

# Georgian conflicts II: Conflict over South Ossetia

IREn5019 No War, No Peace: Frozen Conflicts in the Caucasus  
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# South Ossetia



- The South Ossetia smallest of the four Eurasian de facto states.
- According to the 1989 census: 100,000 out of 160,000 Ossetians lived not in Georgia's South Ossetia Autonomous Region, but in other parts of Georgia.

In South Ossetia: 65,000 – 66.2% Ossetians

Georgian: 29 000 – 29%.

**Language:** Indo-European group and is distinctly related to Iranian (Farsi) but uses the Cyrillic alphabet with Ossetian modifications.

**Religious:** Ossetians and Georgians basically share orthodox Christianity.

# South Ossetia



- Tskhinvali region
- “Georgian enclave” of the Greater Liakhvi gorge - villages populated by ethnic Georgians were razed to the ground by irregular militias
- The contemporary de facto state of South Ossetia – product of a frozen conflict or a fresh warfare?
- De facto states “informational black holes”.

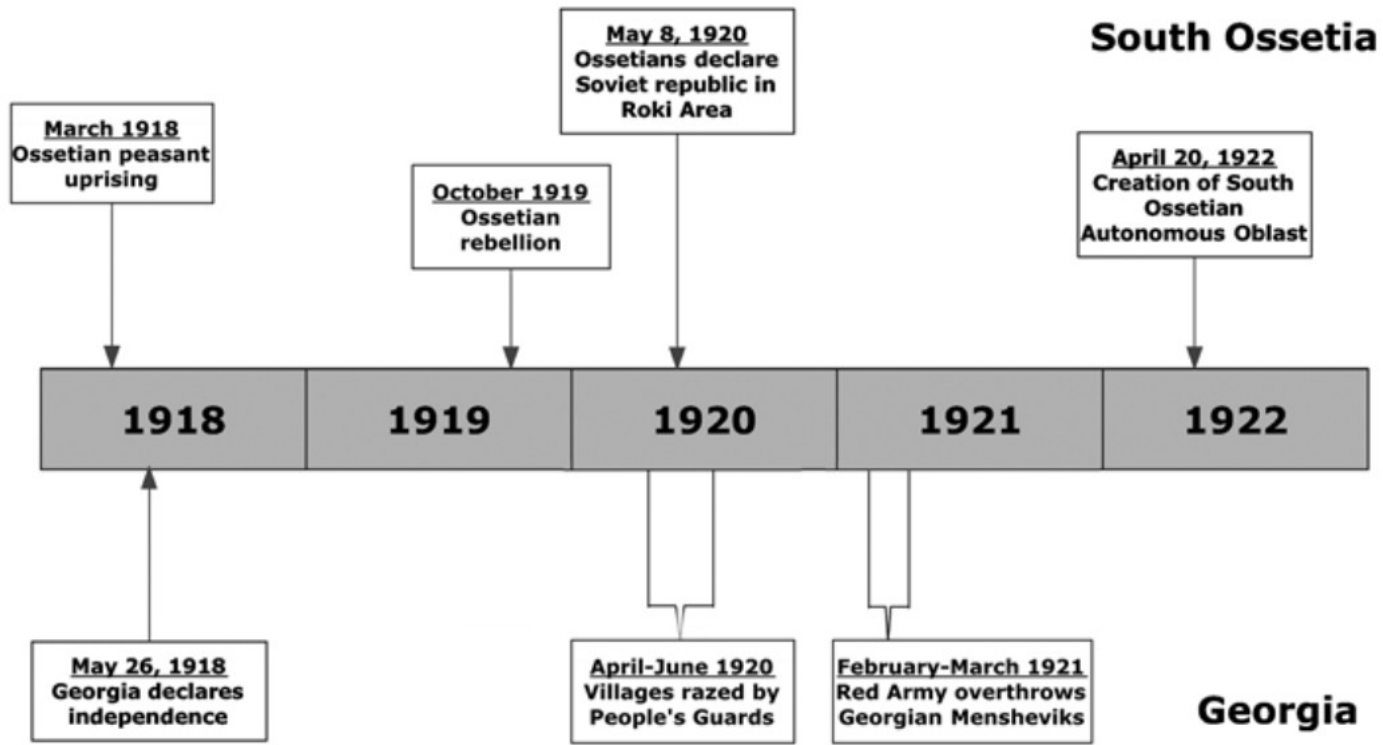
# South Ossetia



- “South Ossetia” – Bolshevik’s invention from 19<sup>th</sup> century – referring to an area that was the heartland of eastern Georgia for centuries.
- The tumultuous period 1918-1920.
- April 1920 a revolt by Bolshevik-led Ossetians: Georgian forces retaliated by destroying 40 Ossetian villages, 5 000 victims and 20,000 – 35, 000 Ossetian residents were forced to flee.
- April 1922 creation of SOAO.
- Ossetians – little evidence of hostility toward ethnic rivals.
- Ossetians hostility in 1980s was primarily a reaction against the chauvinistic tendencies of Georgian nationalism.



## Timeline events 1918-1922



# South Ossetia

- Georgian nationalism - radical, rejectionist and romantic.
- South Ossetia were seen as “ungrateful guests” on historic Georgian soil.
- January 1989 **Ademon Nykhas** Popular Shrine - the South Ossetian Popular Front – Alan Chochiev.
- In the spring of 1989, the leader of Ademon Nykhas, Alan Chochiev, published an **open letter**, declaring his groups support for the Abkhazian campaign against the opening of a Georgian branch of Tbilisi university in Sukhumi, Abkhazia.
- Ademon Nykhas – secession from Georgia and dominance over local Goergians.
- - while Georgian nationalists – abolish South Ossetia’s name and autonomy.

# Mobilization in South Ossetia

- First clashes between Ossetians and Georgians in South Ossetia 26 May 1991, the anniversary of the declaration of Georgian independence in 1918 clashes between irregular groups of Georgians (encouraged by Zviad Gamsakhurdia), leading a protest caravan of Georgian nationalists against SOAO.
- - at first it seemed an isolated incident.
- - however, in July, during the clashes over Abkhazia State University:
  - rumors that Ossetians were aiding the Abkhaz in Sukhumi,
  - rumors, that armed Georgians were headed for South Ossetia.

Nationalist discourse about ancient ethnogenesis and territorial ownership – rationalization of criminal activities, unleashing fear on the both sides.

# Mobilization in South Ossetia

- South Ossetias Communist Party leader Anatolii Chekhoev – denounces the demands of Ademon Nykhas for union with North Ossetia.
- Ossetian militia groups : citizens killed, properties looted, destruction and plunder of private properties.
- Georgian press denounced the rumors about plans for ethnic conflict.
- Ilia Chavchavadze Society issued appeals for nonviolence and “the fraternal brotherhood of nations.”



