

REGIONAL CONFLICTS

DEFROSTING THE CONFLICT IN TSKHINVALI: IS THE “REVOLUTION OF ROSES” STILL GOING ON?

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On 23 November, 2003 we all witnessed unexpected political developments in Georgia, as a result of which the Shevardnadze regime, absolutely unable to cope with the crying social, economic, and political problems, was removed by a crowd driven to despair by a decade of stagnation. This challenge, which put an end to Ed-

uard Shevardnadze's long political career, is a Damocles Sword of sorts for the new Georgian cabinet and President Mikhail Saakashvili, whose charisma determined the outcome of the November events and kindled hopes for a better future. The new government received a huge credit of confidence which must be repaid.

Challenges

The new Georgian leaders strengthened their authority by bringing the crisis in Adjara to a successful end and deposing the clan of Abashidze, but, by the same token, inflating popular expectations. Aware that the long-festered problems, especially social and economic, take time to resolve, the government has to strive for instant (real or virtual) success to keep up the level of confidence and boost the cabinet's legitimacy. At the same time, Saakashvili and his government have to justify the efforts the West has been pouring into our state's future.

To preserve public confidence and ensure stability of the still developing system of power, Mikhail Saakashvili can score real or imaginary victories, which should be regarded as mere propaganda. In dealing with the West, he has to achieve real success in building the state: territorial integrity and restored jurisdiction over two breakaway regions (Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region) can be regarded as such.

This is a sort of “political order” from Georgian society, which supported the revolution and Saakashvili personally. This support was interpreted as a resolute rejection of Shevardnadze’s era associated mainly with defeats and the state’s inability to defend national interests. We can say that the nationalist feelings which accumulated while the country was sliding deeper into the political crisis brought Saakashvili to power; today they should be satisfied. The May 2004 events in Adjara showed that the future of the new regime depends very much on its ability to execute this “order.”¹

The new leaders have to demonstrate to their foreign partners and society that they are resolved to integrate into Western political structures, leave the Shevardnadze epoch behind, and strengthen Georgian statehood politically and economically. The country should fight and defeat corruption and smuggling, two intertwined evils hampering economic development and preventing political stability.

The efforts to stop smuggling laid bare the deep-rooted systemic crisis of the Shevardnadze period: illegal domestic markets are connected with the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region; it is there that the flows of smuggled goods start (at the crossings on River Inguri in Abkhazia and the Ergneti market in the Tskhinvali Region). The money thus obtained is used to fund the separatist regimes, the corrupted officials of the Georgian power structures, local clans, and local administrations of the areas adjacent to the conflict zones. The military of the Russian peacekeeping forces have their share in illegal economic activities, which makes the situation worse: the fight against smuggling has acquired undertones of interstate relations.

The Saakashvili government, obviously, has to address several problems simultaneously: the urgent need for political and economic transformations inside the country; conflict settlement; and building essentially brand-new relations with Russia. At the same time, the political course in Georgia’s relations with the West should be continued.

The above raises several questions: Can any of these problems be successfully resolved separately from the others? Can domestic changes be accomplished if the conflicts remain unresolved? Can relations with Russia be successfully organized if the country aims at integrating into the Euroatlantic structures and if the domestic conflicts dominated by the Russian factor remain unresolved? The answers to these questions are negative. The above problems are interconnected and are closely related to the problem of Georgian statehood. This raises another question: What kind of state are we trying to build: a democratic or a quasi-democratic one? A sovereign or a quasi-sovereign one? Do we insist on the borders recognized in international agreements or are we prepared to accept the ones which actually exist? If we proceed from the desire to make Georgia a genuinely sovereign state able to protect the national interests of its citizens within the internationally recognized borders, we must deal with the above problems simultaneously.

Can Georgia do this? It can if the state opts for a peaceful road of sustainable development so that the country’s leaders can use their meager political resources to address these problems. How can we reach the peace badly needed for the state’s democratic development if there are still two ethno-regional conflicts smoldering on Georgian territory? What sort of peace does Georgia need? Can the country accept peace without the two former autonomies, or does it need peace within its internationally recognized borders?

In the former case, if Georgia accepts its sovereignty within the present (actual) borders and develops within them, it will achieve the peace badly needed for systemic domestic changes and for its further more or less smooth development. In the latter case, it will either have to hope for the peace it desires in the long-term perspective, or for achieving it in the short term by engaging in a new confrontation and facing new challenges at home and abroad.

In both cases the desired peace is not guaranteed. In the first case, if Tbilisi abandons its claims to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a crisis of the still shaky political system will be inevitable. Indeed, the idea of a united Georgia is one of the pillars on which the system born from the revolution rests. This idea is

¹ In May 2004, when the situation in Adjara reached its peak, the non-parliamentary opposition to Saakashvili stepped up its activities in Tbilisi. Had the government failed to promptly defuse the situation, the ranks of the opponents of the revolution would have swelled with new members and antirevolutionary rallies could have taken place.

