



ლევან მიქელაძის სახელობის ფონდი
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Challenges of Georgian-Ossetian Relations Against the Backdrop of the War in Ukraine

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Foreword

You are about to embark on reading a collection of essays authored by representatives of Georgian and South Ossetian civil societies. The idea to put together the collection was generated in the search of the ways for rebuilding bridges between once friendly two peoples connected through history stretching over many centuries. Considering alienation between the two societies and extremely unfavorable geopolitical context, one might think that such an idea lacks sanity. However, common sense and the need for building trust for a peaceful future has prevailed and inspired the authors to cooperate.

Georgian and South Ossetian groups of experts have worked independently but with just enough coordination to allow different essays to end up in a single publication. Initially, the two groups of experts tried to select topics which would provide most constructive support to expert communities and broader audiences on both sides of the line of division. Every author worked independently, and each essay represents views of respective authors on various issues. We, the coordinators had a rather limited role which had nothing to do with the content. After preparing draft papers, the authors met in Istanbul to have a discussion the results of which further enriched the texts presented in the publication.

The reader will take immediate notice that Georgian and South Ossetian authors have agreed to disagree on certain terms and geographical names. However, following a good will to priorities confidence building, they agreed to use less confrontational language instead of the official vocabulary, as much as possible but without compromising on their own attitudes and beliefs in regard to the conflict.

Obviously, the present publication has no intention to standardize terminology or toponyms. Rather, it aims to somehow fill up informational gap created by many years of estrangement through exchanging opinions about various subject matters.

We remain hopeful that readers will be able to find something appealing and interesting in each of the essays and even controversial arguments will help them to understand what they are based on. We believe that there is no relationship built on mutual understanding possible without such insights and rethinking.

Archil Gegeshidze
Zarina Sanakoeva

Outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine War: Implications for Georgia and Possible Future Scenarios

Introduction

A famous phrase about known knowns and unknown unknowns by Donald Rumsfeld, former US Defence Secretary, has long been an iconic quotation of choice, used by security sector professionals to describe the complexity associated with predicting future developments. In his autobiographical account, *Rumsfeld's Rules*, Donald Rumsfeld notes that governments of every country spend billions of dollars to prevent strategic surprises. Yet, foreseeing unknown unknowns is impossible.¹ Since the end of the Cold War, deliberations about the future have never been as relevant for security matters as now – in light of Russia's fully-pledged aggression against Ukraine. Ongoing tectonic shifts in the region, manifested in the Russian revanchism and the latter's attempt to bring down the European security architecture, threaten to shatter Georgia's security environment. The country, with a lack of solid security safeguards and unresolved conflicts, has chosen to pursue a policy of strategic ambiguity:² On the one hand, Georgia continues its journey towards European integration,³ and on the other intensifies its trade and economic ties with Russia,⁴ in anticipation of the outcomes of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The present paper aims to assess possible implications of the Russia-Ukraine war on Georgia's security, more specifically, on the prospects of conflict regulation. The analysis rests upon a scenario planning method⁵ designed in the Rend Corporation in the 1950s to mitigate consequences of fundamental future uncertainties. The scenario planning method, not to be mistaken for a forecasting of the future, is used for developing and describing possible scenarios based on the analysis of identified critical factors and triggers (current trends), the degree of their intensity, and multiple combinations.⁶ Notably, for the purpose of the present paper, the author considers only those scenarios which are likely to have implications on the regulation of Georgia's conflicts, and, therefore, responds to the following key

¹ For possibilities for the prevention of strategic surprises and intelligence errors, see Jones, Milo, and Philippe Silberzahn. *Constructing Cassandra: Reframing intelligence failure at the CIA, 1947–2001*. Stanford University Press, 2013.

² See, for example, David Aprasidze and Giorgi Gvalia, "National Interest and Regime Survival: Why Georgia Is Cautious Towards the Russia-Ukraine War," CACI Analyst, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13716-national-interest-and-regime-survival-why-georgia-is-cautious-towards-the-russia-ukraine-war.html>.

³ Georgia Granted EU Candidacy Status, *Civil Georgia* (blog), December 14, 2023.

<https://civil.ge/archives/574502>

⁴ Emil Avdaliani, "Playing With Fire: Georgia's Cautious Rapprochement With Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90246>.

⁵ Evidently, there is a whole range of limitations to the process since, as a rule, scenario process is a team endeavour with the participation of multiple stakeholders from various fields and sectors

⁶ Goodspeed, Robert. *Scenario planning: Embracing uncertainty to make better decisions*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy., 2019.

research questions: To what extent will Russia, as a state, change/weaken/strengthen after the war? Will its influence over Abkhazia/South Ossetia become weaker/stronger? To what extent will Russia's hostility towards Georgia grow/recede?

Critical factors for scenario planning

The outcomes of any war, including the one ongoing in Ukraine, depend on a combination of different but interrelated variables. According to the Clausewitzian maxim, "war is a continuation of policy by other means⁷ and, as a rule, it is a policy dimension that puts each and every war to an end." Outcomes of military actions are just one side of the equation, since there have been plenty of modern day examples as to how a party winning all the important battles might still end up losing the war.⁸ Since the end of 2023, the war in Ukraine has grown into a "fight for attrition,"⁹ in which the actions of the manager of the specific military industry are no less important than those of the armed soldier on the battlefield. Considering these circumstances, various combinations of the following factors will shape the possible scenarios of how the war might end:¹⁰

- The degree of Western consolidation and engagement in providing support to Ukraine;
- The economic situation in both the West and Russia;
- The effectiveness of the military industries in Russia and Western countries;
- The military-political situations in other theatres (Asia-Pacific, Near East);
- Societal and political system resilience in Ukraine;
- Viability of the Russian political system;
- The military mobilisation resources of the parties to the war;
- Training and equipment of the parties' armed forces.

Scenario 1. Drastically pro-Ukrainian

The West mobilises internal strengths and turns the slogan "as much as needed" into action. A powerful trans-Atlantic solidarity and recognition of irreversible outcomes of the war in other theatres, should Russia rise victorious on the European stage, leads to the removal of all barriers to providing military support to Ukraine. The USA and every member of the EU sets into motion the full capacity of their military industry, securing Ukraine's significant technological advantage in all dimensions of the war. This translates into a successful finale for the campaign, and the latter's return to the 1991 borders.

⁷ Callum, Robert. "War as a continuation of policy by other means: Clausewitzian theory in the Persian Gulf war." *Defense Analysis* 17, no. 1 (2001): 59-72.

⁸ Nolan, Cathal J., "The allure of battle: A history of how wars have been won and lost." Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁹ Gady, Franz-Stefan, and Michael Kofman. "Making Attrition Work: A Viable Theory of Victory for Ukraine." *Survival* 66, no. 1 (2024): 7-24.

¹⁰ Obviously, I am mindful that other triggers that remain beyond my imagination (imagination failure) may influence outcomes of the war, including so called black swan type events which are not yet known. The concept of the black, a phenomenon of the improbable was first described by Lebanese-American author Nassim Nicholas Taleb.

Overwhelmed with failure in the war and the crushing economic burden arising from war-associated costs, discontent towards Putin's regime in Russia snowballs into the demise of the incumbent government, and the country enters yet another phase of "liberalisation," characteristic of its historical experience.¹¹

Implications of the scenario: In order to understand the possible implications of events described in the above scenario, the historical context following the collapse of the Soviet Union might come handy. However, it is paramount that Official Tbilisi avoid past mistakes and prevent reescalation of the conflict. In addition to being ethically inappropriate, walking in the same circle will be unreasonable, since it will close the window of opportunity opened to Georgia to find its place in the Euro-Atlantic space. At the same time, conflict escalation will be used as an excuse by Russia to return to the region. Unlike the context following the demise of the Soviet Union, the West will have greater motivation to accelerate Georgia's membership in European institutions. Reflection on painful mistakes of the past, the degree of preparedness of the state institutions, and the West's interest, will constitute factors which are to give the opportunity to Georgia to first transform and ultimately to resolve conflicts in its breakaway regions, should the developments take a turn different from those of the 1990s. To this end, it will be of utmost importance to grant international security safeguards to Ossetians and the Abkhaz to address the pressing issue created by the removal of the Russian military bases from the conflict regions.

Scenario 2. Moderately Ukrainian

The joint efforts of Ukraine and the West, directed at defeating Russia on the battlefield, have not sufficed to overthrow Putin's regime. Even with solid security safeguards and its eastern part de-occupied, Ukraine refrains from launching an offensive to liberate Crimea, out of fear of nuclear escalation. Meanwhile, Russia becomes, as American historian Stephen Kotkin puts it, "North Korea with many nuclear warheads."¹² Putin manages to consolidate the Russians by invoking a so-called "siege mentality," while the West moves to a long-term containment strategy.¹³ The world enters Cold War 2.0 mode, with an undeclared war lingering between the authoritarian axis – China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and the collective West.

Implications of the scenario: This scenario might bring about two drastically different sets of consequences: a) Georgia escapes with exclusive Russian influence, while Russia annexes Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or b) Russia annexes Georgia as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The probability of the first sub-scenario will considerably depend on the sagacity and actions on the part of the West, as well as on Georgia's foreign policy positioning. However, this sub-scenario is associated with an objective limitation, since Georgia's unequivocal trajectory towards the West might lead to the second sub-scenario, that is the complete annexation of Georgia. Against this backdrop, with high probability, Georgia will maintain a policy of strategic ambiguity, with its fate being dependent on the West's

¹¹ Figes, Orlando. "The Crimean War: A History." Metropolitan Books, 2011.

¹² "Prigozhin's Rebellion, Putin's Fate, and Russia's Future," *Foreign Affairs*, June 24, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/prigozhin-rebellion-putin-fate-russia-future-stephen-kotkin>.

