

# The Spectrum of Georgia's Policy Options Towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Written by Giorgi Buzaladze

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## The Spectrum of Georgia's Policy Options Towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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GIORGI BUZALADZE, MAR 2 2020

### Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the ensuing disorder has caused multiple territorial disputes in the Caucasus region. Without exception, Georgia has experienced two violent conflicts that are still not settled. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are the breakaway regions that demand secession from Georgia, as well as the international recognition of independence. The disputes over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have led to two full-scale wars in the past three decades, including the most recent war in 2008 between Georgia and Russian-backed South Ossetia. Russia's presence in the separatist regions weakens Georgia's sovereignty and independence to pursue its foreign policy goals. The inability of the government of Georgia (hereafter GoG) to act without Western assistance puts further pressure on Georgian leaders to reinstate Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but Georgia's conflicts are far more than territorial disputes. This essay will advise the current governing party of Georgia from the perspective of an independent foreign policy expert with three potential approaches to the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The three options are a light footprint approach, a heavy footprint approach, and strategic patience. The suggested approach will be strategic patience, which recommends keeping the conflicts frozen in the short-term to "buy time" for long-term development. The ultimate goal for the GoG is to offer Abkhazia and South Ossetia better prospects of political, social, and economic growth than Russia, which uses the conflicts in these two regions to advance its foreign policy goals (Charap and Welt 2010). Given that the peaceful conflict resolution is not entirely in Georgia's hands, this essay will assume that in the long run, Russia's decline as a regional power is the only realistic scenario that will allow the GoG to negotiate a reconciliation with Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders.

The first section of this essay will present the background of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The second section will explain the significance of the conflicts for the immediate actors and the wider region. The third section will provide the reasons for advice and discuss why the conflicts need to be solved. The remainder of the essay will define three policy options, discuss their advantages and disadvantages, and provide specific short-term and long-term recommendations to the GoG. The last section will consider policy implications and conclude.

### Background

#### *Abkhazia*

Abkhazia is a region located at the Black Sea coast in the Northwest part of Georgia, sharing a border with Russia. During the Soviet period, Abkhazs constituted only 17.8% of the population of 525,000, while Georgians, with 45.7% of the people, were the largest group (Zurcher 2007, 119). Although Abkhaz people share the Orthodox religion with Georgians, they have a distinct ethnic origin and speak the Abkhaz language, which is not related to Georgian. The federal structure of ethnic regions in the Soviet Union consisted of four levels. At the highest level were the Union Republics, followed by Autonomous Republics, Autonomous Oblasts, and Autonomous Okrugs. Abkhazia was granted the status of the Autonomous Republic by the Soviet Union, which means that despite being a minority, Abkhazia enjoyed a privileged position in the party (King 2001, 533).

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The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of Georgian nationalism led to growing tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia in the late 1980s. The relationship between the two had been tense during the Soviet period as well, during which Abkhazia's fear of Georgian dominance has caused discord between them. Georgia's growing nationalism led to the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, after which the government of Georgia abolished Abkhazia's status of the Autonomous Republic. Abkhazia countered Georgia's steps towards independence by demanding greater local autonomy and signed the Lykhny Declaration, requesting the secession from the Georgian SSR in exchange for union with Russia. Georgia's fear of Abkhazia's independence led to mass anti-Abkhaz protests throughout the country (Zurcher 2007, 124).

For years, Georgian-Abkhaz tensions were manifested in a war of laws. In 1991, Georgia's president Zviad Gamsakhurdia made an attempt to negotiate a power-sharing deal with Abkhazia. However, the agreement was not honored by the succeeding president, Eduard Shevardnadze, who actively opposed the policies of Gamsakhurdia's government. In 1992, the abduction of Georgia's interior minister prompted Shevardnadze to order troops into Abkhazia to restore control. As a result, a full-scale war followed. Georgian forces were eventually pushed back by the Abkhaz military, supported by Russian forces. The war forced over 200,000 Georgians to leave Abkhazia, while 3,000 Russian peacekeepers and 100 United Nations observers were deployed to monitor the region (Zurcher 2007, 131).

## *South Ossetia*

South Ossetia is located in the Northern part of Georgia and shares a border with North Ossetia, which is the Autonomous Republic in Russia. Historically, Ossetians have been concentrated in North Ossetia, until they were split between North and South Ossetia in 1922. In the late 1980s, 66.2% of South Ossetia's population of 100,000 was Ossetian, while 29% was Georgian. Like the Abkhaz language, Ossetian is not related to Georgian and belongs to the Iranian family of languages. The majority of South Ossetians follow Orthodox Christianity. During the Soviet period, South Ossetia was the Autonomous Oblast, which was lower than the Autonomous Republic on the Soviet ethno-federal structure. Both South Ossetia and Georgia use history as evidence to support their self-determination. While South Ossetians believe that their centuries of presence grants them a level of autonomy, Georgians still view Ossetians as guests on the Georgian territory (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki 1992).

