

# The "frozen conflict" that turned hot: conflicting state building attempts in South Ossetia

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**Title: The “frozen conflict” that turned hot: Conflicting state building attempts in South Ossetia**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The recent conflict in South Ossetia reminded everyone that things are far from settled in the South Caucasus region. Generally dubbed “frozen conflicts”, the separatist conflicts in the Caucasus have been considered by many authors as political and military stalemates. This approach, however, tended to brush aside sociological dynamics at work inside what could have been more accurately described as “zones of conflict”. The main argument is to demonstrate how the oppositional logic of the autocratic de facto government in power and outside interference in the region, from Russia and Georgia mainly, are affecting the state building process of South Ossetia by marginalizing the local population and its needs. In fact, no real state building will take place in South Ossetia, either as a component of a Georgian Federation or as an entity in the Russian Federation, without addressing more carefully the needs of the local population. This statement is more topical than ever, in the context of the ongoing struggle between Georgia and Russia for the future of the region.*

**Key words:** South Ossetia; Georgia; Caucasus; Russia; state building; secessionist conflicts

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## Introduction

The South Ossetians living under the authority of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia make up one of those peoples, like their fellow Caucasians the Abkhazs or the Transnistrians, trapped in a complete juridico-political limbo. The political entities that ‘claim the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force’<sup>1</sup> over them are not those juridically representing them in the international arena. Having met three of the four criteria required to be recognized as a state according to the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of the State (1933) – that is to say, having a permanent population, a defined territory and a government – the *de facto* authorities still crave international recognition<sup>2</sup>. This situation is more than a mere juridical imbroglio. It has concrete and specific repercussions for the people living in these territories.

Stuck in the midst of competing state-building attempts, from the *de facto* authorities wanting to cling to power to the *de jure* authorities trying to extend their influence over the territory, the local population finds itself politicized from all sides. Generally dubbed “frozen conflicts”, especially in the Caucasus (in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh) and in Transnistria, this actual denomination ignores the dynamic logic at work in these regions<sup>3</sup>. The recent conflict in South Ossetia, triggered by the Georgian assault of Tskhinvali on August 7<sup>th</sup> and the following military response by the Russian army, clearly showed the limits of this perspective.

After describing the current political setting in South Ossetia and examining the logic of a “zone of conflict”, this article analyzes the oppositional logic between the competing state building attempts in South Ossetia, led by Russia and Georgia respectively. Showing how the local population is literally squeezed between the militarization of both parties, the article contends

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<sup>1</sup> Weber, M. (1957) ‘Politics as a Vocation’ in H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (ed.). *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Available online at : <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/intdip/interam/intam03.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Lynch, D. (2004) *Engaging Eurasia’s Separatist States : Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 7-8.

that South Ossetians themselves ought to be taken into account in order for a genuine state building process to take root in South Ossetia.

### **South Ossetia: From the USSR to an undefined status...**

The Republic of South Ossetia has been a *de facto* state since 1992, when South Ossetian forces defeated their Georgian counterparts and secured a partial grip over their territory. The root of the conflict lies in large part in the administrative divisions of the Soviet Union. Divided into four levels (union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous oblasts and autonomous okrugs), these administrative entities were mostly symbolic under the centralist reign of the Soviet Union. The “ethnic engineering” devised by Moscow was conceived as a means to “divide and reign”<sup>4</sup>. In institutional terms, the union republics had a unilateral right to secession, which were denied to all other political entities. Additionally, the autonomous republics and the union republics had all the attributes of a state, which was not the case for autonomous oblasts or autonomous okrugs. These features, largely irrelevant during the heyday of Soviet rule, would come to the foreground at the time of the dissolution of the USSR.

Historically, South Ossetia was included in the Georgian Republic in 1922 as an autonomous oblast, separating it from the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia which remained in Russia. However, in 1989, in the midst of political turmoil, the Supreme Soviet of the South Ossetian region voted to upgrade its status to the level above that of a region; namely, to that of an autonomous republic within the Georgian Republic. In so doing, they were laying claims to extensive administrative powers. Occurring at a moment of heightened Georgian nationalism, the decision was swiftly revoked by Georgian authorities, which led to a military confrontation between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. The fighting lasted until 1992, when both parties agreed to a cease-fire.

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<sup>4</sup> See : Cornell, S. (1999) ‘The Devaluation of the Concept of Autonomy: National Minorities in the Former Soviet Union’. *Central Asian Survey* 18 (2): 185-196.

