

The Role of International and Regional Actors in Abkhazia, Georgia

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Abstract: Frozen conflicts and instability in the Black Sea region are a growing threat to the European Union. While the region is in a democratic transition period, in a period of emerging democracies such conflicts are a source of insecurity and asymmetric risks. Underlying all this is the Black Sea's growing strategic importance as an outlet for Russian and Caspian oil - another potential source of conflict as well as wealth.

Over ten years have passed since the signing of a ceasefire that marked an end to large-scale hostilities in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Yet a lasting peace settlement remains a distant prospect, and ongoing conflict continues profoundly to affect political and economic development in the region. Large numbers of people, many of whom are displaced, continue to live a precarious existence. Positions remain intransigent, insecurity and lack of trust continue to underpin attitudes, and belligerent rhetoric reinforces a conflict dynamic that leaves little room for engagement with the other side, let alone compromise.

Article engages in a role of International organizations (especially EU) and will focus on the potential of EU in resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict.

Background

The Black Sea region and specifically South Caucasus represents one of the most diverse and conflict-ridden regions in the world. Frozen conflicts and instability in the region are a growing threat to the international Community. As crises in the Caucasus and Caspian have shown, ethnic animosities, economic crises, refugees, environmental problems and disparities in military power make the area prone to instability. While the region is in a democratic transition period, in a period of emerging democracies such conflicts are a source of insecurity and asymmetric risks.

The region is strategically important for the West and to Europe in particular as a trade link and because of its fossil fuel deposits. Given the region's geostrategic position as a natural link between Europe and Asia, and between Central Asia and the Middle East, it constitutes a vital trade link as well as an important area of transit. Weak and rogue states and war-torn societies threaten international security, regional stability, and the lives of millions of people around the globe. Consequently, instability and potential for conflict in the Black Sea area, its energy resources and its economic prospects matter to the international community.

Georgia's political landscape changed substantially after the "Rose Revolution" in November 2003. Since the election of President Mikheil Saakashvili in January 2004, questions have been raised regarding the ability of Georgia's new government to tackle the imminent problems and to improve political and economic life in Georgia. After assuming the presidency, Saakashvili has insisted that he seeks to transform Georgia from a fractured, failed-state into a prosperous democracy.

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Accordingly, government's policy priorities have been restoring the country's territorial integrity and curbing corruption. And indeed, a good start has been made in addressing the structural problems facing Georgia, tackling, for example, endemic corruption, which has harmed every facet of life in Georgia. However, Georgia still suffers from a dormant conflict and latent small-scale warfare in separatist regions. Consequently the political status of the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is still unresolved.

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Meantime, Georgia faces serious geopolitical and ethno-political problems, which has negative impact on democratic transformation and development of the country. Georgia is preparing to exercise its sovereign right to demand the termination of Russian "peacekeeping" operations on its territory and their replacement with genuine international peacekeeping missions. Concurrently, Tbilisi is redoubling efforts to unfreeze not the conflicts as such (these are not and never were "frozen") but rather to unfreeze the frozen negotiations toward political settlements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Within this context, the role of international players (UN, EU, OSCE, USA, Russian federation) is becoming more important and the functions of policy in the secessionist enclaves requires some overall political rethinking and adjustment of goals on the ground. Generally, so called "frozen conflicts", continue to represent a danger to stability, since the resumption of violence can never be excluded.

Regional and international actors present in the conflict zone

European Union

The recent Political reforms in Georgia, coupled with the declaration of the new government that relations with the EU constitute a major priority of Georgian foreign policy, have made the stability of Georgia a crucial issue in the EU's external relations. Generally, the EU agrees that the Georgian people share a common destiny with the other peoples of Europe, and that the integration of Georgia into European structures is in the interest of both the EU and Georgia.

Since 2003, the EU has become more of a security actor in the South Caucasus, particularly in Georgia. It has appointed a Special Representative for the South Caucasus, launched a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) mission, and employed the Commission's Rapid Reaction Mechanism to support post "Rose Revolution" democratization processes. It should be pointed out that the mission is not only the first EU mission of its kind, it also marks the first application of the bloc's defense and security policy outside of the Balkans or Africa.

This change in the EU's approach towards Georgia and the Southern Caucasus in general, is clearly reflected in the (17/18.6.04) European Council's decision to include the three countries of the Southern Caucasus into the "European Neighborhood Policy". In addition, the European Union and the World Bank organized (Brussels, 16.6.04) a Donors' Conference for Georgia, which was highly successful since the total pledges amounted to € 855 m. But so far the EU's reluctance to offer the prospect of membership and its fear of upsetting Russia has prevented it from thinking strategically about Georgia. Nor has the EU used its transformative power to underpin reforms in Georgia¹³⁴.

