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Research Report

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The Georgian Knot

The Crisis in South Ossetia in the Context of Georgian-Russian Relations

Martina Bielawski / Uwe Halbach

The horrific act of terror that took place in the Russian republic of North Ossetia in the North Caucasus has pushed South Ossetia out of the international headlines. But the crisis in South Ossetia has not been overcome and still deserves attention. Since November 2003, international interest in developments in the South Caucasus and elsewhere in post-Soviet space has been determined by Georgia's political "new beginning." Initially the reform program of the young Georgian government under President Saakashvili aimed at combating problems such as corruption and strengthening the state stood in the forefront. The process of reviving the state in a country that previously served as an example of a failing state is being supported with substantial financial aid from external actors, including, the US, EU and the World Bank.

The conflict with the breakaway region of South Ossetia, however, has pushed the efforts to consolidate the Georgian state and the symbolic power of the peaceful "Rose Revolution" to their limits. Above all, the limits to achieving a lasting improvement in Russian-Georgian relations, a goal that the new government in Tbilisi had declared a foreign policy priority, were revealed. The South Ossetian crisis, which has been accompanied by militant rhetoric and skirmishes, redirected attention back to the unresolved regional conflicts in the South Caucasus and the structural problems in relations between Georgia and Russia.

Even before the Rose Revolution there was already international interest in Georgia, which seems out of proportion

with the country's lack of resources and small population. Following the change of power in November 2003, the international community has been actively involved in the internal reforms taking place in the small Caucasian state. At a donor conference organized by the EU and the World Bank in June 2004 financial credits to the tune of one billion dollars were provided to Georgia. The US, which has had around 200 military advisors involved in training Georgian troops since 2002, included Georgia in its ambitious "Millennium Challenge" aid program that was started for 16 selected countries. This favorable decision was made despite the fact the country barely meets the strict economic, social and political criteria for inclusion in the program. The international commit-



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ment to resolving the secessionist conflicts takes a back seat to this massive support for the reform programs of the new Georgian leadership. The observer missions of the UN in Abkhazia (UNOMIG) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in South Ossetia play a minor role, while it is largely left up to the Russian peacekeeping troops to determine the rules of the game in the process of conflict resolution. Yet Russia, which had played the role of the “honest broker” during the peaceful Rose Revolution, has, as in the past, proven to be a questionable partner for peace and stability in the South Caucasus when dealing with unresolved regional conflicts.

Russian-Georgian Relations after the Rose Revolution

Of all the states in the CIS, Georgia has probably had the tensest relationship with Russia over the last ten years. A major reason for Georgia’s distrust of the former colonial power was Russia’s actions in

Georgia’s secessionist conflicts. In the battle stages in the early 1990s, Russia provided military support to separatist groups in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. More recently (since 1999) the main points of contention are:

- ▶ Russia’s refusal to withdraw from the military bases in Batumi and Achalkalaki in Georgia despite international agreements to do so;
- ▶ Georgia’s stance on the infiltration of Chechen guerrillas into the Pankisi Valley on the Georgian border with Chechnya and the cooperation between Georgian security officers and such forces;
- ▶ Georgia’s increased alignment with Western partners (NATO, US, EU) in its foreign and security policies.

The Rose Revolution brought some movement in bilateral relations between Moscow and Tbilisi. The first months following the peaceful regime change, in which the Russian foreign minister at the time Igor Ivanov played a decisive role in the efforts to mediate between the parties, were

marked by surprisingly friendly tones in the Russian-Georgian dialogue. There was reason to hope that Georgia's pronounced Western stance could coexist with a neighborly relationship with Russia. Georgia announced a unilateral relaxation of visa requirements, presented the possibility of rapidly signing a new Georgian-Russian framework agreement, and offered Russian firms new perspectives in the country's energy and transportation sectors, including even the prospect of building a pipeline through Georgian territory. The contentious issue of closing Russian bases in Georgia receded somewhat into the background, and the military cooperation between the two states was to be increased (including, among other things, training for Georgian officers at Russian military academies). Above all, Georgia declared it was now willing to jointly patrol the porous and critical areas of the Georgian-Russian border together with Russia.

