
Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Collision of Georgian and Russian Interests



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Abstract

This article focuses on the deterioration of relations between Georgia and Russia over the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia's separatist conflicts are far more than domestic territorial disputes: they have both regional and international implications, and represent one of the principal obstacles to the development of Georgian-Russian relations. As military skirmishes have threatened to escalate, jeopardizing stability in the volatile Caucasus region, President Mikheil Saakashvili's desire to resolve these protracted conflicts has become symbolic of his vigorous approach to tackling Georgia's more intractable problems.

Introduction

Two years into his presidency, the Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili still faces an array of daunting challenges, notably crime, widespread corruption, economic stagnation, separatism and volatile relations with Russia. Buoyed by his political success in both the presidential and parliamentary elections held in early 2004, he made the restoration of the country's territorial integrity a priority, expressing his wish to consolidate the country by resolving the enduring conflicts with the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, despite having had several years in which to resolve the disputes, they remain locked in stalemate. Tension is very high in the conflict zones and the threat of renewed hostilities remains very real. Furthermore, the two unresolved conflicts mean that nearly 20 percent of Georgian territory is outside the control of the central authorities and have led to the displacement of around 260,000 people, as well as providing fertile ground for the smuggling of weapons, narcotics, and people.

Georgia's secessionist regions represent one of the most serious threats to the security and stability of the multi-ethnic country, a threat exacerbated by Russian backing for the separatist territories. The hand of its powerful northern neighbor has been visible in all of Georgia's separatist conflicts, as Moscow seeks to maintain political leverage over the South Caucasian state, and Tbilisi has frequently accused Russia of seeking to undermine Georgian sovereignty by supporting separatist provinces. The presence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory has only served to exacerbate the situation and until recently the two sides have been deadlocked in a dangerous game of brinkmanship, with Russia hoping that Georgia will change its mind about the closure of the Russian bases and Georgia hoping Russia will change its stance towards its separatist regions. There are currently around 3,000 servicemen in Russia's two remaining bases at Akhalkalaki and Batumi, which were supposed to have been handed back to Georgia five years ago. By the end of March 2006, Moscow finally agreed to a detailed timetable for its planned military withdrawal, which is to be completed by the end of 2008, in line with a preliminary agreement signed in 2005.¹

There are two further groups of Russian military forces on Georgian territory, operating under the aegis of CIS peacekeeping operations in

¹ In 1999, former Russian President Boris Yeltsin agreed to an OSCE-facilitated deal, which obligated Russia to hand back four bases in Georgia before 1 July 2001. So far only two bases have been returned: Gudauta in Abkhazia and the air base at Vaziani, near Tbilisi. According to the framework drawn up in 2006, all heavy military hardware will be withdrawn from Georgia by the end of 2006, while all other weapons must be out of the country by the end of 2007 and the bases completed vacated by the end of 2008.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Saakashvili's desire to consolidate Georgia's territorial integrity has pushed the country towards renewed conflict with Russia, which not only has peacekeeping contingents in the two regions, but also provides tacit support for the separatists. The Georgian leader has cautioned that in the event of large-scale armed conflict erupting in South Ossetia it would be an issue of bilateral Georgian-Russian relations, not merely an internal conflict. Speaking at a press conference in September 2005, Saakashvili declared that there is "no Ossetian problem in Georgia," but "a problem in Georgian-Russian relations with respect to certain territories."²

These separatist conflicts have implications not only for bilateral relation between Tbilisi and Moscow and the stability of the Caucasus region, but also for Europe and the wider international community. As the European Union (EU) and NATO seek to expand their borders, it is becoming more important to focus on conflict resolution on the periphery, where the presence of weak or unstable states poses a threat to the stability of its own member countries. Thus, resolution of these disputes has become more critical and organizations such as the EU need to play a more active role in the search for a negotiated settlement. Fundamental issues remain unresolved and the threat of renewed hostilities persists, as the Abkhazian and South Ossetian leaderships remain entrenched in intransigent positions, with little incentive to participate in negotiations while they have the security of Russian backing. Moscow holds the key to the resolution of Georgia's territorial disputes, both in terms of its relationship with the separatists and the mediating role it purports to play.

² BBC Monitoring (online version), *Imedi TV*, Tbilisi, 16:02GMT, 9 September 2005.