# Mobilization in South Ossetia

- In August 1989, the Supreme Council of Georgia put forward a *State program on the Georgian Language*.
- This program involved not only increased use of the Georgian language, but also, for example, a Georgian language test for entry into higher education, programs for the promotion of Georgian history, the institutionalisation of previously unofficial Georgian national holidays, creation of republican military units comprising only Georgians, and the resettlement of Georgians in areas dominated by minorities.

# Mobilization in South Ossetia

- In September 1989, Ademon Nykhas - protesting that the Georgian language programme was antidemocratic and discriminatory – since Ossetians lacked working language of Georgian.
- Georgian language street signs in South Ossetia were defaced
- Slogans for Ossetian unification became increasingly common.

# Mobilization in South Ossetia

- In November – a petition was sent to the Georgian Supreme Soviet demanding the status of autonomous republic for South Ossetia.
- Georgian response: remove South Ossetian party chief Chekhoev from office.
- Two days later, Georgian claim of the right of veto USSR laws and of the right to secede – both considered threatening by Ossetians.

# Mobilization in South Ossetia

- In August 1990 Georgian Supreme Soviet passed an election law for the elections scheduled for October 28.
- Provision barring the participation of the Abkhazian Popular Front *Aidgylara* and the South Ossetian movement *Ademon Nykhas*.
- 4% minimum needed for representation in parliament.
- Gamsakhurdia's victory
- Tengiz Sigua – premier
- Tengiz Kitovani – commander of the Georgian National Guard.

# Mobilization in South Ossetia

- The next month, National Congress – extremist opposition – backed by Mkhedrioni led by Jaba Ioseliani – a warlord, ex-convict- against the new government.
- The trio of Sigua, Kitovani, and Ioseliani – decisive importance in Gamsakhurdia's and Georgia's future.

# Armed conflict in South Ossetia

- **On 20 September 1990**, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast declared independence as the “South Ossetian Democratic Soviet Republic.”
- In response to this and as a manifestation of their independence from Tbilisi, the South Ossetians held elections to their parliament in December 9, 1990. According to Ossetian sources, 72% of the population of the republic took part in the election, which exceeds the percentage of the Ossetian population.
- The Georgian response: within days the Georgian Supreme Council cancelled the results of the election and voted to abolish the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast as a separate administrative unit within the Republic of Georgia.

# Armed conflict in South Ossetia

- December 11, South Ossetian legislature voted to subordinate the region directly to Moscow – independent of Georgia.
- December 12, Georgia imposed a state of emergency on Tshkinvali.

## The Spiral of Conflict: The Process of Escalation to War

- South Ossetia adopted a declaration on the “sovereignty of South Ossetia” on September 20, 1990, which emphasized the right of self-determination of the Ossetian people. The demands of South Ossetians at this stage included the following aspects:
  - 1. Convert the South Ossetian Autonomous Region into the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic;
  - 2. Ask the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to absorb South Ossetia in the Soviet Union as an independent entity of the federation;
  - 3. Request that the republics of the USSR sign a treaty of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance with South Ossetia



## The Spiral of Conflict: The Process of Escalation to War

- Adamia's Merav Kostava Society and the Gamsakhurdia "Society of the White George" – mobilized early February 1991 – total blockage of Tskhinvali.
- - blew up the a cliff block the road to North Ossetia and sniped at construction crews, while blockading all other roads and cutting off all electricity and most natural gas supplies to the city.

## The Spiral of Conflict: The Process of Escalation to War

- “They (Ossetians) have no right to a state here in Georgia. They are national minority. Their homeland is North Ossetia ... Here they are newcomers.”
- Gamsakhurdia claims to abolish Ossetian autonomy.



# Political Development in Georgia: Struggle for Independence



- Gamsakhurdia's rule embodied a paradox typical of many young and immature democracies: it had a strong popular mandate but was very soon denounced as authoritarian.
- Negative spiral of ethnic polarization, violence and displacement.
- Adding to the difficulties in achieving political pluralism was the problem of ethnic pluralism.
- The Georgian national liberation movement lacked a clear idea **about how to deal with the issues of the autonomies.**
- Radicalism and aversion to compromise were as widespread among the Abkhaz and Ossetian nationalists as among their Georgian counterparts.



# Civil war in Georgia



# Leaders of paramilitary groupings



# South Ossetia war

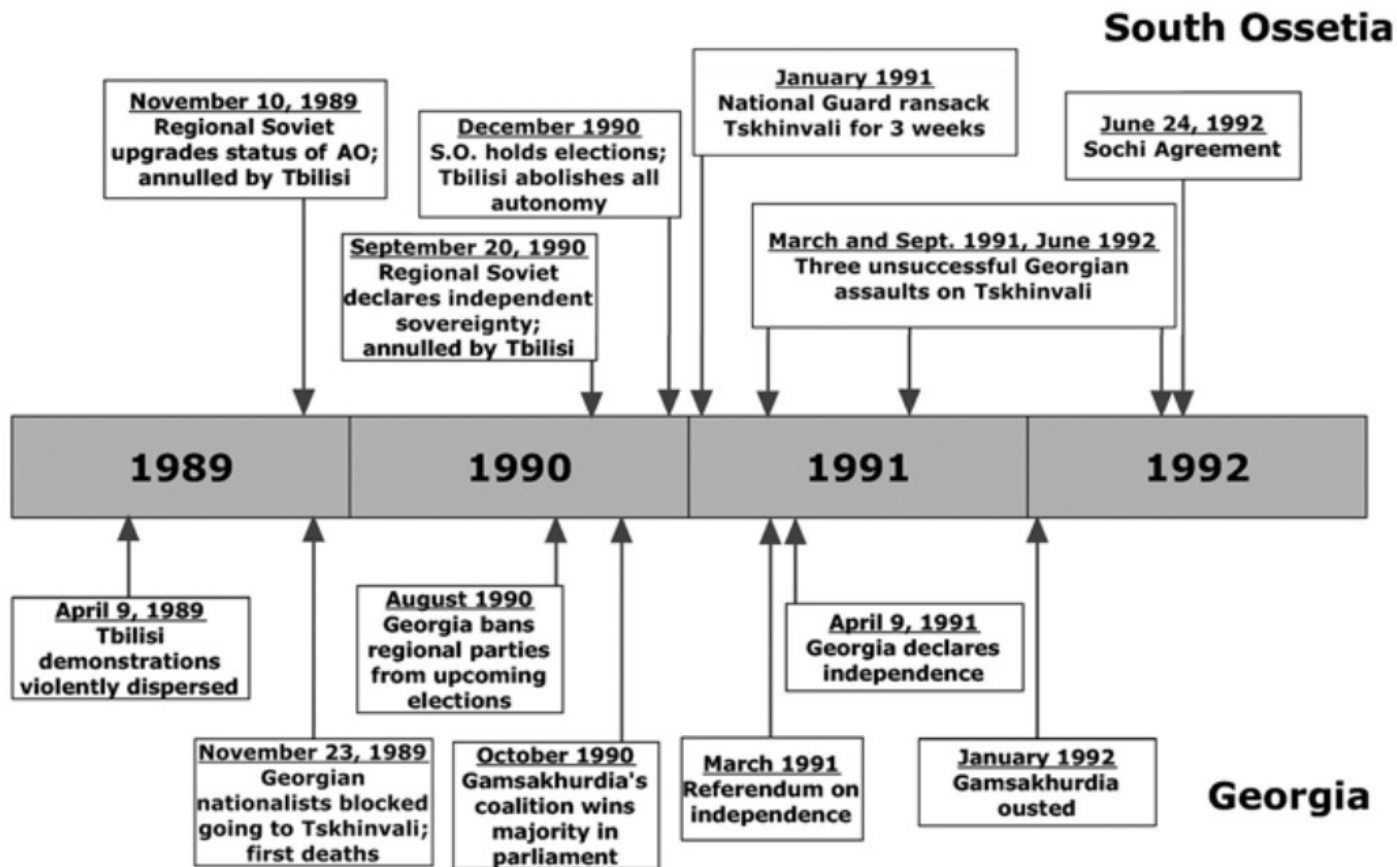
- 1,000 people died in SOAO, 3
- 3, 500 wounded
- 100,000 ethnic Ossetians fled from South Ossetia and Georgia proper, mainly into North Ossetia.
- 23,000 Georgian fled from SO
- 117 out of 365 villages burnt and destroyed
- The flow of refugees into North Ossetia aggravated the tense ethnic situation and played a significant role in the Ossetian-Ingush conflict.

