

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AT THE END OF THE 18TH CENTURY

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Abstract. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the South Caucasus emerged as a key geopolitical arena of imperial competition, where the confrontation between the Russian and Ottoman Empires evolved beyond episodic military conflicts into a process of structural redistribution of power. This transformation was driven by a strategic objective to establish control over the Black Sea region, combining military expansion, the domination of trade and transit routes, and the systematic integration of the Caucasus as a buffer and transit space within imperial policy. The Russo-Turkish wars of 1768–1774 and 1787–1791 created the conceptual and institutional framework within which military success was transformed into legally formalized and ideologically legitimized influence.

The study demonstrates that during this period the South Caucasus gradually shifted from a multipolar balance of power toward a model of asymmetric hegemony, in which the Russian Empire deliberately consolidated a dominant position. This transformation was achieved through the expansion of military infrastructure, the systematic use of diplomatic instruments, and the strategic interpretation of international law. Particular attention is paid to the Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) and Jassy (1791), which are analyzed not merely as formal acts concluding conflicts, but as normative mechanisms through which military superiority was consolidated and converted into long-term political influence. In this context, law functioned not only as a regulatory framework but also as an instrument of power, ensuring the stabilization of hegemonic dominance.

The article places special emphasis on the function of diplomatic language, which is interpreted not as a neutral communicative medium but as a mechanism of legitimizing power. Within this framework, the concept of “protection” is examined as an ideological and legal instrument through which the idea of confessional defense was transformed into a justification for political intervention. As a result, the synthesis of military, legal, and ideological components produced a multilayered structure in which power was not only acquired but also institutionally consolidated and normatively legitimized.

Such an analytical approach reveals that Russian imperial expansion cannot be reduced to territorial conquest alone. It was based on a mechanism of power transformation whereby military success was converted into legally entrenched and ideologically justified dominance. The principle of “protection” played a central role in this process by creating a legitimate basis for intervention while simultaneously constructing a discourse that presented imperial actions not as aggression, but as the maintenance of order and protection. Consequently, Russian policy in the South Caucasus assumed a systemic character, in which expansion was carried out through the combined use of military force, legal argumentation, and ideological formulation.

Within this process, Georgia occupied a strategic position as a geopolitical bridge linking the Black Sea region with the internal spaces of the South Caucasus and eastern directions. In this context, the transformation of Georgia’s political status must be understood as part of Russian imperial expansion, which resulted in the dismantling of centuries-old state institutions and the elimination of its political sovereignty.

It is essential to emphasize that the legal constructions employed in diplomatic texts did not reflect a system of equality or justice. Rather, they functioned as instruments for legitimizing imperial aggression,

through which military achievements were translated into formally justified political control. Legal language thus performed a masking function, creating the appearance of normative order, while in reality the process amounted to conquest.

In the case of Georgia, this process culminated in the destruction of its state system. The overthrow of the Bagrationi dynasty and the abolition of royal authority represented not an administrative adjustment, but a deliberate political act that led to the complete elimination of Georgia as an independent state.

The study argues that the formation of hegemonic order in the South Caucasus was based on the interaction of military power, legal formulations, and ideological justification. In this context, the concept of legal hegemony describes a mechanism through which imperial dominance assumes a normative form while preserving structural inequality in the distribution of power.

Thus, the transformation of the region should be interpreted as a shift from open military confrontation to a system in which conquest was formally embedded within a legal framework, while in practice resulting in the consolidation of imperial control and the ultimate abolition of Georgian statehood.

Keywords: Russian Empire; South Caucasus; Georgia; geopolitics; imperial strategy; Russo-Turkish wars; Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca; Treaty of Jassy; balance of power; imperial expansion

Introduction. The second half of the eighteenth century represents a decisive turning point in the historical development of the South Caucasus, during which the region was gradually integrated into a hierarchical system of imperial power and lost the structural dynamics characteristic of a multipolar balance. This period should not be interpreted merely as a chronology of military conflicts; rather, it constitutes a complex process in which military force, diplomatic practice, and legal formulations converged into a unified mechanism of geopolitical transformation.

The aim of this study is to examine how Russian military success in the South Caucasus was transformed into legally legitimized and institutionally consolidated hegemony between 1768 and 1791. In this context, particular attention is devoted to the mechanisms through which military superiority was converted into a structurally stable form of influence operating within the framework of international law.

The study is based on a theoretical synthesis that combines the paradigm of realism, the concept of the imperial frontier, and the dependency model. Realism explains state behavior through the logic of power maximization and security provision. The theory of the imperial frontier reveals the mechanisms through which peripheral spaces are integrated into imperial structures and gradually lose the capacity for autonomous political action. The dependency model highlights asymmetric relationships in which smaller political units operate within structural constraints imposed by external powers. The integration of these theoretical approaches enables the transformation of the South Caucasus to be interpreted as a transition from a multipolar system to a hegemonic order.

During this period, the confrontation between the Russian and Ottoman Empires assumed a systemic character and extended beyond the framework of localized conflicts. It evolved into a structural competition aimed at controlling the Black Sea region and redistributing political space in the Caucasus (Suny, 1994, pp. 55–60). Military operations, diplomatic agreements, and ideological argumentation were integrated into a coherent strategic system, reflecting the conceptual modernization of imperial policy.

Within this process, Georgia occupied a strategic position as a key geopolitical space. Its geographical location provided significant transit and military potential, yet internal political fragmentation limited the effectiveness of its foreign policy and increased external influence (Lang, 1962, pp. 142–148). This condition

corresponds to the logic of the imperial frontier, according to which peripheral entities gradually lose the capacity to formulate independent strategies. Vakhtang Guruli emphasizes that Georgia functioned as a zone of intersecting imperial interests, where its political status was largely determined by the strategic calculations of external powers (Guruli, 2012, p. 41).

According to Merab Vachnadze, Georgian foreign policy during this period did not exhibit proactive strategic planning and was largely shaped by adaptive responses to external pressures, reflecting the structural logic of dependency (Vachnadze, 2009, pp. 33–35). Under such conditions, political choices were formed not on the basis of autonomous strategy, but within a framework defined by external constraints.

The Russo-Turkish wars of 1768–1774 and 1787–1791 established the legal and institutional framework within which military success was transformed into stable political influence. The Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca and Jassy should therefore be understood as legal mechanisms that ensured the consolidation of Russia's strategic advantage. A terminological analysis of these agreements demonstrates that legal formulations functioned as instruments for legitimizing political intervention (Yuzefovich, 2005, p. 25; Dubrovin, 1897, p. 54).

The outcome of the Treaty of Jassy reflects a fundamental shift in the balance of power, whereby Ottoman influence was significantly weakened and the South Caucasus entered the sphere of Russia's strategic priorities. According to Sergei Solovyov, from this stage onward Russian policy in the south acquired a systematic and consistent character (Solovyov, 1886, Vol. 28, p. 239).

The limited involvement of Western powers created additional structural conditions favorable to Russian expansion. As Dominic Lieven argues, the Caucasus did not constitute a priority within European political strategy, and as a result Russian actions encountered no effective resistance (Lieven, 2000, p. 137). Andreas Kappeler similarly notes that expansion took place in an environment where mechanisms of containment were weak (Kappeler, 2001, p. 102).

As a result, by the end of the eighteenth century, an asymmetric hegemonic system had emerged in the South Caucasus, replacing the previous multipolar balance. Russian dominance was based on the interaction of military power, legal legitimation, and ideological construction, which together ensured the stabilization of imperial influence in the region. Within this process, Georgia's state status was incorporated into the framework of imperial policy and determined by the interaction of external powers.

Methodology. The present study is based on an integrated methodological framework that combines historical analysis, political-legal interpretation, and theoretical modeling. This approach is not limited to descriptive narration; rather, it aims to identify the structural logic of processes and the causal relationships underlying them.

The analysis of primary sources constitutes the empirical foundation of the research. The Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca and Jassy are examined as normative texts that formally reflect the redistribution of power. Key terms such as “protection,” “sovereign right,” and “authority” are interpreted as instruments of imperial legitimation, indicating the use of legal form as a mechanism for institutionalizing political control.

