

Georgia at war: background to the present conflict¹

by **Céline Francis**

Researcher at the VUB and associate researcher at GRIP

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Abstract

On 9 August 2008, Georgia proclaimed the state of war. In the north of the country, the capital city of South Ossetia was set aflame after days of fighting. Willing to “enforce peace”, the Russian fighter jets bombed Georgian military bases and towns. Meanwhile, Abkhazia launched a military operation to recover the Georgian-controlled part of its territory.

On 12 August, France successfully brokered a peace plan which entails future international talks on security and stability in the region. The future work of the mediators will be laborious considered the divergences between the sides' positions but extremely useful as a spiral of security threats seems to be at the origin of this conflict.

The present analysis does not review the details of the current conflict. It rather tries to give a quick outline of the multi-faceted background to the conflict at every level (local, regional, and international).

Résumé

La Géorgie en guerre : les dessous du conflit actuel²

Le 9 août 2008, la Géorgie a déclaré l'état de guerre. Au nord du pays, la capitale de l'Ossétie du Sud s'est embrasée après plusieurs jours de combats. Avec pour objectif « d'imposer la paix », les avions de combats russes ont bombardé des bases militaires et des villes géorgiennes. Entre-temps, l'Abkhazie a lancé une opération militaire afin de reprendre possession d'une partie de son territoire tombée sous contrôle géorgien.

Le 12 août, la Géorgie et la Russie s'accordaient sur un plan de paix qui place les questions de la sécurité et de la stabilité au centre de l'attention. Le travail des médiateurs sera ardu, vu les divergences de positions entre les parties, mais extrêmement nécessaire, tant ce conflit semble être né d'une véritable spirale d'insécurité.

La présente analyse n'a pas l'ambition de présenter les détails du conflit actuel. Elle tente de présenter brièvement les multiples facettes de l'arrière-plan de ce conflit, tant au plan local que régional et international.

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1. Local dimension: Georgia vs. Abkhazia and South Ossetia

	South Ossetia	Abkhazia
<i>Inhabitants</i>	Approx. 60-70 000 (Ossetians and Georgians)	Between 170-220 000 (mainly Abkhaz, Armenians, Russians, Georgians ³)
<i>Territory</i>	4000 km ²	8400 km ²
<i>Declaration of sovereignty</i>	September 1990	July 1991 (rescinded afterwards)
<i>First armed conflict</i>	January 1991-June 1992	August 1992-September 1993
<i>Ceasefire agreement</i>	1992 Sochi agreement	1994 Moscow agreement
<i>Supervision of the agreement</i>	Joint Control Commission (Russia, North and South Ossetia, Georgia) plus participation of OSCE	UN Observer Mission In Georgia (UNOMIG)
<i>Peacekeeping forces</i>	Joint Peacekeeping Forces made up of Russians, Georgians and North and South Ossetians	Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping forces, made up of Russians only
<i>Proclamation of independence</i>	Referendum in November 2006 (99.88% confirmed their willingness to preserve South Ossetia's independence ⁴). Unrecognized by the international community	Referendum in October 1999 (87.6% ⁵) Unrecognized by the international community

The breakdown of the Soviet Union gave rise to a surge of nationalisms in the whole federal structure. While Georgia longed for independence, two of its minorities, the Abkhaz and Ossetians, struggled to upgrade their status. South Ossetia wanted to become an Autonomous Republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, while the Abkhaz longed for the status of Union republic with the possibility of installing special state-legal relations with Georgia.⁶ The clash with Georgia's national project resulted in two armed conflicts in 1991-1993. They were drawn to a close by Russian-mediated ceasefire agreements.

Since then, no comprehensive peace agreement has been reached between the parties and Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been standing as two *de facto* states actually outside the jurisdiction of Georgia. If they differ in terms of internal democratic development, both *de facto* states control a population, a territory (at least partially) and have their own state structures, albeit unrecognized by the international community who consider these territories as part of Georgia.

3. Since no accurate census of the Abkhaz population has been done since the war, one can only refer to estimations. In the 1998 UNDP needs assessment, the population was estimated between 180 000 and 220 000. ("United Nations Needs Assessment Mission to Abkhazia, Georgia", March 1998, p. 9.) According to International Crisis Group, the Abkhaz authorities assessed the population up to 320 000 inhabitants in 2001, including 110 000 Abkhaz. The number was found unrealistic as it is indeed unlikely that there are 20 000 Abkhaz more than in 1989. In January 2005, 129 127 individuals were included on the voters' list, suggesting a population between 157 000 and 190 000. (ICG, *Abkhazia Today*, Europe Report n°176, 15 September 2006, p. 9). If there is no precise estimation, it is because the issue of Abkhazia's demographic composition is extremely sensitive as it questions the demographic balance between minorities. Already a minority before the war, the Abkhaz are still most probably not the majority in the contemporary Abkhazia. It is more likely that the Abkhaz, the Armenians and the Georgians have a similar share of the population. Clogg Rachel, "The Politics of Identity in Post-Soviet Abkhazia: Managing Diversity and Unresolved Conflict", *Nationalities Papers*, 36, 2, 2008, pp. 305-329.

