

Not Frozen but Red Hot: Conflict Resolution in Georgia Following the Change of Government

Introduction

With the fall of President Eduard Shevardnadze on 23 November 2003, Mikhail Saakashvili was hailed in Georgia as a national saviour. Especially in the capital, Tbilisi, euphoric cries of “Misha” could be heard for weeks afterwards. The majority of the population had no doubt that the leader of the “Rose Revolution” would be the next president of Georgia, thereby bringing about a generational change in the political elite – one that was staged effectively by the media and considered long overdue by national and international observers.

However, this “smooth” transition, whose non-violent nature gained it so much attention, has not yet brought about a fundamental transformation of political, social, and economic relations in Georgia. The Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflict resolution processes, on the other hand, are very much at the centre of attention. Restoring territorial integrity is the top priority for Georgia’s new leaders. In seeking to achieve this, police and quasi-military operations have often been used, contributing to worrying escalations in both conflict zones. Bloody clashes, often ending in fatalities, have been particularly prevalent in South Ossetia.

We cannot yet foresee the consequences of repeated military confrontations. It is clear, however, that the lack of common ground that could be used as a basis for negotiation means the hoped-for rapid peaceful resolution has receded into the distant future. The change of regime in Tbilisi has led the conflict parties to further harden their contrary positions. The current contribution is concerned with the main factors that have played a part in this renewed deterioration in Georgia’s ethno-political conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By describing recent developments in the two conflict regions and comparing them with Saakashvili’s policies so far, I hope to give an overall impression of Georgia’s current political situation.

Revival of the Conflict Resolution Processes

Both the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict have been considered “frozen” up to now. In the last instance, however, the term “frozen” is misleading – at least when applied to the conflicts themselves. In truth, armed clashes between the conflict parties were and remain commonplace. What was frozen, in the last years of Shevardnadze’s rule,

were the various conflict resolution processes, as negotiations became increasingly deadlocked.

It was only with Saakashvili's accession to the presidency that the *de facto* independence of Abkhazia (since 1992) and South Ossetia (since 1993) was seriously challenged. The lethargy that characterized the conflict resolution process under Shevardnadze had only served to consolidate the status quo. In contrast, Saakashvili made it clear from the start that the new government's top priority was to restore Georgia's territorial integrity. Economic incentives, stabilization of the country, and the granting of "the broadest autonomy" to the separatist territories were designed to counteract the further fragmentation of the Georgian state. Nonetheless, it is hard to find evidence of concrete measures that were intended to achieve this.

Instead, in the first few months of the new Georgian government, military activities were more prominent. Deserving of special attention is the sabre-rattling posture taken towards Ajaria, a province in the south west of the country, which eventually concluded peacefully with the flight of the local ruler Aslan Abashidze into exile in Moscow in May 2004 and the re-establishment of Ajaria as Georgian sovereign territory. In the summer of 2004, the Georgian Interior Ministry carried out extensive operations – described as police operations, but military in character – in South Ossetia that officially aimed at the long-term elimination of smuggling from the region. The military confrontation that followed was the spark that reignited the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia.

The Georgian government's employment of military force in Ajaria and – just a few weeks later – in South Ossetia proved extremely obstructive to conflict resolution. Moreover, Georgia's "new nationalism" goes hand in hand with a strengthening of the military that frequently meets with scepticism and mistrust.¹ Against this background, the frequent military exercises carried out by Georgian reserves, and the militaristic and nationalistic overtones of the speeches given by Saakashvili and his defence minister, Irakli Okruashvili, at the Tbilisi Palace of Sport in the summer of 2005 were seen by Abkhazians, South Ossetians, and members of the international community as signs of Georgian remilitarization.²

1 The expression "new nationalism" is taken from David Aphrasidze, Georgia's New Nationalism: A Better Opportunity for State Building? in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2004*, Baden-Baden 2005, pp. 179-190.