Historical-contextual analysis is employed to uncover causal linkages between events. Military actions, diplomatic agreements, and shifts in the balance of power are analyzed as interconnected components of a unified process, thereby demonstrating the systemic nature of Russian policy in the region.

The comparative method is used to differentiate historiographical interpretations. Georgian, Russian, and Western sources are treated as distinct analytical perspectives, allowing for interpretive balance and enhancing the accuracy of the study.

Political-legal analysis focuses on the functional role of diplomatic texts. Treaties are interpreted as instruments that not only describe international relations but also construct their normative framework and confer legitimacy upon power.

Spatial analysis is applied to define the geopolitical function of the South Caucasus. The region's location between the Black Sea, Iran, and Anatolia is considered a strategic factor that shaped Russian interests and assigned the region the role of a geopolitical bridgehead.

Critical source analysis ensures the reliability of the research. Imperial-era texts are approached as ideologically embedded materials and are examined through a comparative lens, reducing interpretive bias and strengthening analytical precision.

Preconditions for the Formation of Imperial Strategy in the South Caucasus

The second half of the eighteenth century marks a critical stage in the development of Russian foreign policy, during which territorial expansion can no longer be explained solely in terms of military success or dynastic interests. In this period, Russian state thinking shifted toward a spatial-strategic dimension, where foreign policy was increasingly oriented toward the formation of a long-term hegemonic order. This transformation reflects a qualitative change in imperial policy, in which military force, diplomatic practice, and legal formulation were integrated into a coherent strategic framework, giving rise to a new model of power organization.

The growing Russian interest in the South Caucasus must be understood within this broader context. The region emerged not as a peripheral direction, but as a space where multiple strategic objectives converged, including the provision of military security, the establishment of control over the Black Sea basin, the subordination of trade and transit routes, and the mobilization of ideological resources for legitimation (Lieven, 2000, pp. 89–94). These factors indicate that the South Caucasus functioned as a multifunctional geopolitical platform within imperial strategy, extending beyond regional significance and becoming closely linked to Russia's broader international positioning.

Russian policy toward the South Caucasus was not a spontaneous reaction to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Rather, it developed gradually as a deliberate strategy in which the region was initially perceived as a sphere of influence and subsequently transformed into an object of direct control. This transformation reflects the internal logic of imperial expansion, whereby political engagement evolves into structural domination. In this process, the instruments of influence undergo transformation and acquire institutional form, ensuring the durability and reproducibility of imperial policy.

This development was closely connected to Russia's integration into the European balance-of-power system. Eighteenth-century international politics was structured around principles of spatial control, the formation of buffer zones, and the subordination of transit regions, all of which determined the real capabilities of states. Russia's participation in this system entailed not only integration into its framework, but also the adaptation and application of its mechanisms to advance its own geopolitical interests. Consequently, Russian policy in the South Caucasus can be interpreted as the imperial transformation of the European balance-of-power logic within a peripheral space.

Spatial control occupied a central place in this strategy. The Caucasus was understood not merely as a territorial entity, but as a geopolitical space integrating military mobility, economic communication, and political influence. In this sense, space itself became a form of materialized power, shaping the direction of state behavior. Control over the region provided opportunities to consolidate influence along the eastern Black Sea coast, to establish strategic depth toward Iran, and to exert pressure on the northeastern regions of Anatolia, thereby highlighting its multilayered strategic function.

At the same time, a full understanding of this process requires consideration of its ideological dimension. Russian political discourse increasingly relied on the representation of the empire as the protector of the Orthodox world and as a civilizing force in eastern spaces. This ideological construction functioned as a mechanism of legitimation, through which military and political actions were normatively justified. Ideology

thus constituted not a supplementary element, but an integral component of imperial strategy, reinforcing its discursive and legal foundations.

As a result, the second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the formation of an imperial strategic model based on spatial control, integration into the international system, and ideological legitimation. The interaction of these components created the structural conditions under which the South Caucasus gradually became a priority geopolitical space for Russia. Accordingly, this period should be interpreted not merely as the beginning of expansion, but as the stage of conceptual formation of imperial strategy, which shaped Russia's subsequent policy in the region and laid the foundations of its hegemonic position.

Transformation of Russian Foreign Policy

The transformation of Russian foreign policy in the second half of the eighteenth century was shaped by several interrelated factors that created the structural foundation for the transition from adaptive responses to external threats toward a proactive geopolitical strategy. This transformation reflects a change in the functional nature of the state, in which foreign policy was no longer limited to defensive objectives but increasingly became an instrument of spatial control and the expansion of influence. As a result, Russian policy assumed a systemic character and was grounded in long-term strategic planning, which defined its actions in the South Caucasus.

The strengthening of the military-administrative system constituted a central component of this process. The institutionalization of a regular army and the professionalization of the officer corps created the conditions not only for border defense but also for the consistent implementation of offensive policies. Military power at this stage no longer functioned merely as a defensive resource; it was transformed into an active and strategic instrument of state policy. Sergei Solovyov notes that in the second half of the eighteenth century Russian military power became one of the principal pillars of state policy, indicating the systemic integration of force into political processes (Solovyov, 1886, Vol. 28, p. 238). This observation demonstrates that the military institution had already begun to operate as an organized mechanism of imperial expansion.

The deepening of administrative centralization significantly increased the effectiveness of state governance in peripheral regions and created the conditions for the implementation of a unified political course. Nikolai Dubrovin emphasizes that the strengthening of central authority ensured the consistency and purposefulness of Russian actions in regions that had previously been only episodic areas of interest (Dubrovin, 1897, p. 49). This shift indicates that imperial policy was no longer based on reactive measures but assumed a structured and pre-determined form. This development was particularly evident in the South Caucasus, where the state sought to expand its influence in a stable and institutionalized manner.

The specific characteristics of the European international system also played a significant role in shaping Russian strategic choices. The balance-of-power system of the eighteenth century was based on principles of spatial control, the formation of buffer zones, and the creation of political dependencies, all of which determined the real capacities of states. Russia's integration into this system involved not only participation but also the adaptation and application of its key mechanisms for the realization of its own geopolitical interests. According to Andreas Kappeler, Russia sought integration into this system by employing mechanisms similar to those used by Western European states (Kappeler, 2001, p. 98). In this sense, Russian policy in the South Caucasus can be understood as an imperial adaptation of the European balance-of-power model within a peripheral context.

Georgian historiography interprets this process as a turning point in geopolitical development, during which the Caucasus became a space where long-term imperial interests intersected. According to Merab Vachnadze, the region functioned as an arena of strategic confrontation in which the balance of power was determined (Vachnadze, 2009, p. 30). Vakhtang Guruli emphasizes that Russian policy in the South Caucasus

during this period already displayed a systemic and conceptually developed character, indicating the maturation of imperial strategy (Guruli, 2012, p. 42). These assessments confirm that the region was no longer merely a geographical entity but had become an active center of geopolitical processes.

An important dimension of this transformation was the evolution of imperial self-perception, which was directly linked to the ideological foundations of Russian foreign policy. The state increasingly presented itself as a civilizing force with a historical mission to protect Orthodox populations and to organize eastern spaces (Kappeler, 2001, pp. 94–99). This ideological construction functioned as a mechanism of political legitimation and provided normative justification for imperial expansion. As Dubrovin notes, the idea of protecting Orthodoxy was used as an argument for expanding influence, demonstrating the instrumentalization of ideology within imperial policy (Dubrovin, 1897, p. 52).

Platon Ioseliani observes that within Georgian political circles the idea of Orthodox unity was perceived as a guarantee of security, although it did not reflect the actual objectives of imperial policy (Ioseliani, 1936, p. 87). This situation created an ideological convergence that in practice rested on an asymmetric power relationship. Thus, the concept of protection, while formally oriented toward defense, was transformed into a mechanism of political dependence and served to expand imperial influence.