# South Ossetia

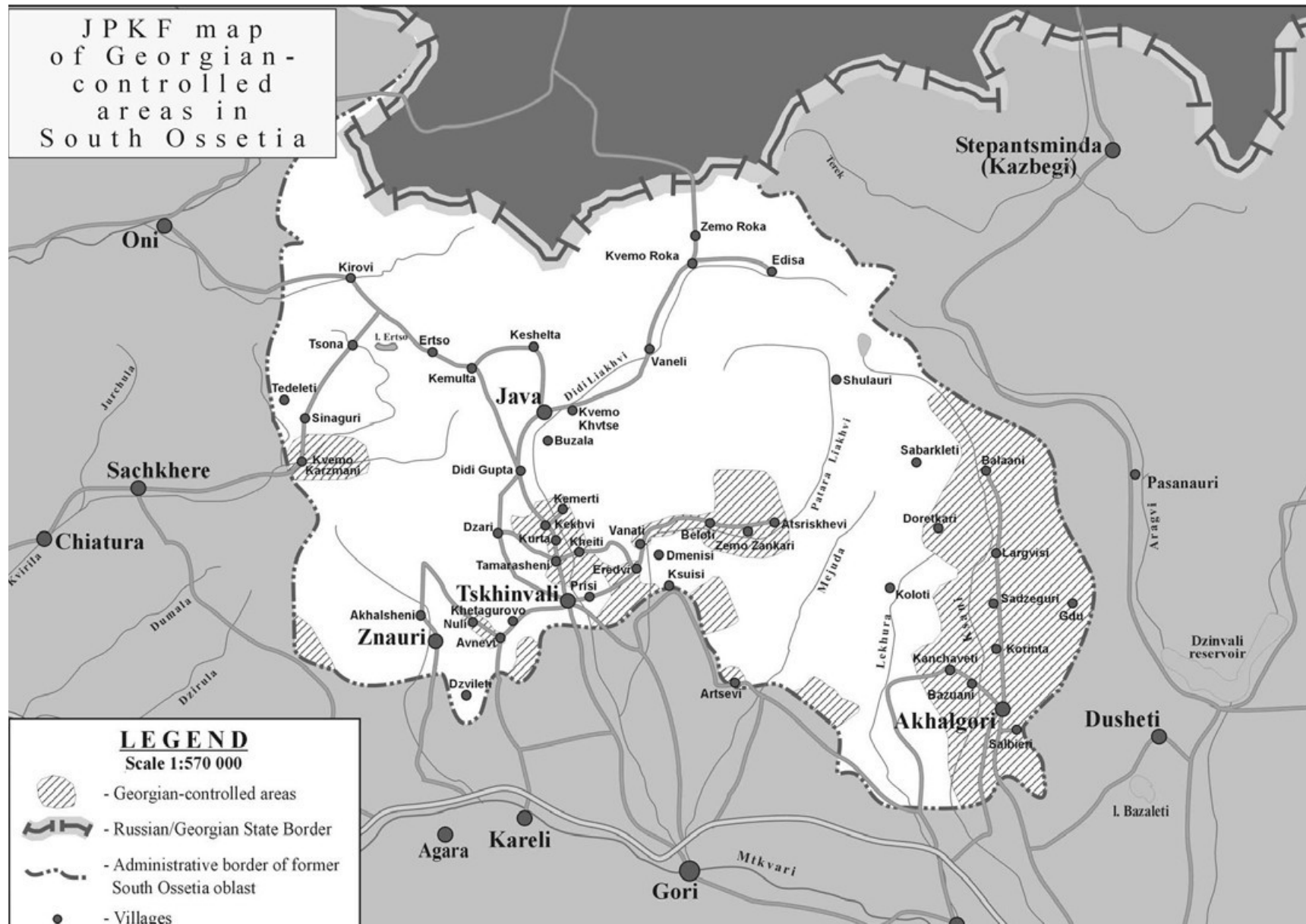
- On 24 June 1992, in the Russian city of Sochi, Russian and Georgian leaders, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze signed ceasefire agreement.
- The Sochi Agreement also set up the Joint Control Commission (JCC), a Joint peacekeeping Forces Group (JPKF) quadrilateral body with Georgian, Russian, North and South Ossetian representatives, plus participation from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.
- Also Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)
- In 1996 the parties signed a Memorandum to Enhance Security and Confidence Building Measures and agreed to step-by-step demilitarization of the zone of conflict and reduction of the number of JPKF frontier posts and guards.



