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GEORGIA AND ITS BREAKAWAY REGIONS: NO PROGRESS IN SIGHT

Canan Atilgan / Mikheil Sarjveladze

Almost four years after the five-day war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, which cost hundreds of lives, there is still no sign of a practical solution to the secessionist conflicts involving Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While the situation at the moment in the breakaway regions is calm for the most part, Russia has declared itself to be the “protecting power” in these secessionist regions and has officially recognised them. The presence of the military has effectively turned the former Administrative Border Lines between each of the regions into state borders. This presence, which amounts to as many as 4,000 soldiers and approximately 1,500 border guards in each region, violates the terms of the six-point plan brokered by the European Union as the basis for a ceasefire. Georgia, for its part, seeks to maintain its territorial integrity and has broad support from the international community. It has a detailed national strategy for the re-integration of the two regions, but implementation is proving very slow. For the Georgian government Russia is the biggest obstacle to finding a solution to the secessionist conflicts.

Are Abkhazia and South Ossetia breakaway provinces, occupied territories or independent states? What strategies are being pursued by Georgia and Russia? What role can the EU play in finding a solution to these conflicts?

Fig. 1

Georgia with its secessionist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia**A BRIEF OUTLINE OF DEVELOPMENTS TO DATE**

After Georgia's independence in 1991, Abkhazia and South Ossetia split away from Georgia following years of civil war and declared themselves to be sovereign states. Since that time, Georgia has had no state control over the two regions, but continues to maintain that they are part of the Georgian state. This status was recognised by all countries, including Russia, up until the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008. The situation was being monitored by a United Nations mission in Abkhazia and a mission from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in South Ossetia. At the same time, the United Nations was doing everything in its power to achieve an internationally brokered negotiated settlement. However, in August 2008 the conflict escalated following a military incursion by Georgia into South Ossetia's capital, Tskhinvali. Russia intervened militarily, occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia and even pushed on into the Georgian heartlands.

The Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 effectively brought an end to efforts made up to that point to resolve the internal conflicts over the two secessionist regions

of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia recognised both regions as sovereign states. Internationally, only Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru followed suit. Georgia continued to call for the recognition of its territorial integrity including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The European Union supported this claim and, as a result, has conducted no official relations with either of the two regions.

As a result of European Union intervention Russia and Georgia agreed to a ceasefire in the form of a six-point plan. The terms of the plan envisaged a renunciation of the use of force and an end to all fighting as well as unimpeded access to humanitarian aid. However, the six-point plan has

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only been partially implemented. Russia has not removed its troops from the secessionist regions and the de facto governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have denied the civilian EU monitoring mission EUMM (European Union Monitoring Mission) access to the regions. A particular challenge for Georgia has been dealing with the high number of displaced people within its borders. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, around 260,000 people have been displaced in Georgia since the beginning of the 1990s. 130,000 to 190,000 people were displaced or became refugees as a result of the August 2008 war alone.¹

Following the August war, the new mechanism, "Geneva Talks", was introduced. It is the only forum, in which all parties to the conflict are prepared to discuss issues of security and stability in the region with representatives of the United Nations, the OSCE, the EU and the USA. These talks are primarily about building trust and discussing humanitarian issues. The Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), agreed as part of these talks and supported by the civilian EU Monitoring Mission, offers the parties to the conflict an opportunity to discuss issues relating to security and potential incidents, as well as the living conditions of the civilian population. However, the

1 | Cf. Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, "Georgien im Fokus, Sicherheitspolitische Perspektive für den Kaukasus – Handlungsempfehlungen für die deutsche Politik", Seminar für Sicherheitspolitik, Berlin, Jun 2009, 19-20, http://www.baks.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/SueA/SueA2009.pdf?__blob=publicationFile (accessed 2 May 2012).

Geneva talks are proving to be very difficult. It appears unlikely that a solution to the conflict will be reached in the near future.

THE GEORGIAN STRATEGY OF “INTEGRATION THROUGH COOPERATION”

From the Georgian perspective, the situation is perfectly clear: the conflicts over the breakaway regions are the result of Russian power politics in the South Caucasus. Georgian resistance to Russian hegemony is seen as the main cause of the breakdown in relations and the trigger for military conflict. Russia is seen as trying to punish and divide Georgia.