Background

Georgia's separatist problems are not solely the consequence of Russian involvement. David Darchiashvili argues that Ossetian and Abkhaz separatism is not the result of a "Russian plot," but of a "process of 'awakening' in these ethnic groups, which was distinct from the Georgian 'rebirth'."³ As the Soviet Union unraveled, several of Georgia's myriad ethnic groups intensified their calls for self-determination, threatening both the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. Secessionist campaigns in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were revived during the national revitalization movement at the end of the 1980s when the renewed upsurge of Georgian nationalism during Mikhail Gorbachev's era of *perestroika* increased inter-ethnic tensions within the Soviet republic, as manifold national groups were permitted free expression throughout the USSR and the manipulation of ethnic affiliation became a key dynamic in political life. Both regions have traditionally been suspicious of the Georgian state, fearing what is perceived to be Georgian "chauvinism" that threatens a loss of ethnic identity. These suspicions were reinforced when Zviad Gamsakhurdia became leader of the Georgian Supreme Soviet in 1990, predominantly on the basis of his support for the rights of Georgians, promulgated under the slogan "Georgia for Georgians".

Gamsakhurdia stripped South Ossetia of its autonomy and introduced a state of emergency, escalating Ossetian demands for reunification with North Ossetia into full-scale violence.⁴ Armed skirmishes broke out, leading to full-scale war in the spring of 1991. The prospect of a localized conflict spreading, together with the election of Eduard Shevardnadze as Georgian president in March 1992, encouraged the two sides to seek a more conciliatory stance and on 24 June 1992 the

³ David Darchiashvili, "Georgian security problems and policies" in Dov Lynch (ed.), "The South Caucasus: a challenge for the EU," *Chaillot Papers No 65*, December 2003 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2003), p.115.

⁴ Gamsakhurdia openly promoted the cleansing of Ossetians from the country with the aim of driving them back to North Ossetia and his election triggered a sharp deterioration of relations between the Georgian government and ethnic minorities, who began to view independence as the only way to retain their cultural rights and autonomy. Following attempts by Tbilisi in August 1989 to make Georgian the country's sole official language, the authorities in South Ossetia (where reportedly only 14% of Ossetians spoke Georgian) ruled that Ossetian was to be the region's sole language. On 19 January 1991 South Ossetia held a referendum in which reportedly over 90% of the population voted to become part of Russia, although the results were never recognized by Georgia. See Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, London: Curzon Press, 2001, p. 162-169. For an in-depth analysis of the conflict itself see Julian Birch, "Ossetia: a Caucasian Bosnia in microcosm" *Central Asian Survey* (1995), 14 (1), p. 43-74.

Dagomys peace agreement was signed, prompting the deployment within the conflict zone of a Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) that comprised "national" battalions from Georgia, South Ossetia, North Ossetia-Alania and Russia (500 troops from each). A quadripartite negotiating body, the Joint Control Commission (JCC), was also established to foster political reconciliation between the various sides. It included representatives from Georgia, South Ossetia, Russia, North Ossetia-Alania and the OSCE.⁵

The situation in Abkhazia was somewhat different. The republic was *de facto* independent during the 1920s, before Stalin incorporated it into Georgia and encouraged ethnic Georgians to migrate to the region. Consequently, by 1989 Abkhazians only constituted 18% of the population, while ethnic Georgians accounted for 46%, unlike other regions where the ethnic group seeking independence was in the majority. Gamsakhurdia took a more conciliatory approach in relations with Abkhazia than with South Ossetia and avoided all-out war. However, his successor, Shevardnadze, was far more confrontational and, with both sides refusing to compromise, war broke out in 1992. The Georgian forces were defeated by the end of 1993 and the 1994 Moscow agreement formalized a ceasefire, providing a legal basis for the introduction of a CIS peacekeeping force that is made up of around 1,700 Russian peacekeepers, together with the establishment of a UN observer mission (UNOMIG) to monitor the agreement.