But even if the small secessionist republic managed then to stand firm before its bigger brother, thanks in part to unofficial military aid from Russia as well as from other Caucasian peoples, its victory could be seen as a Pyrrhic one. It only managed to secure a partial administrative grasp on approximately half of the South Ossetian territory, with a large part of its Georgian villages remaining under Tbilisi's control. This dubious victory also came at a steep price, especially for the civilian population. During the conflict from 1989 to 1992 a large portion of the Ossetian population had to flee the territory and found refuge in North Ossetia. The war also caused significant physical damage, which can still be noticed easily in South Ossetia. All these factors have profoundly affected the state building process of the small republic.

These contemporary factors need to be understood in conjunction with the foundations of the state building process in Ossetia laid down by Soviet federalism. The administrative divisions helped to develop indigenous elites and indigenous institutions, as well as a sense of ethnic self-consciousness<sup>5</sup>. In all levels of the autonomous hierarchy, the local languages and cultures were aggressively promoted throughout the 1920s<sup>6</sup>. Later, the reforms initiated by Gorbachev provided political space for the genuine representation of ethnicity and nationalism as form of popular mobilization<sup>7</sup>. In this way, 'rather than a melting pot, the Soviet Union became the incubator of new nations'<sup>8</sup>. Some theoreticians of the nation have argued that "the state makes the nation",<sup>9</sup> and this process seems to have come to pass in South Ossetia in that the Soviet

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<sup>5</sup> Cornell, S. (2002) *Autonomy and Conflict : Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases of Georgia*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Simon, G. (1991) *Nationalism and Policy toward Nationalities in the Soviet Union : From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*. Boulder: Westview, 135.

<sup>7</sup> Lynch, D. (2004), 23; Smith, G., Law, V., Wilson, A., Bohr, A., Allworth, E. (1998) *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Suny, R. (1993) *The Revenge of the Past : Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Breuilly, J. (1993) *Nationalism and the state*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Gellner, E. (1983) *Nations and nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Hobsbawm, E. (1990) *Nations and nationalism since 1780 : Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

administrative divisions helped to create in it a sense of common identity that outlived the end of the Soviet Union<sup>10</sup>.

Another legacy of the Soviet Union was the administrative practices that strongly affected both the political elites and the political culture of the USSR. What Stephen Jones said about Georgia is also relevant to South Ossetia: 'In Georgia, the Soviet legacy of official nationalism, distrust of one's opponents, paternalism, hegemonism, censorship, the personalization of politics, and a corrupt and unaccountable bureaucracy had a particularly strong influence on the young state. They were all passed on, virtually unaltered, to the new regime'<sup>11</sup>. In fact, the Soviet Union's institutional legacies have generated particularly inauspicious conditions for the construction of effective state authority<sup>12</sup>. With the ideological clout of communism withering away, the political entities composing the Soviet Union all had a hard time re-defining their role to meet the demands of the post-Soviet era. While local government was based mostly on clientelism during the Soviet Union, such practices came to be seen as blatant corruption after the Soviet empire collapsed. This has naturally affected the legitimacy of the political entity as well as the state building process itself.

### **Rivaling state building attempts in South Ossetia**

In this context, the state building process in South Ossetia has not gone smoothly. The 1992 referendum on independence organized by the *de facto* authorities of South Ossetia did not lead to official recognition by the international community. However, Tskhinvali has still pursued the course of independence, most notably after the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections won by Eduard Kokoity, the candidate strongly backed by Moscow. Another independence referendum

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<sup>10</sup> For a good study on the effect of Soviet federalism and its ethnic policies, see: Roy, O. (2000) *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*. London: Tauris.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, S. (1997) 'Georgia: the trauma of statehood' in Bremmer, I., Taras, R. (ed.) *New States; New Politics. Building the Post-Soviet Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 515.

