



ZONE OF CONFLICT: CLASH OF PARADIGMS IN SOUTH OSSETIA

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ABSTRACT

Generally dubbed as “frozen conflicts”, the separatist conflicts in the Caucasus are seen by many authors as political and military stalemates. This approach, however, tends to brush aside sociological dynamics at work inside what would be more accurately described as “zones of conflict”. With a specific focus on South Ossetia, this contribution highlights the different logics at play in the state building processes of the region. The main argument is to demonstrate how the oppositional logic of the autocratic de facto government in power and outside interference in the region, from Russia and Georgia mainly, are affecting the state building process of South Ossetia by marginalizing the local population and its needs. In fact, no real state building will take place in South Ossetia, either as a component of a Georgian Federation or as an entity in the Russian Federation, without addressing more carefully the needs of the local population.

Key Words: *South Ossetia, Georgia, Caucasus, State Building, Secessionist Conflicts*

INTRODUCTION

The South Ossetians living under the authority of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia make up one of those peoples, like their fellow Caucasians the Abkhazs or the Transnistrians, trapped in a complete juridico-political limbo. The political entities that ‘claim the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force’¹ over them are not those juridically representing them in the international arena. Having met three of the four criteria required to be recognized as a state

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¹ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”, in H. Gerth & C. W. Mills (Ed.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 1957, p. 78.

according to the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of the State (1933) – that is to say, having a permanent population, a defined territory and a government – the *de facto* authorities still crave international recognition.² This situation is more than a mere juridical imbroglio. It has concrete and specific repercussions for the people living in these territories.

Stuck in the midst of competing state-building attempts, from the *de facto* authorities wanting to cling to power to the *de jure* authorities trying to extend their influence over the territory, the local population finds itself politicized from all sides. Generally dubbed “frozen conflicts”, especially in the Caucasus (in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh) and in Transnistria, this actual denomination ignores the dynamic logic at work in these regions.³ This article analyzes some important results of what we prefer to call a “zone of conflict”. Here a “zone of conflict” has to be understood as a situation characterized by incessant political manipulation, regular low-intensity conflict and the looming possibility of an overt conflict. More than anything, it is a “zone of conflict” between exogenous and endogenous elements of state building, with a two-way process of action and reaction between the inside and the outside.

This article will highlight the effects of this dynamic with a particular focus on South Ossetia. After describing the current political setting in South Ossetia and examining the logic of a “zone of conflict”, this article analyzes the oppositional logic between the competing state building attempts in South Ossetia, led by Russia and Georgia respectively. Showing how the local population is literally squeezed between the militarization of both parties, the article contends that South Ossetians themselves ought to be taken into account in order for a genuine state building process to take root in South Ossetia.

State Building in South Ossetia: From the USSR to an Undefined Status...

The Republic of South Ossetia has been a *de facto* state since 1992, when South Ossetian forces defeated their Georgian counterparts and secured a partial grip over their territory. The root of the conflict lies in large part in the

² Convention on the Rights and Duties of the State (1933); available at (<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/intdip/interam/intam03.htm>).

³ Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004), pp. 7-8.

administrative divisions of the Soviet Union. Divided into four levels (union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous oblasts and autonomous okrugs), these administrative entities were mostly symbolic under the centralist reign of the Soviet Union. The “ethnic engineering” devised by Moscow was conceived as a means to “divide and reign”.⁴ In institutional terms, the union republics had a unilateral right to secession, which were denied to all other political entities. Additionally, the autonomous republics and the union republics had all the attributes of a state, which was not the case for autonomous oblasts or autonomous okrugs. These features, largely irrelevant during the heyday of Soviet rule, would come to the foreground at the time of the dissolution of the USSR.

Historically, South Ossetia was included in the Georgian Republic in 1922 as an autonomous oblast, separating it from the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia which remained in Russia. However, in 1989, in the midst of political turmoil, the Supreme Soviet of the South Ossetian region voted to upgrade its status to the level above that of a region; namely, to that of an autonomous republic within the Georgian Republic. In so doing, they were laying claims to extensive administrative powers. Occurring at a moment of heightened Georgian nationalism, the decision was swiftly revoked by Georgian authorities, which led to a military confrontation between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. The fighting lasted until 1992, when both parties agreed to a cease-fire.

