



**“Frozen Conflicts” in the South Caucasus Region:
Background, Resolution Agenda and Challenges**

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Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union and independence for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the early 1990s was accompanied by the emergence of three major secessionist armed conflicts: Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and “South Ossetia” and Abkhazia in Georgia. Despite the fact that ceasefire agreements were reached in all three cases, they did not translate into peace agreements and did not provide total resolution to the conflicts characterizing them as “frozen conflicts.” These conflicts have regional security significance because they are the cause of tense relations between states, on the one hand, Georgia and Russia and on the other, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the West, Russia is often viewed as an “elephant in the room,” however it has direct interests in the region and tries to preserve its place through unresolved conflicts. The paper has three main objectives: firstly, describing the background and main recent developments in the conflicts in South Caucasus; Secondly, determining possible solutions to conflicts in Abkhazia, “South Ossetia” and Nagorno-Karabakh the means of making the voices of the main stakeholders heard; Lastly, analyzing the factors that prevent conflict resolution or pose the main challenges to establishment of long-term peace in the region.

Key words: Abkhazia, “South Ossetia”, Nagorno-Karabakh, conflict resolution, Russia, territorial integrity



*Conflicts in the South Caucasus. Map. 2013. Retrieved from: <http://studinfo.edu.aris.ge/2013/09/09/samxret-kavkasiis-konfliqtebi/>*¹

Introduction

During the last years of the Soviet Union, several conflicts emerged in South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh (1991-1994; April 2-5, 2016), “South Ossetia” (1991-1992; 2008) and Abkhazia (1992-1993). The conflicts of South Caucasus have some similar characteristics: the politics of Moscow played an important role in kindling and escalating these conflicts. According to international law, the main common feature of the three conflicts is that, on the one hand, they are related to territorial integrity and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders and on the other hand, incorrect interpretation of the principle of self-determination of nations. All three conflicts have signs of separatism. Separatists do not deny that during some periods in history (especially during the Soviet period), Nagorno-Karabakh belonged to the territory of Azerbaijan while Abkhazia and South Ossetia – to Georgia. However, according to their affirmations, these had violent and non-voluntary character. In addition, representatives of “South Ossetia” and Nagorno-Karabakh have irredentist demands - to unite ethnically, geographically and historically with Russia and Armenia, respectively. The separatist regions of Abkhazia, Tskhinvali region and Nagorno-Karabakh are self-proclaimed republics. They are not recognized as subjects of international law by the international commonwealth. All three are frozen conflicts but sometimes the situations deteriorate. Very often conflict-related bilateral and

¹ Conflicts in the South Caucasus. Map. 2013. Official website of studinfo.edu.aris.ge <http://studinfo.edu.aris.ge/2013/09/09/samxret-kavkasiis-konfliqtebi/>

multilateral negotiations do not provide desired results and the peacemaking process is close to stalemate.

Besides similarities, one significant difference should be pointed out here. Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in 2008 but it did not recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. This happens because Russia tries not to openly take the side of either Armenia or Azerbaijan and its support for one or another party experiences changes in various degrees. On June 24, 2017 Russia, which previously used to mostly support Armenia, delivered a new batch of anti-tank missiles to Azerbaijan as a part of a lucrative arms deal with Baku that has been strongly criticized by Armenia in the past year.² Nevertheless, Armenian Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan said, “We have our program of cooperation with Russia – an allied partnership program of military-technical and military-political cooperation, and we are pleased with the process of its implementation.”³ Therefore, both sides have their own mutually beneficial relations with official Moscow and this factor gives Russia more leverage over them.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the topic of the frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus. Some authors argue that one-sided recognition and reintegration of the breakaway regions will not provide a final solution while others try to prove the contrary. Most of the scholars underscore the importance of international organizations and mediators in finding settlements while also demonstrate the need for representing all the parties to the conflict during the process of the negotiations. Notwithstanding much analysis and research dedicated to this topic, finding durable solutions to these conflicts still remains a significant problem. Moreover, current developments and Russia’s assertiveness regarding Georgia aggravate the situation and increase the need to focus on these conflicts. Russia periodically moves a border sign further in Tskhinvali region thus, “continuing the illegal process of the so-called borderization.”⁴ Vladimir Putin traveled to Abkhazia to express his support for separatists there and in South Ossetia on the

