

Problems And Opportunities For The Settlement Of The Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict At The Current Stage

By

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Abstract

The objective of the study is to identify the problems and prospects for the settlement of the Georgian-South Ossetian confrontation after the armed conflict in South Ossetia in 2008. The use of the symbiosis of systemic methodological and neo-institutional approaches as the research methods contributed to the identification of a number of important contradictions between the immediate parties to the conflict that affect the process of its settlement, ranging from humanitarian and security issues to political confrontation. The paper considers the content of the confrontation settlement process itself, which includes elements of “freezing”, transformation and conflict resolution. The paper explores various interstate and international formats for conflict resolution, in particular, such as the "Geneva discussions on security and stability in the Transcaucasus", "Karasin-Abashidze". They have made a significant contribution to the solution of various security, socio-economic, social and legal issues between the parties to the conflict and determine the political landscape of relations between them. The paper shows the possible prospects for resolving the interethnic conflict, which is considered today in the Caucasus region to a greater extent as an interstate confrontation. The importance of following a pragmatic approach by both Georgia and South Ossetia is noted, which implies joint actions in resolving the conflict based on compromises, exchanges, transparency and the development of confidence-building measures, and thus considering the interests of both of its participants.

Keywords: Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, Russia, reintegration, "unrecognized state", integration projects, conflict resolution.

Introduction

The study of the problems and prospects for the settlement of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict at the present stage attracts considerable attention of domestic and foreign scientists in connection with its role in the transformation processes in the post-Soviet space and the development of statehood in territories that have not received international recognition. Special emphasis is laid on Georgia's policy on the return of de facto South Ossetia to the internationally recognized borders of the state (often called the "reintegration process" in the scientific literature), the instruments and mechanisms of influence thereon by the Russian Federation, other external players, among which the European Union, and their role in conflict resolution. The authors analyze the contribution of these actors to the solution of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, who, moreover, as practice shows, pursue their interests in the region. Modern literature has not sufficiently studied this issue, which prompted the author to consider it in details.

Methods

The research used a systematic methodological approach involving the consideration of any social or political process based on the so-called integrative principle, according to which it is a set of interrelated activities that generate relationships or systemic connections, revealed through the concepts of interaction, complementarity, and interpenetration [1, p. 45-137; 2, p. 34-102; 3, p. 261-299]. This approach made it possible to identify problems and contradictions that impede the political settlement of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, determine their role and influence on the process of ending the conflict, as well as on possible options (approaches) to resolving the confrontation. The application of system analysis contributed to the explanation of the totality, the continuum of various “settlements” carried out in certain areas of interaction between the parties but without resolving the actual political issues that constitute the so-called red lines of confrontation.

The application of the neo-institutional approach contributed to the study of political institutions involved in the conflict, in the relationship between formal norms and informal attitudes (“rules of the game”) [4, p. 936-957], which determine the mechanisms, tactics and strategies of interaction between the parties to the confrontation, the activities of international formats for its settlement and decisions made within their framework. The application of neo-institutionalism made it possible to identify intrastate and interstate institutions that directly influence the process of transformation of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict and the development of integration processes of the “partially recognized republic”. This approach helped to explore scenarios for the possible end of the conflict by both its parties and the regional and extra-regional actors.

Results And Discussion

After the armed conflict in South Ossetia, the Georgian-South Ossetian confrontation is being settled in other geopolitical realities. The recognition of the independence of the former autonomous region of Georgia contributed to the formation of a new format of economic and political relations in the Caucasus region and the search for new opportunities to resolve the interethnic conflict. The possibilities for the reintegration of the territory of South Ossetia into Georgia that existed before 2008 have been exhausted (for example, the existence of the “Government of the Tskhinvali region in exile”, Russia’s support for the country’s territorial integrity, the residence of a significant part of ethnic Georgians on the territory of the republic, etc.), and the new contours of building relationships are still not formed. Today, Russia is the only foreign policy reference point, strategic partner and ally for South Ossetia, which ensures its security and contributes to strong integration of the countries.