¹³ Kissinger, Henry. "Reflections on Containment." *Foreign Aff.* 73 (1994): 113.

decisive actions, which should provide guarantees for the country's security sooner than defeated Russia will try to strike back in Georgia. In the event of the first sub-scenario, Georgia and its separatist regions will become parts of the two rival worlds, further deepening the alienation and division. In general, such a setting is characterised by zero-sum game rules and, therefore, it is highly unlikely that Russia, for instance, will resort to different approaches to Abkhazia and South Ossetia; in other words, annexing one and sparing the other. This pattern is already discernible, with Russia trying to universalise a policy which has been custom-built around the specifics of already existing national projects.¹⁴

Scenario 3. Moderately pro-Russian

A dysfunctional political process in the West fails to provide timely and adequate support to Ukraine, which leads to growing operational problems in combat which, in turn, translates into waning support for the war both in the West and in Ukraine. Putin has managed to recalibrate the Russian economy to suit to the purposes of the war,¹⁵ which means that they have unlimited manpower- a significant advantage in terms of the number of artillery shells and munitions, and also a certain advantage in the air. Russia has adapted to the new economic reality and found loopholes to avoid the sanctions. The Russian authorities have also replaced western markets for gas with eastern ones. At this point, Ukraine is facing a dilemma: either accept a peace recipe and the security guarantees offered (imposed) by the West, or continue fighting at the cost of losing Western support. Ukraine agrees to the Western security guarantees, while Putin presents the newly added territory as a triumph. A new cold war lingers in the air, but is less tangible or threatening.

Implications of the scenario: In the events described in this scenario, Russia gets hold not only of Eastern Ukrainian territories, but those of Georgia, and exerts significant influence on the South Caucasus. Georgia will appear in a grey zone of Russian dominance. While Georgia maintains token independence, Russia will have the final say on its foreign and security policies, just like the status quo seen during Shevardnadze's rule. Since part of this scenario will resemble grand agreements at the expense of small states, as characterised the state of affairs in the 19th century, one cannot exclude the shadow of such agreements appearing between Tbilisi and Georgia's separatist regions, brokered by Moscow. Here, a specific situation calls for explanation: How, in scenario 2, in which Russia sustains a loss, can Georgia also lose its territories or be completely annexed, while in scenario 3, in which Russia effectively wins, Georgia maintains formal independence and might go as far as to have its territorial integrity restored? This is all about international context. An international political setting with post-war agreements is less hostile, even in light of maintaining a shared conflict environment. At the same time, recognising that the boundaries of the grand deal have been drawn in the West of the country,

¹⁴ Lela Kunchulia and Tony Wesolowsky, "Pro-Kremlin Leader In Breakaway Abkhazia Pushes 'Foreign Agents' Bill To Silence Critics," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16:35:07Z, sec. Georgia, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-abkhazia-foreign-agents-bill-bzhania-russia/32821249.html>.

¹⁵ Pavel Luzin Prokopenko Alexandra, "Russia's 2024 Budget Shows It's Planning for a Long War in Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90753>.

the Georgian political elites, regardless of their preferences, give up the politics of ambiguity and opt for bandwagoning. A significant portion of the population and the majority of civil society actors are likely to accept such a drastic change in the political vector in light of anticipated disappointment. As for Russia, it will resort to a feigned cooperation in order to demonstrate to the West that it is committed to keeping its end of the deal. At the same time, pragmatic arguments concerning Georgia's geostrategic location will be maintained and further intensified. In such circumstances, the role of Georgia as one of the gates of the mid-corridor, and its respective infrastructure, will be of essence to Russia. It is likely that in this scenario, in addition to maintaining military bases deployed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia will bolster its presence in other regions of Georgia, first and foremost in Adjara. It is also unlikely that the fragile unity created under Russian domination will serve the interest of the Georgian, Ossetian and Abkhaz peoples, and eventually it will come a burden that Georgia will have to shoulder. A unification model might resemble that of the Russia-Belarus union, with Tskhinvali and Sukhumi rather unlikely to be entitled to the same status as Tbilisi. Alternatively, a formally independent Georgian-Ossetian-Abkhaz confederation might be created.

Scenario 4. Drastically pro-Russian

Dysfunctional political processes ongoing in the States have been coupled with a new wave of isolationism, eventually leading to a conflict with both European partners, as well as the internal security community. American alliances have become weak in both Europe and the Asia-Pacific. The orchestrated efforts of authoritarian states have further weakened the already fragile West. The States have to shoulder certain military responsibility in the Near East, which further strengthens the existing isolationist patterns. Due to China's blatant actions, a disoriented USA is compelled to concentrate its own resources in Asia, while the European nation-states struggle to secure their strategic autonomy, let alone help Ukraine. In this light, Russia succeeds not only in Ukraine, but in a hybrid war campaign in the Baltics and Balkan countries. NATO's resources will be directed at ensuring the security of its member states. Russia thus achieves most of its strategic targets in relation to Ukraine.

Implications of the scenario: In the event of Russia's effective victory, the latter will have no motivation whatsoever to maintain a status quo in relation to Georgia and its breakaway regions. Therefore, the likelihood of triumphant Russia agreeing to grant even tokenistic independence is very low, while the risk of annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia runs very high. Georgia, South Ossetia and Sukhumi will all move to a lord-tenant relationship with victorious Russia. The formal independence of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia might be salvaged by forging a union of allied countries, which Georgia, together with its breakaway regions, will enter. However, the likelihood is rather low, since such developments will be perceived by Russia as excess compromise.

Conclusion

Russian military aggression against Ukraine, and the ensuing geopolitical changes, have significantly exacerbated the security architecture around Georgia. Against this backdrop, the Georgian authorities have been pursuing a "cautious/pragmatic foreign policy," as they put it, awaiting the end of the war in Ukraine. Possible scenarios regarding the outcomes of the war in Ukraine developed based on the

scenario planning methodology described in this paper, and suggest that a set of (pre)conditions for Georgia to realise its national interests can only come if Putin's regime collapses. Even in this case, the degree to which Georgia will be able to achieve its strategic goals will be determined by a policy to be employed by Tbilisi in relation to conflict regulation. It is paramount that such a policy be developed following a critical reflection of past mistakes. Any other scenario that may come to fruition, will create dire domestic and foreign policy dilemmas for Georgia, including the annexation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as well as the entire country.

Security sector analysts are often accused, and for good reason, of alarmism. Hopefully, the scenarios described above will take a drastically positive turn, and the 'black swan' will, this time, be a messenger of fair and just peace.

Acceleration of Georgia's European Integration: Shaping its Image in South Ossetia

For the average resident of South Ossetia, Georgia's European aspiration is no news. However, what has come as a surprise is the excitement and hope that Georgia has put into the process. There is anticipation that if Georgia becomes an EU member state, South Ossetia and Abkhazia will both jump at the opportunity to become part of Georgia, seeking to reap all the benefits that the membership offers.

Relying on the findings of desk research, as well as interviews with experts and citizens of South Ossetia, I will try to answer the following question: How can attitudes towards Georgia change in South Ossetia if Georgia succeeds on its European journey? Let's assume that the success implies not only Georgia's accession to the EU, but also approximation of the quality of life in Georgia with European standards. The same assumption suggests that such attainment should be achieved by Georgia meeting the pre-conditions laid down by the EU.

It should be noted that every South Ossetian respondent, be they politician or average citizen, who commented on Georgia being granted EU candidate status, was looking at the matter from the security angle. For instance, in his commentary for 'Ekho Kavkaza', member of the South Ossetian parliament, David Sanakoyev, highlighted the importance of achieving a maximum level of security: "Security is the major problem for us while striking an agreement with Georgia on the normal, benevolent coexistence of independent neighbouring counties as the main objective. I do not wish anything against anyone. We only want to be recognised and have our right to self-determination respected. Sadly, judging from the Geneva International Discussions, Georgia will continue to refrain from signing an agreement on non-use of force, a decision that is perceived in South Ossetia as Tbilisi's readiness to resolve the South Ossetian question by military means, should they be presented with such an opportunity. It seems that Tbilisi is not planning to revise this stance in the foreseeable future. Under such circumstances, Russia remains our main and only asset for containing Georgian aggression. Will Europe become an additional constraining factor for Tbilisi? I do not know, but I choose to remain hopeful. It seems to me that the only positive fact in this state of affairs is that our ways have progressively and irrevocably been parting, with Georgia heading towards Europe, and us remaining with Russia. Let's wish each other a happy journey."

One of my respondents, an expert who wishes to remain anonymous, points out that security remains a decisive factor when it comes to the relations with Georgia: "Even if Georgia manages to achieve considerable economic prosperity and a quality of life meeting European standards, the national security issue will not go anywhere. National security as a factor always prevails over economic matters.

This is a historical practice. Moreover, we can see that there is no rethinking of the past taking place in Georgia. They have not yet become aware of the horrible crimes that were committed. We also see that the idea of revenge is still there.”

The expert draws attention to yet another aspect while discussing the matters related to Georgia’s candidacy status: Revived interest in South Ossetia on the part of Western and international foundations. Georgia is required to actively engage with the Republic’s population, for instance, within the frame of the ‘A Step to a Better Future’ programme. They have already started making steps, yet without any practical meaning. The only area for which Georgia can claim credit is healthcare. Other commentators have also called for preparation to counter ‘soft power’. In his comments to Sputnik Iuznaya Osetia, expert Alan Jusoyev stated that Georgia and the EU will resort to implementing consolidated policies in regard to both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, through soft power: “Healthcare, education and other programmes will be launched. The EU will widen the scope of the network of such programmes for so called ‘reintegration’ purposes. Various bonuses and incentives will be offered, and we have to be ready for this.”

The results of this concern will inevitably become tangible for civil societies in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia exclusively focuses on contacts established within civic dialogues, not on the direct dialogues between official representatives of the two republics. On their end, the South Ossetian and Abkhaz authorities have been taking all measures to minimise contacts beyond the Track One.