2 Georgian Leadership Dances to Patriotic Tune, in: *Civil Georgia*, 11 September 2005, at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=10722>. The author's conversations in Tbilisi and Sukhumi in September to November 2005 underlined this point vividly.

The actions of the Georgian police in the summer of 2004 led to a higher level of readiness to use violence in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict zone. Although a ceasefire was agreed in August 2004, there have continued to be sporadic exchanges of fire, and several soldiers were killed in one such incident in October 2004. The trust that had been painstakingly built up over more than a decade of negotiations between the conflict parties has largely been destroyed. The results of all negotiations hitherto carried out were declared invalid, while a demilitarization agreement concluded in November 2004 has still not been implemented.

It therefore hit the Georgian side particularly hard when, in December 2004, the Russian delegation to the Permanent Council of the OSCE voted against extending the mandate of the OSCE Border Monitoring Operation. The 250 unarmed OSCE border monitors, who had been responsible for overseeing sections of frontier in northern Georgia totalling 280 km in length, withdrew as early as January 2005. The OSCE undertook damage limitation, starting a training programme for 800 Georgian border troops in mid-April.

In the conflict zone itself, the situation remains extremely unsettled. Detonations are an almost daily occurrence, frequently killing and wounding. In Gori, for instance, a Georgian town near the South Ossetian border, a bomb explosion in February 2005 left four people dead and 20 injured. Abductions are also frequent, and often end in fatalities. On 20 September 2005, the 15th anniversary of the South Ossetian declaration of independence, the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, came under mortar fire from nearby Georgian villages, and ten people were wounded. In early October 2005, armed men entered the Georgian village of Berula in South Ossetia and opened fire, wounding two people. On 5 December, shots were exchanged during the arrest of a South Ossetian deputy police chief by Georgian military police, and he was injured. The next day, South Ossetian militias took somewhere between ten and 20 Georgian police and civilians hostage. When Georgians are arrested by the South Ossetian authorities, the reactions of the Georgians' relatives can be equally tumultuous. In the last two years, in an effort to secure the release of Georgians who have been kidnapped or are held in South Ossetian custody, their relatives have repeatedly set up blockades on the main South Ossetian highway – sometimes for several weeks at a time.³

The security situation became especially precarious again in July 2006. On 9 July, a member of the Georgian security services was killed in a bomb

3 This road, which passes through Tskhinvali and is also known as the Transcaucasian Highway is of great strategic importance as it provides access to the Roki Tunnel, which, apart from the Georgian Military Highway, is the only link between Georgia and the North Caucasus/Russia. Most of the South Ossetian villages with an ethnic Georgian population are also found north of Tskhinvali. A more detailed account of events in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict in 2004 and 2005 can be found in: Marietta König, *Georgien (Südossetien)*, in: Arbeitsgemeinschaft Kriegsursachenforschung (ed.), *Das Kriegsgeschehen 2005* [Events in Warfare 2005], Wiesbaden 2006.

attack in South Ossetia. Just a few days later, on 14 July, two young civilians were killed in a bomb explosion in Tskhinvali.⁴ The situation had escalated when the Georgian government blocked the highway in the north of Tskhinvali on 8 July. This led to the freedom of movement within the conflict zone of Russian members of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) being repeatedly restricted by armed Georgian security officers. As a result, the South Ossetian side boycotted the meeting of the JCC planned for 17 and 18 July.

This was particularly problematic as the JCC, together with the Experts' Group,⁵ is one of the key frameworks for negotiation in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict-resolution process. Every time a meeting of one of these bodies fails to take place, it is seen as an obstruction of the entire process.⁶ The OSCE, on the other hand, appears to have its hands tied. With the withdrawal of the border monitors, its presence in South Ossetia is now minimal and currently concentrated especially on implementing projects that are largely funded by the EU.