<sup>12</sup> Hanson, S. (2007) 'The Uncertain Future of Russia's Weak State Authoritarianism'. *East European Politics and Societies* 21 (1), 69.

was held in 2006, once again rejected by the international community as flawed and partial. However, complete independence is not what the region has in mind. It would actually be an impracticable outcome, since there are no proper economic foundations and a population of less than 70 000<sup>13</sup>. Kokoity recognizes it and is calling officially for re-unification with fellow Ossetians in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, and hence seeking to become part of the Russian Federation. Russian is one of the region's official languages, the Russian ruble is the official currency, and, in February 2004, Kokoity proclaimed that 95 percent of the republic's population had adopted Russian citizenship<sup>14</sup>. The last initiative certainly laid the foundation for the swift Russian response in August 2008 to the Georgian assault of Tskhinvali, on the pretext that Russia had to protect its citizens. Historically, Russia has helped to stoke the hope of the independence movement<sup>15</sup>, yet it has always stopped short of recognizing the region's claim of independence. That was until August 27<sup>th</sup>, when President Medvedev officially recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a move that came in the aftermath of the conflict with Georgia<sup>16</sup>. It remains to be seen whether this decision will lead to further international recognition, by other CIS countries for example, or if Russia is only using South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's recognition as bargaining chips.

The undefined status of the Republic of South Ossetia has reinforced the deep criminalization in the region, notably the smuggling industry, and has helped to perpetuate the economic weakness and de-industrialization process. One of the main reasons for this is the total lack of accountability and transparency in the public affairs of the small republic. For instance, more

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<sup>13</sup> The upper-end estimates for the population of the region fluctuate between 60 000 and 70 000. International Crisis Group (2004) 'Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia'. *Crisis Group Europe Report No. 159*, 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> German, R. (2006) 'Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Collision of Georgian and Russian Interests'. *Russie.Nei.Visions No. 11*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, in 2007, Moscow hosted the second meeting of the Commonwealth for Democracy and Rights of Nations, an informal group bringing together the leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria.

<sup>16</sup> However, Moscow stated in 2007 that it may recognize the two separatist regions of Georgia as independent states if Western powers recognize Kosovo's split from Serbia. *Reuters* (2007) 'Russia warns of Kosovo "precedent" for separatists'. October 24.

than 60% of the national budget of South Ossetia comes from Russian funding<sup>17</sup>. This has allowed the *de facto* authorities to neglect basic economic fundamentals and to overlook the importance of tax collection, with logical repercussions on the social bond between the government and its citizens. This has also reinforced the logic of clientelization of the Tskhinvali authorities towards Russia.

The political status quo has also been reinforced by the tacit agreement between Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, and allegedly the Russian peace-keepers, actually to support the political status quo while controlling their share of the smuggling industry in the region, especially until 2003. Reinforcing that trend, the Georgian government under Shevardnadze was simply too weak to claim back the territory controlled by the Abkhazian and South Ossetian *de facto* authorities. In fact, when Shevardnadze came to power, Tbilisi had only an uneven control over large parts of its territory bordering the conflict zones. Thus, one of the biggest achievements of Shevardnadze was the dismemberment of private militias operating in these regions<sup>18</sup>. Partially because of this incapacity to claim back the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the relations between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi have generally been cordial. The South Ossetian president has even openly supported Shevardnadze's bid in his campaign for the Georgian presidency in 2000<sup>19</sup>.

However, the political equilibrium in the region was modified drastically in 2003, when the Rose Revolution propelled Mikheil Saakashvili and his team of young western-minded technocrats into power. Resolutely anti-status quo, the new team was adamant about bringing back the secessionist regions into the fold. The new Georgian government, strongly supported by Washington, naturally came to clash with the secessionist authorities of South Ossetia.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Anatoli Chachiev, Minister of Information of the Republic of South Ossetia, July 30 2007, Tskhinvali. See also: Lowe, C. (2007) 'Money the Big Attraction in South Ossetia'. *Reuters*, July 26.

<sup>18</sup> Demetriou, S. (2002) 'Rising From the Ashes ? The Difficult (Re)Birth of the Georgian State'. *Development and Change* 33 (5), 879. However, the process has been completed by Saakashvili.

<sup>19</sup> King, C. (2001) 'The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States'. *World Politics* 53 (4), 545-546.

Consequently, military and political skirmishes have cropped up in the region since 2003. An attempt in the summer of 2004 to bring the region back under Tbilisi's control by force of arms backfired badly, costing the lives of 27 people including 17 Georgian soldiers<sup>20</sup>. However, this did not hurt the career of the then interior minister Irakli Okruashvili, himself a native of South Ossetia, involved in the operation, as he later became defense minister. Addressing reservists on New Year's Eve 2006, the Georgian interior minister Irakli Okruashvili famously declared that Tbilisi would restore its hegemony over South Ossetia and would celebrate New Year 2007 in Tskhinvali. In summer 2006, the Georgian military conducted large-scale military exercises dubbed « Kavkasioni 2006 » near the conflict zones, in the Orpolo firing grounds, supposedly to show the professionalism of the Georgian Army. However, in an interview during the operation, Okruashvili said that the exercises were meant to show the readiness of the Georgian Army to take back the separatist regions<sup>21</sup>.