## Timeline events 1989-1992







JPKF map  
of Georgian-  
controlled  
areas in  
South Ossetia

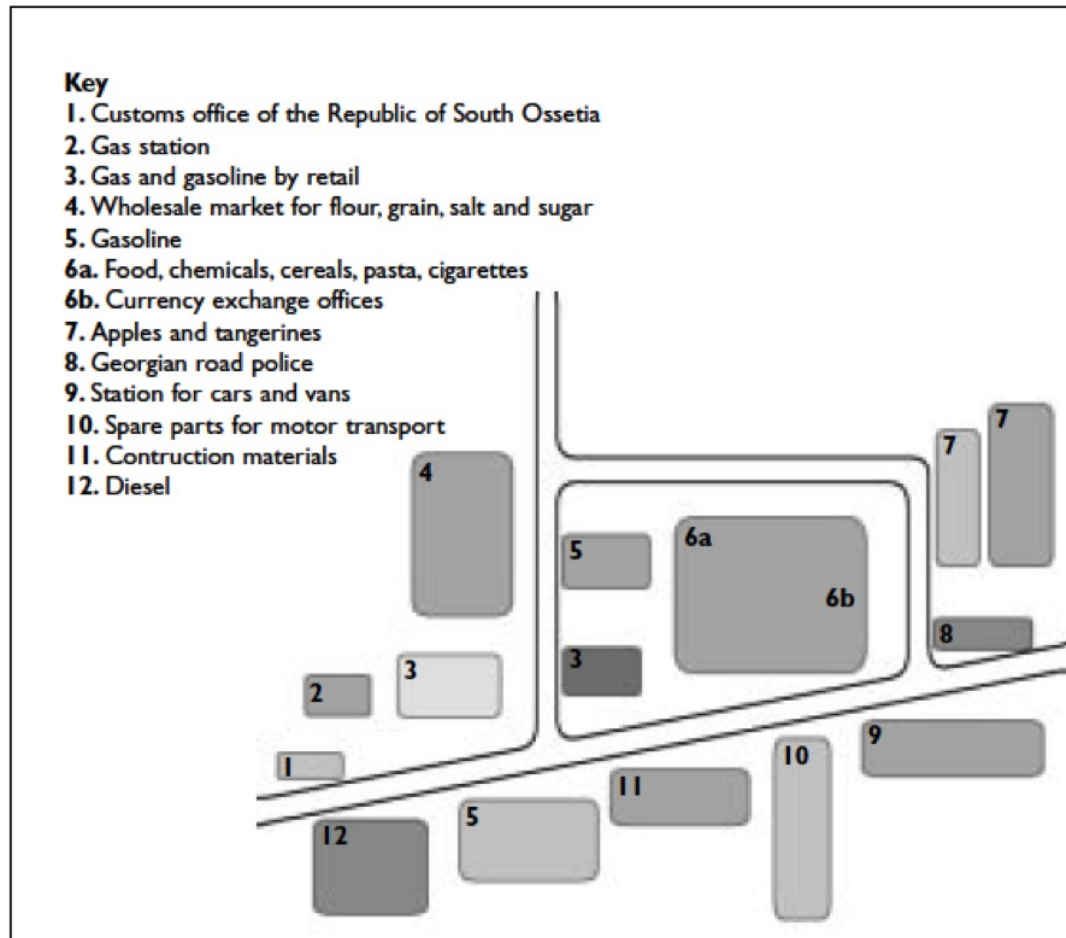


**LEGEND**

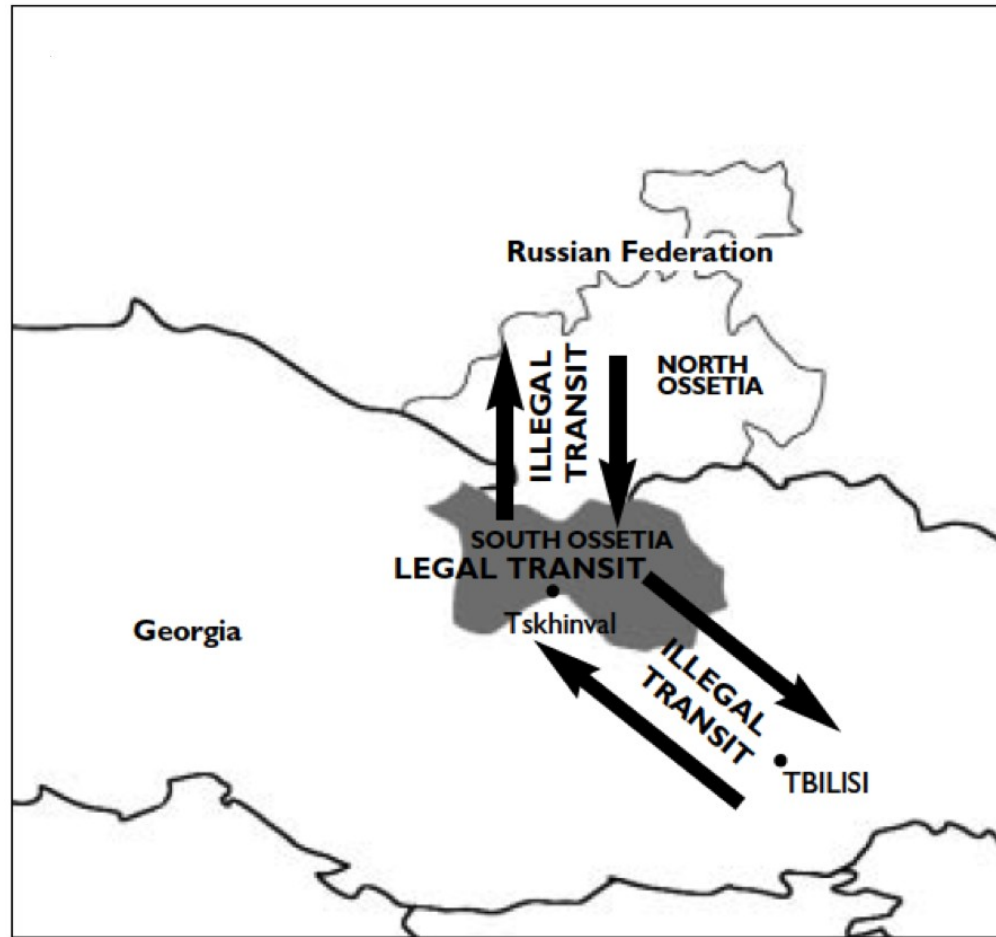
Scale 1:570 000

-  - Georgian-controlled areas
-  - Russian/Georgian State Border
-  - Administrative border of former South Ossetia oblast
-  - Villages

# The Layout of the Ergneti Market in South Ossetia



# Smuggling in South Ossetia



# The second phase of escalation

- Saakashvili's major goals were to accomplish a process of **transformation of Georgian state, struggle against corruption and poverty in the country, achieving NATO membership and territorial integrity.**
- Georgia verbally emphasized its desire for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts. The new Georgian government emphasized the need to deal with the issue of territorial control to build a strong state.
- The first success on this way was achieved in Achara by overthrowing Aslan Abashidze's regime in 2004. This event meant double victory for Georgian government:
  - 1. the victory over autocratic ruler in the name of democracy
  - 2. a victory in the state building process.
- After Adjara had become a part of Georgia without major international complications or an outbreak of violence, the Georgian government started to deal with the issue of South Ossetia.

