

Analysis

A Georgian Perspective: Towards “Unfreezing” the Georgian Conflicts

By Archil Gegeshidze, Tbilisi

Abstract

Since the early years of independence, Georgia has been negotiating terms of political status with the break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although the process has often reached a deadlock. The existing formats of political negotiation and peacekeeping have proved ineffective and the Georgian side has requested a comprehensive review of the entire peace process. There are many factors that hinder the process of conflict settlement. Topping the list are images of the other as the “enemy” and a deep mistrust among the sides. The primary impediment, however, is Russia’s manipulative policies in the conflict zones aimed at preventing Georgia from acceding to NATO. A comprehensive strategy to break the deadlock needs to be devised and doing so requires the deeper involvement of European institutions in “unfreezing” the conflict.

Background to Conflicts

All of Georgia’s conflicts are related to the issue of the status of minorities. Since the time of Russian and Soviet domination over Georgia, existing divisions within Georgian society and culture were manipulated by outside forces for the purpose of maintaining control over the country. Current conflicts in Georgia came to fore during the nationalist movements of the late 1980s, but had roots dating back to Soviet times. When Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, non-Georgian ethnic groups within the country also sought to assert their cultural identity. Some of these peoples, like the Abkhaz or Ossets, who lived in distinct autonomous ethnic regions of Georgia, also strove for more political autonomy. Politicians in these minority areas saw the democratic and nationalist wave as an opportunity to create break-away entities and to establish their own rule, escaping control from a Georgian-dominated center.

In the early 1990s the political leaderships of the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia eventually declared their independence from Georgia, which ultimately led to armed clashes between armed rebel forces representing these minority groups and the armed forces of the Georgian central government. Throughout the conflicts, Russia covertly provided the separatists with arms, ammunition and intelligence. Moreover, the Russian military participated directly in the hostilities on the side of separatists. With Russian support, the South Ossetians and then the Abkhaz were able to defeat the Georgian forces. As a result of these conflicts, about 350,000 people (mostly ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia and South Ossetia) had to flee their homes. These events created deep-seated resentments which exist to this day.

Conflicts: Current State of Affairs

In spite of the ceasefire accords and the ongoing peacekeeping operations, the sovereignty dispute has not yet been resolved. In fact, the conflict resolution process has over the past decade allowed these conflicts to solidify. From the standpoint of semantic convenience the situation of secessionist entities has been called “frozen conflicts.” In reality, however, these conflicts are only dormant and may escalate at any moment. The current status quo is not an effective basis for the political and economic reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia. As the situation deteriorates over time, the current state of affairs regarding the prospects of finding a solution to the conflicts in Georgia looks grim. Bringing the different ethnic groups together is very difficult, especially in Abkhazia. Today, the Abkhaz and Armenian communities, on the one hand, and the Georgians on the other, live in separate enclaves. Hundreds of thousands of additional Georgians who were expelled during the secessionist war live as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees outside the region.

The existing formats of political negotiation and peacekeeping have proved ineffective, even counterproductive, both in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Georgian side has requested a change in the current formats for negotiations and peacekeeping. Necessary changes include the establishment of a new legal framework for the return of IDPs and economic rehabilitation of the conflict zone (this proposal was made by President Saakashvili at the UN General Assembly on September 26, 2007). Concurrently, the government of Georgia had been promoting a “parallel administration” project in South Ossetia, which envisages massive investment in infrastructure and social programs. This project is slowly gaining support among those segments of the local population which have remained

loyal to the Tbilisi administration, but has not led to an amelioration of overall relations between Georgia and the secessionist region. The prospects for a settlement between Georgia and Abkhazia also remains vague at best.

Obstacles to Conflict Settlement

Three main factors complicate and hinder the process of conflict settlement in Georgia: *First*, the parties to the conflicts have different views of the political and legal goals for the conflict settlement process. *Second*, the parties are deeply alienated and perceive the threats to their situations differently. *Third*, Russia, which supports Abkhazia and South Ossetia, wants to extend the process of conflict settlement as long as possible in order to maintain levers of influence over Georgia. Apart from these broader factors, there are a number of other more specific factors that stand in way of the peace process.

The Georgian government claims to have a clear vision for settling the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and maintains that every step it takes is part of a well-considered policy based on this vision. In reality, however, the government lacks a vision and is thereby ultimately making inconsistent moves to change the status quo. Moreover, the existence of groups and individuals who favor or sympathize with the option of open warfare is not helping the peace process. The international community has urged Georgia to abstain from its aggressive rhetoric, yet as recent events have shown, such outside advice has had little impact on some of Georgia's politicians so far. Moreover, there is a lack of political discussion and open public debate on how to solve the problem by peaceful means.