²More Russian Weapons Supplied to Azerbaijan. News.2017. The official website of Armenian Weekly.<http://armenianweekly.com/2017/06/29/more-russian-weapons-supplied-to-azerbaijan/>

³Any supply of weapons to Azerbaijan negative – Armenia DM. News. The official website of Public Radio of Armenia.2017. <https://www.armradio.am/en/2017/06/28/any-supply-of-weapons-to-azerbaijan-negative-armenia-dm/>

⁴ Russia Quietly Moves Border Hundreds of Yards into occupied Georgia. Press Release. 2017. The official website of magazine Independent. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/russia-georgia-border-south-ossetia-move-hundreds-yards-occupied-nato-putin-west-ukraine-a7835756.html>

ninth anniversary of a five-day war between Moscow and Tbilisi.⁵ This action is one more step backward in the possible peaceful conflict resolution. In addition to Russia's policies, the main challenge to finding a solution is its involvement in all discussion formats and possibility to block policies which are against its interests.

The current and increasing interest of local, regional and global actors in the region is related, in particular, to the possible reserves of oil and natural gas in the Caspian Sea. In addition to local reasons for conflict, the political-strategic and economic importance of the South Caucasus has been ground for (attempts at) involvement in this area by states and organizations, such as Iran, Turkey, Russia, the USA, NATO and the EU.⁶

The aim of the paper is to determine possible solutions to the "frozen conflicts" in the South Caucasus considering historical and current developments in this part of the region. The paper builds on describing and analyzing the existent scholarly research and argues that best solution is to gather all parties to the conflicts (including representatives of separatist regions) and give high self-governing status to separatist regions within the countries they historically belong to and give them the autonomy to engage with the countries of their interest.

The generic qualitative research was conducted seeking to discover and understand obstacles and opportunities which exist in South Caucasus' conflicts. Topic-related literature was evaluated and interpreted. Brief history was presented in order to demonstrate the roots of the conflicts and myriad factors that had historically constituted a barrier to conflict settlement. An interview was conducted with Nick Chitadze regarding possible solutions to these conflicts. Case studies were used in order to explore the experience of conflict resolution in European countries and analyze possible matches with the conflict in Tskhinvali region. The work is divided into three main parts and focuses on the South Caucasus' conflicts: Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, conflicts in the so-called South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Each part includes a brief history to the conflict, obstacles to finding a settlement and possible solutions to the conflict.

Literature Review

⁵ Putin in Abkhazia as Georgia Mourns Losses from War with Russia in 2008. Press release. 2017. The official website of Voanews. <https://www.voanews.com/a/nato-criticizes-vladimir-putin-visit-breakaway-georgian-region/3977635.html>

⁶General Overview of South Caucasian Conflicts.AEGEE-Europe/European Students' Forum.Article. 2012. <https://www.aegEE.org/general-overview-of-the-south-caucasian-conflicts/>

Protracted conflicts in South Caucasus have not only regional but also international importance. Resolution to these conflicts is a key issue for political stability and economic prosperity in the region. This topic has always maintained its significance and a lot of scholarly research has been conducted. According to Boonstra and Belvin “the South Caucasus region suffers from a security deficit and has entered a new period of change with a significant risk of increased instability and even conflict... Only creative solutions will bring about positive change and settlement, neither one-sided recognition nor full re-integration of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.” The authors propose that there is a need to revive the role of international organizations, foremost the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)⁷ which I discuss below. However, previous experience shows that considering recent developments, the format of Minsk Group should be changed.