# The second phase of escalation

- Before 2004 there was no major deterioration of situation on the conflict zone with South Ossetia.
- Georgians and South Ossetians were engaged in active trading across the zone.
- Georgian government believed that the problem was only the corrupt clan of Eduard Kokoiti ruling in South Ossetia and South Ossetians would be willing to struggle against him.
- In 2004, Georgia launched a **campaign against smuggling in South Ossetia**. Unlike expected outcome, Ossetians consolidated behind the de-facto government. That led to a crisis culminating in August 2004, when an outbreak of armed conflicts between Georgian and Ossetian soldiers erupted. Unlike the triumph in Achara this development indicated overall setback and worsening relationship in the conflict zone.

# South Ossetia



- Since the development in 2004, Saakashvili's strategy was to achieve success through **internationalization of Georgian conflicts, NATO membership and gaining support of from the West.**
- In July 2005, President Saakashvili announced a **new peace plan** for South Ossetia that offered substantial autonomy and a three-stage settlement, consisting of *demilitarization, economic rehabilitation, and a political settlement.*
- South Ossetian "president" Eduard Kokoiti rejected the plan.

# South Ossetia

- In March 2007, President Saakashvili proposed another peace plan for South Ossetia that involved creating “transitional” administrative districts throughout the region.
- In July 2007, President Saakashvili decreed the establishment of a commission to work out South Ossetia’s “status” as a part of Georgia.
- The JCC finally held a meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia, in October 2007, but the Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that the Georgian emissaries made unacceptable demands in order to deliberately sabotage the results of the meeting. No further meetings were held.



# Background information



Population  
• 4,4 mil.

Population  
•142 mil.

## Roki Tunnel – Only road passage from Russia to South Ossetia



[http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2008/09/16/world/16georgia\\_600.jpg](http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2008/09/16/world/16georgia_600.jpg)

# Convoy of Russian soldiers by the Caucasus mountains



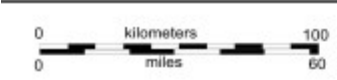
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# Russian forces in Goergia



# The 2008 South Ossetia war



	Railroad		Airport		Road	6000 m
	Georgian offensive (August 7-10)					4000 m
	Russian counteroffensive (August 8-16)					3000 m
	Area shelled by the Georgian artillery					2000 m
	Russian air attacks					1000 m
	Russian naval movements		Russian airborne forces			100 m
	Georgian naval movements		Naval engagement			0 m
	Territory controlled by the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia prior to the war					
	Abkhazian and South Ossetian territory loyal to the Georgian government that was lost to the separatists and Russian forces					
	Georgian territory (outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia) occupied by the Russian army					
	Georgian defensive position after August 11					



# Conflict Analysis: Interests

Stakeholder	Interests
Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Return breakaway regions</li><li>• Display that territorial integrity is under threat</li><li>• Promote NATO membership</li><li>• Demonstrate Russia's aggressiveness</li></ul>
South Ossetia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demonstrate violation of human rights</li><li>• Show that Georgia is aggressive state</li><li>• Get international recognition of their plight</li><li>• Desire for independence or incorporation into Russian Federation</li></ul>
Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Undermine Georgia's territorial integrity</li><li>• Prevent Georgia from joining NATO</li><li>• Send strong message to Ukraine</li><li>• Protect its sphere of influence</li><li>• Control of the Caucasus and its energy resources</li><li>• Promote "regime change" in Georgia? West's recognition of Kosovo? U.S. Missile Defense Shield?</li></ul>

# Conflict Analysis: Interests

Stakeholder	Interests
EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Human rights protection</li><li>• Observance of international law</li><li>• Access to energy resources</li></ul>
NATO/US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Security and stability in the region</li><li>• Observance of international law</li><li>• Energy security</li><li>• Commitment to idea of democracy</li><li>• NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP)</li></ul>



# Conflict Analysis: Actions

Stakeholder	Actions
Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accusing Russia of supporting separatist movements</li><li>• Military attack on Tskhinvali, capital of South Ossetia</li><li>• Accusation of violation of human rights and ethnic cleansing</li><li>• Attack South Ossetian-populated villages in S.O.</li></ul>
South Ossetia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encouraged support from Russia</li><li>• Militias attack and loot Georgian-populated villages in S.O.</li></ul>
Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Disproportionate counter-offensive attack</li><li>• Invasion of Georgian cities and ports</li><li>• Accusation of violation of human rights and ethnic cleansing</li><li>• Recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states</li></ul>
EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shuttle diplomacy between Russia and Georgia</li><li>• Signing ceasefire agreement, ambiguity</li><li>• Accusing Russia of disproportionate response</li><li>• Appeal of use of diplomatic means to resolve conflict</li><li>• Suspension of EU-Russia Partnership talks</li></ul>
NATO/US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accusing Russia of disproportionate response</li><li>• Suspension of NATO-Russia Council</li></ul>