At the same time, rather negative attitudes towards Europe, and the West in general, have taken hold of the South Ossetian communities. The driver of such attitudes, first and foremost, is the stance adopted by the Western countries in relation to the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. In addition, decisions made by various international structures over the course of the past years have only deepened mistrust among the residents of South Ossetia. For instance, in 2023, the UN endorsed Resolution N16 about refugees in Georgia. Resolutions initiated by Georgia are normally supported by the majority of the UN member states. The aforementioned resolution concerns the rights of persons internally displaced from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In turn, South Ossetians also remember tens of thousands of Ossetians who fled Georgia and moved mostly to North Ossetia. Such examples also include the decision of the European Court of Human Rights to turn down a claim against Georgia submitted by the residents of South Ossetia.

In addition, even disinterested parties have raised questions over the decision of the International Criminal Court to order the arrest of three citizens of South Ossetia – Mikheil Midzaev, then Minister of Interior; Hamlet Guchmazov, an employee of the Ministry of Interior; and former human rights commissioner Savid Sanakyevev, for crimes allegedly committed in August 2008. It should be noted that no charges have been filed against the Georgian side for the developments of 2008. Such decisions have delivered a heavy blow to the dialogue process between Georgian and South Ossetian activists since, as a rule, funding for such projects is provided by international organisations. Therefore, participation in projects funded by partisan Western structures is condemned.

Based on the above said, it is evident that such decisions are the result of Georgia's active work, as well as the Western politics against Russia. The majority of these decisions were made in February 2022, after the war had broken out in Ukraine, and so they can be considered as measures against Russia rather than specifically against South Ossetia or in support of Georgia. The same refers to the granting of EU candidate status to Georgia. Georgia's accession to the EU, just like the granting of the candidate status, will depend on the geopolitical situation. Evidently, neither Georgia, Ukraine nor Moldova meet the relevant criteria. The EU officials publicly declared that the Union direly needed to demonstrate readiness for development in order to strike a balance in light of the BRICS enlargement, and the strengthening of China's position, among other developments. For this, it was paramount for the EU to demonstrate that it is not in stagnation – on the contrary, that it is being developed and is ready to hold its positions. This was the reason behind granting the candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

This very reality might influence the decision on Georgia's accession to the EU. Georgia is not likely to become an EU member state following a conventional procedure. Moreover, it is important to consider that not all EU member states will be ready to sign off on the decision. Therefore, making any sort of forecast is a complicated task, and such decisions will greatly depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

However, for many commentators, Georgia's candidacy status also holds certain perspectives for South Ossetia. Some experts have reminded us that there are requirements to be met by a candidate country. For instance, blogger Alic Pukhati argues that developments unfolding in Georgia will have an impact first and foremost on those Ossetians who reside in Georgia as an ethnic minority among other minorities. As such, he suggests that Georgia's candidate status should be viewed from this angle. There is a myriad of recommendations that the candidate country must meet on their way to membership. Among these requirements is the obligation to protect fundamental human rights and freedoms, including those pertaining to ethnic minorities, as the main objective of the state. "I believe that this serves the interests of Georgia's ethnic minorities, including Ossetians residing in the Truso and Gudogorges, from where they were once forcefully displaced. I hope that their voices will become stronger and that they will be able to access more instruments to protect their interests and preserve their identity," says Pukhati.

My respondents have pointed out that South Ossetia would prefer Georgia to adopt an unequivocally pro-European stance, which would narrow the possible course of action Georgia can take in relation to South Ossetia. The incumbent Georgian authorities, having demonstrated a rather descent level of flexibility and rationality, are likely to take advantage of the window of opportunity. The Georgian Dream's policy has been centred around efforts to manoeuvre between the various poles of power, yet, the candidate status requires more certainty in the future.

These demands put forward by Europe also benefit South Ossetia, since they will not allow approximation between Georgia and Russia, something that is much feared here. Many South Ossetian

experts believe that South Ossetia might get 'handed over' to Georgia if the latter gives up on its European aspirations. I believe that reasons for this line of thinking lie not only in the historical memory of the 1990s, but also in the South Ossetian authorities, who, regardless of who is in the leadership, demonstrate little independence and diversity when it comes to our foreign policy. The idea to become part of the Russian Federation, resorted to by the majority of South Ossetia's political actors, points to a lack of mediocre ideas. The policy line of the South Ossetian authorities demonstrates their desire to have no relations with Russia, and to delegate this right to Russia. From this perspective, Georgia's European integration is extremely beneficial to the South Ossetian government. If Georgia continues its irreversible 'journey' to the EU, and tensions between Russia and the Western states remain unchanged, we will end up with a deep crack rather than a mere border between the hostile neighbours. This will be a crack between two extreme poles – Russia, and the West. In this scenario, very few things will be up to either Georgia or South Ossetia to decide.

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Digital Bridges and No Walls for the Peaceful Coexistence of Georgian and Ossetian Youth

Introduction

The capacities of artificial intelligence have gained significant prominence of late, and are being used to tackle numerous challenges and unmet needs of the modern world. According to one [forecast](#), in a few years, AI will replace many professions, or will drive them to extinction. Today, there is almost no doubt that technologies can generate solutions, new visions and decisions with regard to important problems. Conflicts are no exception: Many believe that AI will significantly contribute to the peaceful resolution of many conflicts all over the world.

Before pursuing a specific line of discussion, it is important to understand the concept of artificial intelligence as such. The development of AI, in its full understanding, stretches over thousands of years. However, never before has it penetrated into every sphere of human life as it does today. Modern-day solutions often make reference to the philosophical approaches of Socrates and Aristotle, since AI implies not only technical capabilities, but also quick reasoning.

The term ‘Artificial Intelligence’ was first [coined](#) by American scientist John McCarthy, in 1955. McCarthy defined AI as a programme or a computer which can reason like a human being and make logical decisions. This is an era which marks a new stage in the advancement of the field, holding immense potential for the development of humankind.

The advancement of modern technologies can be used for conflict resolution and the promotion of peaceful coexistence

The frozen conflict has undermined and threatened relations between Georgians and Ossetians, especially the younger generations. At the same time, the fast-paced development of digital technologies opens a window of opportunities for young people. Digital tools, including AI, have the potential to contribute to building ‘bridges’ instead of ‘walls,’ opening up a path to perhaps an initially cautious, yet palpable and more peaceful, future.

Young people in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali are the ones who have shouldered the heaviest burden of the August of 2008 war, in the form of hostility and doubt. At the same time, their paths have almost never crossed for more than 15 years. Traditional approaches to peacebuilding have often proven to be ineffective vis-a-vis development of the world, due to political complexities.

This could be used as an entry point for introducing artificial intelligence and modern technologies, which offer innovative ways for bringing Georgian and Ossetian youth closer, bypassing the political impasse.

What resources could be created to bridge the divide between Georgian and Ossetian youth, and help them to build confidence, taking into account their shared interests? How can software and platforms help them exchange ideas and implement joint initiatives? These are the main questions that peacebuilding practitioners and specialists should try to answer so as to develop viable action plans tailored to the existing challenges and opportunities in the technological era.

Remote Connections since 2008

Efforts to restore connections and the historical coexistence between societies divided by military actions have been revived thanks to software and digital platforms. Online communication became quite common during the Covid-19 pandemic, when methods to combat and treat the virus were widely discussed online. These relationships have continued to this day, and not only in the field of health and healthcare. There have been numerous cases which exemplify sustaining connections between communities, families, and relatives divided by the war:

- During the Covid-19 explosion, Marina Meshvildishvili, currently residing in Tbilisi, was approached by her classmates from Tskhinvali, whom she had not heard from in decades, via an internet platform. They asked her to help them find Covid-19 treatment in Georgian healthcare facilities.
- Family friends living in Tskhinvali put a stone on the grave of a young man from Tamarasheni, who lost his life in a car crash just before the August 2008 war. The family members had had little time to bury him. It was through the internet that the exact location of the gravesite could be shared with those remaining in Tskhinvali.
- The Chulukhadze sisters used the internet to help their children to get to know each other. The sisters were separated by the war – one lives in Gori, while the other raises her family in Tskhinvali. The children continue their relationship, but through the internet, according to the existing circumstances.

This an incomplete list of examples which demonstrate that relationships are still there, regardless of the existing political situation resulting from the conflict. Each example demonstrates that new technologies have created new peacebuilding opportunities, and the process will be irreversible.

Artificial Intelligence Tools for Making Connections

Artificial intelligence tools make it possible to support intercultural dialogues, debunk stereotypes, and facilitate communication, by creating safe online spaces designed to help Georgian and Ossetian youth exchange ideas, aspirations, and experience. Such tools have been widely used by multiple social networks. Below are some examples of how these tools work:

- [Synthesia](#) – A platform which creates realistic video content through innovative technologies and AI generated voiceovers;

- Algorithms which predict consumer preferences and offer tailored recommendations regarding relevant content, for example, [Netflix](#) or [Spotify](#);
- Instruments similar to [Adobe Sensei](#), which offer AI focused proposals, tools for editing images or working on graphic design;
- Instruments designed to detect potentially harmful content, such as hate speech or disinformation (for example, [Facebook AI](#));
- [Chatbots](#) and virtual assistants (for example, [Replika](#)), which use AI for personalised communication and improved access to information;
- Instruments which analyse consumer behaviour in order to understand the preferences of a specific segment;
- [The Washington Post](#) uses similar instruments to personalise news content and identify potential disinformation;
- [X](#) (formerly Twitter) uses instruments to identify spam and advise its users respectively.

[Virtual reality platforms](#) (VR) are also used to simulate virtual human interactions, which help to understand different perspectives. For instance, users of virtual reality platform ‘Enemy’ can stand in the shoes of either Palestinian or Israeli soldiers to [help them](#) cultivate empathy towards ‘the other side’.