Carley Patricia provides a profound analysis of obstacles and opportunities for a settlement of the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. In the end, she concludes that “Only a settlement guaranteeing local Armenian sovereignty over Karabakh with de jure Azerbaijani control has a chance of lasting more than a few short years into the future, thus preventing the current dispute from being passed on to future generations.”⁸

Gegeshidze and Haindrava outlined the importance of conflict transformation – “a situation which not only ensures peace and respect for human rights but which creates conditions for the resolution of problems of development and modernization of economy, infrastructure, political and democratic institutions and so on.” However, they consider this process to take place only if parties to the conflict and international facilitators reach an agreement on the strategy of transformation and the structure of this process.⁹

Nick Chitadze determined suggestions that the Georgian side should have during the period of negotiations about the political and legal status of Abkhazia which mostly concentrate on the high political status of Abkhazia within the jurisdiction of Georgia.¹⁰ Considering contemporary political environment, he proposes functional and realistic approach to conflict resolution.

⁷Jos Boonstra, Neil Belvin. Challenging the South Caucasus Security Deficit. Working Paper. 2011. FRIDE; p.2

⁸Carley Patricia. Nagorno-Karabakh - Searching For Solution. United States Institute of Peace; Roundtable Report; 1998

⁹Archil Gegeshidze, Ivlian Haindrava. Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Rethinking the Paradigm. Research Project.2011; EU; p.40

¹⁰ Nick Chitadze. Geopolitics. 2011

Conflicts are analyzed within the scope of liberalism. The resolution agenda for these conflicts can be determined on the multilateral basis demonstrating the need for international cooperation and participation of regional and international organizations. Military power cannot provide a panacea for conflicts in the South Caucasus. In the cases of Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia, for example, social and economic powers can play a much more important role in establishing closer ties between Georgia and the two breakaway republics.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Brief History

The conflict has roots dating back well over a century into competition between Christian Armenian and Muslim Turkic and Persian influences. Populated for centuries by Christian Armenian and Turkic Azeris, Karabakh became part of the Russian empire in the 19th century. After the end of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the new Soviet rulers, as part of their divide-and-rule policy in the region, established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region, with an ethnic Armenian majority, within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan in the early 1920s. As Soviet control loosened towards the end of the 1980s, smoldering Armenian-Azeri frictions exploded into violence when the region's parliament voted to join Armenia. Ethnic Armenians gained control of the region and pushed on to occupy Azerbaijani territory outside Karabakh, creating a buffer zone linking Karabakh and Armenia. With the break-up of the Soviet Union Karabakh declared itself an independent republic, further escalating the conflict into a full-scale war. That de facto status has not been recognized elsewhere. While Armenia itself has never officially recognized the region's independence, it has become its main financial and military backer.¹¹

In April 2016, heavy fighting erupted between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces over the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The clashes have been defined as "the worst" since the 1994 ceasefire.¹² A ceasefire was agreed on 5 April, 2016 at a behind-the-scenes meeting in Moscow between representatives of the warring sides. As usual, both sides say the other pulled the trigger first. In February 2017, five Azerbaijani soldiers were killed in clashes with Armenian

¹¹Nagorno-Karabakh Profile.2016.The official website of BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18270325>

¹²Nagorno-Karabakh Violence. 2016.The official website of BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35949991>

separatists along the Nagorno-Karabakh boundary. All this shows that “frozen conflict” can reignite at any moment and fighting can lead to a more wide-scale military conflict.

Negotiation and mediation efforts, primarily led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, have failed to produce a permanent solution to the conflict. Russian-mediated peace talks have also not resulted in any concrete steps toward de-escalation. Established in 1994, the Minsk Group continues to work for the creation of conditions in which such a conference can take place. The co-chairs of the Minsk Group are the ambassadors of the Russian Federation, France and the USA. Moreover, a draft of a sophisticated peace plan, dating from 2005, promises both sides much of what they want: a return of Azerbaijani displaced persons and restoration of lost Azerbaijani lands in exchange for security for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and a promise of self-determination and perhaps, eventually, independence.