The communication between Presidents Putin and Saakashvili was described as being excellent. According to some Russian commentators, the two were "kindred spirits" inasmuch as they both called for a "strong state" and they both showed a proclivity towards strong presidential authority.

The relaxation in relations between Russia and Georgia reached a high point with the resolution of the Ajarian crisis. For weeks, the conflict between Tbilisi and the absolutist local regime of the Abashidze clan in the autonomous republic on the Black Sea was on the verge of turning violent. The confrontation was diffused through the repeated peaceful mediation of Igor Ivanov, this time in his role as chairman of the Russian Security Council. In the end, the Abashidzes left the country for Moscow.

The Carrot and Stick of Georgia's Battle against Separatism

At his inauguration Saakashvili swore on the grave of King David the Builder, a sym-

bol for the unity of the Georgian state, to unite the country once again. As such, the reconstruction of the country's territorial integrity by reincorporating breakaway areas became the highest priority. This goal was closely related to efforts to overcome the image of a failed state through internal reforms in the rest of Georgia.

Following the victory over particularism in Ajaria, the Georgian president called on the breakaway areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to return to the fold, and he offered them considerable rights of autonomy. In addition, the Georgian government started a "charm offensive." As incentives it offered the reconstruction of the rail connections between Tbilisi and South Ossetia, the payment of pensions to retired persons and humanitarian aid to the rest of the population in the conflict zone.

As such, it appeared at first as though Tbilisi wanted in the long run to win back the hearts and minds of the people in South Ossetia and overcome the deep mistrust that has existed between Ossetians and Georgians since the outbreak of violence in the secessionist war from 1991 to 1992. At the time, it was Georgia who started the exchange of blows.

At the end of May, however, Tbilisi unexpectedly set up control posts in South Ossetia in order to put an end to smuggling. The measure did in fact succeed at blocking to a great extent the delivery of goods from Russia, which was the main source of income for the majority of South Ossetia's inhabitants. The resulting rise in prices, food shortages and drop in income led to a worsening of the already precarious economic situation in South Ossetia. For all practical purposes, Georgia cut off the South Ossetian population's access to income from the dominant black economy and trading in smuggled goods in order to offer them humanitarian aid in its stead.

In addition to the flaring up again of the conflict over South Ossetia, which up to then had been considered the tamest of the three secessionist conflicts in the South Caucasus (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and

Nagorno-Karabach), and Georgia's heightened rhetoric about reincorporating break-away areas, a new front was opened. At the beginning of August, Tbilisi threatened to sink ships that approached the coast of Abkhazia without Georgian approval.

The young Georgian government is increasingly focused on the reconstruction of its territorial sovereignty. In doing so it risks neglecting the internal reforms that are so desperately needed and which they had hoped would set them apart from the former regime under Shevardnadze. Tangible success in internal reforms and the transformation of "Georgia proper" into a functioning democratic state would take away the separatist forces most important ammunition and would thwart their efforts to distance themselves from an uninviting metropolitan state. But there are some perilous links between the tasks of reconstructing territorial integrity and strengthening the "rump" of Georgia. For example, the battle against smuggling and corruption, which is essential for the consolidation of the Georgian state, leads necessarily to the borders of the separatist areas.

The Conflict over South Ossetia

Tiny regions in the Caucasus repeatedly find their way into the headlines of the international press. This was the case two years ago with the Pankisi Valley, an area with just 8000 inhabitants. In the summer of 2004, the self-declared Republic of South Ossetia, which is not recognized by any state in the world, brought attention to itself. The area, which encompasses roughly 3,000 square kilometers and has a current population of about 70,000, is located at the southern foot of the Caucasian mountain range at one of the intersections between the conflict regions of the South and North Caucasus. It is connected with the Republic of North Ossetia via the narrow passage of the Roki tunnel.