On 14 June in Brussels, at the first donor conference for South Ossetia, organized by the Belgian OSCE Chairmanship, the participating States agreed to provide a total of ten million euros for the economic rehabilitation of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict zone.⁷ Despite the crisis in Russian-Georgian relations that followed, the Steering Committee on Economic Rehabilitation in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict zone was able to convene on 6 October and agreed to establish a centre for the promotion of economic development in Tskhinvali.⁸ Meanwhile, the South Ossetian authorities are continuing their efforts to secure independence. On 12 November 2006, another referendum on preserving *de facto* independence was carried out, again without international recognition. The most recent one had taken place in 1992.

4 Cf. OSCE, *OSCE Chairman calls for calm and restraint in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict*, press release, Brussels, 11 July 2006, at: http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=78&info_id=1784; OSCE, *OSCE Chairman alarmed at detention of Mission Officers in Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone*, press release, Brussels, 12 July 2006, at: <http://www.osce.org/item/19844.html>; *OSCE Mission to Georgia condemns Tskhinvali explosion which killed two young civilians*, press release, Tbilisi, 14 July 2006, at: http://www.osce.org/georgia/item_1_19869.html.

5 Both the Joint Control Commission and the Experts' Group on the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict-resolution process generally meet on the initiative and under the *aegis* of the OSCE Mission to Georgia.

6 *Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on recent developments in Georgia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, press release, 20 July 2006, at: http://www.eu2006.fi/news_and_documents/cfsp_statements/vko29/en_GB/1153411017775; OSCE, *OSCE Chairman regrets delay of JCC meeting and detention of Russian diplomats in Georgia*, press release, Brussels, 17 July 2006, at: <http://www.diplomatie.be/en/press/homedetails.asp?TEXTID=55689>.

7 OSCE, *OSCE donors pledge more than 10 million euros for economy in Georgia/South Ossetia*, press release, Brussels, 14 June 2006, at: http://www.osce.org/cio/item_1_19513.html.

8 OSCE, *OSCE Chairman welcomes first meeting of Steering Committee on Economic Rehabilitation in Georgian-Ossetian Conflict Zone*, press release, 6 October 2006.

The events in Ajaria and South Ossetia also affected Georgian-Abkhaz relations. The Abkhaz government observed political developments in Tbilisi and the actions of Georgia's President Saakashvili closely. The fall of Shevardnadze and the absence of major instability and violence during the Rose Revolution were viewed with relief but also concern. In contrast to those of his predecessor, Saakashvili's actions are hard to foresee. His image – not only in Abkhazia – is remarkably poor. “Bad tempered” and “unpredictable” are the attributes most often used to describe him.⁹

Abkhazia appears ever more self-confident in its dealings with its partner Russia. The background to this is that Abkhazia had its own mini “Rose Revolution” in the autumn of 2004, which confounded the sceptics by ushering in the political self-determination of Abkhaz civil society. Raul Khadjimba, whose candidacy for the presidency was supported by Russia as well as the then *de facto* president, Vladislav Ardzinba, was accused of fraudulently winning the presidential elections of 3 October 2004 (which were not internationally recognized). Just one day after the election, the Central Election Commission, which was under enormous public pressure, declared the results that had been published so far to be invalid. On 11 December, the opposition candidate Sergei Bagapsh was declared the victor. The following tug-of-war over the results lasted for weeks. The opposition occupied the government building, and supporters of both candidates took their protests to the streets. When shots were fired, the situation threatened to escalate.

In this situation, Russia's behaviour was particularly ambiguous. Moscow was openly supporting Khadjimba and even threatened Bagapsh by claiming it would consider intervening in Abkhazia if he “threatened Russia's interests”.¹⁰ At the same time, Russia repeatedly invited both Bagapsh and Khadjimba to talks in Moscow to seek a mutually acceptable way out of the impasse. When the Abkhaz parliament came out for Bagapsh, Russia closed the border to Abkhazia and imposed a blockade. On 6 December, a compromise was finally reached: In the rerun of the election, Bagapsh would stand for president and Khadjimba for vice-president, thereby enabling them to share power based on their almost equal support. Bagapsh was elected as the new president of Abkhazia on 12 January 2005 and sworn in on 12 February.

