

Inside South Ossetia: A Survey of Attitudes in a *De Facto* State

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Abstract: South Ossetia was the main site of the August 2008 war between Georgian military forces, local South Ossetian forces, and the Russian military. Soon thereafter the Russian Federation recognized the territory as a state, the South Ossetian Republic. This article reviews the contending scripts used to understand South Ossetia and the basis of its claim to be a state. Presenting the results of a public opinion survey of Ossetians living in the territory in late 2010, trust in local institutions and leadership, and ethnic Ossetian attitudes towards other groups, return and property, as well as relations with Russia and Georgia are discussed.

On August 26, 2008, when Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev issued a decree recognizing both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign states, he made a decisive break with past Russian policy and the existing international consensus on non-recognition of post-Soviet secessionist regions (Medvedev, 2008). Within this unprecedented act was a less acknowledged one. Unlike Kosovo and Abkhazia, which enjoyed a roughly equivalent status as “autonomous republics” within their respective federal institutions, South Ossetia was a former Autonomous *Oblast*’ (AO) in the Soviet federal system, an administrative position within the federal hierarchy of power below that of Union Republic and Autonomous Republic within a Union Republic (Abkhazia’s status within Georgia at the time of the Soviet collapse). South Ossetia was the first

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“third tier” administrative entity to be recognized as a state. On its face, the SOAO (South Ossetia AO) was a most unlikely candidate for independent statehood, and indeed remains so today. A region with slightly less than a 100,000 people in 1989, two-thirds of its inhabitants then were ethnic Ossetians, the rest mostly ethnic Georgians. Ossetians made up roughly 3 percent of the population of Georgia at the time of the last Soviet census, the majority (approximately 99,000 out of 164,000) living outside South Ossetia. In the wake of successive rounds of violence over its status, the *de facto* republic today has less than half that population and few ethnic Georgians.²

The South Ossetian entity is the smallest of the four Eurasian *de facto* states in population and physical size and its government did not acquire full control over the territory of the former South Ossetian Autonomous *Oblast'* (SOAO) until the conclusion of the August 2008 war.³ It owes this control to Russian intervention rolling back a Georgian military effort to re-establish power over the territory that Georgia dubs the “Tskhinvali region” (within the north central province of Shida Kartli).⁴ The August 2008 war resulted in the protracted forced displacement of thousands of ethnic Georgian families previously living in South Ossetia. Whole villages populated by ethnic Georgians, most notably (but not only) those north of Tskhinval(i) in the so-called “Georgian enclave” of the Greater Liakhvi gorge (also known to Georgian language speakers as Didi liakvis kheoba) were razed to the ground after houses were plundered and

² Population figures for South Ossetia are highly contested and will probably remain so even after the completion of a census. See ICG (2010, pp. 2-4).

³ This group includes Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh, and Transnistria but not the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus. South Ossetia's total area is slightly smaller than the territory controlled by the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria).

⁴ The Republic of Georgia does not recognize the name “South Ossetia” and its parliament controversially abolished the SOAO as an administrative unit on December 10, 1990. It is also commonly referred to as Samachablo, “the fief of the Machabeli clan” in Georgian, a toponym that situates it firmly within the space-time of Georgian feudalism. In accordance with conventional English language usage, we keep the name South Ossetia and spell its *de facto* capital as Tskhinval(i) and other place names in a similar manner, in acknowledgement that both communities have variant spellings of these.

destroyed by irregular militias from the region and the North Caucasus (Amnesty International, 2008; Georgian Young Lawyers Association et al., 2009) (see Figure 1). The contemporary *de facto* state of South Ossetia, in other words, is a product not of frozen conflict but fresh warfare and its aftermath.

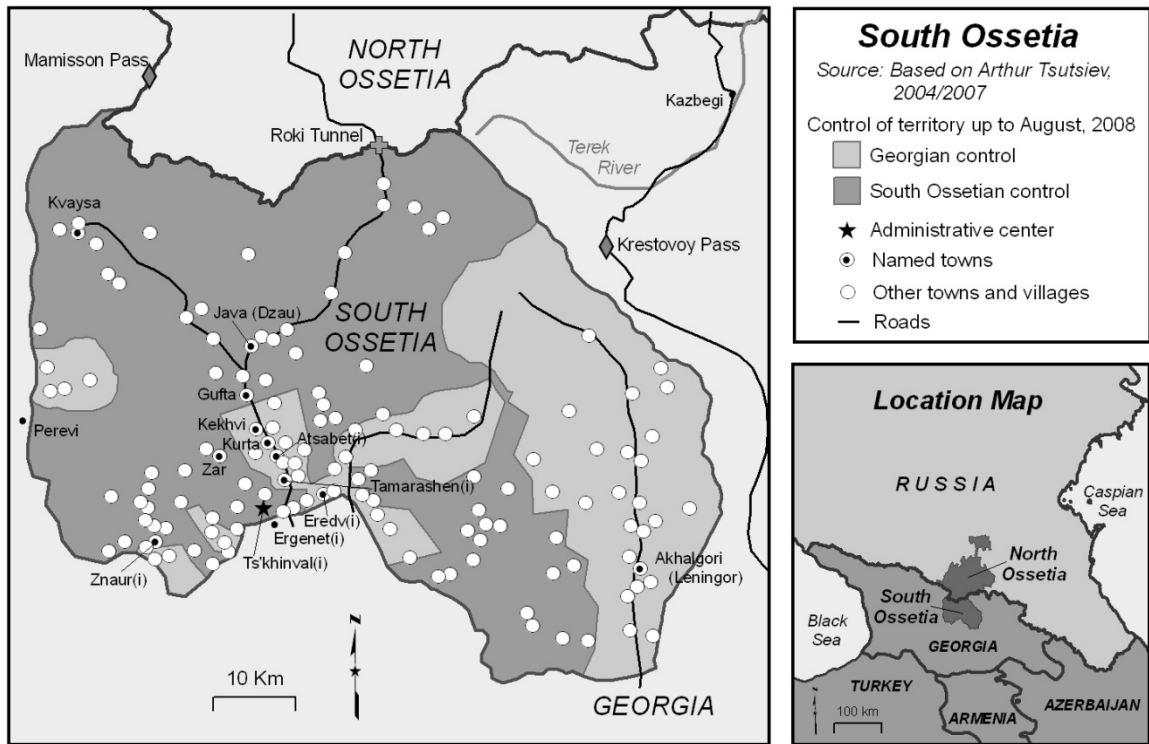


Fig. 1. South Ossetia in its regional setting. Places mentioned in the text are indicated on the map. Territorial control lines are approximate and are amalgamated from a variety of sources, especially Artur Tsutsiyev’s (2006) *Atlas of ethno-political history of the Caucasus*.

