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Měnící se povaha ozbrojeného konfliktu v Jižní Osetii Od zamrzlého konfliktu k otevřenému a zpět

The Evolving Nature of the Armed Conflict in South Ossetia From “Frozen” to “Hot” and Back

Zinaida Shevchuk

Abstrakt

Tento článek se zabývá konfliktními procesy v jednom z nejnestabilnějších regionů v postsovětském prostoru – Jižní Osetii. Cílem analýzy je přinést podrobnější a explicitní pojednání pro pochopení heterogenní povahy ozbrojeného konfliktu. Studiem vývoje problematických otázek a konfliktních procesů můžeme vysledovat vzorec konfliktního chování. Studie se zaměřuje na posouzení míry, do jaké je etnicita pouze vhodným společným dominujícím tématem pro mobilizaci etnických skupiny v boji o zdroje, území nebo moc. Tato studie odmítá obecný názor, že současný konflikt v Jižní Osetii lze chápat jako „nedokončenou záležitost“ z minulých etnických konfliktů, které byly „zmrazeny“ v komunistickém režimu.

Abstract

This article explores the conflict processes in one of the most volatile regions in post-Soviet space - South Ossetia. The objective of the analysis is to bring more nuanced and explicit distinction to the understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the armed conflict. By studying the evolution of issues at stake and conflict processes we can trace the pattern of conflict behavior. The study focuses on an assessment of the extent to which ethnicity is merely a convenient common dominator to mobilize ethnic groups in the struggle over resources, land, or power. This study rejects the common notion that the contemporary conflicts in the South Ossetia can be understood as “unfinished business” from the past ethnic conflicts that had been “frozen” under the communist regime.

Klíčová slova

Procesy a dynamika konfliktů; Gruzie; Rusko; Jižní Osetie.

Keywords

Conflict processes and dynamics; Georgia; Russia; South Ossetia.

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INTRODUCTION

Armed conflicts in the Caucasus represent one of the most complex challenges that emerged with the breaking apart of the Soviet Union. Patterns of political, economic, and cultural discrimination, intensified by historical grievances, as well as the effects of political transformation and economic development, national doctrines, and the role of external actors have all contributed to the escalation of conflicts in this region. Recent crisis in Crimea carries a danger of re-escalation of unresolved conflicts in Eurasia - Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. As we witnessed in 2008 the armed conflict on the other side of the Black Sea - Georgia - served as a tool for Russia to stop the penetration of the Western influence into Russia's periphery. Conducting an assessment of stability in this region is important, as the conflict in South Ossetia can re-escalate and may lead to broader conflicts in the region. Escalation of Caucasian conflicts has implications not only on the stability in the region and its neighboring countries, but on the broader European security architecture.

The armed conflicts in Georgia have been the subject of many academic studies during the last two decades. Stuart Kaufman, one of the biggest representatives of the symbolic theory of ethnic conflict, argues that the conflicts in this region were driven by fear. His argument contradicts with the rational choice theory and claims, that "rather, ideological and prejudice driven ethnic fears caused conflict and violence that, over time, weakened and finally destroyed the state."¹ Besides this interesting argument about the origins of the conflicts, other studies propose that the region emerged as a battlefield of clashing national projects;² secessionist ethnic conflicts,³ that were escalated by foreign intervention;⁴ mass mobilizations aiming to challenge Soviet order and its legitimacy;⁵ and internal power struggles, with high level of corruption in the newly created weak states.⁶ Svante Cornell in his book "Small Nation and Big Powers" explores the role of the institutional structures of autonomy within the Soviet Union republics, as a major factor to explain the outbreak of conflicts in the Caucasus.⁷ Other scholars highlight the role of intellectuals and ideologies of confrontation⁸ or historians, which quite often served as the source of justification for mobilization of ethnic groups. Some studies have geopolitical appeal and overemphasize the role of external powers in these conflicts.

The variety of interpretations and the challenges of competing theories on armed conflicts in the South Caucasus create a demand for a scientific inquiry into the nature of the conflicts. The armed conflict in South Ossetia contains all of the dimensions mentioned above, but what is most important to understand is which of these issues (or which combination of issues) caused the escalation

¹ KAUFMAN, Stuart J. *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Policy of Ethnic War*, Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2001, 262 p. ISBN 0-8014-3802-0.

² NODIA, Ghia. *Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Working Paper Series [online]. Berkeley: 1998. [cit. 2013-10-9]. Available from: http://iseees.berkeley.edu/bps/publications/1997_02-nodi.pdf

³ ŠMÍD, Tomáš. *Etnické konflikty v postkomunistickém prostoru*. In: VAŘURA, Vladimír. *Etnické konflikty v postkomunistickém prostoru*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2007. 278 p. ISBN 978-80-7325-126-0.

⁴ HOROWITZ, Donald L. *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*. Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 2003, 605 p. ISBN-10: 0520236424.

⁵ CHETERIAN, Vicken. The Origins and Trajectory of the Caucasian Conflicts. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2012, Vol. 64, No. 9, p. 1625-1649. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2012.718415. Available from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2012.718415#.UI06tm1tS2U>

⁶ ZURCHER Christoph. *The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2007, 297 p. ISBN-13: 978-0-8147-9709-9.

⁷ CORNELL, Svante. E. *Small Nations and Great Powers. A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2001, 490 s. ISBN 0-7007-1162-7.

⁸ TISHKOV, Valery A. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*. London: SAGE, 1997, 333 p. ISBN 0761951857.

of the conflict into a full-scale war. Giving the ethnic heterogeneity in the South Caucasus region, the armed conflict in South Ossetia is a test case for explanatory power of ethnicity as a cause of the armed conflict. This article sheds considerable light on the significance of the different aspects in conflict dynamics and illustrates their change in time. Finally, the outcomes of this article will also serve as a valuable contribution to the prevention of conflicts for the international community, especially because conflicts in the studied area are particularly dangerous and contain a high potential for escalation. This article posits its findings among those authors' work who contributed to the study of these armed conflicts in a more sophisticated way – by applying and testing the theories of international relations and the causes of wars in the South Caucasus.