However, even if the small secessionist republic managed then to stand firm before its bigger brother, thanks in part to unofficial military aid from Russia as well as from other Caucasian peoples, its victory could be seen as a Pyrrhic one. It only managed to secure a partial administrative grasp on approximately half of the South Ossetian territory, with a large part of its Georgian villages remaining under Tbilisi’s control. This dubious victory also came at a steep price, especially for the civilian population. During the conflict from 1989 to 1992 a large portion of the Ossetian population had to flee the territory and found refuge in North Ossetia. The war also caused significant physical damage, which can still be noticed easily in South Ossetia. All these factors have profoundly affected the state building process of the small republic.

⁴ See; Svante Cornell, “The Devaluation of the Concept of Autonomy: National Minorities in the Former Soviet Union”, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1999, pp. 185-196.

These contemporary factors need to be understood in conjunction with the foundations of the state building process in Ossetia laid down by Soviet federalism. The administrative divisions helped to develop indigenous elites and indigenous institutions, as well as a sense of ethnic self-consciousness.⁵ In all levels of the autonomous hierarchy, the local languages and cultures were aggressively promoted throughout the 1920s.⁶ Later, the reforms initiated by Gorbachev provided political space for the genuine representation of ethnicity and nationalism as form of popular mobilization.⁷ In this way, “rather than a melting pot, the Soviet Union became the incubator of new nations”.⁸ Some theoreticians of the nation have argued that “the state makes the nation”,⁹ and this process seems to have come to pass in South Ossetia in that the Soviet administrative divisions helped to create in it a sense of common identity that outlived the end of the Soviet Union.¹⁰

Another legacy of the Soviet Union was the administrative practices that strongly affected both the political elites and the political culture of the USSR. What Stephen Jones said about Georgia is also relevant to South Ossetia: “In Georgia, the Soviet legacy of official nationalism, distrust of one’s opponents, paternalism, hegemonism, censorship, the personalization of politics, and a corrupt and unaccountable bureaucracy had a particularly strong influence on the young state. They were all passed on, virtually unaltered, to the new regime”.¹¹ In fact, the Soviet Union’s institutional legacies have generated

⁵ Svante Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases of Georgia*, (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2002), p. 3.

⁶ Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*, (Boulder: Westview, 1991) p. 135.

⁷ Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*, p. 23; Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Anette Bohr, Edward Allworth, *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁸ Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 85.

⁹ John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ For a good study on the effect of Soviet federalism and its ethnic policies, see; Oliver Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, (London: Tauris, 2000).

¹¹ Steven Jones, “Georgia: The Trauma of Statehood”, in Ian Bremmer & Ray Taras, (Ed.), *New States; New Politics. Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 515.

particularly inauspicious conditions for the construction of effective state authority.¹² With the ideological clout of communism withering away, the political entities composing the Soviet Union all had a hard time re-defining their role to meet the demands of the post-Soviet era. While local government was based mostly on clientelism during the Soviet Union, such practices came to be seen as blatant corruption after the Soviet empire collapsed. This has naturally affected the legitimacy of the political entity as well as the state building process itself.

The Logic Leading to a “Zone of Conflict” in South Ossetia

In this context, the state building process in South Ossetia has not gone smoothly. The 1992 referendum on independence organized by the *de facto* authorities of South Ossetia did not lead to official recognition by the international community. However, Tskhinvali has still pursued the course of independence, most notably after the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections won by Eduard Kokoity, the candidate strongly backed by Moscow. Another independence referendum was held in 2006, once again rejected by the international community as flawed and partial. However, complete independence is not what the region has in mind. It would actually be total nonsense, since there are no proper economic foundations and a population of less than 70 000, with the institutions of the self-declared state having only partial control of the territory.¹³ Kokoity is calling for re-unification with fellow Ossetians in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, and hence seeking to become part of the Russian Federation. Russian is one of the region’s official languages, the Russian ruble is the official currency, and, in February 2004, Kokoity proclaimed that 95 percent of the republic’s population had adopted Russian citizenship.¹⁴ However, while Russia is helping to stoke the hope of the independence movement¹⁵, it has always stopped short of recognizing the region’s claim of independence.