This point of view is mirrored in the national security concept adopted by the Georgian government in December 2011. The concept describes developments since 2008 and defines the challenges facing the country in terms of maintaining national security. Top priority goes to preventing Russian aggression. It considers the Russian military intervention in August 2008 as having the aim of occupying Georgian territories, with the intention of changing the political orientation of the country and bringing about the fall of the democratically-elected Georgian government. According to the national security concept, the danger of renewed aggression by Russia cannot be ruled out.²

However, in his speech to the European Parliament on 23 November 2010, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili made a legally-binding declaration that Georgia was renouncing the use of force, meaning that Georgia would never use force to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty.³ The aim of official Georgian policy, therefore, was the “peaceful de-occupation” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since 2010, the Georgian government has taken various steps aimed at creating closer ties with the break-

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2 | Cf. “Parliament ratifies National Security Concept of Georgia”, *Prime news*, 23 Dec 2011, <http://prime-news.net/?p=38982> (accessed 2 May 2012).

3 | Cf. speech by Micheil Saakaschwili at the European Parliament, 23 Nov 2010, <http://president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements/?p=5858&i=8> (accessed 2 May 2012).

away regions. In concrete terms, the measures include the strategy of "integration through cooperation" in dealing with the breakaway regions, an action plan for implementing the strategy as well as a law covering the breakaway regions and the modalities for its implementation in the occupied territories. The goal of the strategy is to build trust through projects aimed at improving people's situation in the secessionist regions. These projects

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include promoting interaction between the peoples of the breakaway regions and Georgia itself, assuring the kind of rights and privileges enjoyed by Georgian citizens and the return of displaced people. Specifically, measures are to be introduced to overcome the isolation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in areas such as the economy, infrastructure and transport, healthcare, culture, administration and human rights. In January 2011 a government commission was set up with the task of coordinating and implementing these measures. One important step is the creation of a "status-neutral" identification document to be used by citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in place of the commonly-used Russian passport.

The implementation of such an ambitious plan presents a significant challenge and is unlikely to succeed without the cooperation of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities. The successful implementation of the plan will also require cooperation from Russia, as it is hardly feasible that Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be involved in cross-border activities without Russian approval.

As a result, the state of play since the announcement of the strategy is somewhat sobering. Very few concrete measures have been implemented either at governmental or non-governmental level. Minister for Re-integration, Eka Tkeshelashvili, talks of success in the area of building trust between Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians and of the inclusion of the inhabitants of the breakaway regions in the Georgian healthcare system. The introduction of status-neutral travel documents was offered as a special service, but to what extent the people of the two regions are taking advantage of this service remains unclear. The de facto governments in the breakaway provinces have been particularly critical of these so-called status-neutral documents

and have announced that they will not be used in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. No doubt a lack of trust is the main reason behind this rejection of the Georgian government's initiative. Conflict expert Paata Zakareishvili believes that the level of trust between Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians has never been as low as it is at present.⁴

Although the strategy paper raises the necessity of dialogue with Russia, this seems to be closer to rhetoric than an actual political goal. The Georgian government is insisting upon the revocation of the recognition of breakaway provinces as a prerequisite to any talks with Russia. However, the fact is that Russia remains the lynch pin for the successful realisation of Georgia's political objectives so long as the secessionist regions remain in Russian hands.

There is no doubt that the efforts of the Georgian government can be seen as a commendable attempt to deal with the new situation. However, international experts still suspect that the Georgian government as far as possible wants to bring under state control all future relations with the de facto governments and inhabitants of the secessionist regions. The danger is that this will make informal cooperation between civil society groups more difficult. Integration through cooperation will only be possible if concrete projects can be realised that will actually benefit inhabitants of the secessionist regions. Up to now, projects have generally followed this approach and not been directly linked to the political status. This helps to build greater trust, but is hardly possible without Russian approval.

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WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN THE SECESSIONIST REGIONS?