Speaking about the process of the conflict, it can be noted that it combines a set, a continuum of various “settlements” in certain areas of interaction between the parties but neglecting the actual political issues, including the definition of the international legal status of South Ossetia. In parallel, the participants in the conflict are trying to transform it and making post-conflict reconstruction, related to finding common areas of interaction, building links between divided societies and participating in integration projects with regional and non-regional countries. Another thing to point is some elements of the actual resolution process as the final stage in the development of any conflict. This is evidenced, for example, by the formation of associated relations between South Ossetia and Russia, which involves the transfer of the last part of its sovereignty, or Georgia's actions to join Euro-Atlantic structures, which sooner or later will require specific steps to resolve the status of an “unrecognized state”.

The analysis showed that a significant factor that explains the impossibility of achieving any progress in resolving the confrontation is the different vision of the parties (Georgia, South Ossetia, and Russia) of the situation in the region and ways to resolve the conflict in which opponents today cannot overcome the so-called red lines. Russia considers the Republic of South Ossetia, as well as the entire Caucasian region, the territory of its vital national interests, and Georgia's attempts in this regard to change the situation for the worse as a threat to its security [5, p. 53-54]. At the same time, it should be noted that many socio-economic and political processes in South Ossetia are no longer considered in relation to the interethnic conflict. The factor of Russia and its provision of comprehensive assistance to the republic is more important for it.

Georgia, in turn, promotes the idea of a small liberal empire [6] and tries to get any benefit from the West in its confrontation with Russia. According to researcher **A.A. Sushentsov**, "it sees Russia as a hopelessly backward country that is on the "wrong side of history" and is holding Georgia back from progress. It is believed that Georgia is now developing a "policy of strategic patience" towards Russia in the name of the common good of the Western community. By expressing its readiness for dialogue, Georgia seems to be sacrificing itself to the interests of the West (preferably not free of charge) and doing Russia a favor" [6]. In my opinion, it is worth agreeing with these words. Indeed, after the victory of B. Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party in the parliamentary elections in Georgia and the rise to power of President G. Margvelashvili in 2012-2013, there have been positive steps in building relations between the two countries both in the economic and security spheres. At the same time, it should be noted that these efforts are insufficient and ineffective in resolving the protracted inter-ethnic conflict.

The process of conflict resolution does not contribute to the reintegration of South Ossetia or any change in its political status. To date, it proceeds within two international formats: the Geneva discussions on security and stability in the Transcaucasus, held with the participation of representatives of Russia, Georgia, the United States, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and under the UN, OSCE and EU co-chairmanship in the capital of Switzerland, Geneva, as well as a special "Karasin-Abashidze" diplomatic line created by Georgia and Russia, which, meanwhile, have not yet brought any cardinal changes in terms of the settlement or transformation of the conflict. Here it should be noted that these negotiations do not aim at the actual political settlement of the conflict or have not reached this stage so that it can be discussed openly. At the same time, the issues they have raised, which will be discussed below, contribute to the solution of problems in relations between Georgia and the "partially recognized republics", as well as between Georgia and Russia. In the opinion of the author of the article, they contribute to the promotion of the conflict resolution process, the subject of which is no longer limited to political factors but also includes other significant social, cultural, economic, humanitarian and other issues.

The Geneva discussions are the most important international forum, the purpose of which is to ensure the security of the population in the conflict zone and maintain a direct dialogue between Georgia, on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the other. This format was opened in October 2008 in accordance with the "Medvedev-Sarkozy Plan" for the military settlement of the conflict and additional measures for its implementation. The discussions have shown their sufficient effectiveness in the opposing positions of the parties to the confrontation.

To date, the situation in the zone of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict remains relatively stable, periodically accompanied by an increase in tension and the emergence of new problems that the direct parties to the confrontation cannot overcome. They include issues of security and humanitarian cooperation: the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, freedom of movement across the border, illegal detentions of citizens by law enforcement agencies on both sides, demarcation of the border, access to education, problems of socio-economic rehabilitation of the region. These and other difficulties make the main goal of the Geneva discussions, which is to conclude an alleged agreement on the non-use of force between Georgia and South Ossetia, as well as Georgia and Abkhazia, unattainable in the short term. The reason for the current situation is largely the lack of trust and transparency between the parties to the conflict, which is complicated by the influence of an external factor, namely Russia, the US, the EU, pursuing their interests in the region. The complexity of developing specific strategies and tactics of action hinders the transition to an open and constructive dialogue to resolve the conflict.