The relationship between Georgian and South Ossetian people has mostly been free of conflict until the late 1980s. In response to Georgia's steps towards independence, South Ossetia asked the government of Georgia to upgrade its status from the Autonomous Oblast to the Autonomous Republic. The request was denied by the Georgian government, and mass protests ensued. Georgia's president Zviad Gamsakhurdia mobilized 30,000 Georgian demonstrators to protest in Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. In 1990, South Ossetia declared itself a separate republic within the Soviet Union, held local elections, and decided to unite with North Ossetia. In response to South Ossetia's steps towards secession, the Georgian government revoked South Ossetia's status of the Autonomous Oblast and ordered troops in the area, who were met by South Ossetian and Russian resistance. The situation was stabilized by the Sochi Agreement of 1992, which established a military exclusion zone and deployed OSCE and Russia-led peacekeepers (King 2001, 534).

The conflict escalated again in 2004 after the ascent of Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's newly elected president, who promised to restore Georgia's territorial integrity. Abolition of the Ergneti market, in which Georgians and South Ossetians used to trade with each other, dismantled whatever trust was left between the two sides. The ensuing polarization and diplomatic conflict eventually led to a full-scale war in August 2008, in which South Ossetian forces, assisted by Russia, ousted Georgian forces from Tskhinvali. The ceasefire agreement was mediated between Georgia and Russia by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy. As a result of the war, over 15,000 Georgians were displaced from South Ossetia to Georgia proper (UNHCR).

## *The Current State of Conflict*

The status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is still undecided. After the South Ossetian victory in the 2008 war, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The international community, including the United

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States, the European Union, and G7, condemned the recognition stating that it violates Georgia's territorial integrity. Currently, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are formally recognized only by five other states (Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Syria) besides Russia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia explicitly decline consensus with the GoG to reunite with Georgian territory, while the GoG does not want to give up its historical lands. During the stalemate, Russia has established patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and started issuing Russian passports for the citizens of both regions. Although with little progress, negotiations over the conflict resolution take place at the Geneva International Discussions between the immediate actors, the OSCE, the EU, and the UN. As of now, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are occupied by Russia, and the conflicts are frozen.

## Geopolitical Setting

The ethnic conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia must be understood within the context of the post-Cold War geopolitical environment. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 ended the bipolar world that was a product of the rivalry between the two superpowers and their ideologies. The Berlin Wall isolated Communist Eastern Europe from the capitalist West, effectively blocking any possibility of interaction. In the final years of the Soviet Union, there was a drastic difference in the living standards of Eastern and Western Europe, and Eastern Europeans were well aware of their restricted freedom. Once the Iron Curtain broke down, Eastern Europe was able to reunite with Western Europe, establish strong ties with the countries across the continent, and adopt the democratic institutions, although with varying success. In her paper about the post-communist memory, Głowacka-Grajper notes that common usage of the words "return to Europe" indicates that post-communist countries "were outside Europe and now need to make an effort to be back in it. Thus, Western Europe is the model of a 'proper' European identity, and Russia, by continuing the Soviet Union, is its opposite" (Głowacka-Grajper 2018, 925). Long oppressed by the communist regime, the majority of post-communist countries turned their backs on Russia and began economic, political, and national transformations. Central European countries, disillusioned with communism, regarded the EU as the "the only game in town" (Way and Levitsky 2007, 51). The prospect of the EU membership served as a strong incentive for democratization, as the EU, contrary to Russia, promised a single market, freedom, and security. The EU has been open to Eastward expansion, imposing austere accession criteria on the candidate countries that include liberal democratic institutions, the market economy, and the rule of law. In 2004, with its most significant enlargement to date, ten Central and Eastern European countries joined the union. The 2007 enlargement added Bulgaria and Romania, while several other post-communist countries, including Georgia and Ukraine, are still negotiating their accession.

On the other hand, Russia has had difficulties handling the loss of a Soviet empire. When asked about what event in Russia's history he would have liked to change, Russian president Vladimir Putin named the fall of the Soviet Union, which he called the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Sanders 2014). Putin's nostalgia for Soviet dominance translates into Russia's revisionist foreign policy. Elias Götz, in his article about the three contending perspectives of Russia, states that Putin's ultimate goal is to "recreate an empire" and "challenge the prevailing Western-led international order" by creating "a totally new one" (Götz 2016, 251). To balance against the West, Russia seeks to install pro-Kremlin governments, by force, if necessary, in the post-communist countries. Political turmoil in Ukraine is a manifestation of the contest between the EU and Russia in their shared neighborhood. In 2013, Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, rejected the European Association Agreement that offered to lend Ukraine 610 million euros, citing that Ukraine cannot sacrifice the trade with Russia. Following the demonstrations led by the pro-European protesters, Yanukovich was overthrown and replaced by the pro-European successor. In March 2014, Russia reacted by annexing Crimea, which is officially part of Ukraine, but was part of Russia until 1954. According to Götz, the annexation of Crimea is a strategic step to "re-establish Russian primacy in the post-Soviet space," as well as "pull Ukraine into its orbit" and deter Ukraine from Western integration (Götz 2016, 254).