The Madrid Principles are one of the proposed peace settlements for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The original version of the principles was presented to the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers at the OSCE ministerial conference in Madrid in November 2007. The Basic Principles reflect a reasonable compromise based on the Helsinki Final Act principles of Non-Use of Force, Territorial Integrity, and the Equal Rights and Self-Determination of Peoples. The Basic Principles call for: return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control; an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance; a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will; the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and International security guarantees this would include a peacekeeping operation. The endorsement of these Basic Principles by Armenia and Azerbaijan will allow the drafting of a comprehensive settlement to ensure a future of peace, stability, and prosperity for Armenia and Azerbaijan and the broader region.¹³ Despite the fact that Armenian and Azerbaijani societies harshly criticized this document, representatives of Minsk group considered the “Madrid Principles” as fair and balanced. Notwithstanding that this document mostly represents the views of the parties, the fact that the document which can create the base for negotiations exists, is in itself a positive development.

Obstacles to Finding a Settlement

¹³Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries. Press Release. 2009. The official website of the OSCE. <http://www.osce.org/mg/51152>

The fact that the dynamic of the current negotiating process over of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict itself appears to reflect more positions of regional superpowers rather than the countries involved in this conflict complicates the process of conflict resolution. It is important to get consensus between the powers (Turkey, United States, European Union, and Russia) of interests in the region before encouraging Azerbaijan and Armenia to sign a peace agreement.

The absence of dialogue between the government and the people demonstrates the great democracy deficit, as flagrant violations of human rights continue in both countries. One of the main obstacles to a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a historic failure to establish links between the unsuccessful democratization process in both countries and the unresolved conflict. At the same time, it is vital to convince both societies that a peaceful solution is the preferred solution.¹⁴

According to Edward Walker, six factors present serious obstacles to reaching a settlement in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The first is the extent of mutual and historical mistrust between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The mistrust between Armenians and all Turkic-speaking Muslims, whom Armenians tend to view as a single people, is profound. The enmity dates back at least to the end of the last century and was greatly aggravated by the 1915 genocide and the subsequent unwillingness of the Turkish government to acknowledge it. At the same time, most Azerbaijanis believe that Armenians hate Azerbaijanis and are essentially racist. These images pose another obstacle to finding a settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh. Most Azerbaijanis and Armenians believe that the Karabakh conflict is between their two peoples; though “outside agitators” may have aggravated tensions, Armenians are basically convinced that Azeri civilians—not simply the government or the military—committed atrocities against them, and Azerbaijanis believe the same thing of Armenians. Each side remains convinced that the root of the conflict lies in attitudes and beliefs of the people on the other side.

A third obstacle is the problem of refugees. There are currently 600,000–700,000 refugees from the Karabakh region living in appalling conditions in Azerbaijan and another 200,000–300,000 in Armenia and Karabakh. Walker noted, the need to repatriate at least some of these refugees complicates the settlement picture—in particular, it makes it difficult for Azeri president Aliiev to be patient about reaching a settlement. Security problems present another complication.

¹⁴Orhan Gafarli. The Possible Scenarios of Resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. Analytical Paper. <http://www.academia.edu/1279435/The-Possible-Scenarios-of-Resolution-of-the-Nagorno-Karabakh-Conflict>

Azerbaijan simply cannot feel secure while Armenians occupy six of its provinces. On the other hand, if Azeri forces were to reenter those districts, Armenians in the southeastern part of their country would feel particularly vulnerable. In addition, Yerevan has to be concerned about its long border with Turkey. This issue is a particular concern for the Armenians and is one of the main stumbling blocks in the attempts to find a settlement. The character of the respective governments in the two capitals is a fifth impediment to efforts to reach a compromise agreement. The Armenians, Walker said, find it difficult to trust a government in Baku that they perceive as authoritarian, corrupt, and intolerant of minorities; Azerbaijanis, for their part, cannot bring themselves to trust the government of a state they believe is constructed on a strictly ethnic basis, a state that acts as if it believes that Armenia is for ethnic Armenians alone.¹⁵