4. ICG, *Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly*, Europe Report, n°183, 7 June 2007, p.7.

5. ICG, *Abkhazia Today*, Europe Report n°176, 15 September 2006, p.4.

6. The USSR federal structure was based on territorially defined and ethnicity-based entities and took the form of a Matrushka doll system: at the top, the USSR, followed by the union republics, such as Georgia, were recognized as sovereign, entitled to a constitution, an organised state structure, and the constitutional right to secede and to enter into relations with foreign states. As an autonomous republic (ASSR), Abkhazia was endowed with its own constitution and a large autonomy. Finally, the autonomous *oblast'* (region) like South Ossetia, and autonomous *okrug* (district) constituted the fourth level of the federation and benefited only from a limited autonomy. Contrary to the union and autonomous republics, they were not entitled to state structures.

Saakashvili's moves against status quo

When Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in Georgia in 2004 in the wave of the “Rose Revolution”, he put as a priority to recover Georgia's territorial integrity. The status quo, he asserted, was not satisfactory anymore: Georgia's political and economic development was dependent on the repossession of its whole territory. But his willingness to haste the recovery of South Ossetia ended up in setting the region on fire in August 2004. It also led the Georgian troops to conquer a piece of Abkhazia's territory, the Kodori Gorge⁷, in July 2006.

Since then, the tensions had never been totally defused. On both sides, negotiations were stalemated:

- Georgian-South Ossetian negotiations have been nearly at a standstill since the flare-up of August 2004. Set up by the 1992 ceasefire agreement, the Joint Control Commission has been perceived as a ‘three against one’ format by the Georgians who insisted on a format change. In March 2008, Saakashvili offered an alternative 2+2+2 format including the European Union, the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Russia, South Ossetia, Georgia and the Tbilisi-backed government of Dimitri Sanakoev. If Sanakoev, who was elected president during the alternative elections held in Georgian-controlled villages of South Ossetia in 2006, is considered by Tbilisi as a trustworthy interlocutor, the de facto South Ossetian regime of Eduard Kokoity denies him any legitimacy. The proposal was therefore deemed unacceptable by the de facto South Ossetian regime.
- Similarly, Georgian-Abkhaz talks have been in a complete deadlock since July 2006. The Abkhaz authorities made their return to the negotiating table mainly dependent on the recovery of the Kodori Gorge.

One of the core issues is the diverging interpretation of the root causes of the conflicts. For the Georgians, Russia prompted the Abkhaz and Ossetians to oppose them at the beginning of the 90s. Georgia has therefore generally been unwilling to recognize that those two regions have legitimate claims and that there is a real popular support for self-determination.⁸ Russia's increasing support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not encourage the Georgians to reconsider their judgment. For the last years, Russia has been the main supplier of economic help and political support to those regions⁹. It provided more than 80% of the inhabitants with Russian passports.¹⁰ But necessity knows no law: Georgia refused the distribution of Nansen-type passports¹¹ asked by the Abkhaz in the 90s, prompting the Abkhaz and South Ossetians to accept the offer of Russia who has actually been the only ally these regions could turn to. For Russia, these were additional assets vis-à-vis its relation to Georgia.

2. Regional dimension: Georgia vs. Russia

Security threats

The Georgians always felt insecure vis-à-vis their giant neighbour. In their eyes, Georgia's independence was always brought to an end by Russia, either by the czars or by the Soviet regime. Therefore, since the independence in 1991, one of the first priorities of the Georgian leadership was to sever the links of dependence with Moscow. The moves of Russia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia awoke fears of annexation. On the other side of the Russo-Georgian border, Russia's priorities were twofold: to stabilize its country, especially its unruly Northern Caucasus, and to keep a say in the development of the South Caucasus. To

7. The names of the towns in Abkhazia are part of the symbolic struggle between the Abkhazians and the Georgians. The Abkhaz speak about Sukhum, Kodori Gorge, while the Georgians recognized it under the name Sukhumi, Kodori, etc. Throughout this article, I will use the terms ‘Sukhum/i’, ‘Gal/i’, ‘Kodori/i’, etc.

8. In a poll conducted in Abkhazia in 2001, the independence of Abkhazia was supported by 81.2% of the Abkhaz, 81.6% of the Armenians, 58.6% of the Russians, and 31.3% of the Georgians living in the Gal/i district. Tania Leila, “Public Opinion in Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process”, Civic Initiative and People of the Future Foundation, unpublished, Sukhum/i, 2002, p. 20.

9. For instance, Russia is providing with pensions for the bearers of the Russian passports in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia. In 2008, the Abkhaz pension was 100 rubles, 3 euros (700 rubles for the former mine workers and 1500 for the ‘heroes of Abkhazia’), that is, 12-14 times less than the Russian pension.