Similar to Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are strategically important regions that Russia uses to balance against the West. Like other Eastern European countries, Georgia has expressed the desire to join the EU and NATO. Political instability in the 1990s and the ensuing civil war provoked a decade of crises that kept Euro-Atlantic integration as a lower priority. The situation started to improve following the 2004 Rose Revolution, after the election of Mikheil Saakashvili — a young, Western-educated leader that prioritized the EU and NATO memberships during

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his leadership. Georgia's ranking in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index is a revealing indicator. From 2003 to 2010, Georgia improved from the most corrupt to the least corrupt post-Soviet country (Cornell 2013, 25). The priority of the EU membership has not shifted ever since. Georgia is fully committed to Western integration and is currently in the process of negotiating the EU Association Agreement.

Besides joining the EU, Georgia targets the security protection offered by the NATO membership. NATO has evolved as the West's meaningful political instrument to balance against Russia and to "guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means" (NATO). Russia views Georgia's growing ties with NATO as a threat to its foreign policy goals and regional influence; therefore, Russia's presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia serves as a strategy to deter Georgia from moving closer to NATO. Indeed, the 2008 war in South Ossetia significantly delayed Georgia's NATO membership. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that an attack against one member is perceived as an attack against all members, and if such an attack occurs, other NATO members have the right to use armed force in order to maintain peace and security (NATO). Until the ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are resolved, it is improbable that Georgia will attain the NATO membership, as admitting Georgia would require NATO members to protect an ally and may trigger a large-scale war against Russia. Nevertheless, Euro-Atlantic integration remains Georgia's priority. Failure to deter Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO will jeopardize Russia's goal of maintaining influence in the post-Soviet sphere and will threaten Russia's legitimacy as a regional superpower. If Georgia is accepted in the EU, it will become the farthest country in the East that the EU has pulled into its orbit, as well as the first former Soviet Union member besides the Baltic states.

## The Rationale for Action

### *Georgia*

Solving the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is equally important for each actor involved. Currently, approximately one-fifth of Georgia's territory is occupied by Russia. Russian occupation weakens Georgia's sovereignty and the autonomy to pursue its foreign policy goals. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, over 370,000 Georgians have been displaced by armed conflict, out of which 189,000 were displaced internally (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2018). IDPs of the 2008 war in South Ossetia are settled in Tserovani, where 2,000 small cottages were built to shelter the refugees. Residents of Tserovani are concerned about the lack of employment opportunities, agricultural lands, and various other issues that affect their daily lives. Many families had their social allowance suspended (Nikuradze 2014). The refugees go through difficult livelihoods in the settlements and are waiting to be returned home. Although the hope is still alive, the political reality makes the prospect of return far away. Georgia's inability to take action exacerbates the situation near the borders. "Creeping occupation," which is a term for one party pushing the border farther into another party's territory, has become an insurmountable reality. Occasionally, Russian forces place barbed-wire fences in the local people's backyards, restricting them from farming their lands. More severe incidents include the abductions of Georgian citizens for "illegally crossing the border," often leading to severe beatings or murders of the abducted. Pushing the demarcated boundaries threatens the US-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline operated by British Petroleum. If South Ossetia seizes the pipe, Georgia will be facing dangerous economic and political implications, including deprived revenues and another barrier towards the EU and NATO.

### *Abkhazia and South Ossetia*

The peaceful conflict resolution is essential for Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well. Even though Russia recognized the independence of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the international community, led by the major Western powers, considers the recognition as the violation of Georgia's territorial integrity. Their motivation is purely political, as Georgia is an ally of the West, including the US and the EU. Out of the five states that recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, three are close Russian allies, while Nauru received \$50 million in humanitarian aid (Harding 2009). Given the current geopolitical reality, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not likely to gain *de jure* independence. In addition, the international community is mostly in favor of conflict regulation practices as an alternative to partition, which often intensifies the violence. Despite their *de facto* independence, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, particularly the latter, are not self-sufficient states, as they are not able to provide fundamental services to

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their citizens without Russian assistance. In her article about South Ossetia, German notes that "South Ossetia today is further away from statehood than it was prior to its recognition as a 'state' by Russia in 2008" (German 2016, 156). South Ossetia does not have a defined territory, a primary characteristic of the state based on the Montevideo Convention, and both Abkhazia and South Ossetia depend on diplomatic, economic, and military support from Russia. South Ossetia is also facing a population crisis. After the 2008 war, over 30,000 Ossetians left for Russia to seek physical and economic security (Jones 2008). The population of South Ossetia's Autonomous Oblast declined by 26% from 1989 to 2015, and 98% of South Ossetian citizens now hold Russian passports (Democracy and Freedom Watch 2018). Given that Abkhazia and South Ossetia's international recognition is unlikely, and Russia's foreign policy goals prevent them from building independent statehood, it is safe to say that resolving the conflict is necessary for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to gain traction in their political objectives.