Thus, after ten years of Vladislav Ardzinba's regency, a real change in who was holding the reins of power had proved possible. Abkhazians regard this as a victory over external attempts to exert control. They are proud of having won the battle of wills with their larger neighbour, even if Russia does remain Abkhazia's most important partner for co-operation and trade. One result is the virtual elimination of internal Abkhaz differences. Nor is it remarkable that the majority of the Abkhaz people, and above all the younger

9 Interviews carried out by the author in Abkhazia, October 2005.

10 Reported by Ekho Moskvyy, RIA Novosti, Itar-Tass, et al., 12 November 2004.

generation, are in favour of independence, while the older generation and ethnic minorities believe that becoming part of the Russian Federation is the more realistic course.¹¹ Abkhazia's increasing autonomy is also underscored by economic factors. In 2005 alone, 1.2 million tourists visited the region. The increase in revenue is most evident in the booming property sector. Russia only complies officially with the embargo imposed on Abkhazia by the CIS under pressure from Georgia in January 1996.¹² CIS peacekeeping troops are also among those who profit heavily from the Abkhaz black market.

In July 2006, Georgia launched an operation in the Georgian-Abkhaz border zone in an attempt to crack down on smuggling. Georgian police moved into the Kodori Valley, officially to restore security in the area, which is considered the main centre of smuggling in the conflict zone.¹³ From the Russian and Abkhaz perspective, however, this operation is seen as an attempt to use military means to force Abkhazia to return to the Georgian fold, and thus constitutes a breach of the 1994 Moscow Ceasefire Agreement. Representatives of the Abkhaz media and NGOs released an official statement in which they tried to draw attention to what were, in their opinion, Georgia's true motives.¹⁴

In the meantime, Georgian paramilitary police are preparing to stay in the upper Kodori Valley in order to eventually bring it under Georgian control. However, possession of the Kodori Valley may be nothing more than a bargaining chip that Georgia can use to bring about (long-term) international inspections of the military base at Gudauta.¹⁵ Officially, this formerly Russian base had been handed over for the use of CIS peacekeeping troops. As most of these are Russian, the base is still effectively in Russian hands. As a result, it is the only base that has remained hidden from Georgia's sight. Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian relations have deteriorated considerably because of the Kodori crisis. It is no accident that the meeting of the Joint Control Commission of the conflict parties in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict on 12-13 October 2006 ended for the third time in succes-

11 Interviews carried out by the author in Abkhazia, October 2005.

12 Decision Taken by the Council of the Heads of States of the Commonwealth of Independent States on Measures for Settlement of the Conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, 29 January 1996, in: Tamaz Diasamidze (ed.), *Regional Conflicts in Georgia – the Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia, the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (1989-2002). The Collection of Political-Legal Acts in English Language*, Tbilisi 2003, pp. 170f.; Decree Issued by the Government of the Russian Federation on Importing of Citrus and Some Other Agricultural Products to the Russian Federation, in: *ibid.*, p. 200.

13 According to Abkhaz sources, some 1,500 Georgian police and/or military personnel are in the Kodori Valley, in: *Apsnypress*, 27 July 2006. While the Abkhaz media speaks of troops, Georgia describes it as a police operation. Cf. Russia Fears Georgia will Use Kodori For Attacking Abkhazia, in: *Civil Georgia*, 29 July 2006, at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13211>.

14 Cf. *Apsnypress*, 27 July 2006.

15 Cf. Police Forces to Remain in Kodori, in: *Civil Georgia*, 26 July 2006, at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13181>; Tbilisi wants Gudauta Inspection in Exchange for Kodori Monitoring, in: *Civil Georgia*, 1 August 2006, at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13232>.