The [capacities](#) of AI provide unlimited ideas for the use of artificial intelligence instruments and tools. For example, let’s imagine the following scenarios:

- Georgian and Ossetian teenagers work together in an online space to develop a friendship strategy that goes beyond physical boundaries. With experience exchange, they will be able to eradicate prejudices and stereotypes, and develop instead [empathy](#), which, in turn, will provide a foundation for interactions in the real world.
- A virtual exchange [program](#) with inbuilt AI-generated translation instruments enables students from Tbilisi and Tskhinvali to engage jointly in online classes, projects and open discussions, which will promote mutual understanding and respect, and result in greater communication between Georgians and Ossetians, mutual understanding, and the overcoming of geographical and political barriers.
- Chatbots created for the ease of interaction and engagement help to break the ice and encourage participation. Also, by offering a personalized experience and shared activities, they support interactions and engagement.

- A museum with inbuilt AI features provides information and displays showing the rich history and traditions of the Georgians and Ossetians. The museum also provides opportunities for young people to master traditional music, arts and crafts, as well as narration, celebrate shared cultural celebrations, and acknowledge the value of diversity.
- A shared virtual memorial is created dedicated to the victims of the conflict so as to underscore the shared pain and loss sustained by both communities.

Implementing initiatives like ones described above, by using respective [instruments](#), requires specific skills and knowledge. These examples should not be viewed only at the ideational level, since they can be implemented through the use of artificial intelligence in light of development in technologies. Opportunities are available in the digital era that allow for the analysing of vast archives maintained in both cultures.

AI-based chatbots can act as virtual companions, answer questions, and engage users in interactive activities. Users can also engage through the VR/AR [reconstruction](#) of historical places, and through conventional performances and other fields of art.

Artificial intelligence also helps users to verify information, identify conflict narratives, and analyse narratives based on historical accounts. For more clarity, here is an in-depth overview of these opportunities:

For instance, through peacebuilding VR simulations and online gaming platforms, young people will be able to participate in interactive peacebuilding trainings. These simulations are designed to identify various scenarios of conflict resolution, and to help users to understand the consequences of violence etc. It is important to ensure the participation of young people from both sides in the process of designing and implementing, as well as in the management of the projects, following a specific skills development endeavour.

Algorithms can be built specifically to [decipher](#) distorted, inaccurate and falsified information, which takes the issue of bias off the table for participating countries.

Artificial intelligence can also observe the emotions of users and bring corrections to scenarios which nurtures empathy and improves mutual understanding.

At this point in time, AI might not find it difficult to control emotions, however, through existing platforms, games, simulations or chatbots, it will certainly contribute to establishing relations, perceiving and understanding human stories, identifying the specific role of users in processes, and improving their skills for more articulated positive changes.

While implementing new approaches to peacebuilding, artificial intelligence can analyse large volumes of data in order to detect early [warnings](#) of tensions, and offer preventative measures to the parties. It

can also ensure the participation of youth and marginalised groups in inclusive peace processes. Such opportunities have already been seized in the modern world:

[UN Global Pulse](#) analyses social media data to detect potential conflict triggers;

[PeaceTech Accelerator](#) supports the development of AI instruments for conflict prevention;

[Acled Data](#) collects real-time data on all reported violence and protest events, and uses it for analysis and early warning.

The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Peace Negotiations and Deals

The opportunities referred to in the paper corroborate that artificial intelligence has vast potential to resolve conflicts and develop peace initiatives through various means. First and foremost, it should be used for confidence building and promoting peace negotiations. To this end, here are [a few ways](#) in which artificial intelligence can be used:

Neutral broker: AI-based systems have the capacity to analyse proposals, identify hidden biases, and offer compromises to the parties of the conflict, without emotional attachment, thus contributing to fair and impartial negotiations.

Identification of common ground: AI will help the parties to find a common language through identifying shared interests based on analysis of a large volume of data.

Assessment of a deal: Modelling various scenarios and forecasting potential consequences of a deal will allow the parties to assess possible outcomes of their actions in an effective manner.

Data-based visions and trend analysis: [Identification](#) of historical data and conflict samples will help to forecast potential escalation and take preventative measures.

Risk Assessment: Based on an analysis of data and social media, AI will assess the risk of escalation in real-time, which will contribute to developing valuable insights in conflict mitigation strategies.

Monitoring of peacebuilding efforts: By analysing peaceful directions at the local level, AI will identify fields of success and gaps that need to be addressed.

Several important factors need to be taken into account while defining the role of Artificial Intelligence:

AI is an instrument, not a solution. For the time being, it is not yet developed to an extent that it can replace human empathy, nor does it have the skill and understanding to build trust, which is of utmost importance for lasting peace. At this point in time, stakeholders/interested groups should resort to AI as an auxiliary instrument, to be used together with human experience and public engagement.

At the end of the day, decisions to resolve conflict need to be made by people who will take responsibility for their own actions. Artificial intelligence should not replace human fact, but should instead be used for awareness raising. To conclude, AI has the potential to become a powerful instrument to support peace efforts, and to ease communication through providing meaningful information and identifying potential risks.

Conclusion

Conflict resolution remains a complicated, delicate and arduous endeavour, requiring empathy and peace negotiations. However, in such a complex setting, artificial intelligence appears as a potential instrument for supporting and promoting peacebuilding. AI cannot be viewed as a safeguard for resolving the issues, however, its potential to improve existing approaches to peace and promote more effective practices of conflict resolution cannot be denied.

Based on the existing data, AI may be used to assess escalation triggers (such as the movement of troops, discourse observed on social media, economic fluctuations, etc.), which will ensure the development of meaningful visions for peace, and conflict mitigation strategies.

Opportunities for youth engagement require an analysis of the needs and priorities. Several considerations should be taken into account:

- In the process of implementing such initiatives, it should be made clear how their participation can make true, meaningful and positive changes, and contribute to building a peaceful and inclusive world. Artificial intelligence components should be explained in a clear and comprehensible manner that underscores their conducive role in confidence building and establishing positive interactions;
- It is important to identify the real-world problems and needs faced by young people;
- They should be personally engaged in designing respective platforms; their features and content which should be in line with and respond to their needs;
- For greater trust, data protection and confidentiality issues, as well as those related to online security, should be taken into consideration.

Bringing everything to fruition by developing and introducing respective programmes not only at a governmental level, but also by bringing in specialists and individuals with expert knowledge, is possible only with in-depth analysis of the potential risks and success factors.

Evidently, opportunities are always coupled with numerous challenges which might hamper the application of new opportunities for peacebuilding purposes. Therefore, it of utmost importance to use powerful instruments and promote digital literacy in order to ensure a safe and inclusive online environment.

Access to technologies in conflict-affected localities is often restricted, which further exacerbates existing inequalities and contributes to the further marginalisation of certain groups. In addition, relying solely on technologies in peacebuilding processes threatens the diminishment of the importance of direct dialogue and political reconciliation.

It should also be taken into consideration that Artificial Intelligence, in addition to performing specific tasks and activities according to a human-designed plan, has the capacity to quickly [develop](#) itself using digitalized information and its own data (for instance, where a process might have taken around 20 years a few years ago, now, it can take just a couple of hours). However, this is an area which, according to experts in the field, poses the greatest challenges and threats with regards the future of AI. The situation is often likened to King Midas' Gold Touch (King Midas from Greek mythology, his wish granted, asked that all he touched might turn to gold. He failed to consider that this would extend to his family members and food).

Therefore, specialists recommend that all potential risks should be taken into consideration to ensure that humans maintain control over the use of AI instruments, which is a necessary prerequisite for preventing potential escalations and uncontrollable situations that self-taught and self-developed AI might bring about.

These arguments and counterarguments highlight the complex relationship between conflicts on the one hand, and technologies and peacebuilding on the other. In spite of the potential opportunities that modern technologies offer for reconciliation, their effectiveness is determined by the extent of [responsibility](#) to which these technologies are treated, as well as the equality of access (often access to online platforms is artificially limited by blocking systems, the use of which can be prevented by VPN-like programmes) and continuous commitment to conventional peacebuilding efforts.

Unlike other fields (mediation, the justice system, etc), the use of AI through multi-disciplinary partnership in conflict resolution, from the political perspective, is nascent, but still creates unprecedented opportunities.

The process of developing and implementing similar initiatives must be led by Ossetian and Georgian communities/young people, who will use respective AI instruments to create various platforms. Development of technologies should be driven by their voices, aspirations and concerns, which will ultimately serve their shared needs and visions of a peaceful future.

Treating artificial intelligence and modern technologies with caution and responsibility raises hope that, considering the aforementioned challenges related to AI, Georgian and Ossetian young people will be able to build digital bridges of mutual understanding that take them towards a shared peaceful existence. This, in turn, requires properly identifying needs and replacing walls with bridges, not only in the digital world, but also in the heart and mind of each participant.

South Ossetia: Threatening Outcomes of the Karabakh and Ukraine Conflicts

Human history has no knowledge of two ethnoses, however close they might stand ethnically, having simple relations over an extended period of time. The centuries-long struggle for survival and the domination of small and large ethnic communities ultimately ends up in interminable conflict translated into violence and military confrontation. Constraints, and a yoke of any empire under which the two ethnic communities exist, may hamper these processes, but will always fail to address the core issue. After liberation from the barnacles of an empire, former prisoners become prison wardens, as former victims often seek to become the oppressors. The desire to build a partially recognised state demonstrated by part of Ossetians of the South Caucasus is in line with the aspiration of the Ossetian people, and is perceived as the only means for preservation as an ethnos, since the darkest fear of every small nation is related to mental disappearance and assimilation with other peoples.

However, grave obstacles on the way towards the building of a sovereign and democratic state have the potential to incapacitate this process. The undetermined international-legal status of South Ossetia, and future uncertainties, remain among the most significant challenges. A partially recognized territorial-state formation may be yielded to Georgia, should the latter give up on his North Atlantic direction and return to Russia's orbit. The man who signed the document recognizing South Ossetia as an independent state is ready to tear it up if Georgia laments all its wrongdoings. In 2020, Dmitry Medvedev wrote on his Telegram channel: "Georgia aspired towards Russia, since the latter was its only ally amidst hostile Islamic states. History repeats itself, and North and South Ossetia, as well as Abkhazia, might reunite [with Georgia] only under the Russian Federation". This is rather a loose interpretation of history on the part of the former Russian president, but it begs the question as to at what cost this compromise may be made.