As a result, the transformation of Russian foreign policy in the second half of the eighteenth century should be understood as a complex and multilayered process in which military power, administrative organization, integration into the international system, and ideological construction were combined within a unified strategic model. This model established the structural conditions under which the South Caucasus became one of the central directions of Russian imperial policy, where expansion acquired a systematic, legitimized, and long-term character.

Geopolitical Significance of the Black Sea and the Caucasus

The significance of the Black Sea and the Caucasus for Russia should be understood as a multilayered strategic system that integrates military, economic, and political dimensions of control within a unified geopolitical logic. Access to the Black Sea was not limited to the resolution of a maritime problem; it represented a strategic opportunity through which Russia shifted the geopolitical initiative southward and expanded its spatial influence. According to Sergei Solovyov, control over the Black Sea constituted a central objective of Russia's southern policy, highlighting the systemic importance of this space within the framework of imperial strategy (Solovyov, 1886, Vol. 28, p. 241).

The economic factor operated in this process not as a supplementary element, but as a structural component. Access to the Black Sea ensured direct connections with Mediterranean and eastern markets and facilitated the creation of new networks of trade and communication, thereby reducing Ottoman control and increasing Russia's economic autonomy. As Nikolai Dubrovin notes, access to the Black Sea opened communication channels that had previously been under Ottoman control, indicating a redistribution of economic space (Dubrovin, 1897, p. 51). In this sense, economic integration and geopolitical expansion were organically interconnected.

Military and economic interests converged within a broader strategy of spatial control, in which territory was understood not as a static unit, but as a functional platform for the realization of power. Within this system, the Caucasus assumed the role of an intermediary space that integrated military mobility, trade flows, and the projection of political influence. According to David Lang, control over the South Caucasus implied simultaneous influence over the eastern Black Sea coast, the direction toward Iran, and the northeastern regions of Anatolia, thereby underscoring the region's multilayered strategic significance (Lang, 1962, pp. 140–145).

Georgian historiography interprets this process as a transformation of space into a political factor, in which geographical position became a determinant of power. Vakhtang Guruli emphasizes that the Caucasus evolved into a space where geography was transformed into political force, shaping the trajectory of regional processes (Guruli, 2012, p. 43). Platon Ioseliani highlights the role of the Caucasus within a broader transit network connecting different civilizations, thereby enhancing its strategic importance (Ioseliani, 1936, p. 85). These interpretations confirm that the region functioned as a critical link between multiple geopolitical systems.

According to Andreas Kappeler, the Caucasus was perceived as a key zone for the expansion of a multiethnic empire, underscoring its importance as a platform for imperial integration (Kappeler, 2001, p. 97). This perspective demonstrates that the region was not merely an object of foreign policy, but a space in which the structural mechanisms of imperial control were actively formed and consolidated.

As a result, the Black Sea and the Caucasus should be interpreted as a unified geostrategic system, within which military power, economic interests, and political control operated in an interdependent manner. The acquisition of this space by Russia did not signify only territorial expansion; it represented the formation of a mode of power capable of ensuring the stability of influence and the establishment of long-term hegemony in the southern direction.

The Condition of the Ottoman Empire and the Preconditions of Russian Policy in the South Caucasus

An analysis of Russian policy in the South Caucasus cannot be undertaken without examining the condition of the Ottoman Empire. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the empire retained formal strength, yet its institutional effectiveness was gradually declining, a process that was particularly evident in peripheral regions. The weakening of central authority led to increasing administrative decentralization and created spaces in which state power was unable to maintain stable control.

Sergei Solovyov observes that peripheral areas progressively lost stability, giving rise to zones beyond effective control, which indicates the weakening of imperial authority (Solovyov, 1886, Vol. 28, p. 245). This assessment reflects a broader process in which the decline of administrative control transformed into a geopolitical problem, creating conditions of fragmented authority. Turkish historiography partly attributes this development to an administrative model that granted significant autonomy to local elites, thereby limiting the effective influence of central power in the provinces (İnalçık, 1994, pp. 67–70). At the same time, Stanford Shaw emphasizes the role of external pressures, demonstrating that the Ottoman crisis was not solely the result of internal dynamics, but was also shaped by shifts in the international balance of power (Shaw, 1976, pp. 250–258).

Georgian historiography interprets this process as the formation of a power vacuum that created favorable conditions for external intervention. Vakhtang Guruli highlights the growth of decentralization, which weakened state control and increased regional instability (Guruli, 2012, p. 45). Merab Vachnadze points to the emergence of structural gaps that facilitated competition among imperial powers and simplified the conditions for Russian intervention (Vachnadze, 2009, pp. 30–33). These interpretations confirm that the situation within the Ottoman domains was not merely an internal crisis, but became a geopolitical opportunity for competing powers.

The relative backwardness of the Ottoman military further intensified this process and reinforced asymmetries in the balance of power. Virginia Aksan notes that the Ottoman army was unable to compete effectively with modernized European military systems, which reduced its operational capacity and increased its strategic vulnerability (Aksan, 2007, pp. 130–136). This military weakness not only diminished the empire's defensive capabilities but also created the conditions for the gradual loss of peripheral territories.

Thus, the institutional and military weakening of the Ottoman Empire should be understood as a structural process directly linked to the strengthening of Russia. These two developments evolved in an interdependent manner and produced a new configuration of power in the South Caucasus. This transformation created the conditions necessary for the emergence of a new hegemonic order, within which Russian influence gradually assumed a dominant and structurally embedded position in the region.

Military Conflicts as a Geopolitical Instrument (1768–1774; 1787–1791)

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Russo-Turkish wars should not be understood as isolated military events, but as instruments of geopolitical strategy through which structural redistribution of power and transformation of regional space were achieved. These wars constituted a complex mechanism in which military action, diplomatic practice, and legal formulation were integrated into a coherent political system, creating the institutional foundation of imperial expansion (Black, 1999, pp. 120–125). In this sense, war functioned as a systemic instrument through which the state pursued not only territorial expansion, but also the reconfiguration of spatial order.

Within this framework, war was no longer an end in itself; it operated as a strategic mechanism whose outcomes were integrated from the outset into long-term geopolitical calculations. Military action should therefore be interpreted as a constitutive phase of policy, within which factual realities were produced and subsequently translated into legal form, becoming part of the normative structure of international relations. This approach demonstrates that military and legal processes were not separate domains, but functioned within a unified structural logic, where force and law operated in an interdependent relationship.

The conflicts of 1768–1774 and 1787–1791 should be interpreted as two interconnected stages of a single process, in which military success was systematically transformed into diplomatic advantage and subsequently into legally codified influence. As Jonathan Black argues, eighteenth-century wars were an integral component of the negotiation process, highlighting the functional unity of military and diplomatic practices (Black, 1999, p. 123). This interpretation underscores that war and diplomacy were not alternative mechanisms, but successive phases of a unified strategic process.

Russian historiography likewise presents these wars as strategically organized and premeditated processes whose objectives extended beyond immediate military outcomes. Sergei Solovyov emphasizes that Russian military action was directed not only toward operational success, but also toward its subsequent legal consolidation through international agreements (Solovyov, 1886, Vol. 28, p. 248). This perspective indicates that military campaigns were embedded from the outset within a long-term political strategy aimed at achieving outcomes that would enable the institutionalization of power.

Thus, the Russo-Turkish wars should be understood as an active instrument of geopolitical transformation, in which military action generated new configurations of power, diplomatic practice formalized these changes, and legal mechanisms ensured their stabilization. This three-stage process created the structural foundation through which regional space was transformed and Russian influence evolved into a systemic and long-term hegemonic order.

Strategic Objectives of the Wars and Their Geopolitical Content

Russian objectives in these wars extended significantly beyond territorial expansion and should be interpreted as a strategy oriented toward spatial control, grounded in the principles of long-term organization of power. The pursuit of dominance in the Black Sea basin, the disruption of the Ottoman monopoly, and the creation of strategic depth in the southern direction constituted the core components of this policy and defined the systemic character of Russian actions. As Dominic Lieven argues, Russian southern policy aimed to alter the balance of power through control of the Black Sea, indicating that this space was perceived as a central arena for the concentration of geopolitical power (Lieven, 2000, pp. 95–101).

