



ნაციონალიზმისა და კონფლიქტების კვლევის ინსტიტუტი
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF NATIONALISM AND CONFLICTS

**The Georgian–Ossetian Conflict:
The Past, the Present, and Prospects for Peacebuilding**

2024

The materials included in this collection of analytical articles are devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the challenges associated with the Georgian–Ossetian conflict and to identifying future perspectives.

*The collection was prepared within the framework of the Georgian–Ossetian Civil Dialogue Process of George Mason University and the project **SCOPE: Supporting Communities of Practice and Exchange**.*

The collection of analytical articles was prepared in May 2024.

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Tbilisi and Tskhinvali in the face of forgotten pragmatism

Ivane Abramashvili

Tbilisi, 2024

The August 2008 war, apart from being an alarming geopolitical event, turned out to be a watershed for Georgian-Ossetian relations. For the last 15 years, the degree of estrangement between the two communities has been steadily increasing. Isolated from each other by endless "borderization", both sides live in their own parallel realities. Nevertheless, Tbilisi and Tskhinvali still, from time to time, need to keep an eye to the facts.

The military aggression in Ukraine launched by Russia in February 2022 shook the security and political status quo of the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions. The current crisis has awakened many new but familiar fears throughout the post-Soviet space, especially in the 30-year-old conflict zones. The three-day "special military operation" originally planned by Moscow is now two years in the process and has exacted its toll on its loyal allies, South Ossetia among them. As the past two years have shown, its cost itself is heterogeneous and varies according to the context. It is not only human cost, but also political, which once again revealed the invisible asymmetry of inequality that exists between Tskhinvali and Moscow¹. However, the fast temp and high enthusiasm of paying this price by Tskhinvali was not necessarily directly proportional to the deepening of partnership with Moscow, which further complicates the positions of Tskhinvali, limits the room for maneuver and makes the development trajectory of South Ossetia unclear.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the possible political trends that may develop in the context of Georgian-Ossetian relations and lead to a change in the 15-year status quo. However, the development of this analysis is based on the assumption that the estrangement between Georgians and Ossetians has not yet passed the point of no return, and therefore it makes sense to think about the search for common interests.

There is no more banality of the status quo

The war of August 2008 effectively preserved one of the relatively easiest conflicts in post-Soviet space. Georgian-Ossetian relations, which were characterized by exceptional dynamism not so long ago, have weakened more and more due to the mistrust renewed by the military conflict and the accompanying

¹Гарина И. «Россииненужныдрузья, Россиинужнышестёрки». НоваягазетаЕвропа. 08.08.2023. об.
<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/08/08/rossii-ne-nuzhny-druzia-rossii-nuzhny-shestiorki>

processes of occupation. Physical isolation of the parties from each other, restriction of civil space in South Ossetia, periodic casualties, the loss of political interest in conflicts in Tbilisi, adapting the Ossetian "statehood" project towards general integration into Russia, became the main factors that contributed to bringing disconnection between societies to a critical level. Informal dialogue remained the only attempt to fill the growing political, social and economic fissures, although such formats are severely limited in their capabilities.

This situation of the last 15 years has created a kind of comfort zone on both sides of the conflict, which has been threatened by Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. Awakened by the feeling of insecurity, Tbilisi and Tskhinvali are still stubbornly trying to remain in their own comfort zones, but it is clear that due to the scale of the ongoing geopolitical cataclysm, this stubbornness cannot last for long. This reality is especially relevant for Tskhinvali, which, despite the seemingly traditional integration policy, cannot get the desired results from Moscow and is facing a number of growing social and economic problems.

As for Tbilisi, the granting of candidate status to Georgia by the European Union will automatically lead to the return of conflict issues to the agenda, which will be one of the key issues in the accession negotiations. The models familiar to the EU regarding the acceptance of states with territorial conflicts as members may not be very relevant for the new candidate countries, therefore, the search for different and relevant approaches to the context is primarily in the interests of Tbilisi.

Development Scenario of Georgian-Ossetian Relations 1 - Continued erosion of South Ossetian "statehood"

Despite the Russian occupation and the "one conflict" narrative, the issue of Georgian-Ossetian relations is still relevant, since the unresolved conflict, which after the 1990s has fueled trauma and mistrust between peoples, has not gone anywhere. Nevertheless, in the background of the growing exhaustion of the de facto independence or "statehood" of South Ossetia, it is becoming more and more difficult for Tskhinvali to maintain room for maneuver in relations with Tbilisi and Moscow.

Several factors are contributing to the current depletion trend. The first is the decline of human capital in South Ossetia. The second factor is the transfer of one's own security and socio-economic guarantees to the Russian Federation as a whole, which is done by Tskhinvali with less and less enthusiasm and more control².

Such a difficult demographic and social situation contributes to the extreme weakening of South Ossetia as a political entity and dependence on the "good will" of other actors. Therefore, if this pace of depletion is maintained while there is no established position in Russia on its annexation, South Ossetia

² გუგუშვილი მ. რა აღმოაჩინა რუსეთის აუდიტმა ცხინვალში – რატომ მაღავენ დოკუმენტებს. Netgazeti. 01.09.2021. იხ. <https://netgazeti.ge/news/561730/>

may remain only as a historical and cultural symbol. This in turn increases the probability that in case of tactical and situational needs, Moscow will make symbolic concessions in relations with Tbilisi at the expense of the interests of Tskhinvali, which is usually perceived very acutely by the Ossetian population.

A recent example of such a policy was the removal of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the list of countries by the Russian airline "Azimuth" in May 2023, one day before the start of direct Moscow-Tbilisi flights, which caused great excitement in Tskhinvali.³ Ossetians have also met with suspicion the Kremlin's decision to impose a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens⁴. Similarly, any speculative talk about using South Ossetia as a transit space raises some fears in Tskhinvali. In addition, in March 2024, three deputies of the de facto parliament of the Tskhinvali region - Davit Sanakoev, Gari Muldarov and Dzambolat Medoev - were deprived of their Russian citizenship due to "actions causing increasing tension near the Russian border". This unprecedented decision of the Russian "FSB" was also explained among the Ossetian population by the warming of Georgian-Russian relations and the strengthening of "pro-Georgian lobbyists" in Moscow and Tskhinvali⁵.

Development scenario of Georgian-Ossetian relations 2 - Tskhinvali's turn towards development

At the time of geopolitical uncertainty caused by the war in Ukraine and the obsolescence of the above-mentioned usual strategy of relations with Moscow, it is important for Tskhinvali to adapt to the current reality in the spirit that the post-World War II Finnish president Juho Kusti Paasikivi called "recognition of facts as the basis of all wisdom". Today, for South Ossetia, the recognition of the facts would be a turn towards the development model, which includes the inevitable and necessary restoration of pragmatic relations with Tbilisi.

The facts that Tskhinvali should face is that Russia is increasingly demanding to withdraw the political, military, social and economic dividends given to it in both material and non-material form, which will further accelerate the above-mentioned exhaustion trend. Therefore, for political and economic survival, it is necessary for South Ossetia to start thinking about the development model. As can be clearly seen, today South Ossetia has visible problems with Russia in terms of complicated customs⁶

³Тарханова Ж. «Авиаскандал» в ЮжнойОсетии: всеобвиняютвсех и встревоженыулучшениемотношениймеждуРоссией и Грузией. Jam-news. 19.05.2023. об. <https://shorturl.at/CGX37>

⁴ზურდული ნ. რუსეთმასაკართველოსმოქალაქეებისთვისავიზოორეჟიმიგააუქმა. Netgazeti. 10.05.2023. об. <https://netgazeti.ge/life/669001/>

⁵ЭхоКавказа. Знакомыелицабезгражданства. 07.03.2024. об. <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32852871.html>

⁶Гукемухов М. «Правиланатаможнепостоянноменяются... Тамсамчертногусломит» ЭхоКавказа. 19.01.2024. об. <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32783744.html>

procedures and expensive imports taxes, which causes dissatisfaction and a feeling of injustice among the local population, while many ethnic Ossetians have died in the war in Ukraine⁷.

If Tskhinvali starts thinking about a new model of development, this will directly lead to the deepening of trade and human relations with the Georgian side in terms of diversification of economic sources, which will positively affect the restoration of trust among the people. Such a pragmatic but at the same time vital decision for Tskhinvali would be a step forward in the transformation of the conflict, which obviously does not oblige the parties to the conflict to cross their "red lines."

The main indicator to determine the political will for such a turn towards development would be the public discussions before the so-called parliamentary elections scheduled for June 9, 2024, or the non-public support of the informal dialogue⁸ by the de facto authorities, which is limited but still maintained between the representatives of different spheres of the Georgian and Ossetian societies. In this regard, the information about the dialogue held between the Russian curators and the de facto authorities in February 2024, about the necessity for Tskhinvali to maintain internal and external stability, including by not irritating Tbilisi excessively, may allow the interpretation that the restoration of such "pragmatic" ties between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali should not be unacceptable for the Kremlin at this stage.

Georgian-Ossetian relations development scenario 3 - Tbilisi's proactive policy against the background of European integration

The granting of EU candidate status in December 2023 will be the beginning of a number of important political reforms for Georgia in the coming years. The accession negotiations, which are the next step in the development of relations between Brussels and Tbilisi, will directly or indirectly affect the problem of unresolved conflicts. On this path, it is expected that both sides will start thinking about the model and form how Tbilisi should approach its relations with Tskhinvali and Sukhumi.

Based on the experience of Cyprus, it is not attractive for the European Union to add new members to its ranks, in whose territory its *acquis communautaire* cannot be fully extended. Therefore, the probability increases that Georgia will proactively approach the fulfillment of its homework even without a priori communication with Tskhinvali, Sukhumi and Moscow.

Regardless of what model one will start thinking about, it is already clear that by accepting the candidate status, Tbilisi, as a part of the European political and normative space, has already agreed to

⁷ 16-დან 61 წლამდე ასაკის ყოველ 10 000 მამაკაცზე უკრაინის ომში დაღუპულთა რაოდენობით ჩრდილოეთ ოსეთი პირველ ადგილზეა ჩრდილოეთ კავკასიის რესპუბლიკებს შორის (იხ.

<https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cmmp04mz53po>), ხოლო სამხრეთ ოსეთიდან დაღუპულია 40-მდე მეომარი (იხ. <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32693313.html>)

⁸ Гүкөмүхов М. Новое требование московских кураторов – не раздражать Тбилиси Эхо Кавказа. 06.02.2024. იხ. <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32808047.html>

restore its territorial integrity only in a peaceful way and to be committed to this policy. This is obviously a self-evident result, but not sufficient, hence how Tbilisi presents the "positive peace" agenda will soon have to be judged.

Summary

This article, as it was mentioned in the introduction, aimed to highlight the possible, but realistic scenarios for the future development of Georgian-Ossetian relations. Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, which for the last decade have been looking at the 30-year unresolved conflict from a selective and comfortable perspective, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, were forced to finally adjust their eyes to the reality that was being systematically formed throughout this period.

It is clear that the future development of the war in Ukraine will introduce additional corrections in the Georgian-Ossetian relations, but with the already established composition, it can be said that the post-2008 status quo is coming to an end. On the other hand, pragmatism and flexibility will be crucial for the parties to establish a new agenda, but according to the above analysis, while it is politically important for Tbilisi, it may turn into an existential task for Tskhinvali in the near future.

Red lines in the sand - in search of the transformative energy of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict

Shorena Lortkipanidze

Tbilisi, 2024

Introduction

The current article is a kind of stream of consciousness about the conflicts in Georgia, and in particular, the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Perceptions of the conflict are different in Georgian and Ossetian societies - the official narratives vary, and the same story is told and interpreted in different ways. The parties have their own truths, strengthened by hard experiences, war, loss of loved ones, loss of home and land, constant fear and uncertainty about the future. Fear and worry make the difference. People along the dividing line have a sense of physical danger on both sides, as well as a fear of visible or invisible borders.

There are different ideas about the causes of the conflict. There is no completely objective and unbiased Georgian-Ossetian historical memory. The main component of this conflict is territory, land. For Georgia, it is about territorial integrity. Its inviolability and the imperative of the physical consolidation of the country are leading in the political and public discourse at all levels.