This particular situation has helped to create a particular state of mind in South Ossetia that is closer to that found in an actual conflict than in what we might call a “frozen conflict”. The local population is literally squeezed by the oppositional logic of the two main actors. On the one hand, the local population fears a Georgian invasion and its effects. Living only 80 to 100 kilometers away from Tbilisi and with Georgian military outposts visible from the main place in Tskhinvali, inhabitants of the capital live in a state of constant fear about military action. This state of fear has been reinforced by numerous skirmishes between South Ossetian and Georgian militias, which have rendered the threat of a Georgian invasion even more tangible to the South Ossetian population. Moreover, ongoing Georgian militarization is doing nothing to lessen the fears of the local population<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, the South Ossetian leadership has put into place a massive system of repression to face the eventuality of a Georgian attack and to quiet any

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<sup>20</sup> Fuller, L. (2007) ‘Georgia : Tbilisi Ups the Ante Over South Ossetia’. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 29.

<sup>21</sup> *InfoRos* (2006) ‘Okruashvili is Pushing Georgia to War’. July 03.

<sup>22</sup> The defence budget of Georgia reached \$600 millions in 2007. To give a comparison, the total budget of Georgia in 2003 was around \$600 millions.

dissent in South Ossetia. The militarization of South Ossetia can be seen everywhere, but especially in Tskhinvali, where armored trucks and soldiers are simply part of the landscape. Maybe more disturbing for the local population is the fact that the provision of security is not really in the hands of South Ossetians *per se*. Actually, Russia has appointed its own officials to key posts in Tskhinvali. The prime minister, Mr. Yuri Morozov, the defense minister, Lt-General Anatoly Barankevich, and the security chief, Mr. Anatoly Yarovoy, are all affiliated to a certain extent with Russian intelligence services. In the words of one independent NGO leader in Tskhinvali, the fact that security is assured mainly by Russia drastically changes the situation. With a population of approximately 20 000 (the numbers are probably inflated according to most of the accounts), Tskhinvali is a small city indeed, and it is hard not to know everyone. However, the Russian security personnel, mainly North Ossetians, live away from the city and are less prone to entertain friendly contacts with independent-minded individuals. Thus, repression comes easily from these battalions, which are perceived as obedient supporters of the *de facto* institutions<sup>23</sup>.

The local population is stuck in the middle of this dual process of militarization. Independent activists, whether NGO leaders, businessmen or students, are few and far between in Tskhinvali, and one of the reasons for this is that the dynamic of a conflict tends to annihilate all spaces for independence and neutrality. The actual conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia tends to empower radicals and to silence dissent. In this context, most of the inhabitants of South Ossetia feel that they are made to choose between cholera and the plague. On the one hand, Saakashvili embodies the nationalistic rhetoric that prompted the conflict in first place. He is mostly seen as assimilationist, centralist, and a menace to the specific culture of South Ossetia. He is also perceived as too Western-oriented, which would threaten the specific relationship South Ossetians maintain with Russia, which goes beyond the institutional relationship between

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with a South Ossetian NGO leader, July 30 2007, Tskhinvali.

Moscow and Tskhinvali. Most of the South Ossetians have been offered Russian passports, and hence Russian citizenship, by Moscow. As Shaun Walker reports:

A Russian passport is akin to a lifeline for South Ossetians - a way to get an education or a job in North Ossetia or Moscow. There are very few jobs in the region, so most families have at least one person working in Russia and sending money home. It becomes obvious when talking to people that reintegration into the Georgian state will not be an easy process - to start with, only the eldest generation even speaks the language. People would not be able to get jobs or study in Tbilisi - Russia provides them with their only chance to make something of their lives<sup>24</sup>.