Little progress has been made in resolving the political stalemate with either region during the intervening years and in September 2005 South Ossetia celebrated the 15th anniversary of its "independence" with a Soviet-style military parade watched by representatives from Abkhazia and Russia. The impact of these separatist areas within Georgia has been considerable. In addition to the fact that thousands of ethnic Georgians who used to live in these regions have become refugees, Tbilisi has been unable to govern or levy taxes in substantial portions of the country and important trade routes have been disrupted. Furthermore, the presence of thousands of Russian peacekeepers, who are not considered to be impartial, exacerbates relations between Tbilisi, Moscow and the regional leaders.⁶

⁵ The EU has participated since April 2001. The OSCE (then CSCE) established a mission in Georgia on 6 November 1992 with the primary task of bringing conflicting parties in the country's separatist conflicts closer. In 1994, its mandate in South Ossetia was expanded to facilitate co-operation with and among the parties concerned and, with their consent, monitor the Joint Peacekeeping Forces. More recently it has been involved in projects to reduce the number of small arms in the region. For further information see Farian Sabahi & Daniel Warner (eds.), *The OSCE and the Multiple Challenges of Transition*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004)

⁶ In February 2006 the Georgian parliament voted unanimously (179-0) in support of a non-binding resolution demanding the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia and calling upon the government to review the 1992 agreement, which forms the legal basis for the JPKF.

Challenges for Saakashvili

Speaking prior to his inauguration in January 2004, Saakashvili stated that the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity was his first priority and he expressed his desire to "consolidate" the country by seeking resolutions to the frozen conflicts of the Shevardnadze era, emphasizing that "Georgia as a single organism does exist". The Georgian leader has described Abkhazia as the "promised land" and his "most cherished goal," ominously pledging that "[j]ust as President Putin wants to establish control over Chechnya and all other regions, I want Abkhazia's reintegration in Georgia".⁷

These ambitious declarations have also been backed up by substantive action. At the end of May 2004, buoyed by his success in Ajaria⁸ Saakashvili offered Abkhazia and South Ossetia "special status" within Georgia, proposing the creation of a federal state containing republics with considerable autonomy. Tbilisi has focused on seeking a resolution to the dispute with South Ossetia, largely because, of the two, it was perceived to be the region that would be the most willing to compromise and make concessions with Tbilisi. Moreover, the United Nations is involved in conflict resolution in Abkhazia, thereby alleviating some of the pressure on Tbilisi. While the South Ossetian conflict shares many similarities with the Abkhaz conflict, the territory involved is much smaller and ethnic Georgians are still living in the disputed region, unlike the situation in Abkhazia, where the majority have fled. South Ossetia is not seeking to become an independent state. Rather, it is calling for reunification with fellow Ossetians in the Russian republic of North Ossetia-Alania, across the international border in the North Caucasus, and hence is seeking to become a constituent part of the Russian Federation. Russian is the region's official language, the Russian rouble is the official currency, and in February 2004 the South Ossetian leader, Eduard Kokoity, proclaimed that 95 percent of the republic's population of approximately 100,000 had adopted Russian citizenship.

⁷ BBC Monitoring Select Central Asia and Transcaucasus, 16 July 2004, p. 35-6, *Imedi TV*, Tbilisi, 13:00GMT, 16 July 2004.

⁸The rebellious region of Ajaria has been brought back into the fold with the removal of its former leader Aslan Abashidze and the success of the pro-Saakashvili political bloc in local elections there in June 2004, there have been concrete moves to crack down on crime, particularly smuggling, and the leadership has turned its attention to resolving the political disputes with separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Saakashvili reportedly has a particular interest in resolving the Abkhazian and South Ossetian crises, having written his thesis at Kiev University on national minority rights, focusing on the problems of the two separatist regions.

Abkhazia is seeking full independence, an ambition its leaders insist is non-negotiable. This autonomy would be based on close political and economic integration with Russia. Following his election to power at the beginning of 2005, the Abkhazian leader Sergei Bagapsh stated that integration with Russia was a priority for his government. He described Abkhazia as being tied to Russia "by an umbilical cord" and said his administration would do "everything we can to make the laws and the acts of legislation of the Republic of Abkhazia dovetail with those of the Russian Federation."⁹ Similar to South Ossetia, a majority of the republic's population has adopted Russian citizenship. In August 2005 the Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed that over 80 percent of Abkhazians hold Russian passports, a figure that Bagapsh confidently expects to rise, particularly following a declaration from Moscow that, as of 1 December 2005, it will no longer pay pensions to those Abkhazians who do not hold Russian passports.