An equally important platform for negotiations, along with the International Geneva discussions on security and stability in the Transcaucasus, involving, among other things, the solution of a whole range of issues of Russian-Georgian cooperation, which facilitates the settlement of the conflict, is the Karasin-Abashidze diplomatic line, opened by Russia and Georgia in 2012. Its creation became possible after the majority of seats in the Georgian parliament were won by the party of the country's well-known businessman B. Ivanishvili "Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia", which proclaimed a course towards the normalization of relations with Russia. This was the purpose the Karasin-Abashidze format was created for, which began to solve a number of problems of bilateral cooperation in the absence of official diplomatic relations. The negotiations, which were held with a certain interval in Prague, contributed to the normalization of relations between the two countries, the solution of significant issues in the trade, economic, transport and humanitarian spheres, which in the future may become a starting point in resolving the ethno-political confrontation.

In this matter, we can agree with the opinion of the director of the Business Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization D. Tyurin, who correctly noted that economic development can contribute to the political settlement of the conflict. In his opinion, "If now the political elites of Armenia, Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia do not reach understanding that it is the economy the path to a political settlement in the region lies in, this exclusive chance to become a center of trade between Europe and Asia will be lost for Transcaucasia forever." [7]. As we can see, the expert affects several countries of the region at once but his statement is also relevant for the confrontation considered by the author of the article.

An important achievement of bilateral cooperation was the promotion of the "Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of Georgia on the basic principles of the mechanism for customs administration and monitoring of trade in goods" signed in 2011, which opened trade corridors through the territories of the so-called "unrecognized states" and contributed to the expansion of economic ties not only with Georgia, but also with other states of the South Caucasus [5, p. 57-58]. In the context of the settlement of the conflict under study, this process forms a significant level of trust and understanding of its direct parties.

Under the existing conditions, the confrontation between Georgia and South Ossetia cannot be an option for resolving the conflict at all, so another approach is desirable, pragmatic, involving joint actions in resolving it and considering the interests of both of its participants. The Georgian political elite needs to be more clearly aware that today it seems impossible to resolve the protracted conflict without Russia. Ensuring security in the region and solving many problems of interaction can only be done by the participants in the confrontation.

With a certain level of mutual trust and political will of the parties, Russia could act as a neutral state and become a guarantor of the conflict settlement. But to achieve the development of the situation according to such a scenario is not easy enough, it will require a radical change in the positions of the parties, the relationship to each other, the development of economic and political ties between the countries. The implementation of this approach to conflict transformation is difficult but possible. Other ways of reintegrating South Ossetia into Georgia seem even less realistic.

If we assume the future deepening of Georgia's relations with the EU and NATO up to full membership in the ranks of these organizations, then it will be forced to either give up its former territories or enter into a tougher confrontation with Russia in order to resolve the conflict in this way. The consequences of such actions are unpredictable but their implementation is unlikely to become possible due to the futility of any form of direct military confrontation between the Western countries and Russia. As S. Charap, a Rand Corporation senior researcher, believes, "The United States is out of tune for another conflict with Russia because of distant and little-needed Georgia. In addition, Washington does not have a single effective tool to influence Moscow" [8]. In addition, the lack of significant prospects for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures may contribute to the emergence of doubts and disappointments in Georgian society about the advisability of pursuing the country's pro-Western policy.

Multiple review shows that there is an alternative solution to the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict and some reintegration of the "breakaway" territory. The world practice of state development demonstrates various possibilities for peaceful coexistence or management of disputed territories. So, for example, in the space of the states of Southeast Asia in the mid-60s of the XX century, an organization appeared, later called "ASEAN", the economic prospects for the development of which and each country individually turned out to be more significant than the many territorial and political conflicts between countries, its components that also differ in the nature of political regimes. As the domestic researcher G.M. Kostyunina notes, "The formation of the organization was initially caused by the need for military-political stabilization in the region, and only then became a manifestation of economic logic. In the future, the political factor had contributed to the integration interaction in the economic sphere" [9, p. 227-228].