However, on the other hand, the current South Ossetian leadership is seen as corrupt and detached from the real needs of the population. Any attempt to address the governance issue in South Ossetia is perceived as national treason by the authorities and might get you on the “Georgian spy list”<sup>25</sup>. If ardent supporters of Kokoity and his political circle are rather difficult to find in South Ossetia, it is also difficult to find people speaking overtly against the regime. Economically and politically strangled, South Ossetians are increasingly leaving the region to find economic opportunities elsewhere, notably in Vladikavkaz, in Northern Ossetia, thereby depriving the region of essential workforce for the future.

### **The effects of the militarization of the region on the local population**

A real process of state building in South Ossetia, either inside a federal Georgia or as an autonomous state (later joining the Russian federation), will have to build genuine trust with the local population. None of the state building attempts is actually taking into account the needs of the local population. There was an attempt to win the “hearts and minds” of South Ossetians in the first moment of the Sakaashvili presidency, especially after the “Second Rose Revolution”, when Ruslan Abashidze was peacefully ousted in May 2004 in Adjara, another *de facto* entity inside Georgia that flirted with declaring independence. At this time, Sakaashvili notably proposed to restore the railway link between Tskhinvali and the rest of Georgia, the distribution

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<sup>24</sup> Walker, S. (2006) ‘South Ossetia : Russian, Georgian... Independent?’. *Open Democracy*. November 15.

<sup>25</sup> This list is rather long and includes all individuals suspected to work undercover for Georgian interests. It notably includes various businessmen, journalists, and South Ossetians working for international organizations as the OSCE.

of pensions from Georgia's state budget to the populations living in the breakaway region, the launching of news broadcasts in the Ossetian language on Georgia's state-run television, the provision of a free emergency ambulance service for the Tskhinvali population and the distribution of agricultural fertilizers<sup>26</sup>. However, the "hawks" in the Georgian administration, notably Okruashvili, rapidly gained influence in the government, which led to the marginalization of moderate voices, like the minister of conflict resolution, Giorgi Khaindrava<sup>27</sup>. Thus, most of the previous propositions became dead letter, and the focus shifted instead to finding a more pro-active way to resolve the conflict.

With the military operation of 2004, Tbilisi lost all the room of maneuver that they previously acquired after the resolution of the Adjarian crisis. Specifically, the closure of the Ergneti market at the border of the Georgian and South Ossetian disputed territories, just before the military operation itself, was widely resented by the population<sup>28</sup>. If the market was a well-known hub of smuggling activities with Russia, it was also a very important point of contact between Ossetians and Georgians and provided economic opportunities to the South Ossetians. One South Ossetian trader summed up the situation in 2002: 'If the market closed, it would be very bad for both the Georgian side and the Ossetian side because it is the only source of life for both sides. Everyone knows that the factories do not work. And this market in Ergneti feeds a lot of people'<sup>29</sup>. As anticipated by the trader, the closure of the market intensified the economic problems for South Ossetians while pushing them to turn even more to Russia help. According to a Georgian deputy from South Ossetia, the market employed more than 3000 people before its closure, both Ossetians and Georgians, and its closure brought very negative results<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Sepashvili, G. (2004) 'Saakashvili Sends Reconciliatory Signals to South Ossetia'. *Civil Georgia* June 1.

<sup>27</sup> Lemay-Hébert, N. (2006) 'La Géorgie prise entre évolution et révolution : la (re)construction de l'État géorgien en questions'. *Transitions et sociétés* 11, 39-47.

<sup>28</sup> Freese, T. (2005) 'A Report From the Field : Georgia's War Against Contraband and Its Struggle For Territorial Integrity'. *SAIS Review*, 25 (1), 112-113.

<sup>29</sup> Santana, R. (2002) 'South Ossetia Market Important for Local Economy'. *VOA NEWS.COM*. February 13.

<sup>30</sup> 'Local MP Says Ergneti Closure a Mistake'. *Civil Georgia*. June 22 2006.

Paradoxically, Georgia's militarization and its failed attempt to oust the *de facto* leadership of South Ossetia have managed to give an ethnic dimension to a conflict that was mostly deprived of ethnic references at the outset<sup>31</sup>. In fact, it was arguably the greatest gift to the Tskhinvali leadership that Georgia could give. Everyone recognizes, in Tskhinvali as well as in Tbilisi, that we are not dealing with an inter-ethnic conflict *per se*<sup>32</sup>. By closing the Ergneti market and then engaging in a conflict with the secessionist authorities, the Georgian authorities only confirmed Tskhinvali's propaganda, portraying Georgia as an enemy to the South Ossetian people. It also gave them an excuse to step up the security measures and political repression in the region<sup>33</sup>.