I argue that political elites play a significant role in mobilization of masses and transformation of low-scale struggles into organized, full-scale war. The escalation of the armed conflict cannot be explained as an “unfinished business” from the past ethnic conflicts that had been “frozen” under the communist regime. I do not deny that ethnicity is a significant factor in prolongation of the conflict; however, the link between ethnicity and armed conflict is indirect and should be reconsidered. The armed conflict in South Ossetia is the outcome of a decision made by political leaders in order to impose, institutionalize, and legitimize their rule over a territory.

This article follows the logic of a qualitative research to “scale down” and trace the bellicose aspects of the armed conflict. The issue at stake has a profound effect on conflict strategies, mutual relationships among conflict parties, dynamics of escalation, and the overall outcome of the conflict. The objective is to take the analysis of these factors one step further by tracing the modes of escalation in the life cycle of the conflict in South Ossetia. This article does not aim to present a comprehensive history of the armed conflicts in the South Ossetia. Nor does it aim to assess the mistakes of conflicting parties and unsuccessful peacebuilding efforts. Rather, what this article aims to do is to overcome the static study of the various factors determining the modes of escalation of the conflict by tracing its evolution over time. From there, the article sheds a light on conflict processes and draws some tentative conclusions about common factors of unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus region.

THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF CONFLICT: ISSUES AT STAKE AND THE NEXUS OF ESCALATION, DE-ESCALATION AND RE-ESCALATION

The “frozen conflict” in this article is understood as a conflict which remains between the stages of stalemate and de-escalation when peace-keeping efforts never result in the resolution of a conflict. This may lead to the establishment of a regime which has achieved de facto independence, but has not gained the international recognition.⁹ Incompatibility of goals has not found compromise and ceasefire does not necessarily mean that the conflict parties have exited from violence. Quite the opposite might be the case, “frozen” conflicts involve the simmering nature of interests of conflicting parties, which may transform the conflict back to the escalation phase.

In order to understand the nature of the conflict in South Ossetia and to address the question of re-escalation of this conflict in the future, this article studies evolution of issues at stake over time. The issue at stake reveals the core aspects in the heart of the conflict and defines what the conflict is about. An analysis of issues at stake points out the significance of the aspects embedded in the conflict. Such analysis goes beyond the surface of conflict phenomena. For example, ethnic autonomy can be manifested in terms of preservation of traditions and culture of a conflict party, but the main issue at stake might be a fight over access to the power-sharing institutions of a state. The detailed study of issues at stake furthers better academic understanding of the conflict nature. Furthermore, it is essential to differentiate what is a key issue at stake and whether it corresponds with the actual claims of conflict parties. In other words, some issues might be masked and manipulated

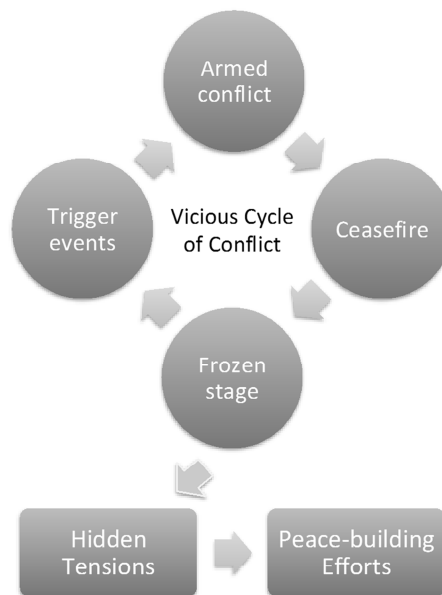
⁹ CASPERSEN, Nina and STANSFIELD, Gareth eds. *Unrecognized States in the International System*. London: Routledge, 2011. ISBN 9780415582100

by leaders of conflicting parties. In order to achieve conflict resolution, it is essential to uncover and address the key issues at stake in each conflict.

The complexity of armed conflicts can hardly be captured in a linear way. The trajectory of the conflict represents the culmination of the latent phase to intensification of violence leading to a full-scale war. Once the conflict starts, it may transform leading to an increase or decrease of intensity in violence. The analysis of conflict processes in this article traces the relationships among the different phases. The change in conflict dynamics, as a rapid eruption of violence, can be caused by accumulated tension between conflict parties. A trigger event can lead to the escalation of violence. On its way to escalation the conflict produces uncertainty and unpredictability. The significance of issues at stake reflects the incentives of conflicting parties to full engagement in the full-scale confrontation.

The modes of escalation of a conflict have a significant influence on the behavior of the conflict parties. As the conflict evolves, the pattern of this behavior becomes more complex, the number of issues at stake increases, and the intensity of violence leads to a vicious circle of escalation. In order to explain the armed conflicts with long duration in South Ossetia, this article employs the scheme of “vicious cycle of conflict” as illustrated in Figure 1 below. This logic could be applied on the other “frozen conflicts” in Eurasia.

Figure 1. Vicious Cycle of Armed Conflict



Note: This figure was prepared by the author.

The frame of analysis is divided into three major periods: first, Phase A, the stage of initiation, last years before the demise of the Soviet Union; second, Phase B, culmination, when the conflicts escalated to the violent stage; third, Phase C, the second stage escalation during the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in August 2008. The objective of the next section is to trace the process of transformation of aspects that determined conflict behavior in the outlined phases. It is legitimate to claim that the entire dynamic of the armed conflict – characteristic feature of conflict groups, factors that triggered the outbreak of violence, conflict termination – could be hardly grasped within a single study. This article achieves this goal by within-case causal process observation, which involves

the reconstruction of an empirical sequence of conditions. Such approach requires extensive and systematic empirical investigation. In this way, this research seeks to advocate a more balanced and dynamic explanation of conflict processes. Triangulation of sources, including English, Russian and Georgian language documents and publications, contributes to eliminate the problem of biased data. It also allows us to capture wider spatiotemporal contexts and processes within evolving conflict policies and actions.