It is more than a decade ago since King pronounced Eurasia’s *de facto* states “informational black holes” where travel is difficult and often dangerous (King, 2001, p. 550). Because they have survived as spaces on the world political map, scholarly interest has grown beyond dynamics of secessionism and external sovereignty to questions of their endurance and internal sovereignty (Caspersen, 2008; Kolstø, 2006). To what degree have they managed to engage in relatively successful state and nation-building despite non-recognition (Kolstø and

Blakkisrud, 2008)? Do *de facto* state institutions have internal legitimacy and trust (Berg and Mölder, 2012; Caspersen, 2011)? What features and limits characterize their political systems (Caspersen, 2012; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2012a, 2013; Kolstø, Edemsky, and Kalashnikova, 1993; Smolnik, 2012)? Researching the interior life of *de facto* states compliments equally necessary higher scale geopolitical analysis: no one suggests that the survival of *de facto* states can be explained by successful internal sovereignty alone. South Ossetia's size, history, and recent experience with violence make it an extreme case on many of these questions. Blakkisrud and Kolstø (2012, p. 284), for example, write that it has “undoubtedly the weakest democratic credentials” of the South Caucasian *de facto* states while their pre-war assessment ranked it as the least successful in establishing state capacity (see also Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008). The August war added to this in rendering it the least accessible and most unknown externally of the four Eurasian *de facto* states.⁵

In an attempt to overcome the informational deficit about Eurasian *de facto* states, we conceived a research project in early 2008 to study their internal dynamics in the wake of the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo. We envisioned developing the first comparative social scientific surveys that would examine the attitudes of current residents of Abkhazia, Transnistria, and South Ossetia (later extended to Nagorny Karabakh). Successfully garnering funding from the Human Social Dynamics program of the US National Science Foundation in the spring of 2008, we made plans to travel to all regions, conduct elite interviews, and contract independent social scientific surveys there to the best standards possible. Despite considerable obstacles thereafter, we have been able to achieve our objectives. Building upon experience from our previous research in North Ossetia in 2007, in March 2010, we travelled to

⁵ A recent special issue on post-Soviet *de facto* states, for example, contains separate essays on all but South Ossetia (von Steinsdorff and Fruhstorfer, 2012).

South Ossetia from Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia) through the Roki tunnel, the only working option available for academics to travel to the region. This article reports on perhaps the most difficult research environment we have encountered (though all *de facto* states have distinctive difficulties). Once perceived as the most promising Eurasian “frozen conflict” for transition towards a peaceful resolution of its territorial status, the South Ossetian conflict is now deeply intractable, its once soft administrative borders with undisputed Georgian territory now hardened and closed, and diligently patrolled by both Russian and Georgian forces.

In this article, we first review the competing discursive scripting of the South Ossetian conflict. Second, we profile South Ossetia within the terms of the four 1933 Montevideo Convention criteria of statehood and outline the research questions we examine. Third, we discuss the survey research project we organized there in November 2010, presenting survey findings for five distinct research questions. These findings help reveal the ground-level realities of the South Ossetia conflict today. Attitudes towards ethnic Georgians, the current Georgian leadership, and the prospect of Georgian returns are strongly negative, and measurably shaped by personal experience with violence and displacement. They present a bleak picture to those hoping to foster inter-ethnic reconciliation, and a measure of the failure of Georgian policies towards their own ostensible citizens in this region over the last two decades, a failure the Georgian government locates elsewhere.

OCCUPATION VERSUS GENOCIDE: THE SCRIPTING OF SOUTH OSSETIA

To the Georgian government of Mikheil Saakashvili, the problem of South Ossetia is not a problem of Georgian-Ossetian inter-ethnic relations but Georgian-Russian geopolitical relations, a problem not of state-building within Georgia but imperial practice by the Russian Federation in the South Caucasus. This vision of Russia as the source of Georgia’s ethno-

territorial problems is a longstanding principle in Georgian nationalist thought (Kaufman, 2001, pp. 93-94). Most Georgians hold that contemporary South Ossetia is Russian-occupied Georgian territory, with independence a façade covering a reality of annexation by its larger neighboring state. Its “Law on Occupied Territories of Georgia,” passed by parliament in October 2008, designated any authorized body or official person performing legislative, executive or judicial functions as illegal if not formed by Georgian state legislation (Clause 8). The law declared that the Russian Federation, “being the state implementing military invasion... shall be responsible to reimburse moral and material damages inflicted on the Occupied Territories upon citizens of Georgia” and others (Government of Georgia, 2008). This law criminalized travel from Russia to Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and territorial waters in the Black Sea claimed by Georgia (Clause 4). In an advisory opinion on the law, the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission expressed concern that the wording of the criminal indictment was very broad, pointing out that there were no exceptions for emergency situations: “The entry in the country is punished whatever the intention of the person; it also applies to persons providing necessary humanitarian aid. In this respect, this provision may be in contradiction with the Georgian international engagements” (Venice Commission, 2009b). In response, the Georgian parliament partially modified the text of the law, allowing that special permission to enter the Occupied Territories can be granted “in order to protect the state interests of Georgia, promote peaceful resolution of the conflict or serve the de-occupation or humanitarian purposes” (Clause 4, 3). The Venice Commission found that the revised text still had problematic features (Venice Commission, 2009a).

The great majority of the international community supports the principle of Georgian “territorial integrity” in keeping with the *uti possidetis* norm that recognizes the borders of the first order constituent units in any breakup of a federal state as those of successor states. South

Ossetia and Abkhazia are viewed as still legally part of the successor state to the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, namely contemporary Georgia. The Georgian government has devoted considerable diplomatic effort to moving the international community towards what it sees as the logical corollary of the territorial integrity principle, naming Abkhazia and South Ossetia as “occupied territories.” In this effort, it has had considerable success. In a visit to Georgia in July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, spoke of how Georgia was invaded and occupied in August 2008, noting the need to “protect the IDPs, as well as the people in the occupied territories...” (Clinton, 2010a). Later that year, at a meeting of the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership she called on “Russia to end its occupation of Georgian territory, withdraw its forces, and abide by its other commitments under the 2008 ceasefire agreements” (Clinton, 2010b). On a June 2012 trip to Batumi, she stated that the United States rejects “Russia’s occupation and militarization of Georgian territory” (Clinton, 2012). US State Department documents routinely use the phrase “occupied territories” to refer to Georgia’s breakaway territories.⁶ US Senate Resolution 175 (July 2011) refers to them as “occupied territories.” Georgia has also successfully promoted the terminology within European institutions. In November 2011, the European Parliament passed a resolution recognizing “Georgia’s regions of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia as occupied territories.”⁷ The Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE approved on July 9, 2012 a resolution on Georgia underscoring Georgia’s territorial integrity and referring to breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia as “occupied territories.”

⁶ For examples, see US Department of State Georgia Country notes, available at http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1122.html and the international religious freedom report, available at http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168312.htm.

⁷ For the text see: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A7-2011-0374&language=EN>.

The Russian government and the small group of states that have followed it in recognizing South Ossetia as an independent state (what might be described as “unipolar recognition”)—Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Tuvalu—speak from a different script. For President Medvedev, the nighttime Georgian artillery assault on Tskhinval(i) on August 8, 2008, after days of intermittent skirmishes, was evidence of an enduring genocidal policy by the Georgian state against its ethnic minorities like Ossetians and Abkhazians. This script is not a Russian invention but a Russian adoption and (re)articulation of an Ossetian nationalist narrative on the history of Ossetian-Georgian relations. According to this narrative, which emerged in the 1980s and took center stage during the rule of former South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity (2001 to 2011), the August war was the third genocidal campaign by Georgian armed groups against the Ossetian people (Ó Tuathail, 2008).⁸ The first alleged campaign was by the Menshevik-controlled Democratic Republic of Georgia, the independent Georgian state proclaimed in May 1918 and overthrown in February-March 1921 by the Bolshevik Red Army. The tumultuous period between 1918 and 1920 saw three separate revolts by Ossetian groups in what was then administratively the Gori *uyezd* (county) of the Tiflis *guberniya* (province). The most consequential of these was a revolt by Bolshevik-led Ossetians in April 1920 which saw them capture Tskhinval(i) before retreating in the face of a counter-offensive by Georgian National Guard soldiers in June. During the course of this campaign, Georgian government forces retaliated by destroying some 40 Ossetian villages; at least 5,000 people perished, mostly displaced persons from starvation and illness. An estimated 20,000 to 35,000 Ossetian residents were forced to flee across high mountain passes to North Ossetia. In response to the legacy of distrust created by this violence and displacement, a compromise was forged between Ossetian

⁸ The term “third genocide” predates the August war. For example, in October 2006, Kokoity declared that “the peoples of South Ossetia cannot form a state with Georgia” because “[w]e cannot be sure this will not lead to a third genocide” (Interfax, 2006).

leadership demands for unification with North Ossetia and Georgian reluctance to create any special Ossetian district. That compromise was the creation of a South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (SOAO), which was approved by Bolshevik Georgian Central Committee decree on 20 April 1922. Saparov (2010) argues convincingly that this move was an attempted conflict resolution in response to independent Ossetian forces from below, and not, as was claimed subsequently by many Georgian nationalists and others, a “divide and rule” strategy from above (Saparov, 2010; on this period, see also Welt, 2013).