Hence, part of the problem seems to be that officials in Tbilisi are unwilling to engage with the demands of the Ossetian people on any level. 'We are not talking about what the South Ossetians want; there are only 10,000 people in Tskhinvali anyway,' says Georgian Deputy Defense Minister Mamuka Kudava. 'It makes no sense to talk about what the South Ossetians want. This is about Georgia and Russia'<sup>34</sup>. If Georgia and Russia are certainly crucial actors in this drama, the lack of consideration of South Ossetians and their desires has certainly hindered the state building process conducted by Georgia so far.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Dov Lynch, Senior Research Fellow, EU Institute for Security Studies, June 1 2005, Paris.

<sup>32</sup> Interview conducted in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, 2006-2007. For Tskhinvali, the human rights violations committed by Georgia impede any federal solution for the conflict, while for Georgia, Russia and its puppet regime hinder all meaningful process of conflict resolution to happen.

<sup>33</sup> As one observer noted after the 2004 events: 'An atmosphere of fear now prevails in Tskhinvali region. In recent weeks, there have been various reports of beatings, arrests, and officials losing their positions for communicating with Georgians. Residents report that Tskhinvali authorities have built trenches, delivered arms to unauthorized persons, and that troops with heavy military equipment have entered Ossetia from the North Caucasus. Meanwhile, Georgian peacekeepers and Ministry of Interior troops have set up camp along the conflict zone'. Freese, T. (2004) 'Will Ossetians Embrace Georgia's Initiative?'. *Central Asia –Caucasus Institute*, available online at: [http://www.cacianalyst.org/view\\_article.php?articleid=2455](http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=2455)

<sup>34</sup> Walker, S. (2006) 'South Ossetia Looks North'. *IISS Press Coverage*. Available at: <http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/press-coverage-2006/july-2006/south-ossetia-looks-north/> In the same line, Saakashvili stated in 2005 that: 'There is no Ossetian problem in Georgia. There is a problem in Georgian-Russian relations with respect to certain territories. I have repeatedly said that Russia is a great country with lots of territories, but its borders certainly do not lie on the Inguri river or the Ergneti market'. *President of Georgia official website*. 'Georgian president outlines three-stage development strategy at the news conference', September 9 2005. Available online at: [http://www.president.gov.ge/print\\_txt.php?id=617&l=E](http://www.president.gov.ge/print_txt.php?id=617&l=E)

### **The rise of Dmitry Sanakoev: More of the same in South Ossetia**

However, starting in 2006, a new Georgian strategy for the resolution of the separatist conflicts began to take shape. Saakashvili decided to adopt a political strategy and to put into place a “Provisional Administrative Entity of South Ossetia” in 2006, composed of ethnic Ossetians, to counter any claim of independence by the *de facto* authorities. Based on the “Salvation Union of South Ossetia”, a group of outspoken critics of the regime headed by the former defense minister and then prime minister of the secessionist government Dmitry Sanakoev<sup>35</sup>, the movement organized a parallel presidential election in districts mainly controlled by Georgia. Both elections showed Brezhnevian results, with above 90% of voters voting for their respective candidates<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, to retaliate against the independence referendum held by the authorities of Tskhinvali, the alternative government held a referendum asking for the start of negotiations with Georgia on a federal arrangement for South Ossetia (which also reached the threshold of 90%).

Some see the rise of Sanakoev as recognition by the Georgian authorities of the need to take into account the South Ossetian population. However, this strategy seems to be little more than a continuation of the same policy of pressuring the *de facto* authorities, whether by military or by political means. The need to convince other Ossetians to join the movement does not seem to be a priority for Vladimir Sanakoev, brother of Dmitry Sanakoev and believed to be the *éminence grise* of the movement<sup>37</sup>. His attention and energy are mainly turned to Russia and to attracting international recognition for the parallel government. If there is a will to promote economic improvement, notably by distributing rehabilitation and development aid in the zone of conflict, many of the proposed projects remain to be put in place.

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<sup>35</sup> He was appointed defence minister in 1996 and vice prime minister in 1998, under the presidency of Ludvig Chibirov. He served until 2001, when Eduard Kokoity replaced Chibirov as South Ossetia’s leader.