Within this framework, military action should be understood as an instrument through which political reality is produced and new configurations of power are established. War creates factual conditions that determine the balance of forces, while diplomatic agreements transform these conditions into a legal system and confer international recognition upon them. Sergei Solovyov notes that Russian policy sought to закрепить military outcomes in international acts, highlighting the transformation of force into legal form and the attempt to stabilize its results (Solovyov, 1886, Vol. 28, p. 249). This perspective demonstrates that military and legal processes were integrated within a unified strategic logic, where power assumed an institutional form.

According to Andreas Kappeler, Russian objectives included the institutionalization of influence in the region, implying not only territorial expansion but also the creation of a system in which political control was reinforced through legal and diplomatic mechanisms (Kappeler, 2001, p. 103). This interpretation emphasizes that expansion was carried out through a комплексный approach, in which military action constituted only one component of a broader imperial strategy.

Georgian historiography evaluates this process as a structural reconfiguration of space, whereby the Caucasus was transformed into an organized sphere of imperial interests. Merab Vachnadze argues that these wars determined the subsequent political development of the Caucasus and created the conditions under which the region came under the strategic influence of external powers (Vachnadze, 2009, p. 34). Vakhtang Guruli interprets this process as an instrument for establishing imperial domination, highlighting the functional role of military conflicts in shaping geopolitical order (Guruli, 2012, p. 47).

Thus, Russian objectives in these wars should be understood not as isolated attempts at spatial expansion, but as a systematic construction of power. Within this framework, military action creates the factual foundation, diplomatic practice ensures its formalization, and legal mechanisms consolidate its outcomes. The interaction of these elements defines the effectiveness of imperial strategy and creates the conditions for the formation of Russia's hegemonic position in the South Caucasus.

The Relationship Between Military Operations and Diplomatic Outcomes

The interdependence of military operations and diplomatic processes constitutes a central characteristic of these wars and defines their structural function. The conclusion of the war of 1768–1774 and the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca mark a turning point at which military success became fully integrated into diplomatic strategy and was transformed into legally legitimized influence. In this sense, war no longer functioned as a completed military event, but as part of a continuous process that was deliberately directed toward legal formalization.

Russian archival materials indicate that military operations were from the outset oriented toward the creation of peace conditions that would ensure Russia's "sustainable influence" in the Black Sea and its surrounding regions (AVPRI, f. 5, op. 2, d. 171, l. 11). This formulation demonstrates that military campaigns were not merely operational responses, but components of a pre-defined political process aimed at the institutionalization of achieved results.

According to Andreas Kappeler, Russia used military success to expand its legal influence (Kappeler, 2001, p. 103). In this context, particular significance is attached to the right to protect Orthodox Christians, which formally appears as a humanitarian category but in practice functioned as a legal basis for intervention. This mechanism reflects the specific character of imperial policy, in which legal argumentation was employed as an instrument for the expansion of influence.

The Treaty of Jassy represents both the continuation of this process and its consolidated stage. Russian documents indicate that its purpose was to reinforce the advantages gained through military means (AVPRI, f. 5, op. 2, d. 182, l. 7), implying not only the formal recognition of results but also their legal stabilization.

Military victory was thus transformed into a normative condition that ensured the long-term preservation of influence.

Jonathan Black's theoretical approach, according to which war functions as an instrument of negotiation (Black, 1999, p. 123), accurately captures the essence of this process. Military and diplomatic actions operated within a unified system in which force created opportunity, while diplomacy translated that opportunity into legal reality.

Legal Legitimation as an Instrument of Power

The Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca and Jassy should be interpreted as normative texts that ensured the transformation of military success into structural power and established the legal framework within which Russian influence acquired international legitimacy. These agreements cannot be reduced to formal acts marking the end of conflict; rather, they functioned as instruments for the organization of political space.

Within Russian diplomatic practice, the institution of "protection" operated as a systemic mechanism through which influence was expanded among the Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire (AVPRI, f. 5, op. 2, d. 176, l. 21). This indicates that legal formulation functioned as a political instrument, creating a legitimate basis for intervention. In this context, law no longer operated as a neutral regulator but was transformed into a technology of power.

Sergei Solovyov notes that such mechanisms ensured the long-term consolidation of military outcomes (Solovyov, 1886, Vol. 28, p. 250). This assessment confirms that legal formalization was an essential component of imperial strategy, without which military success could not be converted into stable political advantage.

Transformation of the Regional Balance of Power

The outcome of these wars was a systemic transformation of the regional balance of power, whereby the model of Ottoman-Iranian competition was replaced by Russian dominance. According to Ronald Suny, by the end of the eighteenth century Russia had emerged as the decisive power in the region, indicating the concentration of authority within an increasingly unipolar system (Suny, 1994, p. 60).

Russian archival materials suggest that the Caucasus entered a system of unipolar influence (RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 329, l. 6), meaning that regional politics came to be determined by a single hegemonic center. This transformation resulted in a sharp reduction of the political agency available to local actors and redefined the structure of regional decision-making.

Platon Ioseliani notes that this process significantly constrained Georgia's political choices and increased its dependence on external power (Ioseliani, 1936, p. 91). This observation indicates that changes in the balance of power had a direct impact on the sovereignty of regional political entities.

Disintegration of the Political System of the Caucasus

The consequences of these wars should be interpreted as a structural disintegration of the political system of the Caucasus. The multipolar model, based on a competitive balance among regional powers, was gradually replaced by a unipolar hegemonic system. This transformation was not merely a redistribution of power, but a qualitative change in the nature of political order.

According to Dominic Lieven, peripheral regions undergoing such transformations lose functional independence and become elements of strategic control (Lieven, 2000). This interpretation reflects the logic of imperial expansion, in which peripheral spaces are integrated into a system defined by the center.

Vakhtang Guruli emphasizes that the Caucasus was transformed into a space of imperial control (Guruli, 2012, p. 49), while Merab Vachnadze highlights the growing dependence of regional politics on external forces (Vachnadze, 2009, p. 36). These assessments confirm that the regional system no longer functioned as an autonomous political environment, but became an integral component of imperial strategy.

Diplomatic Treaties and the Consolidation of Legal Hegemony

A comprehensive analysis of Russian imperial strategy in the second half of the eighteenth century is impossible without examining the diplomatic treaties through which military advantage was transformed into legally legitimized, institutionally consolidated, and geopolitically stable hegemony. These documents should not be interpreted merely as formal acts concluding conflicts, as their function extends beyond recording the outcomes of war to encompass the normative mechanisms through which power is organized. It is within these treaties that military success acquires legal form and is transformed into a political reality capable of ensuring the durability and structural stability of influence.

From this perspective, diplomatic treaties perform a dual function that defines their particular significance within the context of imperial policy. On the one hand, they formalize the existing balance of power and reflect the reality established through military means. On the other hand, they construct the normative framework within which this balance is to operate in the future and define the rules governing political relations. Thus, a treaty is not merely a description of outcomes; it is an instrument for stabilizing those outcomes and for constructing a new political order on their basis. This functional duality transforms the diplomatic text into one of the principal mechanisms for the institutionalization of power.

For this reason, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) and the Treaty of Jassy (1791) should be regarded as two key pillars of the legal architecture of Russian southern policy, through which the empire transformed military success into structural advantage. These agreements do not simply mark the conclusion of specific wars; they establish a normative system that consolidates Russian influence and facilitates its transformation into long-term hegemony. Within this process, legal formulation becomes the medium through which military outcomes are translated into an internationally recognized order.

This transformation is particularly significant because it reveals the emergence of a modern form of imperial power. In medieval and early modern imperial relations, influence often rested on direct military force, dynastic arrangements, or personal subordination, creating relatively unstable and personalized systems. By the second half of the eighteenth century, a more complex and structurally organized mechanism had developed, in which law, diplomacy, and ideological justification were integrated into a unified model of power organization. Within such a system, military superiority alone was insufficient; it required legal reinforcement and diplomatic recognition in order to achieve legitimacy.