In the context of these red lines, the paper examines the Georgian version of declared or hidden interests, widespread thoughts, and attitudes related to the conflict. It will analyze the political, legal, social, and personal red lines of the conflict. The main question it will ask is whether there is any potential to rethink or expand the red lines. Where can we look for this opportunity? Who is ready for what, and what steps can be taken to renew the experience of the conflict and the current situation in such a way that it would make a significant change in the formation of a new peaceful vision of perceptions, values, relations, structural aspects of the conflict?

Georgians and Ossetians have been writing about the positive experience of coexistence, shared historical memory, and common cultural traditions, along with differences, for more than three decades. However, the traumatic experience of conflict and confrontation prevents meaningful transformational conversation and objective analysis of the conflict.

The boundaries of conflict analysis are very broad, and can include such factors as the degree of democracy of our societies, receptivity and openness to dialogue, the interests and influences of external forces, and the idiosyncrasies of the broader regional and international context.

The war in Ukraine gave even more severity to the conflicts of Georgia, made the perspective more uncertain and even more dependent on external factors, the restrictions and red lines that the war additionally imposes, especially since for Georgia the "occupying" country is the aggressor in this war.

The fragility or rigidity of the red lines, as mentioned above, depended on many circumstances, including the personal and professional experience of the participants in the dialogue at different levels, their readiness, knowledge and emotional ties to the conflict.

I wonder if the red lines drawn in the sand will be washed away by the river of time if we allow them to be cemented in the end.

Professional experience - in search of potential for conflict transformation

My professional experience is largely devoted to the study and teaching of conflict and peace issues. My interest has always been to find ways and opportunities, how the scholarly knowledge, approaches and experience of working on conflicts can be used in the process of peace building. There is more than one theoretical approach and practical experience of transferring conflict and confrontation to the space of cooperation and dialogue. This arsenal of peacekeeping tools has been collected over the years through many practical peacekeeping experiences in various conflicts around the world, including Georgia.

I was given the opportunity to understand and observe the conflict in 2018-2020 while working within the framework of the international World Bank Accountability Mechanism. I was mediating the conflict between the residents of one of the communities in Zemo Adjara and the representatives of the company managing the hydroelectric station. The conflict concerned a complaint by the villagers about environmental damage caused by the company's construction, which was directly related to the social, economic and security risks and concerns of the local community. The villagers and the company agreed to the dialogue process on their own terms. For more than 3 years, several meetings were held with the participation of the parties. I worked with small groups, preparing each meeting and communicating with other stakeholders on the issue that was associated with many challenges given the complex political and social context. The mediation process did not end with an agreement, the parties found it difficult to find an acceptable solution within the framework of their own red lines. However, a significant change occurred in the mediation process, a transformation of relations between the parties took place. Today, the company and the local community are in open communication with each other, and the community shares its concerns directly with the company.

The mentioned experience allows us to draw some important conclusions. Planning processes is a key issue for any level of dialogue. Part of the planning process is to think about the positions and interests of the parties, to involve the parties in the planning process, to start a dialogue with the issues that can be resolved in the existing formats.

When discussing the transformation process, we must also consider several issues, who we are and what role we play in this process. Often, our role and relationship to the conflict determines the strength of the red lines as well as our openness.

Red lines - part of the conflict analysis process - theoretical aspects and international experience

There is no agreement upon definition of red lines, definitions in academic literature or political analysis provide just means of interpretation.

Any discourse or statement aimed at defining a red line has a different purpose and audience: one is to deter the adversary, and the other is to mobilize one's own public opinion and domestic institutions⁹. This definition of red lines dates back to the Cold War era, when red lines were a necessary tool for implementing deterrence policies in international relations. In Georgia, this term began to be actively used after the 2008 war. "It is mostly used in the context of conflicts to present the fundamental aspects of Georgian-Russian, and sometimes Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflict"¹⁰.

In relation to conflicts, the red lines for Georgia may reflect the strongest and most important national interests related to national and state identity and the principles and ideas on which the nation-state rests. Here, first of all, the borders of the state and guarantees of its inviolability are considered.

One is the goals and interests defined by the national policy regarding the conflict resolution framework, the second is what different actors in the society are ready for and how they see the dialogue processes.

The red lines of civil society in Georgia may be international norms and standards, such issues as unconditional protection of human rights on any side of the conflict, refusal to solve problems by forceful methods and priority of human security issues.

There is also a separate field of art, literature and cinema, which is relatively free from pre-determined visions of the conflict. The best example of this is the film "Liza, go on", which was shot by the famous Georgian director Nana Janelidze. Released on the screens in early 2023 in Georgia, it presented an Abkhazian and Georgian perspective on the conflict in Abkhazia. The film is a kind of attempt to understand and explain the Abkhazian "pain" with the Georgian perspective. The film has had a mixed discussion in the society, there are many criticisms and accusations of distortion of history by the authors of the film. Nevertheless, the main achievement is that the public was ready to accept this content and this form of expression.

⁹Richard N. Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 85.

¹⁰ეკსპერტი აზრი, ივლიანე ხაინრავა, წითელი ხაზები და არა მხოლოდ მათ შესახებ, 2020, საქართველოს სტრატეგიის და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი.

Part of the civil society brought into the discussion the possibility of revising the policy of non-recognition, the question was raised, is it time to unilaterally revise the existing policy towards conflicts, including the "policy of non-recognition"? The main argument of this part of civil sector representatives is that it is necessary to create conditions for the possibility of real dialogue, first of all, within the country and critical analysis of existing policies. This discourse has a limited number of participants and supporters.

In Georgia, the media's interest in conflicts is low, but when such an opportunity opens up, it shows several trends.

The red lines in the media discussion are highly emphasized and solid, namely: the unconditionality of the territorial integrity of Georgia, as well as the inevitable necessity of the return of the displaced persons and the investigation of the crimes committed during the war and the determination of the truth.

The media also devotes time to those political parties that openly ignore the parties to the conflict and see the conflicts only in a geopolitical prism, focusing on the crimes committed by the Abkhazians and Ossetians in the war, Georgian histories and the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On the one hand, the media presents rigid public positions, but at the same time, the mainstream media and journalists try to make a kind of facilitation and take an unbiased position. This trend also indicates the openness of the Georgian perspective and openness to discussion.

Anatomy of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, how the red lines were formed

The Georgian-South Ossetian conflict is a complex event. It is difficult to define the type of conflict, because many factors are interrelated. The conflict is a part and result of complex historical and political processes. It can be said that for more than a century, in different political formations (the Russian Empire, independent Georgia 1918-1921, Soviet Georgia and independent Georgia after 1991), various factors and irritants were added and removed from the conflict, which ultimately led to a chain of violent events: Georgian-South Ossetian war in 1991-1992 and Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008¹¹. Military operations have largely affected a large part of the territory of the former autonomous region of South Ossetia, both Ossetian and Georgian villages, and after the Russian military aggression in 2008, at least 158,000 citizens became internally displaced persons, and also part of the

¹¹In the Georgian version of Wikipedia, two articles are devoted to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict: the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, which more generally reviews the relations and the history of the development of the conflict, and the second article is called the South Ossetian War, which describes the conflict of 1991-1992.

villages of Shida Kartli remained outside the new line of occupation¹². Georgians became displaced, as well as the Ossetians of Tskhinvali¹³.

Georgia is a multi-ethnic country, in which Georgians represent the largest majority. Although the constitution of the First Republic was based on equality, including the principle of equality of peoples, it was difficult to give real content to the implementation of this idea. The processes of state building, even within the Soviet Union, and the preparation and maturation of the national liberation movement were based on an ethnocentric basis. Almost no ethnically non-Georgian could find a place in it. On the contrary, ethnocentric appeals were constantly heard. During the Soviet period, relations between ethnic groups developed by inertia, there was never any special care for it. The only policy was an unofficial, unannounced assimilation policy, which worked "successfully" at the existential level.

South Ossetia is a historical region for Georgia, a symbol of the unity of Georgia. It can be said that the historical term is the main red line in the Georgian-South Ossetian discourse. This conflict and relations are most afraid of history. What complicates things the most is the historical perspective. No matter what is written and said, no matter how neutral and, at first glance, harmless, it seems that it will be difficult to accept it. Analysis of the narratives of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict shows that people mostly remember negative and biased stories¹⁴.

We mentioned above that authoritarianism further limits the range of dialogue issues. Authoritarian countries are afraid to discuss conflicts openly, because this calls into question the social and/or territorial unity of the authoritarian state. For example, the "special rights" of the Malays in Malaysia are largely a red line in relation to the Chinese and Indian minorities and cannot be questioned. On the one hand, the government somewhat exploits fears and tensions between different groups and presents itself as a guarantor of peaceful relations. On the other hand, it may genuinely fear large-scale ethnic unrest, as well as Islamic radicalism. Discussing ethnic relations in Kazakhstan is problematic for the same reasons. In China, focusing on conflicts between the Uyghur minority and other ethnic groups is unacceptable. In Rwanda, as Loyle (2016, 925) writes, asking questions about a person's ethnic identity is actually prohibited by law. Questioning Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, or suggesting that the rights of the local population are being violated, is a red line for Morocco, as is questioning whether Tibet or Taiwan belong to China (see also Ren 2016, 916).

The more democratic the society, the greater is the chance that space will expand and red lines will be questioned. However, this requires the agreement and readiness of the parties.

¹²Control over 110 villages was lost.

¹³30,000 Ossetians are among the displaced persons. They moved to Ossetia, Russia. As a result of this conflict, a total of 230,000 people became displaced, both Ossetians and Georgian citizens, from the beginning of the 90s to the present day.

¹⁴ჭანკვეტაძე ნ. 2019, ქართულ-ოსური კონფლიქტი, ფაქტი ნარატივი და რისიკ გვჯერა.

And what are the red lines in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict? Are there positions, interests or vital interests on which compromise is impossible?

Red lines - the main line of state policy

The issue of territorial integrity is the main red line for Georgia. Territorial integrity is the spirit of all existing state documents of Georgia, and the policy of non-recognition is one of the ways to realize this goal. The law on occupation has a specific task. It was a response to the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia.

The red line is the issue of Georgia-Russia relations in the context of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. After the Rose Revolution of 2003, a new policy was gradually implemented towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remained outside the control of Georgia. The concept of ethno-political conflict was transformed into political conflicts staged by Russia. Such an attitude towards the conflict and shortening the causes of the conflict to the Russia-Georgia conflict naturally created a deficit in the analysis of the conflict and, therefore, reduced the possibilities of constructive intervention in terms of conflict resolution, prevention of the next escalation, transformation or management at a particular moment.

Conflict analysis is a complex process. Conflict analysis helps us to understand the conflict in a larger context, to discuss the parties, their motivations, the peculiarities of the relations between the interested parties and its dynamics. In this process it is possible to identify the issues that are a priority at a particular moment and require immediate response. The analysis process allows for the determination of the effects and impacts of the conflict. Conflict analysis and political analysis do not overlap, they are not the same thing.

Discussing red lines is part of conflict analysis, but it is also possible for this discussion to arise in the process of dialogue, preparing space for negotiations and delineating this space.

The national security concept of Georgia approved in 2011 declares the provision of territorial integrity as the number one national interest.

Achieving national unity and civil harmony by protecting the interests, rights and freedoms of all citizens, ethnic and religious groups living in Georgia is the second in the list of national interests. In the same paragraph, freedom of self-identification and non-discrimination are emphasized as the main principle of maintaining and developing identity.

For Georgia, regional stability is an important interest along with freedom and democracy in Georgia and its neighborhood. It is in the national interest of Georgia to ensure environmental and energy

security for the well-being of citizens. The importance of preserving national and cultural identity for Georgia, as a country with an ancient history, is emphasized here¹⁵.

Georgia is preparing for a new national security concept, although the national interest chapter does not usually change. To a large extent, national interests determine the red lines, which are the main topic of discussion and the subject of controversy.