Saakashvili's mission, therefore the first alternative is absolutely unacceptable. The second alternative looks more probable: Georgia can either count on a long process of conflict settlement by gradually increasing the involvement of mediators² (international organizations or countries) to create peaceful conditions for domestic systemic changes, or resolve to use force to ensure the stability of its political and economic expanse needed to start reforms.³

The events going on since the end of May in South Ossetia show that the Georgian leaders prefer to use force. Is this true?

Why “the Republic of South Ossetia?”

In his inauguration speech delivered in the Gelati monastery Saakashvili promised to restore Georgia's territorial integrity; he confirmed his promise in May 2004 when he successfully coped with the Adjarian crisis. Georgia waited with bated breath for more victorious “inroads” by the young president. All were convinced that Sukhumi's turn had come: defeat in the war with Abkhazia in the first half of the 1990s is still causing pain in the Georgian political establishment; it is regarded as a birth injury of Georgian statehood. Sure enough, Tskhinvali was never forgotten, but the economic damage and moral wound inflicted by the loss of Abkhazia were much more painful.

On 4 June, 2004, the Georgian government sent humanitarian aid (mineral fertilizers) to the people in the conflict zone. Contrary to logic, the aid was sent not to the west of the country but to the heart of it, to Shida Kartli (South Ossetia). Just one month after the events in Adjaria, the nation seems caught in a feeling of *déjà vu*. The central government insisted that the local people should accept the gift from the president, while the leaders of the autonomy rejected it. This brought to mind the scene on the River Choloki (the administrative border of the Autonomous Republic of Adjaria).

The problem is not limited to re-integration of South Ossetia into Georgia. This all started with anti-smuggling efforts. On 31 May, 2004, the Georgian government dispatched a unit of the Ministry of the Interior to the Tskhinvali Region to stop smuggling. The Ergneti market, from which smuggled goods were distributed across the country, was closed.

Why then were anti-smuggling efforts launched in South Ossetia and not in Abkhazia? Cigarettes, petroleum products, flour, and even drugs and weapons are smuggled in large quantities across the Inguri River. South Ossetia was selected for the following reasons: ethnic tension between the Georgians and Ossets in South Ossetia was much lower than in Abkhazia; during the conflict of 1990-1992 the Tskhinvali Region did not experience large-scale ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population as happened in Abkhazia; the ethnic balance between the Ossets and Georgians in South Ossetia remained the same, while the confidence level rose.

This explains why the republican leaders started fighting smuggling in this region. They were convinced that this would not cause a violent reaction among the local people, something that could be expected in Abkhazia. Clearly, Saakashvili and his circles tried to repeat the Adjarian alternative. For several reasons, the anti-smuggling efforts could not be detached from the other problems described above: the Tskhinvali Region through which smuggled goods travel inland is a conflict zone; despite the high level of mutual confidence between the two main ethnic groups, the memory of their confrontation twelve years ago still lingers, so everything the central government planned could be interpreted as pressure on the Ossets and cause another upsurge of mutual mistrust; smuggling is supported by local clans, the South

² The U.N. is working in Abkhazia, while the OSCE is involved in South Ossetia. When talking about broader involvement, I not only mean a larger number of countries or organizations involved, but also wider missions and mandates of those present.

³ A certain part of the Georgian political elite favors the second option; it remains to be seen, however, whether Georgia has enough forces to establish peace and stability in case of military intervention in the mutinous regions and, more important still, whether it will be able to prevent destabilization of other regions.

Ossetian authorities, high ranking military among the Russian and North Ossetian peacekeepers, as well as Georgian clans connected with the local authorities; the peacekeepers are present in the conflict zone on the strength of international documents; and Georgia is limited in its actions by certain international agreements (the Dagomys agreements of 24 July, 1992), therefore any initiative uncoordinated with the Mixed Control Commission made up of Russian, Georgian, and North and South Ossetian representatives violates these agreements.

Because of the above, the counter-smuggling efforts had been transferred to another sphere: restoration of the country's territorial integrity. The Georgian government failed to prevent its counter-smuggling efforts from developing into another confrontation with the separatist sentiments. Was it a conscious choice? It is hard to give a straight answer. One thing is clear, though: the events in Vanati (a village in South Ossetia), when Ossetian armed groups took 50 Georgian policemen prisoner, came as an unpleasant surprise for the president, who was then on a visit to Iran (on 7-9 July, 2004). The statements that came from Minister of State Security Vano Merabishvili and First Foreign Minister Deputy Giorgy Gomiashvili showed that these were unexpected complications. The Georgian side undertook several humanitarian actions to confirm its peaceful intentions and show the Ossetian side that the struggle with smuggling, which affects the interests of the clan of Kokoity (head of South Ossetia), was not aimed against the Ossets. For example, Sandra Rulovs, President Saakashvili's wife, visited the region, where she planned to meet children in Georgian and Ossetian villages; children were sent to vacation in Chakvi on the Black Sea coast; and flour and other foodstuffs were regularly delivered to the villages in the conflict zone. The response from the separatist authorities was unexpected: the president's wife was accused of causing more tension; Alik Kozaev, who organized the seaside camps for children from the conflict zone, was arrested; and the response to the humanitarian aid delivered in the name of the Georgian president, as well as to the visits by a children's football team and dance group from Tbilisi, etc. was negative.