¹² Stephen Hanson, “The Uncertain Future of Russia’s Weak State Authoritarianism”, *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2007, p. 69.

¹³ The upper-end estimates for the population of the region fluctuate between 60 000 and 70 000. International Crisis Group, “Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia”, *Crisis Group Europe Report*, No. 159, 2004, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ Tracey German, “Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Collision of Georgian and Russian Interests”, *Russie.Nei. Visions*, No. 11, 2006, p. 8.

¹⁵ For instance, in 2007, Moscow hosted the second meeting of the Commonwealth for Democracy and Rights of Nations, an informal group bringing together the leaders of Abkhazia,

The undefined status of the Republic of South Ossetia has reinforced the deep criminalization in the region, notably the smuggling industry, and has helped to perpetuate the economic weakness and de-industrialization process. One of the main reasons for this is the total lack of accountability and transparency in the public affairs of the small republic. For instance, more than 60% of the national budget of South Ossetia comes from Russian funding.¹⁶ This has allowed the *de facto* authorities to neglect basic economic fundamentals and to overlook the importance of tax collection, with logical repercussions on the social bond between the government and its citizens. This has also reinforced the logic of clientelization of the Tskhinvali authorities towards Russia.

The political status quo has also been reinforced by the tacit agreement between Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, and allegedly the Russian peace-keepers, actually to support the political status quo while controlling their share of the smuggling industry in the region, especially until 2003. Reinforcing that trend, the Georgian government under Shevardnadze was simply too weak to claim back the territory controlled by the Abkhazian and South Ossetian *de facto* authorities. In fact, when Shevardnadze came to power, Tbilisi had only an uneven control over large parts of its territory bordering the conflict zones. Thus, one of the biggest achievements of Shevardnadze was the dismemberment of private militias operating in these regions.¹⁷ Partially because of this incapacity to claim back the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the relations between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi have generally been cordial. The South Ossetian president has even openly supported Shevardnadze's bid in his campaign for the Georgian presidency in 2000.¹⁸

South Ossetia and Transnistria. Moscow also stated in the same year that it may recognize the two separatist regions of Georgia as independent states if Western powers recognize Kosovo's split from Serbia. *Reuters*, "Russia Warns of Kosovo "Precedent" for Separatists", 24 October 2007.

¹⁶ Interview with Anatoli Chachiev, Minister of Information of the Republic of South Ossetia, 30 July 2007, Tskhinvali. See also; Lowe, C., "Money the Big Attraction in South Ossetia", *Reuters*, 26 July 2007.

¹⁷ Spyros Demetriou, "Rising From the Ashes ? The Difficult (Re)Birth of the Georgian State", *Development and Change*, Vol. 33, No. 5, 2002, p. 879. However, the process has been completed by Saakashvili.

¹⁸ Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States", *World Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 2001, pp. 545-546.