# Georgian soldiers in Gori



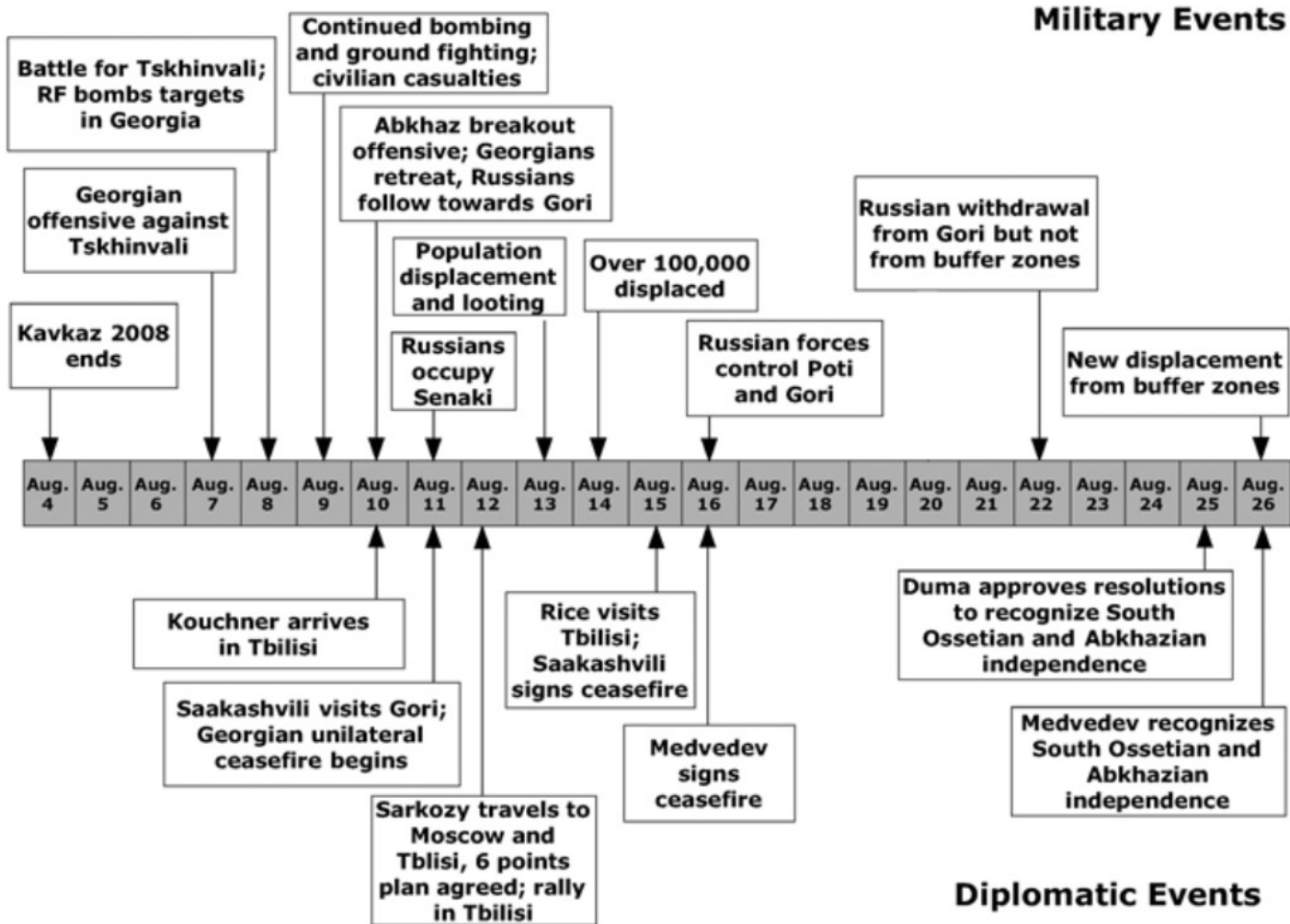
# Tskhinvali: the Aftermath



AFP

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# Timeline events 2008



# The logic of armed conflicts in the South Caucasus

- The armed conflicts in the phase of initiation (a) – the emotional process associated with ethnic mobilization on one hand and the nature of incompatible goals (political) – the escalation of the conflict (b) was ethno-political.
- “frozen” stage (c) - manifold and involve political, economic, territorial aspects and unsuccessful peace building efforts.

# The logic of armed conflicts in the South Caucasus

- Re-escalation phase (d), I draw a distinction with the previous escalation phase (b).
- state is not endangered by popular movement, rather the state itself is the actor.
- The conflict in the 90s - how to define political arrangements in Georgian state; it was **more about the clashes between national projects** and their legitimacy. The conflict in 2008 was more about state borders and territorial integrity.
- radical nationalism of 80s and 90s has changed to a form of state patriotism

# The logic of armed conflicts in the South Caucasus

- The recognition of de-facto independence of South Ossetia by Russia (e) - Georgia has become a country without definite borders of its own territory.
- This will lead to escalation of the conflict in the future.

# Differences between 2 escalation phases

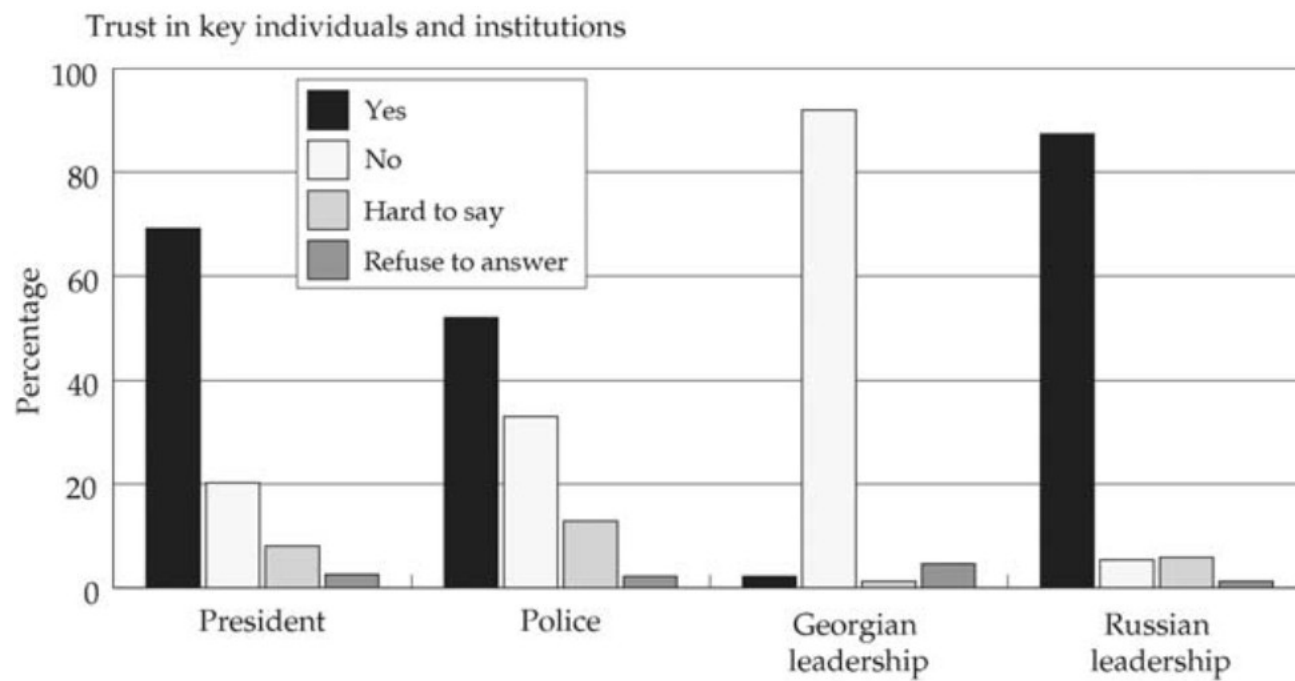
- The conflict in the 90s was about how to define political arrangements in Georgian state; it was more about the clashes between **national projects and their legitimacy**.
- The conflict which took place in 2008 was more about **state borders and territorial integrity**. Furthermore, unlike the situation in 90s, Georgian states demonstrated its ability to resist and survive military defeat: the political regime maintained in power even after the conflict and continue to function; even the armed forces reformed their ranks, without undergoing disintegration or collapse.
- Most importantly, the Russian-Georgian armed conflict demonstrated that the **radical nationalism of 80s and 90s has changed to a form of state patriotism**, when armed confrontation is organized by states and the clashes between regular armies.