Russia provides three fundamental levers to South Ossetia: Status, economic means, and security. These very levers constitute the threats coming from Georgia. First and foremost, this is about the non-recognition of status. Here, we are dealing not so much with international recognition, as with the right of a political-legal formation to exist. The essence of Georgia's political course is as follows: Ossetians may reside in Ossetia, but under no circumstances shall Ossetia be in Georgia. According to the Georgian Constitution, districts which were previously under the former autonomous oblast of South Ossetia are now divided between four neighbouring municipalities, while Ossetian, unlike the Abkhaz language, does not have a status of being a state language. Negotiations over the creation of a unified federal state, launched in the first years of Saakashvili's presidency, entered a deadlock, with both Ossetians and Abkhazians turning down the proposition. 'Occupied Territories', a term deeply rooted in the Georgian legislation as well as in public discourse, is a remnant of the insurmountable past. According to international law, there the universally recognised territory of Georgia, which is recognised by the majority of the UN member states, and the military presence of a foreign country

without the consent of Georgia's authorities constitutes a violation of international law. However, this is just one side of the coin. The term 'Occupied Territories' covers up Georgia's covert desire to deprive the other side of the status of subject and to pass this off as a conflict between Tbilisi and Moscow, thus shirking all the responsibility. This practice reinforces the myth in Georgian society according to which Ossetians and Abkhazians want to live together with Georgians, but Russia is preventing them from doing so. The truth, however, is that neither Ossetians nor Abkhazians see a future that can be shared with Georgians.

As for the economic issues, the harsh closure of Ergneti market by the Georgian authorities did not serve to prevent smuggling, since there were other ways to legalise this successful case of inter-ethnic relations. In fact, this act had a different and sole purpose of suffocating South Ossetia's economy and ultimately subjugating the republic. Sadly, this objective was partially achieved: Today, South Ossetia is totally dependent on Russia, with its economy in stagnation and rendered unprofitable.

The third lever is security. The only subject on earth ready to destroy South Ossetia by force is Georgia, with Russia being the only preventive factor. The South Caucasus has also been affected by the conflicts unfolding over the past few years in the world, especially in Ukraine and Nagorno Karabakh.

The 4th Russian military base deployed in South Ossetia shortly after the end of the August 2008 war has been manned predominantly by ethnic Ossetians and citizens of South Ossetia. The reason for this is that the average remuneration for employees at the military base is higher than in the rest of the republic. Paying military duties allowed service personnel to live better than the average citizen of South Ossetia. Everything changed in 2022, when a 2014 conflict in Donbas snowballed into an active phase, resulting in the widening of the stage for military actions. Part of Ossetian society believe that in the event of Russia's defeat in the so-called special operation, Georgia will try to take revenge for the 2008 war, and will seek to resolve the interethnic and territorial issues by force. In addition, Ukraine's role in the 2008 August war is extremely overstated and mythologised. Ossetians fighting in Ukraine justify their participation by Ukraine providing weapons to Georgia in the 2008 war while its citizens fought side by side with Georgians. According to various unverified estimations, around 2000 citizens of South Ossetia have been fighting in Ukraine. Considering the results of the 2015 census, according to which the population of South Ossetia totals 53.000, around 4% of the republic's population is participating in the war, which is a rather considerable number for such a small society. The number of volunteers, however, has been on a rise. Those fighting at the frontline receive at least 200.000 rubles monthly, while those working for private security services in Donetsk and Luhansk have lower salaries, but still earn enough to climb the ladder from being half-poor to middle class. Under normal circumstances, such mobility, which now happens with minimum effort and without intellectual labour, would require quality education, hard work, and an extensive period of time

Even though there have been no casualties, the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was dissolved on the order of its head, Samvel Shakhramanyan, is alarming to [South Ossetia](#). In his interview with StudioRe in April 2023, journalist Tengiz Ablotia said: "Since the majority of South Ossetians hold Russian passports, have relatives and own property in Russia, they are most likely to migrate to North

Ossetia should Georgia restore its control over the region, which will result in resolving the existing interethnic [problem](#). It is feasible that footage showing destroyed towns and villages in Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian part will serve as a positive example of conflict resolution to some Georgians.”

The two major demands that the Ossetian side will raise vis-à-vis the Georgians, should the two sit at the negotiation table, will be the signing of an agreement on non-use of force by the Georgian authorities, and recognition of South Ossetia's independence. However, I believe that even signed, the document will have no value. Who or what can guarantee that the revanchism, in a dormant state under the Georgian Dream, will not come to life again? Even if the Georgian side keeps to its contractual commitments, they need to be mutual. Is South Ossetia really in the position to ensure that no third party will use its territory against Georgia? Or will things take a turn described in Dmitry Gordon's famous [interview](#) with Aleksandr Lukashenko?

Gordon: Can you now repeat that Russians will not cross from Belarus to Ukraine?

Lukashenko: N-E-V-E-R.

Gordon: Thank you.

Lukashenko: Even less so with weapons. Dmitry, I am the border guard.

What might serve as grounds for negotiation for South Ossetia? The republic is ready to discuss any issue except the yielding of its sovereignty, just as Georgia is ready to talk about everything except for recognising South Ossetia's independence. It appears that there are hundreds of questions that are open for discussion to both parties. In addition to already existing cooperation in the field of healthcare, reopening of transport arteries and cooperation in cultural and economic matters will positively contribute to Georgian and Ossetian relations. Ideally, South Ossetia will give up its psychology of a being a “besieged castle.”

The return of IDPs might be a starting point for the commencement of negotiations. More than 60,000 ethnic Ossetians had to flee from Georgian inner districts during the 1990s conflict. To butter up the EU, in 2006, the Georgian Parliament passed a law on property restitution and compensation on the territory of Georgia for the victims of conflict in the former South Ossetia district. However, the law is just a formality, since it lacks financial mechanisms. Few in reality managed to return to their homes. In the aftermath of the August 2008 war, 20,000 Georgians residing in South Ossetia became refugees. Every person born in the territory of South Ossetia, regardless of their ethnic origin or religion, is considered a citizen of the country. The Georgian minority has never participated in any of the referenda taking place in the territory of the republic. Under no circumstances should any ethnic group be condemned as a perpetrator for unlawful actions committed by their representatives. The return of Ossetians and Georgians to their respective homes will be a pivotal point for launching a constructive dialogue. A transition period stretching from 10 to 15 years should be allowed for the return of internally displaced persons, followed by a new referendum in which the Georgian minority should also participate. Such a move will also define the legitimacy of South Ossetia as a state, which has been ignoring the opinions of a fourth of its population. The process of restitution should be complex, and should include partnership for investigating military or other crimes, with the mediation

of international law enforcement organisations. Perpetrators behind the tragedies of Dzara, Eredvi and Tsinagara must not remain unpunished or anonymous. However, blood shed by one side is no redder than that shed by the other, and crimes committed against Georgians also count on the scale of Themis.

In light of developments unfolding in Karabakh and Ukraine, South Ossetia should recognise that the present offers better conditions for negotiations, which the republic needs more than an economically, demographically, and militarily stronger Georgia. South Ossetia should aim at securing conditions which will minimise the threat of a renewed war. This requires the yielding up of a part of the past in order to rise victorious in the future. Turning one's back on compromises will lead to losing more in the future. Compromising does not mean giving up on the aspiration of independent existence; it means that the only road to survival is through dialogue. Tomorrow, which is entirely dependent on the mood of Russia and the Kremlin, will certainly be overcast should the pendulum of history swing in the other direction.

Political and Social Media Narratives on Both Sides of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict

Introduction

In the modern era, the informational dimension of conflicts plays an important role, largely due to advancements in information technologies and media instruments.

While the development of media contributes to greater awareness among the parties to any conflict, their negative effects are also evident. First and foremost, this refers to the dissemination of narratives which are conducive to deepening a division between societies, and promoting antagonism and destructive and radical nationalistic sentiments.

Traditional media – TV, newspapers and other centralised outlets, responsible for developing and spreading narratives, in the first decade of the 21st century have given way to social networks, especially Facebook, Instagram and Telegram, a most recent trend that allow literally anyone to create an information platform. In this regard, Telegram stands out, with features which are built specifically for the purpose of channelling information.

Materials (articles, comments, social media posts) about the Georgian-Ossetian conflict can be found in both traditional and digital media – on webpages and social networks. Even though there are certain similarities shared by the Georgian and Ossetian narratives, the differences are even more striking. They are also tangible: If one compares conventional and modern media outlets, the latter tend to be harsher and more aggressive in their choice of terms and coverage.

About the paper

The paper aims to identify and analyse Georgian and Ossetian online media narratives. The findings have been drawn from an examination of content created by popular online channels which regularly cover conflict related issues (Netgazeti, Civil Georgia, etc). Such resources are far more limited in South Ossetia; however, there are a few outlets (e.g. Cominf.org) which publish news and analytical materials related to Georgia and Georgian-Ossetian relations. The paper represents an expert observation, one based on the examination of available materials, with the purpose of identifying the main patterns with regard to one of the most significant aspects of Georgian-Ossetian relations. Analysis of these patterns points to the main issues, while documenting and describing these problems and their features is the ultimate goal of the paper.

Georgian Online Media Narratives about South Ossetia

Even though Georgia has been struggling to resolve its conflicts for more than 30 years, conflict-related issues certainly do not top the present public agenda. As a rule, issues related to South Ossetia and Abkhazia hit the headlines only on war-related anniversaries or against the backdrop of significant political developments, such as elections in the conflict regions. The latest development in South Ossetia which caught the media's attention concerned the presidential elections and, in particular, the referendum promoted by Anatoly Bibilov, which, in Tbilisi's eyes, had the potential to significantly [alter](#) the status quo in relation to South Ossetia.