For Ghia Nodia, the term “frozen conflict” is justified “as far as all the parties involved agree not to challenge the effective regime of military-political control as shaped after the last ceasefire, without recognizing it as legitimate. Occasional violence, even if it does occur, is not meant to threaten the status quo”.¹⁹ However, while the situation could have been effectively termed a “frozen conflict” during the Shevardnadze era, the political equilibrium in the region was modified drastically in 2003, when the Rose Revolution propelled Mikheil Saakashvili and his team of young western-minded technocrats into power. Resolutely anti-status quo, the new team was adamant about bringing back the secessionist regions into the fold. The new Georgian government, strongly supported by Washington, naturally came to clash with the secessionist authorities of South Ossetia. Consequently, military and political skirmishes have cropped up in the region since 2003. An attempt in the summer of 2004 to bring the region back under Tbilisi's control by force of arms backfired badly, costing the lives of 27 people including 17 Georgian soldiers.²⁰ However, this did not hurt the career of the then interior minister Irakli Okruashvili, himself a native of South Ossetia, involved in the operation, as he later became defense minister. Addressing reservists on New Year's Eve 2006, the Georgian interior minister Irakli Okruashvili famously declared that Tbilisi would restore its hegemony over South Ossetia and would celebrate New Year 2007 in Tskhinvali. In summer 2006, the Georgian military conducted large-scale military exercises dubbed « Kavkasioni 2006 » near the conflict zones, in the Orpolo firing grounds, supposedly to show the professionalism of the Georgian Army. However, in an interview during the operation, Okruashvili said that the exercises were meant to show the readiness of the Georgian Army to take back the separatist regions.²¹ The renovations of the Georgian military base in Gori in 2006, only 25 km from Tskhinvali, is also another sign of the readiness of the Georgian army to escalate the conflict if necessary.

This particular situation has helped to create a particular state of mind in South Ossetia that is closer to that found in an actual conflict than in what we might call a “frozen conflict”. The local population is literally squeezed by the

¹⁹ Ghia Nodia, “Europeanization and (Not)Resolving Secessionist Conflicts”, *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 2004.

²⁰ Liz Fuller, “Georgia : Tbilisi ups the Ante Over South Ossetia”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 March 2007.

²¹ *InfoRos*, “Okruashvili is Pushing Georgia to War”, 03 July 2006.

oppositional logic of the two main actors. On the one hand, the local population fears a Georgian invasion and its effects. Living only 80 to 100 kilometers away from Tbilisi and with Georgian military outposts visible from the main place in Tskhinvali, inhabitants of the capital live in a state of constant fear about military action. This state of fear has been reinforced by numerous skirmishes between South Ossetian and Georgian militias, which have rendered the threat of a Georgian invasion even more tangible to the South Ossetian population. Moreover, ongoing Georgian militarization is doing nothing to lessen the fears of the local population.²² On the other hand, the South Ossetian leadership has put into place a massive system of repression to face the eventuality of a Georgian attack and to quiet any dissent in South Ossetia. The militarization of South Ossetia can be seen everywhere, but especially in Tskhinvali, where armored trucks and soldiers are simply part of the landscape. Maybe more disturbing for the local population is the fact that the provision of security is not really in the hands of South Ossetians *per se*. Actually, Russia has appointed its own officials to key posts in Tskhinvali. The prime minister, Mr. Yuri Morozov, the defense minister, Lt-General Anatoly Barankevich, and the security chief, Mr. Anatoly Yarovoy, are all affiliated to a certain extent with Russian intelligence services. In the words of one independent NGO leader in Tskhinvali, the fact that security is assured mainly by Russia drastically changes the situation. With a population of approximately 20 000 (the numbers are probably inflated according to most of the accounts), Tskhinvali is a small city indeed, and it is hard not to know everyone. However, the Russian security personnel, mainly North Ossetians, live away from the city and are less prone to entertain friendly contacts with independent-minded individuals. Thus, repression comes easily from these battalions, which are perceived as obedient supporters of the *de facto* institutions.²³

The local population is stuck in the middle of this dual process of militarization. Independent activists, whether NGO leaders, businessmen or students, are few and far between in Tskhinvali, and one of the reasons for this is that the dynamic of a conflict tends to annihilate all spaces for independence and neutrality. The actual conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia tends to empower radicals and to silence dissent. In this context, most of the inhabitants of South Ossetia feel that they are made to choose between cholera and the

²² The defence budget of Georgia reached \$600 millions in 2007. To give a comparison, the total budget of Georgia in 2003 was around \$600 millions.