## *The European Union and Russia*

The frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are important not only for the immediate actors but also for the relations between the EU and Russia, as well as ethnic conflict management in general. The ongoing conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia influence the diplomatic relations between Western Europe and Russia, and the resolution will at least shape, if not decide, a trajectory of their relationship. The peaceful resolution can potentially improve the ties between the two sides, which will open up other alleys of cooperation and reduce tensions on the international political playground. If the conflict stays frozen, the rivalry will continue as it is, primarily manifested in other ways of soft balancing, such as imposing economic sanctions. If the conflict escalates, it will lead to severe consequences for Georgia, Russia, and the occupied territories. Another full-scale war will be disastrous for Georgia's security and its hopes of European integration. Western Europe and the US will likely sever ties with Russia for breaking its word to end the crisis, which will lead to Russia's further isolation as Western Europe will look to diversify its sources of energy supply and impose harsher economic sanctions. Russia had already faced such consequences for its actions in 2014 when the G8 suspended its membership due to the annexation of Crimea. Finally, the evolution of the ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will raise questions about the cases in which the regional autonomy can be translated to independence, the circumstances under which the regions are allowed to secede, tools for the international community to prevent political divorce, and effectiveness of various conflict regulating practices (Jones 2008).

## **Policy Options**

The three possible approaches that the GoG can take to solve the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be placed on a spectrum of policy choices in between the two extremes of disengagement and the surge strategy. Disengagement means that Georgia will accept the *de jure* secession of both breakaway regions and recognize their independence. The surge strategy means that Georgia will prioritize the restoration of its territory by all means, including military involvement. Since neither of the extreme strategies is viable, they will not be proposed as possible policy options. The potential policy options will be labeled as a light footprint approach, a heavy footprint approach, and strategic patience. A light footprint approach deprioritizes territorial integrity and lays close to disengagement, a heavy footprint approach prioritizes territorial integrity and lays close to the surge strategy, and strategic patience aims to contain the crisis and lays in the middle of the spectrum.

### *Light Footprint Approach*

A light footprint approach towards the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia implies that the GoG will not only take no actions to restore the control over the separatist regions but will also deprioritize the territorial integrity from its foreign policy agenda. This approach is reasonably pragmatic, as current reality shows that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will not agree to reunite with Georgia, at least in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the peaceful resolution of this conflict is in Moscow's, not Georgia's, hands. Taking a light footprint approach would mean that Georgia will refrain from any constructive steps to restore the territories and leave it up to leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Russia to decide the fate of the breakaway regions. In that case, Abkhazia will likely continue building statehood, South Ossetia will unite with North Ossetia, or both regions will join Russia. In short, Georgia will no longer be politically invested in the restoration of its lost territories and will focus on other priorities. A light footprint approach

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differs from disengagement in the sense that Georgia will not voluntarily recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

A light footprint approach has several advantages. First, according to Kaufmann, the separation may bring peace to the region, as the intermixed population often promotes violence (Kaufmann 1996, 120). Given that Georgia's population is ethnically homogenous, 85% of Georgians think their culture is superior to others, and 36% say it is better if society consists of the same nationality, renewed hostilities are highly probable (Pew Research Center 2018). The main advantage of a light footprint approach is that it will allow space for the GoG to pursue other priorities, such as Euro-Atlantic integration. If Georgia accepts the *de jure* secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia will no longer be able to justify its presence in Georgia to protect local people from Georgia's hostile behavior.

Nonetheless, a light footprint approach fails to solve the conflict in the region. First, by choosing this strategy, the GoG will be neglecting the refugees that are waiting to be returned to their homes. Accepting the partition will manifest the political laziness that seeks to avoid the problem, instead of solving it, and will violate the UNHCR's policy of bringing "safety to people, not people to safety" (Kaufmann 1996, 123). Second, a light footprint approach will not solve the border crisis. Georgia's conflict is not only against the separatist regions but also against Russia. Russia is a powerful regional player that is interested in keeping the conflicts alive. Putin's intention is to impede the expansion of NATO, its main security threat, by prolonging the tensions in post-communist nations that question Russia's influence. Therefore, Georgia's light approach will not succeed in ending the "creeping occupation" or the danger near the borders. The third and the most apparent reason why a light footprint approach is not the best option is that it is unrealistic. Territorial integrity is a preeminent political debate in Georgia's civil society. The recent murders of Georgian citizens, Giga Otkhozoriya and Archil Tatumashvili, prompted Georgian people to put Abkhazia and South Ossetia back on the political agenda. Civil society organizations like Strength in Unity drive to the South Ossetian border multiple times a week to protest with Georgian flags and posters reading anti-occupation slogans, such as "I remember August 2008" (Kozak 2018). Given the shared political opinion among the Georgian public, it is without a doubt that no politician that deprioritizes the restoration will get elected.

## *Heavy Footprint Approach*

An alternative way that the GoG can approach the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is a robust strategy. A heavy footprint approach implies that Georgia will prioritize the restoration of the lost territories on its foreign policy agenda. This strategy will include a comprehensive list of aggressive policies that aim to challenge Russia's influence in the region. First, Georgia will harshen the rhetoric against Russia's occupation to spread the political message, urging Russia to start "honoring international law and the right of sovereign neighboring states to choose their own destiny" (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2018). Second, Georgia will put military pressure on the separatists by modernizing the army (Bartuzi and Strachota 2008). Third, Georgia will deploy troops in the neighboring villages to counter Russia's "creeping occupation" with military resistance. Fourth, Georgia will seek to increase Western involvement in the peace-building process to increase the leverage against Moscow. Specifically, the Georgian leadership will encourage its Western allies to apply pressure on the four nations to change their stance on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states (Mrachek 2018). Finally, until the conflicts are resolved, Georgia will end the visa-free regime for visiting Russians and withdraw from any diplomatic attempts, such as trade talks, that aim to stabilize bilateral relations between the two sides. A heavy footprint approach differs from the surge strategy in the sense that it leaves the direct military confrontation in the region as a last resort.