The ongoing isolation of the breakaway regions as a result of the closing of the borders to Georgia, and the fact that most countries have not recognised them, as well as the ensuing lack of international contacts and treaties, has made the regions increasingly dependent on Russia, both economically and politically. Internal stability in the regions is only

4 | Cf. Nino Tarkhishvili, "Re-establishing dialogue between peoples – the most important goal of national and civil strategies", *Radio Liberty*, 13 Mar 2012, <http://www.tavisupleba.org/content/article/24514449.html> (accessed 2 May 2012).

minimally ensured. Financially, neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia can keep their heads above water without Russia's help. The secessionist regions run the risk of becoming Russian protectorates.

Abkhazia

Since its recognition by Russia after the August war, this small de facto republic believes it now has more hope of being internationally recognised than it did before 2008. In Abkhazia, which according to international estimates has a population of between 180,000 and 220,000,⁵ less than half the population is comprised of ethnic Abkhazis. The remainder are Georgians, Armenians, Russians, etc. There is a relatively large Abkhaz diaspora in Russia, Turkey and the Middle East, which is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands.⁶ The diaspora is considered to be of vital importance, particularly from an economic point of view. Money transfers from abroad represent an important source of income for Abkhazia. Even though the breakaway region's geographical location on the Black Sea affords it greater potential for future development than South Ossetia, its economic structure is very under-developed and is not viable without subsidies from Russia. Up to 60 per cent of the country's budget expenditure is borne by Russia. The region's larger neighbour not only finances infrastructure projects, but also provides direct financial assistance. Russia is also Abkhazia's most important trading partner and its only foreign investor.⁷ As a non-recognised entity, Abkhazia has no access to Western capital markets and cannot profit from international financial institutions. The Russian rouble is the main unit of currency. The de facto Abkhaz government has so far shown no inclination to introduce its own currency. The difficult economic

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5 | Between 130,000 and 150,000 according to Georgian estimates.

6 | Cf. Uwe Halbach and Sabine Jenni, "Nachkriegsentwicklung in Südossetien und Abchasien. Internationale Isolation und Abhängigkeit von Russland", *SWP-Aktuell*, No. 28, Jun 2006, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 5, http://swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2009A28_hlb_jenni_ks.pdf (accessed 17 Apr 2012).

7 | Cf. International Crisis Group, "Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence", *Europe Report*, No. 202, 5, 26 Mar 2010, http://crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/202_abkhazia___deepening_dependence.ashx (accessed 20 Mar 2012).

and social situation has led to an increase in crime and corruption, which in turn have a negative impact on everyday life. The Abkhaz leadership is looking to further develop tourism, which is seen as the most important economic sector for Abkhazia's potential future growth.⁸ In this regard, hopes are focused on the Winter Olympic Games to be held in 2014 in the nearby Russian city of Sochi.

Abkhazia remains firmly in Russia's grip, not only economically, but also in terms of security. After the August war, Russia opened a number of new military bases in Abkhazia and re-opened those that had been closed.⁹

According to the International Crisis Group, its military presence in Abkhazia has cost Russia 465 million U.S. dollars.¹⁰ In September 2009, Abkhazia and Russia also signed an agreement on building a "joint military base".

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Abkhazia appears relatively stable in terms of its domestic politics. On 26 August 2011, it held its second presidential elections since the August war, which international observers rated as having been conducted in a democratic manner. Vice President Alexander Ankwab won the election with 54.86 per cent of the vote, ahead of his opponents Sergei Shamba and Raul Khadjimba. Ankwab's goal

8 | Cf. n. 6.

9 | Cf. Uwe Halbach, "Ungelöste Regionalkonflikte im Südkaukasus", *SWP-Studie*, Mar 2010, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 17, http://swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/suedkaukasus_ungeloeste_konflikte (accessed 2 May 2012).