One reason for the high percentage of Abkhazia's population holding Russian citizenship is that the majority of ethnic Georgians were either expelled from the republic or fled during the war. The conflict in Abkhazia resulted in demographic changes in the region that have been described as "unacceptable" by the UN and triggering claims of ethnic cleansing from Tbilisi: a major stumbling block in negotiations is Georgia's demand for official recognition that ethnic cleansing took place. Around 300,000 ethnic Georgians fled the fighting in 1992-1993 and little is being done to facilitate their return. Those who do attempt to return to their homes in Abkhazia are often subjected to persecution and Bagapsh has advised those residents who refuse to adopt Russian citizenship to leave the republic and move to Georgia.¹⁰

There is a special regime in place for ethnic Abkhazians and Ossetians to claim Russian citizenship which bypasses the usual lengthy application process. These peoples are keen to acquire Russian passports, as their refusal to acknowledge Georgian statehood means they do not hold Georgian passports and hence are unable to travel beyond the country's borders. Abkhazians and South Ossetians are also excluded from the visa regime Russia imposed on Georgian citizens in December 2000, a move described by the European parliament as the "*de facto* annexation of Georgian territory."¹¹

⁹ BBC Monitoring (online version), *NTV Mir*, Moscow, 10:00GMT, 11 January 2005.

¹⁰ BBC Monitoring (online version), *Rustavi-2 TV*, Tbilisi, 11:00 GMT, 12 November 2005.

¹¹ *Visa requirements between Russia and Georgia*, text adopted by European Parliament, 18 January 2001 - <www2.europarl.eu.int/omk/sipade2?PUBREF=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P5-TA-2001-0037+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&LEVEL=3&NAV=X>.

What is Russia seeking?

Relations between Tbilisi and Moscow have been characterized by tension and mutual mistrust, ever since Georgia declared its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The South Caucasian state has sought to maintain an autonomous and pragmatic foreign policy that removes it from the Russian sphere of influence and the new leadership in Georgia has been inclined to seek the engagement of external actors such as the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the US, demonstrating its desire to integrate with the West. This has upset Moscow, which is unhappy with its southern neighbor's European leanings and rewarding relationship with Washington, particularly the growing US military influence in the South Caucasus.¹²

Moscow is seeking to retain its influence over former Soviet states such as Moldova and Belarus, believing that it has "lost" Georgia and Ukraine to the West. President Vladimir Putin has insisted that Moscow will continue trying to influence affairs in former Soviet states, dismayed at perceived Western attempts to "manufacture democracy" in what it considers to be its own "strategic backyard."¹³ As a result, Moscow has been seeking to re-assert its waning hegemony by means of political posturing and saber-rattling, attempting to manipulate separatist conflicts as foreign policy instruments. However, far from enabling Moscow to retain influence, its manipulation of events in regions such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia have hastened Georgia's move towards the West, strengthening its desire to join organizations such as NATO and reduce the leverage that Russia has.

¹² Georgia has witnessed a veritable flood of assistance from the US: financial support for Georgia to date totals over US\$ 1bn, making Georgians the second biggest *per capita* recipients of American aid after the Israelis. The US\$ 64m "Train and Equip" (GTEP) program, which ran from 2002 to 2004, has been replaced by a 16-month, US\$ 64m Sustainment and Stability Operations Program (SSOP) launched in 2005.

¹³ Vladimir Putin, *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly*, 25 April 2005, The Kremlin, Moscow, <www.kremlin.ru>. The democratic "revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine are viewed as part of a Western conspiracy to usurp Russian influence, an opinion expressed in the government-controlled newspaper *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* in December 2004, which argued that "Russia cannot afford to allow defeat in the battle for Ukraine" as it "would mean velvet revolutions...in Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and possibly Armenia." *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (online version), 2 December 2004. <www.rg.ru>. Quoted in Graeme P. Herd, "The 'Orange Revolution': Implications for Stability in the CIS" *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, January 2005. (Camberley: 2005).

With the majority of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian population claiming Russian citizenship, Moscow is able to cite concerns for the security of its citizens as a possible motive for escalation of the conflicts. The Russian authorities did precisely that in July 2004 with the statement that Moscow “will not remain indifferent towards the fate of its citizens, which compromise the absolute majority of South Ossetia.”¹⁴ This rhetoric has yet to be backed up by any real action and, despite 15 years of so-called “independence,” the secessionist regions are still a part of Georgia and neither *de jure* independent, nor a legal part of Russia. If Moscow really wanted to incorporate South Ossetia, then it has the means to achieve this. The fact that this has not happened indicates that, while it enjoys the leverage over Georgia that involvement in these conflicts lends it, it is not keen to actually take full control and propel itself into a full-scale war with a neighboring state.