For example, Tagliavini's conclusion about South Ossetia's self-determination rights can be considered as a red line: "The international community (including Russia) has constantly stressed the issue of Georgia's territorial integrity, both before and after the 2008 armed conflict. This was clearly expressed in a number of resolutions of the UN Security Council, as well as in the decisions of other international organizations. These statements indicate that any right of secession based on self-determination is not permitted.

Conclusion: During the transition period when Georgia became independent, the aspirations of the people of South Ossetia for self-determination were neither de-facto nor de-jure, as the status of autonomy was abolished without replacing it with other firm legal guarantees. Nevertheless, according to international law, South Ossetia had no right to secede from Georgia"¹⁶.

The Government's Program for European State Building, covering the period 2024-2027, also emphasizes territorial integrity and mobilizing strong international support for non-recognition policies.

The concept of red lines became relevant for Georgia after the 2008 war. It is legally compatible with the law on occupation and also with the policy of non-recognition, which was a response to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 war.

It should be noted that the issue of IDPs is another red line for Georgia in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. However, there are many question marks and uncertainties here too.

Apart from conceptual issues, we can single out those events that further reduce trust and obscure the perspective of conflict transformation. Such events are the killing of Georgians near the dividing line. There was not a single public response to studies about this from the civil society of Ossetia. The process of borderization in itself strengthens and deepens the distance and alienation.

¹⁵„საქართველოს ეროვნული უსაფრთხოების კონცეფცია“ 2011;
<https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/43156?publication=0>

¹⁶საქართველოში მომხდარ კონფლიქტთან დაკავშირებული ფაქტების დამდგენი დამოუკიდებელი საერთაშორისო მისია, ანაგარიში, ტომი1 და ტომი 2, 2009 წელი. გვ.

Cultural heritage issues are also one of the components of this conflict. Today, there are 556 temples of religious purpose in the territory of South Ossetia occupied by Russia¹⁷. In South Ossetia, a large part of them is being destroyed, while in Abkhazia, it is being more actively converted into Russian-style churches. Cultural heritage issues are also a very difficult issue in bilateral relations, as these issues are directly related to national identity for both Georgians and Ossetians.

In search of a resource for transformation

For some scholars, conflict transformation is a method that leads to conflict resolution. Nevertheless, at the same time, conflict transformation can be imagined as changes that occur in relationships, values, systems and structures, which lead to changes in conflict components, reducing the effects of conflicts, and preventing new complications.

The essence of conflict transformation lies in the fact that the characteristics of the conflict change in this process. That is, the transformation process is a method that helps the parties understand their relations and better understand each other. Conflict transformation is linked to peace building and systemic change. Conflict transformation is a set of practical actions that help maintain the dialogue process (Brubaker and Verdonk, 1999; Bock and Anderson, 1999; Green, 2002; Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, 1999; Schrock-Shenk and Stutzman, 1995). The types of transformation are divided into international transformation of contexts, internal structures, actors, issues, personnel and elites.

To what extent can we expect that in the event of Russia's defeat in Ukraine, Georgia will be able to start a meaningful and goal-oriented dialogue process? Or what can happen if the processes develop in the opposite direction?

Despite the current crisis of democracy in Georgia, during several decades, the civil society expanded its field of vision through ties with the West. The level of freedom is high and the readiness for meaningful dialogue is solid.

There is clearly a high risk that the retreat of democracy will bring leaders with new rhetoric to the top of the government, who may limit the discussion of conflicts in the same way as in the non-democracies whose examples were mentioned above.

Today we still face existential questions, and these questions are more important than particular red lines. Georgians and Ossetians alike should be worried about this, because our common or separate future is becoming even more unclear.

¹⁷ ოკუპირებული მემკვიდრეობა - რა მოსდის ძეგლებს ომის შემდეგ ივნისი 30, 2021 ეკა ქევანიშვილი, რადიო თავისუფლება

Peace building processes in South Caucasus.

Lessons from the Georgian-Ossetian conflict

Mariam Tskhovrebashvili

Tbilisi, 2024

Introduction

In the South Caucasus, since the end of the 1980s, the intensification of ethno-nationalist sentiments was evident. Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-Ossetian, Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts engulfed the region, which led to a dramatic development of the processes in the following years. Ronald Rayfield compares the demand for independence in the South Caucasus to stepping on a hornet's nest, and indeed, in the early 1990s, several centers of armed conflict emerged in the region¹⁸. Ethnopolitical confrontations turned into armed conflicts - at the beginning of 1991 in South Ossetia / Tskhinvali region, at the end of the same year in Karabakh, and in the summer of 1992 in Abkhazia. The peaceful resolution of the conflict did not have much support from the elites of either side, and isolated cases of preventive initiatives could not change the picture of the confrontations¹⁹. Preventive approaches to peaceful conflict resolution require responding at the level of urgent issues, but are forward-looking and focused on community identification of crisis-causing factors and prevention of its recurrence²⁰. Against the backdrop of chaotic post-Soviet crises in the South Caucasus, it was difficult not only to avoid armed confrontations, but also to stop the emergence of new foci of them.

Since the 1990s, immediately after the end of the hot phases of the conflicts, the first steps of peace processes were taken in the South Caucasus. In the footsteps of the official peace policy, the formats of civil peace initiatives and dialogue were being developed. The present text is an attempt to dynamically review the development of the civil peace dialogue process in the Georgian-South-Ossetian direction, with its challenges and opportunities, parallel to the official peace policy of Georgia.

¹⁸რეიფილდი, რონალდ; „საქართველო იმპერიათა გზაჯვარედინი.“ გამომცემლობა პალიტრა L, თბილისი, 2019, გვ. 558.

¹⁹აბრამიშვილი, ივანე; ჭოიავა, რევაზ; „საქართველოს სამშვიდობო პოლიტიკის 25 წელი“. კავკასიური სახლი, თბილისი, 2018, გვ.13.

²⁰ Lederach, John Paul; Building peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies, United States Institute of Peace, 1999.

The first steps of the peace process

The peace process in the Georgian-South-Ossetian direction started with the end of the armed phase of the conflict, when Eduard Shevardnadze signed a bilateral agreement with the Russian Federation in June 1992. The document known as the Sochi Agreement provided for a general ceasefire in South Ossetia, the development of a demilitarization plan and the creation of a quadripartite control commission with the participation of Georgia, Russia, South and North Ossetia. The commission was supposed to prevent the further development of the conflict through a mixed peacekeeping force. In August of the same year, the beginning of the armed conflict in Abkhazia interrupted the peace process in the Georgian-South-Ossetian direction, but the negotiations were resumed in September 1993 and continued in the following years²¹.

Along with the official peace policy, the civilian peace direction was also active. Since 1994, letters have appeared in the Georgian press, where the first manifestations of civil dialogue formats are read, although they are limited to general messages and are not directed to a specific conflict region. "Georgian Women for Peace" was the name of the civil society that participated in the Transcaucasian Women's Dialogue in America, together with representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan²². Also, "Peaceful and cultural bridges of Georgian adolescent and student youth with youth of all nationalities, creeds and beliefs" - the press informed us about the creation of an international association with such a name in April 1994²³. During this period, the Georgian civil society still did not have a formalized face, although the participants of the civil peace dialogue recall that the first steps in the direction of the Georgian-Ossetian civil dialogue were taken in 1993-1994, when Georgians and Ossetians met each other in the first conference format meetings in Adjara, organized by a British non-governmental organization. They met at annual regional forums with the support of this organization²⁴. From the mid-1990s, the active stage of the formation of Georgian non-governmental organizations began, and the civil dialogue took a more systematic form. With the support and mediation of international foundations and organizations, local Georgian and South-Ossetian organizations and individual actors participated in the civil peace process. The formats were diverse in content and included education, economy, ecology, journalism, women's issues²⁵.

In the late 1990s, the restoration of trust at the political level and the stable maintenance of peace encouraged the return of IDPs to the territory of South Ossetia. It should be noted that transport and

²¹ჯონსი, სტივენ; „საქართველო: პოლიტიკური ისტორია დამოუკიდებლობის გამოცხადების შემდეგ“. სოციალურ მეცნიერებათა ცენტრი, თბილისი, 2013, გვ.132.

²²გაზეთი „საქართველოს რესპუბლიკა“, N127, 1994 წელი, 19 ივლისი, გვ.2.

²³გაზეთი „საქართველოს რესპუბლიკა“, N68, 1994 წელი, 26 აპრილი, გვ.2.

²⁴Interview with Zurab Bendianishvili (civil dialogue participant, conflict expert). 12.03.2024

²⁵Interview with Mamuka Kufaradze (participant of civil dialogue, director of Studio RE). 22.03.2024

trade connections have been strengthened. In addition, the role of the Ergneti market was perceived as important in the process of restoring Georgian-Ossetian trust, and its closure is considered one of the watershed events. However, the illegal, corrupt side of this market is also considered an obstacle to the settlement of the legal side of the conflict²⁶.

A peace between the acute phase of conflict and war

In the early 2000s, the internal political situation changed in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. This significantly hindered the process of peace negotiations, although existing peace formats at the civilian level continued to work actively. The possibility of citizens traveling between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali created a favorable ground for these formats. Meetings were often held in Tbilisi or Tskhinvali. Representatives of non-governmental organizations and journalists could come from Tbilisi to Tskhinvali within the framework of cooperation with Ossetian colleagues, and vice versa, from Tskhinvali to Tbilisi. It can be said that the civil dimension of conflict work and dialogue was taking successful steps.

In 2004, one of the first steps of the new government of Georgia in the direction of Georgian-South-Ossetian relations was the closing of the Ergneti market, which contributed to the existence of economic "black holes". However, the anti-smuggling operation and the closure of the market made the situation on the ground tense, clashes started in the conflict zone and there was a danger that these clashes would turn into a full-scale military confrontation. The tense situation soon eased and the parties reached a ceasefire agreement, however, the complicated relations could not be settled easily, and the peace initiatives of the Georgian government did not succeed in the following years either²⁷. As one of the important initiatives, we can consider the law of restitution, according to which the state of Georgia takes responsibility to restore the legal status of the population affected by the conflict in South Ossetia in 1989-1992, because a significant part of the ethnically Ossetian population had to be forcibly displaced from their homes. According to the law, a special commission should be established to determine the restoration of property rights and compensation²⁸. However, the implementation of the law has been postponed indefinitely and as of 2024, it has not even started.

Against the background of complicated relations after the events of 2004, the cooperation mechanisms at the civil level also lost their effectiveness²⁹. Although the possibility of traffic between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali was maintained, the civil society was already refraining from working on joint projects³⁰.

²⁶აბრამიშვილი, ივანე; ქოიავა, რევაზ; p. 17

²⁷აბრამიშვილი, ივანე; ქოიავა, რევაზ; p. 26.

²⁸Law of Georgia on property restitution and compensation of victims in the territory of Georgia as a result of the conflict in the former South Ossetia Autonomous District. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/23050?publication=4#!> 09.04.2024

²⁹This refers to the closing of the Ergneti market, the tense situation and the clashes that complicated the relations between the Georgian and southern parties.

³⁰Interview with Zurab Bendianishvili (civil dialogue participant, conflict expert). 12.03.2024

The Georgian civil society actively responded to the peace initiatives of the Government of Georgia. As an example, we can cite the appeal sent to President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2005 by non-governmental organizations and individual activists, which was about current events and the government's peace initiatives. However, neither then nor in the following years, cooperative relations between the governmental and non-governmental sectors in this direction could not be established. The reason for this Ivliane Khaindrava sees as "a deaf, soundproof wall erected on the line of communication between the society and the government"³¹.

Just like other post-Soviet conflicts, the Georgian-South-Ossetian conflict has several dimensions, and the peace negotiations were also conducted in several dimensions. In 2004-2005, active negotiations were held between Tbilisi and Moscow regarding the withdrawal of Russian military bases from the conflict zones. Nevertheless, Georgian-Russian relations became more and more tense, and in 2006, the revelation of the Russian spy network reduced the chances of establishing a stable and peaceful relationship with Russia³². In 2007, one of the reasons for the establishment of the South Ossetian Provisional Administration in the village of Kurta by the Georgian authorities was the message sent to the international community that there was no real conflict between Georgians and Ossetians, and Russia was the problem³³. Against the background of these events, the relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali became even worse. Bilateral shootings have become a daily occurrence in the region. In July 2008, a large part of the military units of the Russian 58th Army remained in place after the completion of the military exercises conducted near the northern border of Georgia, and finally in August 2008, the extremely tense situation turned into a full-scale war.