sion with no agreement being signed.¹⁶ On 2 October, the *de facto* governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had declared jointly that they were breaking off talks with Tbilisi for the time being.¹⁷ Abkhazia would only be willing to return to the negotiating table when Georgia had withdrawn from the upper part of the Kodori Valley. This, however, is unthinkable for the Georgian side, as their tactics have already brought a third of Abkhaz territory under their control. The United Nations has so far reacted cautiously to the Kodori crisis, merely calling upon the disputing parties to return to the negotiating table. It was certainly inconvenient that the term of office of Heidi Tagliavini, the Head of Mission of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), ended in July. In August 2006, she was succeeded by Jean Arnault, previously the Head of Mission of the UN Mission in Afghanistan.¹⁸ On 13 October, the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling upon Georgia to refrain from “provocative actions, especially in upper Kodori Valley”.¹⁹ Nevertheless, tensions remain. Rockets were fired on the upper Kodori Valley on 25 October.²⁰ Warlords operating in the Kodori Valley are believed to have been responsible.

Georgian Conflict Resolution Plans

In a speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy on 2 March 2006, Saakashvili reiterated clearly how he understood Georgia’s national interest:

1. The peaceful and complete restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity
2. The establishment of lasting security through energy diversification and the creation of a modern national defense force
3. Broad economic growth and investment in education, health care and good governance
4. And integration into NATO and other European institutions, including constructive relations with all our neighbors.²¹

16 OSCE, *OSCE Chairman expresses serious regrets at the failure of Joint Control Commission meeting on Georgian-Ossetian conflict*, press release, 13 October 2006.

17 Cf. *Secessionist Authorities quit talks with Tbilisi*, at: <http://www.civil.ge>, 2 October 2006.

18 Cf. United Nations, *Annan names Jean Arnault as new head of UN mission in Georgia*, press release, 17 July 2006, at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=19217&Cr=georgia&Cr1=>.

19 United Nations, *Security Council extends Georgia Mission until 15 April 2007, Unanimously adopting Resolution 1716 (2006)*, 13 October 2006, at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8851.doc.htm>.

20 Cf. United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia, *United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia Investigation into Reports of Rocket Attack in Upper Kodori Valley*, 1 November 2006, at: http://www.unomig.org/data/file/793/PR_2006_77_eng.pdf.

21 Mikheil Saakashvili, *Georgia’s role in International Security Policy*, at: <http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?sprache=en&id=163&>, 2 March 2006.

Georgia's allies in the Euro-Atlantic region are to help it implement these goals. In recent years, the USA has considerably expanded the financial support it provides to Georgia.²² The visit of US President George W. Bush to Georgia in May 2005 was celebrated as a national holiday lasting several days. Bush has also repeatedly expressed his strong support of Georgia's desire to join NATO, stressing the importance of finding a rapid resolution to the conflicts in Georgia. Hardliners on the right wing of the US Republican party are particularly active in gathering signatures in the US Senate in support of the fastest possible accession of Georgia to NATO. Meanwhile, Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, has voiced the suspicion that Georgia may even have acted with the support of the USA and NATO, as a timetable for negotiations for Georgia to join NATO had been agreed a month earlier.²³

In an effort to involve the international community more closely in the conflict resolution process, at the General Assembly of the United Nations, on 21 September 2004, President Saakashvili presented a three-step plan aimed at settling the South Ossetian and Abkhaz conflicts. Measures to build confidence between the ethnic groups, demilitarization and the search for a format for an international peacekeeping mission, and, finally, the resolution of the status question should be dealt with one by one.²⁴ On 27 October 2005, the Georgian prime minister, Zurab Nogaideli, presented an updated version of the "South Ossetia Conflict Resolution Plan" to the Permanent Council of the OSCE.²⁵ Because Georgia called for changes to the current negotiating framework and a rapid solution to the status question – before the end of 2006 – this plan was rejected by Moscow and Tskhinvali. Thereafter, the Georgian government returned to emphasizing Saakashvili's three-step plan, which lacks the two controversial points. The "Statement on Georgia" adopted by the Ministerial Council on 6 December 2005 underlined the significance of this plan as a basis for the peaceful settlement of the conflicts.