The Georgian leaders were obviously mistaken when they decided to repeat the Adjarian scenario in South Ossetia. They naturally did not want to reduce to naught the progress already attained in Georgian-Ossetian relations, that is, mutual confidence and acceptance of coexistence. The government was also mistaken when it expected to isolate the clans involved in smuggling from the rest of society and to see the people of Tskhinvali rise against their leaders as happened in Batumi. There is a great difference between South Ossetia and Adjaria, which central power failed to detect. The leaders of Adjaria never wanted to separate the republic from Georgia; there was no war there to divide the local people; in Adjaria central power was never bound by international agreements⁴; and the status of the Russian military units deployed in Adjaria did not allow them to interfere in the relations between the central authorities and the local powers.⁵

Due to the fact that Tbilisi's tactics in South Ossetia brought to mind the tactics it used in May in Adjaria, the media, some politicians, and experts⁶ started talking about the export of revolution to the breakaway regions. But while in Adjaria export of the "revolution of roses" was successful and the means and methods chosen correctly, in Tskhinvali, the government should have treaded cautiously and opted for different methods. The "export of revolution" obviously failed (due to the above factors). The Georgian government will probably have to try and reintegrate the separatist regions openly.

War or Peace?

On the Choloki River in Adjaria it was Abashidze's troops made up of armed mercenaries that tried to repel the revolution. The notorious rapid deployment unit trained by retired Russian General Netkachev

⁴ Although Abashidze and certain Moscow politicians tried to evoke the Kars Agreement of 1921.

⁵ We should not exclude the possibility of Russia's interference, but this could only have happened on the basis of Abashidze's informal contacts with members of the Russian political and military elite. In South Ossetia the local regime has informal support because of smuggling; at the same time, there is also formal support, in the form of the peacekeeping forces mandate.

⁶ This is especially true of the media, politicians and analysts in Russia.

and the 25th Batumi Brigade of the Georgian Defense Ministry under General Dumbadze scattered as soon as they saw the enemy. The Abashidze regime collapsed while its supporters deserted the leader one by one and in groups. There was an impression in Georgia that the Adjarian events caused Kokoity to mistrust his immediate circle. The president of the self-proclaimed republic disbanded his guard in an effort to ensure personal protection. This does not mean that the events in Tskhinvali will follow the Batumi scenario and that the president will be left alone to face the Tbilisi revolutionaries. First, memories of the 1990-1992 war are feeding nationalism; second, the majority of the local population is tied to Russia economically and by its Russian citizenship, which pulls the Ossets even further away from Georgia. Third, there are Russian military deployed in the region under the international agreements,⁷ which encourages separatism to a certain extent.

The above suggests a question: How many troops can Kokoity gather under his banner? According to independent expert Irakliy Aladashvili,⁸ on the eve of the counter-smuggling operation, the regime commanded the following structures: the Ministry of Defense and Emergencies (about 1,000 people); the Ministry of the Interior (1,100 people plus the Riot Police); the State Security Committee; and the Migration Control Service (the two latter structures have armed units of their own). Kokoity also had 17 T-55 and T-72 tanks under his command; about 80 armored vehicles (BMP-1; BMP-2; BTR-70; BTDM-2); 5 self-propelled assault guns Gvozdika; 3 multiple-launch rocket systems BM-21 Grad; 4 D-44 guns; an automatic anti-aircraft gun ZU-23-2; several 82-mm mortars, and about 5,000 units of automatic fire-arms. As soon as the tension mounted, more materiel and arms started pouring into the region through the Roki Tunnel from Russia (from North Ossetia).

There is information that in the last month Kokoity received about 10 tanks, a large amount of ammunition; and several units of portable Strela-2M and Iгла anti-aircraft missile systems. Gvozdika self-propelled assault guns with a maximum range of 15 km, and Grad multiple-launch rocket systems with a maximum range of 21 km are the most serious weapons at the separatists' command. Even though they cannot reach the city of Gori, the largest Georgian settlement closest to the conflict zone, they can reach targets far beyond the zone. We should not forget that if it comes down to fighting, the Russian, and North Ossetian, peacekeepers will defend the Tskhinvali regime. The North Ossetian peacekeeping battalion Alania has already received 18 new BTR-70 armored personnel carriers and 22 BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles to replace the old ones. The Russian battalion is armed with 38 BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles and 6 armored vehicles. The Georgian battalion has 15 armored vehicles, so it is easy to guess who will have all the advantages if hostilities flare up.