Russia holds the key to the resolution of Georgia’s territorial disputes, and plays a crucial role both in keeping them alive and in moderating tensions. In the wake of the agreement between Moscow and Tbilisi in 2005 regarding the closure of Russian military bases on Georgian territory, there was hope that this positive momentum could be harnessed to resolve other major sticking points in the bilateral relationship, notably the issues of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, there is some doubt as to whether Russia is genuinely interested in facilitating the resolution of these conflicts. First, this would deprive them of leverage over Tbilisi. Second, an unstable Georgia is a lot less attractive to the West in terms of investment and political partnership and thus would enable Moscow to retain its dominant influence in the region. It could be argued that the Russian approach is short-sighted for while it may benefit in the short-term from political leverage over its southern neighbor by providing support for Georgia’s separatist groups, in the longer term such intervention is only going to lead to further instability in the Caucasus. Moscow will gain far more from encouraging the development of a stable country on its volatile southern border and co-operating with Tbilisi to tackle transnational problems such as drugs and weapons trafficking.

Unable to stop itself meddling in what they still consider to be its own backyard, Russian officials hold periodic meetings with the leaders of Georgia’s separatist regions and in September 2005 hosted a conference of self-proclaimed republics, the so-called Commonwealth of Unrecognized States, which included representatives from South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdnistr.¹⁵ This tacit recognition by a major world power encourages the separatists to persist with their demands and balk at negotiations. South Ossetian officials have rejected a series of peace proposals put forward by Tbilisi, which offered considerable autonomy, on the basis that the region is already independent and agreeing to a deal would essentially represent a step backwards.. There were no official representatives from either South Ossetia or Russia at a peace conference held in Batumi in July

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Statement “V svyazi s obostreniem situatsii vokrug Yuzhnoi Osetii” 9 July 2004 - <www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/3C8799FB6DC16167C3256ECC0045352E>.

¹⁵ The Russian position is at odds with its stance over Chechnya, a self-proclaimed republic that is seeking independence from the Russian Federation, and Moscow’s anger if other states engage with Chechen separatists.

2005, at which Saakashvili unveiled new proposals to resolve the conflict, stating that the status quo is unsustainable and Georgia will aggressively pursue peace as he is not prepared “to wait for the next 100 years to resolve these problems.”¹⁶ According to the Georgian authorities, most of the key security positions in the South Ossetian administration are occupied by ex- or current Russian officials. Givi Targamadze, the chairman of Georgia’s parliamentary Defense and Security Committee, has described talks with South Ossetia as “pointless” because “the key posts in Tskhinvali are directly appointed by Russia,” while the local authorities have no influence.¹⁷

One of the principal obstacles to an agreement between Russia and Georgia over the separatist regions is the issue of border monitoring. Tbilisi has demanded that it be permitted to establish checkpoints in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to monitor the border with Russia. It believes that the placing of customs officers and border guards at Adler and Leselidze in Abkhazia and the Roki Pass in South Ossetia will tackle the problem of smuggling, which it alleges is facilitated by the current lack of controls. The Roki Pass contains a tunnel, through which the Transcaucasian highway travels, the sole road linking South Ossetia with Russia.¹⁸ Georgian concerns over the pass have been compared to Russian fears over the Chechen sector of the Russian-Georgian border: when Moscow became increasingly frustrated that Chechen guerrillas were able to escape by crossing the massive Caucasus mountain range, Georgia agreed to Russian calls for joint control of this section of the border in an attempt to halt the flow of fighters and arms to the North Caucasus republic. In contrast to this co-operation, Moscow has remained intransigent over the issue of joint monitoring of the Roki Pass and the issue has been largely ignored, although Tbilisi is continuing its calls for international monitoring of the situation to independently establish the quantity of weapons and armed formations in the region in order to put an end to unsubstantiated rumors that merely served to inflame the tense situation further.

¹⁶ BBC Monitoring (online version), 9 July 2005, *Imedi TV*, Tbilisi, 11:00GMT, 9 July 2005.