PHASE A: THE SPIRAL OF THE CONFLICT: THE PROCESS OF ESCALATION TO WAR

The armed conflicts in South Caucasus emerged in the late years of the Soviet Union that after an initial violent stage ended in a political stalemate. The series of armed conflicts in this region started with armed confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, followed by the conflicts within Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Unlike other parts of the post-Soviet space, where the nomenklatura initiated conflicting national projects to remain in power, the conflicts in the South Caucasus, at the initial stage, were led by nationalist movements aiming to change the existing political order by a new one ruled by the Soviet-era intelligentsia.¹⁰ The mass movements in the South Caucasus were anti-systemic, aiming to replace the ruling class with the new one, stimulating the social, political and economic transformation.¹¹

The tensions between Georgians and South Ossetians started in 1989, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and lead to the full-scale escalation in 1991. Due to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia has a high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs): in the 1990s, the number of IDPs was 233,453 (6 percent of the Georgian population); it increased to 249,365 after the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in 2008 (initially there were 22,000 people, but only 15,912 had refugee status in accordance with the Georgian government policy).¹² The number of victims in the armed conflict in 1991 in South Ossetia is unclear. According to South Ossetian data, more than 1,000 people died and 3,500 were wounded in the aftermath of the conflict in SOAO, and the number of refugees topped 20,000 people.¹³

The beginning of Georgia's campaign for independence was characterized by a permanent jostling for power between the former members of the communist nomenklatura elite, some of whom were inspired by nationalistic ideas. The process of dissolution of the Soviet Union opened up opportunities for bloody confrontations. It was believed that the "Russian empire" would use military force to defeat the Georgian national movement. The radical wing of the Georgian political spectrum at that time emphasized the need to restore independence.¹⁴ On November 14, 1990, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the chairman of the Georgian Supreme Council (or Parliament), declared Georgia's high national consciousness for freedom and declared this as the beginning of the more significant war for independence.¹⁵

The nationalist mobilization and radicalization of the newly formed Georgian government, however, boosted separatist movements of non-Georgian ethnic groups. The dynamics of the Georgian-Ossetian armed conflict were shaped by a number of factors, including the extreme position of Georgian

¹⁰ CHETERIAN, Vicken, ref. 5, p. 1628.

¹¹ Ibid., ref. 5, p. 1644.

¹² Angarishi Idzulebit Gadaadgilebul Pirta Da Konfliktis Shemdeg Dazaralebulta Uplebebis Mdgomareobis Shesaxeб Saqartveloshi [Report on the State of Human Rights of IDPs in Georgia] (Saqartvelos Sakhalkho Damcveli, July 2010), [online] Available from: <http://www.ombudsman.ge/uploads/other/0/92.pdf>

¹³ TOAL Gerard (Gearóid Ó Tuathail) and John O'Loughlin. Inside South Ossetia: A Survey of Attitudes in a de Facto State. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2013): 136–72, doi:10.1080/1060586X.2013.780417.

¹⁴ SHVELIDZE, Dimitri. Politikuri dapirispirebebi da erovnuli kherlisuplebis damkhoba saqartveloshi (1987-1992 clebi). [*Overthrow of the Government and National Political Controversy in Georgia (1989-1992)*] Tbilisi: Gamomcemloba "Universali," 2008. p. 42 ISBN 978-9941-12-325-2

¹⁵ Saqartvelos Uzenaesi Sabchos Tavdzdomaris Baton Zviad Gamsakhurdiis gamosvla 1990 Clis 14 noembris skhdomaze [The Speech of the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia at the meeting on 12 November 1990], *Saqartvelos Respublika*, 1990.

nationalists in 1989, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia's coalition "Round Table – Free Georgia" and his first presidency, the lack of a clear idea by the Georgian establishment of the autonomous regions, and the great faith of South Ossetian leaders in being supported by North Ossetia and the Russian Federation.¹⁶

According to one of the most prominent social scientists in Georgia, Ghia Nodia, "Georgia's nationalist movement was probably the most radical in style in the former Soviet Union, at least among the movements at the union republic level. However, this radicalism was primarily targeted at the imperial center, not ethnic minorities."¹⁷ For Georgians, the problem with minorities did not exist on its own.

The initial phase of the escalation of the conflict is interlinked with the political processes within Georgia. "Independence" and "democracy" became keywords in Georgian political discourse. Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationalistic agenda was primarily directed against the Soviet regime in Georgia, and the problem with Ossetia was considered part of that struggle. Claims of minority were interpreted as dictated from the Kremlin, and so there were no trust-building efforts for compromise.¹⁸ Gamsakhurdia's rule and his struggle for independence had strong popular support; however, his efforts to dismiss the opposition and strengthen his power at the expense of the democratization processes led to his overthrow by military means, organized by anti-Zviadist pro-democratic coalition.¹⁹

Under these conditions, when anti-Gamsakhurdia forces were strengthening, the president of Georgia played the nationalistic card to stay in power at the expense of democratization and minority groups in the country. However, the further development failed to "unite the nation" by compelling the spirit of armed conflict in South Ossetia.²⁰

One of the first manifestations of this process started with the confrontation over amendments to the Georgian Constitution – the law on the status of the state language, which demanded the need for the Georgian language in the public sphere. After the August 1990 election, which excluded the small region-based parties from participating in the parliamentary elections, this language law was passed.²¹ These policies were interpreted as antidemocratic as they cut down on the influence of minorities in the power-sharing institutions in Georgia.

Political issues at stake provoked the spiral of violence, causing increasing distrust between the titular nation and the South Ossetian minorities. A parallel trend took place in the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. In order to express their aspirations and their dissatisfaction with Georgian nationalist politics, the Ossetian minorities formed a popular front named Ademon Nykhas. In the atmosphere of accumulating tensions, 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

¹⁶ Fond "Otkrytoe Obshestvo," *O Poiske Prichin, Putei Uregulirovania I Vozmozhnykh Napravleniakh Razvitiia Gruzino-Osetinskogo Konflikta* [On the Search of the Causes, Possible Directions and Ways to Resolve the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict] Tbilisi, 2005.

¹⁷ NODIA, Ghia, ref. 3, p. 30.

¹⁸ NODIA, Ghia and Scholtbach Alvaro Pinto eds. *The Political Landscape of Georgia. Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*, Eburon Uitgeverij B.V., 2006).

¹⁹ SHVELIDZE, Dimitri, ref. 25, p. 30-44.

²⁰ NODIA, Ghia. *Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia*, In: COPPIETERS, Bruno, eds. *Contested Borders in The Caucasus*, Brussels: VUB Press. 1996. ISBN 90 5487 1172 NUGI 654. Available from: <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0101.htm>

²¹ Fond "Otkrytoe Obshestvo," *O Poiske Prichin, Putei Uregulirovania I Vozmozhnykh Napravleniakh Razvitiia Gruzino-Osetinskogo Konflikta* [On the Search of the Causes, Possible Directions and Ways to Resolve the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict], 12.