The second alleged Georgian genocidal campaign was in the chaotic period between 1988 and 1992 when Soviet authority lost its legitimacy and Georgian nationalism became a replacement among most ethnic Georgians. The culture of Georgian nationalism during this period, most especially after the death of 20 protestors in April 1989, was radical, rejectionist and romantic. “The peculiarity of Georgia,” according to Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia, “consisted in the fact that it was a single republic where the “irreconcilable” mentality dominated the opposition political agenda” (Nodia, 1992, p. 32). Long-established Soviet administrative structures, such as the SOAO, were viewed as Bolshevik encumbrances upon a Georgian geo-body—an imagined organic nation space—designed to divide, fragment and dismembering it.⁹ Ossetians were conceptualized as “ungrateful guests” on historic Georgian soil, outsiders whose real home was across the Caucasus in North Ossetia (Gordadze, 2001). Few articulated these sentiments more forcefully than Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a KGB persecuted dissident who became the first democratically elected president of Georgia on May 26, 1991 (Jones, 1993).

Gamsakhurdia owed his rise, in no small part, to his campaign against Ossetians and the SOAO, leading a protest caravan of Georgian nationalists against the entity on November 23, 1989 that

⁹ On the concept of the nation as geo-body in the Georgian context see Kabachnik (2012). On the Georgian Orthodox Church and nationalist discourse at this time see Broers (2002) and von Lilienfeld (1993).

triggered the first ethnicized violence in the area and blockade of Tskhinval(i) (English, 1996; Slider, 1991; Aves, 1992).

Just as significant as the uncompromising nature of Georgian nationalist rhetoric at this time was the proliferation of nationalist militias, so-called informals (*neformaly*), who took advantage of the collapse of authority and police power to plunder the property of vulnerable groups. Nationalist discourse about ancient ethnogenesis and territorial ownership provided a rationalization for this criminal activity, unleashing fear and fantasies on both sides. Armed groups formed on the basis of occupation, social clubs, neighborhoods, and around charismatic leaders (Parastaev, 2003). Under Gamsakhurdia, the Georgian state formed a new National Guard in January 1991. During that month Tskhinval(i) descended into violence with the murder of some Georgian militia prompting several thousand Georgian police, National Guard troops and *neformaly* to occupy the town on the night of January 6-7, 1991. Citizens were killed, properties looted, and the town's Ossetian theater and graveyards despoiled. In rural areas, there was also considerable destruction of dwellings and plunder of private property.

Ossetian militia groups, lead by various local figures—Soviet Army veterans of Afghanistan, black marketers, Komsomol leaders, sports club members and others—fought back. Since 1988, the Ossetian popular front organization *Adamon Nykhaz* pushed an agenda of greater autonomy and separation from Georgia (Fuller, 1989). Moves by it and local Georgian nationalists fed off each other, creating a tense environment pervaded by ethno-political fears (Welt, 2012). The violence of January 1991 pushed South Ossetia and the surrounding regions of Georgia into a negative spiral of ethnic polarization, violence and displacement. Tskhinval(i) was blockaded again, with power, communications, and food lines cut. Soviet Central Television characterized the situation in February 1991 as “worse than Leningrad in 1942. The entire city is

without heating and electricity...there is no food” (Fuller, 1991). Fighting within the town left it divided into Ossetian and Georgian zones, with the Georgian forces eventually expelled from the section they held. Ossetians living in the predominantly Georgian communities to the north of the town were themselves driven out, and forced into mono-ethnic settlements, with their houses plundered and robbed. Ossetians living beyond the SOAO in other parts of Georgia were also forced from their homes, with thousands fleeing to North Ossetia. The result was the “unmixing” of the population in those settlements across South Ossetia where ethnic Georgians and Ossetians lived together, and beyond. Because relations were generally good between Georgians and Ossetians in the Soviet period, there were many mixed marriages and families caught in the middle (Barry, 2008). People were forced to choose their primary ethnic allegiance even though many had Georgian and Ossetian relatives. The end result was an ethno-politically divided South Ossetia. Militia groups on both sides committed war crimes with impunity (Human Rights Watch, 1992). It was not until weeks after a peace agreement negotiated by the new Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze (who had replaced Gamsakhurdia after a violent coup in January 1992) and Russian President Boris Yel'tsin on June 24, 1992 that an uneasy peace was re-established in the region through the mechanism of a Joint Control Commission.

The wounds from the violence in 1989-1992 run deep in South Ossetia. A South Ossetian memorial book claims over 1,000 people were killed in the SOAO, 3,500 wounded, over 20,000 South Ossetians forced to flee, and 117 out of 365 Ossetian villages burnt and destroyed during this period (South Ossetian Ministry of the Press and Mass Communications, 2009). Many incidents from this time are recalled but one is particularly salient in public memory. On May 20, 1992 a convoy of Ossetians fleeing the region on the Zar road, the makeshift mountain road used by Ossetians to avoid the Georgian held enclave north of Tskhinval(i), was shelled by Georgian

forces. Thirty-three people were killed, 19 of them women and children, with 30 people left severely wounded. The incident was widely publicized in North Ossetia, and provoked a renewed flow of arms and fighters to the Ossetian forces in the region (de Waal, 2010, pp. 142-143). A tall black statue of a wailing woman looking skywards next to a Christian cross memorializes the incident on the now paved road today.

In his August 2008 recognition speech, President Medvedev took the Gamsakhurdia-era slogan “Georgia for the Georgians”—a banner that appeared at many of his rallies—as evidence of an enduringly intolerant Georgian nationalism, underscoring its illegitimacy by a mid-sentence exclamation: “tol’ko vdumaytes’ v eti slova” (“just think of what these words mean”). Irrespective of whether one accepts this as evidence of a Georgian genocidal attitude (“the annihilation of a whole people”) towards the Ossetians, as he claimed, or as something much more conjunctural, Medvedev’s speech reveals a Russian leadership persuaded of the righteousness of its actions by its understanding of Georgian nationalism as innately fascistic.¹⁰ Not only did the Russian leadership script its actions as a version of the “responsibility to protect” doctrine used by NATO to justify the Kosovo war of 1999 (Ó Tuathail, 2008), it also framed itself imaginatively re-fighting the Great Patriotic War, with Saakashvili as Hitler, genocide as his objective, and Tskhinval(i) as the “hero city” withstanding the Georgian “blitzkrieg” (Medvedev’s word choice to describe the Georgian attack).¹¹

¹⁰ It is worth recalling the attitude of the US government of George H. W. Bush in the early nineties. In a much-criticized speech in Kiev on August 1, 1991 Bush warned: “Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred” (Bush, 1991). The example Bush had in mind, according to one former Bush administration official, was Gamsakhurdia in Georgia (Merry, 2012).

¹¹ The vision of Saakashvili as Hitler was popular among Russian nationalists during the August War. A supposed like image of both men was juxtaposed in a defacement of the Georgian parliament’s website by Russian cyber attackers. Lyubov Sliska, Vice Speaker of the Russian Duma, stated bluntly that Saakashvili is like Hitler, who attacked “sleeping Russia” (Vice speaker, 2008).