It is within this context that the process of the instrumentalization of law becomes evident. Legal texts no longer functioned as neutral regulatory frameworks; rather, they became active instruments of power organization, shaping not only the form but also the substance of political relations. Legal formulations performed a strategic function, creating the conditions under which one state could assume a privileged position and expand its influence. In this way, law and power were integrated into a single system that ensured the consolidation of imperial hegemony.

As a result, diplomatic treaties should be understood as a central instrument of imperial policy, through which military success was transformed into a stable and normatively structured order of power. This transformation represents a historical process in which authority shifts from the direct use of force to a form of legally regulated hegemony, thereby creating a more advanced model of imperial governance.

Diplomatic Treaties and the Consolidation of Legal Hegemony

A comprehensive analysis of Russian imperial strategy in the second half of the eighteenth century is impossible without examining the diplomatic treaties through which military superiority was transformed into legally legitimized, institutionally consolidated, and geopolitically sustainable hegemony. These documents should not be interpreted merely as formal acts concluding conflicts, as their function extends beyond recording the outcome of war and encompasses the normative mechanisms through which power is orga-

nized. It is precisely within these treaties that military success acquires legal form and is transformed into a political reality capable of ensuring the durability of influence and structural stability.

From this perspective, diplomatic treaties perform a dual function that defines their particular significance within the context of imperial policy. On the one hand, they formalize the existing balance of power and reflect the reality established through military means. On the other hand, they construct the normative framework within which this balance is to operate in the future and define the rules governing political relations. Thus, a treaty is not merely a description of outcomes; it is an instrument for stabilizing those outcomes and for constructing a new political order on their basis. Owing to this functional duality, the diplomatic text becomes one of the principal mechanisms for the institutionalization of power.

For this reason, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) and the Treaty of Jassy (1791) should be regarded as two key pillars of the legal architecture of Russian southern policy, through which the empire transformed military success into structural advantage. These agreements do not simply mark the conclusion of specific wars; they establish a normative system that ensures the consolidation of Russian influence and its transformation into long-term hegemony. Within this process, legal formulation becomes the medium through which military outcomes are translated into an internationally recognized order.

This transformation is particularly significant, as it reveals the emergence of a modern form of imperial power. In medieval and early modern imperial relations, influence often rested on direct military force, dynastic arrangements, or personal subordination, producing relatively unstable and personalized systems. By contrast, in the second half of the eighteenth century, a more complex and structurally organized mechanism emerged, in which law, diplomacy, and ideological justification were integrated into a unified model of power organization. Within such a system, military superiority alone was insufficient; it required legal reinforcement and diplomatic recognition in order to achieve legitimacy.

It is within this context that the process of the instrumentalization of law becomes clearly visible. Legal texts no longer functioned as neutral regulatory frameworks; instead, they became active instruments of power organization, shaping not only the form but also the substance of political relations. Legal formulations assumed a strategic function by creating the conditions under which one state could occupy a privileged position and expand its influence. In this way, law and power were integrated into a single system that ensured the consolidation of imperial hegemony.

As a result, diplomatic treaties should be understood as a central instrument of imperial policy, through which military success was transformed into a stable and normatively structured order of power. This transformation represents a historical process in which authority shifts from the direct use of force to a form of legally regulated hegemony, thereby creating a more advanced model of imperial governance.

The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca as a Turning Point of Legal Transformation

The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca represents a decisive legal turning point through which Russian military success, for the first time, assumed a broad normative form and was transformed into a systematic instrument of influence over the Ottoman Empire. Its significance extends beyond the formal conclusion of war; it reflects the emergence of a new order in international relations in which power is no longer determined solely by military victory, but is consolidated and extended through legal formulations. This transformation enabled Russia to convert military superiority into long-term political influence that was no longer dependent on periodic military campaigns, but instead rested on a legally reinforced privileged status.

The importance of the treaty is clearly evident in its provisions concerning the protection of Orthodox populations, the expansion of diplomatic representation, and the consolidation of Russia's status within the Ottoman domain. While these clauses could formally be interpreted as guarantees of confessional protection or extensions of diplomatic rights, their functional analysis demonstrates that they constituted a broader

mechanism. Through these legal formulations, Russia was able to transform religious issues into a legitimate basis for geopolitical intervention, thereby establishing a legal framework for the expansion of influence (Yuzefovich, 2005, p. 25; Dubrovin, 1897, p. 54).

In this context, the concept of protection acquires particular significance as the normative core of the treaty. Its formal humanitarian interpretation does not fully reflect its actual function. It creates an asymmetric legal relationship in which one state operates within the internal sphere of another under the claim of special responsibility. This arrangement departs from the classical model of sovereign equality and instead introduces a legal form of limited sovereignty in which the right of intervention acquires legitimacy. Consequently, legal formulation is directly linked to the possibility of political intervention and establishes the foundation for the expansion of imperial influence.

From this perspective, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca can be interpreted as one of the early models of a protection-based legal order in the Black Sea and southeastern European space. It establishes a precedent in which legal obligation no longer functions solely as a means of regulating relations, but becomes a mechanism for the unequal distribution of power. Its innovation lies precisely in the fact that law no longer constrains the stronger state, but instead facilitates the expansion and institutional consolidation of its influence.

This approach is clearly reflected in Russian archival materials. One document explicitly states that “the right of protection must serve as a means of strengthening influence among the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire” (AVPRI, f. 5, op. 2, d. 176, l. 21). This formulation confirms that legal categories were understood as practical instruments of policy aimed at expanding and consolidating influence.

Andreas Kappeler’s interpretation, which regards this agreement as an early form of the institutionalization of influence (Kappeler, 2001, p. 103), situates the process within a broader imperial context. This perspective demonstrates that the treaty should not be understood solely within the framework of Russo-Ottoman relations, but as part of a general model in which powerful states employ legal mechanisms to advance their interests. Accordingly, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca should be regarded as a significant stage in the development of imperial legal thinking.

A full understanding of its significance requires analysis not only of its text but also of its function. Diplomatic agreements are important insofar as they shape subsequent political practice. In this case, the treaty established legal principles that became the basis for future political action and defined the normative framework of imperial behavior.

The logic of this process can be divided into three stages. First, military success creates a new balance of power and establishes a factual reality. Second, this reality is formalized through legal instruments. Third, the legal framework is used to facilitate further political expansion. In this way, the treaty is no longer merely the outcome of conflict, but becomes the starting point of a new political process.

In this context, the legal text functions as an instrument for organizing geopolitical space. It defines the rules of power, establishes legitimate forms of intervention, and creates the argumentative framework within which state behavior is perceived as legally justified. For this reason, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca transcends the boundaries of a traditional agreement and acquires systemic significance.

Thus, legal principles cease to function as abstract norms and instead become the foundation of political practice, determining the forms through which power is exercised. Military force creates opportunity, while law defines the rules of its application and ensures its legitimacy.

As a result, following the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, Russian policy in the southern direction acquired a consistent and normatively grounded character. From this stage onward, a form of imperial policy emerges in which force and law are integrated into a unified system, creating a durable structure of hegemonic influence.

The Treaty of Jassy as the Second Stage of Legal Consolidation.

The Treaty of Jassy represents the conceptually completed stage of the same strategic line initiated by the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. If the 1774 agreement established the normative foundation through which military success was transformed into legal influence, the Treaty of Jassy of 1791 provided these foundations with stability, continuity, and practical effectiveness. Accordingly, it should be interpreted not merely as a postwar peace act, but as the legal consolidation of Russia's already acquired advantage and an instrument for its further expansion.

Russian diplomatic materials emphasize that the primary function of a peace agreement is the consolidation of results achieved by force (AVPRI, f. 5, op. 2, d. 182, l. 7). This principle defines the real purpose of the Treaty of Jassy. It concerns not the acquisition of new territories, but the legal stabilization of an already established superiority. Such stabilization creates the conditions necessary for the formation of hegemonic order, since power requires not only physical dominance but also normative reinforcement.