¹⁷ BBC Monitoring (online version), 15 September 2005, *Alia newspaper*, Tbilisi, 15 September 2005. According to Saakashvili, the “*de facto* defense minister of South Ossetia is an active Russian military officer” from Siberia, while the security minister was the acting head of the security service in the Russian republic of Bashkortostan. BBC Monitoring (online version), 9 July 2005, *Imedi TV*, Tbilisi, 11:00GMT, 9 July 2005.

¹⁸ For further details of the alleged contraband that travels between North and South Ossetia, see *Novyie Izvestiya*, 1 July 2004, pp. 1-4. According to the article, Russian customs officials stop up to six people a day from entering the tunnel from North Ossetia without the correct documentation. For a detailed analysis of the economic impact of these unresolved conflicts, particularly the problem of smuggling and criminal activities, see Roman Gotsiridze, “Georgia: Conflict Regions and the Economy,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No 1 (25) 2004, p.144-152.

International Involvement

The Georgian leadership has consistently called for greater regional and international participation in the search for a resolution to the conflicts. In an attempt to weaken Russian influence in the Caucasus, Tbilisi has sought to use international fora such as the United Nations (UN) and OSCE in order to express its views and gain support. Saakashvili reiterated his commitment to a peaceful resolution of Georgia's unresolved separatist disputes in a speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2004, stating that "no democracy can go to war against its own people." Proposing a new three-stage program designed to facilitate their settlement, he underlined his determination to resolve these conflicts, observing that such "black holes" are "incompatible with progress, development and lasting stability" as they "breed crime, drug trafficking, arms trading and... terrorism."¹⁹ The Georgian president also called for increased co-operation between Georgia and Russia and an end to double standards, an oblique reference to Russian support for separatist groups in Georgia.²⁰

The UN already plays a key mediating role in the Abkhazian conflict with the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), established to oversee the cease-fire. In addition, the Secretary-General's "Group of Friends" (France, Germany, Russia, UK and US) is leading efforts to find a resolution within the framework of the so-called Geneva process. However, speaking during a General Assembly summit meeting in September 2005, Saakashvili called on the international organization to do more than merely talk about solutions, declaring that it "must act to end the lawless and immoral annexation" of Abkhazia.²¹

Georgian-Russian relations were the focus of a Georgian-led debate at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in October 2004, when Nino Burjanadze, Georgia's parliamentary chairperson, once again accused Russia of double standards, supporting separatist groups in Georgia while suppressing them in Chechnya. Georgian attempts to attract international attention to its dispute with Russia appeared to have been successful, when on 14 October the European Parliament adopted a resolution "deploring the recent statements of the Russian authorities about the use of pre-emptive strikes in the South Caucasus" and calling on the

¹⁹ *Remarks on the Occasion of the 59th Session of the UN General Assembly*, Mikheil Saakashvili – President of Georgia, September 21 2004 – <www.un.org/webcast/ga/59/statements/geoeng040921.pdf>, p. 6-10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹ *Sixtieth General Assembly*, Plenary, 5th & 6th Meetings, GA/10384, Department of Public Information, <www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/ga10384.doc.htm>.

Russian leadership to help secure stability in Georgia.²² Saakashvili made further use of PACE in January 2005 to accuse Russia of hampering efforts to resolve the protracted regional dispute. He also outlined a new peace plan for South Ossetia (which included guaranteed language rights, and control over education, policing and social policies), offering the region constitutional guarantees of broad autonomy within a federal Georgia, an offer rejected by Tskhinvali on the basis that it is already “independent.”

In addition to international and regional organizations, Georgia has also sought to engage both the EU and US. During his visit to the country in May 2005, US President George W. Bush called for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity to be respected and lent his support to Saakashvili’s plans for South Ossetia and Abkhazia to become autonomous and self-governing, but not independent. In addition, one of the reported aims of a visit by Defense Minister Okruashvili to Washington in June 2005 was to enlist US assistance in resolving Georgia’s secessionist conflicts and the topic was also on the agenda of a meeting between Saakashvili and US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice in September 2005. Okruashvili has expressed confidence that Georgia will regain control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the end of the decade, optimism he claims is based on the participation of the US in the peace process, which, in his opinion, will undermine Russia’s position as the sole mediator.²³