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.²²

Thus, the process to attain national liberation was twofold: Georgian political leaders aspired to attain independence from the Soviet Union while disregarding grievances by their own national minorities. At the same time, South Ossetia struggled for the preservation of its specific status, which it had enjoyed within the Soviet ethno-federal system. This system was asymmetric in its nature and enabled some groups to have certain political, economic, linguistic, and cultural rights under Soviet rule. After the demise of the Soviet Union, South Ossetians feared that the Georgian national movement would undermine their right to self-determination, which would lead to their assimilation with the titular nation. As a result, a triangular struggle occurred: Georgia struggled for independence, Moscow fought against Georgian secession from the Soviet Union, and South Ossetia tried to carve out a special status for itself and to protect its rights vis-à-vis Georgian nationalism under the protection of Moscow.

A second feature characteristic for the conflict at this time was the process of collapsing existing political institutions and the challenge to create a new one. The clashes that took place between the titular nation (Georgia) and ethnic groups (South Ossetians, for instance) were about the national project of how to organize political arrangements in the newly created state. In the early 1990s, South Caucasian states had started constructing their own state structures without armed forces. Conflicts that arose from these changes were led by paramilitary armed formations, often inspired by nationalistic ideology motivated by self-enrichment and criminal interest.²³ According to the Georgian political establishment, these conflicts were not ethnic, as South Ossetians and Abkhazians were not recognized as “other.” Everybody was Georgian. So the armed conflict in South Ossetia was considered “political” because the conflicts were about statehood and territorial integrity of the post-Soviet state of Georgia. In other words, it was argued that Georgia was not fighting specific ethnic groups but “separatists,” that is, people who are challenging its territorial integrity, whatever their ethnic origin.²⁴

According to this logic, the conflicts inside Georgia with separatists were not caused by ethnic hostility. Rather they were struggles of forming a nation state, struggles over the status of some specific groups, and they were caused by contradictions between national projects.²⁵ Conflicts in Georgia were about defending the territory, political status, and independence. However, it should be said that, nowadays, mutual relations between conflict parties are ethnically hostile. This can lead one to conclude that ethnic animosity was not the cause but the result of the armed conflict in South Ossetia.

For Ossetian minorities, then, the conflicts were about self-determination and reinforcement of their political rights in their ethnic homes. Ossetians themselves claimed that they did not have any better choice than looking for security guarantees from the Kremlin, “striving for survival as an ethno-historical entity – and identity – drove [them] ‘to side with Soviet Russia’ – not [their] genetic love for bolshevism, sovietism and other ‘isms’ ...”²⁶

Finally, the armed conflict in South Ossetia was accompanied by mass mobilization. Clashes between popular movements were led under nationalist slogans of former dissidents and intellectuals. They played a significant role in the events of “re-writing” the history of the Caucasian nations. These clashes, involving mass-level violence, were attempts to define their strength, territory, and rights

²² Fond “Otkrytoe obshestvo – Gruzia”, ref. 13, p. 14.

²³ KUPATADZE, Alexander. Radiological Smuggling and Uncontrolled Territories: The Case of Georgia. *Global Crime*. 2007, Vol. 8, No. 1., p. 40-57. ISSN 1744-0572. DOI: 10.1080/17440570601121852.

²⁴ NODIA, Ghia, ref. 3, p. 3.

²⁵ MAMRADZE, Petre. *Absurduli omi, romelic ar unda momkhdariko*. Tbilisi: Bakur Sulakauris Gamomcemloba. 2011. 302 s. ISBN: 9789941155321

²⁶ SAMMUT, Denis. *Background to the Georgia-Ossetia Conflict and future prospects for Georgian-Russian relations*. London: The London Information Network on Conflicts and State-building. 2008. p. 6. ISBN 1-899548-06-08

for independence.²⁷ As Georgia was seeking to change its status from a Soviet republic, the former autonomous region – South Ossetia – was trying to upgrade its position as well. The South Ossetian parliament demanded to transform the region’s status from “Autonomous Region” to “Autonomous Republic.”²⁸

In sum, Georgian policies towards its secessionist regions were ambivalent and, therefore, resulted in two secessionist conflicts inside Georgia, in South Ossetia (1989-1992) and Abkhazia (1992-1993). The conflicts have not been resolved, and in most of the specialized literature, they are referred to as frozen conflicts.²⁹ Consequently, clinging to exclusivist national identity in an ethnically mixed Georgia led to an armed conflict and destroyed the state.

Having failed at creating a new statehood, Georgia collapsed. It was the price the Georgian political establishment had to pay in order to abolish the exclusivist nationalist political culture. Furthermore, the Russian involvement in these conflicts resulted in the defeat of a titular nation against their minorities. Rumors had it that the conflicts really were not between Georgia and its ethnic minority, the Ossetians, but with Russia, which was punishing post-Soviet republics for their aspirations for independence. However, in order to study the conflict mechanisms in South Ossetia, it is significant to point out that this conflict was not between the state and non-state actors. The conflict actors at the stage of initiation involved parties involved in nationalist movements on both sides, competing over the rules of the new political structure in this region.

The international recognition of Georgia as an independent state did not change the course in the process of conflict escalation. As mentioned above, Georgia did not possess the tools to regulate these increasingly severe tensions, nor did the government have the means to stop the escalation from conflict to war. Georgia was ill equipped to address the process of state building and the demands of ethnic minorities for autonomy.

PHASE B: "FROZEN" CONFLICT

Unresolved status of the armed conflicts has jeopardized political stability and economic development in Georgia and has contributed to a re-escalation of tensions in 2004. State weakness was the key problem that undermined Georgia’s development since its independence. National-building efforts to achieve national integration were ill-prepared as well as state effectiveness (or “state capture”) to provide territorial control. After Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, he launched a policy of consolidating the Georgian state, developing the elementary features of functional statehood.³⁰ Control over oil, Black Sea ports, flow of commodities, and trans-Caucasian roads, as well as over local markets played a significant role in igniting conflicts in South Ossetia.