The author of the so-called third genocidal campaign is the current Georgian president, Mikhail Saakashvili. In the Ossetian version, this campaign began in 2004 when Saakashvili launched a war against smuggling and criminality around Tskhinval(i) concentrated in the Ergneti market to the south of the town. Saakashvili's government hoped to drive a wedge between South Ossetia's leadership, which under Eduard Kokoity were widely held to benefit from contraband commerce, and ordinary Ossetians. The move backfired, however, as dozens were killed as fighting erupted in August 2004 before peace was restored (ICG, 2004). Kokoity had the bodies of the dead Ossetians displayed in the center of Tskhinval(i). As a result of the insecurity and fighting, his grip on power was strengthened. An in-depth analysis of the skirmish attributed its outbreak to mixed Georgian government motivations of insecurity and ambition (Welt, 2010, p. 65). Saakashvili's government switched to a new tactic in 2006 by sponsoring an alternative South Ossetian government based in the village of Kurta in the Greater Liakhvi gorge north of Tskhinval(i) under the leadership of a former South Ossetian prime minister, and Kokoity rival, Dmitriy Sanakoyev. This project deepened segregation in the region and, in heightening the geopoliticization of the enclave, set the stage for violent retribution (ICG, 2007).

From the outset, the August 2008 war was framed by Ossetian officials as a third genocide, with claims that 2,000 people died in the nighttime shelling of Tskhinval(i) on August 8. Scores of civilians did die violently that night and subsequently, without doubt a trauma for a small town and its people. Subsequent official South Ossetian figures put the number of dead at more than 364. On our visit to the region, officials presented us with a glossy English-language booklet of graphic color pictures from the August war entitled *Georgian Operation "Clean Field": Genocide against the Ossetians*. This booklet lists 364 names. Another booklet details the personal experiences of terror and loss by Ossetians during the August war (South Ossetian

Ministry of the Press and Mass Communications, 2009). By the time the 2,000 dead claim was abandoned, the storyline of Ossetians as the victims of genocide was firmly established in the consciousness of the Russian public and, most importantly, in the rhetoric of then-Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev. Adapting the script used by the US government to justify its support for Kosovo's independence, the Russian leadership argued that the material facts of genocide justify the remedial action of secession from the oppressor parent state.¹² Secessionism is not an initiated action but a defensive reaction. Thus, in his recognition speech, Medvedev argues that, in indiscriminately attacking innocents on the night of August 8, 2008, Saakashvili "chose genocide to solve his political tasks. Thus he killed with his own hands all hopes for the peaceful coexistence of Ossetians, Abkhazians, and Georgians in one state" (Medvedev, 2008). Because of its unilateral use of indiscriminate force, Medvedev concluded, Georgia squandered its claim to have its territorial integrity respected by Russia. The declarations and appeals of the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and of their presidents, for political independence from Georgia, therefore, deserve recognition.

SOUTH OSSETIA'S CLAIM TO STATEHOOD

Beyond international law arguments about *uti possidetis* or the squandering of sovereignty through genocidal policies against minority peoples (remedial secession), are arguments claiming legitimacy for *de facto* states based on the facts of actually existing statehood. The Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States was a treaty signed in 1933 by the United States and 18 countries in Latin America. Its first clause set out an influential definition of a state: "The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d)

¹² At the time of Kosovo's independence, Vladimir Putin declared that "this stick has two ends, and one day the other end of this stick will hit them [those supporting Kosovo] on their heads" (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2008).

capacity to enter into relations with the other states.” Article three outlined a declarative theory of statehood by stating: “The political existence of the state is independent of recognition by the other states.”¹³ These principles of international law have long been used by *de facto* states to justify their claim to statehood, sovereignty, independence, legitimacy and, eventually, recognition by other states. In a review of the three *de facto* states in the South Caucasus Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic—Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008) assess whether “they may be said to exist as functioning state entities” (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008, p. 484). They find a clear hierarchy with regard to defense, border control, and control over territory: “Nagorno-Karabakh on top, Abkhazia in the middle and South Ossetia at the bottom.” Citing pre-2008 war interviewees in Tskhinval(i), they suggest that South Ossetia has never given high priority to building a state since their aim was to join Russia as soon as possible (p. 506).

Even after the transformations wrought by the August war, fundamental questions persist over all four of the Montevideo criteria in the case of South Ossetia. First, the region has a population that is most probably less than half of what it was in 1989. The official population estimate of the State Committee on Statistics in Tskhinval(i) is that the state had 64,400 residents before the August war and had 50,860 on January 1, 2010 (Pukayev, 2010). Artur Tsutsiyev, a professor and cartographer in North Ossetia put the figure at roughly 35,000, with 15,000 people in Tskhinval(i) (Tsutsiyev, 2010). Professor Khasan Dzutsev from the North Ossetian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences estimated the population at 45,000, with 15,000 in Tskhinval(i) (Dzutsev, 2010). An International Crisis Group report in 2010, overseen by the US journalist and Caucasian analyst Lawrence Sheets, estimated that no more than 2,500 ethnic Georgians remain in South Ossetia, mostly in Akhalkalaki (Leningor to Russian-language

¹³ The full text of the treaty is available at <http://www.molossia.org/montevideo.html>.

speakers) (ICG, 2010, p. 3). The Georgian government has long considered official population estimates from the “occupied territories” as inflated and uses much lower figures. In a speech in Washington DC, the State Minister for Reintegration in Georgia, Eka Tkeshelashvili, described South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) as “hugely depopulated,” estimating the former’s population at 12,000 on the ground (Tkeshelashvili, 2011). Whatever the current numbers, the population of South Ossetia has been subjected to intermittent war and displacement since 1991. Thousands of its former ethnic Georgian residents now reside in internally displaced person settlements built by World Bank funds in undisputed Georgia. The current population, like that in Abkhazia, is a residual population, those that remain after violence and forced displacement.

The second criterion is a defined territory that, as we have already noted, South Ossetia only gained full practical control over after the August war. That war was brought to an end by unilateral ceasefire policies and a six-point plan signed in Moscow on August 12, 2008 by Presidents Medvedev and Sarkozy (for the European Union) and textually agreed to by President Saakashvili later that night. One point has proven to be particularly contentious: “The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation must withdraw to the line where they were stationed prior to the beginning of hostilities.”¹⁴ Russian forces continued to occupy Georgian territory beyond South Ossetia until October 2008 when they dismantled the last of the checkpoints they had established to create a buffer zone around South Ossetia. Their subsequent withdrawal was to the ostensible border of the SOAO, not to where they were stationed prior to the war.¹⁵ Russian military forces, thus, took up what have become permanent positions in Akhagori (Leningor) and for a time occupied the village of Perv(i) beyond the SOAO (see Figure 1). Prior to this, on September 9, 2008, Russia had announced that new bilateral agreements between an independent

¹⁴ Point five of the six-point agreement. For a discussion of the diplomacy surrounding the forging of this agreement, and its contested implementation, see Asmus (2010); de Waal (2010); Philips (2011).

¹⁵ Georgia, obviously, does not use the term “border” preferring the term “administrative boundary line” (ABL).

South Ossetia and Russian Federation would govern the presence of its troops in the region. According to Georgian defense officials in early April 2009, Russia had “a presence in at least 51 villages it did not occupy the previous summer” (Chivers, 2009). On April 30, 2009, Russia and South Ossetia concluded an agreement establishing their joint authority to secure South Ossetia’s borders. In practice, this has resulted in the placement of Russian troops on the (closed) border between undisputed Georgia and South Ossetia, the one exception being the area around Akhalgori (Leningor), which is open to local residents passing back and forth to undisputed Georgia. On September 15, 2009, Russia and South Ossetia signed a 49-year renewable agreement on maintaining a Russian military base in Tskhinval(i). Russian officials have also demarcated their version of the proper “state border” between South Ossetia and Georgia with a planned series of 20 manned frontier posts.