Post-war phase of peace building

After the war, the official Georgian peace policy was based on several main mechanisms: the Geneva International Discussions Format³⁴ created in accordance with the August 12, 2008 ceasefire, the European Union Unarmed Civilian Monitoring Mission (EUMM)³⁵ and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM)³⁶ created a little later. The war completely changed all dimensions of the peace processes that existed before. Although the ongoing peace processes at the civilian level did not stop despite the extreme tension before the war, their intensity and diversity were already limited.

³¹ხაინდრავა, ივლიანე; „სამოქალაქო საზოგადოება და სამშვიდობო პროცესი“. ქართველ მკვლევართა სტატიების კრებული - „ქართულ-ოსური კონფლიქტი: სამშვიდობო გზის ძიება“. საქართველოს სტრატეგისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი, 2011, p.44.

³²ჯონსი, სტივენ; p.345.

³³აბრამიშვილი, ივანე; ქოიავა, რევაზ; p. 27.

³⁴<https://smr.gov.ge/ge/page/26/jenevis-saertashoriso-molaparakebebi>

³⁵https://www.eumm.eu/ge/about_eumm/mandate

³⁶<https://smr.gov.ge/ge/page/27/incident-prevention-and-response-mechanism>

After the 2008 war, it became impossible to hold meetings in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, but soon new formats were created when in December, with the support of George Mason University, a series of Georgian-Ossetian meetings called "Point of view" began. Civil society representatives from various professional circles took part in the cycle of meetings. Several articles about the meetings appeared in the Georgian media in 2012³⁷. Before that, in 2010, it was also written about the Georgian-Ossetian civil forum³⁸. It should be noted that from the same year, the Georgian government took steps in the direction of working on the transformation of the human dimension of the conflict. In the declared goals of the state strategy, the implementation of a human-oriented policy was emphasized. However, such a radical change of the state policy of Georgia in a short period of time was critically evaluated by Tskhinvali and Sukhumi and was considered only as a tactical move. Therefore, these initiatives did not have significant results in the direction of conflict settlement³⁹. Instead, one of the most active and fruitful times has come to civil initiatives and peace dialogue formats. Georgian-South-Ossetian relations became the focus of international donor organizations and the promotion of civil peace initiatives became an active process, and the formats became diverse again⁴⁰.

In 2012, the government in Georgia changed again. The new government chose different approaches in the direction of conflict settlement and decided to stimulate bilateral relations with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. One of the direct manifestations of this was the offer to start a direct dialogue for Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. The peaceful way of conflict resolution was defined as one of the important directions of Georgia's foreign policy, and the commitment to non-use of force was recorded in the resolution of the Parliament of March 7, 2013⁴¹. Also, it is worth noting that in 2014 the name of the minister's office previously called "State Minister's Office for Reintegration Issues" was changed. At the initiative of the minister at that time, Paata Zakareishvili, the new name of the agency became "Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality". The new name became much more suitable for conducting peace processes, because according to Paata Zakareishvili, it was unacceptable for the Abkhazians and Ossetians to cooperate with an agency whose name contained "reintegration" since for them it was not associated with the resolution of the existing conflict⁴².

³⁷Georgian-Ossetian civil dialogue with new hopes, Radio Liberty. 02.11.2012 <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/georgian-ossetian-dialogue/24758585.html>

³⁸Members of the Georgian-Ossetian Civil Forum have developed an action plan, RFE/RL.03.12.2010 <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/2238222.html>

³⁹აბრამიშვილი, ივანე; ქოიავა, რევაზ; p. 39.

⁴⁰Interview with Goga Aptsiauri (civil dialogue participant, journalist). 21.03.2024

⁴¹Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the main directions of Georgia's foreign policy. March 7, 2013. <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/115666> 10.04.2024

⁴²ზაქარეიშვილი, პაატა; ხედვა. კონფლიქტები საქართველოში 2012-2016. ფრიდრიხ ებერტის ფონდი, თბილისი, 2021. pp.20-21

Despite these initiatives, it soon became clear that the peace policy of the Georgian government could not easily leave the format of working in a reactionary and crisis mode. That is why the first significant success in the peace process was achieved in 2016, when prisoners were exchanged with Gali district and Ergneti village based on the Georgian-Abkhazian-Ossetian agreement. The Georgian authorities handed over 4 prisoners to the Ossetian side, while the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides returned 12 prisoners⁴³. The process of releasing the prisoners was also supported by the Public Defender of Georgia. The office of the ombudsman would study the legal situation of prisoners from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgian prisons. The issue of their release was reflected in the agency's reports and recommendations as contributing to the process of restoring trust between the parties and maintaining further stability. In 2014, on the initiative of the Public Defender, a consultative council - Ossetian Forum was created, which advised the Public Defender in the direction of protecting the rights of the ethnically Ossetian population. The working group discussed both arrests and the legal status of prisoners at the "dividing line", as well as issues related to citizenship and restitution. One of the recommendations of the public defender was related to the implementation of the restitution law⁴⁴.

Examples of successful cooperation were also revealed in the process of civil dialogue, where, as a rule, the participants discuss humanitarian issues and try to jointly solve the problems which affect and worry Georgian and South-Ossetian society equally. The participants of the meetings within the framework of the civil dialogue format "Point of view" raised the issue of the Zonkar reservoir, which posed a threat to both Ossetian and Georgian villages. As a result of the active work of the civil dialogue participants and their involvement of political actors in the process, the problem was solved⁴⁵.

New challenges and attitudes of Georgian society

If we look at the peace policy of the Georgian government from 2012 to 2024, its main content revolves around humanitarian issues and does not contain acute political messages. Nevertheless, political issues are discussed in the Geneva format, and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) is used to discuss and manage day-to-day incidents on the ground. All the heads of the government, who held office during this period, tried to maintain the absence of war and carried out a peace policy in the preventive mode of the acute phase of conflicts. Heads of the Georgian government also spoke from the international forum about human rights issues, the human dimension of conflicts and the main creator of problems in these areas, the Russian occupation. These messages were contained in the

⁴³აბრამიშვილი, ივანე; ქოიავა, რევაზ; pp. 41-43.

⁴⁴Special informational essay of the Public Defender about arrests and the condition of prisoners on the dividing line. Public defender of Georgia. June 2014. <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2019040514065686199.pdf> 10.04.2024

⁴⁵Georgian-Ossetian civil dialogue perspective. Radio Freedom 19.11.20213 <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/samokalako-dialogi/25184045.html>

speech of Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze from the UN tribune in 2016⁴⁶, and the same messages were voiced by Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili from the same tribune in 2021⁴⁷. Official peace initiatives were developed with the same content. For example, the initiative "Step towards a better future" presented by the Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Kvirikashvili at the government meeting in 2018. The initiative envisages improving the humanitarian and socio-economic conditions of the population living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region, as well as encouraging trade contacts and traffic along the dividing lines⁴⁸.

At first sight, civil peace initiatives and the dialogue process should be encouraged and supported in the background of such government policy. There was no direct opposition to these processes from the side of the Georgian government, although the participants of the civil dialogue did not see support either⁴⁹. Moreover, in February 2023, the consideration of the draft law "On Registration of Foreign Agents" by the Parliament of Georgia⁵⁰ was assessed as an attempt to discredit the civil sector and non-governmental organizations, which would harm the peace-building process⁵¹.

In recent years, the ongoing peace processes at the civilian level had many other challenges. The process, activated since 2010, has slowed down due to several factors. The global covid pandemic and Russia's initiation of a full-scale war in Ukraine have had a significant impact on the process, albeit for completely different reasons. According to the observations of the participants of the civil dialogue, the focus of attention of the international organizations involved in the peace processes in the South Caucasus was significantly changed by the military actions that started in Karabakh in 2020, and subsequently, in the background of the Russia-Ukraine war, the involvement of international donor organizations in the context of the Georgian-South-Ossetian peace dialogue decreased and, accordingly, the financial support of the projects that were implemented before became limited too. The slowdown of the Georgian-South-Ossetian civil dialogue process was also caused by the fact that the closure of non-governmental organizations in Tskhinvali almost destroyed the possibilities of cooperation, and the process remained only at the level of involvement of individual actors⁵². It should

⁴⁶The Prime Minister speaks at the United Nations about Russian occupation, engagement with Abkhazians and Ossetians. civil.ge, 27.09.2018 <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/255912>

⁴⁷Gharibashvili's speech at the UN General Assembly, civil.ge, 24.09.2021 <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/442742>

⁴⁸<https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/a2beda36.pdf>

⁴⁹Interview with Medea Turashvili (civil dialogue participant). 23.03.2024

⁵⁰<https://parliament.ge/media/news/biuos-gadatsqvatilebit-kanonproekti-utskhoeli-agentebis-registratsiis-shesakheb-gansakhilvelad-komiteteb-gadaetsa>

⁵¹Response of organizations working on the rights of people affected by conflicts and peace issues on current political processes, Center for Social Justice, 07.03.2023 <https://rb.gy/e6kyss>

⁵²Interview with Mamuka Kufaradze (participant of civil dialogue, director of Studio RE). 22.03.2024

also be noted that the resumption of the armed phase of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in 2023 and the resulting spread of Azerbaijan's control over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh was perceived in a certain part of the Georgian society as an embodied example of abstract desires for the return of territories. All this has fueled even more skepticism towards civil peace dialogue and made long-term oriented peace processes even less popular. Militaristic sentiments do not prevail in Georgian society, although it does not stand firm in supporting peace initiatives at the civilian level either. There have always been questions and doubts about the civil dialogue. Often, the discussion about conflicts is superficial, it cannot go beyond the discussion of terms and is limited only to the debate whether South Ossetia is a more correct term or Samachablo. Also, there are inappropriate perceptions and expectations regarding the civil dialogue, as if the function of this process should be the political solution of territorial disputes. But on the other hand, the exchange of information between people, listening to each other, putting themselves in each other's place and understanding each other's interests is no less important for societies divided by conflict. The recent crisis clearly demonstrated the need for internal dialogue in Georgian society and the importance of understanding the value of civil dialogue in general⁵³. The need for internal dialogue is clearly seen when the discussion about conflicts takes an in-depth look and political and social issues on which there is no internal public agreement are identified. There are not many platforms for thematic discussions where not only future peaceful ways of working on conflicts are discussed, but also analysis and reflection of past events.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war, the geopolitical situation is becoming more and more fragile, which raises new challenges. In a certain part of the political spectrum and society, the effectiveness of the civil peace dialogue causes question marks and irony. In the discussion about conflicts, aggressive political campaigns have appeared, where the concept of peace is attached to different meaningful labels. Public attitudes towards civil dialogue have never been uniform and constantly changed under the influence of various external factors and the internal political situation. Furthermore, there has always been skepticism about whether civil dialogue can actually produce results. Every time the Georgian society sees the results of the Russian militarist policy, the civil peace dialogue probably seems like a game with a butterfly net. The participants of the dialogue themselves often become sharp critics and even opponents of the process. Nevertheless, at no stage of the conflict did the necessary cooperative relationship between Georgia's official peace policy and civil dialogue take place, which had a significant impact on its success.

⁵³Interview with Medea Turashvili (civil dialogue participant). 23.03.2024

South Caucasus-2024: Global Challenges and New Opportunities for Conflict Resolution

Paata Zakareishvili
Tbilisi, 2024

South Caucasus, Black and Caspian seas are important zones of geopolitical attraction, where interests of regional actors and superpowers intersect. In addition, in recent years, tectonic geopolitical shifts have been permanently taking place in this region. Such shifts have not happened in the last 100 and 30 years⁵⁴. Based on the new reality, it is better to start assessing the current situation in the South Caucasus by analyzing the international context and the interests of the main players influencing the current processes in the region.