A heavy footprint strategy has one advantage. It is an uncompromising approach that rules out cooperation with Russia until Georgia's requirements are met. Engagement with Russia threatens Georgia's interests and "willingly opens the door to constant meddling in Georgia's internal affairs" (Whitmore 2013). However, this approach is risky and has failed empirically. Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili has pursued the restoration policy following his ascent in 2004. The situation first flared up in 2004 when Saakashvili proposed the creation of a federal state and offered unlimited autonomy to South Ossetia. After the diplomatic crisis in 2008, and violent confrontations between South Ossetian and Georgian military, Saakashvili ordered troops in the region, which created an opportunity for Russia to intervene on the grounds of protecting South Ossetian population. The failure of this policy delayed, if not eliminated, the option of peaceful conflict resolution. Furthermore, it damaged the chances of Georgia's NATO

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membership, although the membership is difficult to attain irrespective of the conflicts. Georgia lacks size and military power to challenge Russia by hard power, and Georgia's aggressiveness will provide Russia with a further excuse to maintain and increase its presence in the region, which conveniently serves Moscow's foreign policy goals. Besides inducing a constant threat of war, taking a heavy footprint approach towards solving the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will exacerbate the situation and jeopardize Georgia's statehood in the best case, and will lead to devastating results in the worst case. Instead, as stated by Irakli Alasania, Georgia's former defense minister, Georgia needs to "outsmart" Russia by using soft instead of hard power (Whitmore 2013).

## *Strategic Patience*

In 2012, the Georgian Dream coalition replaced Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement with the majority vote. The new government led by Bidzina Ivanishvili has revised Saakashvili's aggressive policy on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At NATO's Parliamentary Assembly, Ivanishvili stated that he intends to correct the mistakes committed by the previous government that caused the conflict in 2008 (Whitmore 2013). The current policy does not aim to change the Western trajectory but aims to tone down the harsh rhetoric with Russia to allow cooperation on common interests. The Georgian Dream coalition repeatedly proposes peace initiatives to Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaderships. These initiatives promise autonomy to both regions, promote trade opportunities along the borders, extend Georgia's education and healthcare services to the Abkhaz and South Ossetian population, and grant access to the benefits available from Georgia's recent development. However, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia keep rejecting Georgia's peace initiatives and view the attempts of reconciliation as illusory.

Georgia's current policy can be labeled as a normalization approach that avoids crossing dangerous lines in the relationship with Russia. The peaceful resolution of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be realistic only when Russia's interests allow it. As of now, it is unlikely that Russia will reverse the recognition and change its stance on Georgia's possible NATO membership, or that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will agree to reunite with Georgia; thus, maintaining the status quo is a right short-term policy. Georgia should aim to prevent the escalation of violence and keep the conflicts frozen until structural geopolitical changes appear in the region. The sole long-term scenario that will allow the GoG to initiate meaningful discussions with separatist leaders is Russia's decline as a regional superpower and Georgia's EU accession. This essay will assume that such development of events is a causal link between short-term and long-term time frames. In the meantime, Georgia should pursue Euro-Atlantic integration, strengthen democracy, and create a state suitable for Abkhaz and South Ossetian minorities. In the long run, if Georgia joins the EU and Russia's political influence fades, Georgia can promise an attractive future to Abkhazia and South Ossetia that Russia will not be able to provide. The remainder of this essay will give specific recommendations about how to implement the containment policy in the short-term and advise the GoG about the country's long-term orientation.

## **Short-Term Action**

### *Cooperation*

In order to effectively implement the containment policy, the GoG must take several concrete steps to improve the existing situation. Saakashvili's harsh anti-Russian rhetoric and repeated attempts to forcibly return the lost territories proved to be counterproductive; therefore, Georgia's current leaders should avoid crossing red lines and refrain from using provocative language directed at Moscow. Instead, the Georgian leadership should begin supporting fundamental negotiations with Russia and the separatist regions on the common interests. Cooperation is the only way to gain traction in improving relationships with all parties, which is the first step towards peaceful conflict resolution. Yet, Georgian leaders should avoid delving too far into the negotiations, as Russia might use that as an opportunity to intrude into Georgia's internal affairs and weaken its autonomy. The ultimate goal is not to enter back into Russia's orbit, but to normalize the relationship and increase the possibility of solving the conflicts peacefully.

Two areas of the initial stages of cooperation could be trade and transit. As of now, Georgia and the breakaway regions restrict trade among each other, limiting the engagement between the residents. However, these constraints do not stop local people from trading goods across the borders. According to a study done by the International Crisis

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Group, decreased Russian aid due to the economic sanctions imposed after Russia's annexation of Crimea led to increased informal trade along the boundaries of the conflict (International Crisis Group 2018). Formally recognizing some aspects of the trade could be a step towards building trust and connections between the communities on both sides of the border.