10 | Cf. n. 7, 3.

is to secure a certain level of independence for Abkhazia through economic development. He is not uncritical of Russian development and reconstruction aid, but for obvious reasons he cannot afford to refuse it. However, he is categorically opposed to closer ties with Georgia. As far as he is concerned, any attempts by Georgia or the EU to initiate dialogue are bound to fail. While he is well known for ruling with an "iron fist", his leadership does seem to adhere to democratic principles. The most recent parliamentary elections, held in March 2012 and involving two

Most of the Abkhazians have Russian passports and can therefore also take part in Russian elections. According to Georgian reports 91 per cent voted for Putin.

rounds of voting, did not provide him with a parliamentary majority. 75 per cent of the 35 seats in parliament went to independent candidates. The opposition party "Forum for the National Unity of Abkhazia" and Ankwab's own party "United Abkhazia" were also elected to the de facto parliament. The communists won no seats at all. It is worth mentioning at this point that most of the Abkhaz people have Russian passports and can therefore also take part in Russian elections. According to Georgian newspaper reports, the overwhelming majority of eligible voters took part in the Russian presidential elections, with 91 per cent voting for Vladimir Putin.

The Abkhaz populace are well aware of the danger that their de facto independence will turn into total dependence on Russia. According to Georgian media reports, civil society groups in Abkhazia have been expressing their concerns about Russia's dominant influence. Reports and speculation about Russian plans to annex the northern tip of Abkhazia – an area encompassing 160 square kilometres – have alarmed Abkhaz society. In March 2012, the opposition Abkhaz newspaper reported that the Russian government had made a proposal in this respect as part of the Abkhaz-Russian border negotiations. The area in question is close to the town of Sochi, where the Winter Olympics will be held in 2014. It is not clear to what extent the information is accurate, but this case has made it clear to the Abkhaz people that their Russian protectors also provide no guarantee of independence.

In light of the difficult situation in Abkhazia, it is understandable that large sections of the population and of the region's elite would like to see better international con-

tacts, especially with the EU. However, EU policies tend to encounter resistance amongst the Abkhaz leadership. Ankwab has made it quite clear that he does not foresee an improvement in relations with the EU so long as the EU holds to its policy of non-recognition.

South Ossetia

South Ossetia is even less independent than Abkhazia. This small region is too weak to be able to develop on its own. It has no economic potential of its own, no tourist attractions and no influential diaspora abroad. The August war brought no real benefits to the de facto republic. Closed borders, blocked economic channels and poverty represent everyday reality for the people of South Ossetia. Population numbers in this small secessionist region have been in decline since 1990. During the 2008 war alone, 130,000 people fled from the conflict zone into Georgia. The current population is estimated at no more than 30,000 people. Georgian authorities set the figure at 15,000. 95 per cent of the inhabitants have Russian citizenship.

Up to 99 per cent of South Ossetia's budget expenditure is financed by Russia. The 840 million U.S. dollars worth of reconstruction and development aid received by South Ossetia from its larger neighbour after the war has done little to improve living conditions in the region.¹¹ The region has no natural resources to speak of, agriculture is all but non-existent, the economy is basically reliant on providing services to Russian military personnel and there is widespread corruption. Unequal distribution of humanitarian aid, slow progress in rebuilding damaged houses, crime and unemployment are all set against a background of mass emigration. The civil society sector is no longer capable of functioning effectively: of some 100 registered NGOs, only about 10 per cent are currently active.¹²

The region has no natural resources to speak of, agriculture is rarely existent, the economy is basically reliant on providing services to Russian military personnel and there is widespread corruption.

11 | Cf. International Crisis Group, "South Ossetia: 'The Burden of Recognition'", *Europe Report*, No. 205, Jun 2010, 1, <http://crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/205%20South%20Ossetia%20-%20The%20Burden%20of%20Recognition.ashx> (accessed 2 May 2012).

12 | Cf. *ibid.*, 11.

Military and security policy cooperation with Russia is regulated by bilateral agreements. The agreement on the building and maintenance of military bases over the next 49 years also forms the basis for the stationing of Russian troops in South Ossetia. These joint military installations are intended to protect the borders and help build up South Ossetia's military infrastructure. There are currently up to 4,000 Russian soldiers stationed in South Ossetia. In February 2012, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev suggested that the Russian military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were capable of causing "disproportional damage" to any aggressor.¹³

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Russian influence in South Ossetia is not limited to the economy and security, but also dominates domestic politics in the breakaway region. Russia retains the decision-making power in various key areas, including borders, public order and foreign relations. South Ossetia's elite are accorded a certain amount of freedom to act in areas such as reconstruction, education and justice. This was obvious during the most recent parliamentary and presidential elections.