Today, the interests of two big players - Russia and Turkey - intersect in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea. Turkey's influence on all three states in the region is growing, albeit disproportionately. Until 2020, Ankara, despite its declared support for Azerbaijan, took a neutral position on the issue of the unresolved conflict in the territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region and regularly called for peace between Baku and Yerevan. Turkey started to become more active in the South Caucasus in the fall of 2020, when Azerbaijan decided to resolve the 30-year "frozen conflict" of Karabakh by force. At that time, Ankara clearly took the side of Baku, although it got involved in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia not directly by participating in hostilities, but by using diplomatic, economic, political and to some extent military resources⁵⁵. Since then, Turkey has returned to the South Caucasus with unfurled flags for the first time in 100 years⁵⁶. It left the South Caucasus in 1921 under a treaty with Bolshevik Russia and now returns, not as a revenge-obsessed empire defeated in the First World War, but as a NATO member and EU accession negotiator⁵⁷.

Today, Turkey has influence not only in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus, but also in the Balkans, the Mediterranean Sea, and even in Africa - for example, in February 2024, Turkey and Somalia agreed that the Turkish fleet would protect Somalia's territorial waters, thus allowing Turkey to control the

⁵⁴It is about the collapse of the Russian Empire twice: in February 1917 and in December 1991.

⁵⁵Turkey provided Baku with military expert support and consultations, probably intelligence data, weapons, and special drones.

⁵⁶<https://netgazeti.ge/news/492582/>

⁵⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Moscow_\(1921\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Moscow_(1921))

Persian Gulf as well⁵⁸. All this indicates that Turkey clearly confirms its ambition to expand its spheres of influence in the region and beyond.

Turkey pursues a policy of balancing between West and East, NATO and "non-NATO". Ankara's interests in the South Caucasus are expressed through its support for Azerbaijan, and Ankara's interest in the Black Sea is expressed through its ties with Ukraine. Turkey supplied Kyiv with affordable drones (which the Ukrainians used effectively in the first months of the war); built and handed over a warship to Kyiv. On the basis of international law, Turkey closed the Bosphorus Strait to warships, which deliberately weakened Russia's attempts to carry out aggression against Ukraine from the sea. All these actions of Turkey clearly show that it is not a neutral player in the region, but an interested state, which, based on the current situation, is successfully realizing its strategic interests, which lies in the dominance of Turkey as a NATO member state in the region.

In addition, Turkey is positioning itself as the leader of the Turkic-speaking world. It is the founder of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which unites the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia⁵⁹. This is another region (besides the Balkans and the South Caucasus) where the geopolitical interests of Turkey and Russia intersect. In Russia itself, there are about 10 million Turkic-speaking citizens: Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash, Karachays, Balkars and others.

Despite the fact that Turkey tries to have partnership relations with both sides in the Russia-Ukraine war, it successfully implements a policy of non-provocation towards Russia. On the other hand, Russia also takes into account Turkey's interests - the complication of relations with Ankara would further weaken Russia's role in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. Therefore, it is vital for Moscow to consistently pursue a policy of checks and balances with Turkey. Obviously, in the South Caucasus, Ankara and Moscow are not partners, but competitors who maintain politically correct relations in their public behavior. For example, in Syria and Libya, where the statehood of these countries is facing existential challenges, the confrontation between Turkey and Russia is visible even to the naked eye. In the case of Syria and Libya, Moscow and Ankara are not competitors, they are rivals. The listed examples show that Turkey and Russia have different views and claims towards each other on various issues. Their relationship is not an alliance of strategic partners. This relationship is more of a situational partnership.

In addition to the clear rivalry between Turkey and Russia, the EU and the United States have growing interests in the South Caucasus. The European Union is institutionally present in the region through Georgia. It is the only international institution that provided a format for negotiations and stopped the August 2008 Georgia-Russia war. Under the auspices of the European Union, a six-point peace plan

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nt3d-oKfN1w>

⁵⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization_of_Turkic_States

was signed between Tbilisi and Moscow⁶⁰, from which the instruments of the European Union were created: the European Union Monitoring Mission⁶¹ and the format of international discussions in Geneva⁶². For the last two years, the European Union has started monitoring the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border from the side of Armenia, just like the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia⁶³. Additionally, in April 2024, a tripartite (USA, EU and Armenia) meeting was held for the first time in Brussels, which was attended by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen⁶⁴. All this confirms that the European Union has serious intentions to set foot in the South Caucasus.

When talking about the South Caucasus, Iran's role and interests should also be described. Iran has been represented in the region for centuries with civilizational values: language, religion, institutions of state management, culture, existing values and many others. But today Iran does not play a big role in the region. It is not welcomed in the South Caucasus (except for the public mood of Armenia). Moreover, Iran has other concerns that go beyond the South Caucasus region - it is preoccupied with Syria and Iraq, where it is strengthening Shiite groups to fight against Israel.

Recently, China's interests have been highlighted in the South Caucasus. In July 2023, Georgia and China announced a joint decision to establish a strategic partnership⁶⁵. Nevertheless, given the current status quo of geopolitical checks and balances in the region, China cannot compete with Russia and Turkey, which have been in the region for centuries, both in terms of civilizational values and institutional involvement. China's only connection to the region is economic investment directly linked to the One Belt One Road megaproject. South Caucasus, although important, is only one link in this chain.

Although the states and organizations discussed above have their own geopolitical interests in the region, these interests cannot be realized if they are not adjusted to the security and development interests of any state in the region. After the success achieved in the second Karabakh war, Azerbaijan became the uncontested favorite in the region, both economically and militarily, in terms of security and diplomacy. Azerbaijan is a reliable ally of Turkey in the South Caucasus. It achieved its success with the support of NATO member Turkey, although Azerbaijan does not aspire to join either NATO

⁶⁰<https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=19157>

⁶¹<https://www.eumm.eu/ge/>

⁶² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_International_Discussions

⁶³https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma_en?s=410283

⁶⁴[CPC | Armenia's Grand Rebalance: EU and Russia \(caspiantourism.org\)](https://cpc.caspiantourism.org/Armenia%20s%20Grand%20Rebalance%3A%20EU%20and%20Russia)

⁶⁵<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32527175.html>

or the European Union. Baku-Ankara has formed a choreography calculated and purposeful for the relations with Moscow, whose strategic task seems to be to gradually squeeze and expel Russia from the territory of Azerbaijan. Russia, weakened in the world, has no support in the region to provide diplomatic or political resistance to the common geopolitical choreography of Turkey and Azerbaijan. The decisive date for Russia's departure from the territory of Azerbaijan should have been the fall of 2025, when the five-year memorandum signed by the trilateral (Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) on November 9, 2020 would expire⁶⁶. However, on April 17 of this year, unexpectedly, Russia decided, on its own initiative, to withdraw its military units 19 months earlier, in order not to put itself in such a humiliating situation that it had to take this inevitable measure at the request of Azerbaijan. Whether this is the result of trade between Moscow and Baku, the coming months will show us, but the fact is that the Russian military left the territory of Azerbaijan without any dramatic response. Thus, Azerbaijan became the first territory in the post-Soviet space from which Russia withdrew its military forces willingly and even more prematurely.

In the conditions of such successes, the government of Azerbaijan is in a kind of euphoria, so the peace talks with Armenia are taking place against the background of a clear demonstration of superiority. Armenia and Azerbaijan recognize the need for an agreement at the declaration level, but it is difficult to take real steps. Currently, the working version of the text of the agreement has not been made public, although the main positions are known: the restoration of transport and economic communications stopped after the collapse of the USSR; the demarcation/delimitation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border and the determination of the fate of the enclaves that existed during the Soviet era, both on the territories of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although hostilities have ceased and the parties have recognized each other's territorial integrity, the absence of a peace treaty can change the situation in favor of armed conflict at any time.

Among the states of the South Caucasus, the most dramatic situation is in Armenia, which is facing complex existential challenges. What the region will look like in the next 5 years depends on how things will develop in Armenia. Yerevan does not hide its European aspirations. Disappointed with Russia, the Armenian government took the vector of development and security in the direction of civil values and democratic institutions. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan suspended the country's participation in such an organization managed by Russia - such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)⁶⁷. This is quite a bold move, because Armenia is alone today - it does not have such a reliable ally as Turkey for Azerbaijan, which is a force to be reckoned with by Russia. The fact that Prime Minister Pashinyan's Civil Contract party won the parliamentary elections after being defeated in the Karabakh war means that the potential for democracy in Armenia is high. However, the country is facing a serious challenge. As soon as Yerevan and Baku sign a peace treaty, Moscow

⁶⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Nagorno-Karabakh_ceasefire_agreement

⁶⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_Security_Treaty_Organization

may launch a project to change the government in Armenia - a democratic Armenia is not in the interests of the Kremlin. Russia will try to change the power in Armenia in any way.

Will Armenia continue to democratize if it is replaced by a pro-Russian candidate? This is an existential challenge not only for Armenia, but also for the South Caucasus. If Armenia maintains its democratic development, Russia will have scarce resources to influence Yerevan. But if the Kremlin breaks Yerevan's resistance, then Moscow will strengthen its anti-democratic positions in the South Caucasus.

No matter how strange it sounds, Armenia should try to ally with its historical rival, Turkey. Ankara, despite supporting Baku, is consistent and persistent in its regional policy. Progress in Armenia-Turkey relations is already noticeable - recently a diplomatic forum was held in Antalya, where the official delegation of Armenia was received with honor⁶⁸. Improving relations with Armenia should also be beneficial for Turkey. Yerevan's desire to distance itself from Moscow should suit Ankara, if we take into account that the joint vision of Turkey-Azerbaijan is aimed at squeezing Russia out of the region.

Of the three states in the region, Georgia is the only one located both in the South Caucasus and on the Black Sea. Turkey, which is a leading regional player, is also in the Caucasus and the Black Sea. So, the geopolitical reality has become such that Georgia and Turkey should be natural allies in the region. Nevertheless, when the strengthening of Turkey in Azerbaijan has created a solid security basis to restrain Russia's imperial goals, the Georgian government takes a strange neutral position and thus protects Russia from inevitable expulsion outside the region.

According to Georgian legislation, Russia has occupied a significant part of Georgian territory⁶⁹. Therefore, until the complete de-occupation of the territories of Georgia is carried out, the restoration of more or less good neighborly relations with Russia will be unacceptable for the absolute majority of Georgian citizens. The possible positive activity of the Georgian government towards Moscow will definitely damage the reputation of the Georgian government in the eyes of its citizens (voters). The Kremlin, in order not to put the Georgian government under constant attack, prefers the Georgian dream not to be too proactive in the direction of rapprochement with Russia. It is more important for Russian politics if the "Georgian Dream" government shifts more attention to targeted rhetoric and actions against the values and institutions of the European Union and NATO. Naturally, such a vague policy of Tbilisi worries the international partners interested in the ongoing processes in the South Caucasus. The actions of the Georgian government are suspicious and incomprehensible to them. Neither the European Union, nor NATO, Turkey, or the USA can perceive Georgia as a reliable and consistent partner, as its geopolitical positioning increasingly fits into the coordinates determined by Russia. It is clear that neglecting democratic values and institutions will inevitably lead to significant

⁶⁸<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1131611/>

⁶⁹<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/19132?publication=9>

tensions in society and deepen alienation among foreign partners. The EU and NATO are still waiting for substantial reforms in a number of state institutions and sectors.

On the basis of the described analysis, it can be concluded that the processes developed in the South Caucasus during the last 4-5 years have essentially undermined the 200-year hegemony of Russia and formed a new geopolitical configuration in the region. In the changed reality, unresolved conflicts on the territory of Georgia acquire additional dimensions and perspectives of transformation. It seems that the new concept of the South Caucasus will shift towards a more European and Euro-Atlantic axis. Accordingly, the transformation and final solution of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts will be based on the conflict transformation standards tested in the European Union and NATO, which in principle exclude forceful methods of conflict resolution. Georgia, which is on the way to join the European Union, with the support of its partner states and organizations, should create solid guarantees of security and development for Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. Tbilisi should be principally interested in showing Abkhazia and South Ossetia all the advantages of rapprochement with the European Union.