However, the Georgian government has still published no official document containing a detailed description of its concept for resolving the two ethno-political conflicts, and the existing three-step plan has not been further elaborated. According to the EU Special Representative, Peter Semneby, this was partly because moderate Georgian mediators were no longer involved. Giorgi Khaindrava, the former minister for conflict resolution, was replaced in July 2006 by the deputy foreign minister, Merab Antadze. In the same month, Saakashvili appointed Irakli Alasania, the former chief negotiator on Abkhazia, as Georgia's ambassador to the United Na-

22 Cf. Aphrasidze, cited above (Note 1), pp. 186-187.

23 Cf. Steven Lee Myers, Russian Officials Pledge More Sanctions to Cut off Cash to Georgia, in: *The New York Times*, 4 October 2006.

24 Cf. Address by Mr. Mikhail Saakashvili, President of the Republic of Georgia, in: United Nations, General Assembly, Fifty-ninth session, 4th plenary meeting, 21 September 2004, A/59/PV.4, pp. 11-16, here: p. 14.

25 See: South Ossetia Conflict Resolution Plan – Presented by Prime Minister of Georgia Mr. Zurab Nogaideli, Vienna, 27 October 2005, in: OSCE, *Conference Services*, PC.DEL/1060/05, 27 October 2005.

tions.²⁶ While interesting papers have been produced by those with no formal role in the conflicts and discussed by the conflict parties, the media, NGOs, and the opposition,²⁷ the Georgian government has paid these little attention. Both the Abkhaz and South Ossetian sides meanwhile stress that only a document drafted jointly by Georgia and Abkhazia or South Ossetia, respectively, can be legally binding in the long term, noting also that this remains unlikely for the time being given the lack of dialogue.

The Resolutions of the Georgian Parliament

From the Georgian perspective, the key obstacle to the long-term resolution of the two ethno-political conflicts is the constitution of the peacekeeping forces deployed in the conflict zones. The Georgian parliament passed its most recent resolution on the peacekeepers on 18 July 2006.²⁸ This resolution builds on the resolutions of 11 October 2005 and 15 February 2006, in which the presence and activities of the troops under Russian command in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were described as a major obstacle to the peaceful resolution of the conflicts. Georgia therefore explicitly demands the withdrawal of these forces, asking for them to be replaced by an international peacekeeping and police force. Only then would the way be clear for the reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in a united Georgian state, in which the rights of Abkhaz and South Ossetians would be guaranteed.

The Abkhaz and South Ossetian *de facto* republics have strongly protested against the resolutions of the Georgian parliament and demand that the existing ceasefire arrangements be maintained, according to which a CIS peacekeeping force is deployed in Abkhazia, and Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) – consisting of Georgian, Russian, and North Ossetian units (with South Ossetian peacekeepers serving in the North Ossetian contingent) – are stationed in South Ossetia.²⁹ International troops, biased due to their *a priori* recognition of Georgian territorial integrity, would act exclusively in Georgia's interests and would not take into account Abkhazia's desire for independence and South Ossetia's wish for reunion with the Republic of North

26 Cf. Ahto Lobjakas, Georgia: EU Urges "Confidence Building" With Separatists, in: *RFE/RL Newsline*, 5 October 2006, at: <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/10/6a7772d3-d3ec-4a5f-a4e6-397682ea5d27.html>.

27 One example is Paata Zakareishvili, et al., *A concept on the special status of Abkhazia in the Georgian state (Project)*, Tbilisi 2004 (unpublished).

28 The resolution can be viewed at the website of *Civil Georgia*, at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/detail.php?id=13079>.

29 Declaration on measures for a political settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, signed in Moscow on 4 April 1994, in: Diasamidze, cited above (Note 12), pp. 132-135; Agreement on a Cease-fire and Separation of Forces, 14 May 1994, in: *ibid.*, pp. 138-141; Agreement on Principles of Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict, in: *ibid.*, pp. 94f.