A further obstacle to normalizing relations are the Abkhazians' and Ossetians' mistrust of Georgia. There is a considerable amount of fear about Georgia's intentions and a deep-seated image of Georgia as "the enemy" (which is particularly true for the Abkhaz). Since both Abkhazians and Ossetians do not believe that Georgia might be willing to recognize their independence, there is little enthusiasm to enter serious negotiations with Georgia. A further obstacle is the fact that Abkhazia and South Ossetia view Russia as their only true ally and guarantor of their security. Finally, for both entities, independence is considered the highest goal and all other interests are secondary. In Abkhazia, for example, the degradation of the language and demographic decline of the population have increasingly become a matter of concern. Nevertheless, tackling these problems is not a priority in the immediate future since most attention focuses on neutralizing the "Georgian threat."

It goes without saying, however, that the key reason for the deadlocked process of conflict settlement is Russia's aim to prevent Georgia from integrating into the Euro-Atlantic community. The Georgian elite believe that if it were not for Russia's obstructive attitude, the government of Georgia and the representatives of the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be able to find a solution to their bilateral problems.

The Russia Factor

Since the conflicts in Georgia have been inspired largely by external forces, it is impossible to solve them without engaging external actors. No matter how strongly motivated the parties in the conflict may be to reach compromises and maintain the peace, it is impossible to achieve these goals without the help of impartial well-wishers and the neutralization of policies of unfriendly outsiders aimed at undermining the peace process. It is an unfortunate reality that Russia has played a negative role in the instigation and the escalation of conflicts in Georgia. Russia is trying to prevent conflict resolution by both overt and covert means since the Russians believe that continued conflict will ensure the maintenance of their influence over Georgia. With the Russian government's April 16, 2008 decision to establish official links with breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia once again underlined the fact that it is a participant in the conflict, rather than an impartial mediator.

Similarly, it is unfortunate that Russia is the very country that has the ability to actually solve these conflicts, but Russia is clearly unwilling to use its leverage. It is impossible to solve the conflicts in Georgia without Russia's active participation in the peace process. At the same time, it is a difficult task to motivate Russia to take part in the peace processes wholeheartedly. There has to be concerted action on the part of the international community aimed at convincing Russia to play a truly impartial role in conflict settlement. Such an action can be taken both on the bilateral level (via direct Georgian-Russian talks) and through a multilateral dialogue in the framework of international organizations (such as the UN).

What next?

Given the circumstances, there is an acute need to devise and implement a strategy, which would ensure that

- Georgia becomes attractive for both Abkhazia and South Ossetia;
- Russia constructively addresses the conflict resolution process; and,
- an alternative course of development as an option emerges in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which un-

like the “Russian choice” would imply orientation toward building societies modeled on western democracy.

Should these conditions be met, an agreeable environment for constructive dialogue between the parties would be created. Indeed, the best way out of the current impasse would be a dialogue facilitated by a neutral Russia together with international organizations, which are equally trusted by the sides in the conflict. Peaceful dialogue would broaden prospects for a compromise solution.

As the Bucharest NATO Summit in early April 2008 has demonstrated, there is a growing awareness among Western states that the frozen conflicts are the primary impediments to Georgia’s democratic transfor-

mation and its eventual integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. It is expected that the Western community will stimulate a more active search for a formula that would bring about the peaceful resolution of the conflicts. To this end, the European institutions whose credibility and resources have not been fully exploited so far must become more actively engaged. As a benchmark of this engagement, Abkhazia should be offered an alternative vision for development towards establishment of European political, legal and administrative institutions. Such a vision could provide a basis for the convergence of development agendas in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, thus contributing to building much needed trust and confidence.

About the author:

Archil Gegeshidze is a Senior Fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Tbilisi.

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Analysis

An Abkhaz Perspective: Abkhazia after Kosovo

By Viacheslav Chirikba, Sukhumi /Leiden

Abstract

The Kosovo case opens up a new chapter in the modern history of admitting states into the international community, as this province was recognized against the will of its mother state, Serbia. Now, after Kosovo, one can hardly offer any more or less reasoned explanation as to exactly why the already 15 year-long *de facto* independence of Abkhazia, unlike the independence of Kosovo, cannot be recognized by the international community.

The Case for Abkhazian Statehood

Though the western politicians and governments have hastened to declare the precedent of Kosovo “unique,” everybody understands perfectly well that the right of people to self-determination, upon which the recognition of Kosovo is based, is universal and fixed in the United Nations Charter. According to this right, the independence of East Timor was recognized. Kosovo, East Timor and Abkhazia – in the light of international law – belong to the same order. The insistence on the “uniqueness” of the Kosovo case is obviously flawed, and Kosovo, undoubtedly, has already become a legal precedent.

One of the most important differences between Kosovo and Abkhazia is that Kosovo Albanians never

had a state, whereas the statehood of Abkhazians has existed for more than a millennium. Abkhazia was a kingdom, a principality, and, within the early Soviet federal structure, a full union republic, on equal footing with Georgia. This was the case until Joseph Stalin decided to incorporate it in 1931 into Georgia, against the will of its people.

The current Abkhazian Republic, encompassing a territory somewhat smaller than Cyprus, satisfies all key criteria required by international law for being a state. It has a territory, a population, and clearly defined external borders. The democratically-elected government of Abkhazia exercises effective control over nearly all its territory. Abkhazia has a strong civil society, and free