²³ Interview with a South Ossetian NGO leader, July 30 2007, Tskhinvali.

plague. On the one hand, Saakashvili embodies the nationalistic rhetoric that prompted the conflict in first place. He is mostly seen as assimilationist, centralist, and a menace to the specific culture of South Ossetia. He is also perceived as too Western-oriented, which would threaten the specific relationship South Ossetians maintain with Russia, which goes beyond the institutional relationship between Moscow and Tskhinvali. Most of the South Ossetians have been offered Russian passports, and hence Russian citizenship, by Moscow. As Shaun Walker reports:

A Russian passport is akin to a lifeline for South Ossetians - a way to get an education or a job in North Ossetia or Moscow. There are very few jobs in the region, so most families have at least one person working in Russia and sending money home. It becomes obvious when talking to people that reintegration into the Georgian state will not be an easy process - to start with, only the eldest generation even speaks the language. People would not be able to get jobs or study in Tbilisi - Russia provides them with their only chance to make something of their lives.²⁴

However, on the other hand, the current South Ossetian leadership is seen as corrupt and detached from the real needs of the population. Any attempt to address the governance issue in South Ossetia is perceived as national treason by the authorities and might get you on the “Georgian spy list”.²⁵ If ardent supporters of Kokoity and his political circle are rather difficult to find in South Ossetia, it is also difficult to find people speaking overtly against the regime. Economically and politically strangled, South Ossetians are increasingly leaving the region to find economic opportunities elsewhere, notably in Vladikavkaz, in Northern Ossetia, thereby depriving the region of essential workforce for the future.

The Need to Include the Local Population in the Equation

A real process of state building in South Ossetia, either inside a federal Georgia or as an autonomous state, will have to build genuine trust with the local population. None of the state building attempts is actually taking into

²⁴ Shaun Walker, “South Ossetia : Russian, Georgian... Independent?”, *Open Democracy*, 15 November 2006.

²⁵ This list is rather long and includes all individuals suspected to work undercover for Georgian interests. It notably includes various businessmen, journalists, and South Ossetians working for international organizations as the OSCE.

account the needs of the local population. There was an attempt to win the “hearts and minds” of South Ossetians in the first moment of the Sakaashvili presidency, especially after the “Second Rose Revolution”, when Ruslan Abashidze was peacefully ousted in May 2004 in Adjara, another *de facto* entity inside Georgia that flirted with declaring independence. At this time, Sakaashvili notably proposed to restore the railway link between Tskhinvali and the rest of Georgia, the distribution of pensions from Georgia’s state budget to the populations living in the breakaway region, the launching of news broadcasts in the Ossetian language on Georgia’s state-run television, the provision of a free emergency ambulance service for the Tskhinvali population and the distribution of agricultural fertilizers.²⁶ However, the “hawks” in the Georgian administration, notably Okruashvili, rapidly gained influence in the government, which led to the marginalization of moderate voices, like the minister of conflict resolution, Giorgi Khaindrava.²⁷ Thus, most of the previous propositions became dead letter, and the focus shifted instead to finding a more pro-active way to resolve the conflict.

With the military operation of 2004, Tbilisi lost all the room of maneuver that they previously acquired after the resolution of the Adjarian crisis. Specifically, the closure of the Ergneti market at the border of the Georgian and South Ossetian disputed territories, just before the military operation itself, was widely resented by the population.²⁸ If the market was a well-known hub of smuggling activities with Russia, it was also a very important point of contact between Ossetians and Georgians and provided economic opportunities to the South Ossetians. One South Ossetian trader summed up the situation in 2002: “If the market closed, it would be very bad for both the Georgian side and the Ossetian side because it is the only source of life for both sides. Everyone knows that the factories do not work. And this market in Ergneti feeds a lot of people.”²⁹ As anticipated by the trader, the closure of the market intensified the economic problems for South Ossetians while pushing them to turn even more to Russia help. According to a Georgian deputy from

²⁶ Giorgi Sepashvili, “Saakashvili Sends Reconciliatory Signals to South Ossetia”, *Civil Georgia*, 1 June 2004.