Leaders in conflict zones are involved in illegal trade with drugs, contraband, and weapons, and they are not interested in a resolution of the conflicts because of the benefits from the zones of conflicts. According to Paata Leiashvili, professor and leading expert in the administration of the Parliament of Georgia “millions of dollars change hands in such places; this gives rise to powerful economic interest that exploit high-sounding patriotic slogans to keep the conflict alive.”³¹

The frozen status of the conflict in South Ossetia created unique conditions for the illegal distribution of goods. The region’s political instability led to escalation of tensions in 2004, when the Georgian administration started an anti-smuggling campaign, aiming to close Ergneti market. The “invisible” movement of goods across the state border, bypassing customs, had reached alarming

²⁷ SHVELIDZE, Dimitri, ref. 13, p. 178-179.

²⁸ Fond “Otkrytoe obshestvo – Gruzia”, ref. 20, p. 9.

²⁹ ZURCHER, Christoph, ref. 5, p. 112-113.

³⁰ The Permanent Mission of Georgia to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. “H.E. President Mikheil Saakashvili To The Parliamentary Assembly Of The Council Of Europe.” Vienna: 26 January 2005.

Available from: http://www.diaspora.gov.ge/files/faili/GoG_WarRep_Ch4/GoG_WarRep_Ch4.Att36.pdf

³¹ LEIASHVILI Paata. Post-Soviet Ethnic Conflicts: The Economic Aspects Require an In-Depth Study. *The Caucasus & Globalization* 2007, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 37.

proportions. Goods and petroleum products were imported without customs clearance into Georgia from Russia through the Roki Tunnel. Highly organized transnational groups were smuggling narcotic substances, weapons, and cigarettes, threatening the economic development in Georgia.³²

Saakashvili's main goals were to accomplish a process of transformation for the Georgian state, eliminating corruption and poverty in the country, and achieving NATO membership and territorial integrity. Georgian political establishment verbally emphasized its desire for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts. The new Georgian government realized the need to deal with the issue of territorial control to build a strong state. The first success in this regard was achieved in Adjara (autonomous region) by overthrowing Aslan Abashidze's regime in 2004.³³ In a way, this turned out to be a double victory for the Georgian government: first, the victory over an autocratic ruler in the name of democracy, and second, 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.

Before 2004, there was no major deterioration of the situation in the conflict zone with South Ossetia. Georgians and South Ossetians were engaged in active trading across the zone. The characteristic "cold peace" ideology – free movement and trade in the region-wide Ergneti market – saw the biggest challenge for peace in the ruling clan of Eduard Kokoiti in South Ossetia. They assumed that sending support to the Ossetian people would lead to the fall of the separatist government in Tskhinvali. The Georgian government believed that the problem was only the corrupt clan of Eduard Kokoiti ruling in South Ossetia and that South Ossetians would be willing to fight him. Indeed, the overall goal of the Georgian administration was not only its economy, but the usage of "anti-contraband measures as a dual-purpose mechanism: (...) to add revenues to Georgia's ailing budget (but also) to oust the (...) government of the de-facto president, Eduard Kokoiti (...) Without contraband funds to prop up his government and security services, Kokoiti's 'regime of bandits' would fall apart."³⁴

In May 2004, Georgia launched a campaign against smuggling in South Ossetia. Contrary to the expected outcome, the Georgian strategy of trade restrictions threatened South Ossetians, which led to armed skirmishes, while Ossetians consolidated behind the de-facto government in order to defend their territory, their freedom of movement, and to prevent Georgian military success in this zone. From the Georgian perspective, the countermeasures taken by Ossetians represented danger for the local Georgian population and the territorial integrity of the country. On the other hand, Kokoiti blamed the Georgian government of following aggressive policy and countered with an offensive operation, declaring that the South Ossetians were ready to defend themselves with armed forces.³⁵ At the same time, Kokoiti claimed that the relationship with Georgia would not be restored until the Georgian side fulfilled the following demands: first, restoration of the damages in the Republic of South Ossetia caused during the Georgian aggression; second, the Georgian parliament was expected to give a political assessment of the events of 1989 to 1992, recognizing the genocide of the Ossetian people; third, Georgia was expected to adopt a law on refugees that included reinstating their rights

³² As one of the leading Georgian expert Mamuka Areshidze suggests, illegal activities in South Ossetia were protected by the "Sport Mafia" of Jambul Tedeev, the trainer of wrestling team. Mamuka Areshidze, *Konpliktebis Mimdinare Ekonomikuri Mizezebi* [Current Economic Causes of the Conflicts], 2010.

³³ Civil Georgia. *Acharis krizisi - movlenata qronologia*. Civil.ge. [online] 5. 5. 2004 [cit. 2013-10-10]. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=6700>

³⁴ FREESE, Theresa. A Report from the Field: Georgia's War against Contraband and the Struggle for Territorial Integrity. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*. 2005, Vol. 25, No. 1, p. 109-110. doi:10.1353/sais.2005.0008.

³⁵ *Silovye Struktury Juzhnoi Osetii Privedeni v Sostojanie Boeboi Gotovnosti, Ozhidaja Provokacii* [Security Structures in South Ossetia Have Combat Readiness, Awaiting for Provocation], Newsru.com, June 11, 2004, Available from: <http://www.newsru.com/arch/world/11jun2004/osetia.html>

and fully reimbursing for reparations. Kokoiti also claimed that he had “no doubts” that “the historical justice will prevail, and the Ossetian people will be united and be a part of the Russian Federation.”³⁶

These demands led to a rapid escalation, which reached its culmination in August 2004, when fire-fights erupted between Georgian and Ossetian soldiers near the village of Tamarasheni.³⁷ The Georgian side attacked the village of Didi Liakhvni in its attempt to take control over the bypass road. According to the Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, Georgia’s goal was to protect Didi Liakhvni in order to overcome “large-scale ethnic cleansing.”³⁸ The spiral of insecurity-driven escalation of tension in the conflict zone led to the edge of an unwanted conflict. Unlike the triumph in Adjara, this development indicated an overall setback and worsening relationships in the conflict zone.