Finally, the sixth obstacle to resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute is the asymmetrical nature of the negotiating process. In virtually all other secessionist conflicts in the former communist world, Walker stated, the national government has been willing to enter into direct negotiations with the secessionists, as in the cases of Chechnya, Abkhazia, former South Ossetian Autonomous District, and the Transdnestr region. In the Karabakh conflict, however, the three main parties, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, had been willing to accept an arrangement in which Baku and Yerevan—but not Stepanakert—had been represented at the negotiating table. In particular, they have been willing to allow Vafa Guluzade, Aliev's senior adviser, and Gerard Libaridian, Ter-Petrossian's senior adviser, to be the principal negotiators. The government representing the people being asked to take the most risks, the Karabakh Armenians, was not a direct party to the negotiations.

Possible solutions

Despite these considerable obstacles, there are factors in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh that provide a strong incentive to finding a settlement. One of the positive steps could be changing the membership of the Minsk Group to include other actors: In 2015, Azay Guliyev, an Azerbaijani member of parliament, proposed inclusion of Turkey and Germany to the co-chairmanship institute.¹⁶ However, according to Matthew Bryza, former U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, the EU would make more sense because it would represent all of Europe and has

¹⁵Carley Patricia. Nagorno-Karabakh - Searching For Solution. United States Institute of Peace. Roundtable Report. 1998

¹⁶Azerbaijani MP proposed introduction of Germany and Turkey to co-chairmanship of Minsk Group. Policy. 2015. http://azertag.az/xeber/Azerbaycanli_deputat_Almaniyanin_ve_Turkiyenin_Minsk_qrupunun_hemsedrliiyine_getirilmesi_teklifini_ireli_surub-833528

experience mediating similar conflicts in the Balkans.¹⁷ Azerbaijani foreign affairs expert, Rusif Huseynov, proposed Kazakhstan as an additional co-chair in the Minsk Group. According to him, Kazakhstan, which has turned into a big actor in the post-Soviet area, has titular population that is culturally similar to the Azerbaijanis, but is a member of several Kremlin-led organizations together with Armenia. Therefore, Kazakhstan could be equally close or distant to either warring side. Kazakhstan's previous experience in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict also makes it a good candidate for the mediation process.¹⁸

The following proposal, by Ambassador John Maresca, former special U.S. negotiator for Nagorno-Karabakh, outlines a political settlement of the conflict, with the aim of providing a new impetus to the negotiating process and a reference point for consideration of the eventual political solution and is based on the following elements:

- Nagorno-Karabakh would be reconstituted as the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (RNK), a self-governing legal entity within and freely associated with the sovereign Republic of Azerbaijan.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan would sign a treaty on mutual transit rights across each other's territory.
- Refugees would be permitted to return to their homes, with certain villages designated for international monitoring.¹⁹
- All of Armenia and Azerbaijan, including RNK, would be a free trade area.
- All agreed arrangements would be included in two documents to be the basis for a diplomatic solution signed at the Minsk Conference.
- The provisions of these documents would be guaranteed by the CSCE and the UN Security Council.
- The United States should not be involved on the ground in the Caucasus, but should take the lead in building good road connections between RNK and Armenia, and between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, an exclave of Azerbaijan.
- A donor's conference would be organized to raise funding for the economic reconstruction of the region.

¹⁷OSCE Minsk Group's Format Changing Agenda. Press release. The official website of OSCE.2015. <http://www.azernews.az/nation/76977.html>

¹⁸Rusif Huseynov. Time to Reform the Minsk Group. Analytics. 2015. <http://thepoliticon.net/analytics/172-time-to-reform-the-minsk-group.html>

¹⁹John Maresca. War in the Caucasus: A Proposal for Settlement of Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Special Report.1994.<https://www.usip.org/publications/1994/08/war-caucasus-proposal-settlement-conflict-over-nagorno-karabakh>