The third Montevideo criterion is government. Beyond the overt involvement of Russian officials in the creation, demarcation, and ongoing security of the South Ossetian state, Russian officials also occupy significant positions of power within its institutions. The prime minister from October 2009 to April 2012, Vadim Brovtsev, was a Russian national from Chelyabinsk with no previous connection with South Ossetia. A veteran of the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces and former director of the Russian construction company Vermikulit, he was reportedly foisted upon President Kokoity as a means of controlling alleged widespread embezzlement of Russian reconstruction funds for the region by Kokoity’s entourage (Fuller, 2011b). Brovtsev’s deputy was also a Russian as were the ministers of defense, economic development, and trade, figures allegedly under the control of officials in the Russian Federation, though they nominally served at the pleasure of the South Ossetian president (ICG, 2010, p. 10).

From what can be determined from public information, the Russia treasury provides the overwhelming bulk of the budgetary funds of the South Ossetian state. Russia has provided large sums of aid to help South Ossetia recover from the destruction wrought by the August War, about \$28,000 per person according to the Russian Deputy Minister of Regional Development (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin, 2011). The ICG estimated the figure as \$840 million in the two years since the war (ICG, 2010, p. i). Evidence of the expenditure of reconstruction and repair funds are visible across the urban landscape of Tskhinval(i), most notably the new red or blue roofs for apartment buildings and new window frames installed (often without supporting trim) in public buildings that had their windows blown out. Kindergartens, schools, and most administrative buildings are functional once more. Former Moscow city mayor Yuriy Luzhkov provided funds for a new apartment complex at the edge of the town, next to the former (now razed) Georgian village of Tamarasheni (he and his wife are also actively involved in business ventures in Abkhazia). Yet one does not have to look far for evidence of the marks of war, recent and older. The former South Ossetian Soviet assembly building is an empty shell. Some smaller apartment buildings and private dwellings remain in a state of ruin, with fire and structural damage rendering them difficult cases for reconstruction. Many houses in Tskhinval(i) are still in a state of abandonment.

The management of reconstruction funds has been a particularly contentious question in South Ossetian political life, perhaps the most divisive question within a polity largely homogenized (and traumatized) by the experience of war. After the war, the needs for basic shelter and repairs were enormous. Public authorities were not particularly responsive. Suspicion was rife that officials were embezzling funds. When reconstruction projects began, laborers were imported from Central Asia and other parts of the North Caucasus causing some local

resentment. Reconstruction priorities were questioned. In February 2009, Russian officials suspended payments of aid after its internal auditing officials found irregularities in how funds were being used, misused and not used. In July 2009 President Medvedev made a surprise visit to Tskhinval(i). A week later Russian Regional Development Minister Viktor Basargin announced that Moscow would allocate a further 20 billion rubles (\$641.4 million) for post-conflict reconstruction in South Ossetia over the following three years. An apparent quid pro quo was the appointment in August 2009 by President Kokoity of Vadim Brovtsev, reportedly close to Basargin, as the new prime minister. Thereafter a power struggle between Kokoity's entourage and those enjoying the trust of the Kremlin appears to have unfolded (Fuller, 2010).

Presidents in South Ossetia are constitutionally limited to two terms. In 2011 President Kokoity's attempt to overturn this restriction was thwarted. In the subsequent election, candidates perceived as close to him polled poorly while Emergency Situations Minister Anatoliy Bibilov (widely viewed as the Kremlin's favorite candidate) and former Education Minister, and outspoken Kokoity critic, Alla Dzhioyeva finished neck and neck in the first round of voting on November 13 with 25-26 percent each (Fuller, 2011a). Amidst claims of voting irregularities, the entity's Supreme Court controversially annulled the results of the subsequent runoff election on November 27 as it became apparent that Dzhioyeva was likely to win. Subsequently barred from running in a new election, Dzhioyeva was beaten up by security forces in February 2012 and landed in hospital. A new presidential election was held in March 2012 and a run-off in April 2012, with Leonid Tibilov, a former security service head (1992-1998) and deputy prime minister (1998-2002), the eventual winner (Fuller, 2012b). Such politicking was played out before a tiny electorate: Tibilov won the election by garnering a mere 11,453 votes.¹⁶

¹⁶ The total registered electorate (in South Ossetia, North Ossetia, and Moscow) was 40,929. For details see the South Ossetian electoral commission website,

He has reportedly moved quickly to remove Kokoity entourage figures from positions of power, and investigate charges of embezzlement. He also appointed a new prime minister, Rostislav Khugayev, who though originally from South Ossetia, was previously a businessman in Samara and reportedly unconnected to powerful families in his home region (Fuller, 2012a).

The Georgian government, as one would expect, speaks of South Ossetia's government in de-legitimizing terms: the “de facto regime,” “Tskhinvali region officials,” or “occupation regime.” Russia's recognition is viewed as a willful creation of a “virtual legal reality” within which occupied regions are independent states (Tkeshelashvil, 2011). Saakashvili's initial approach was the try to secure Georgia's borders and capture lost customs revenue from the existence of the unregulated Ergneti market. In practice, as noted, this meant criminalizing South Ossetia and its officials by associating them with smuggling and contraband commerce (George, 2009). Its geographic location has long offered opportunities in this regard. The region is bisected by the Transcaucasian (TransKam) highway, a road system that was constructed in the 1970s and 1980s as a modern alternative to the Georgian military highway. The centerpiece of the road system is the Roki tunnel, which was opened to traffic for the first time in 1985 (Figure 1). Control of this strategic crossing point offered lucrative trade and transit revenues. Closure of Ergneti market in 2004 was not only a major blow to the unregulated and untaxed trade that came through the Roki tunnel but also to more legitimate forms of commerce and cross-ethnic cooperation (de Waal, 2010; Kukhianidze, Kupatadze, and Gotsiridze, 2004). The criminalization of South Ossetian (and Abkhazian) officials was set into law by the Law on Occupied Territories of 2008. Beyond the crime of occupation, the Georgian government has linked the local *de facto* regimes to nefarious Russian schemes including sponsoring terrorism

against Georgia.¹⁷ Some international analysts recite older charges of criminality. Phillips, for example, describes South Ossetia as a site for organized crime and a hub for human trafficking. Criminal activities are “widespread in Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (Phillips, 2011 p. 10).

The final Montevideo criterion is the capacity to enter into relations with other states. The South Ossetian government has an “embassy” in Moscow and representation in Abkhazia and Transnistria as well as lobbying support in a few global capitals, including Washington, DC. However, most observers question its capacity to act independently. The 2010 ICG report, for example, argues South Ossetia is “no closer to genuine independence now than in August 2008, when Russia went to war with Georgia and extended recognition. The small, rural territory lacks even true political, economic or military autonomy” (ICG, 2010, p. i). Whether the leadership and population of South Ossetia ever wanted genuine autonomy and statehood is a moot point. In March 1991, South Ossetians voted in favor of Gorbachev’s new union treaty for the USSR and did not participate in the alternative referendum two weeks later that saw a majority of Georgians endorse Georgian independence. Faced with the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, the Supreme Soviet of South Ossetia adopted a declaration of independence of the Republic of South Ossetia. A referendum in January 1992 endorsed this independence and, at the same time, unification with Russia as the legal successor of the USSR. An instrumental attitude towards independence as a step towards the unification of a trans-Caucasian Alania (North and South Ossetia) within the Russian Federation is barely concealed by the South Ossetian leadership. In a justly famous gaffe in September 2008, President Kokoity greeted Russian recognition with the declaration that South Ossetia aspires to join the Russian Federation: “Now we are an

¹⁷ Georgian officials charge that Russia is behind a series of unexplained bombs in Georgia and that they have thwarted terrorist plots organized by Russia. In June 2011 a man from Akhalkalaki (Leningor) was arrested for seeking to place a bomb in the NATO liaison office in Tbilisi. In July, Georgian officials arrested three photojournalists on spying charges and found them guilty though they were freed after a plea agreement. See Police say (2011) and Photographers found (2011).

independent state, but we look forward to uniting with North Ossetia and joining the Russian Federation” (Blair, 2008). He later corrected his statement after communication with Russian Prime Minister Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov. Even the iconography of sovereign statehood calls into question South Ossetia’s status. Its flag, for example, is identical to that of North Ossetia, except only in its official dimensions. ICG compare the entity’s situation as similar to that of Russia’s North Caucasus republics, in effect, corrupt and impoverished dependencies (ICG, 2010).