The EU’s relations with Georgia and the Caucasus region as a whole have been tentative, in contrast to those of the US. Nevertheless, it has included the South Caucasus in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), a reversal of previous policy that shunned engagement with the region. Although the ENP does not offer potential membership of the EU, it does offer a “privileged relationship” with the aim of sharing the Union’s stability and prosperity. This is a noble objective, but there has been little tangible progress made in furthering relations with any of the South Caucasus states. In spite of the European Commission recommending the “significant intensification” of relations through the development of an Action Plan, the inclusion of these countries into the ENP has yet to translate into substantive programs. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the three South Caucasus states is of considerable significance, recognizing the importance of the region to an expanding EU. With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, the organization will border the Black Sea, while Turkish accession would push the Union’s frontier even further eastwards to the South Caucasus.²⁴

²² Text adopted at the sitting of the European Parliament, Thursday 14 October 2004 - <www2.europarl.eu.int/omk/sipade2?PUBREF=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+20041014+SIT+DOC+PDF+V0//EN&LEVEL=3&NAV=X>.

²³ BBC Monitoring (online version), 22.11.05, *Imedi TV*, Tbilisi, 22 November 2005.

²⁴ “European Neighbourhood Policy: the next steps,” Brussels, 2 March 2005, IP/05/236, <www.europa.eu.int>. According to a strategy paper adopted by the European Commission in September 2003, the EU has a “strategic long-term interest” in Georgia achieving a successful transition to democracy and a market economy. The strategy paper also acknowledged that the EU may well have underestimated the size of the challenge facing Georgia. *Country Strategy Paper 2003-2006. Tacis National Indicative Programme 2004-2006. Georgia*. Adopted by the European Commission on 23 September 2003.

In December 2005 Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, affirmed that the organization was willing to play a greater role in efforts to solve the South Ossetian conflict.²⁵ Although he did not go into detail, Solana's statement signified deepening EU engagement with the three countries of the South Caucasus, first demonstrated by the appointment of the Union's Special Representative (EUSR) for the region in 2003 and the inclusion of the three states in the ENP. The EU has also announced a 2 million Euro aid package for victims of the conflict in Abkhazia to assist in reconstruction, the provision of food, healthcare, and job creation programs. Georgia is very keen for the EU to increase its presence in the country and is encouraging its participation in conflict resolution. The possibility of the organization establishing its own border monitoring mission to replace the now defunct OSCE one is under consideration, despite Russian antagonism.²⁶ EU specialists are working in Tbilisi under the aegis of the EUSR, assisting Georgia to improve its own border monitoring capacity. Moscow is slightly more receptive to EU involvement than it was to the OSCE mission, although it is still wary of "outside" involvement in what it considers to be its sphere of influence.

Georgian efforts to move towards the West have unsettled Moscow. In September 2005 the Russian Foreign Ministry warned that the supply of armaments to Georgia by NATO member states could destabilize the whole of the Caucasus region, strengthening Tbilisi's desire to resolve its territorial disputes by force.²⁷ In spite of Georgian criticism of Russian involvement, it is important to take into account the crucial moderating role that Russia plays in the Caucasus region as a whole. Its stabilizing influence and substantial presence cannot be ignored. Russia played a decisive part in averting bloodshed during Georgia's "Rose revolution" of November 2003, becoming involved in the impasse surrounding Eduard Shevardnadze's position as president and also remains the key economic power for the country.

²⁵ "Summary of remarks by Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the CFSP, at press briefing with foreign ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia following political dialogue meetings" Brussels, 13 December 2005, S411/05, <ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/discours/87535.pdf>.

²⁶ Tensions flared between Russia and Georgia at the end of 2004 when Moscow refused to extend the OSCE border monitoring mandate, which covered Georgia's border with the Chechen, Ingush and Dagestani republics, arguing that the missions had completed their tasks and were no longer required. The mandate expired at midnight on 31 December 2004.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Kommentarii departamenta informatsii i pechati MID RF v svyazi s voprosom SMI otnositelno resheniya pravitelstva Chekhii o peredache Gruzii boyepripasov," 13 September 2005, <www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/FEC8CB5B3B3C7D9CC325707B003BFC99>.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Saakashvili is pursuing a high-risk strategy: by making the restoration of the country's territorial integrity his first priority and seeking to resolve long-running separatist disputes, he risks undermining his own political position if he fails to achieve this. He declared his determination to tackle the issue of separatism right at the beginning of his presidency, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate his leadership credentials and intention of following a more dynamic path than his predecessor. The Georgian leader needs to focus on "soft" means of persuasion and conflict resolution, taking a "carrot" rather than a "stick" approach by seeking to meet peoples' basic needs with the provision of pensions, medicines and fertilizers, rather than immediately resorting to "hard" military pressure in order to reinforce its political message to the separatist regions. By providing proactive economic rehabilitation and social assistance programs, Tbilisi can seek to quell separatism through economic and political persuasion, offering them commodities and facilities that the regional authorities are unable to, as well as substantial autonomy, in the hope of convincing the populations that they will be better off within Georgia rather than outside of it.