²⁷ Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, “La Géorgie prise entre évolution et révolution : la (re)construction de l’État géorgien en questions”, *Transitions et sociétés*, No. 11, 2006, pp. 39-47.

²⁸ Theresa Freese, “A Report from the Field: Georgia’s War against Contraband and its Struggle for Territorial Integrity”, *SAIS Review*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2005, pp. 112-113.

²⁹ Santana, R., “South Ossetia Market Important for Local Economy”, *VOA NEWS*, 13 February 2002.

South Ossetia, the market employed more than 3000 people before its closure, both Ossetians and Georgians, and its closure brought very negative results.³⁰

Paradoxically, Georgia's militarization and its failed attempt to oust the *de facto* leadership of South Ossetia have managed to give an ethnic dimension to a conflict that was mostly deprived of ethnic references at the outset.³¹ In fact, it was arguably the greatest gift to the Tskhinvali leadership that Georgia could give. Everyone recognizes, in Tskhinvali as well as in Tbilisi, that we are not dealing with an inter-ethnic conflict *per se*.³² By closing the Ergneti market and then engaging in a conflict with the secessionist authorities, the Georgian authorities only confirmed Tskhinvali's propaganda, portraying Georgia as an enemy to the South Ossetian people. It also gave them an excuse to step up the security measures and political repression in the region.³³

Hence, part of the problem seems to be that officials in Tbilisi are unwilling to engage with the demands of the Ossetian people on any level. 'We are not talking about what the South Ossetians want; there are only 10,000 people in Tskhinvali anyway,' says Georgian Deputy Defense Minister Mamuka Kudava. 'It makes no sense to talk about what the South Ossetians want. This is about Georgia and Russia'.³⁴ If Georgia and Russia are certainly crucial actors in this

³⁰ "Local MP Says Ergneti Closure a Mistake", *Civil Georgia*, 22 June 2006.

³¹ Interview with Dov Lynch, Senior Research Fellow, EU Institute for Security Studies, 01 June 2005, Paris.

³² Interview conducted in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, 2006-2007. For Tskhinvali, the human rights violations committed by Georgia impede any federal solution for the conflict, while for Georgia, Russia and its puppet regime hinder all meaningful process of conflict resolution to happen.

³³ As one observer noted after the 2004 events: "An atmosphere of fear now prevails in Tskhinvali region. In recent weeks, there have been various reports of beatings, arrests, and officials losing their positions for communicating with Georgians. Residents report that Tskhinvali authorities have built trenches, delivered arms to unauthorized persons, and that troops with heavy military equipment have entered Ossetia from the North Caucasus. Meanwhile, Georgian peacekeepers and Ministry of Interior troops have set up camp along the conflict zone." Theresa Freese, "Will Ossetians Embrace Georgia's Initiative?", *Central Asia -Caucasus Analyst*, 16 June 2004; available online at (http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=2455).

³⁴ Shaun Walker, "South Ossetia Looks North", *IISS Press Coverage*, 26 July 2006; available online at (<http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/press-coverage-2006/july-2006/south-ossetia-looks-north/>). In the same line, Saakashvili stated in 2005 that: "There is no Ossetian problem in Georgia. There is a problem in Georgian-Russian relations with respect to certain territories. I have repeatedly said that Russia is a great country with lots of territories, but its borders certainly do not lie on the Inguri river or the Ergneti market". *President of Georgia Official Website*, "Georgian President Outlines Three-Stage Development Strategy at the News Conference", 09 September 2005; available online at (http://www.president.gov.ge/print_txt.php)

drama, the lack of consideration of South Ossetians and their desires has certainly hindered the state building process conducted by Georgia so far.

The Rise of Dmitry Sanakoev: Towards an Ossetian Civil War?