Apart from the bloody repression of a pro-Russian (Bolshevist) uprising in the area by the ruling Mensheviks in 1920, relations

between Georgians and Ossetians were quite peaceful up to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The conflict between anti-minority Georgian nationalism under Sviad Gamsakhurdia, the country's first freely elected president, and separatist efforts in the autonomous territorial units of Georgia created a tense situation. In 1991 the situation in South Ossetia escalated to actual combat between Georgian troops and local Ossetian militias.

Since the ceasefire agreement of June 24, 1992, South Ossetia has grown accustomed to its self-declared independence from Georgia and its reliance on Russia. According to international law the area is still part of Georgia.

The truce is overseen by the so-called Joint Control Commission (JCC) which is comprised of representatives of Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia and North Ossetia. The JCC operates a mixed peacekeeping force under Russian command. Since the interests of South Ossetia are represented thrice over in the JCC (via Russia, South Ossetia and North Ossetia), Georgia has long considered this arrangement as outdated. The commission has to date been unable to contribute to resolving the dormant conflict. Tbilisi demands an internationalization of the regulation of the conflict (among others, by expanding the OSCE mandate in the conflict zone and an international conference), but Moscow strictly rejects these demands.

South Ossetia is not Ajaria

The effort to reconstruct the state's territorial integrity was initially granted a surprising success. The quick and bloodless end to the rule of Abashidzes in Ajaria sowed the seeds of hope in Georgia of being able to resolve the separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia soon. In the case of Ajaria, the population was successfully separated from its autocratic leadership, representing a sort of repeat of the Rose Revolution. However, there are funda-

mental differences between the situation in Ajaria and the two secessionist conflicts.

The particularism of the Abashidze rule in Ajaria did not fall under the rubric of a secessionist conflict in which ethnic differences are politicized and a separatist area declares its independence from a multinational state. There is no ethnolinguistic difference between Georgians and "Ajarians," and there was never any use of violence between the two sides during any phase of the conflict. The political conflict between Tbilisi and Batumi was based on the private economic and power interests of Aslan Abashidze. He exploited the weakness of the Georgian state and refused to transfer to Tbilisi taxes and tariffs collected at the harbor of Batumi. Despite the political tension, Ajaria always considered itself as part of the Georgian state.

In contrast, after winning military victories in the secessionist wars, which were supported from abroad, South Ossetia and Abkhazia have gotten used to their "hard-fought" independence and separation from Georgia. This is especially true, though not exclusively, for the local power elite, who are embroiled in white-collar crime and corruption. The claim from the Georgian side that there is no conflict between Georgians and Ossetians, rather simply a conflict with a criminal secessionist regime supported by Russian power politics, ignores the interethnic violence that broke out during the military phase of the conflict in 1991/1992 for which Georgian actors share considerable responsibility.

The ties with Russia are also completely different in the cases of the two secessionist regions when compared with Ajaria. Russia has issued passports to 80% of the population in South Ossetia, and it has paid out pensions to retirees that are way above the typical Georgian level. The "informal duty-free trade" in Russian goods is the main source of income for the majority of the population of South Ossetia. Dependence

on Russia is even greater in the case of Abkhazia.

"Frozen" Secessionist Conflicts Reignite

The Georgian advance on the border of South Ossetia set developments into motion that brought with them a sharp rise in tensions and the militarization of the conflict zone.

In mid-July the JCC attempted to reach an agreement to peacefully resolve the conflict and reduce the troops to the level agreed to in the 1992 ceasefire (500 "peacekeepers" each for the Georgian, Russian and Ossetian sides). Key points of contention, such as the control over the Roki tunnel, were left out of the negotiations. A stable solution could therefore not be reached, and five days later fighting broke out again. In mid-August, the parties to the conflict said that the renewed conflict had thus far cost 16 people their lives. And now there was increasing talk of Caucasian mercenaries roaming about the conflict zone who were not under the control of either Tskhinvali or Tbilisi.