Hegemony cannot be sustained solely through military success. Its durability depends on legal recognition, international legitimacy, and political continuity. The Treaty of Jassy facilitated precisely this transformation. The position achieved by Russia was converted into a legally formalized order that was no longer perceived as a temporary outcome, but as a stable geopolitical configuration. In this way, Russia's position in the region became systemic rather than contingent.

The Treaty of Jassy represents a stage at which military results are transformed into institutional power. It does not introduce entirely new norms, but reinforces the existing legal framework and ensures its effective operation. As a result, influence becomes stabilized and develops into a form of political practice operating within a reproducible order.

Thus, the Treaty of Jassy may be interpreted as a highly developed form of the diplomatic capitalization of military advantage. It not only confirmed Russia's positions but also established long-term strategic expectations according to which the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus would remain within its sphere of influence. These expectations played a significant role, as they predetermined the future trajectory of power distribution in the region.

A full understanding of this process requires a combined analysis of the Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca and Jassy. In the second half of the eighteenth century, international law extended beyond its function of concluding conflicts and became an active mechanism for shaping geopolitical space. In this context, both agreements should be understood as elements of a unified legal-political system that restructured the balance of power in the Black Sea region.

One of the central provisions of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca concerns the "independence" of the Crimean Khanate (Martens, 1874, p. 316). Formally, this represents recognition of sovereignty; in practice, however, it created a political vacuum that facilitated the expansion of Russian influence. This demonstrates the divergence between legal formulation and political outcome, a key characteristic of eighteenth-century diplomacy.

Similarly, the principle of freedom of navigation in the Black Sea (Martens, 1874, p. 330) carried strategic implications beyond its economic dimension. The breakdown of Ottoman monopoly opened the space to Russian access, ultimately contributing to a shift in the balance of power. In this way, an economic provision was transformed into an instrument of geopolitical influence.

Particular importance attaches to the provision concerning the protection of Christians (Martens, 1874, p. 323), which formally addressed a religious issue but in practice created a legal basis for intervention. In this case, a humanitarian argument was employed to achieve political objectives, reflecting a characteristic feature of imperial diplomacy.

In the case of Georgia, these processes are not fully reflected in the treaty texts, yet their consequences are evident. Georgia gradually became a strategic space between two empires, which shaped its political choices and constrained its sovereignty.

The Treaty of Jassy reinforced this process in legal terms. The provision concerning the protection of the lands of the Kartli ruler (Martens, 1878, p. 52) formally elevated Georgia's status, yet in practice established an asymmetric system in which its independence was limited. At the same time, the reaffirmation of previous agreements (Martens, 1878, p. 45) ensured legal continuity and strengthened the existing order.

Historiographical interpretations of these treaties differ. Russian tradition emphasizes their role as stabilizing factors, whereas Western scholarship tends to interpret them as instruments of imperial expansion. This divergence reflects different approaches to the interpretation of international law.

Thus, both treaties should be understood as elements of a unified mechanism in which legal texts function as instruments of political influence. The example of Georgia clearly demonstrates how legal formulations can shape a country's geopolitical fate.

On this basis, a broader phenomenon can be identified, which may be defined as legal hegemony. This refers to a condition in which a state not only dominates, but also provides its dominance with legal form, transforming it into a legitimate political order.

Legal hegemony differs from military domination in that it reduces the need for direct force and creates a more stable system of control. In the South Caucasus, this model proved particularly effective, as direct annexation was not always feasible in a multipolar environment.

Under these conditions, the legal framework became the principal instrument of influence. It established an order in which peripheral spaces operated within norms defined by the hegemon, and their political choices were structurally constrained.

Thus, legal hegemony represents the highest form of imperial strategy, in which force, law, and diplomacy are integrated. It was precisely this model that defined Russia's success in the South Caucasus and laid the foundation for its long-term hegemonic position in the region.

The South Caucasus as a Space of Legal Experimentation

The South Caucasus was not merely a zone of military confrontation for Russia; it also constituted a space in which the empire systematically developed legal and diplomatic models for the expansion of its influence, thereby shaping a new type of imperial governance practice. In this context, the region should be understood not only as a strategically located territory, but as a functional platform where various instruments of power were synthesized and tested in practice. It was precisely here that military success, the ideology of protection, and diplomatic law converged, forming a complex and structurally coherent model of imperial policy.

The case of Georgia is particularly significant in this regard, as it represented a space in which this model assumed a concrete and clearly defined form. Orthodox identity provided the ideological foundation through which Russia presented its intervention as legitimate and endowed it with normative justification. At the same time, Georgia's political weakness and its position between competing powers created structural conditions that facilitated the transformation of this ideological argument into a practical political mechanism. This combination produced an asymmetric relationship in which the concept of legal protection gradually evolved into a condition of effective dependence.

Thus, the South Caucasus became a space in which the concept of protection was practically tested as a form of hegemonic relationship and acquired an institutional character. This process was not limited to ideological declaration; it involved the consistent application of legal and diplomatic mechanisms through

which a stable system of influence was established. It is precisely within this space that one can observe how confessional and ideological arguments were transformed into instruments of geopolitical control.

This provides grounds for the broader conclusion that Russian policy in the region was not a situational response to ongoing developments. It constituted a systematically developed strategic model based on the synthesis of force, law, and ideology. Within this model, military action created the factual foundation, legal formalization ensured its legitimacy, and ideological justification reinforced its acceptance at both domestic and international levels.

This synthesis distinguishes imperial strategy from simple military expansion. Military expansion relies on the direct use of force and often requires continuous control, whereas imperial strategy based on legal and diplomatic instruments creates a more stable and self-regulating system. Accordingly, the South Caucasus should be understood as a space in which a model of imperial governance was formed, grounded in the institutionalization of power and its transformation into a normative order.

Law as an Instrument of Imperial Power

An analysis of eighteenth-century diplomatic treaties demonstrates that law functioned within imperial policy in a dual capacity: as a language of legitimation and as a technology of power. This dual function defines the specific role of law within imperial strategy and indicates its transformation from a neutral regulator into an active political instrument. On the one hand, legal formulation was necessary to ensure that military outcomes received international recognition and were transformed into legitimate political realities. On the other hand, these same formulations created long-term mechanisms of control that ensured the stability of influence.

When law is employed as a technology of power, it no longer merely records achieved results, but actively structures political space and defines the rules of its operation. Legal norms, in this context, extend beyond regulation and become a form of organizing power. They establish roles and hierarchies, define who is the protector and who is to be protected, who possesses the right of intervention and who is subject to it. In this way, law creates the normative framework within which power acquires a systematic and reproducible form.

In this context, the Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca and Jassy acquire particular significance, as they represent the historical moment when legal discourse in the South Caucasus first became a primary instrument in the formation of imperial space. These agreements do not merely record military outcomes; they construct the order that shapes subsequent political practice. Military force produces the result, but legal formalization ensures its stabilization, recognition, and long-term effectiveness.

The instrumentalization of law should therefore be understood as a central mechanism of imperial policy, through which power is transformed from factual domination into a normatively reinforced system. This transformation is particularly important in environments where direct military control is difficult or undesirable, and where the maintenance of influence requires more flexible and institutionally structured forms. Under such conditions, law becomes the principal means of expanding and stabilizing power.

A broader evaluation of Russo-Ottoman diplomatic practice in the second half of the eighteenth century reveals a clear historical pattern: the success of Russian southern policy was determined not only by military capabilities, but also by the ability to transform those capabilities into a legally justified and normatively recognized order. In this process, the empire operated not only as a military power, but as an author of political order, establishing the norms according to which the regional system functioned.

For this reason, these treaties should be interpreted not as texts that merely confirmed an existing situation, but as documents that created a new historical reality and determined the direction of political development. They established a normative framework within which the South Caucasus gradually shifted

from a buffer space between competing empires into a region governed by a legal and political logic defined by Russia. This transformation involved not only a redistribution of power, but also a qualitative change in political order.