The first initiative aims to extend the benefits of Georgia's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) to Abkhaz and South Ossetian businesses. The free trade agreement between Georgia and the EU does not cover Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as the 2008 Law on Occupied Territories restricts economic activity in the occupied regions (Matsne). To facilitate successful cooperation, the GoG should amend the law to simplify economic interaction and offer to establish communication mechanisms with Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaderships to discuss "status-neutral options" and mutually beneficial solutions (International Crisis Group 2018). If successful, the DCFTA extension could help stimulate imports and foreign investments for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as reduce their isolation from Georgia's economy.

The second initiative offers the potential to allow international trade to pass through the disputed borders. The 2016 landslide sparked discussions between Georgia and Russia about replacing an unsafe Kazbegi-Upper Lars route with an alternative trade corridor that passes through South Ossetia. The new transit route will link Russia to Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan, and will provide multiple economic benefits to all sides (Lomsadze 2019). Georgia and Russia agreed to sign a contract with a Swiss company to monitor the trade in the corridor, but the political status of South Ossetia serves as a barrier towards the final agreement. The GoG should continue the dialogue with Russia to find diplomatic solutions to the passport and customs control challenges. If an agreement emerges, the transit route will generate much-needed income for South Ossetia, facilitate trade with Georgia, and open the isolated region that depends on Russian assistance.

The political obstacles hinder the development of trade talks between Georgia and the separatist regions. While each side wants to secure the benefits of successful programs, neither wants to compromise its political demands or status. What makes matters worse is that leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia cannot make independent decisions that are against Moscow's interests. Nonetheless, Georgia should not lose confidence if the outcomes are limited and must not believe that these trade initiatives will transform the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead, Georgia should embrace these negotiations as peace-building steps that reduce the isolation of the breakaway republics, encourage interaction between the communities across the conflict divides, and allow isolated Abkhazia and South Ossetia to trade with Georgia formally. Such constructive steps will minimize the risk of renewed violence and create opportunities for further peaceful discussions. Georgia's attempts to encourage cooperation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia will show leaders of the breakaway regions, as well as the international community, that Georgia is committed to peaceful conflict resolution.

## *Confidence Building*

Besides establishing trustworthy relationships with Abkhaz and South Ossetian people, the GoG should adopt what Lake and Rothchild call confidence-building measures that "reassure minority groups of their physical and cultural safety," maintain stability, and alleviate ethnic insecurities (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 56). The key confidence-building strategy is a demonstration of respect. Now that the generations have changed after the wars and the hatred has diminished, all sides must recognize each other's interests as legitimate. According to Lake and Rothchild, the reciprocity of respect will help narrow the "social distance" and erase the distrust that was created between groups by history (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 57).

The crucial steps towards creating reliable safety nets for ethnic groups is to strengthen minority rights and to foster inclusion. Legal provision of minority rights, coupled with a tolerant society, is necessary to reduce the fear and uncertainty in Abkhaz and South Ossetian minorities about their possible future in Georgia. According to the most recent data by the Minority Rights Group International, there are 233,000 Azerbaijanis, 168,100 Armenians, and multiple other communities of Russians, Greeks, Ossetians, and Yazidis that live in close-knit communities on the Georgian territory (Minority Rights Group International 2009). These groups are widely regarded by the Georgian public as guests and are marginalized from society, with minimal attempts by the state to accommodate their



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integration. Mira Sovakar, project manager at the NGO Conciliation Resources, states that “the Georgian government has not been willing to handle and manage pluralism in their country in a constructive way. Minorities are still perceived as guests on the territory of Georgia, not as full citizens. Guests are always welcome, but they are expected to adapt and not voice any open criticism or concern” (Minority Rights Group International 2009). If Georgian leaders want to reconcile with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they should strengthen their efforts to build an inclusive society.

Building on the report by the Minority Rights Group International, the following section will examine the areas of discrimination that need to be addressed to strengthen minority rights. The four areas that need the most adjustment to accommodate Abkhaz and South Ossetian minorities are the judicial system, language and education, political representation, and media. Although the Georgian constitution legally provides special arrangements for minority groups to access the judicial services, minority members believe that the judicial system is biased against them. According to one study, only 11% of minority members that reported a violation of their rights pursued legal action through Georgia's judicial system (Minority Rights Group International 2009). Another barrier towards minority integration is the Georgian language. Since Georgian is the only official language of the country, minority members need to know Georgian to access the majority of public services and education. Minority members often graduate from secondary schools without sufficient knowledge of Georgian, making it harder for them to pass the mandatory entrance exam that covers Georgian language and literature. Language barriers disadvantage minority members from seeking employment outside their communities, further contributing to their marginalization. Minority groups are also discriminated against in the media, as they are often portrayed as separatists or Russian allies. Such practices are especially damaging to the relationship with Abkhazs and South Ossetians. A representative of the South Ossetian community complained that “the media is trying to make enemies out of us. This has very negative effects on the trust between communities and might be a cause of the non-resolution of the conflicts. This spreads fear among the Georgian community, but also the Ossetian one, since we fear we will be expected to assimilate and disappear as a nation” (Minority Rights Group International 2009). Finally, the lack of representation in Georgia's politics reflects the marginalization of minority groups. The Georgian constitution limits minority members from political ascension by banning ethnic-based parties, which may be the only way for minorities to gain representation.