<sup>36</sup> Kokoity was re-elected with 98.1 percent of the vote, while Sanakoev received 94 percent of the vote in the parallel election.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Vladimir Sanakoev, spokesman of the government of South Ossetia, July 30 2007, Tbilisi.

While Sanakoev blames Kokoity for being a stooge for Russia and boasts of being the true voice of ethnic Ossetians, he seems pretty closely tied to Georgian interests. As the *International Crisis Group* stated, ‘It is evident that the Georgian government helped create Sanakoev. He himself admits Georgian help was key, and he openly co-operates with Tbilisi, which is engaged in a not so subtle effort to build his credibility’<sup>38</sup>. One sign of this proxy war between Georgia and Russia is the flags waved in the respective capitals of the political entities. In Kurta, the capital of the new entity led by Sanakoev, the flags of Georgia and South Ossetia fly alongside, while couple of kilometers away, in Tskhinvali, the Russian and South Ossetian flags are displayed. Actually, the parallel government is trying to stay discrete about the fact that it is mostly based in Tbilisi, in a small, low-key building, and only occasionally goes to Kurta in the conflict zone<sup>39</sup>. The appearance of Sanakoev side by side with Georgian officials, notably when he made a speech at the Georgian Parliament in May 11 2007, has also not helped to draw support from ethnic Ossetians for the parallel institutions. During this meeting, he was appointed formally to a Georgian government position and his movement is now funded from the state budget. Such support of the parallel government seems to be aimed at preventing the Kosovar precedent to take root in the region by means of bringing a new interlocutor in the conflict resolution process that could plausibly claim to represent the will of the South Ossetian people<sup>40</sup>. But as the *International Crisis Group* has reported, the closeness of the parallel institutions and the Georgian government is actually alienating the broader Ossetian constituency<sup>41</sup>.

Contrary to all intentions, this shift of Georgian strategy for conflict resolution from the military to the political realms, far from easing the tensions in South Ossetia, has tended to reinforce the

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<sup>38</sup> International Crisis Group (2007), ‘Georgia’s South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly’. *Europe Report No. 183*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a political adviser to Dmitry Sanakoev, July 26 2007, Tbilisi.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, one of the first acts of Sanakoev as a member of the Georgian government has been to go to Brussels to address the European Parliament concerning the political situation prevailing in South Ossetia. *Medianews* (2007) ‘Dimitri Sanakoev gave speech in Brussels’, June 26. Moreover, according to the political analyst Zaal Anjaparidze, ‘The wording, idea and political message of Dmitry Sanakoev’s address revealed a “Georgian editor”’. Anjaparidze, Z. (2007) ‘The Sanakoev Operation’. *Eurasian Home*, Available online at: <http://www.eurasianhome.org/xml/t/expert.xml?lang=en&nic=expert&pid=1162>

<sup>41</sup> International Crisis Group (2007), 2.

state of fear in South Ossetia. One of the biggest fears in South Ossetia is a military escalation that will end up as a proxy war between Russia and Georgia through the intermediary of their Ossetian allies<sup>42</sup>. On the one hand, Sanakoev was supposedly building up a 150-strong special forces unit in Kurta, only 5 km away from Tskhinvali<sup>43</sup>. Such proximity increases the risks of escalation already inherent to the volatile situation in South Ossetia. On the other hand, the *de facto* authorities have no strategy for countering the rise of Sanakoev<sup>44</sup>. They are not trying to attract international support to counter the rising influence of Sanakoev, instead relying exclusively on the military option in case of escalation<sup>45</sup>. Even more concerning, the youth branch of the movement seems even more radical than the officials in power and are bracing themselves for a military confrontation with the Georgian authorities<sup>46</sup>. Not having taken part in the previous war, a military conflict with Georgia has a romantic appeal to it. Hence, these evolutions combined do not indicate a change of mentality in the conflict resolution of South Ossetia but are rather bound to reinforce the logics of a “zone of conflict” in the region.

### **Conclusion: how these logics unfolded in August 2008**

The recent Russian-Georgian conflict, triggered by the Georgian assault of Tskhinvali on August 8<sup>th</sup>, clearly shows the competing state-building logics at work in South Ossetia. 170 Georgian soldiers and 69 ethnically-Georgian civilians have been killed during the conflict according to official account, but the death toll could be ten times higher according to local press in Georgia. On the South Ossetian side, Russian authorities stated that more than 2 000 civilians have found death during the conflict. If these numbers are probably inflated, it is hard to negate the suffering South Ossetian have gone through during this war. Human Rights Watch estimated that more than 24 000 South Ossetian civilians have had to flee the region and take refuge in North

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<sup>42</sup> Interviews conducted in Tskhinvali, summer 2007, especially with Temur Tskhovrebov, former commander of the South Ossetian Army and director of the NGO “Former Combatants” in Tskhinvali, July 29 2007.