The EU is playing an active role in the stabilization of the country. At this stage the European Commission (EC) supports the peaceful resolution of the internal conflicts as the basis for meaningful negotiations and a continuing search for a political settlement. While concerns remain over the possibility of conflict in troubled breakaway regions, the EU is working with concrete measures to help relieve tensions between central government and South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In South Ossetia, a new railway link with central Georgia is planned, as well as support for refugees. As for Abkhazia, plans for a construction program are under way to span an area, cutting the region off from the Georgian mainland. However, the EC is not directly involved in the political side of conflict resolution and prevention in Abkhazia. Instead, the EC actively supports various economic rehabilitation and confidence building activities in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone as an important measure to build greater trust between the conflict-affected populations.

Georgia would like the European Union and international community to step up their involvement in the country's "frozen conflicts." The Georgian government makes no secret that a greater EU and OSCE presence in Abkhazia should come at the expense of Russian involvement. As stated in Brussels by former State Minister for Conflict Resolution issues, Giorgi Khaindrava: "...We are seeking the internationalisation of, shall we say, conflict-affected relationships. We think that the presence of European observers, the large-scale involvement of the European community in managing conflicts can only help and play a positive role in this context. We also believe that Russia is also facing a great many problems, and to place peace-making responsibilities solely on Russian shoulders would not be fair, either."¹³⁵

While, Tbilisi is seeking greater OSCE and European Union involvement in managing the country's conflicts and its relations with Russia, Georgian society expects more support, especially in political and security issues. There is an impression that the EU deliberately gets behind U.S. in these issues, avoiding complication of relationship with Russia. On the other hand, the Georgian public believes that worsened Russian-Georgian relations over a set of issues should become concern for the evolution of EU-Russia relations. Due to the specific affiliation between EU and Russia, it is widely accepted that in some cases EU can play greater role than other international organization involved in Georgia. In the South Caucasus, Georgia now appears best placed to make use of EU goodwill, especially in conflict resolution and facilitation of Russo-Georgian political dialogue.

¹Mark Leonard and Charles Grant. „Georgia and EU: Can Europe's neighbourhood policy deliver?“, Centre for European Reform; policy brief. Sept.2005

²www.civil.ge

Indeed, to become more effective in Abkhazia, the EU must increase its political visibility. Compared with Russia, the U.S., the UN and the OSCE, its financial and political engagement in the region has been minimal. However, as it gives more aid through new and old instruments, its ability to provide incentives and apply conditionality should grow. “Compared with other actors, the EU can offer added value, with its image as an “honest broker” free from traditional US/Russia rivalries; access to a range of soft and hard-power tools; and the lure of greater integration into Europe.”¹³⁶

United Nations Observer Mission to Georgia

UN peacekeeping operations demonstrate the ability of an International organization to perform on the world stage with certain degree of independence and with effectiveness not always matched by state actors. They also show the limitations on international organisations-even with the UN-as actors.¹³⁷ UN involvement in the attempts at resolution and management of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is multifaceted and complex. The leading role is assumed by UNOMIG (United Nations Observer Mission to Georgia). UNOMIG mission, which consists of 120 military observers and international police officers from 25 countries, deployed in 1993. It patrols the separation line between Abkhazia and the rest of the country, alongside a separate Russian (CIS PKF) mission¹³⁸. The UN Security Council, by its resolution 937 (1994) of 21 July 1994, decided that the mandate of an expanded Mission shall be as follows:

- To monitor and verify the implementation by the parties of the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces signed in Moscow on 14 May 1994;
- To observe the operation of the peacekeeping force of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) within the framework of the implementation of the Agreement;
- To verify, through observation and patrolling, that troops of the parties do not remain in or re-enter the security zone and that heavy military equipment does not remain or is not reintroduced in the security zone or the restricted weapons zone;
- To monitor the storage areas for heavy military equipment withdrawn from the security zone and the restricted weapons zone in cooperation with the CIS peacekeeping force as appropriate;
- To monitor the withdrawal of troops of the Republic of Georgia from the Kodori Valley to places beyond the boundaries of Abkhazia, Republic of Georgia;
- To patrol regularly the Kodori Valley;
- To investigate, at the request of either party or the CIS peacekeeping force or on its own initiative, reported or alleged violations of the Agreement and to attempt to resolve or contribute to the resolution of such incidents;
- To report regularly to the Secretary-General within its mandate, in particular on the implementation of the Agreement, any violations and their investigation by UNOMIG, as well as other relevant developments;

³ Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus: The EU's Role; *International Crisis group. Report N°173 20 March 2006*

⁴ Clive Archer. *International Organisations; Rutledge, London and New York. Third edition, 2006. p.81*

⁵ www.unomig.org

- To maintain close contacts with both parties to the conflict and to cooperate with the CIS peacekeeping force and, by its presence in the area, to contribute to conditions conducive to the safe and orderly return of refugees and displaced persons.

Working with France, the United Kingdom, US, Germany, and Russia and through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations continues to encourage a comprehensive settlement consistent with Georgian independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. In addition to the principle of territorial integrity, UN activity with regard to Abkhazia is based on supporting the rapid, safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to Abkhazia, especially in the Gali district. The UN-led “Geneva process” has identified three priority areas for the discussions: security and political issues; the return of refugees and internally displaced persons; and economic cooperation between the sides. Despite those efforts, however, little substantial results have been achieved on the key issues of the negotiations, and the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process has remained stalled.

The UN a long ago offered a proposal on the distribution of competences between Abkhazia and the central authorities. The latter hope that this document will provide a basis for the settlement, but the Abkhaz side does not seem to abandon its position of principle that the reunification is only possible if Georgia and Abkhazia are treated as equal entities. Lately, Abkhaz side has renewed its insistence on the independence, while the international community has not recognized such an attempt. Moreover, separatist authorities suspended their participation in peace process, blaming Georgian authorities for infringement of “State frontiers of Abkhazia” in Kodori gorge. This creates an uncomfortable situation for international organizations and their member states, including UNOMIG.

For the time being, in view of the absence of a political settlement, the situation in the conflict zone continue to be unsettled and prone to destabilization. While the Abkhaz leadership still refuses to discuss the political status of the republic, it appears that the UN is poorly suited to mediate in conflicts, which involves an existing state and a separatist region.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the failure to devise more imaginative ways of dealing with the conflict indicated that the UNOMIG is perhaps running out of steam in its role as mediator. Nor did it appear to serve well in its function as stabilizing force, since the period once again saw deterioration in security in the Gali and Kodori regions. This situation temporarily diminishes role of UNOMIG, however there is a hope that after the political turmoil is over, the situation could be changed.

In terms of outside cooperation, the UN shares information with the OSCE on developments in Abkhazia and includes the OSCE in a limited fashion in conflict management attempts. Further, UNOMIG observers cooperate closely with the CIS peacekeeping force (CISPKF) in Abkhazia, whose activity they monitor but on whom they are also dependent for providing a certain degree of security for the conduct of UN Operations.¹⁴⁰ Although the role of the UN has been stronger in some phases of the

⁶ Susan Stewart. *The Role of United Nations in the Georgian-Abkazian conflict; Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe. Issue 2/2003. p. 5-6*

⁷ Susan Stewart. *Ibid. p. 26*

conflict negotiations than in others, the necessity of working with the Russian Federation and the CIS has remained important.

Generally, UNOMIG continues to contribute to the implementation of the cease-fire agreement and to play a constructive role in the overall peace process, thus encouraging grassroots cooperative and confidence-building measures in the region. The role-played by UNOMIG in preventing the resumption of hostilities and pursuing a lasting solution of the conflict remain relevant and important.

Russian Federation and CIS PKF

The Russo-Georgian Relationship remains tense. Over the past five years, these relations have been characterized by tension, threats, recriminations, and mutual suspicion. Saakashvili's unequivocally pro-Western orientation, in particular, Georgia's ambition to join NATO and his recent promise that he will integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the end of his presidency, causes outrage in Moscow. Russia still continues its strategy of dragging out and halting negotiations with Georgia, seeking to limit the presence of O.S.C.E. and U.N. monitors along the borders of the separated regions, condoning local separatist militia and maintaining its "peacekeeping" forces.

While the Russian military continues to pursue a harder-line foreign policy towards Georgia, Russia began granting citizenship to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This situation in fact could be understood as a de facto annexation of these territories.¹⁴¹ Moreover, Russian Duma has passed a declaration wherein it openly considered the possibility of integration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia into the Russian Federation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia has openly said that its main goal is to protect their citizens in the region. (Russia has granted citizenship to the individuals in these breakaway regions in a speedy manner, hence breaking all international rules and legal procedures.)