In the 2009 parliamentary elections several parties were allowed to take part, at least initially. However, immediately before the election itself, opposition groups that were felt to be an inconvenience were excluded, so that the "Unity Party" loyal to President Eduard Kokoity was assured of victory. Growing dissatisfaction with the Kokoity regime and the region's catastrophic social and economic problems helped the opposition candidate Alla Dzhioyeva to win the presidential election in November 2011 ahead of the pro-Kremlin Anatoli Bibilov.¹⁴ Since the Kremlin had backed Bibilov during the election campaign, Dzhioyeva's victory was seen as unacceptable. South Ossetia's Supreme Court annulled the election results at the Kremlin's bidding because of complaints from Bibilov that there had been evidence of irregularities during the election. Dzhioyeva was

13 | Cf. "Zeichen an 'irren Saakashvili': Militärbasen in Abchasien und Südossetien", *RIA Novosti*, 6 Feb 2012, <http://de.rian.ru/politics/20120206/262634909.html> (accessed 20 Mar 2012).

14 | Cf. "Südossetien, Präsidentenwahl in Konfliktregion ungültig", *Der Standard*, 29 Nov 2011, <http://derstandard.at/1322531427990/Suedossetien-Praesidentenwahl-in-Konfliktregion-ungueltig> (accessed 2 May 2012).

not allowed to stand in the re-arranged elections, leaving only pro-Russian candidates in the race. The former KGB chief Leonid Tibilov won the election with 54.12 per cent ahead of the region's human rights ombudsman David Sanakoev on 42.65 per cent.

Since the 2008 August war, South Ossetia has forged dangerously close ties to Russia, which has left many wondering if the region would rather form a union with North Ossetia than strive for its own independence. Immediately after the war, leading politicians from South Ossetia were saying that an agreement had been reached with Moscow for the region to be accepted into the Russian Federation, and that this would take place within a few years. Since then there has been conflicting information about an intended incorporation of the breakaway region into the Russian Federation.

What is clear is that, for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the split with Georgia is as permanent as it has ever been. At the same time, both breakaway regions find themselves in a dangerous state of political and economic dependence on Russia. Their actual independence and sovereignty is severely limited.

STALEMATE IN GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Russia has not acted as aggressively towards any other neighbouring state in recent years as it has towards Georgia. The Georgian leadership has used this as an opportunity to portray the country as a victim of ongoing Russian imperialism, which in turn provokes a corresponding reaction from Moscow. This basically sums up Georgian-Russian relations even now, four years after the end of the August war. All political and diplomatic relations have been broken off. The political leaders of both countries are showing no inclination of seeking to forge closer ties with each other. On the contrary: mutual recrimination, blame and accusations are dominating relations between the two governments. It is clear from the ongoing sparring carried out in the media that the personal antipathy between Saakashvili and Medvedev/Putin is a significant obstacle to creating a basis of trust for potential

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negotiations. The Russian leaders feel it is impossible to do business with Saakashvili and portray him as a puppet of Washington. Ex-president Medvedev wanted Saakashvili to be classified as *persona non grata* and to see him tried by the International Criminal Court. Saakashvili, for his part, continues to claim that Russian leaders are pursuing imperialist goals and provoked the August war in order to prevent Georgia from becoming a member of NATO.

An agreement was signed between Georgia and Russia that would allow international observers to monitor the transportation of goods in the border regions between Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia.

In the midst of this war of words, however, Swiss-led talks have been held on Russia becoming a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Following a long and laborious negotiation process, Georgia agreed to withdraw its long-held veto. On 9 November, an agreement was signed between Georgia and Russia that would allow international observers to monitor the transportation of goods in the border regions between Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia. This agreement provides for the establishment of three trade corridors, of which two will have an affect on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A private company is to be commissioned by the Swiss to monitor customs procedures.

The international community is hoping that, as a consequence of these successful negotiations to allow Russia to join the WTO, there will be an improvement in Georgian-Russian communications and a rapprochement between the two countries. Georgia's willingness to cooperate during the WTO negotiations was seen as a sign of goodwill and an opportunity for thawing relations between the two hostile countries. So far, however, these hopes have not been realised.