To reduce the marginalization of minorities and ensure that their rights are respected, the GoG should develop a comprehensive definition of minorities and adopt an anti-discrimination law that will be supervised by an independent organization (Minority Rights Group International 2009). When minorities are deprived of political power, they depend on the judicial system to protect their rights by enforcing anti-discrimination laws. The inability of minority members to trust the system precipitates violence and leads to further alienation between people; therefore, the GoG must establish functioning laws and procedures that recognize and correct injustices committed against minority members (Baldwin et al. 2007). Furthermore, the GoG should provide additional multilingual services to ensure that the language barrier does not impede minorities from accessing the judicial system (Minority Rights Group International 2009). The GoG can promote minority-inclusive education by offering financial support for programs that provide training in the Georgian language to the teachers in the minority schools. In addition, the GoG should amend the law that requires subjects like history and geography to be taught in Georgian, and design native curriculums for minority groups like Armenians and Azeris (Baldwin et al. 2007). In order to prevent the spreading of hatred and fear between people, media representatives should be trained on how to frame the stories that involve minority members appropriately. Discriminatory comments in the media must be discouraged and carefully observed (Baldwin et al. 2007). Strengthening the voices of minority groups will require special arrangements that promote and increase minority political participation. The most effective measures to foster minority participation could be reserved seats for minority representatives, ethnic-based political parties, and informal consultative bodies that “advise government or parliament on minority issues without having executive power” (Minority Rights Group International 2009).

Overall, the GoG should seek to build a sustainable society by actively promoting inclusion and raising awareness about national minorities. Erasing fear and protecting the security of minority groups will be essential if Georgia wants to reintegrate Abkhaz and South Ossetian people into society successfully. The confidence-building measures are necessary whether or not Abkhazia and South Ossetia are open to reuniting with Georgia. Demonstrating respect and strengthening minority rights are essential building blocks of democracy that do not require the GoG to influence directly or engage with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian population. Instead, they are essential for creating a state

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that is suitable for minority groups if reintegration ever becomes a realistic possibility.

## Long-Term Orientation

Keeping the conflicts frozen is not a sustainable permanent policy, as the current reality does not satisfy the demands of either Georgia or the breakaway regions. Strategic patience risks renewed violence if the situation in South Caucasus does not settle in the long run. The following section will discuss Georgia's potential ways forward and the possible development of events that will allow the GoG to take resolute steps towards territorial integrity. Based on the geopolitical situation in Europe, it is evident that by choosing the Western route, Georgia is moving further away from its territorial integrity. Russia uses the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the means to compete with the West; thus, the more integrated Georgia becomes with the West, the more likely it is that Russia will strengthen its grip on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Besides, the US and the EU are limited in their policy choices in Georgia and Russia. Neither fully supporting Georgia nor taking a modest approach towards Russia is an attractive option. The softer stance on Russia's destabilizing actions abandons strategically important allies like Georgia and Ukraine while extending military assistance to Georgia risks a new Cold War-like reality. NATO's inaction during the 2008 war reflects the West's dilemma. NATO left Georgia helpless against Russia by choosing not to intervene on the basis that Georgia is located in Russia's "backyard." Intervention would have been a risky move for the West as a rational actor, as it might have triggered a large-scale conflict against Russia.

It is tempting to assume that integration in Russia's sphere of influence will help Georgia avoid further conflicts with Russia and move closer to restoring its lost territories. However, choosing Russia over Europe will not eventually pay off for Georgia. At the same time, Georgia cannot ignore Russia while it turns to Europe, as such a strategy might trigger Russia to revamp its presence in Georgia. Engagement with Russia through cooperating on the common interests is a good short-term strategy, but appeasement does not imply that Georgia should steer away from the Western route and stop pursuing the EU and NATO membership. Instead, Georgia should contain the crisis until the favorable geopolitical changes in the region permit the GoG to discuss reintegration with Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders. Even though Abkhazia and South Ossetia decline any consensus, Russia's fading ambition of being a regional superpower will lead them to look for Georgia's assistance. Moreover, establishing a friendly relationship with Russia is not a realistic option, as 61% of Georgians support the country's goal of the EU membership (National Democratic Institute 2015). The next section will argue that given the EU offers stronger economic prospects than Russia and Russia's political influence is on the decline, Georgia may not forever be a prisoner of its geography; therefore, Euro-Atlantic integration should remain Georgia's long-term priority.

The EU offers integration in the common market that Russia cannot provide. Although Georgia is not the EU member yet, the ties established through the Eastern Partnership (EaP), such as the DCFTA, give Georgia access to the EU's internal market. Besides, the EU accession process requires comprehensive democratic reforms to be carried out in the areas of human rights, political freedom, and the rule of law. The prospect of EU membership serves as a powerful source of development for Georgia. The 2004 EU enlargement brought substantial economic benefits to the post-communist countries. The study by Campos, Coricelli, and Moretti shows that had the six post-communist countries not joined the EU, their incomes would have been 12% lower and growth rates 1% lower (Campos et al. 2014). In general, the EU's economy is the second-largest in the world and has been, on average, growing by 1.47% yearly from 2012 to 2017 (Eurostat). Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is hardly a match to the EU's single market. While it started with three members (Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan), it now only has five, and a few members, like Belarus and Kazakhstan, have expressed that they will leave if their interests are at stake. The EEU is underperforming because it depends heavily on Russia's economy. Russia accounts for 1.6\$ trillion out of the EEU's 1.9\$ trillion GDP, as well as 80% of the population. When oil prices are high, and the ruble is stable, Russia is an attractive trading partner, but when oil prices are plunging and the ruble's trading at \$60 US dollars, the entire union stagnates (Sindelar 2015). In conclusion, the EEU mainly serves as a political tool for Russia to solidify its influence in the post-Soviet sphere and is not a viable alternative to the EU's single market.