Ossetia-Alania (a federal subject of the Russian Federation).³⁰ They see Russia's troops as the only guarantee for the protection of Abkhaz and South Ossetian interests.

Moscow, however, is pursuing its own power-political interests in the region. By rejecting the extension of the mandate for the – unarmed – OSCE border monitors in late 2004, Moscow underlined its claim to an exclusive military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This, however, is being increasingly called into question by the new Georgian government. In 2005, negotiations lasting months were held between Georgia and Russia, in which Russia was forced to meet its commitments to close its military bases in Georgia, as agreed in the 1999 Istanbul joint declaration.³¹ On 30 May 2005, a joint declaration on the withdrawal of Russian troops by the end of 2008 was signed in Moscow.³²

It was further agreed, in accordance with Georgia's wishes as outlined above, to end Russia's dominance of the peacekeeping forces stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the long term and to implement their withdrawal as soon as possible. With every new resolution the Georgian parliament passed on this, Georgian-Russian relations reached a new nadir. This recently became clear when Saakashvili cancelled his attendance at the CIS summit in Moscow on 21 and 22 July 2006, ostensibly because Putin had refused to agree to meet him personally. Like Ukraine, Georgia plans to withdraw from the CIS, which it despises as wholly under Russia's sway.³³ This explicit antipathy to Russia on the part of the new Georgian government, in particular, contributed to the current crisis in Russo-Georgian relations. This was triggered by the arrest of four Georgia-based Russian army officers, who were accused of spying. They were handed over to the OSCE Mission in Tbilisi a few days later. By 28 September, Russia had already stopped issuing visas to Georgian citizens. On 3 October, Russia broke off all communications with Georgia. The official explanation given was outstanding payments owed by Georgian airlines, which Russia claimed total 3.6 million US dollars. However, Georgia disputed the existence of these debts. Russia then

30 Like the UN and OSCE presences currently active in Georgia on the invitation of the Georgian government, an international peacekeeping force would be subject to international law, which aims to protect a state's territorial integrity. For this reason, external actors in ethno-political conflicts are often accused of non-neutrality and partisan support of the other party by the groups seeking to secede. The work of international organizations with a political mandate is therefore considerably more challenging than in cases of pure humanitarian intervention.

31 Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and Georgia, Istanbul, 17 November 1999, Annex 14 to the Final Act of the Conference of the States Parties to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, in: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Istanbul Summit 1999, *Istanbul Document 1999*, Istanbul 1999, January 2000/Corr., pp. 236-252, here: p. 252, at: http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1999/11/4050_en.pdf.

32 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and Georgia*, Document No. 1233, 30 May 2005, at: http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/bf502c80081d8ac5c32570120056b2d2?OpenDocument.

33 Cf. RIA Novosti, 21 July 2006.

introduced a further sanction in the form of a ban on money transfers to Georgia, a means by which around a million Georgian migrant workers support their families. Hundreds of Georgians were also expelled from Russia. At least 200 Georgians are currently in custody pending deportation; an old man died in such circumstances in Moscow in mid-October. All offers of mediation by third parties are rejected by Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry has stated that Georgia would only see external mediation as encouragement for its destructive policies. Georgia knows full well, Moscow claims, that only by giving up its anti-Russian policies can it help to defuse the tense situation. Moscow considers Georgia's current conduct to be a clear case of state terrorism.³⁴ Although the official view is that relations appear to be slowly normalizing as a result of international pressure, Gazprom announced, on 2 November 2006, that the price of gas sold to Georgia would double as of 2007, just as the Georgian foreign minister, Gela Bezhushvili, was in talks in Moscow with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov.