# Differences between 2 escalation phases

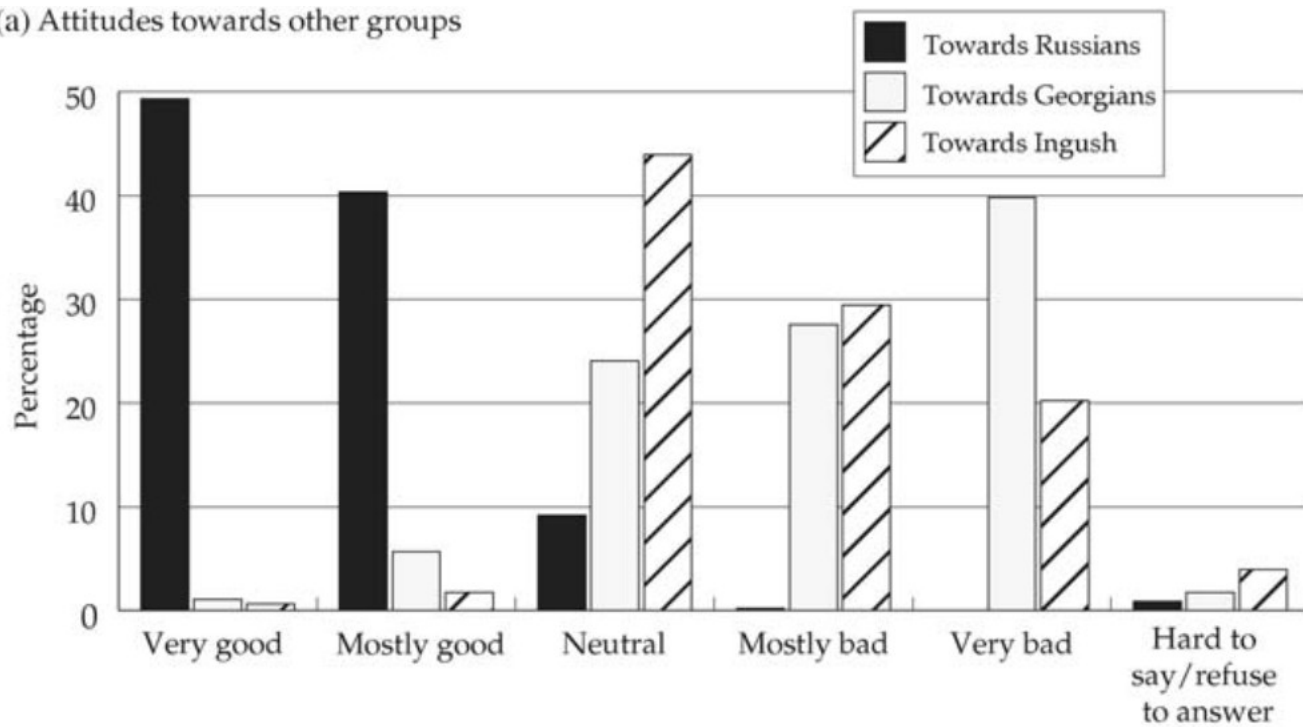
- **Mass mobilization** which was a key factor in the first escalation phase disappeared as a factor in the second escalation phase. Mobilization of masses, which led to the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, was a struggle against electoral frauds, corrupted elites and state weakness. In the latter one, the state is not endangered by popular movement, rather the **state itself is the actor**, initiating change through its military might rather than through nationalistic appeals of political leaders manipulating with the aspect of ethnicity.
- The conflict which erupted in 1980s was sparked by the **fear from assimilation** and fear to lose cultural heritage of minor groups. This time the conflict did not touch the hearts of Georgian and the issue of their self-identification. It was more about defending Georgian territory and state's borders. The issue in stake in 2008 was the **pro-Western orientation** of Georgia and Russia's interests to undermine the penetration of other powers in the South Caucasus region. In this way, we can argue, that **territorial issues, that played a primary role in the second escalation phase were correlated with ideological aspects.**

## Inside South Ossetia: survey



## Inside South Ossetia: survey

(a) Attitudes towards other groups



## Inside South Ossetia: survey

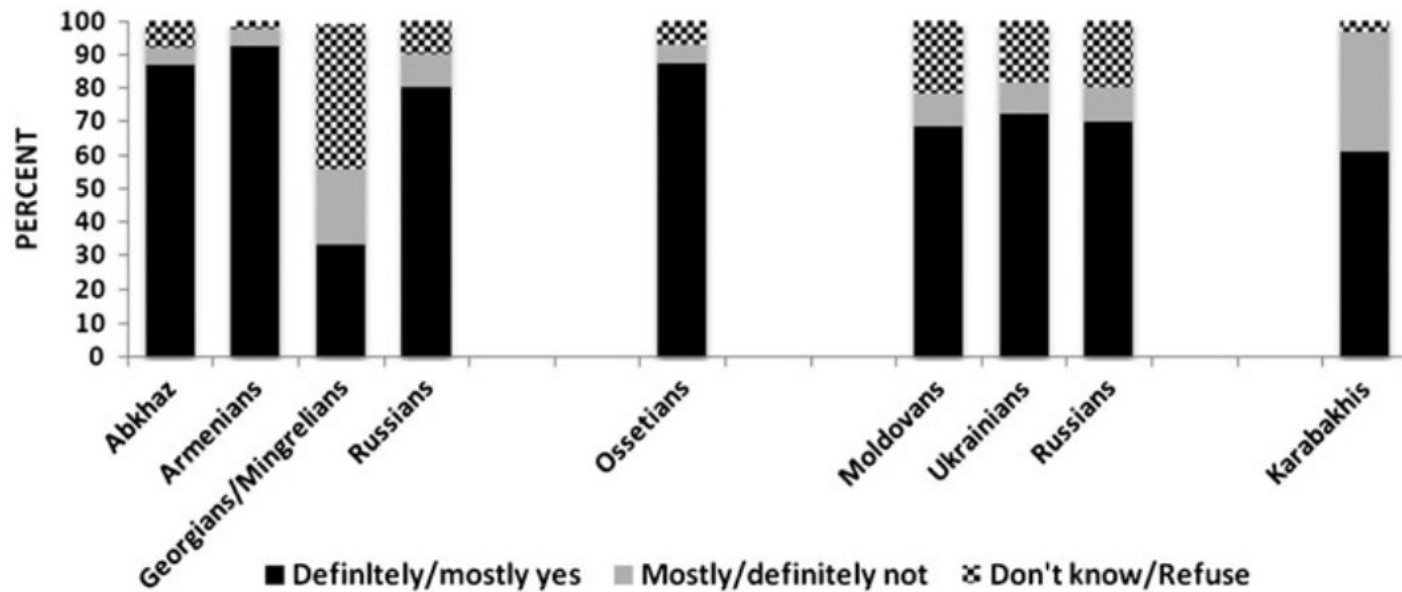


Figure 2. Trust in the Russian leadership by the nationalities of the de facto states. The question asked, do you trust or not trust the Russian leadership? (binary answer).