One symbolic, but not to be underestimated, step towards a rapprochement with Russia was the Georgian president's initiative to unilaterally lift visa requirements for Russian citizens. Russia reacted by stating that it was also willing to change its visa requirements for Georgia, but only on condition that Tbilisi revoked the law "on occupied territories." According to Georgian law, a permit is required from the authorities for travel to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and overland crossings can only be made at certain crossing points. The Georgian government operates a very

strict permit policy and allows very few people to make the journey. According to Georgian law, entry to and exit from Abkhazia and South Ossetia via the Russian border, by air or, for Abkhazia, by sea is illegal without a Georgian permit and is punishable by law.¹⁵ Likewise, the Georgian government declined Moscow's offer to re-establish diplomatic relations and announced that such a move would only be possible if Russia recognised Georgia's territorial integrity.

It is likely that these frequently repeated offers are not so much serious attempts at re-establishing official relations as pseudo suggestions designed to provide the international community with evidence that attempts at initiating a dialogue are being made. The lines drawn between the leaders of the two countries are so inflexible that the chances of a breakthrough appear remote at best.

For Russia there is no pressing need to negotiate, as it is not looking for any change to the status quo. This is not the case for Georgia. Without the cooperation of its larger neighbour there is only a very slim chance that it can find a solution to its secessionist conflicts. Time is running out for Georgia. By recognising the breakaway regions, Russia has established itself as a protecting power and has expanded its room for manoeuvre. There has been an unmistakeable increase in the secessionist regions' dependence on Russia. Russia's military presence has grown, not only in these provinces, but in the region as a whole. And Russia is not afraid to advertise that fact.

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In September 2012, Russia intends to carry out its first big military exercises in the Caucasus. "Kavkaz 2012" will not only take place in the North Caucasus, but will also encompass Armenia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. For Georgia, this demonstration of military power is seen as a provocation and as evidence of Moscow's unwillingness to compromise, especially in terms of the status quo in the breakaway regions and the potential eastward expansion of NATO. Carrying out these military operations shortly before parliamentary elections are due to take place in

15 | Cf. website of the Georgian Parliament, Law on Occupied Territories, http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=69&kan_det=det&kan_id=3089 (accessed 2 May 2012).

Georgia threatens not only Georgia's internal stability, but also increases the potential for conflict in the entire region.

Georgian expert Tengiz Pkhaldze and his Russian colleague Nikolai Silayev believe that, for Moscow, there are two important preconditions entailed in its relations with Georgia: firstly that Georgia's pro-European orientation should not be automatically seen as an anti-Russian choice, and secondly that this pro-Western orientation should not result in the expansion of NATO's military infrastructure on Russia's borders. At the end of March, a representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Lukashovich, expressed his concerns that the USA might once again begin supplying arms to Georgia, which, in the hands of what he termed Saakashvili's "unpredictable" government could have serious consequences for the region as a whole.

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The greatest deficit in Russia's foreign policy is the fact that Moscow relies too heavily on military power and economic pressure. All too often, Russian policies lack any element of cooperation and Russia rarely seeks to win over its neighbours or present itself as an attractive partner with whom to do business. Despite this, Russia is likely to remain the most important power in the South Caucasus for the foreseeable future.

The most challenging task will be to persuade Russia to enter a peace process aimed at the long-term stability of the Caucasus region. This is difficult to envision absent some form of compromise, as Russia's interests are unlikely also in future to coincide with those of its Western partners. Russia will therefore remain a difficult partner in the region. However, there is much to suggest that Russia has a vested interest in having a stable South Caucasus neighbor, particularly in light of the growing number of crises in the North Caucasus, which is part of the Russian Federation. The growing cost of Russia's military engagement in the Caucasus could also play a role. Either way, the current political confrontation between Russia and Georgia is unlikely to be the final word on the matter. The interests of both sides dictate the need to re-establish formal relations. In light of this, Georgia should take this opportunity

to re-think its integration strategy as part of normalising relations with Russia.

WHAT CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION DO?