Maresca's proposal was based on the idea of associated statehood, a self-government arrangement. The intention was that the Treaty and the Basic Law would be approved and officially signed by all participants at the Minsk Conference and submitted to the Secretary General of the United Nations for distribution to all UN members. The CSCE and the UNSC would become the guarantors of the implementation of this agreement. The Maresca proposal was the subject of a special hearing by the CSCE Commission of the U.S. Congress. A letter urging the appointment of a special envoy by the USA was sent to President Clinton. However, due to the U.S. administration's unwillingness to take a leading position on an issue that Russia considered to belong to its sphere of influence, this proposal was not implemented and remains lost. Moreover, in both states the political leadership faced opposition parties that were unwilling to make a compromise proposed by Ambassador Maresca. After their victories Armenians were resistant to the idea of leaving Karabakh within Azerbaijan, even as a fully self-governing republic. At the same time Azerbaijanis, who considered themselves victims of Armenian aggression, stood firm on the right to territorial integrity of their republic.

Conflict in Abkhazia

Brief History

The war in Abkhazia broke in 1992-1993 between the Georgian Government and Abkhaz separatist forces supported by Russian and North Caucasian militants. During the Soviet era Abkhazia enjoyed status of an "autonomous republic," however it has always been considered as an integral part of Georgia, including political, social, economic and cultural life. From the 1990s Abkhazian separatists, supported by Russia, started to lead the policy for separation of Abkhazia from Georgia. Anti-Georgian propaganda and preparation for war (with the slogan "Abkhazia without Georgians") aggravated the situation. The first blood was spilt in 1989 when Abkhazians protested the creation of a branch of the Tbilisi State University in Sukhumi. In 1993 the capital of Abkhazia, Sokhumi fell, separatists captured the city committing ethnic cleansing of the local Georgian population. It was later recognized by the OSCE.²⁰ Georgia lost control over Abkhazia. On 12 October, 1999 separatist government of Abkhazia made "The state independence act of the Republic of Abkhazia." According to this document,

²⁰ Lisbon Document 1996. Official website of the OSCE. <http://www.osce.org/mc/39539?download=true>

after the war of 1992-1993 Abkhazia gained independence. As a result of the conflict more than 250,000 Georgians fled their homes.

In August 2008, during the war between Russia and Georgia over Tskhinvali region, Russian army troops moved through Abkhazia and pushed into Georgia proper. Meanwhile, Abkhaz forces drove Georgian troops out of the only area of Abkhazia still under Georgian control - the Kodori gorge. After the 2008 conflict, Moscow recognized the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia's allies Nicaragua and Venezuela followed suit, as did the Pacific microstate of Nauru. Since Abkhazia's "independence" was recognized by Russia, it has grown more and more dependent on Russia. In 2014, Russia and the breakaway Georgian region signed a "strategic partnership" agreement, angering Tbilisi, which accused Moscow of seeking to annex Abkhazia.²¹

Possible Solutions

Nowadays, to resolve the conflict by peaceful negotiations is practically impossible because of radically different views of the sides on the political status of Abkhazia and first of all because of pressure of Russia on the regime in Abkhazia. Besides this, the negotiation process is complicated by the refusal of the Abkhazian side to renew negotiations with Georgia, till Georgia does not sign a non-aggression pact.

From a long-term perspective, in the case of renewed negotiations, the Georgian side should have concrete suggestions, particularly regarding the political and legal status of Abkhazia: two main principles of international law: territorial integrity of the state and the right of nation to self-determination should be taken into consideration in defining the legal status of Abkhazia. The right of the nation to self-determination does not necessarily mean giving absolute independence to the state. Here high political status is implied - the existence of political formation within the state where political, social, economic, religious and other rights of the representatives of that formation are protected. Abkhazia can have its own President which will be Abkhazian and should be elected by the direct vote of the Abkhazian population. Abkhazia should have all state symbols - flag, national anthem and the constitution of Abkhazia, the penal, civil and administrative codes. An adequate quota for Abkhazian representatives in the Parliament of Georgia should be defined, as well as an adequate quota for Georgian MPs in the Parliament of Abkhazia. Representation of Abkhazia in Tbilisi and the representation of the