Thus, the unresolved conflict in South Ossetia remained the biggest challenge of Georgia’s state-building efforts. Since the developments in 2004, Saakashvili’s strategy was to achieve success through internationalization of any Georgian conflicts, through NATO membership, and by gaining support from the West. Georgia came up with peace initiatives based on a three-level solution in 2005 – demilitarization, economic rehabilitation, and political solution – and Mikheil Saakashvili’s peace plan in 2007. However, this took place against a backdrop of pressure on South Ossetian political representatives. For example, in December 2005, the Minister of Defense of Georgia at the time, Irakli Okruashvili, announced that Georgia would regain control over South Ossetia by January 1, 2007. None of the peace plans were ever implemented or contributed to a substantial improvement of mutual relations and the situation in the region.³⁹

PHASE C: RED LINES IN SOUTH OSSETIA

The second phase of escalation of the conflict, which led to the Russian-Georgian armed conflict came in the spring of 2008 when the Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle “Hermes-450” was shot down over the Gadida village in the Gali region by a Russian MIG-29 fighter plane.⁴⁰ This incident was also confirmed in a report of the UN Observer Mission in Abkhazia. Russia accused Georgia of mobilization of troops in the Kodori Gorge and increased its number of Russian troops.⁴¹ In addition, new checkpoints were added in the Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli regions and an additional 400 Volgograd railway troops were deployed. Russian troops were preparing platforms to transport military equipment to Abkhazia. These activities were criticized by the US,⁴² NATO,⁴³ and the EU as a violation

³⁶ Prezident Juzhnoi Osetii Ne Somnevaetsja, Chto Respublika Voidot v Sostav RF [The President of South Ossetia Has No Doubt That the Country Will Become a Part of the Russian Federation]. Newsru.com, 10 June 2004.

Available from: <http://www.newsru.com/world/10jun2004/osetia.html>

³⁷ VASHAKIDZE, Guram. Cxinvalis Gavlit – Tamarashenshi: Konfliktis Zona [Through Tskhinvali to Tamarasheni: The Conflict Zone]. *Saqartvelos Respublika*, 2004, N160(4889) edition, 2.

³⁸ WELT, Cory. The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2010, Vol. 62, no. 1, p. 86. doi:10.1080/09668130903385390.

³⁹ Report of the Government of Georgia on the Aggression by the Russian Federation against Georgia. Civil Georgia. 7 August 2009. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/files/files/GeorgianGovernmentReportWar.pdf>

⁴⁰ Report of UNOMIG on the Incident of April 20 Involving the Downing of a Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Over the Zone of Conflict. United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia. 20 April 2008. Available from: <http://globe.blogs.nouvelobs.com/media/01/02/cf530afbef0fb6f305824428f6c83509.pdf>

⁴¹ In accordance to the Russian sources number of Russian troops composed 2, 500 soldiers, while the Ministry of Interior of Georgia stated that the number of Russian troops exceeded 4 000, See: Parliamentary Temporary Commission on Investigation of the Military Aggression and the Acts of Russian Against the Territorial Integrity of Georgia, Parliament of Georgia, *Parliamentary Temporary Commission on Investigation of the Military Aggression and the Acts of Russian Against the Territorial Integrity of Georgia*. Available from: http://www.parliament.ge/files/1329_22127_506571_Conclusion_E.pdf

⁴² U.S. Calls on Russia to Reconsider Abkhaz Moves. Civil Georgia. 1 May 2008. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17732>; “Rice Concerned over Increase in Russian Troops in Abkhazia,” Civil Georgia, May 1, 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17743>

⁴³ NATO Secretary General’s Statement on the Deployment of Russian Railway Troops into Georgia. NATO Press Release. 3 June 2008. Available from: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-076e.html>

of the cease-fire agreement in 1994; however, the Russian side argued that it was in line with the “peacekeeping mandate.” On April 25, Russia’s Ambassador-at-Large Valery Kenyaikin warned that “... if a war is unleashed, we will have to defend our compatriots even through military means. We will use every means to do this; there should be no doubt about this.”⁴⁴

These developments were alarming for Georgia. As stated by the Georgian foreign ministry in May 2008, Russia “started to enlarge its military infrastructure in Abkhazia, Georgia, ... to prepare for a large-scale military aggression against Georgia.”⁴⁵ According to the International Crisis Group, the increased military presence of Russia in Abkhazia might have “reassured on their physical security but at the same time increased their fears of being swallowed by Russia. Many Abkhaz worry that their national cause is being diluted, and they are reverting to minority status in a larger entity by de facto integration into Russia.”⁴⁶

From the low-intensity conflict that started on April 20 to the hot stage in August 2008, the development could be characterized by militarization of the region.⁴⁷ While it is not the purpose of this article to find out who launched the offensive and defensive military operations, it is important to keep in mind that on March 31, 2008, Davit Bakradze, Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced that another 350 Georgian soldiers would be sent to Afghanistan.⁴⁸ The deployment of 2,000 troops in Iraq was also extended for several months. This is an indication that the Georgian administration was not planning to wage war on its own territory any time soon.⁴⁹ The escalation of the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in August 2008 increased the scope of Russian targets beyond the South Ossetian territory. On August 9, Russia opened the second front in Abkhazia and bombed the Kodori Gorge, where the Abkhazian government-in-exile was located. As a result, more than 2,000 Georgians had to leave their homes. The next day, Russia attacked other Georgian cities in Zugdidi, Senaki, and Gori. In combination with air and ground attacks, Russian battleships blocked the Georgian coast.

On Thursday August 7, 2008 at 11:35 p.m., the Georgian armed forces entered the separatist region of South Ossetia, according to official pronouncements, to “restore constitutional order”.⁵⁰ The Russian response was very quick. The next day, using the Roki Tunnel, the Russian armed forces reached the territory of South Ossetia. The Russian armed forces crossed the borders of the separatist regions and entered the Georgian inland. Russian armed forces stopped at the city of Mtskheta, only 35 km from the capital of Tbilisi.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Russia Warns Georgia Could Use Force against Abkhazai, South Ossetia. *Ria Novosti*. 25 April 2008. Available from: <http://en.ria.ru/world/20080425/105945463.html>

⁴⁵ Saqartvelo Rusetis Qmedebas Mtrul Nabijad Apasebs [Georgia Assesses Russia’s Actions as a Hostile Step]. Rustavi 2. 1 June 2008. Available from:

http://www.rustavi2.com/news/includesG/get_news_print.php?id_news=26513&ct=1

⁴⁶ Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia. International Crisis Group. 5 June 2008. Available from:

http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/193_georgia_and_russia_clashing_over_abkhazia.ashx

⁴⁷ For militarization and deployment of Russian troops in Georgia see ILLARIONOV, Andrei: *The Russian Leadership’s Preparation for War, 1999-2008*, in CORNELL, E. Svante and STARR Frederick: *The Guns of August 2008 Russia’s War in Georgia*. New York, London: M.E. Sharpe, 2009. p.49-84.

