

The Post Soviet Knot: Understanding the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict

Written by Vera Michlin

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VERA MICHLIN, AUG 11 2008

Despite repeated warnings from international NGOs and regional experts, most of the international community chose to ignore signs of the brooding conflict. It is only now, when both sides are counting the dead, that attention has turned to this war torn part of the world. However, the origins of the fighting are deeply embedded in the security situation in the post Soviet space. Furthermore, the failure to prevent the breakout of the current conflict should be an important lesson for future western involvement in regional conflicts and in democracy promotion efforts.

Origins

In the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet system, the Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia (AOSO) fell under the jurisdiction of the newly sovereign republic of Georgia, while North Ossetia remained in the Russian Federation. South Ossetian ethno-national aspirations, which were expressed in the form of seeking upgrades of their federal status under the Soviet system, started in 1989. [1] The Georgians pursued policies which undermined such aspirations, by banning participation of regional parties in the first elections in summer 1990 and by abolishing South Ossetian autonomy in December the same year. [2] Fighting broke out in January 1991, and continued until June 1992, when a peace agreement was signed. [3]

The structure of conflict management mechanisms in South Ossetia are a product of the 1992 Sochi Peace Agreement between the Presidents of Russia and Georgia. Perhaps the most important mechanism to note is the Joint Control Commission (JCC), a quadripartite commission whose main purpose is to guarantee ceasefires, and to explore possibilities for conflict resolution. [4] The JCC includes representatives from Russia, North Ossetia, South Ossetia and Georgia. Closely linked to the JCC was the establishment of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF), which were established to maintain peace in the conflict zone. The JPKF includes three battalions: Russian, Georgian and North Ossetian (which often deploys South Ossetians). This was a truly unique mechanism, since it entrusted the keeping of peace at the hands of a joint mission, which included the warring sides. The Russian side held both the position of the chairman of the JCC and the commander of the JPKF, which made it an ultimate arbiter. [5] In addition, a three-sided Group of Military Observers (GMO) was established to facilitate communication between battalions of the JPKF. [6] However, the separatist forces were not disarmed in the aftermath of the peace agreement, and the 2004-2005 Military Balance indicates that they possess a total of 2000 men, along with several battle tanks, as well as about 30 armoured vehicles and a limited artillery capability. [7]

South Ossetia has always constituted a complex peace-keeping operation. Russia is operating under precarious circumstances. The ethnic constitution in the zone of conflict is mixed. Ossetian and Georgian villages exist side by side, with important consequences for the strategic dynamic of the conflict zone. On the one hand, this means that ethnic groups are not properly segregated and share not only a common past but also current economic and personal contact. However, on the other hand, it renders volatility and a potential slide into violent clashes more likely. The ethnic composition complicates the military dimension. For example, in the southern parts of the breakaway republic, four densely populated Georgian villages, run along a transit-route connecting South and North Ossetia, and surround the capital, Tskhinvali. [8] Such geographical realities create the potential for inter-ethnic cooperation, while serving, simultaneously, as flashpoints for potential friction.

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Russia's objectives in South Ossetia are difficult to determine, specifically because of the 'shady' circumstances under which intervention was formed. In order to understand foreign involvement within South Ossetia, it is important to look at a much broader picture. In the early 1990s, when Russia became, de facto, the main arbiter in conflicts in the Former Soviet Union (FSU), it outlined several formal objectives of such intervention. However, observers also pointed towards several additional objectives, which drove Russia to intervene. Russia maintained traditional geopolitical objectives in the Caucasus, and neo-imperialist objectives for control of the FSU. A further interest Russia had in South Ossetia was the assertion of its regional and global power status, by exercising intervention and being a broker in conflict resolution. Under President Putin, these objectives were mostly maintained. Nevertheless, there was an evolution in their relative importance.

South Ossetia: between Kokoity, Shevardnadze and Saakashvili 2000-2006

Between 2000 and 2006 Russia was involved diplomatically and militarily in South Ossetia. The situation deteriorated due to succession on the South Ossetian and the Georgian side. Russian involvement was based on the objective of facilitating its own interests, while retaining its allies. On the diplomatic level, policy implementation followed a trend of partial integration and recognition of the de facto regime of the republic. The military, in the form of the JPKF mission, was mainly acting as a guarantor of the status quo in the conflict zone. These were two competing, but not necessarily contradicting, trends in Russia's involvement in South Ossetia.

During Putin's Presidency, South Ossetia continued to reinforce its de facto independence from Georgia. This was partly achieved through maintenance of close diplomatic relations with Russia. The Russian foreign policy apparatus was cooperative, which allowed and encouraged this trend. Early into Putin's Presidency South Ossetian elections shifted the balance of forces in the region from partial cooperation with the Georgian authorities, promoted by the previous de facto President Ludwig Chibirov, towards closer ties with Russia. The election of Eduard Kokoity in November 2001, as the president of the de facto Republic of South Ossetia, marked another step away from the possibility of conflict resolution with Georgia. Kokoity was the candidate favoured by Russia. He openly promoted integration of South Ossetia with North Ossetia and the Russian Federation and received much-needed encouragement and attention from both the MFA and local authorities in the Russian Southern Federal District. Moscow hosted Kokoity on a regular basis, which meant a de facto recognition of the legality of his position. From 2002-2003 most South Ossetian residents acquired Russian passports. Kokoity himself also holds a Russian passport (Currently Russia uses the Russian passport holders in South Ossetia as a reason for its intervention). [9]