Conclusions

The Georgian government is currently swinging dangerously between the moderate position it is forced to adopt by its Western partners in order to avoid losing essential support for political and economic consolidation, and the domestic pressure to demonstrate new successes in the fight against territorial fragmentation as soon as possible. A comprehensive strategy for modernizing Georgia's political culture, for promoting the willingness to engage in dialogue and discussion among the Georgian population, in order, finally, to facilitate constructive conflict settlement solutions, has not yet been forthcoming. Instead, Georgia's new rulers, who are generally young and have little experience of war, are rushing again and again into quasi-military operations disguised as policing, which increasingly run the risk of a return to open violence in the two conflict regions.³⁵

In the search for factors that could promote long-term stability, attention has recently focused increasingly on the potential for Black Sea co-operation. From 24-27 June 2006, for example, a conference was held in Istanbul on

34 Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, *Prezident okharakterizoval dejstviya rokovodstva Gruzii kak gosudarstvennogo terrorizma s zakhvatom zolozhnikov* [The President Characterizes the Conduct of the Georgian Government as State Terrorism, Including Hostage Taking], 1 October 2006, at: <http://www.kremlin.ru>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, *O telefonnom razgovore Ministra Inostrannykh del Rossii S. V. Lavrova s Deistvuyushim Predsedatelem OBSE, Ministrom Inostrannykh del Belgii K. De Guchtom* [On a Telephone Conversation between Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov and the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, Belgian Foreign Minister K. De Gucht], 4 October 2006, at: http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/sps/D3AA3E328FAA7809C32571FD004CCFAF.

35 The police operations are indeed organized and carried out by the Georgian Interior Ministry, while the Defence Ministry works permanently on Georgia's efforts to join NATO. This makes it easy for the Defence Ministry to deny any military ambitions. Private conversations, Tbilisi, October 2005.

perspectives for Georgia and Abkhazia in the context of Black Sea integration, which was also attended by representatives of the EU and NATO.³⁶ EU policy has so far placed little value on the Black Sea region. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), in particular, which has a high degree of relevance for the states of the South Caucasus, has – if one excludes the considerable financial support that has provided to a variety of programmes and projects and the successful appointment of an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus in July 2003 – been more about lip-service than any well-founded strategy. To this day, the Special Representative has not been granted any powers to go with his mandate. His function remains that of an observer and reporter (to the EU), who rarely issues statements on his own account (the last time being on 5 October 2006, when the new Special Representative, Peter Somnerby, criticized Georgia's strongly worded demand for the withdrawal of the CIS peacekeepers on the grounds that it would only serve to intensify the conflict with Russia.³⁷ The deployment of EU peacekeeping troops, which Georgia desires, is still not on the agenda for discussion. The EU remains uninterested in playing an active roll in the official negotiations on the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts but is rather content to retain the role of the largest provider of finance in the region.³⁸ From the EU's perspective, the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) has been insignificant for developing relevant regional co-operation. For this reason, the BSEC and its organs are not invited to strategically important meetings, despite their growing importance.³⁹ A German initiative has called for the EU and the BSEC to work together more closely in the future. This would create a field of action shared by the EU, the South Caucasian states, and other partners in the Black Sea region.⁴⁰ By establishing economic structures creating transregional ties, this could have a positive effect on the future development of the ethno-political conflict resolution processes, and could perhaps contribute to the long-term stabilization of the entire region. In view of current events, every attempt that could contribute to the long-term pacification of the region should be emphatically grasped.

36 Cf. *Apsnypress*, 27 June 2006.

37 Cf. RFE/RL, Ahto Lobjakas, Georgia: *EU Urges "Confidence Building" With Separatists*, 5 October 2006.

38 The most recent resolution of the European Parliament of 25 October 2006 deviates from this position. It explicitly states that the EU should prepare for the possible deployment of peacekeeping troops in South Ossetia. See: <http://www.delgeo.cec.eu.int/en/press/25october2006.html>.

39 Cf. Markus Vahl, *The EU and Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Some Challenges for BSEC*, at: http://www.ceps.be/Article.php?article_id=420, Brussels, 15 April 2005.

40 Cf. Norbert Baas, *Vertrauen bilden, Stabilität schaffen. Die Vereinten Nationen und der georgisch-abchasische Konflikt [Build Trust, Create Stability. The United Nations and the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict]*, in: *Osteuropa* 3/2006, p. 47.