Another reason why Georgia should look towards the West is that Russia's economic and political power is declining. While in 2008 the ruble was trading at approximately \$25 US dollars, it now trades at \$64. Plunging oil prices negatively impact Russia's oil-dependent economy, and international sanctions further isolate Russia from the global

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market. Russia is in need of Western investments and lifted sanctions, but the trend has been the opposite. The sanctions incurred against Russia after the Crimean War continue to be in effect and have weakened the financial aid allocated to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, forcing them to search for other sources of revenue. Although Russia is trying to reenter the international economic stage, countries that used to depend on Russian energy are looking to diversify their sources of oil supply. Pressure from the West erodes Russia's economic tools to exert political influence, which is reflected in Putin's diminished national popularity. According to the Levada poll, Putin's approval rate, which has never been lower than 80% after the annexation of Crimea, has decreased to 64% over the past two years (Levada-Center). In 2018, Transparency International ranked Russia as the 138th most corrupt country in the world (Transparency International). Although such a high rate of corruption guarantees that 67-year-old Putin will remain in power, the odds of a successor are likely to increase if Putin fails to get Russia's economy back on track. If Putin's approval rates keep declining, and he is unable to secure a successor, the likelihood of Russia's transition to democracy will be more realistic than it has ever been in the 21st century. However, such a development of events is nothing but an early prediction and depends on multiple circumstances to converge towards the same result.

The two trends discussed above indicate that Russia's future as a regional superpower is not promising or sustainable in the long run. Abkhazia and South Ossetia depend on Russia, but Russia cannot provide attractive economic and political prospects to neither of these regions. If Russia weakens, Moscow's ambition of spreading regional influence through ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet sphere will be replaced by the priority to restore the economy. By keeping the conflicts frozen before such changes appear, Georgia will allow space for development without the burden of renewed conflicts on its territory. Georgia should also look to diversify the strategic and economic partnerships with other allies that recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Georgian territories. Foreign projects in Georgia will guarantee that more actors are interested in Georgia's territorial integrity and the minimal risk of violence. By taking such a route in the long-term, Georgia will equalize the playing field and increase the leverage against Russia. If Georgia becomes a safe democratic country that is part of the EU, leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will find their political, social, and economic prospects in Georgia more appealing than their future *as de facto* independent states that entirely depend on Russia. In case Georgia builds the state suitable for Abkhazs and South Ossetians by strengthening minority rights and integrating minority groups in the society, the chances are that leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be more open to discussions about reconciliation than they are today. Realistically, a scenario in which Russia's power and ambition decline and Georgia grows into a strong democratic state may be the only opportunity for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to reunite with Georgia.

## Conclusion

To sum up, it is safe to conclude that maintaining the status quo is the most reasonable option for the GoG to pursue in the short-term. As a rational actor, Georgia should calculate costs and benefits of the proposed policy choices, identify risks associated with each, and choose the optimal policy accordingly. This essay suggested three potential ways of dealing with the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, namely a light footprint approach, a heavy footprint approach, and strategic patience. Abandoning the pursuit of restoration is not a realistic choice and is not popular among Georgians. Therefore, Georgia should maintain the desire of restoring territorial integrity, but choose between strong-willed and diplomatic tactics towards attaining the goal. The proposed strategy does not have any major implications in the near future, as it does not aim for sudden or dramatic victory in conflict resolution. Such a forceful approach over the past decade has proved to be detrimental to Georgia's territorial integrity and autonomy. Georgia should acknowledge the complicated relationship with Russia and accept that Moscow will not change its stance on Abkhazia and South Ossetia anytime soon. Therefore, the GoG should carefully determine the risks and benefits of every step taken towards solving the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Given that Georgia targets the EU membership, it should keep building democracy and strengthen minority rights whether or not it affects the future of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the long run, Georgia should remain patient and wait until the changing geopolitical situation in Europe allows the right opportunity to advance negotiations with Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders. As expressed by Paata Zakareishvili, Georgia's former reconciliation minister, Georgia needs to give Abkhazia and South Ossetia "a choice between Russia, as it is, and a new Georgia, a democratic Georgia that will be a part of Europe" (Whitmore 2013). Peaceful resolution of these conflicts will reduce tensions not only in the Caucasus but in the whole region. Abkhazia and South Ossetia's reintegration in Georgian territory will restore Georgia's sovereignty to pursue its goals freely and will serve the development goals of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well.

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*Written by: Giorgi Buzaladze*  
*Written at: University of Toronto Mississauga*  
*Written for: Spyridon Kotsovilis*  
*Date written: April 2019*