In order to strengthen the strategy of peaceful conflict resolution, the Georgian side should first take four important steps. First of all, it is necessary to clearly request Moscow to fulfill the commitment taken by the six-point peace plan signed on August 12, 2008 - to return the armed forces to the lines existing before the start of military operations. In the same direction, Tbilisi should regularly remind the international community that both the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the implementation of the Russian neo-imperialist policy of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, and what is happening in Ukraine is a continuation of the Kremlin's policy of aggression that began in Georgia in August 2008.

The second step that Georgia should take in the direction of conflict resolution is to strengthen European involvement. The Kremlin's request for the withdrawal of troops should not mean that Tbilisi is supposed to remain face-to-face with Tskhinvali and carry out revenge. The Georgian authorities may propose to transform the EU monitoring mission into a peacekeeping force to act as a guarantor of security for South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The third step - after Russia fulfills its commitment under the six-point peace plan and the EU monitoring mission ensures security conditions for the Ossetian and Abkhaz sides - Tbilisi should express its readiness to discuss the start of the discussion of the non-use of force agreement with Tskhinvali and Sukhumi.

The fourth step should be to strengthen cooperation between Georgia and NATO member Turkey in security and defense issues.

With these four steps, Georgia, Tskhinvali and Sukhumi should create sustainable and irreversible prospects for security and development in the new regional rearrangement of the South Caucasus.

The former "South Ossetia" or the phantom "Samachablo".

The problem of names in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict

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Tbilisi, 2024

Introduction

One of the characteristic factors of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict is the incompatibility of the positions of the parties regarding the naming of the conflict territory. At different stages of the conflict, the attitude regarding the name has changed, especially on the Georgian side. We often find the refusal to express the term "South Ossetia" and the attempt to replace it with various alternative names in the public space. On the other hand, the Georgian side periodically activates efforts to establish the term "Samachablo" for the conflict zone, which also causes special resistance in the Ossetian community, although on the Georgian side, a number of other terms are used as an alternative to South Ossetia. The purpose of this article is to structurally analyze how particular terms were established, what is behind the current protest against them, and what is the impact of this process on the Georgian-Ossetian conflict as a whole.

In the public space, it is common to discuss the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in a uniform manner and not to see these two conflicts as different situations. Among others, the name is not seen as one of the important distinguishing marks of these two conflicts. Therefore, the name is not taken into account both in regards to the conflict regions and in the messages that are sent to the residents of the respective regions. The name "Abkhazia" is an unequivocally acceptable toponymic term for both the Georgian and Abkhazian sides. Obviously, the parties assign this name different statuses, although the term itself is indisputable. As for the Ossetian-Georgian conflict, here even the name of the territory itself is a separate subject of dispute, especially from the Georgian side, and an attempt to establish different terms in the context of different periods is noticeable.

Among the significant factors that determine the attitude towards names is the process of their formation and the context in which they were introduced. The process of establishment of the term is related to both public unacceptability and public fears.

The purpose of the current article is not to judge and evaluate the processes, neither to fully present the full history and dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian relations, but to research what effect the name of these territories has on the dynamics of the conflict, on the emergence of opportunities for its

transformation, both in Georgian and Ossetian society, and to what extent the name is a hindering factor of the transformation. Accordingly, a number of tragic, essential and important processes are presented only partially, in the context of research goals.

"South Ossetia" - the history of the formation of the term

The appearance of South Ossetia, as well as the general toponym "Ossetia" in Georgian reality, causes protest and non-acceptance in Georgian society.

The introduction of these terms coincides with the period when the Russian Empire established control over the territory of the Georgian principalities. The administrative-territorial arrangement of the Georgian kingdoms was different over the centuries, but it was not explicable for them to imagine the geographical area covered by the "South Ossetian Autonomous District" as a single, separate unit. Also, despite the fact that the existence of the Ossetian population, especially on the southern slopes of the Caucasus, has been recorded for centuries, we also historically do not find a reflection of the mentioned event in the name of any entity in the form of the toponym "Ossetia".

Only from the beginning of the 19th century, the toponym "Ossetia" appears in various correspondence and reports of the officials of the Russian Empire, which refers to the mountainous regions inhabited by Ossetians of the Big and Little Liakhvi valleys⁷⁰. We also often see the following expressions: "Georgian Ossetia", "Ossetians of Kartli", "Ossetians of Georgia", "Ossetians of North Kartli", "Georgian Ossetians living in the mountains of the Caucasus", "Ossetians belonging to Georgia", "Ossetians of Imereti" or "Ossetians living in Imereti ". Some researchers attribute this process to the attempt to incorporate the term "Ossetia" into the local, endemic toponymy⁷¹. The pair of toponyms "South Ossetia" and "North Ossetia" appears in various sources since 1830⁷².

In the 19th century, the formation of the name of the territory of the research interest - "Ossetia" - and its reflection in official documents is related to the formation of "Ossetia Okrug" within the Tbilisi Governorate as a result of the administrative-territorial reform of 1842. It existed until 1858⁷³.

⁷⁰Report of Lieutenant-General Karl Kroning of March 26, 1802 to the Emperor of Russia.

⁷¹ ОСЕТИНСКИЙ ВОПРОС; ВАХТАНГ ИТОНИШВИЛИ "ЮЖНАЯ ОСЕТИЯ - В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ ГРУЗИИ?!";

Издательство "Кера – XXI"; Тбилиси; 1994

⁷²In September 1830, in the newspaper "Tiflis News" ("Тифлисские ведомости" (1830, № 72) an anonymous author's article "Correspondence, letters from Ossetia" is published <https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/191304>

⁷³The issue is uniformly described and indicated by Georgian official agencies. [რეგიონის შესახებ - SMR.GOV.GE - შერიგებისა და სამოქალაქო თანასწორობის საკითხებში საქართველოს სახელმწიფო მინისტრის აპარატი](http://www.smr.gov.ge) История. Официальный сайт Администрации Президента Республика Южная Осетия (south-ossetia.info)

The attempt to establish an Ossetian administrative-territorial unit called "South Ossetia" also took place during the period of the First Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). In general, during this period, the territorial arrangement established during the Russian Empire was preserved. From September 1918, the "National Council of Ossetians" demanded a separate administrative district autonomy for Ossetians.

In July 1919, the commission under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia submitted to the government an extraordinary project on the introduction of a national unit for Ossetians, according to which, on the basis of the territories cut off from the counties of Gori, Racha and Shorapani, the creation of a special "Java county" unit was envisaged.

The issue was considered by the inter-departmental commission, however, the creation of such a territorial-self-governing unit was unacceptable to the National Council of South Ossetia. Finally, the creation of a separate administrative unit of the Ossetians was considered unacceptable by the inter-departmental commission.

In the same period, the National Council of Ossetians submitted to the Constitutional Commission of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia the "Draft Constitution of Canton South Ossetia", the first article of which stated that "South Ossetia is an autonomous part of the Democratic Republic of Georgia". The document implied creation of a canton with special rights for Ossetians within Georgia which would be similar to the Swiss-Confederate model. Georgian legislators considered the presented project unacceptable.

The 1921 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia took into account only three autonomous units: Abkhazia (Sukhumi) Autonomous District; Muslim Georgia (Batumi area) and Zakatala District⁷⁴. Neither "South Ossetia" nor the previously considered "Java county" was found among them.

After the establishment of the Soviet government, the territorial arrangement of Georgia changed. Only after that, the toponym "South Ossetia" is introduced at the normative level. On April 22, 1922, South Ossetian Autonomous District was established by the Decree No. 2 adopted by the Councils of the Central Executive Committee of All Georgia and the Council of People's Commissars⁷⁵. The mentioned status and name remained unchanged until the period of the National Movement.

The factor of names in the period of national movements (war of terms)

The widely established in Georgian society term "Samachablo" as a name of the region can be regarded as the firstborn of the era of the National Movement. In the last period of the existence of the Soviet

⁷⁴[საქართველოს კონსტიტუცია \(მიღებული საქართველოს დამფუძნებელი კრების მიერ 1921 წლის 21 თებერვალს\) | სსიპ "საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე" \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

⁷⁵[Iverieli: Декрет №2 Об образовании автономной области Юго-Осетии \(nplg.gov.ge\)](#)

Union, in parallel with the activation of the national movement, the issue of both the status of the South Ossetian Autonomous District and its name has become relevant, and this process had a two-way dimension (in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali).

For the problem of names, it is not essential on which side the process started that caused a counter process on the other side. The conflict of positions between the parties started with the processes related to the status of the region, which later turned into a state of incompatibility of names.

The District Council of People's Deputies of the South Ossetian Autonomous District made a decision to transform the South Ossetian Autonomous District into the "Soviet Democratic Republic of South Ossetia" within the Soviet Union⁷⁶.

Later, the reverse processes regarding the status of the South Ossetian Autonomous District and the name "South Ossetia" itself begin. From this point of view, we can observe the mentioned processes through the publications of the period, when the term "South Ossetia" is gradually being replaced by alternative names of the region, and "Samachablo" among them.

On March 16, 1990, the newspaper "Literature in Georgia" published the article "Syndrome of Hatred". It represents a kind of response to the processes taking place in Abkhazia and the South Ossetian Autonomous District in that period. The South Ossetian Autonomous District is referred to in the article as the "so-called" or, to express the same essence, it is enclosed in quotation marks. It is also referred to as "this land, the oldest Georgian corner of Samachablo..." The development of this idea takes place step by step⁷⁷.

Until the issue related to the status is resolved, the name of the territory is still not considered reliable. Therefore, in the December 9, 1990 issue of the "Republic of Georgia" newspaper, the "Address of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia to the population of the Autonomous District of South Ossetia" is published. The article is a kind of appeal to the population not to participate in the planned, according to the presidium's position, illegitimate elections. It uses the name of the region "South Ossetian Autonomous District"⁷⁸.

Nevertheless, in just a few days, based on the events in South Ossetia, we already see different rhetoric in the same newspaper. On December 11, 1990, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia adopted a law by which the Supreme Council of the Republic canceled the autonomous region of South Ossetia. The adoption of the mentioned law was preceded by the speech of the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in which he reviewed both the legal and historical

⁷⁶[4-11.jpg \(402x556\) \(kvaisha.ru\)](#)

⁷⁷"Indigo" magazine, September-October 2019, N47.

⁷⁸[Iverieli: საქართველოს რესპუბლიკა N3 \(nplg.gov.ge\)](#)

principles related to the creation of the "South Ossetian Autonomous District". For the purposes of this article, the part of the speech is used where Zviad Gamsakhurdia points out that: "The creation of the South Ossetian Autonomous District harmed the interests of the Georgian population of the historical Samachablo, Safalavando and Duchy of Ksani ..." Thus, in the legal part, the resolution simply cancels the status of the Autonomous District, although adopting the law was still in process. The speech already introduces a kind of historical justice restoration narrative through this process and helps to stir up historical sentiments by referring to administrative-territorial, community subjects⁷⁹.

The dynamic developed in the Georgian press regarding the naming of the conflict zone in the early 1990s shows that as soon as the first signs of conflict appeared in the former autonomous region of South Ossetia, the term "South Ossetia" (with its neutral political-administrative meaning) slowly disappeared from the discourse of the Georgian political, cultural, scholarly elite, and journalists. It begins to be replaced by alternative terms and names that carry different categories of identity: Samachablo, Shida Kartli, Tskhinvali, etc⁸⁰.

The fundamental element in the representation of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in the Georgian print media of 1990-1991 was the very terms that replaced the term "South Ossetian Autonomous Region"⁸¹. In Khatuna Maisashvili's doctoral thesis "Representation of National Identity in the Georgian Print Media of 1990-1991" has been formulated for the following purposes of this replacement:

- these alternative terms represented the sign-signal that required an appropriate response and reaction from the recipient of the message;
- it helped the ruling elite to mobilize public support in the "fair fight against separatism";
- it was an example of replacing official history with unofficial, "true" history.