Conflict-related matters also draw the attention of the Georgian media outlets when, from time to time, ethnic Georgians are killed near the Administrative Boundary Line. This is well exemplified by the tragic [murder](#) of Tamaz Ginturi of Kirbali village. This incident drew attention to South Ossetia in the [aftermath](#) of the last presidential election. However, just like other issues, the relevance of this tragic incident soon faded away, and merged with domestic and party insinuations, seeing the tragedy of Tamaz Ginturi and other murdered Georgians being used by opposition actors to criticise the incumbent authorities.

Georgian online media narratives rest heavily on the premise that, unlike Abkhazia, in South Ossetia, local communities play minimal, if any, role in resolving domestic political, economic, security or social affairs. More often than not, the Ossetian factor in news about South Ossetia is missing, or is portrayed as the 'occupation regime' 'with Kremlin backing.' Therefore, it should be noted that whenever news about tragic incidents, like the Ginturi case, or detentions across the ABL hits the headlines, online outlets put little responsibility on local Ossetian communities or politicians. The use of such terminology as '[Russian occupation forces](#)' and '[Tskhinvali's occupation regime](#)', underscoring the role of Russia, overshadows the importance of the domestic Ossetian factor.

The Ossetian factor has been similarly overlooked in coverage of the 'borderisation', one of the most significant dimensions in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict as perceived in Tbilisi. In 2017, *Netgazeti* [published](#) a long analytical article dedicated to the 'borderisation', in which the words 'Ossetian [people], the Ossetian and Ossetian society' were used only once, and in a context which concerns 'drawing a dividing line between Georgian and Ossetian societies as one of the objectives of the Russian occupation policy'. Indeed, the article mainly talks about Russian troops, and views respective processes from the angle of the Russian-Georgian confrontation.

The Ossetian factor is relatively prominent in the coverage of domestic political affairs by Georgian online media outlets. However, in the majority of articles, political forces, more specifically authorities, are labelled as 'the occupation regime'. These internal rivalries are mostly related to the fight over gaining influence and personal financial or political benefits. Further, these individuals are rarely seen as independent persons, and instead are [perceived](#) as politicians who are backed by more powerful stakeholders, usually Russia.

Therefore, one of the mainstream Georgian narratives in relation to South Ossetia from the political perspective implies the absence of free and democratic political processes, by which we mean free from

Russian influence, suggesting that nothing changes substantially along with the new names in politics. For example, during the 2022 presidential elections in South Ossetia, several analytical pieces were published by Georgian online media outlets, with the purpose of introducing a then low-profile candidate, Alan Gagloyev, to the Georgian audience. All articles shared the same narrative: No changes were expected to the fundamental foreign policy choices of South Ossetia, these being greater approximation to Russia and the perception of Georgia as an existential threat, since Russia would call the shots anyway. The question of a referendum, raised by Bibilov and considered as irrelevant for the time being by Gagloyev, was perhaps the only matter which was portrayed as controversial between the two candidates, and with significant [differences](#) between the Georgian media and public. However, in the end, both candidates were characterised as having a high degree of loyalty towards Russia.

Netgazeti [wrote](#) that ‘just like any other politician and candidate in South Ossetia, Alan Gagloyev sees the future of South Ossetia with Russia, while Georgia remains in the role of an aggressor. Therefore, one should not expect any changes to Tskhinvali’s foreign policy direction should Gagloyev win the election’.

An [article](#) published by Radio Liberty also suggested that Gagloyev is affiliated with the KGB and ‘nothing is going to change with regard to the occupation’. Zurab Bendianishvili, interviewed by Radio Liberty, argued that ‘Gagloyev’s policy in relation to the Kremlin will not be drastically different. However, if elected as so called ‘president’, Akhagori communities will feel some relief’.

As stated above, the role of South Ossetians in South Ossetia’s political life is extremely diminished by the Georgia media. However, it should also be noted that Georgian online media outlets do not use hate speech or terms promoting ethnic hatred in relation to either Ossetians or Abkhazs. News and analytical articles further do not provide any assessment of Ossetians as a ‘society’ or ‘nation’.

According to the Georgian online media narrative, Ossetian society becomes more of an ‘actor’ during protests when they raise their voices against the actions of the local authorities or against developments which, from the Georgian perspective, can be perceived as something that does not serve Russian interests. For instance, the Georgian-language media actively [covered](#) protest rallies concerning the Inal Jabyev case, a local man murdered in Tskhinvali. One of the related Georgian articles, titled [Ossetians of Tskhinvali Take to Streets against the ‘Sadistic Regime’](#) was one of those cases in which a Georgian media outlet portrayed Ossetian society as an actor with enough influence to leverage the political agenda.

Radio Liberty also actively [covered](#) the [discontent](#) in Tskhinvali in relation to Ossetian servicemen [being sent](#) to fight in Ukraine. Ossetian fighters have been the main characters of recent articles published by *Netgazeti* and *Civil Georgia*, since these developments have been perceived by Georgian society to have the potential to flare up anti-Russian sentiments within Ossetian society. They also fit well into the mainstream Georgian narrative, according to which Russia is the main impediment for Georgian-Ossetian friendship and unity.

Ossetian online media narratives about Georgia

Sadly, South Ossetia suffers from a lack of independent media outlets. When it comes to online media, government-managed state information agency ‘Pec,’ and a Tskhinvali branch of [Sputnik](#), set the tone. As compared to Georgia, Instagram ([Adaem Novosty](#)) and Telegram ([Сапа Цхинвал](#)) channels, which are considered to be more or less independent, are more popular in South Ossetia, since in Georgia independent Instagram and Telegram channels are not commonly used for receiving news.

While the Ossetian side is portrayed in a less antagonistic manner or entirely ignored in the Georgian media, news and analytical materials published by Tskhinvali-based media outlets demonstrate drastically negative sentiments towards Georgia. The latter is constantly implicated for refusing to give up its ‘retaliatory politics’ against South Ossetia and preparing for [war](#) in order to reclaim the territories by use of force. Georgia is portrayed as a country which refuses to sign the document on non-resumption of fire, which lives in illusion concerning the return of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and which resists the idea of a [direct dialogue](#) with the conflict parties, concocting instead provocative schemes along the ‘border’, devising and executing plans to [destabilise](#) the situation.

Orchestrated efforts are made to reinforce the image of Georgia as the enemy. Indeed, Ossetia’s media outlets do not shy away from circulating such disinformation. For instance, one of the large-scale disinformation campaigns promoted by both Russian and Ossetian media concerns the ‘Lugar lab’, labelled as a ‘serious threat to the entire region’ in an analytical article published by [cominf.org](#). The article, like many similar articles, talks about a conspiracy scheme concocted by the US and Georgian government to create viruses in order to facilitate the spread of these viruses in hostile countries. According to this narrative, the Georgian authorities have long been covering up information about an extremely high number of casualties of ‘biological experiments’ in Georgia and beyond.

Tbilisi’s Western policy preferences, perceived as a security and stability risk not only for Tskhinvali but also across the entire region, are a popular topic in the South Ossetian media. The topic has hit headlines several times, especially since Georgia was granted EU candidacy status. Tskhinvali-based media outlets [disseminated](#) several messages among their audience: Georgia is not going to change its attitude towards the conflicts; the EU does not need independent Tskhinvali and Sukhumi; the EU needs new members to fill the gap created by Brexit, and that is why Georgia’s integration process is supported; Georgia has a long way to go before it becomes a member-state; problems existing between the parties to the conflict are not going to be resolved by Georgia’s becoming an EU member-state.

When it comes to Georgia’s European journey, Tskhinvali-based media outlets are particularly concerned about the NATO-Georgia joint military trainings, as well as about any manifestation of Georgia’s approximation with the North Atlantic alliance. These media organisations perceive these developments as a direct threat to South Ossetia, and implicate Georgia for militarisation and preparing for a war which, according to them, is being ‘encouraged’ by the West. When covering matters pertaining to Georgia’s potential membership of the EU, an emphasis is often put on the assumption that NATO is in fact Georgia’s main influencer, while the latter has been trying to [beef up](#) its military potential through its approximation to the West.

With regard to those NATO-Georgia joint military trainings, Ossetian media outlets have continuously sought to diminish Georgia's role, and portray the latter not as the Alliance's partner, but rather as a satellite country to the West which is compelled to take certain steps [because of the pressure](#) exerted on it by the US. In this respect, the Ossetian media narrative is rather inconsistent: On the one hand, it points to the alleged pressure for militarization on the part of the USA, and on the other, it emphasizes that Georgia is the one which needs NATO in order to reclaim the territories by force. In any case, Tskhinvali-based media outlets have so far captured every single activity between Georgia and NATO and portrayed the cooperation as anti-Ossetian and anti-Russian.

An important narrative pursued by the Ossetian media concerns Georgia's 'efforts' to [introduce](#) immoral and obscene Western liberal values, commonly associated with the [LGBT community](#). The storyline shared by such narratives suggests that Georgia, under the influence of the West, is progressively giving up on its traditional values, with gay prides and same-sex marriages being the end of it. According to these narratives, Georgia has been increasingly distancing itself from conservative family values, while the Georgian Orthodox faith is in grave danger.

A narrative, according to which Europe has been [preparing](#) another Maidan in Georgia, dominates materials and news about Georgian-Western relations. This narrative has gained greater prominence in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. It suggests that "the West has been trying to exert pressure on Tbilisi to open a 'second front' against Russia. If Europe fails, it will try to organise a coup-d'etat in Georgia."

Saakashvili, in his personal capacity, regardless of how active he is in Georgian politics, is discredited and critiqued by the Ossetian online media. To this day, he remains one of the main antagonists held 'personally responsible for the 2008 war', and is someone who attracts a great deal of Ossetian online media [interest](#).