On the military level, Russia used the peacekeeping force to maintain the status quo, keeping Georgian ambitions in check. The peacekeeping forces are an important source of animosity in the Russo-Georgian relationship; however, their role became increasingly static. Most Russian military activity in Georgia surrounded the Pankisi gorge, as opposed to South Ossetia itself. In the late 1990s the gorge became a place of refuge for Chechens fleeing the Russian campaign. The Russians claimed that the place was a 'safe haven' for terrorists, while the Georgians claim that these were mainly civilian refugees. Nevertheless, it gave Russia reason to claim the legitimacy of an intervention on Georgian soil. [10] The Russians launched operations against Chechnya from Georgian territory, violated Georgian airspace, launched air-to-surface missiles and mined gorges in northern Georgia. The Georgians recorded 25 airspace violations between fall 1999 and August 2002. [11]

The Georgian Rose Revolution, at the end of 2003, changed the situation considerably. The new Saakashvili administration, which ousted Shevardnadze from power, embraced a campaign to restore Georgian credibility as a sovereign state. Georgia was striving to increase its state capacity not only in political terms, gaining control over the breakaway republic, but also in terms of tax collection and economic activity. In the case of South Ossetia the two aims overlapped. After successfully restoring Tbilisi's control over the breakaway region of Ajaria in May 2004, Saakashvili announced the beginning of 'the reunification of Georgia' [12]. South Ossetia, due to its tight economic contacts and relatively weak apparatus, seemed like an appropriate target for Saakashvili's campaign. [13] Indeed, Saakashvili's regime had started making moves for South Ossetia as early as December 2003 by increasing control over the region with special forces.

In 2004 open fighting erupted – breaking out on several occasions during the summer. Conflicting versions of events

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and biased reporting complicates descriptions of the situation. Opposing accusations and a media war was launched between Russia and Georgia. The events of summer 2004 underlined several points of tensions in the region. These were, as a general rule, points of disagreement between Georgia and Russia on issues of conflict management. The Saakashvili administration identified the nature of the de facto South Ossetian republic's economic activity as the main element preventing conflict resolution and the restoration of Georgian integrity of borders. [14] This included illegal trade around the zone of conflict and control of the Roki tunnel, which connects North and South Ossetia. In effect, Georgia pursued the alteration of the status quo created under the aegis of Russian conflict management, but it hoped to avoid direct confrontation with Russia. During 2004, whilst Russia allowed movement of volunteers from the Russian Federation into South Ossetia and helped with intelligence and ammunition, it was involved only in a very limited capacity in fighting on the South Ossetian side.

Russia perceived its conflict management role to be under threat by the Georgian actions in 2004, while Georgia viewed Russia as an extremely biased mediator, to the extent that it even became a party to the conflict. On the diplomatic level, the Joint Control Commission was seen as the most prominent arena for Russia's leverage in the conflict. Thus, the Georgian tendency to ignore JCC resolutions, and its claims that the conflict resolution frameworks should be internationalised, were seen to target exactly this mechanism. Russia held firm on its insistence that the JCC should be the only mechanism to address problems. Russia also represented South Ossetian interests in relation to international actors like NATO. Since 2004 the work of the JCC has been extremely limited by quarrels between the sides.

The Current Conflict

The current phase of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict is the bloodiest since 1992. Many of the reasons for current events are similar to those which incited the fighting in 2004. However, there are certain trigger points, which caused the current campaign.

The International Factors-

The process of Georgian accession to NATO is a minefield which has had an adverse affect on containing the conflict in South Ossetia. Since the Rose Revolution in late 2003, membership of NATO has become a primary route for Georgia to pursue its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In September 2006, NATO opened an intensified dialogue with Georgia [15] but at the organisation's recent April 2008 summit in Bucharest Russia strictly opposed Georgia joining. As a result, Georgian accession was delayed, but was not ruled out. The outcome of the summit left both sides more likely to take violent action to achieve their goal; the Georgians to join NATO, the Russians to curtail Georgian aspirations.

The regional dimension-

The regional dimension has often stopped Russia from pursuing more interventionist policies in South Ossetia. Russian concern for stability in the Caucasus, which includes the troublesome Republic of Chechnya, prevented Russia from open conflict during other possible flash points. Russia was concerned at the prospects for overspill of violence. Currently Russia is relatively confident in its grip over the North Caucasus (Russian Federation) and over stability in Chechnya. It was thus more comfortable with an intervention in South Ossetia.

The National dimension-

Since the Rose Revolution Georgia has acquired military capabilities and consulting mostly from the US, France and Britain as well as from Israeli firms. Georgian opposition to the current regime often expressed concern over the militaristic trends of the Saakashvili administration, which are likely to have contributed to the renewal of fighting. Meanwhile, in Russia, changes in the Kremlin may have prompted a more aggressive approach towards Georgia. The new President, Dmitri Medvedev, was viewed by the West as a more liberal figure, and hence was expected to be more lenient with the former Soviet republics. The current campaign is a clear sign that despite its change of leadership the Kremlin is strong and continues to grow ever more confident.

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[1] ICG report No. 159, 'Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia', (26 November, 2006)

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Mackinlay J. and Sharov E. in Micanlay J. and Cross P. (ed.), (2003),p.77

[5] Mackinlay J. and Sharov E. in Micanlay J. and Cross P. (ed.), (2003),p.79

[6] Ibid. , p.84

[7] The Military Balance 2004-2005, (2004), p.88

[8] Chauffour C. and Gusep T., in Caucaz Euronews, '*Roki Pass: an artery for South Ossetia?*', (2005)

[9] BBC regions and territories profile: South Ossetia, BBC Website.

[10] Devdariani J. in Coppieters B. and Legvold R. (ed.), (2005), P.181

[11] Ibid., (2005), P.180

[12] BBC report, 'Georgia take control in Ajaria', (8 May 2004)

[13] IISS Strategic Comments, Vol. 12 Issue 3. (April 2006)

[14] Ibid.

[15] See nato.net, official NATO website