²¹Abkhazia Profile-Overview. 2015. The official website of BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18175394>

government of Georgia in Sukhumi should be opened. Abkhazia should have a right to define its main principles of administrative-territorial division and their responsibilities – method of election, the method of appointing the Head of Administration, etc.²² Moreover, Geneva Talks should be maintained because despite a difficult start, the parties appear to have accepted this format as a legitimate platform for interaction. The EU - along with the UN and the OSCE - has assumed responsibility for preserving this process. Even if no breakthrough can be expected in the near future, the channels must be kept open for future developments. Over time, changes and adaptations to the process could be considered to take into account the peculiarities of the conflicts and increase the format's efficiency. The EU should be prepared to take the lead and to engage with the US in the search for solutions to the pressing problems of the region, particularly the unresolved conflicts.²³

In the absence of any possibility of resolving the conflict in the foreseeable future, Tbilisi's principal aim at the moment is to preserve the prospect of the country's reunification until better times. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to solve two crucial tasks:

- Conflict transformation, understood by the government as the gradual establishment of mutually beneficial cooperation in humanitarian, economic and other areas, without resolving sensitive political issues. There is evidently a calculation that the resulting feeling of mutual dependence may reduce excessive tensions in Tbilisi-Sukhumi relations and quite possibly create conditions for restoring confidence;
- Stalling the process of recognition of Abkhazia (and South Ossetia), i.e. securing the sustainability of the “non-recognition” policy on the part of the international community. Despite the declared firm position of the US, the EU and other countries on supporting Georgia's territorial integrity and non-acceptance of the new realities after August 2008, it appears that Tbilisi is not fully confident in the future sustainability of these positions.²⁴

The current absence of trust between the parties remains the main obstacle. The lamentable state of transport and communications infrastructure will undoubtedly be an obstacle in the realization of projects/initiatives to restore trust and cooperation. The information vacuum factor,

²²Nick Chitadze. Geopolitics. “Universal.” Tbilisi. 2011. p.497

²³Sabine Fischer .Abkhazia and Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict.EU Institute of Security Studies.Analysis. 2009. P.7http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Abkhazia_and_the_Georgian-Abkhaz_conflict.pdf

²⁴Archil Gegeshidze, Ivlian Haindrava. Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Rethinking the Paradigm. Research Project.2011. EU. p.34

characterizing the population of Abkhazia and their habitual indifference towards events and processes in Georgia, is also of relevance here.

Conflict in Tskhinvali Region

Brief History

The first encounters between the Government of Georgia and ethnic Ossetians started in 1920 when the region became an “autonomous oblast” (*region*) of Soviet Georgia despite several rebellions by ethnic Ossetians for independence. The conflict escalated in 1989 when leaders of the former South Ossetian Autonomous District sent an official request to the Georgian Supreme Soviet Court demanding the status of an autonomous republic. First clashes took place in 1990 when South Ossetia declared the creation of the “Republic of South Ossetia” and later, held their own elections. Later the newly elected “Supreme Council” announced the separation from Georgia. An armed conflict started after the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia took away the status of the autonomous region of South Ossetia. The conflict ended with a trilateral agreement on the deployment of Georgian, Ossetian and Russian peacekeepers. Tensions escalated in 2004 again and reached peak in August 2008 when military actions were renewed in Tskhinvali region. Russia intervened and after the war formally recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

The Geneva International Discussions co-chaired by the EU, UN and OSCE in which Georgian, Abkhaz, South Ossetian, Russian and US representatives participate, so far remains the only official platform to find a solution for the conflicts’ resolution in a peaceful way. However, so far this has not resulted in any concrete progress allowing the return of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) to either territory. This happens because the parties to the conflict have different political goals which do not coincide with each other. Nowadays separatism is so deeply rooted in the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region and their dependence on and cooperation with Russia is so strong that it is practically impossible to return the breakaways republic to the jurisdiction of Georgia. Georgia has very limited resources to achieve that goal. Below several models which represent possible solutions to such conflicts on the European continent are outlined.