The essence of the consolidation of legal hegemony is revealed precisely in this process. Military victory alone remains temporary if it is not accompanied by legal formalization, which ensures its recognition and stabilization. At the same time, legal form cannot function effectively without the force that guarantees the implementation of its norms. It is this interdependent unity of force and law that produces an imperial order far more durable than any individual military success.

By the end of the eighteenth century, such an order began to take shape in the South Caucasus. This was a space in which military force, diplomatic practice, and legal formulation were integrated into a unified system, creating a new model of hegemonic control. This model was based not only on the physical exercise of power, but also on its normative justification and institutional consolidation, which determined the long-term success of the Russian Empire in the region.

Thus, the transition from military success to normative empire should be understood as the essential outcome of a historical process in which power was transformed into an organized, legitimate, and self-reinforcing system. It was precisely this transformation that defined the effectiveness of Russian imperial strategy and laid the foundation for the consolidation of its hegemonic position in the South Caucasus.

The Question of Georgia in Russia's Legal-Geopolitical Strategy

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the question of Georgia cannot be interpreted merely as the outcome of regional political dynamics or as an expression of local power relations. Rather, it should be understood as an integral component of a broader geopolitical process within which the South Caucasus was gradually integrated into the structural framework of Russian imperial policy. Georgia's significance in this process was determined not so much by its internal political resources, but by the function it performed as a geographical, military, and diplomatic nexus between the Black Sea and the Iranian directions (Suny, 1994, pp. 58–62).

In this sense, the question of Georgia becomes a space in which imperial strategy assumed a concrete form. It is here that a model of power becomes visible, one that is based not only on military action, but also on legal formalization and ideological legitimation. For this reason, the Georgian case occupies a particular place in the analysis of imperial policy: it does not represent an isolated episode, but rather a concentrated expression of the process through which Russian influence in the region was transformed into structural hegemony.

Georgia's Geopolitical Function: Space as a Determinant of Politics.

Georgia's geographical position created a configuration in which space itself became a determining factor of political behavior. Located at a strategic crossroads linking the Black Sea coast, the internal regions of the South Caucasus, and the Iranian direction, it possessed not merely a transit role but systemic geopolitical significance. As David Lang notes, such spaces become zones where multiple influences converge and competing political vectors intersect (Lang, 1962, pp. 140–145). Georgia, therefore, functioned as a structural node shaping regional dynamics.

For Russia, control over Georgia ensured not only immediate military advantage but also strategic depth and the expansion of influence toward the south. As Dominic Lieven observes, empires prioritize territories that serve as buffer zones and enable influence over peripheral regions (Lieven, 2000, p. 137). In this context, Georgia became a strategic platform for consolidating positions and extending influence in a structured manner.

Georgian historiography interprets this process as a classical example of spatial politics, in which geographical conditions are transformed into determinants of political behavior. Vakhtang Guruli emphasizes that Georgia functioned as a zone of intersecting imperial interests, where its political status was shaped less by internal development than by external strategic calculations (Guruli, 2012, p. 52). Space, therefore, was not a neutral setting but an active factor generating both opportunities and constraints.

Internal Political Structure: Weakness as a Geopolitical Factor.

The internal political condition of Georgia in the eighteenth century was characterized by decentralization and feudal fragmentation, which significantly limited the formation of unified state policy and reduced the effectiveness of collective action. This condition constituted not merely an internal weakness but a geopolitical factor that increased vulnerability to external intervention (Vachnadze, 2009, pp. 33–35).

In this context, internal weakness must be understood not only as a domestic political issue, but as a structural determinant of a state's position within the international system. When a state fails to consolidate its resources and maintain effective centralized governance, it inevitably becomes subject to the influence of stronger actors. This dynamic corresponds to the logic of dependency, whereby smaller political units operate under structural constraints that shape their strategic choices.

Platon Ioseliani notes that Georgian elites frequently sought external support, thereby reinforcing dependency and diminishing political autonomy (Ioseliani, 1936, p. 93). This created a paradox in which the pursuit of security itself deepened dependence. Internal weakness and external orientation thus appear as interconnected processes shaping the state's strategic position.

The Concept of Protection: From Security to Control.

In the Georgian case, the concept of "protection" occupies a central place. Initially perceived as a guarantee of security, it gradually evolved into an instrument of political dependence. The idea of Orthodox unity provided the ideological foundation through which Russia justified its intervention and presented it as both legitimate and necessary.

However, functional analysis demonstrates that this concept was not neutral. It operated as a legal-political mechanism through which influence was progressively expanded and structurally consolidated. Russian diplomatic documents indicate that "protection" was viewed as a means of strengthening positions in the region (AVPRI, f. 5, op. 1, d. 213, l. 9), confirming its instrumental character.

Within this process, a significant transformation becomes evident: protection, initially framed as a security mechanism, evolved into a form of control. It created an asymmetric relationship in which the protected party lost strategic autonomy, while the protecting power acquired the capacity to define political direction. In this way, ideological justification was transformed into a geopolitical instrument and became a key mechanism for the expansion of influence.

Integration into the Imperial System: From Process to Outcome

Georgia's integration into the Russian imperial system should be understood as a prolonged and multi-stage process that encompassed military, diplomatic, and legal components and unfolded within a structurally coherent logic. This process was not the result of a single act; rather, it constituted a gradual transformation through which Georgia progressively lost the capacity for independent action and became incorporated into an expanding system of imperial influence. Integration, therefore, should not be interpreted as a discrete political event, but as a dynamic process involving the transformation and institutionalization of forms of power.

Within this transformation, the military factor created the initial conditions, diplomatic practice ensured the formalization of relations, and legal mechanisms consolidated the achieved results and transformed them into a stable political reality. It was precisely the interaction among these three components that determined

both the effectiveness of the integration process and its long-term outcomes. As a result, influence gradually acquired a systemic character and ceased to depend solely on the periodic use of force.

As Ronald Suny observes, by the end of the eighteenth century Georgia had already entered the Russian sphere of influence, despite the formal preservation of sovereignty (Suny, 1994, p. 62). This situation reflects an intermediate form of imperial governance in which formal independence coexists with actual political dependence. Such a dual condition indicates that integration can occur not only through direct annexation, but also through the structural expansion of influence, which progressively constrains sovereign agency.

Georgian historiography emphasizes that this process ultimately led to the transformation of Georgia's political space and its incorporation into the imperial structure (Guruli, 2012, p. 55). This transformation involved not only territorial change, but also the reconfiguration of the political system, within which local institutions gradually came under the influence of imperial order. Integration, in this sense, should be understood as a structural transformation encompassing changes in governance, political relations, and the distribution of power.

The analysis of this process demonstrates that integration was not based on a single decision, but on a consistent mechanism through which dependence was gradually transformed into an institutionalized order. This mechanism relied on the expansion of influence through legal formalization, which ensured both its stability and reproducibility. As a result, Georgia became a space in which imperial policy operated as a normatively reinforced and structurally organized system.

Thus, Georgia's integration into the Russian imperial system should be assessed as the logical outcome of imperial strategy, in which military, diplomatic, and legal instruments were combined to create a durable form of power. This process reflects a model of imperial governance in which influence is transformed into a systemic and institutional reality, ultimately shaping the trajectory of regional political development.

Generalization: The Georgian Case as an Imperial Model

The Georgian case provides an opportunity not only to describe a specific historical process, but also to formulate a theoretical generalization of the core characteristics of Russian imperial strategy. This strategy was based on the synthesis of force, law, and ideology, through which a structurally organized and normatively reinforced system of hegemonic influence was established. The interaction of these three components determined the effectiveness of imperial policy and ensured the durability of its outcomes.

Within this process, Georgia became the space in which this synthesis assumed a practical and fully developed form. Military force created the factual foundation that defined the balance of power; legal formalization ensured the legitimation of this balance and its transformation into a recognized political order; and ideological justification reinforced the acceptance of this order at both domestic and international levels. The unity of these three elements thus produced a functional model of imperial policy that extended beyond the mere application of force and was grounded in its institutionalization.