⁴⁸ JOHN, Mark. Georgia Offers NATO Troops for Afganistan. Reuters. 31 March 2008. Available from:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/03/31/us-nato-georgia-afghanistan-idUSL3189194620080331>

⁴⁹ Georgia respond was diplomatic by bringing attention of international actors on Russia’s “creeping annexation” of Georgian territory. “The reality is that August 2008 war was neither provoked not a product of miscalculation. It was initiated and waged by Russia for well-articulated geopolitical reasons. Georgia behaved diplomatically – perhaps too long”. See in SMITH, J. David. The Saakashvili Administration’s Reaction to Russian Policies Before the 2008 War, in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*, Svante E. Cornell, Svante and Frederick S. Starr eds. (ME Sharpe, 2009), 142.

⁵⁰ BARDAKCI, Mehmet. EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in Georgia: Towards a More Proactive Role.

Caucasian Review of International Affairs. 2010, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 214-236. Available from:

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=120780>

⁵¹ CORNELL, Svante E. a POPJANEVSKI, Johanna a NILSSON, Niklas. *Russia’s war in Georgia: causes and implications for Georgia and the Word*. Stockholm: Silk Road Studies Program. 2008. ISBN: 978-91-85937-35-6.

The Russian-Georgian armed conflict was by some scholars interpreted as a first armed clash between the West and the East after the end of the Cold War.⁵² However, it is questionable whether such an interpretation is sustainable. The West did not enter a conflict with Russia because of Georgia. After all, Georgia had never received any security guarantees from the West.⁵³ On the other hand, this conflict involved some aspects of ideological confrontation: Georgian pro-Western orientation and Russian great power ambitions in the South Caucasus region. Russia started to recover after the demise of the Soviet Union and under the Putin's rule being a Great Power was no longer an aspiration but a determining element aiming to secure its special status. One of the most prominent scholars on Russia's foreign relations Ted Hopf claims Russia has never really concealed its great power ambition and can hardly imagine itself in any other role.⁵⁴ According to Robert Kagan the Russian-Georgian conflict is part of Russian grand strategy. "Putin cares no more about a few thousand South Ossetians than he does about Kosovo's Serbs. The claims of pan-Slavic sympathy are pretexts designed to fan Russian great-power nationalism at home and to expand Russia's power abroad."⁵⁵

Because of the war, Georgia has become a country without definite borders of its own territory, and hence it does not meet one of the key requirements for new NATO members declared in a NATO study on its potential expansion.⁵⁶ Opponents of Georgian membership in NATO have been using this unquestionable fact intensively in recent years. Recent developments have revealed that Russia maintains a substantial military presence in the conflict zones and even after Bidzina Ivanishvili became the head of the new government in Georgia, Russia continues to undermine Georgian territorial integrity by erecting barbed wire barricades in South Ossetia, as well as keeping Georgians from Western-style sovereign state by putting pressure on joining the Eurasian Union. It can be concluded that the Russian-Georgian armed conflict and the subsequent recognition of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be independent states by Russia institutionalized the old dividing lines in the region of South Caucasus.

As a consequence of the armed conflict, Russia accomplished many of its aims: to have at its disposal strategic *place d'armes* in the middle of South Caucasus; to stop the penetration of Western influence into the region and prevent Georgian membership in NATO; to arouse a feeling of fear among Russia's neighbors; to get rid of Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia representing the main obstacle to Russian annexation of this area, and to ensure a significant military presence. Russia's aim has been and further remains to suppress the Western influence and make sure that Georgia will not set an example for other countries in the region. Last but not least, Russia managed to send a clear signal to its neighbors that their friendship with the West is not a guarantee against a Russian military attack.

For Georgia, the overall impact of the conflict on Georgia's prestige in the world was tremendous. Probably the most adverse consequence for Georgia was the violation of its territorial integrity, as Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov, announced that Georgia could forget about its territorial integrity.⁵⁷

⁵² ASMUS Ronald. *Mcire Omi Romelmac Msoplio Shedzra [A Little War That Shook the World]* Tbilisi: Ilia State University Press. 2010, p. 236.

⁵³ For analysis of military aspects of the Russian-Georgian armed conflict see KŘÍŽ, Zdeněk and SHEVCHUK Zinaida. Georgian Readiness for NATO Membership after Russian-Georgian Armed Conflict. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. 2011, Vol. 44, No. 1, p. 89–97, doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2011.01.003. Also see: KŘÍŽ, Zdeněk. Transformation NATO and the Summit in Bucharest. *Obrana a strategie*, Brno: Univerzita obrany, ÚSS, 2008, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 17–29. ISSN 1214-6463.

⁵⁴ HOPF, Ted. *Russia's European Choice*. First Edition edition. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 274.

⁵⁵ KAGAN, Robert. Putin Makes His Move. *The Washington Post*. 11 August 2008. Available from:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/10/AR2008081001871.html>

⁵⁶ KŘÍŽ, Zdeněk. *Adaptace Severoatlantické aliance na nové mezinárodní bezpečnostní prostředí*. 1. vyd. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2006. 217s. Monografie. ISBN 80-210-4218-4.

⁵⁷ Germania Otstaivaet Celostnost Gruzii [Germany Defends Integrity of Georgia]. *Kommersant.ru*. 15 August 2008. Available from: <http://kommersant.ru/doc/1012261>.

Georgian strategic situation deteriorated by deploying relatively strong Russian contingents on Georgian territory (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Russia keeps 7,600 troops on the Georgian territory where secessionists have declared independent states.⁵⁸ These forces serve not only as a deterrence to Georgia's future efforts to use military force against secessionists, but they also pose a permanent threat to Tbilisi, as they reduce the period of warning for the Georgian army in case of a Russian attack against this country.