However, starting in 2006, a new Georgian strategy for the resolution of the separatist conflicts began to take shape. If Saakashvili had threatened the status quo by putting military pressure on the *de facto* authorities in the first years of his presidency, most notably during the summer 2004, he decided to adopt a substantially revised policy under pressure exerted by his American ally and out of a desire not to alienate the European Union. He marginalized Okruashvili, the most hawkish minister of his cabinet, in November 2006 by appointing him minister of economic development. Okruashvili later resigned and joined the opposition. While keeping the military option available, Saakashvili decided to adopt a political strategy and to put into place a “Provisional Administrative Entity of South Ossetia” in 2006, composed of ethnic Ossetians, to counter any claim of independence by the *de facto* authorities. Based on the “Salvation Union of South Ossetia”, a group of outspoken critics of the regime headed by the former defense minister and then prime minister of the secessionist government Dmitry Sanakoev³⁵, the movement organized a parallel presidential election in districts mainly controlled by Georgia. Both elections showed Brezhnevian results, with above 90% of voters voting for their respective candidates.³⁶ Furthermore, to retaliate against the independence referendum held by the authorities of Tskhinvali, the alternative government held a referendum asking for the start of negotiations with Georgia on a federal arrangement for South Ossetia (which also reached the threshold of 90%).

Some see the rise of Sanakoev as recognition by the Georgian authorities of the need to take into account the South Ossetian population. However, this strategy seems to be little more than a continuation of the same policy of pressuring the *de facto* authorities, whether by military or by political means. The need to convince other Ossetians to join the movement does not seem to

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³⁵ He was appointed defence minister in 1996 and vice prime minister in 1998, under the presidency of Ludvig Chibirov. He served until 2001, when Eduard Kokoity replaced Chibirov as South Ossetia’s leader.

³⁶ Kokoity was re-elected with 98.1% of the vote, while Sanakoev received 94% of the vote in the parallel election.

be a priority for Vladimir Sanakoev, brother of Dmitry Sanakoev and believed to be the éminence grise of the movement.³⁷ His attention and energy are mainly turned to Russia and to attracting international recognition for the parallel government. If there is a will to promote economic improvement, notably by distributing rehabilitation and development aid in the zone of conflict, many of the proposed projects remain to be put in place.

While Sanakoev blames Kokoity for being a stooge for Russia and boasts of being the true voice of ethnic Ossetians, he seems pretty closely tied to Georgian interests. As the *International Crisis Group* stated, “it is evident that the Georgian government helped create Sanakoev. He himself admits Georgian help was key, and he openly co-operates with Tbilisi, which is engaged in a not so subtle effort to build his credibility”.³⁸ One sign of this proxy war between Georgia and Russia is the flags waved in the respective capitals of the political entities. In Kurta, the capital of the new entity led by Sanakoev, the flags of Georgia and South Ossetia fly alongside, while couple of kilometers away, in Tskhinvali, the Russian and South Ossetian flags are displayed. Actually, the parallel government is trying to stay discrete about the fact that it is mostly based in Tbilisi, in a small, low-key building, and only occasionally goes to Kurta in the conflict zone.³⁹ The appearance of Sanakoev side by side with Georgian officials, notably when he made a speech at the Georgian Parliament in May 11 2007, has also not helped to draw support from ethnic Ossetians for the parallel institutions. During this meeting, he was appointed formally to a Georgian government position and his movement is now funded from the state budget. Such support of the parallel government seems to be aimed at preventing the Kosovar precedent to take root in the region by means of bringing a new interlocutor in the conflict resolution process that could plausibly claim to represent the will of the South Ossetian people.⁴⁰ But as the *International Crisis Group* has reported, the closeness of

³⁷ Interview with Vladimir Sanakoev, Spokesman of the Government of South Ossetia, 30 July 2007, Tbilisi.

³⁸ International Crisis Group, “Georgia’s South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly”, *Europe Report No. 183*, 2007, p. 5.