An important portion of media narratives concern developments unfolding in the vicinity of the so-called 'border', including tragic and fatal incidents involving detentions and killings of Georgian citizens. While covering detention cases, the line pursued by the Ossetian media suggests that the Georgian citizens have violated 'the state border', and detentions are related to Georgia's [refusal](#) to recognise the independence of South Ossetia and delimitate the 'border'. In the event of such notorious occurrences as, for instance, Tamaz Ginturi's murder, Ossetian media outlets often opt for silence. A statement released by the de-facto security service was the only piece published by Sputnik in relation to Ginturi's tragic death. The statement, among other epithets, proclaimed Ginturi as a supporter of the United National Movement, an activist, and someone who had illegally crossed the 'border'.

Conclusion

The analysis of media narratives suggests that negative patterns dominate the narratives of both Georgian and South Ossetian media when it comes to covering events and developments occurring on the other side. However, there are stark differences.

Georgian media view outlets tend to view the events taking place in South Ossetia almost exclusively through the lens of the Russian occupation, diminishing or entirely minimising the role of South Ossetia, its society, and political actors. Georgian media shifts attention to South Ossetia only during extremely important developments, such as detentions and killings, or elections.

On the Ossetian side, attempts to downplay Georgia and minimise its role to a mere 'satellite' of NATO, the USA and EU, are notable. Yet, Georgia is more often portrayed as an actor with agency, which has retaliatory plans with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

From the perspective of conflict transformation and its final resolution, media outlets on both sides have so far played mainly a negative role. The Ossetian media is more radical in fuelling antagonism towards the Georgian side, while Georgian media outlets tend to diminish the role of Ossetian society as a party to the conflict. There are effectively no media organisations on either side which actively work on confidence building between the divided societies. This dimension is randomly covered by certain articles; however, their nature is rather inconsistent.

Conflict resolution or transformation requires active contribution on the part of the media. The state of affairs in this respect is rather grave when it comes to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, with media serving as an obstacle rather than an instrument supporting conflict transformation. What constitutes a serious problem in Tskhinvali is media outlets being resources at the hands of political groups, with very limited, if any, editorial freedom.

The Georgian media outlets, in relation to the conflict, with rare exceptions, focus almost exclusively on the Georgian-Russian perspective, with the Georgian-Ossetian line profoundly blurred. Online media outlets are likely to continue flaring up the conflict either unintentionally or with targeted efforts, unless their approaches to conflict-related issues change.

The Influence of the War in Ukraine on the Georgian Factor in South Ossetia

Shortly after the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, something that can conditionally be called a "gap" appeared between South Ossetia and Georgia. Fearing looming provocations, both parties have since started to look carefully into it. At the highest political level, South Ossetia has supported the special military operation as a sign of the loyalty that officials have traditionally demonstrated to decisions made by the Russian Federation. However, in general, the launch of the special operation caused concerns among the local communities, which, considering the history of military actions that were regularly seen on the territory of the separatist region from 1989 to 2008, does not come as a surprise.

Importantly, in light of the propaganda campaign promoted by the Russian media, the majority of the population demonstrated understanding of the special military operation, yet, they disapproved of the participation of Ossetian military servicemen in it, which might be driven by concerns over preserving the national genetic pool.

Moreover, at a certain, the likelihood of the resumption of the war with Georgia was rather high, against the backdrop of speculations concerning the so called "second front," following pressure from a number of Western countries and the Georgian opposition. One of the arguments put forward by said opposition was Azerbaijan's victory in Karabakh, which resulted in the dissolution of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, and Armenia's official recognition of the new reality. Even the presence of the Russian 4th military base safeguarding South Ossetia's security failed to mitigate the resulting anxiety among local communities.

Georgia's solidarity towards Ukraine goes back to 2008, when Kyiv stood by Saakashvili not only morally, but also militarily, in the latter's confrontation with Russia. Therefore, Volodymyr Zelensky's expectations for Tbilisi to make reciprocal steps were not without fair grounding. However, Georgia's incumbent authorities recognised the possibility of a renewed military conflict with Russia. It will suffice to say that Western support publicly expressed towards Georgia forced the Russian Federation to double its stake on the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Yet, at the end of the day, not only did Georgia choose not to open a second front, but it also refused to join the anti-Russian sanctions, which ultimately led to both countries reintroducing direct flights and increasing trade volume.

This decision gave the EU reason to accuse the Georgian authorities of pursuing pro-Russian politics, however, the latter managed to provide justification for their actions and to reaffirm their Western aspirations.

It has since become evident to the West that the Georgian incumbent authorities have no intention of confronting the Russian government. The West has thus shifted its focus to supporting the opposition

forces to change the situation through parliamentary elections. In addition, Georgia has been granted EU candidacy status, which implies the irreversible implementation of certain obligations, first and foremost being the joining of anti-Russian sanctions.

Such developments will disrupt the fine line Georgia has been treading; a balance which conflates the opportunities for European integration together with maintaining benevolent neighbourly relations with Russia.

Understandably, the Russian Federation, for its part, has leverage of its own – a possible referendum on South Ossetia's unification with Russia, an idea which was actively promoted by president Bibilov, stemming from his own, personal, interests. In this regard, it should be noted that the Georgian establishment consists of many layers of politicians who believe that the issue of Georgia's territorial integrity can be resolved only with Russia's support. They also believe that such a prospect is rather realistic.

Developments on the Russian-Ukrainian frontline are being observed by multiple stakeholders, who will shape their policies not only with Russia, but also with the West, based on the outcomes of the war. Georgia is one of these stakeholders. Paradoxically, Russia's military success will enable the Georgian authorities to strengthen their reputation before the electorate by demonstrating an appropriate communication strategy with Russia in the runup to the parliamentary elections. At the same time, if Russia sustains defeat, it may lead to a governance crisis and the ascension of the radical opposition to power, and ultimately a series of consequences such as anti-Russian sanctions, the opening of that "second front," etc.

Based on the above said, the security issue remains pressing for South Ossetia. Visions on how to resolve this problem vary across groups of South Ossetia's population. While most senior citizens are eager to see South Ossetia uniting with the Russian Federation, the younger generation side with the idea to strengthen South Ossetian statehood, especially in light of recent developments in the region's geopolitics with regards to Nagorno-Karabakh being absorbed by Azerbaijan. Therefore, South Ossetia should continue its efforts to strengthen its economic and defence capabilities. They believe that agreements with Russia and the latter's presence do not suffice to ensure security in South Ossetia. Efforts should be made to develop statehood and attain a maximum level of self-sufficiency, which implies independence from all parties as the only pathway to preserving a unique culture and national identity.

Currently, the first two options are more or less tied to the Russian Federation which, in the event of considerable warming of relations, might offer the launch of a direct dialogue between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi. However, neither party seems ready for this. It is hard to imagine that any politician in Tskhinvali would propose starting a direct dialogue with Georgia without first asking Moscow. However, unlike them, Ossetian youth are asking questions about past relations and future prospects with Georgia in relation to the identification of a national project and national consciousness.

Currently, the so-called *civic dialogue for confidence building* is the only mechanism facilitating a certain degree of approximation between Georgians and Ossetians. Compared to other formats, the

dialogue is the one which brings “the difficulties of translation” between Georgians and Ossetians most to the fore. Such difficulties are evident in the fact that the parties perceive the Russian factor in different ways. Often, Georgian participants of the dialogue try to separate this dimension from the lives of Ossetians, or, in other words, to downplay the role it plays for South Ossetia. The Georgian side also tries to portray the events of 1991, 1992, and 2008 as history that needs to be forgotten, which is categorically unacceptable to the Ossetian participants, who believe that friendly neighbourly relations require at least official recognition of one’s wrongdoings.

However, in spite of the above mentioned, there was a risk that such a “misunderstanding” between the participants of the civic dialogue would snowball from active discussion into a momentum for political initiatives for both official sides of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Yet, as a result of the introduction of a law on foreign agents introduced first in Russia and then in South Ossetia, all non-governmental organisations were shut down and, therefore, all contacts established under the Georgian-Ossetian dialogue formats were eventually brought to the minimum.

In South Ossetia, in the presence of a weak civil society, domestic issues that are regulated only by the state are being left beyond the public’s attention. These include social inequalities, arbitrary distribution of rehabilitated accommodations and housing, indirect discrimination, and the violation of human rights, including the freedom of movement.

The isolation of South Ossetia hampers the development of economic ties for attracting investments, while strict control over movement discourages foreign nationals from visiting South Ossetia. Indeed, there have been growing concerns over the republic’s security. The majority of the local population has been looking to purchase property in neighbouring North Ossetia in order to have a “plan B” if needs be, and many end up living there permanently.

Experts believe that the warming of relations between Moscow and Tbilisi has been perceived with great caution in South Ossetia, which may lead to an increase in the number of those who support unification with the Russian Federation.

Implication of the War in Ukraine on Georgian-Ossetian Bilateral Relations

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a special military operation against Ukraine under the ruse of protecting the Russian-speaking population of the Donbas and Luhansk separatist regions, and defeating ‘Ukrainian fascism’. The operation immediately snowballed into a full-fledged, conventional, uninterrupted war which, with varying dynamics, and now into its third year, continues to change the geopolitical setting. These changes are especially palpable in countries under the so-called domain of Russian influence, including Georgia and its de-facto republics under Russia’s effective control. More specifically, these changes have impacted the attitudes of the parties to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Two years into the war, it would be interesting to track changes in the perceptions of Georgian and Ossetian societies towards the war, and towards each other.

The paper aims to describe attitudes to the conflict rooted in Georgian and Ossetian societies, and to analyse any changes in light of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Importantly, the analysis provided in the paper is based on the most recent developments and trends. However, it is not without its limitations: In South Ossetia, in the absence of wide-scale sociological research, there is a dire lack of reliable information pertaining to every aspect of public life. Georgia is better off in this regard; however, there is still a scarcity of in-depth sociological research.

The Changing Attitudes of Ossetian Society and the Ruling Elite Following the War in Ukraine

Unlike advanced democracies, where public opinion plays a significant role in shaping a state’s political choices both domestically and internationally, in non-democratic political systems, such as that of South Ossetia, it is political preferences that often shape public preferences. Since the authorities have almost total control over information sources, they have the capacity to influence public opinion without significant effort. Against this backdrop, understanding public opinion and sentiments in South Ossetia requires examination of the narrative promoted by the ruling elite. This narrative, in turn, is impacted by the influence of the Russia-Ukraine war on the de-facto republic.