Military experts have attempted to evaluate the purpose of Russian military bases in Gudauta and Ochamchira (in Abkhazia) and Java (South Ossetia). Gudauta could be used for offensive troops, air forces, or air protection, while Ochamchira could serve as a naval base, which would enable Russia to transfer the Black Sea fleet from Sevastopol. As far as Java is concerned, this city could be used for the dislocation of the motorized infantry brigade.⁵⁹ However, the most serious military consequence is unquestionably the reduction of time necessary for a direct threat for the Georgian metropolis of Tbilisi by troops stationed in South Ossetia, which is situated on the southern side of the South Caucasus ridge, and thus it is an ideal strategic starting point for a potential military occupation of Georgia.

Among others, the Russian-Georgian armed conflict strengthened anti-Georgian attitudes both in South Ossetia and Abkhazia; despite President Saakashvili's optimistic declarations, this makes the possible reintegration of these areas into Georgia in the near future even less likely. Russia takes these attitudes into account in its politics and uses them actively when obtaining support for the new "independent" states. As is evident from the negotiations in Geneva, the attitude of all sides of the conflict does not offer much space for a compromise. A great role in this respect is played by the fact that Russia wants Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be treated as sovereign states. The Russian Federation calls on Georgia to sign an agreement on the non-use of military force in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this regard, the Georgian position lies in the preparedness to sign such an agreement with Russia, as it does not recognize the separatist regions as the subjects of international law.⁶⁰ So far the most recent round of negotiations taking place did not lead to any particular results. The main issues lay in the requirements imposed by the Georgian side to withdraw financial support for terrorist attacks on Georgia's territory by the Federal Security Service (FSB) of the Russian Federation. The positions of the individual sides of the conflict remain unchanged and at odds on the issue of a secure return of internally displaced persons to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At this moment, it is evident that Georgia has *de facto* lost these territories and cannot hope to regain them soon.

Due to the Russian-Georgian armed conflict, there has been a shift in the perception of domestic conflicts in Georgia both by Georgian political elites and inhabitants. The Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts are regarded as a part of the Russian-Georgian conflict. After the Russian-Georgian armed conflict, the possibility of a direct dialogue between the conflicting sides (Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia) diminished as the separatist governments negotiated with Russia. In this respect, it is necessary to point out the paradoxical situation that Russia recognizes the existence of South Ossetia as an independent state, while North Ossetia is regarded as a part of Russia. That implies that Russia considers the sovereignty of South Ossetia as an instrumental principle, using it as a tool to put pressure on Georgia and the international community.

⁵⁸ MIKHELIDZE, Nona. After the 2008 Russia-Georgian War: Implications for the Wider Caucasus and Prospects for Western Involvement in Conflict Resolution. Presented at the conference The Caucasus and Black Sea region: European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Beyond, Istituto Affari Internazionali. 2009. Available from: <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iai0901.pdf>

⁵⁹ War in Georgia. Global Security. 5 July 2009. Available from: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/georgia-2008-1.htm>

⁶⁰ Georgia Spells Out Conditions For Signing Agreement On Non-Use Of Force. Radio Free Europe, Caucasus Report edition. 2. July 2009. Available from: http://www.rferl.org/content/Georgia_Spells_Out_Conditions_For_Signing_Agreement_On_NonUse_Of_Force/1767937.html

CONCLUSION

Conflicts are not static, but multilayered and dynamic. In this regard, the armed conflict in South Ossetia is no exception, but an example of the extremely complex interplay of issues at stake that have not been resolved yet. The aim of this article was to trace the evolution of aspects and issues at stake at each stage of the armed conflict. By studying the evolution of issues at each stage of the conflict we can trace the processes and patterns of conflict behavior in the case of South Ossetia. In this way, we can obtain a better understanding of the internal and external dimensions of the armed conflict and how the transformation from the one escalation stage in 1990s to another in 2008 shapes their outcomes.

Assessing the extent to which ethnicity is used to mobilize masses in the struggle over resources, land, and power is not an easy task, especially in the South Caucasus region, where the notion of ethnic hatred and primordial characteristics are widely used to justify incompatibility in goals and rights of conflicting parties. The in-depth study of ethnicity as an explanatory variable that has ignited full-scale armed conflicts has revealed that ethnicity was not a sufficient condition for the conflicts to emerge. It was, however, used in legitimizing mass mobilization by political elites. The most prudent explanation points out that there are three common factors determining evolution of the unresolved conflicts in the the South Caucasus region: secessionism, political transformation and international competition among regional and global powers.

One of the major findings of this article lies upon the role of political leaders and political processes that lead to escalation of tensions. Without the support of political elites, the conflict in South Ossetia region would never have escalated to a war. The conflict in South Ossetia in the 1990s was the outcome of the disintegration of the previous political order and an attempt to create a new one. It was about defending territory, political status, and independence. The issue at stake at the stage of escalation was characterized by conflicting visions about the political arrangement and secessionist aspirations of the South Ossetians. Ethnicity was used by political leaders to legitimize their claims, strengthen their position, and mobilize the masses.

The armed confrontation from 1990 to 1992 differs from the one in 2008. Mass mobilization, which was a key factor in the first escalation phase, disappeared in the second escalation phase. Masses were mobilized in Georgia in a struggle against electoral frauds, corrupted elites, and state weakness, culminating in the Rose Revolution in 2003. In the armed conflict in 2008, the state was not endangered by popular movement, rather the state itself was the actor, initiating change through its military might rather than through nationalistic appeals of political leaders who use ethnicity for purposes of manipulation.

The Russian-Georgian armed conflict did not touch the hearts of Georgians or their self-identification. It was more about defending the Georgian territory and the state's borders. The issue at 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. On the other hand, Georgia's main objective is to be incorporated into the Euro-Atlantic institutions, which would guarantee security, democratic transformation, sustainable economic development, and peaceful resolution of the conflicts. In this way, we can argue, the territorial issues that played a primary role in the second escalation phase were correlated with ideological aspects of the future orientation of the Georgian state.

"Frozen" conflicts have a significant impact on the stability in this region. The heavy military presence in the South Caucasus gives the Russian Federation support in manipulating the unresolved conflicts in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. This is especially dangerous now, during the crisis in Crimea, because as the crisis evolves, Russia can use its leverage in the South Caucasus in order to extend its power and control over these territories by supporting any escalation of simmering tensions and the transformation of "frozen" conflicts into a next series of "hot" wars.