This example is relevant for the modern Georgian state. However, in this case, Georgia will have to abandon its bloc status and pursue a multi-vector policy, for example, as Finland does today, which is not a member of the NATO bloc but receives significant benefits from cooperation with European countries and Russia. In the context of an unresolved ethno-political conflict, perceived in the South Caucasus region to a greater extent as an interstate one [10, p. 128-130], it would be promising for Georgia to join the SCO, which includes a number of countries of the post-Soviet space, and participate in the implementation of major international projects (for example, the Silk Road Economic Belt), which bring it closer to Russia and at the same time contribute to the solution of many security issues in the region and the emergence of options for the reintegration of the South Ossetian Republic.

The creation of a new regional organization initiated by Russia and Georgia in the interests of both states and with the involvement of other countries of the Caucasian region is no exception in the future. The formation and development of such an association, pursuing political, socio-economic, cultural and other goals, would be considered by the political elites of Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a “common Caucasian home” [11], in which conflicts are either impossible or resolved in the interests of both parties. Subsequently, this could contribute to the revision or transformation of Russia's position regarding the recognition of the independence of the former autonomous republics of Georgia [12, p. 131-132] and the relationship of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to their development as independent subjects of international law.

The development of contacts and ties between its parties in various fields, which involves the creation and implementation of plans, programs, strategies of action in relation to South Ossetia and its citizens, is vital in resolving the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. Georgia's policy aimed at promoting peaceful initiatives for the reintegration of the South Ossetian Republic, as it is not surprising, began to be implemented after the armed conflict in South Ossetia in 2008, when it became obvious that it was impossible to resolve this confrontation by armed means [13]. But all these plans, aimed, for example, at improving the humanitarian and socio-economic situation in the republic, have not had the desired effect to date. At the same time, one cannot fail to note some achievements in these areas, which are approved by both the Georgian and South Ossetian societies. In particular, these areas are represented by such programs as "Step to a Better Future", "Georgia's Peace Policy Program", as well as "Strategy for the Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation".

Thus, that is not to say that the Georgian and South Ossetian societies have no progress in their relations. It would be a mistake. They occur in separate areas of interaction, which have already been mentioned, influencing at the worldview level the consciousness and behavior of societies separated by administrative boundaries and contributing to the emergence of trust and mutual understanding that is so necessary for the parties in a conflict [14]. In my opinion, at least two factors can contribute to the transformation of the Georgian-South Ossetian confrontation today: first, a gradual change in Georgia's policy towards Russia; second, the Western countries are pursuing a more active line of conduct in resolving the conflict.

Summary

Based on the analysis we can draw the following conclusions. As the conflict developed, its subject became more and more complex, overgrown with new circumstances, which began to be clearly manifested in various situations of confrontation. If initially the cause of the conflict was and remains the question of determining the political and legal status of South Ossetia, then today its elimination seems practically impossible without solving other problems of the Georgian-South Ossetian confrontation (ensuring the security of the population, the problem of refugees and internally displaced persons, issues of social, humanitarian and economic assistance to citizens living on both sides of the conflict, etc.) that were included in the content of this subject.

In the current conditions, the settlement policy pursued by the direct parties to the conflict, the “partially recognized state” of South Ossetia, on the one hand, and Georgia, on the other, will be relevant. In my opinion, any progress will be more in the interests of the parties to the confrontation than the conditions imposed by non-regional players. But the ways of cooperation and compromise, including the further normalization of Russian-Georgian

relations, and not the intensification of confrontation, while taking into account the extremely opposite positions of the conflicting parties, remain an open question.

Conclusions

The settlement of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict today is complicated by a number of both internal and external factors in the development of the situation around this confrontation. The parties do not change their positions, and if they do, then only if they do not affect the issues of a political settlement of the conflict and have a neutral status. It would also be logical to note the fact that with the strengthening of statehood, the development of an independent domestic and foreign policy in the countries of the South Caucasus, social, cultural, and economic ties that have been preserved since the days of the Soviet Union are gradually being lost. Of course, this cannot but contribute to the emergence of political, legal, economic, mental, value and ideological differences that form an excessive potential for conflict in a single state and in the region as a whole. Therefore, the development of relations between countries requires new approaches to and conditions of resolving conflicts between them on a mutually acceptable basis. At the same time, Russia is not interested in developing a situation where the strengthening of influence in South Ossetia or, for example, in Abkhazia will be accompanied by a decrease in its role in the rest of Georgia or other countries of the South Caucasus.

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Biography

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