Russian peacekeepers, under the authority of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS PKF) still are deployed in Abkhazia, along with UN observers (UNOMIG). Tensions still persist between Russia and Georgia regarding the role of the CIS PKF. The CIS PKF force poorly performs its cease-fire duties and carefully avoids taking any action on the refugee problem. Despite the presence of peacekeepers, there has been only very limited repatriation of ethnic Georgian IDPs, apart from some spontaneous returns to the Gali region of Abkhazia, where the security situation remains unstable.

The Georgian side is proposing a change in their mandate, which the Abkhaz and Russian side refuse. It should be mentioned that the Georgian Parliament asked, last autumn, for an immediate withdrawal of these forces from conflict zone. Nevertheless, the UNOMIG says that as its own observers are unarmed, the joint patrol with the CIS PKF is a necessary condition for the UNOMIG's observers to function till other international forces replace it. Meanwhile, Georgia agreed to an extension of the CIS PKF mandate, which allowed the UN Security Council to extend accordingly the UNOMIG mandate.

⁸ Svante E. Cornell, Niklas L.P. Swanström, Anara Tabyshalieva, Georgi Tcheishvili; A Strategic Conflict Analysis of the South Caucasus with a Focus on Georgia 2005
http://www.silkroadstudies.org/docs/publications/2005/050601Caucasus_Total.pdf.

Generally, the role of CIS PKF is rather controversial, since de facto it does not fulfil classical Peacekeeping mission but rather acquired “border guard” functions between the conflicting sides. The current relationship in Abkhazia sets a bad precedent for international peacekeeping operations, since it provides the CIS legitimacy without responsibility. Moreover, presence of CIS PKF helps to maintain status quo favourable to Moscow. While Russia remains the greatest obstacle to a peace settlement, the Russian government claims to be searching for new relationships with its smaller neighbours and argues that the overwhelming role of Russia in the CIS and in the peacekeeping force is only a temporary reflection of the current capabilities of CIS members.

On the other hand, the Georgian government believes that CIS PKF as Russian dominated political and military tool has already exhausted its recourses and alternative PKF forces (most probably International police force) is needed to facilitate peace process in Georgia. Unfortunately, due to different reasons It’s difficult to persuade the International community to do this, even though everybody understands that Russia as interested party can never play role of fair dealer in conflict resolution in Georgia.

Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

The OSCE mission to Georgia is active in all dimensions within Georgia and with its main area of interest in South Ossetia, where the main purpose is to facilitate the political settlement, to eliminate the sources of tension and to promote political reconciliation. The OSCE mission in Georgia supports the UN in the Abkhazia conflict. According to the original mandate, adopted on 13 December 1992, the objective of the Mission was to promote negotiations between the conflicting parties in Georgia which are aimed at reaching a peaceful political settlement.

On 29 March 1994, in relation to the conflict in Abkhazia/ Georgia, the above objectives were expanded to include: “ensure liaison with the United Nations operations in Abkhazia, in order to follow events closely and report regularly to the CSCE, inter - alia with a view to facilitating the participation of the representative of the Chairman-in-Office, at the invitation of the United Nations, to the negotiations carried out under United Nations auspices.”¹⁴²

The OSCE monitored and reported on the human rights situation in Abkhazia, helped build human rights protections into new legislation, conducted prison investigations, and forcefully condemned prison conditions and other aspects of abuse. OSCE has increasingly engaged in dialogue with officials and civil society representatives in Abkhazia, especially from NGOs and the media, regarding human dimension standards, and is considerable a presence in Gali. OSCE expressed concern and condemnation over ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia during the 1994 Budapest Summit Decision¹⁴³ and later at the Lisbon Summit Declaration¹⁴⁴ in 1996 make this organisation most welcome in Georgia. However, in general regarding to the Mission’s political activity in the Abkhazia conflict, less progress can be reported.