The Croatian model. In 1991 after Croatia declared independence, Croatian Serbs in the east of the country expelled Croats with the aid of the Yugoslav army. Nearly one-third of Croatian territory came under Serb control. In 1992, the UN set up 4 protected areas in Croatia, with

14,000 UN troops keeping Croats and Serbs apart. In 1995 Croat forces retook three of the four areas created by the UN. Croatian Serbs fled to Bosnia and Serbia. Thus, Croatia established territorial integrity through military means.²⁵ This model cannot be considered useful in the case of Georgia due to limited and small military resources of the country.

Finnish model. After the 105-day conflict - Winter War with the Soviet Union in 1939-1940, according to the Moscow Peace Treaty, Finland had to cede border areas to the Soviet Union, a portion of Karelia—the entire Karelian Isthmus as well as a large swathe of land north of Lake Ladoga.²⁶ The Finnish model also cannot be considered a good option for Georgia. As Georgia classifies achievement of restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty as its survival interests, it is unlikely that Georgia will cede the breakaway regions to Russia.

Cyprus model. The Republic of Cyprus is de facto partitioned into two main parts: the area under the effective control of the Republic, located in the south and west, and the north, administered by the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. In the referendum on the Annan Plan held on April 24, 2004, both sides had to approve the proposals for Cyprus to be reunified in time for EU membership. Turkish Cypriots endorsed the plan with a 65% majority, seeing it as a way to end the international isolation they have endured since Turkish troops invaded the island in 1974.²⁷ This is the best possible option for Georgia. Its main goal should be that Georgia should work on strengthening democratic institutions and develop governmental institutions which in turn, will promote economic development and implementation of necessary reforms for European and Euro Atlantic integration. These achievements can increase the interest of the breakaway republics of Georgia in developing relations with Georgia.

CONCLUSION

Several significant factors that create barriers to stability in South Caucasus can be determined: First is the difficulty of solving the already existent ethnopolitical conflicts. The difficulty in the case of Georgia is related to the Russian Federation and negotiations with the separatist leaders. In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, even if the compromise could be reached regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, it is doubtful whether friendly relations could be established between the two countries which could promote economic and political integration. In the region of small South Caucasus three different

²⁵Croatia Country Profile. 2017. The official website of BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17212572>

²⁶USSR Attacks Finland.This day in History.<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/ussr-attacks-finland>

²⁷Cyprus Spurns Historic Chance.Press Release. 2004.The official website of BBC.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3656753.stm>

languages and religions exist which in itself points to the complicated character of the region. Moreover, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia have different political cultures, different level of development of civil society and democracy. The three countries have different foreign political priorities that complicate the creation of the durable and sustainable security system. The different and/or clashing interests of regional and non-regional actors make the situation tense.

Conflicts in Abkhazia and former South Ossetian Autonomous District are not on the agenda of the international community. The diplomatic service of Georgia should work on promoting the discussion of these issues. One of the possibilities will be the implementation of energy projects. The perspectives of political stability in South Caucasus depend on the desire of the three countries of the region as well as international factors. Russia remains the greatest challenge to conflict resolution. This is why any decision should be made on a multilateral basis. Moreover, strengthening the energy transportation potential of South Caucasus will increase the desire of the West to renew negotiations about extant regional conflicts and find durable solutions to them.

In the case of Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia, the Georgian government should improve people to people contacts and increase the awareness of people in the breakaway republics about the achievements of Georgia. In addition, Georgia should be ready to make concessions regarding high autonomy of the regions within its borders. As for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Minsk Group format should be definitely maintained and representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh should also be allowed to participate in discussions. This region should have high legal status within Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan and Armenia should establish strong transit ties allowing for free movement from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan.

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