The only diplomatic forum for international discussions on South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) is the Geneva Process talks whose members are Russia, Georgia, the EU, the US, the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and delegates from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This brings some international diplomats to the area on occasion. While these talks have made progress on a few issues like an Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism, larger issues are intractable. For those independent international analysts able to access South Ossetia (or working on peace-building like the effort led by Susan Allan Nan; see Allen Nan, 2011) information gathering is limited to interviews with those in its administration, and civil society, willing to speak openly. For popular attitudes, one is reliant on what can be gleaned from unstructured conversations with ordinary residents. We engaged in both types of interviews during our visit to inform our customized questions about South Ossetia that complement the standardized questions we also used in surveys in Abkhazia, Transnistria, and later Nagorny Karabakh. While the overall survey contained 135 questions, in this article we limit ourselves to the following questions, which we discuss in comparative context:

1. *A Socio-Economic and Demographic Overview.* What is the self-assessed mood and quality of life in South Ossetia relative to neighboring states? How widespread are personal experiences of armed conflict? Are there identifiable cleavages amongst its population?
2. *Trust in Institutions and Leadership.* How trusted are the entity's leadership and institutions relative to that of other states?
3. *Attitudes towards other Groups.* How have ongoing experiences with violent conflict and displacement impacted Ossetian attitudes towards other groups? Do ethnic Ossetians hold that South Ossetia belongs only to ethnic (South) Ossetians?
4. *Property Questions and Population Return.* What is the attitude of current residents of South Ossetia to the possible return of their former ethnic Georgian neighbors, to property claims and to possible international mechanisms for addressing restitution issues? Do Ossetians acknowledge that some locals have benefited materially from the displacement of their ethnic Georgian neighbors?
5. *Views of Existing Relations with Russia and Georgia.* How do Ossetians view their government's relations with the two powers that delimit their conflict?

WHAT SOUTH OSSETIANS BELIEVE: THE 2010 SURVEY RESULTS

Conducting surveys in *de facto* states is a challenging undertaking, and one fraught with difficulties and necessary compromises. Organizing the survey presented here for South Ossetia was the most difficult we have encountered in our years of working in the Balkans and Caucasus. As noted, in March 2010, less than 18 months after the August 2008 war, we visited South Ossetia and met with state officials of the presidential and parliamentary administrations to discuss the possibility of an independent survey. While the state authorities had conducted public opinion polls for electoral purposes and had commissioned polls about the conditions of the

population in the aftermath of the war, no independent survey had been completed in the region to our knowledge. After six months of negotiations and setbacks, we proceeded with the region-wide survey in November 2010 following a pilot in Tskhinval(i) in September 2010. The authorities did not interfere with the survey design and selection of questions—we shared a draft of the questionnaire with them—nor the actual implementation of the survey in the region. The pilot and the full survey were carried out by Professor Khasan Dzutsev of the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences center in Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia) who has extensive experience in designing and conducting surveys across a wide variety of social and political topics in the North and South Caucasus, including South Ossetia. The interviewers were Ossetians from North and South Ossetia, trained by the Sociology Institute and experienced in working in South Ossetia. As is usual in surveys of this kind, 10 percent of the respondents were contacted after the survey was completed to ensure that the interview was completed in the planned and appropriate manner. Interviews lasted 50 minutes on average and were conducted in Russian, which 86 percent of the respondents speak fluently, with some translations into Ossetian of items that a few respondents did not understand fully. While nearly all respondents use Russian or Ossetian at home, 29 percent indicated that they are also fluent in Georgian.

Initially, 506 questionnaires were completed, distributed amongst the *rayoni* of South Ossetia (Tskhinval(i) city 270, Tskhinval(i) *rayon* 65, Znaursky *rayon* 53, Java (Dzau) *rayon* 64 and Akhagori (Leningor) *rayon* 54. Of the 506 respondents, more than 90 percent (460) self-identified as Ossetian and only 19 as Georgian. As in Abkhazia, we felt it was important to survey ethnic Georgians still living in the area if at all possible since omitting them would have presented a misleading picture of the range of public opinion in that entity. Asking survey questions, some of which are politically sensitive, of a population that feels marginalized,

however, is fraught with ethical, logistical, and procedural difficulties. In South Ossetia, we knew that the percentage of ethnic Georgians still residing there is small. Nevertheless, in an endeavor to capture ethnic Georgian perspectives, a follow-up survey in Akhagori (Leningor) *rayon* in the east of the region was conducted in September 2011. This sub-sample ended up heavily skewed to an older female demographic. Additionally, the 10-month gap between this sub-sample and the original survey also saw significant internal domestic political developments in the area that precluded direct comparison with the earlier (November 2010) sample. In the end, we did not have complete confidence in the representativeness of the Akhagori (Leningor) sub-sample. Because too few non-Ossetians in the original sample made reliable comparisons across nationalities impossible, we have opted to report in this article only the responses for the Ossetian sample in the November 2010 survey. Almost all of the non-Ossetians therein are married to Ossetians and, in comparative tables, their answers do not differ significantly from the Ossetians. Our approach thus is to report the attitudes and beliefs of Ossetians, accepting that the small non-Ossetian population still residing in South Ossetia is missing from these results. We also note that these results do not represent the demographic situation in South Ossetia when we first conceived this project (early 2008) because of the forced population movements as a result of the August war. Finally, we note the objections of Georgian government officials to our survey work in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Accurate surveys in occupied territories, they argue, are impossible. We concede that survey conditions are indeed not ideal in *de facto* states but submit that the results presented here constitute a representative portrayal of ethnic South Ossetian attitudes in the aftermath of the 2008 war.¹⁸

¹⁸ We have learnt that we are both banned from travelling to Georgia. For an exchange on this travel ban between Toal and the Georgian Ambassador to the United States, Timuri Yakobashvili, at the “Frozen Conflicts After Twenty Years” conference held at the Harriman Institute in Columbia University in December 2011 see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eS51FJzOxtg&feature=relmfu> (mark 2:08:42 onwards).

Socio-Economic and Demographic Overview

The field report and the survey respondents present a portrayal of the South Ossetian population that is living in a poor, peripheral area that has suffered dramatic out-migration as a result of economic transition and warfare. In an earlier publication that drew upon the survey Kolossov and O'Loughlin (2011) show that 24 percent of the respondents would like to leave, and more than half of these would-be migrants want to go to Russia for economic reasons. Almost all households have family members in Russia and the population is disproportionately composed of women, especially the elderly. In the sample, two-thirds are women (66.8 percent) and 20 percent are pensioners. The overall age distribution is skewed to the older end of the spectrum, with 25 percent over 60, 50 percent between 47 and 60, and 25 percent under 47, another reflection of the higher rates of out-migration for study and for jobs of the younger generation. The field report indicated that, once contacted, 70 percent of potential respondents agreed to take part, though the frequency of empty and partially-reconstructed dwellings made the process of using a random route method and sampling quite challenging. However, in the villages in Java (Dzau) and Akhagori (Leningor) *rayoni*, refusal rates were as high as 50 percent because of anger at the authorities for their slow response to the earthquake of September 2009 in the former and because most potential respondents were Georgians in the latter.