For this reason, the history of Georgia in this period should be interpreted not only as part of national history, but also as an analytical example of imperial policy that allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of power organization. In this context, Georgia represents not merely an object of imperial action, but a space in which the fundamental principles of imperial strategy were articulated and made visible. It demonstrates how regional realities can become experimental arenas of imperial policy and how local processes are transformed into components of broader geopolitical strategies.

Accordingly, the Georgian case demonstrates that imperial expansion is not solely a military process and cannot be explained exclusively through the use of force. It constitutes a complex transformation in which force, law, and ideology are integrated to produce a new political reality. Within this reality, hegemony emerges not as a temporary advantage, but as a structurally embedded and normatively reinforced order that ensures the stability and reproducibility of influence.

Thus, the Georgian example provides grounds for concluding that the success of imperial strategy depends not only on military capabilities, but also on the ability to transform those capabilities into a legally legitimized and ideologically justified system. It is precisely through this transformation that hegemony is created—one that is far more durable than any temporary military superiority and that ultimately determines the trajectory of regional political development in the long term.

Conclusion: From Military Power to Legal Hegemony — A Model of Imperial Transformation in the South Caucasus

The geopolitical transformation of the South Caucasus in the second half of the eighteenth century should be interpreted not as a coincidental convergence of historical events, but as a structurally organized process through which forms of power were transformed into more complex, institutionally consolidated, and normatively legitimized configurations. The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that the success of the Russian Empire in the region was determined not solely by military superiority, but by its capacity to convert that superiority into a legally structured and durable hegemonic system.

The central thesis of the research—military success, legal formalization, and the formation of hegemonic order—is confirmed through both empirical and theoretical analysis, allowing us to identify a universal mechanism of imperial policy. This three-stage model transcends the specific historical context and acquires broader analytical significance, as it reflects the logic through which power is transformed into a stable political order.

At the first stage, military force establishes factual reality and determines the balance of power. The Russo-Ottoman wars of 1768–1774 and 1787–1791 should be understood as instruments of geopolitical restructuring, through which Russia consolidated its position in the Black Sea basin and secured strategic initiative toward the South Caucasus. However, military success alone is insufficient for long-term domination, as it merely creates an opportunity that requires subsequent institutional and legal consolidation.

At the second stage, these military outcomes are formalized through legal mechanisms, transforming *de facto* superiority into a component of international law. The Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca and Jassy must therefore be interpreted as normative instruments that legitimize and stabilize military achievements. At this level, power acquires recognized form and becomes embedded within the regulatory framework of international relations.

Simultaneously, legal discourse undergoes a fundamental transformation, functioning as a technology of power. Law ceases to be a neutral regulator and becomes an active instrument through which states expand and consolidate their influence. The right to protect Orthodox Christians serves as a clear example of how humanitarian formulations can be converted into legal grounds for political intervention. In this way, legal norms acquire an instrumental character and become integral to geopolitical strategy.

At the third stage, a hegemonic order emerges, grounded not only in force but in its normative recognition. This stage represents the most advanced form of imperial policy, as it ensures stability of influence while reducing the need for direct coercion. Once legitimized through legal and diplomatic means, power becomes self-reinforcing and reproducible, functioning as a structural system.

Legal hegemony, as the final form of this process, represents a more sophisticated phase of imperial governance, in which power partially shifts into a self-regulating mode. The hegemon no longer relies on constant military demonstration, as its influence is already secured through legal and diplomatic mechanisms that guarantee recognition and stability. Thus, force and law merge into a unified system that sustains long-term political control.

The case of Georgia is particularly significant in this context, as it represents a space where this model assumes concrete and practical form. Its geopolitical position and internal political conditions created a

favorable environment for the implementation of imperial strategy. Georgia's integration into the Russian sphere of influence was not a singular event, but a multi-stage process in which military, diplomatic, and legal mechanisms operated sequentially to construct a system of structural dependence.

The concept of "protection" occupies a central place in this process, illustrating the transformation of an ideological argument into a geopolitical instrument. Initially perceived as a means of ensuring security, it gradually evolved into a form of political control and legally institutionalized dependency. This transformation demonstrates that ideology in imperial policy functions not merely as rhetoric, but as a strategic tool.

Georgia's integration into the imperial system reflects an intermediate model of governance, in which formal sovereignty coexists with actual dependency. This condition indicates that hegemony does not necessarily require direct political control; it can persist even when formal independence is maintained, provided that the effective scope of state action is determined by an external power.

Thus, the experience of the South Caucasus in the eighteenth century reveals that imperial expansion is a complex process in which force, law, and ideology converge to create a new political reality. Within this framework, hegemony emerges as a more устойчиво and enduring form of dominance than temporary military superiority, shaping the long-term trajectory of regional political development.

Conclusion: The present study demonstrates that Russian imperial policy in the South Caucasus in the second half of the eighteenth century cannot be assessed solely through the prism of military achievements. Rather, it constituted a multi-layered and coherent system in which military operations, diplomatic negotiations, and legal instruments were closely interconnected and collectively ensured the realization of geopolitical objectives.

The analysis of the Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) and Jassy (1791) reveals that these documents did not merely reflect an already existing balance of power; on the contrary, they actively produced a new political reality. The formulations embedded in the treaties—particularly the principles of "protection" and "guardianship"—should be understood not only as legal norms, but also as political instruments through which Russia legitimized its influence within the Ottoman sphere.

This approach is especially evident in the case of Georgia. While formal statehood was preserved, it gradually lost its substantive content, as key components of foreign and partially internal policy were transferred under imperial control. As a result, a condition emerged that may be defined as a model of limited sovereignty—characterized by the coexistence of formal independence and the systematic reduction of actual political agency.

A comparative perspective encompassing the Balkans and the Middle East confirms that such practices were not unique to the South Caucasus. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, great powers actively employed religious and ethnic arguments to construct legal grounds for intervention. However, in the Russian case, this policy was particularly consistent and strategically oriented, ultimately ensuring the expansion of its influence in the Black Sea region and adjacent geopolitical spaces.

Thus, the study confirms that international law in this period did not function as a neutral system of rules. Instead, it was actively utilized as an instrument for the distribution of power and the advancement of imperial interests. Within this context, developments in the South Caucasus should be interpreted as processes in which legal forms became one of the principal instruments of geopolitical transformation.

The theoretical significance of the research lies in its proposal of an analytical model of imperial policy that integrates multiple methodological approaches into a unified explanatory framework. This approach enables the interpretation of historical processes not merely as chronological sequences of events, but as structurally organized systems governed by an internal logic.

At the core of this model lies the dynamic transformation of power, unfolding through interconnected stages. At the first stage, military force establishes factual reality and determines the balance of power. At the second stage, legal formalization ensures the legitimization of this reality and transforms it into a recognized component of international relations. At the third stage, diplomatic practice consolidates the achieved outcomes and establishes a stable political order.

The integration of these three components produces a durable political system that fundamentally differs from temporary military dominance. It is within this process that the interdependence of force and law becomes particularly evident: force creates opportunity, while legal form ensures the legitimization and stabilization of that opportunity.

In conclusion, the success of Russian imperial policy in the South Caucasus was determined not only by military strength, but also by its capacity to formalize that strength through legal and diplomatic means. This approach enabled not only the consolidation of achieved results but also their long-term preservation.

Accordingly, the transformation of the South Caucasus in the eighteenth century should be understood as a transition from military confrontation to a legally consolidated political order. It is precisely within this transformation that the essential characteristic of imperial policy is revealed—the capacity of power to evolve into a stable and reproducible system.

The original contribution of this research lies in its formulation of an integrated analytical model of imperial expansion, which unites military force, legal formalization, and diplomatic practice within a single framework. In contrast to traditional studies that focus on isolated factors, this approach demonstrates how these elements interact and produce a durable political order.

Furthermore, the study develops the concept of “legal hegemony,” according to which military success is transformed into a normatively grounded and institutionally stable system. The proposed three-stage model—military capability, legal legitimization, and political consolidation—can also be applied to the analysis of other historical processes.

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