After the 2008 August war, the EU, then under French presidency, took the lead as international mediators between Russia and Georgia and established a monitoring mission in Georgia. Following the ceasefire, the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), effectively took responsibility for peacekeeping in this far-flung corner of Europe. Day and night, EUMM patrols monitor the Administrative Boundary Lines between Georgia and Abkhazia and between Georgia and South Ossetia. With 200 observers from 26 EU countries, the mission is currently the largest international contingent in Georgia. Its mandate consists of stabilisation, normalisation and confidence-building within “the whole territory of Georgia”. However, as a consequence of its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has not allowed the EU mission access to the territories in these regions, while the EU and other international organisations would like to see the mandate being applied to the whole territory of Georgia. According to its headquarters in Tbilisi, the mission has so far been successful in preventing renewed violence. Deliberate acts of provocation have reduced significantly on both sides of the Administrative Boundary Lines.

With 200 observers from 26 EU countries, the EU Monitoring Mission is currently the largest international contingent in Georgia.

However, political discussions between the parties to the conflict have so far been less successful. The latest round of the Geneva talks in March 2012 also came to an end without any concrete results. Russia still refuses to honour the terms of the six-point plan. The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and for the Crisis in Georgia, Phillip Lefor, is trying to remain optimistic, but is not happy about the extremely slow progress being made by the talks.

The European Parliament has passed various resolutions calling upon Russia to stop its occupation of Georgian territories and to accept the Georgian strategy for dealing with the breakaway regions as the basis for a dialogue between

the parties.¹⁶ Russian leaders have repeatedly been called upon by official EU bodies to fulfil their obligations under the terms of the ceasefire agreement with Georgia and to allow EU observer missions access to the breakaway regions. At the same time, the EU has also called upon the Georgians to step up their relations with Russia so that the terms of the six-point plan can be met.¹⁷

EU policy on the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions is one of “non-recognition and integration”. What this means in reality is that active policies need to be developed in respect of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that, setting the status issue aside, focus on stimulating contacts and cooperation. It is

The idea behind the European concept of “integration without recognition” is to entice Abkhazia and South Ossetia out of their Russian isolation.

on this basis that the EU has appealed to the Georgian government to find pragmatic solutions to problems linked to the currently irresolvable status issue. However, Georgia’s territorial integrity remains the number one priority. The idea behind the European concept of “integration without recognition” is to entice Abkhazia and South Ossetia out of their Russian isolation, but this goal is not considered to be very realistic by the secessionist states, or indeed by Georgia itself. Georgian experts believe that this EU strategy will not tempt the breakaway regions to give up their de facto independence. They are concerned that the European concept actually represents the beginning of an international recognition process on the part of the EU.¹⁸

Despite all its efforts, the EU has not been able to achieve a breakthrough in resolving the conflict. Numerous external challenges have limited its room for manoeuvre, including Russia’s military and political interests in the region, the irreconcilable differences between the stances of Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the lack of political will on the part of the elite on all sides to make concessions. As mediators, the EU have limited possibilities, especially as their policy of non-recognition and their declared belief in

16 | Cf. Civil Georgia, “European Diplomat on Russia-Georgia Conflict”, 23 Mar 2011, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23270> (accessed 21 Mar 2012).

17 | Cf. “Negotiations of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement”, *Humanrights.ge*, 24 Nov 2011, <http://humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=14142&lang=eng> (accessed 2 May 2012).

18 | Cf. “The west has drawn up a new strategy on conflict settlement in Georgia”, *Presage.tv*, 27 Jan 2011, <http://presage.tv/?m=politics&AID=3031> (accessed 2 May 2012).

Georgia's territorial integrity clearly puts them on Georgia's side. This has made acceptance by Abkhazia and South Ossetia almost impossible.

The EU's efforts and measures are primarily focused on maintaining the peace. They have neither the political will nor the means to act as effective mediators between the conflict parties of Georgia, Russia and the secessionist regions. As a reunification of the two territories with Georgia now seems unlikely, the question is whether the EU is capable of changing its approach and looking for new ways to resolve the conflict. So far, its efforts have clearly brought no results. It needs to be able to offer a clear alternative, both politically and economically, in order to mitigate Russian influence in the breakaway regions, to breach these regions' isolation and to create the conditions necessary for dialogue between the regions and Georgia.