The *ad hoc* committee created by the OSCE parliamentary assembly for the conflict in Abkhazia is a good example of the intensified activities of the OSCE

⁹ www.osce.org/georgia

¹⁰ From the Resolution of the OSCE Budapest Summit, 6 December 1994

¹¹ Lisbon Summit Declaration of the OSCE, 2-3 December 1996

institutions in the conflict resolution process. Recently, the OSCE ambassadors, delegations from 13 participating States headed by OSCE Permanent Council Chairman, Belgian Ambassador Bertrand de Crombrugge, visited Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone and met the leaders of the breakaway region. While urging the sides to reiterate their commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict He said: "The OSCE reaffirms its support to Georgia's territorial integrity. Our message is that self-determination is not a principle that means independence. There are many other constitutional mechanisms to achieve self-determination."¹⁴⁵

Although the OSCE has succeeded in establishing and maintaining an ongoing dialogue between each of the secessionist's authorities and the central authorities, all its efforts aimed at achieving a mutually acceptable political compromise have, so far, proved less fruitful. It also failed to hold the pertinent authorities accountable for war crimes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, the absence of the OSCE from the region could give Moscow a freer hand, thus leaving Georgia in a challenging situation. While Moscow has formally recognized the territorial integrity of Georgia, its policy aims are containing violence below escalation level but also maintaining enough tensions to justify Russia's mediation efforts and politico-military presence in Georgia.

Conclusion

The new Georgian leadership faces a sizeable challenge: it is going to take a skilled mediator to maintain the necessary balancing act between the conflicting interests that have converged over Georgia. Undoubtedly the new government in Tbilisi must continue move towards a conflict settlement. Recent developments in Abkhazia indicated that Russo-Abkhaz relationships have undergone very significant transformation. It is clear that internal stability in Abkhazia no longer meets Russian interests. It is also quite obvious that that Abkhaz people do not want to be, but in reality are unconditional puppets of Moscow. All these circumstances might provide a window of opportunity for Tbilisi. However, Russian helpful and positive support still is a prerequisite for solving this longstanding problem.

The peace-keeping and public security efforts taken by Georgian government and the International organizations (UN,OSCE,EU) on respective conflict area must be pursued further:

- International organizations (especially EU) must intensify their involvement in Georgia and work actively in order to give new impetus to the peace and stabilization processes in the country, thus minimizing Russia's detrimental geopolitical influence; persuade Russia to refrain from any unilateral measures affecting Georgia and its citizens, in particular as regards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, without prior consent of International community;
- The Georgian government and International organizations involved (UN, OSCE, EU, etc), including the Russian Federation, should convene international forum and revise the current peace-keeping mandates for Abkhazia to obtain more efficient and more tangible results on conflict resolution. A clearer and more energetic mandate and a single managing authority could achieve better integration of the international effort in the peace operation.

¹² www.osce.org/georgia ; Press release

- The international community (including Russia) should influence the Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders to abandon their harsh positions and accept to engage in serious negotiations regarding the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within Georgia;
- Special Assistance needed to remove foreign military bases in Georgia as soon as possible in accordance with the International agreement reached with Georgia: the Government solved the conflict with Adjara relatively easily. But Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be more difficult, will take a long time, and will require Russian cooperation. Nonetheless, resolving both conflicts is essential for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity;
- EU's and other international actors principle position regarding the Russia will foster the implementation of the agreements achieved by conflicting sides, including that regarding return of refugees and IDP-s in Abkhazia;
- While stressing the important role being played by UN police in the region, the international community should stress the need for them to be allowed onto both sides of the conflict zone. Its should be pointed out that the police are really the force that is needed in the conflict zone, as the problems are not so much security-military related in the area but much more crime-related;
- Adequate resources should be provided to the International NGOs under the Rapid Reaction Mechanism (RRM) to continue confidence-building activities in Abkhazia focused on grass roots security, divisive history, a needs assessment, and media activities. All this efforts in long run will encourage a peace settlement.
- International Human Rights watchdogs engage actively in Abkhazia to avoid deterioration of Human rights records in the region. In the Gali district, Georgian IDPs have returned in fairly large numbers to their homes in an unorganised movement that the Abkhaz authorities could not stop. However, Abkhaz authorities are subjecting those Georgians to various forms of discrimination and intimidation. The international community should facilitate removal of all suspicions from the central government over the serious concern of how the Abkhaz separatist leadership respects Human Rights in practice and how the laws are enforced. Those problems -- as well as organized crime in the Gali and Ochamchire districts -- can best be handled by an international police force of several hundred, not by military peacekeeping troops, let alone by Russian Army "peacekeepers."

Generally, these facts and conclusion suggest that the political as well as the humanitarian dimensions of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in Abkhazia are eminently manageable at the local level. By the same token they underscore the need to face up to the Russian challenge at the international level, first and foremost by pressing for withdrawal of Russian troops to clear the way for local processes toward political settlement.