<sup>43</sup> International Crisis Group (2007), 4.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Alan Pliev, vice minister of foreign affairs, Tskhinvali, July 30 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Unlike the Abkhaz *de facto* authorities, which strive to attract international support to counter the Abkhaz Government in exile. Interviews conducted in Sukhumi, summer 2007, especially with Maxim Gunjia, vice minister of foreign affairs, and Sergei Chamba, minister of foreign affairs, August 9 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews conducted in Tskhinvali, summer 2007.

Ossetia<sup>47</sup>. Many Georgians living in South Ossetia have also been forced out of their homes and are currently living in Tbilisi, without being able to reintegrate their communities. The number of ethnically-Georgian refugees can be as high as 130 000, if we include the refugees from Gori and the villages included in the so-called buffer zone between Gori and the South Ossetian administrative border.

The brief war ignited by Tbilisi's impatience with the slow pace of political change in South Ossetia clearly shows how both parties value (or neglect) the population living in South Ossetia. It is safe to say that both Georgia and South Ossetia, supported by Russia, have indulged in various degrees of ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia, given the high number of refugees on both sides and according to local accounts<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, according to Human Rights Watch, both parties have used cluster bombs during the war. According to Marc Garlasco, a senior military analyst at Human Rights Watch, this weapon is well-known for being an "indiscriminate killer that most nations have agreed to outlaw", notably because of its capacity to kill and maim civilians<sup>49</sup>.

Squeezed in this oppositional logic, the local population and its needs have been largely neglected up to now by both parties. Stuck between a kleptocratic self-appointed clique and a belligerent, nationalistic government, the local population has not been treated as an actor in this process but more as bargaining chips in the great conflict between the *de facto* authorities, Russia and Georgia. As a matter of fact, the future looks grim for the war-stricken South Ossetian population. On the one hand, there is serious concern that Russia, and then South Ossetia if they take over this responsibility, will not allow the return of the Georgian refugees in

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<sup>47</sup> The number can be as high as 30 000, although at least 25,000 of them have now returned to their homes, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said.

<sup>48</sup> Hider, J. (2008) 'Russian-backed paramilitaries ethnically cleansing villages'. *The Times*, Available online at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4621592.ece>

<sup>49</sup> Tran, M. (2008) 'Georgia admits dropping cluster bombs, says rights group'. *The Guardian*, Available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/01/georgia.russia?gusrc=rss&feed=worldnews>

South Ossetia. Taking as an example the Abkhaz model, South Ossetia might consider the ethnic Georgians as a possible obstacle in the way of South Ossetia's state consolidation. Hence, they might hinder the repatriation process, forcing them to share squalid hotels in Tbilisi with Abkhaz refugees<sup>50</sup>. Fueling this fear, Eduard Kokoity has indicated that ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia will be resettled with Ossetian refugees<sup>51</sup>. On the other hand, the process of state consolidation will most certainly embolden the self-proclaimed government of South Ossetia and lead it to continue using the same tactics to strangle moderate voices. In this regard, the future of the state building process in South Ossetia could be similar to what we have seen in Chechnya, with all powers in the hands of a unrepresentative clique, vowing allegiance to the Kremlin. Furthermore, the economic perspective of a reunified Ossetia can also be cast into doubt, South Ossetians sharing a lot of mutual interests with their Georgian neighbors. As this article contends, for a real and sustainable state building process to take place, South Ossetians need to be perceived as a real and vital actor in the process. There are real opportunities to alleviate the negative effects of the conflict, which have not been fully taken by the main actors in this process. However, the logic of confrontation adopted thus far by all parties has diminished these opportunities and consolidated the divisions between the two entities.

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<sup>50</sup> Associated Press (2008) 'U.N. : Georgians Effectively Blocked From Homes'. 30 August.

<sup>51</sup> Bilefsky, D., Schwirtz, M. (2008) 'For Thousands of Refugees From the Conflict in Georgia, the Fear Lingers'. *The New York Times*, 1 September.

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