were given along with the questions.

The main part was followed by special tasks - letters, which were related to various important issues. Special questionnaires were created; Two types of questionnaires were developed: 1. political; 2. statistical-economic.

Political questionnaire - detailed and specific description of the political situation in the Caucasus.

Statistical-economic questionnaire - collected detailed information about geographical location, population, economic situation, combat potential and political attitudes and moods;

In some cases, these two main questionnaires were accompanied by a third one - a questionnaire related to faith; With this questionnaire, the Russians offered the Georgians to find out how much they followed the foundations of the Orthodox confession;

The information obtained by these questionnaires about the Georgian kingdoms of the XVII century is very interesting.

The political questionnaire included the following questions:

1. What is the current relationship of a particular king with Ottomans and Persia; Haven't there been ambassadors or messengers with him recently, and if they were - on what business? Did the Georgian king himself send ambassadors to Ottomans and Persia, or does he intend to send them? If the answer is positive, then what is the issue?
2. What is the current relationship between Ottomans and Persia? Did the ambassadors and envoys from the Ottomans visit the Persians, or were the Persian ambassadors with the Ottomans? If the answer is positive, what is the purpose? Hasn't there been a recent war between Ottoman and Persia? If it was, in what places and from whom did it start? Did the Persians occupy the Ottoman cities or vice versa? What do they expect in the future - war or peace? Does Persia have a war with anyone other than the Ottomans?
3. What kind of relationship do the kingdoms of the Caucasus have with each other? (Shevkalebi, Kumiki, Sadadiano, Guria, Kartli, Kakheti).

The political questionnaire mainly included these three questions; In some cases, ambassadors were given additional instructions.

With the questions included in this questionnaire, Russia also explored the issue of the Caucasus in general; Who was stronger in the Caucasus - Persia or the Ottomans; To whom did

## **4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts**

**21-23 April 2023**

**Athens, Greece**

the individual political units of the Caucasus take their orientation? What was the internal political situation in the Caucasus; Knowledge of these issues was important and necessary for Russia before gaining influence in the Caucasus.

These questionnaires were created in the 30s of the XVII century by Teodore Likhachov and Maxime Matyushkin, the governor of "Prikazi" of that period. These questionnaires allowed the Russian diplomatic service to create a fairly complete picture of this or that country. (Zhuzhunashvili, 2006., p.49).

In relation to the Caucasus, Russia had political and economic interests as well, which can be clearly seen in the second– statistical-economic – questionnaire.

The statistical-economic questionnaire can be found in the most complete form in the regulations given to Tolochanov and Yevlev (ambassadors were at the royal court of Imereti in 1650-1652). This questionnaire consists of five main questions:

1. Geographical location of the country - its area.
2. Population of the country - population of settlements, residents of fortified areas, and total number;
3. The political mood of the educated society - the attitude of the population towards the local government, how solid is the power of the government;
4. Economy of the country - a) natural wealth (minerals), b) agriculture and its condition, basic products; c) industry and the main types of folk crafts; d) Trade (whether there is internal trade and with whom), export and import facilities, prices of different products.
5. Military organization of the country - the number of armed forces and the state of military equipment;

Based on these questions, descriptions of different parts of Georgia were created in the XVII century; Samegrelo - Fedot Yelchin, Kakheti - Danil Mishechki, Imereti - Nikifore Tolochanov, Alexi Yevlev. The mentioned kingdoms represented 1/5 of the South Caucasus at that time. These descriptions are very important, although there are several cases of the inexperience of the describer and incorrect, vague, descriptions.

The third questionnaire (relating to faith) is drawn up considering specific issues. Most likely, this questionnaire should be completed in the Patriarchal Chancellery. Its goal was to identify the religious situation in different corners of Georgia and to try to spread the influence of the Russian Church in the region. This questionnaire used in some cases consists of 38 questions and answers in total, the purpose of which is to find out the foundations of the Orthodox confession. We bring some of them as examples.

1. Question: Who are you? Answer: A man by birth, a child of God by grace.
2. Question: Why are you a child of God? Answer: Because I was enlightened with a blanket of spiritual renewal, i.e. I was bathed in water and spirit and partook of Christ's flesh and blood.

## 4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts

21-23 April 2023

Athens, Greece

3. Question: What is epiphany? Answer: Epiphany is washing away from original sin; It can be interpreted in another way: Epiphany is a mystery that leads to the sonship of God and gives birth to eternal life.
4. Question: What does the Orthodox faith mean? Answer: truly believe and glorify God the Father and God the Son - our Lord Jesus Christ - and one Holy Spirit, as the creed, i.e., the symbol of faith received at the First and Second World Church Councils will say, "I believe in one God the Father..." and so on until the end.
5. Question: How many persons or hypostases? Answer: to three: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
6. Question: How many natures do you recognize in God the Son? Answer: divine and human; ...