The official parties to the conflict, Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, agreed to jointly fight these "third forces." On August 19, President Saakashvili announced the withdrawal of Georgian troops above the allowed limit of 500 soldiers from South Ossetia. The fear of war had arisen on all sides, and signs of the conflict escalating throughout the region had increased. Among other things, Chechen forces had supposedly gotten involved in South Ossetia – pro-Russian on the South Ossetian side and anti-Russian on the other side. There were also demonstrations in North Ossetia. The close relationship between the conflict regions of the North and South Caucasus was apparent once again. Both Moscow and Washington pushed in equal measure for a de-escalation in South Ossetia.

Russia's Role in the Secessionist Conflicts

The Network of Separatist Forces

South Ossetia is only one of four “dormant” secessionist conflicts in post-Soviet space. Apart from Nagorno-Karabach, self-declared mini-states like Trans-dniester (in conflict with the multinational state of Moldova), Abkhazia and South Ossetia are largely dependent on Moscow's support. Politically this support includes Russia's efforts to create a platform for the networking of the separatists. This has included “separatists' summits” that have taken place in Moscow and elsewhere. Russia allows the residents of the affected regions to travel to Russia without a visa. In doing so, it violates CIS agreements which call for economic sanctions against and the isolation of break-away regions.

During the current crisis, both Trans-dniester and Abkhazia responded to South Ossetian appeals for help by sending fighters to the region. It is highly likely that this was the result of a solidarity pact which the separatist regions agreed to in 1994. Guerrillas from the other separatist areas and battle-ready Cossacks traveled to the conflict area via Russian territory.

The Ambivalent Role of Russian “Peacekeeping Troops”

A treaty from July 15 entrusts Russian troops, of all people, with overseeing the withdrawal of these mercenaries and voluntary fighters. From the Georgian point of view, the Russian troops play a high questionable role in the conflict zone.

They refuse, for example, to accept the Georgian contingent in the joint control of the Roki tunnel. The tunnel is the main route for smuggling and the movement of illegal fighters. The Russian peacekeeping troops profit substantially from this situation. As such, they have more interest in maintaining the status quo than in actively keeping the peace. In Georgia they are

consequently seen as a “protective force” for a secessionist regime.

The principle of neutrality is not even minimally observed by the Russian side. Russia believes that all the actions of its peacekeeping troops in South Ossetia are completely covered by the mandate provided by the ceasefire agreement, and Georgia does not have the right to object to the actions of the Russian troops. But this ignores one of the three pillars of peacekeeping, namely the agreement of both parties. Russia has so far blocked Georgia's wish to expand the mandate of the OSCE troops that are also active in South Ossetia at the expense of the CIS peacekeepers.

The End of the “Thaw”

The South Ossetian crisis has pushed the hopes of a lasting improvement in Russian-Georgian relations back into the background. At the outset of the crisis, President Saakashvili's statements on the role of Russia in the worsening of the crisis were still cautious. Above all, the Georgian side avoided attacking President Putin, who for his part did not make any public statements about South Ossetia during the entire escalation phase. Tbilisi accused “certain forces” in Russia of aggression against Georgia. But Saakashvili was very clear in blaming Russia when he said that a renewal of war in South Ossetia would ultimately mean war between Russia and Georgia.

By July at the latest, the initial relaxation in bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia had given way to a war of words in which classic enemy images were revived on both sides.

The Variety of Russian Actors

The recent crisis over South Ossetia reflects the incoherence of Russian policy in the Caucasus. This was obvious in the Yeltzin era when everyone followed their own interests and agendas in the region, whether from the presidential administra-

tion, the ministry of foreign affairs, the military, the energy sector or regional elites. According to the views of Russian and foreign observers, Russia under Putin has also not yet formed a coherent policy towards Georgia and the South Caucasus that is driven by clearly articulated interests.