10. Peuch Jean-Christophe, Visiting Abkhaz Leader Continues To Court Russia, RFE-RL, 18 August 2005.

11. The Nansen passports were an international identification and travel document for stateless people. There were first issued in 1922.

reach those goals, Russia has been trying to hinder the apparition of anti-Russian regimes in the region, to keep the status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia or to negotiate peace agreements where it acts as a security guarantor. The Rose Revolution in 2003, which brought the corrupted regime of Shevardnadze to a close, and the coming to power of the pro-Western president Mikhail Saakashvili were therefore felt as a credible threat, all the more with Georgian desire to access NATO. The potential presence of the Alliance, still perceived by Moscow as an anti-Russian military institution, on the Southern flanks of the Russian territory has been felt as a deeply hostile move.

Conflict spiral

Tension between the two countries, whose relations worsened significantly with the arrest of four Russian officials on suspicion of spying by Georgia in 2006, has been running high for the last few months. A spiral of bellicose statements, disinformation, unilateral steps and armament build up could be witnessed on each side. The Georgian authorities were blowing hot and cold, stating the beginning of the 'countdown' to recover the breakaway regions, increasing the number of army servicemen while submitting at the same time peace proposals to the de facto states. In turn, Russia increased its support to those regions. In March 2008, Russia removed the 1996 CIS sanctions which prohibited any arms supply to, or any trade-economic, financial, transport or any other operations with the Abkhaz regime and in April authorized direct links with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹² It unilaterally decided to introduce additional peacekeeping troops¹³ and a military railways unit in the region. The worrying unfolding of events brought Germany to offer a peace proposal to the Abkhaz and the Georgians which entailed the assurance of non-use of force, the return of the refugees and internally displaced people, confidence-building measures and negotiations on Abkhazia's status. But this is in South Ossetia that the confrontation eventually broke out.

3. International dimension: the West vs. Russia?

The Caucasus region has a geopolitical importance as a transit corridor for oil and gas. The 3.6 billion dollars Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (TBC) pipeline crosses under the Georgian territory and provides the West with crude oil. A secure and stable Georgia is therefore crucial for the Western allies. It explains the United States support, starting with the 'Train and Equip' programme in 2002, to the Georgian military now involved in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US has also been a staunch advocate of Georgia's accession to NATO. A stable and democratic Georgia is also on the agenda of the EU who included the country in the European Neighbourhood Partnership (ENP) in 2005.

Although Georgia pushed for changes of peacekeeping forces and negotiation formats, the international community kept on calling for negotiations within the existing formats, or through a new format which would be mutually acceptable for all the parties. In the eyes of the Georgians, the efforts of the international organizations – the United Nations in Abkhazia and the OSCE in South Ossetia – to resolve those conflicts have been at best inconclusive, if not negative, as the status quo allowed the entities to develop into de facto states. For the past years, Georgia has therefore been trying to internationalise the conflicts by bringing them back to the international agenda and pushing a Western coalition to pressure the Russians to give up their support to the breakaway regions. If it succeeded in receiving international support for its democratization, economic and military developments, Georgia did not get the expected backing of its position at the level of conflict resolution. NATO made it clear that even in case of Georgia's accession to the organization, it was not part of its competences to intervene in Georgia's conflict resolution, but the task of the UN and the OSCE.¹⁴ Against the background of increasingly conflicting

12. On 16 April 2008, the Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered to the Russian organs to cooperate with Abkhaz and South Ossetian agencies, to define the documents that will be recognized by Russian organs, to provide legal assistance in the field of civil, family and criminal law, and to recognize the entities registered in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Civil Georgia, "Russia Moves to Legalize Ties with Abkhazia, S.Ossetia", 16 April 2008.

13. Russia increased its presence with more than 500 additional servicemen, bringing the peacekeeping force up to 2542 men. It was still below the agreed threshold of 3000 men.

14. Heinrich-Boell Foundation, the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California Irvine, "Georgian NATO accession and potential impacts on the Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process", 14th Conference in the Series Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict, Istanbul, Turkey, 14-15 June 2007, p. 28.

positions of the sides and the subsequent (near) cessation of talks, the third parties were restricted to conflict management – to impede flare-up and curb the conflict – unfortunately unsuccessfully.

Conclusion

This analysis reveals a complex pattern of security threats which remained unaddressed and spiraled into conflict. The de facto states felt that their genuine self-determination drive was overlooked by the Georgians and found protection under the Russian shield. This gave additional leverage for Russia to try and influence Georgian policymaking and to obstruct Georgia's 'dangerous' moves such as a potential access to NATO. Feeling threatened by Russia's ambitions and provocations, Georgia multiplied bellicose statements which questioned the genuineness of its peaceful intentions and concerned even more the two de facto entities. Unhindered, this vicious circle brought the parties into the abyss. The issue now is therefore the nature of the security guarantees needed to prevent any future flare-up in the region, and their guarantors, before the actual resolution of those conflicts begins.

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Source : United Nations Cartographic Section

Keywords :

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