Implication of the War on South Ossetia’s Economy

In the effective absence of a local economy, South Ossetia is entirely dependent on Russia. The 2024 budget of the de-facto republic will amount 8.836.000.000 rubles, including 35 million funded by Russia. Russia provides financial support to South Ossetia’s development through the *Social-Economic Development Investment Programme*, which aims to improve infrastructure, implement investment projects in the economic sector, and to create an environment and jobs conducive to attracting foreign investment. However, it should also be noted that the programme has proven itself insufficient to

ensure the sustainable development of the de-facto republic, since South Ossetia has become increasingly dependent on the programme's support. Indeed, it has reached a point where the de-facto republic is totally dependent on the Russian Federation. The programme has been implemented in three-year fiscal cycles since 2015. From 2020 to 2022, a total of 4.5 billion rubles were allocated to South Ossetia (equalling some 72 million USD at that time), while in 2023-2025, the [amount](#) stipulated by the programme amounted to 3 billion 587 million rubles (approximately 52 million USD as of March 2023). With ongoing inflation of the Russian Ruble, by February 2024, the amount had further dwindled, to approximately 39 million USD, which means that since the war, the financial resources allocated to South Ossetia have been effectively halved.

Implication of the War on Security in South Ossetia

The war has also impacted the security context in the de-facto republic. Some ethnic Ossetian soldiers fighting in Ukraine are servicemen contracted at the fourth military base under the Russian Southern Military District deployed in South Ossetia, while others are volunteer fighters. It should be noted that the fourth military base answers directly to Russia's federal ministry of defence, and the decision as to whether or not its staff should participate in the war is up to the ministry, not the de-facto authorities. Even though South Ossetia's involvement in the war bears a rather symbolic nature, it nevertheless damages the de-facto republic: Based on the information obtained from open sources, more than 40 soldiers from South Ossetia [have fallen in action](#) and more have been declared missing.

Traumas associated with the war have taken a toll on survivors returning to their home region. Their mental health status became a subject of public concern in South Ossetia after two high-profile [incidents](#) in particular: One of the returning soldiers opened fire at opposition politicians having lunch in a local cafe, while another fighter took the life of an all-favourite local character nicknamed *Tsugri*.

Military trainings in the Southern Military Districts have become rare, as the majority of the troops have been sent to Ukraine. Joint military trainings, rather intense before the war, put together militaries from South Ossetia, North Ossetia and the Russian Federation. Two years into the war, such trainings have become less frequent, with the training format of those troops remaining in Tskhinvali limited to light exercises, especially towards the end of 2023.

Public Perceptions

The prolonged war has intensified the perception of insecurity among the population of South Ossetia, driven by the lack of resources safeguarding security on the one hand, and perceived 'revanchist plans' coming from Tbilisi, on the other.

Sending ethnic Ossetians of the Tskhinvali region to the war, and transferring servicemen of the fourth military base to the frontline in Ukraine, was not welcomed by South Ossetia's local communities. However, public sentiments were only reflected in statements made by opposition politicians." ["Canon fodder"](#) is how Ossetian soldiers have been referred to in Tskhinvali, amidst concerns and discontent with ["threats to the genetic pool"](#).

In spite of displeasure with regard to the implications of the war, Georgia still maintains the image of the enemy. Parallel to the war, mistrust towards the Georgian side further deepened in Tskhinvali, where the public awaits Georgian ‘revanchism,’ fearing that Tbilisi will resort to the use of force at its earliest convenience. This is driven in part by long-standing and successful anti-Georgian and Russian disinformation, and is also promoted by occasional reckless [statements](#) from Georgian politicians and impromptu shoutouts at protest rallies. However, it should be noted that such expressions are not representative of the official stance of the Georgian central authorities nor the majority of the Georgian public.

To the population of South Ossetia, security is paramount, to the extent that they agree to integrate with Russia in order to have their security guaranteed.

There is no significant difference between the perceptions of different generations. The history of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, ‘recorded with extreme attention’, equating Georgians with the aggressor, is taught to young people of South Ossetia at schools and in university. The situation varies across the regions [in this regard](#). While Tskhinvali-based youth display radically anti-Georgian sentiments, young people living in Java or Akhlagori have demonstrated less intense anti-Georgian attitudes.

The Stance of the Ruling Elites

The de-facto authorities have demonstrated support to the war at every stage, since South Ossetia is indebted to Russia and ‘the time has come to pay their dues’. It is clear that if Russia wins the war, it would mean the strengthening of South Ossetia. And yet, the war has further exacerbated the security and economic situation in the de-facto republic. The ruling elites are fully aware that the significantly curtailed budget will have dire consequences on the quality of life for South Ossetia’s communities in light of an already dire social and economic situation, and will present numerous institutional problems. However, anticipation and expectation in Tskhinvali might be drastically different from the reality we face two years into the war. The worsened situation is very likely to lead to greater discontent among the public, which is against the interests of the ruling elites, who plan to stay in power for a long time to come.

In 2022 and 2023, the Georgian and Ossetian sides struck a deal on two important matters. On 18 August 2022, the de-facto security council ordered the opening of checkpoints which had been closed for an extended time. Following this decision, local communities can now cross through the Odzisi-Mosabruni (Razdakhani) and Perevi-Kardzmani checkpoints during the last ten days of every month. A landmark event of 2023 was the opening of the Zonkari water reservoir and operation of Tiriponi irrigation channel to its full capacity. As a result of the deal between the parties, since September 2023, villages on both sides of the Administrative Boundary Line have had full access to irrigation water provided through the Tiriponi channel, allowing them to cultivate both annual and perennial crops. Unhindered access to irrigation water also provides an opportunity for local communities to engage in new trade and entrepreneurial activities.

Attitudes of the Georgian Public and Authorities in Light of the War

Public Attitudes

The war in Ukraine has dire implications in the eyes of the Georgian public. For some Georgians, with reopened wounds as they remember the 2008 war, it has served as a reminder that it is paramount to turn down any opportunity to resolve conflict by use of force and violence. For this part of society, armed conflicts, with all associated elements, bring nothing but burden and devastation to any society. This is a widely held view, especially among those groups who have suffered from catastrophic consequences of the war – IDPs from South Ossetia residing in IDP settlements, communities residing along the ABL who had friendly relations, as well as sustaining emotional ties with ethnic Ossetian citizens, and young people who try to rationally rethink a conflict that originated with the previous generation. Most Georgians are well aware that the core of the problem lies in interpersonal relations, rather than in territorial issues, the resolution of which has no value without reconciliation between the divided communities.

In other societal groups, the war has fuelled revanchist sentiments. These groups believe that ‘whatever has been lost through war can only be reclaimed through war’. Even though these groups have sought to mislead the Ossetian and Abkhazian societies, luckily, they have failed to influence the overall public attitude, since they tend to be small in number.

South Ossetia’s participation in the war and the ideological support that South Ossetian communities have demonstrated towards the cause, have not changed the attitudes of the Georgian-controlled population towards the former to the worse. It is difficult to say with absolute certainty what each citizen thinks, since there has been no wide-scale sociological research. However, observation of the general picture, personal conversations, focus group discussions with various societal groups and opinions expressed online, suggest that those residing in Georgia proper do not display drastically negative views towards South Ossetian society. Indeed, positive sentiments are dominant in those groups of society who had friendly relations with Ossetians – people living in various regions of Georgia who were neighbours to Ossetians before the latter’s mass 1990s exodus, as well as communities residing in villages adjacent to South Ossetian municipalities, with which they enjoyed active trade and entrepreneurial relations, kinship ties, friendship and, therefore, tight emotional connections. These groups also include those ethnic Georgians who, by the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, ran joint business ventures with ethnic Ossetians in the vicinity of Ergneti marketplace.

At the same time, it should be noted that the adult population are strongly convinced that the Georgian side sustained greater damage than the South Ossetian one, on account of the conflict on the one hand, and the war on the other.

Unlike the adult population, young people display relatively neutral attitudes. Some of them believe that such neutrality has been shaped by a lack of knowledge of the past, which raises their concerns and motivates them to learn more about history. Young people also tend to bring up the need for mutual

compromise. This segment of society has relatively impartial attitudes towards the conflict, and demonstrates greater empathy towards the Ossetian side.

Stance of the Authorities

Regaining territorial integrity is one of the top national priorities in Georgia. The peaceful resolution of the territorial issues is an extremely rare exception of a vision to which both authorities and opposition consent. The Russia-Ukraine war has only reinforced peace rhetoric in government circles, and has further cemented the official position of the state to seek compromise with South Ossetians only through peaceful means. The perceived danger of Georgia opening a so-called second front has raised serious concerns among South Ossetian society. Greater emphasis made by Georgian officials on the peace rhetoric has been aimed mostly at debunking these fears. Indeed, Georgia opening a “second front” would be rather difficult, to put it mildly, as, by signing the Association Agreement with the European Union in 2014, Georgia concluded an agreement on non-use of force, individually, with each of 27 EU member states. Violation of this agreement by launching military aggression would mean Georgia’s exclusion from the European integration process (Georgia has long declared its European aspirations) or, in the worse-case scenario, the long-term abortion of the process.

The situation remains unchanged with regard to the Georgian central authority’s perception of the parties of the conflict. Russia is still standing on the other side of the conflict, which means that there has been no revision of attitudes towards the conflict in governing circles. Perceptions of the conflict almost never get down to the Georgian-Ossetian layer, and are still being discussed through the Georgian-Russian lens.

Afterword

It seems that the Russia-Ukraine war, and future uncertainties related to the Russian factor, will continue to negatively impact Georgian-Ossetian relations. Under such circumstances, channelling all efforts towards conflict transformation within Georgian and Ossetian societies remains the only pragmatic way to move forward.