Although he has consistently denied that Tbilisi is planning a military campaign against either Abkhazia or South Ossetia, he may be left with little choice if attempts to resolve the disputes by political and economic means fails. While a renewed offensive appears an unlikely prospect, if Saakashvili were to decide that the military is in a position to resolve the political stalemate by force, the ensuing conflicts could spell disaster for the volatile South Caucasus and may necessitate the deployment of international peacekeepers or peacemakers, together with a substantial humanitarian aid package and forces to protect energy infrastructure in the region.

Resolving the situation by military means also raises the possibility of further confrontation with Russia, although Tbilisi has called on Russia to remain neutral and not get involved in separatist conflicts on Georgian territory. As discussed above, the resolution of both the South Ossetian and Abkhazian disputes depends on the attitude that Russia takes and its role as a mediator must be fostered, although not at the expense of Georgia's position. Moscow has a very positive role to play as the major economic and military power in the South Caucasus, but it needs to move away from its traditional geopolitical view of the region towards a more co-operative and consensual approach.

Peaceful settlement of the two conflicts would boost stability in the Caucasus and strengthen regional security. Western states must make a commitment to stability and democracy in the region, and efforts to sort out unresolved conflicts in the region need to be stepped up by international

and regional actors. Although the OSCE and UN have to date remained the key external actors involved in attempts to resolve Georgia's long-running separatist problems, their efforts are hampered by a lack of consensus among its members and effective enforcement mechanisms. The EU has more leverage: it is developing into a major international player and is a key trading partner for the South Caucasus countries, giving it considerable influence. Thus the EU, as well as individual member-states, need to redouble their involvement in the search for acceptable solutions. There is some optimism for positive action in 2006, as the Austrian and Finnish presidencies have made it clear that they intend to consider expanding the role of the EUSR, as well as supporting EU conflict resolution efforts.²⁸

If the EU really is committed to boosting stability in the South Caucasus then it needs to take substantive action, rather than merely making well-meaning statements and publishing reports. It needs to expand the mandate of the EUSR and take concrete steps towards enhancing the conflict prevention aspect of its presence in the region. Increasing its border monitoring role would enable the EU to view the situation at first-hand, rather than relying on information from third-parties. It should promote the negotiation process and advocate the necessity of compromise and consensus. In both disputes, confidence must be restored and all sides need to express a willingness to compromise on key issues such as political autonomy and the rights of refugees. Furthermore, Russia must be encouraged to play a more positive role and end years of persistent interference. This is perhaps the most difficult task: the EU lacks any form of leverage by which it can seek to influence Russian behavior—it cannot offer the potential of membership, as the prospects of Russia ever joining (or ever wanting to join) the EU are minimal—while conversely, Russia appears to have considerable leverage in the form of its hydrocarbons.

Mikheil Saakashvili faces an uphill struggle to re-integrate the rebellious regions back into the Georgian fold. He needs to strike a balance between preserving Georgia's territorial integrity and protecting the rights of the Abkhazian and Ossetian peoples. Although he is determined to engage the separatist regions in dialogue about their political status, the separatist leaders have no incentive to participate in negotiations whilst they have the security of Russian backing. In order to prevent further deterioration of either separatist dispute, Georgia must focus on political and economic efforts to resolve the conflicts, Russia must be persuaded that it is in its best interest to play a positive role and the EU must deepen its engagement with the region as a whole. Superficially, Georgia's secessionist conflicts are a dispute between the authorities in Tbilisi and separatists. However, they have become a battleground between Georgia and Russia, with the former seeking to maintain its territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of persistent interference by the latter.

²⁸ See *Operational Programme of the Council for 2006 submitted by the incoming Austrian and Finnish presidencies*, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 22 December 2005, 16065/05, POLGEN 51, p. 53.