The interviewers reported that only 11 percent of the respondents were somewhat reticent in answering the questions with older women the most forthcoming. More than half of the interviews were conducted with the respondent only but one-third of interviews were held in the presence of family members who offered opinions especially on economic questions. The interviewers noted a greater reserve to elaborate on questions about the performance of the local political authorities, though here again, older women were more open. There is a general sense of

either disaffection or fear since only 4.2 percent of the respondents believe that they can influence political or economic affairs in the region. But this low ratio does not translate into any potential for activism, since most respondents expect the authorities to address problems of unemployment and housing.

The quality of life in South Ossetia is usefully compared to its Russian and Georgian neighbors. While there is little doubt that most respondents were concerned about weak economic prospects, with 84.6 percent rating it as a significant or the major problem (compared to 11.9 percent for the growth of ethnic hostility and 21.9 percent for the possibility of a new war with Georgia), the South Ossetian situation is not unusual in the region. In Georgia, 61 percent ranked unemployment and poverty as the most important problem (note the difference in the question posed that allowed only one answer) (CRRC, 2010) while in Russia, three economic worries (poverty and price rises at 57 percent, unemployment at 40 percent and the economic crisis at 37 percent) led the rankings of major concerns in a January 2012 survey by the Levada center (RussiaVotes.org). When asked to rate their neighbors' ability to cope in the current circumstances, the South Ossetian sample showed ratios quite similar to a 2011 Russian national sample reported by RussiaVotes.org ("Things not so bad", 34 percent for South Ossetia and 26 percent for Russia, "Difficult but bearable" 54 and 56 percent, and "situation is unbearable" 10 and 15 percent, respectively).

While the economic worries are stressful for all samples, the overall mood of the respondents depends not only on economic matters but also on the prospects of further political violence and civil unrest. A standard question in the post-Soviet countries asks about the respondent's mood in recent weeks. Again, the answers in South Ossetia for the November 2010 sample closely track those of the Levada Center sample for Russia in 2011. "What would you

say is your mood in recent days?” elicited an answer of “excellent” by 8 percent in Russia and 12.5 percent in South Ossetia, “normal” by 64 percent and 51.2 percent, “tense, irritable” by 22 percent and 27.9 percent, and “fearful” by 5 percent and 7.5 percent. However, by comparison with its Abkhazian neighbor especially with respect to its ethnic Abkhaz, Armenian, and Russian inhabitants, the South Ossetian sample is decidedly less optimistic (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal, 2011, p. 16). The Kolossov and O’Loughlin (2011) assessment of the economic prospects of both de facto states contends that these subjective judgments of the two samples closely reflect the objective economic and political realities.

In Abkhazia, we found that the self-identification of an individual as Abkhaz, Russian, Armenian, or Georgian overwhelmed all other societal cleavages in explaining differences in attitudes and beliefs (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal, 2011). Few such clear social or economic distinctions are evident in the mono-ethnic South Ossetian survey responses. To see if there were internal cleavages, we examined the survey responses by the usual socio-demographic factors and by political attitudes. Gender, income, urban-rural, and educational differences were generally not meaningful. Only age group (younger 18-35, middle-aged 36-60, and older over 60) showed any relationship with beliefs amongst the socio-demographic predictors. Significant deviations on a range of political questions that were consistent allowed us to define a group of respondents as “skeptics” in the sense that they are suspicious of government motives and policies, distrustful of local institutions, and generally questioning of official South Ossetian positions. To determine this group, constituting 30.1 percent of the respondents, we used the question: “How do you evaluate the people in power in South Ossetia?” Respondents who chose the answers “People who are only interested in their own material welfare” we classified as “skeptics.” The remaining respondents picked either the incompetence answers, “people who do

not know how to use power” (18.4 percent) or “people who do not know how to solve the economic problems (15.8 percent) or competence “people who are leading the country on the correct course” (23.4 percent) or “don't know/refuse to answer.” We are thus being conservative in defining skeptics as narrowly as we do; a clear majority of respondents had an unflattering view of those in power. It is significant that while the majority indicated that they trusted “the President” (the survey did not prime respondents by calling out Kokoity by name) and “the parliament,” less than one-quarter believed that they were competent administrators. This discrepancy is further evidence for the need to disaggregate the notion of “internal legitimacy” in de facto states.

A third predictor that helps to understand the responses, especially about possible reconciliation and opinions about the war's outcomes, is the degree to which the respondent and his/her family were affected by displacement due to the fighting in either the early nineties or 2008. We constructed an ordinal scale of displacement. Thirty-five percent of the respondents reported no displacement in either of the wars, 41.9 percent reported being displaced once, and 23.2 percent reported being displaced twice or more. We asked respondents about damage to their homes as a result of armed conflict over the nearly two-decade period 1989-2008. Slightly more than a quarter of respondents indicated their house suffered no damage whereas 63.7 percent indicated it was damaged, with 8.4 percent indicating it was completely destroyed. In asking about whether respondents and their families were victims of violence or witnesses to it, we separated out the 1989-1992 period from the 2004-2008 period. Over 62 percent of respondents indicated they had personally experienced violence in the first period while almost 67 percent indicated they had during the second period. The survey results, in sum, reveal strong

majorities of respondents personally affected by the multiple rounds of violence in South Ossetia since the early nineties.

Trust in Institutions and Leadership

At the time of the survey (November 2010), President Eduard Kokoity was facing the end of his second term, having been first elected in November 2001 and reelected five years later. As the prospect loomed of having to relinquish power, the power struggle between Kokoity's network and Vadim Brotsev, the prime minister imposed by Russia, was unfolding behind the scenes, and occasionally bursting into the public domain. Knowing that Kokoity had demonstrated acute sensitivity to his public opinion standing in earlier opinion surveys, we decided it was necessary to not ask directly about his personal popularity. Instead we asked about the presidency itself. Two-thirds of respondents indicated they had trust in "the president." This ratio is significantly lower than the corresponding figure for (the late) President Sergey Bagapsh of Abkhazia at 84 percent and President Bako Sahakyan of Nagorny Karabakh at 87 percent. However, Kokoity's score is significantly better than former President of Transnistria, Igor Smirnov, who lost the 2012 elections and who scored only 36 percent in our PMR survey. (We conducted all four de facto state surveys in 2010 and 2011). With a similar prompt, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2010 had a trust rating of 56 percent (CRCC, 2010) while Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev's performance in Russia was approved by 75 percent of the electorate in December 2010 (RussiaVotes.org). All of these polities can be considered to be part of the set of post-Soviet regimes that are classified as "competitive authoritarian" by Levitsky and Way (2010) in which the presidential administrations wield strong executive power, the legislative and judicial branches are weak and compromised, civil society is both under suspicion and limited in its operations, and elections are held under restrictive

circumstances (see also Blakkisrud and Kolstø, 2012). In this comparative perspective, Kokoity's rating is not unusual nor is it unexpected in light of the events of 2008 which still reverberated in South Ossetian society two years later at the time of the survey. However, the fact that only 66.5 percent said that they voted for him in the previous presidential election (compared to the official electoral figure of 98 percent) suggests that there was a certain distancing from him over time, though the electorate had changed somewhat due to the war's effects on population movement.