Georgia's obvious military disadvantage puts war out of the question. The tension, though, is high and Tbilisi should shoulder part of the blame for this. Exchanges of fire, which are not infrequent in Tskhinvali and the adjacent villages, have already caused losses.

On many occasions President Saakashvili repeated that he wanted to resolve the conflict peacefully, yet all his steps designed to normalize the situation and fight smuggling came up against Kokoity's refusal to engage in any form of cooperation and Russia's consistent rejection of all Georgian initiatives. The Mixed Control Commission headed by Russian General Nabzdorov (obviously supported by the Russian military command) and the official political circles in Moscow refuse to accept the changes that have occurred in the situation during the past 12 years. They interpret the anti-smuggling efforts as economic pressure on South Ossetia, which violated the Dagomys Agreements, and all attempts at stemming the contraband of weapons and the flows of North Caucasian mercenaries as violations of the MCC's proto-

⁷ There are the following documents: an agreement "On the Principles of Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict" signed by Yeltsin and Shevardnadze in June 1992; an agreement "On Further Development of Peaceful Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict and Setting up a Mixed Control Commission" and the regulations "On Mixed Control Commission"; an agreement "Decision of the Mixed Control Commission on the Peacekeeping Forces" of 6 December, 1994; regulations "On the Basic Principles of Activity of the Military Contingents and Military Observers" and appendices "On Peaceful Settlement in the Zone of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict and the Rights and Obligations of the Commander of the Mixed Forces."

⁸ [www.pankisi.info].

col of 2 July, 2004.⁹ The Georgian side's suggestion that the commission's responsibility zone and the zone of OSCE monitoring should be extended and that the Roki Tunnel should be jointly controlled was rejected.

This shows that Moscow's position and the documents that define Georgia's actions in the confrontation zone are the main obstacles on the road toward settlement. President Saakashvili repeatedly accused the Russian Federation of complicity with the separatists.

Georgia would have been more moderate in its accusation had it not had its foreign partners' support. (Here I have in mind not the Western governments, but the experts working on fresh assessments of Russia's role in the conflict.) In his paper "The Crisis in South Ossetia: A Test of Russia's Conduct," Vladimir Socor of the Jamestown Foundation has pointed out: "Russian troops in South Ossetia are not peacekeepers... These troops have all along served Moscow's policy of cementing South Ossetia's secession... Russia's official role as mediator is a misnomer; in fact, Russia is a participant in the conflict, with an interest of exploiting it, not solving it."¹⁰

This raises a question: Which of the sides—the Kokoity regime or Russia—should the Georgian leaders regard as a party to the conflict? President Saakashvili has hinted that in the case of South Ossetia, it is for Russia and Georgia to sort things out with the help of Western partners and international organizations. There is the danger of this squabbling developing into another armed conflict, even in the presence of neutral mediators. We do not know whether the trust between the Georgian and Osset communities still holds and whether the Georgian government will manage to preserve it (if this trust still exists).

The Future of the "Revolution of Roses"

A child of the November revolution, the nation-building policy has been subjected to a severe test. Saakashvili's government has to select one of two options: either carry out systemic reforms (revolution in-depth) or yield to the temptation to promptly resolve the territorial integrity issue under the pressure of populist feelings. It is hard to separate one problem from the other. It is impossible to change the state without a legally identifiable expanse in which these reforms should take place. It is equally impossible to develop statehood and move closer to the world community (by which I mean integration into the Euroatlantic structures) without settling relations with Russia, the main obstacles being the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, the attempts of the Georgian government to develop the revolution in-depth and to extend it (to establish control over its economic expanse, in particular) have defrosted the South Ossetian conflict and brought the situation to the brink of armed confrontation.

Deprived of Western support and left alone to face Russia, Georgia will have to either accept the status quo, fight an unequal battle, or capitulate and drop the dreams born from the "revolution of roses". In the latter case, Saakashvili will only preserve the chance of consolidating his power and the power of his group to oppose domestic crises and the revival of Shevardnadze's system. If Georgia and its Western partners manage to influence Russia and prevent the defrosted conflicts from developing into new wars, the revolution will have a chance of going in-depth and spreading gradually without upheavals, ultimately reaching the goals for which it began.

⁹ This is especially true of the fact when the Georgian side discovered and confiscated unguided rockets brought in allegedly for the helicopter peacekeeping unit (not deployed in the conflict zone).

¹⁰ 14 July, 2004, Washington; the full text can be found at [http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/policy_recs-072104.pdf].