Russia was particularly interested in the treasure of purity in Georgia. e.g., Fedot Yelchin had a special instruction to use all possibilities to carefully investigate whether there was a treasure of purity in the country of Sadadiano: The living pole of the cross of the Lord, on which our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, or a shirt, or a cobe, or a part of a garment, a veil of his Savior, or the Holy Mother of God, or a girdle, or the holy parts of some godly figure, or myrrh and all other kinds of holiness. (Gamakharia, 2014., p.246).

By the 40s of the XVII century, Russia's interests towards the Black Sea coast of the South Caucasus were so weak that the Russian embassy in response to Levan II Dadian's ambassador Gabriel Gegenava's business trip to Russia (1636-1639) was of a rather low rank; e.g. Fedot Yelchin was an illiterate person (he was a translator of the Turkish language), and the other person was the priest Pavle Zakhariiev. According to Mikheil Polievktov, the article descriptions compiled by them were close to the article descriptions of the Russian ambassadors who came to Georgia at different times (before 1640 and later), but they were inferior to them. The reason for this was probably Fedot Yelchin's illiteracy and his careless attitude towards official duties.

In the 30s-40s of the XVII century, Russia receives more detailed information about the Caucasus; Vasil Gagara, a merchant from Jerusalem and Kazan, returns to Moscow from his trip (1634-37). Gagara, who traveled through the Caucasus, was obliged to present a report to the Russian authorities. The report talks about Tbilisi where the topography, fortification systems, and Tbilisi baths are described. (Polyevktov, 1932., p.24).

At that time, Russia had the most scarce information about Kartli and Tbilisi; Tbilisi was under the influence of Iran, and the trade route connecting Russia and Persia did not pass through Tbilisi, and in a such situation, Gagara's information was very important.

Diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia are noticeably active after the ambassadorship of Metropolitan Nikifor Irbach. Dadian's ambassador is allowed to enter Moscow only after passing "interrogation" at the border; The "interrogation" questionnaire is as follows: 1. In what territory is the ambassador's country located; 2. Who is the ruler of this political unit, are they independent or not, and which country do they recognize as their sovereignty; 3. which religion do they follow; 4. What do they grow on the land, how fertile is

## **4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts**

**21-23 April 2023**

**Athens, Greece**

the land and what goods do they trade; 5. Number of population and their description; 6. Special, additional information from the ambassador's side; Answers are sent to the king in Moscow, and only after his approval the ambassador has the right to visit him. Russia used every possible opportunity to get as detailed information as possible about the Georgian principalities.

### **4. Conclusion**

From the 20s of the XVII century to the 20s of the XVIII century, Russia's policy towards the Caucasus had an intelligent nature. He comprehensively studied the political, religious, and economic situation of individual kingdoms and principalities of Georgia. Internal relations, and the attitude of the kingdoms towards Ottomans, Iran, and the North Caucasus; Naturally, in the case of perfect information, Russia would have carried out the expansion of the Caucasus more easily.

In conclusion, we can say that Through the questionnaires discussed above (political, statistical-economic, religious) Russia has thoroughly studied the South Caucasus.

Political questionnaire - detailed and specific description of the political situation in the Caucasus.

Statistical-economic questionnaire - collected detailed information about geographical location, population, economic situation, combat potential and political attitudes and moods.

And the third one – was a questionnaire related to faith. With this questionnaire, the Russians offered the Georgians to find out how much they followed the foundations of the Orthodox confession;

With the help of the embassies in the XVI-XVII centuries, Russia studied the geographical location of the South Caucasus in detail and the ways to get there. After collecting this information, a detailed description of Samegrelo, Imereti, Kakheti, Dagestan, and North Azerbaijan was compiled.

In the XVI and XVII centuries, Russia still did not have enough power and opportunity for an open attack on the Caucasus. The international situation did not help this either. During these centuries, Moscow only tried to maintain its position in the Caucasus, establishing its own influence among individual Caucasian sovereigns in one way or another. Collected all kinds of political, economic, and statistical information; this was the preparatory period for Russia's attack on the Caucasus. At the same time, the Georgian kings and princes did not have a complete idea of the main directions of Russian foreign policy. For the kings and princes of Georgia, they thought that Russia was the only way to liberate them from infidel Persia and Ottomans. Naturally, the common faith was a "good bait" for Russia as well.