The multiplicity of words and signs that replaced the term "South Ossetian Autonomous District" represented a strengthening factor of the national-identity discourse. Accordingly, based on this basis, the communication strategies of the Georgian print media in 1990-1991 are aimed at strengthening patriotic motivation and patriotic attachment to this land on the part of Georgians, and to the collapse of nationalist aspirations on the part of the South Ossetians⁸².

Establishment of the term "Samachablo"

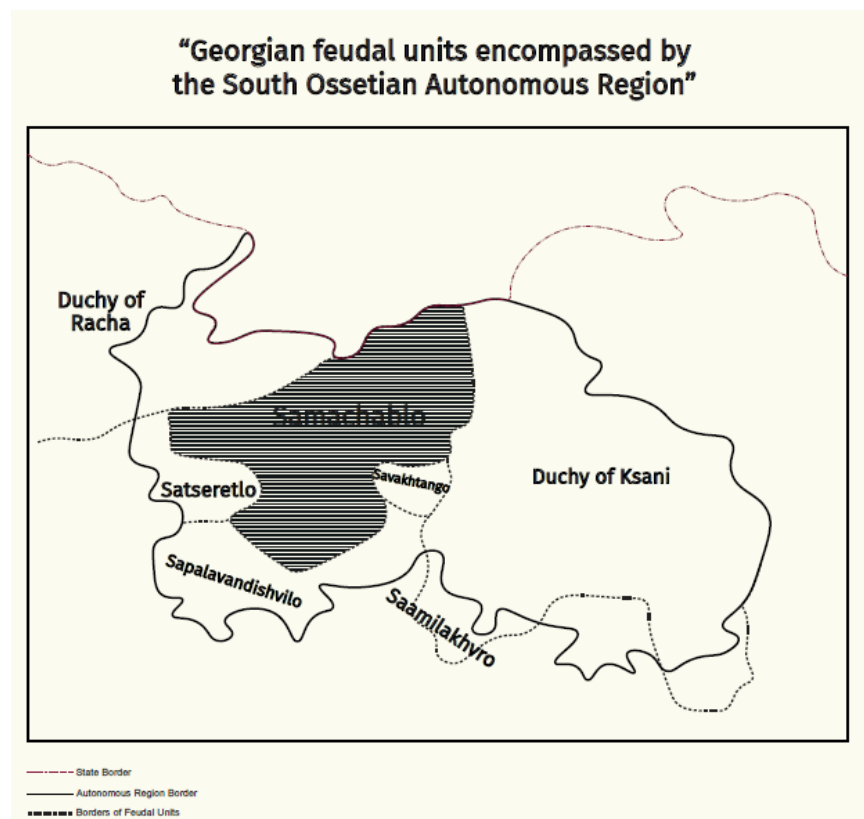
⁷⁹[1990 | ISNC](#)

⁸⁰Doctoral thesis of Khatuna Maisashvili "Representation of national identity in Georgian print media of 1990-1991".

⁸¹The researcher has used articles from newspapers - "Communist", "Republic of Georgia", "Mamuli", "7 days", "Drone".

⁸²Doctoral thesis of Khatuna Maisashvili "Representation of national identity in Georgian print media of 1990-1991".

Samachablo was only one among the list of feudal subjects mentioned in the speech of Zviad Gamsakhurdia on December 11, 1991. If we analyze various historical sources, "Samachablo" is one of the terms denoting sabatono (county) and is identical to such concepts as "Sabaratiano", "Saamilakhvro", "Satseretelo", etc. "Samachablo" originates from the feudal house of Machabeli promoted in Achabet (or Achabet valley). This territory appeared after the breakup of the Duchy of Kartli into separate sabatonos - Duchy of Ksani, Duchy of Aragvi, Sacitsiano, Saamilakhvro, Samukhranbatono, Sajranavakho, Safalavandishvili, etc. - and became one of those sabatonos (counties). Based on the available sources, "Samachablo" mainly included the foothills and mountainous areas of the Big Liakhvi valley, separate sections of the Kvirili and Gramuli valleys, and a certain part of Dvaleti (in particular, the Zrogi valley), which is currently part of "North Ossetia". In addition, "Samachablo" directly bordered the territorial unit called Duchy of Ksani, Duchy of Racha, Safavlenishvili, Safalavandishvili, Satseretelo, Duchy of Aragvi (in the vicinity of Dvaleti) and Savakhtango. Based on the mentioned information, the following schematic illustration is useful to outline the ratio of the territory of the historical "Samachablo" and the subsequently created "South Ossetian Autonomous District"⁸³:



⁸³ ОСЕТИНСКИЙ ВОПРОС; ВАХТАНГ ИТОНИШВИЛИ "ЮЖНАЯ ОСЕТИЯ - В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ ГРУЗИИ?!";

Despite the historical description given in the above-mentioned speech of President Gamsakhurdia, and despite the fact that "Samachablo", as visible on the scheme, was not the largest of the feudal units included in the South Ossetian Autonomous District, it soon established itself as the collective name of the entire region. This term is already established as more socially acceptable and supported⁸⁴.

For this period, the acceptance of the term "Samachablo" is formed at the public level, and despite political opposition, it is still not questioned. After the decision to cancel the autonomous district, the Presidium of the National Congress of Georgia, which was in opposition to the "Round Table" government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, issued a statement criticizing the decision. It states that "the decision of the Supreme Council of Georgia, despite its fairness, is currently unfounded". At the same time, the National Congress also points out that "we welcome the fact of canceling the illegal administrative territorial unit on the territory of Samachablo..."⁸⁵

The term "Samachablo" acquired a special meaning during the period of military confrontation that began as a result of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. In the chronicles of hostilities, "Samachablo" is used as the main term. This is especially visible in the published articles regarding the victims⁸⁶, as well as in relation to the displaced persons from the region⁸⁷. Accordingly, in relation to the military actions and the rest of them, the term Samachablo immediately comes to the fore, and depending on the results of the war, it acquires an additional dimension. In fact, the name of the military actions is established as "the war of Samachablo".

Today, at the legislative level, Samachablo is not used as a term denoting the region, nor is it mentioned in the main acts and documents related to the conflicts. The term remains in use only with the victims of hostilities and the social programs derived from them. Among the documents where the term is still valid are the municipal budgets approved by individual municipalities which provide the assistance programs for family members of those killed in hostilities or displaced persons. They mention "Abkhazia and Samachablo" as a definition of what is considered to be the place of ongoing hostilities for territorial integrity⁸⁸.

⁸⁴TV speech of Zviad Gamsakhurdia on December 16, 1990; [გაზეთისაქართველოსრესპუბლიკა. №10. 1990 | INDIGO](#)

⁸⁵Statement of the Presidium of the National Congress of Georgia on December 14, 1990. <https://timeline.isnc.ge/timeline/1990>

⁸⁶In 1991, the newspaper "Akhlagazrda Ivereli" ("Young Iverian") published war chronicles, mainly using the term Samachablo as the collective name of the region.

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⁸⁸[„ქართვის მუნიციპალიტეტის 2013 წლის ბიუჯეტის განსახორციელების შესახებ“ | სსიპ „საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე“ \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

[წალენჯიხის მუნიციპალიტეტის 2024 წლის ბიუჯეტის დამტკიცების შესახებ | სსიპ „საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე“ \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

[თელავის მუნიციპალიტეტში განსახორციელებელი ჯანდაცვისა და სოციალურ საკითხთა პროგრამის დამტკიცების შესახებ | სსიპ „საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე“ \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

The introduction of this name during the period of the National Movement was dictated by the connection to historical sentiments, by inciting the desire to unite and to the solidarity with the historical past of the society. The elimination of the term "South Ossetia", which was considered to be established at its core in the USSR, was part of the process of getting rid of the Soviet legacy, so there was a need to create an alternative, collective name for the region.

Accordingly, the historical Georgian name of "Samachablo" as a region is being promoted by political actors and media based on them. This was based on historical and public memory about the existence of a feudal unit of this name in the territory covered by the South Ossetian Autonomous District.

Samachablo mentioned in the modern public narrative and Samachablo in the narrative of the 90s is associated with different prerequisites. In the contemporary public narrative, including among young people, the term "Samachablo" is less associated with historical sources and more with the sentiments of the period of the National Movement. Accordingly, it can be said that the use of the term "Samachablo" during the period of the National Movement is a source of legitimacy for its use as a collective name of the region in modern discussions. At different times, the sentiments of the National Movement are used by individual political actors as a justification of ideological-value mortality with the founders of the modern state. One example of this is the use of the term "Samachablo" by Irakli Kobakhidze along with Abkhazia in the process of being approved as Prime Minister⁸⁹. This should be understood more as an attempt to gain positive public sentiment than as part of any deliberate strategy.

Terms in peace agreements and initiatives

The attitude towards the name of the conflict region is well manifested in the documents signed between the parties at different times and the peace visions and initiatives voiced by the Georgian side.

In the first process aimed at the end of active hostilities, in the protocol signed as a result of the Shevardnadze-Galazov meeting on June 10, 1992, the zone of hostilities is mentioned as "the zone of conflict between Georgians and Ossetians"⁹⁰. Logically, on June 24 of the same year in Sochi, the Republic of Georgia and the Russian Federation signed an agreement on "Principles of settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict". It also does not directly mention any name of the conflict zone, and it is a general indication that the parties strive to eliminate the conflict between Georgians and Ossetians in every way. Moreover, the document talks about the parties involved in the conflict, although it does not name them⁹¹. Accordingly, in both agreements, the use of terms unacceptable to either party and/or causing new disagreements is avoided as much as possible.

⁸⁹ „ქართული ოცნების“ ყრილობა - ირაკლი კობახიძის გამოსვლა - 1TV

⁹⁰The minutes of the meeting of the Chairman of the State Council of the Republic of Georgia E. A. Shevardnadze and the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the North Ossetian SSR A. Kh. Galazov. <https://timeline.isnc.ge/ge/timeline/1992>

⁹¹Соглашение о принципах урегулирования грузино-осетинского конфликта <https://web.archive.org/web/20111006192516/http://www.noar.ru/files/content/82.pdf>

On September 21, 2004, President Saakashvili announced the peace initiative, the new "gradual settlement plan" of the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia from the UN tribune. The announced plan talks about the peaceful integration of South Ossetia into Georgia⁹².

On November 5, 2004, in the statement signed in Sochi with the participation of Zurab Zhvania and Eduard Kokoity, the participants of the meeting confirm with concern and worry that "...as a result of the armed clashes in South Ossetia, the peaceful process of settlement faced a real threat of disruption. They expressed their deep regret because of the casualties suffered by the parties, including the civilian population". The statement is signed by Zhvania on behalf of the Georgian side and by Kokoity on behalf of the South Ossetian side⁹³.

Within the framework of peace initiatives, on January 26, 2005, during a speech before the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, President Mikheil Saakashvili announced a new peace initiative. The President's speech is interesting from the point of view of names, when he initially uses the term which is more acceptable to the Georgian society (Tskhinvali region), although he indicates that he is talking about the region which is "...generally known as South Ossetia"⁹⁴. In March of the same year, in the peace initiative announced by the Georgian government regarding the peaceful settlement of the conflict in South Ossetia, when talking about the political status of the region or the processes necessary for the peaceful conflict resolution, "South Ossetia" is used unambiguously as the name of the region⁹⁵. This initiative is based on the vision expressed by the President in the European Council⁹⁶.

In the cease-fire agreement signed under the mediation of French President Nicolas Sarkozy after the August war in 2008, Article 6 refers to the initiation of international discussions on the conditions of security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁹⁷.

The term Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia is already established in the peace policy documents initiated after the August war. This name of the region is used both in the state strategy for the occupied

⁹²[Civil Georgia | Saakashvili's Speech at UN General Assembly](#)

⁹³ Statements by Z. Zhvania and by E. Kokoity on the results of the meeting, <https://timeline.isnc.ge/timeline/2004>

⁹⁴ [მიხეილ სააკაშვილი ევროსაბჭოს საპარლამენტო ასამბლეის წინაშე: ახალი სამშვიდობო ინიციატივა \(radiotavisupleba.ge\)](#)

⁹⁵ [Civil.Ge | საქართველოს მთავრობის ინიციატივა სამხრეთ ოსეთის კონფლიქტის მშვიდობიან დარეგულირებასთან დაკავშირებით](#)

⁹⁶ [Civil Georgia | თბილისი სამხრეთ ოსეთის სტატუსის თაობაზე დოკუმენტს აქვეყნებს](#)

⁹⁷ [08.08.08 დოკუმენტები \(iccn.ge\)](#)

territories initiated in 2010 "Engagement through cooperation"⁹⁸, as well as in the peace initiative "A step to a better future" adopted in 2018⁹⁹.