President Putin assured his Georgian counterpart at a CIS summit in Moscow from July 2-4 that Russia respects Georgia's sovereignty and supports a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Such assurances stand in sharp contrast to the unsuccessful calls in the state duma and the federation council to accept South Ossetia into the Russian Federation. The fact that two members of the Russian FSB were appointed to the leadership of the KGB in South Ossetia suggests that the Russian secret service also supports the separatists.

As in the case of the crisis in Ajaria, which was resolved through close cooperation between Saakashvili and Putin, the Russian foreign ministry has once again accused the Georgian leadership of an irresponsible escalation of the situation.

The military follows its own agenda in South Ossetia and other secessionist conflict zones, with Russian "peacekeepers" taking a cut in the profits from the trade in smuggled goods and the black economies that have been established there.

Russia's Interests

It is hard to understand, even for many Russian commentators, why Russia is risking ruining its relations with Georgia, a neighbor that is strategically not unimportant, over South Ossetia, a region which has neither natural resources nor plays a key historical role for the Russian Federation. In light of its own irresolvable problems in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus, Russia ought to be interested in ensuring that there are no "black holes" on its neighbor's territory which facilitate the illegal movement of goods and persons.

To this extent, Saakashvili is probably

correct in claiming that Russia has no strategic interests in South Ossetia. What is driving Moscow's behavior is rather the particular interests of certain actors.

Russia uses the separatist issue in the "near abroad" as leverage for influencing the multinational states and is interested in creating conditions in the South Caucasus that have been characterized as "controlled instability." An armed conflict or a rekindling of the "secessionist wars" like those at the start of the 90s can definitely not be in its interests.

In addition to the interests of particular actors, the general Russian view of the Caucasus also plays a role. In Russia the region is seen as a unified whole. Conflicts in the South Caucasus can reverberate in the North Caucasus and vice versa. A military clash in South Ossetia would mobilize armed forces in the North Caucasus and bring unrest to the already unstable southern periphery of the Russian Federation. The confederation of north Caucasian mountain nationalities played an important role on the side of the separatists during the wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia at the beginning of the 90s. And they have had anything but a stabilizing effect on the Russian Federation.

Especially in light of the instability and its lack of consolidated power in a series of republics in the North Caucasus, Moscow has to be sensitive in its reactions to developments in the South Caucasus.

A Return to Old Habits?

The international community should make it clearer to Russia than it has in the past that Russia can not run roughshod over essential cornerstones of the state system – such as territorial integrity – without having to fear consequences. This is, after all, the same Russian state that demands categorical understanding from the international community for its actions against Chechen separatism and indignantly rejects criticism of the massive

human rights abuses it commits in the process.

Georgia's leadership, which after the regime change had given priority to internal reforms, is also repeating mistakes by seeking the rapid reconstruction of its territorial sovereignty while placing more modest yet equally important and difficult domestic issues on the backburner. In doing so Georgia has also raised concerns in the international community which has up to now expressly supported the reform process in the small country.

The "frozen" conflicts in the South Caucasus are too complex to be solved by some simple, one-off process. The bitter experience of the war over a decade ago has created a mindset among the population of the separatist republics that makes it seemingly impossible for them to rejoin their metropolitan state without there first being a far-reaching process of confidence building. Georgia needs to return to the realism that determined its policy towards Russia in the first months after the Rose Revolution. Russia's role as an economic and political regional power cannot be overlooked in any policy approach for achieving stability in the Caucasus, whether at the national or at the international level.

At the same time, Georgia's demand for territorial integrity and its efforts to combat smuggling and corruption are legitimate. These cannot be separated from the rest of its internal reform tasks and the consolidation of the state in the core of Georgia. The uncomfortable question that Western policymakers must put to Russia is, "What is your position on the sovereignty of your neighbors?" It is a reasonable question to put to a state that likes to brush aside criticism by invoking the inviolability of its own sovereignty. And it is especially appropriate for a state such as Russia which complains about any exogenous involvement in its own secessionist conflict in Chechnya, while at the same time cooperating with secessionist regimes at the

junction of the conflict areas of the North and South Caucasus.

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