## 4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts

21-23 April 2023

Athens, Greece

### References

- Avalishvili, Z., (1994). k'avk'asiuri p'olit'ik'is ist'oriidan., kartuli dip'lomat'ia., t'omi I, tbilisis sakhelts'ipo universit'et'i, tbilisi [Avalishvili, Z., (1994). from the history of Caucasian politics, Georgian diplomacy, volume I, Tbilisi state University, Tbilisi.]
- Gamakharia, J., (2014). gabriel gegenavas, pedot' elchinisa da p'avle zakharievis elchobata masalebi 1636-1640 ts'lebi, tbilisi [Gamakharia, J., (2014). The materials of the embassies of Gabriel Gegenava, Fedot Yelchin and Pavle Zakhariev, 1636-1640, Tbilisi]
- Datuashvili, Z., (2001). nark'vevebi ruset-sakartvelos urtiertobata ist'oriidan., I, kutaisi [Datuashvili, Z., (2001). Essays from the history of Russia-Georgia relations., I, Kutaisi]
- K'ach'arava, D., (1997). sakartvelo-rusetis urtoertobis sak'itkhisatvis (XVII-XVIII s.), kartuli dip'lomat'ia, t'omi IV, tbilisis sakhelts'ipo universit'et'i, tbilisi [Kacharava, D., (1997). For the issue of Georgia-Russia relations (XVII-XVIII centuries), Georgian Diplomacy, Volume IV, Tbilisi state University, Tbilisi]
- Masalebi sakartvelos da k'avk'asiis ist'oriisatvis : nak'veti I., (1944). metsnierebata ak'ademia, tbilisi [Materials for the history of Georgia and the Caucasus: Plot I., (1944). Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi]
- Zhuzhunashvili, G., (1995). ruset-sakartvelos urtiertoba XVII sauk'unis 40-iani ts'lebis shuakhanebshi., kartuli dip'lomat'ia., t'omi 2, tbilisis sakhelts'ipo universit'et'i, tbilisi [Zhuzhunashvili, G., (1995). Russia-Georgia relations in the mid-40s of the 17th century, Georgian Diplomacy, Volume 2, Tbilisi state University, Tbilisi]
- Zhuzhunashvili, G., (2006). sakartvelo-rusetis urtiertobis ist'oriidan (XVI-XVII sauk'uneebi), tbilisi [Zhuzhunashvili, G., (2006). From the history of Georgian-Russian relations (XVI-XVII centuries), Tbilisi]
- Saitadze, G., (1995). rusetisa da imeretis samepoebs shoris dip'lomat'iuri k'avshir-urtiertobebis damqarebis dziritadi pakt'orebi (XVII sauk'unis 40-50-ian ts'lebshi), tbilisi [Saitadze, G., (1995). The main factors of establishing diplomatic relations between the kingdoms of Russia and Imereti (in the 40s-50s of the 17th century), Tbilisi]
- Utskhouri ts'qaroebi sakartvelos shesakheb., (1970). ts'igni XXIV., t'olochanovis imeretshi elchobis mukhlobrivi aghts'eriloba 1650-1652 ts'ts'., tbilisi [Foreign sources about Georgia., (1970). Book XXIV., Article description of Tolochanov's embassy to Imereti 1650-1652, Tbilisi]
- Tsintsadze, I., (1965). ruset-sakartvelos urtiertobis ist'oriidan (X-XVI ss.), tbilisi [Tsintsadze, Y., (1965). from the history of Russian-Georgian relations (X-XVI centuries), Tbilisi]
- Belokurov, S. A. ( 1888). Snoshenie Rossii s Kavkazom s 1578 po 1613 g.gju [ Belokurov S.A. (1888). Russia's Relation with Caucasus from 1578 till 1613 yy.]
- Polievktov M. A. (1932). Jekonomicheskie i politicheskie razvedki Moskovskogo gosudarstva XVII v. na Kavkaze. - Tiflis, [Polievktov M. A. (1932). Economic and Political Intelligence conducted by The State of Moscow in XVII in Caucasus. Tiflis.]
- Materialy po istorii rusko-gruzinskih otnoshenij, (1979). III., Tbilisi., [ Materials on Russian-Georgian Relation, (1979). III. Tbilisi. ]



## **4th International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts**

**21-23 April 2023**

**Athens, Greece**

Tivadze, T., (1972). Zashifrovannoe donesenie russkih poslov, otpravlennoe iz Gruzii v 1597-98 gg [Tivadze T. (1972). Encrypted Denunciations of Russian Ambassadors sent from Georgia. Matcne., History, archaeology, ethnography series. №2. Tbilisi]