Thus, in such peace initiatives and agreements, which involved both sides of the conflict or related to the political status of the region after the August war, when there is no longer any talk regarding the initiatives related to the political status and the majority of views are more declarative, the Georgian side constantly expressed readiness to use the term "South Ossetia". Aimed largely at the transformation of the conflict, a relatively neutral, combined version of acceptable terms for both communities: "Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia" is already in use.

Naming in legal acts

In the context of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, the problematic nature of conflict zone names is reflected in the current legislation. The basis of the problem at the level of the legislation on names was created on December 11, 1990, by the decision of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia "On the abolition of the Autonomous District of South Ossetia"¹⁰⁰. Since during this period the "South Ossetian Autonomous Okrug" as an administrative-territorial unit for Georgian reality was abolished, it is obvious that the proposals for the administrative-territorial structure of the territory of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Okrug provided for in the same act were not presented.

In the legislative and regulatory acts preserved in the database of legislative acts, we find several names, the context and period of adoption of which clearly show the significance of the terms in public and state life in the corresponding period. At the legislative level, the terms "Former South Ossetian Autonomous District", "Tskhinvali Region" and their combined version "Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia" are mainly used.

The Constitution of Georgia, adopted on December 24, 1995, fully linked the demarcation of the territorial state structure of Georgia with the full restoration of Georgian jurisdiction over the entire territory of the country, and its first edition does not even mention the status of the autonomous republic of Adjara¹⁰¹. From the terminological point of view, only the first article of the Constitution mentions that the March 31, 1991 referendum was held in the entire territory of the country, including the "former South Ossetian Autonomous District". Thus, the Constitution establishes at the legislative level the standard of referring to the geographical area by the name of the "former South Ossetian Autonomous District".

The attitude to the status and name in the political and legal space in the corresponding period of time is well reflected by the decree of the President of Georgia of March 23, 1997. The act refers to the administrative-territorial units that are part of Georgia with different statuses. Adjara and Abkhazia

⁹⁸ [11. სახელმწიფო სტრატეგია ოპერირებული ტერიტორიების მიმართ – ჩართულობა თანამშრომლობის გზით.pdf \(nsc.gov.ge\)](#)

⁹⁹ [ნაბიჯი უკეთესი მომავლისკენ - SMR.GOV.GE - შერიგებისა და სამოქალაქო თანასწორობის საკითხებში საქართველოს სახელმწიფო მინისტრის აპარატი](#)

¹⁰⁰ <https://matsne.gov.ge/document/view/1079618?publication=0>

¹⁰¹ Clause 3 of Article 2 of the Constitution of Georgia (as amended on August 24, 1995).

are separately mentioned in it, and "former South Ossetia" is separately mentioned as a territorial unit¹⁰². Accordingly, "former" does not refer to the status of the territorial unit "autonomous district", but to "South Ossetia" itself.

In 2005-2006, the Parliament of Georgia adopted several resolutions on the situation and peace processes in the conflict regions in the country, in which the region is referred to by the term "former South Ossetian Autonomous District"¹⁰³. In them, as well as in the Law of Georgia on Property Restitution and Compensation for Victims of the Conflict in the Former South Ossetian Autonomous District adopted in the same period, the chapter avoids referring to the geographical area simply as "South Ossetia"¹⁰⁴.

As early as 1996, the resolution of the Parliament of Georgia indicated the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia on the one hand and the Tskhinvali region on the other hand as territorial units from which a part of the population was forcibly relocated¹⁰⁵. In other acts, "Tskhinvali region" is established as a more humanitarian term¹⁰⁶ used in acts regulating issues related to displaced persons from the region, and is rarely found to denote a territorial-geographical area¹⁰⁷.

The term "Tskhinvali region" appears in the legal space in parallel with the "former South Ossetian Autonomous District", although before the August war, these two terms were usually not used simultaneously and synonymously. The joint use of the terms "South Ossetia" and "Tskhinvali region" in the legislative framework was first encountered in the resolution of the Parliament of Georgia of

¹⁰²"Abkhazia, Ajara, former South Ossetia, and the city of Tbilisi. Regarding the measures of development of complex programs of socio-economic development". <https://matsne.gov.ge/document/view/109672?publication=0>

¹⁰³<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/43282?publication=0> Resolution N1927 of the Parliament of Georgia dated 11/10/2005 "On the situation in the conflict regions on the territory of the country and the progress of peace operations"

<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/43594?publication=0> Resolution N2655 of the Parliament of Georgia dated 15/02/2006 "On the current situation in the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region and the progress of the peace process"

<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/43984?publication=0> Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia dated 18/07/2006 N3483 "On peacekeeping forces stationed in the territory of Georgia"

¹⁰⁴<https://matsne.gov.ge/document/view/23050?publication=0>

¹⁰⁵[„საქართველოს მოქალაქეთა და საქართველოში მცხოვრებ უცხოელთა რეგისტრაციისა და პირადობის დადასტურების წესის შესახებ“ საქართველოს კანონის თაობაზე | სსიპ „საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე“ \(matsne.gov.ge\)](https://matsne.gov.ge)

¹⁰⁶[რუსეთის ფედერაციისა და საქართველოს მოქალაქეთა ურთიერთმიმოსვლის შესახებ შეთანხმების განხორციელების გააძულებელ ოპონისძიებათა თაობაზე | სსიპ „საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე“ \(matsne.gov.ge\)](https://matsne.gov.ge)

¹⁰⁷[საქართველოს სახელმწიფო საზღვრის მართვის სტრატეგიის დამტკიცების შესახებ | სსიპ „საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე“ \(matsne.gov.ge\)](https://matsne.gov.ge)

January 31, 2008¹⁰⁸. Accordingly, South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region is gradually being established in various combined forms for the territorial/geographic designation of the conflict region.

More often we find the form “Tskhinvali region (former South Ossetian Autonomous District)”. Such a form is established by the Law of Georgia "On Occupied Territories" adopted after the August 2008 war¹⁰⁹. According to its second article, for the purposes of this law, the occupied territories include "Tskhinvali region (territories of the former South Ossetian Autonomous District)".

"Tskhinvali region", as it had no legal-geographical definition before, is already taking a specified form, and the new form coincides with the territories of the South Ossetian Autonomous District that existed before its abolition. This term is mainly used in various legal acts adopted until the last period, including those related to persons living legitimately in the region¹¹⁰, as well as in the acts regulating the recognition of education received there¹¹¹.

The combined version of the terms “Tskhinvali region” and “South Ossetia” can be found in the association agreement between Georgia and the European Union signed in 2014, according to which Georgia has pledged to resolve relations with its regions Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia only peacefully, taking into account international law¹¹².

Provisional administration

In 2007, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the law "On the creation of appropriate conditions for the peaceful conflict resolution in the former South Ossetian Autonomous District"¹¹³, based on which a temporary administration was established by the decree of the President of Georgia¹¹⁴. Among the functions of the administration, according to it, was to conduct negotiations for the purpose of determining the autonomous status of the former South Ossetian Autonomous District within the state of Georgia, although it does not specify the name of the mentioned autonomy.

The temporary administration, both in its supporting acts and in subsequent documents, is constantly referred to as "the administration of the temporary administrative-territorial unit in the territory of the former South Ossetian Autonomous District", although it is worth noting that in the news published

¹⁰⁸[საქართველოს მთავრობის შემადგენლობისა და სამთავრობო პროგრამისათვის ნდობის გამოცხადების შესახებ | სსიპ "საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე" \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

¹⁰⁹[ოკუპირებული ტერიტორიების შესახებ | სსიპ "საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე" \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

¹¹⁰[აფხაზეთის ავტონომიურ რესპუბლიკასა და ცხინვალის რეგიონში \(ყოფილ სამხრეთ ოსეთის ავტონომიურ ოლქში\) ლეგიტიმურად მცხოვრები პირების რეგისტრაციის, პირადი ნომრის მინიჭების, პირადობის ნეიტრალური მოწმობის და ნეიტრალური სამგზავრო დოკუმენტის გაფორმების, გაცემის და გაუქმების წესის დამტკიცების შესახებ | სსიპ "საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო მაცნე" \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

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¹¹²[eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0830\(02\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0830(02))

¹¹³<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/24280?publication=0>

¹¹⁴Decree No. 296 of the President of Georgia dated May 10, 2007, <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/100630?publication=0>

by the administration itself at different times, as well as in the public and media space, the term "Administration of South Ossetia" was established in relation to the administration¹¹⁵.

In the resolution of the Government of Georgia adopted in the process of changing the head of the temporary administration in 2022, it is generally spoken about the "temporary administrative-territorial unit" without any geographical names¹¹⁶, however, in the information about the change in the administration on the official the government administration's Facebook page, the administration is referred to as the "South Ossetian Administration"¹¹⁷ and accordingly, the information in the media uses exactly this wording¹¹⁸. It can be said that there is no opposition to the use of the term "South Ossetia" either at the political or public level in relation to the mentioned administration.

Summary

The observation shows that the fear of naming is an important factor for both sides. On the one hand, the appearance in the Georgian region of a non-endemic name, which was associated with the name only of the Ossetian population living in this area, caused discontent and resistance in Georgian society. The term "South Ossetia" was connected with the so-called concept of a united Ossetia and the declared aspiration of local political actors to unite with North Ossetia. Accordingly, on the Georgian side, it was this circumstance that formed the attitude that the name "South Ossetia" does not exist in any administrative-legal form.

As for the opposition to the naming from the Ossetian side, it is formed by two main factors. Firstly, this is the perception of the term as a given, and several generations of people living in the space called "South Ossetia", without any objections on their part, perceived the space with that name as their homeland. For them, it is a natural name of this space in a way, so the name of another form is unacceptable. The second factor is the ignorance of removing "South Ossetia", considering them as a side of the conflict, an accountable party. A good illustration of this is the current map of Georgia, where "South Ossetia" is not marked in any way.

The change of names, both at the level of legislative and public narratives, shows us that this process is a reflection of the realities created in relation to conflicts arising from internal or external factors. While the chances of conflict transformation appear, the more so if the parties are in the process of direct dialogue and search for political solutions to the conflict, it is possible to turn aside conflicting terms.

¹¹⁵<https://soa.gov.ge/>

¹¹⁶Resolution N518 of the Government of Georgia of November 4, 2022,
<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5607380?publication=0>

¹¹⁷<https://www.facebook.com/GeorgianGovernment/posts/pfbid0Rra2EhqLVnFGtEfqUbryxuuDUrwDLonL1t8S94pRC9iqhWm6c3BfSGq23MrtFeuZl>

¹¹⁸<https://www.ajaratv.ge/article/104885>

The increased attention paid to the name of the conflict zone by public discussions and even more so by political actors in the public space shows the impasse of the current situation, the lack of visions for resolving the conflict and a superficial attitude towards the issue¹¹⁹.

The Georgian side's seemingly principled approach to the term used for the conflict zone has, in many cases, turned into greater flexibility. The choice of term to use often depends on to whom the action or statement is directed. If the statement is aimed at reconciliation, the other side in this case was choosing the most acceptable wording for the other side. This trend is maintained throughout the entire period of conflict dynamics. Statements made to an internal audience take into account what is acceptable to society at the moment, what it is ready for and, accordingly, which term has more political weight, and thus the term is chosen both in legislation and for internal announcements.

¹¹⁹ For example, [ნიკოლოზ სამხარაძე ევროკავშირის ტერმინ "სამხრეთ ოსეთის" ცხინვალის რეგიონით" შეცვლას სთხოვს \(radiotavisupleba.ge\)](http://radiotavisupleba.ge)