

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

Tskhinvali (South Ossetia), Georgia

By Robert M. Cutler

(We offer this analysis as part of FPIF's Self-Determination and Governance project. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the FPIF staff or the boards of either sponsoring organization. Comments are welcome. Please send to Tom Barry <tom@irc-online.org>.)



History

The Russian Empire annexed Ossetia in the first decade of the nineteenth century. After the Bolshevik Revolution, this became in March 1918 the Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, renamed the Mountain Autonomous Republic in January 1920. In 1922, the section of this region south of the mountains became the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1989 it declared itself to be part of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, then

declared itself sovereign in August 1990. In response, Georgia abolished South Ossetia's autonomous status within Georgia in December 1990. After South Ossetia declared independence (not internationally recognized, and as distinct from sovereignty) on November 28, 1991, Georgia in April 1992 reestablished the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast.

An eighteen-month war stopped after a ceasefire agreement negotiated between the presidents of Russia and Georgia in June 1992. The resulting

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Regional Overview

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Russian-Georgian-Ossetian peacekeeping forces have maintained the ceasefire since then with very good success.

Ethnic unrest in Georgia first broke out in South Ossetia under Gamsakhurdia, but this escalated in mid-1992 under Shevardnadze. Within a period of weeks over 100,000 refugees fled to North Ossetia, a part of the Russian Federation. In North Ossetia, ethnic Ingush refugees in the Prigorodnyi (literally "Suburban") region around the capital Vladikavkaz were demanding the re-attachment of that region (severed by Stalin) to Ingushetia. The presence of so many refugees strained resources, led to disputes and unrest, and resulted in the appointment of a special prefect from Moscow to head an emergency administration. Ethnic Ossetes in North and South Ossetia alike began to call for reunification of their territory. In South Ossetia, Russia brokered an agreement providing for the deployment of a tripartite Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian force to guarantee civil peace and encourage residents to return there.

In 1995 the Georgian Parliament adopted a new constitution that left open the question of Georgia's territorial and administrative structure in relation to South Ossetia (as well as Abkhazia). President Shevardnadze proposed a federal solution. Bilateral talks began, leading to signature, in Moscow in July 1996, of a framework agreement officially titled the "Memorandum on Measures to Provide Security and Strengthen Mutual Trust Between the Sides in the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict." (Also in 1996 Georgia changed the official name of the region from South Ossetia to Tskhinvali, which is also the name of its administrative center.)

Profiles of Major Organizations

The Russian Federation plays a leading role in multilateral forums under the aegis of the **Organization for**

Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE provides political guidance to the **Joint Control Commission** (JCC), created by the 1994 agreement. The JCC's original charge was to oversee the trilateral (Georgian-Russian-South Ossetian) peacekeeping force. (**North Ossetia**, which is part of the Russian Federation, participates autonomously in the activities of the JCC.) The JCC later expanded its activities later to include promotion of **South Ossetia's** economic reintegration into **Georgia**. In this connection it has undertaken practical programs for cooperation among local officials.

This is all the more important in a South Ossetian environment where the years of dislocation and immiseration, coming simultaneously with and following immediately upon the breakup of the one-party Soviet Union, have resulted even in the absence, in South Ossetia, of political parties; while on the Georgian side, there is no political force that advocates Ossetia's separation from Georgia, and President Shevardnadze has been willing to entertain a federal relationship between Tbilisi and the region.

The **United Nations Development Program** is only one of a large number of international institutions contributing to the construction of a lasting settlement. Also there are many NGOs present, which often try to coordinate their activities through the **Assistance Georgia** network. More extensive information on these and other international actors is given in the bibliographic references cited below.

Role of United States

Television pictures of the Georgian repression of the Ossetian rebellion in 1990 are what first forced the U.S. to focus attention on the situation. Shevardnadze's arrival in power in mid-1992 brought unmatched prestige and attention to Georgia in the eyes of the U.S. Partly because of his personal con-

nections on the international stage, the U.S. became most interested in his political success, which was defined to include assuring the territorial integrity of the country since Shevardnadze's political fate was tied to this. The United States has relied upon extensive bilateral assistance programs to improve administration and governance under the Tbilisi regime, allocated dedicated funding to international nongovernmental organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross to help address social problems, and supported the efforts of multilateral intergovernmental institutions such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to assure broader social and political stability in the region.

Proposed Solutions and Evaluation of Prospects

The 1996 Memorandum provides for return of refugees, negotiations on

political arrangements, and round-table meetings of mass media, civic organizations and intellectuals from both sides. A new administration took office in the region that was not connected with immediately preceding conflict period. Working arrangements on practical every-day matters have followed since then.

Negotiations over the status of the region began in March 1997 in Moscow but have not made progress, while proposals for an interim agreement have also not been followed up. Given other conflicts in the South Caucasus (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh), the two sides seem to have a common interest in not pressing toward an immediate resolution. The Georgian side must first deal with Abkhazia, while the South Ossetian side waits for the outcome in Abkhazia to define the widest limit of any possible autonomy they may subsequently negotiate.

The fact that the region now has a government that is not implicated in the earlier conflict has been very important in readying the population to accept eventual Georgian jurisdiction. The approximately 30,000 refugees from the region now living in Georgia appear to consider improved economic conditions on par with security issues in determining to return.

On 8 April 2001, South Ossetia held a referendum on proposed changes to its constitution that were intended to increase presidential power. Voter turnout was roughly two-thirds, of whom two-thirds again approved the changes. Because the referendum was held by the "Republic of South Ossetia" on its own initiative without central Georgian participation, the EU and the OSCE condemned it, declaring it illegal and void.

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