## Inside South Ossetia: survey

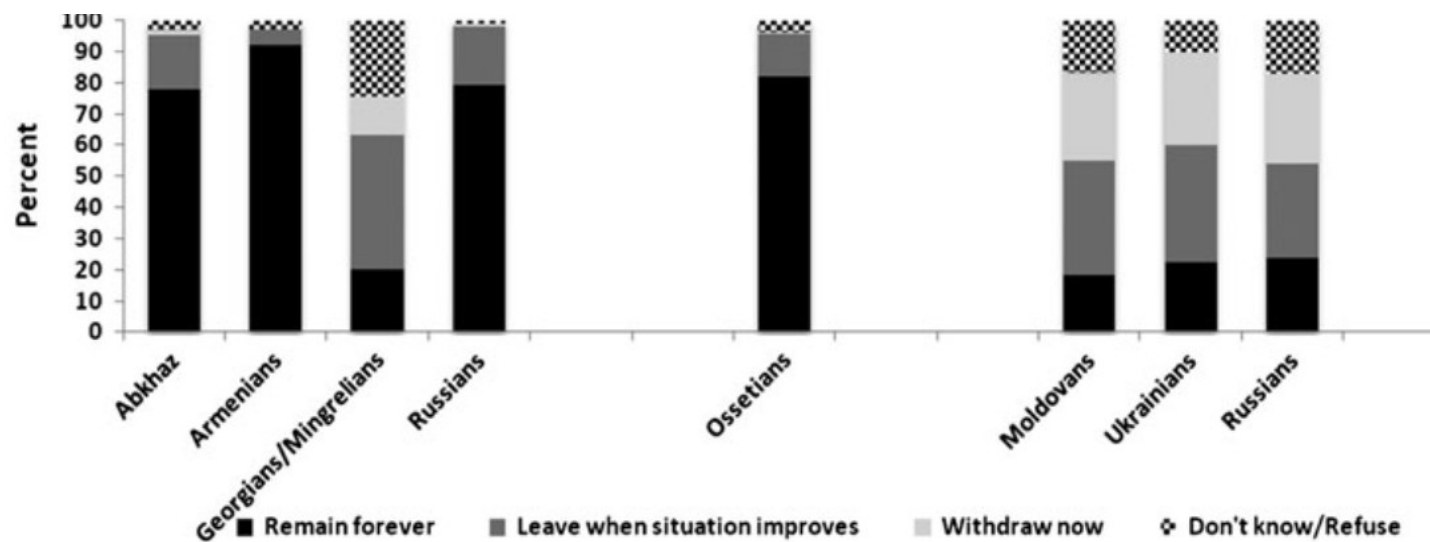
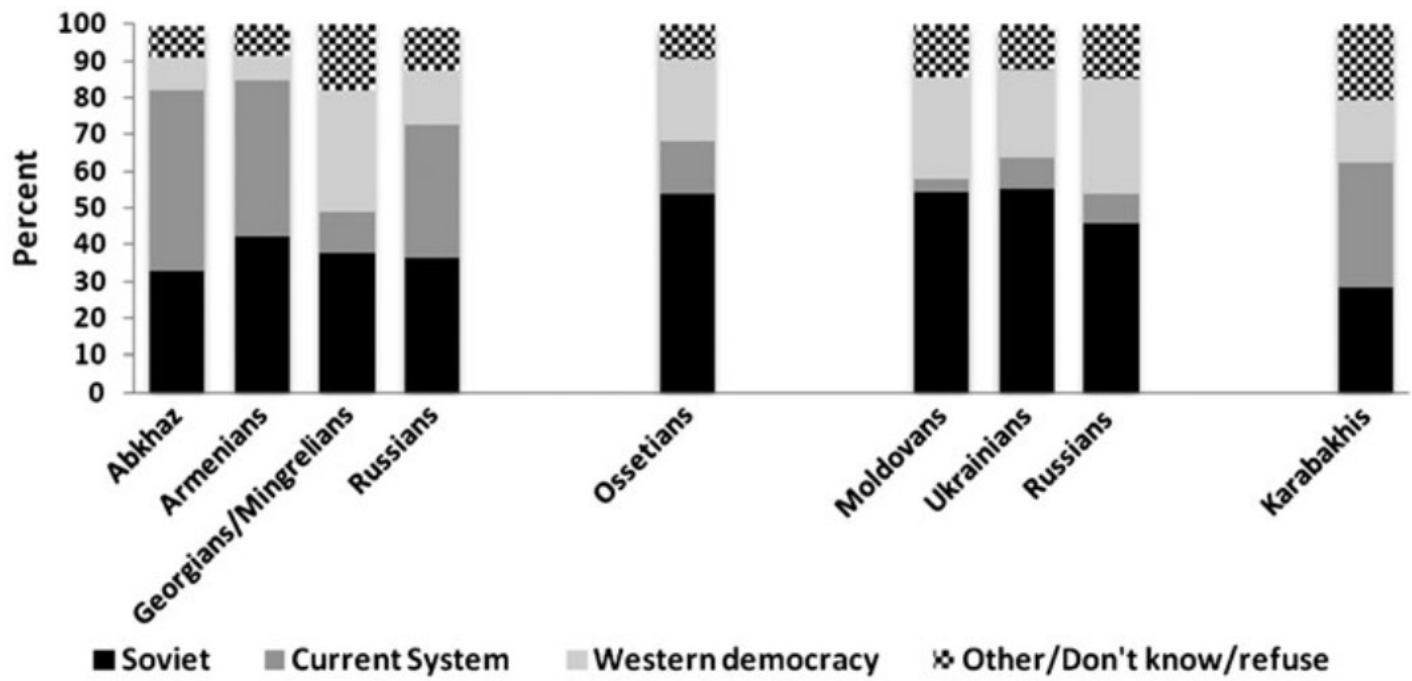


Figure 3. Support for the presence of Russian troops. The question asked in the respective territories, how long should Russian troops remain? The question was not asked in Nagorny Karabakh, since there is no Russian base there.

# Inside South Ossetia: survey



# Inside South Ossetia: survey