³⁹ Interview with a political adviser to Dmitry Sanakoev, 26 July 2007, Tbilisi.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, one of the first acts of Sanakoev as a member of the Georgian government has been to go to Brussels to address the European Parliament concerning the political situation prevailing in South Ossetia. *Medianews*, “Dimitri Sanakoev Gave Speech in Brussels”, 26 June 2007. Moreover, according to the political analyst Zaal Anjaparidze, “the wording, idea and political message of Dmitry Sanakoev’s address revealed a “Georgian editor””. Zaal

the parallel institutions and the Georgian government is actually alienating the broader Ossetian constituency.⁴¹

Contrary to all intentions, this shift of Georgian strategy for conflict resolution from the military to the political realms, far from easing the tensions in South Ossetia, has tended to reinforce the state of fear in the South Ossetian “zone of conflict”. One of the biggest fears in South Ossetia is a military escalation that will end up as a proxy war between Russia and Georgia through the intermediary of their Ossetian allies.⁴² On the one hand, Sanakoev is supposedly building up a 150-strong special forces unit in Kurta, only 5 km away from Tskhinvali.⁴³ Such proximity increases the risks of escalation already inherent to the volatile situation in South Ossetia. On the other hand, the *de facto* authorities have no strategy for countering the rise of Sanakoev.⁴⁴ They are not trying to attract international support to counter the rising influence of Sanakoev, instead relying exclusively on the military option in case of escalation.⁴⁵ Even more concerning, the youth branch of the movement seems even more radical than the officials in power and are bracing themselves for a military confrontation with the Georgian authorities.⁴⁶ Not having taken part in the previous war, a military conflict with Georgia has a romantic appeal to it. Hence, these evolutions combined do not indicate a change of mentality in the conflict resolution of South Ossetia but are rather bound to reinforce the logics of a “zone of conflict” in the region.

CONCLUSION

As this article has contended, the political situation in South Ossetia is far from being frozen, especially in the post-Rose Revolution context. A dual process of militarization has taken place between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, which has

Anjaparidze, “The Sanakoev Operation”, *Eurasian Home*, 2007; available online at (<http://www.eurasianhome.org/xml/t/expert.xml?lang=en&nic=expert&pid=1162>).

⁴¹ International Crisis Group, “Georgia’s South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly”, p. 2.

⁴² Interviews conducted in Tskhinvali, Summer 2007, especially with Temur Tskhovrebov, former commander of the South Ossetian Army and director of the NGO “Former Combatants” in Tskhinvali, 29 July 2007.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, “Georgia’s South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly”, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Interview with Alan Pliev, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tskhinvali, 30 July 2007.

⁴⁵ Unlike the Abkhaz *de facto* authorities, which strive to attract international support to counter the Abkhaz Government in exile. Interviews conducted in Sukhumi, Summer 2007, especially with Maxim Gunjia, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Sergei Chamba, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 09 August 2007.

⁴⁶ Interviews conducted in Tskhinvali, Summer 2007.

instilled a climate of fear and tension in South Ossetia. From a sociological standpoint, the situation is not as long-lasting a status quo as the term “frozen conflict” would seem to indicate. To the contrary, the effects of progressive militarization, the constant military clashes between Georgia and Tskhinvali and the looming prospect of a large-scale conflict have considerably affected the configuration of South Ossetian society. What is more, there have been major political changes in the region since the rise of Dmitry Sanakoev and his parallel government of South Ossetia. This process, far from alleviating the pressures on the local population, has so far worked only to reinforce the oppositional logic between the two parties. The logic of a “zone of conflict” has strangled moderate voices while empowering radicals from each side.

Squeezed in this oppositional logic, the local population and its needs have been largely neglected up to now by both parties. Stuck between a kleptocratic self-appointed clique and a belligerent, nationalistic government, the local population has not been treated as an actor in this process but more as bargaining chips in the great conflict between the *de facto* authorities, Russia and Georgia. However, for a real and sustainable state building process to take place, South Ossetians need to be perceived as a real and vital actor in the process. The South Ossetian conflict is not bound to lead to a major confrontation between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. There are real opportunities to alleviate the negative effects of the conflict, which have not been fully taken by the main actors in this process. However, as this article contends, the logic of confrontation adopted thus far by all parties has diminished these opportunities and consolidated the divisions between the two entities.

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