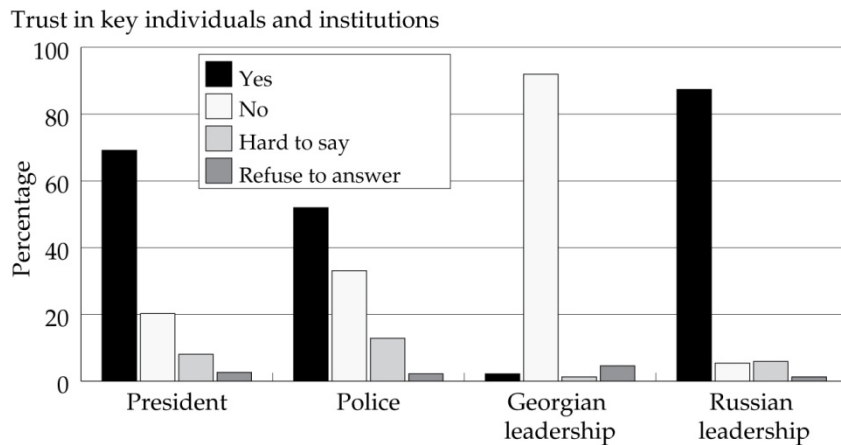


Fig. 2. Responses showing ratios of trust in key local and neighboring institutions. The question was a binary choice with “hard to say” and refusal options.

Compared to the trust ratings of two other South Ossetian governing organs, the judicial system (at 48 percent) and the police (at 51 percent), the presidential rating appears reassuring (Figure 2). It is noticeable that the “don't know” responses were higher for the trust questions about the president and the police that for almost all other questions, an indication of their sensitivity and a sense of possible repercussions on the part of some respondents. Police in many states of the former Soviet Union are notoriously corrupt and their trust rating in Russia averages only about 20-40 percent (Kosals, 2010; Taylor, 2011). Our own representative survey across the North Caucasus republics of Russia in 2005 showed a trust rating for the police that averaged only 8 percent. While it would be inappropriate to portray South Ossetia as a functioning

democratic society, its political institutions have as much support as their equivalents in adjoining regions. Part of the explanation for these scores is the war legacy in this small republic which left a population traumatized by the events of August 2008; though no longer as fearful of the Georgian state as before that date, they remain reliant on their own security forces, in combination with Russia's military and economic patronage, for their protection.

The legacies of war experience are also evident in the two graphs in Figure 2 that show the respective trust in the Russian (Putin and Medvedev) and Georgian (Saakashvili) leaderships. The answers are not broken down by any socio-political-demographic category since these differences are small and insignificant. One question that interested us was the degree to which South Ossetians understood the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in personalized or structural terms. One piece of graffiti on a damaged building summed up what appeared to be the prevailing street level attitude in Tskhinval(i): "Saakashvili is a maniac." Not content with that, someone later improvised an addition: "and an assassin!!!" Many of those we interviewed also expressed strong feelings of contempt for Saakashvili but offered variations on the degree to which the conflict was one of politicians or primordial divisions. For example, Lira Kozaeva-Tskhovrebova, a well-known former schoolteacher active in women's organizations and civil society initiatives, declared that "we can only expect the worst from Saakashvili. The people in Georgia are brainwashed. If Sakaashvili goes, the situation in general would improve but the Saakashvili team includes people who are worse than him, more nationalistic" (Kozaeva-Tskhovrebova, 2010). Kosta Dzugaev, an advisor to the president and professor at Tskhinval(i) State University, argued that "our enemy is not the Georgian people with whom we have lived for centuries; it's Georgian Nazism. He referred to Saakashvili's government as a "group of political criminals," a perhaps conscious mirroring of the attitude of the Tbilisi government (Dzugaev, 2010).

Konstantin Petrovich Pukhayev, deputy head of administration, held a more hard line view: “People say there are no bad nations, just bad people, but here is a very real life example that there could be bad nations as well” (Pukhayev, March 29, 2010). Merab Maksimovich Zassejev, head of the domestic affairs section, rejected this view, noting that he himself is of mixed descent (Zassejev, March 30, 2010).

To probe the issue of primordialism or personality we asked respondents if relations between South Ossetia and Georgia would improve if President Saakashvili were replaced. While a sizable portion replied in the affirmative (42.9 percent), the majority held that conflictual relations transcended individual leadership. Clearly there are some South Ossetians who blame Saakashvili personally for the deterioration in South Ossetian-Georgian relations from the summer of 2004. Lira Kozaeva-Tskhovrebova, for example, declared that she could never have imagined a South Ossetia cut off from Georgia until that moment. With relatives in her family that are ethnic Georgians, she has experienced this rupture as a painful tragedy (Kozaeva-Tskhovrebova, 2011). Yet, whatever opportunity existed then was lost. As we shall see below, perceptions of relations with Georgians (the ethno-nationalist group) are poor, with most Ossetians believing that relations were bad or very bad.

Attitudes Toward Other Groups

One question that is of special interest to us in our comparative research is the degree to which *de facto* states are functional ethnocracies even though their official creed may be the opposite. All Eurasian *de facto* states justify their creation in part as a legitimate response to an aggressive parent state nationalism that sought to turn that larger entity into an ethnocracy that would exclude minorities from decision-making. *De facto* states, thus, tend to see themselves as anti-ethnocracies and draw upon Soviet-era credos of multi-ethnic cooperation and harmony in

presenting themselves to the world. Contradictions, however, are soon apparent, most especially in the two *de facto* states (Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia) that are now effectively mono-ethnic as a consequence of wartime violence and forced displacements.

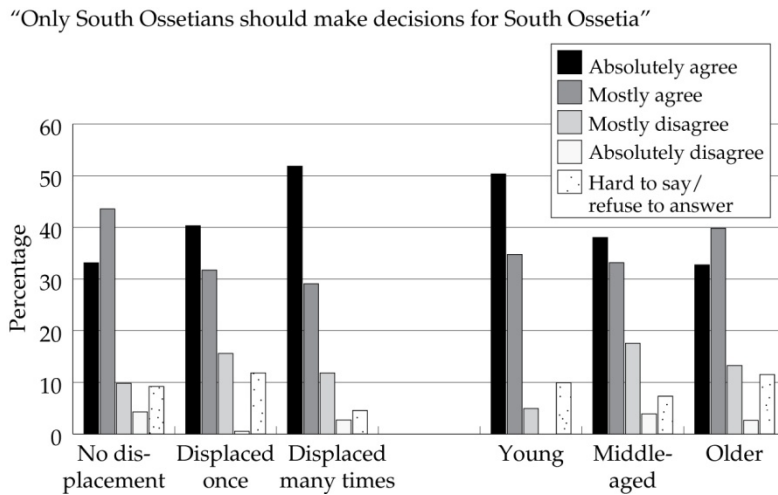


Fig. 3. Responses to statement (agreement/disagreement) about the nature of decision-making in South Ossetia by agreement/disagreement and by displacement experiences and age.

Given the high levels of wartime experience with violence and displacement in South Ossetia, we probed what impact this had on attitudes towards who should be in control of South Ossetia and towards Georgians and other groups more generally. In the survey, we posed the question: “What do you think of the statement that, in South Ossetia, those who are not South Ossetians should not make decisions on the future of the country?” Of the nearly three-quarters of the respondents who supported this notion, 15.2 percent strongly agreed and 56.4 mostly agreed (Figure 3). On this question, however, there are some significant differences within the homogenous South Ossetian community. Respondents whose families were displaced during the wars of 1989-1992 and 2008 were more uncompromising in their attitudes and more displacement appeared to engender more hardline attitudes about the decision-making in South Ossetia on the part of the victorious side (Figure 3). This difference is consistent with other

responses in the survey about the war outcomes and the distribution of resources between the nationalities. While this gradation of replies is anticipated as a result of the hostile legacies of war and civilian disruptions, the graph for the age groups on this question is a bit surprising.

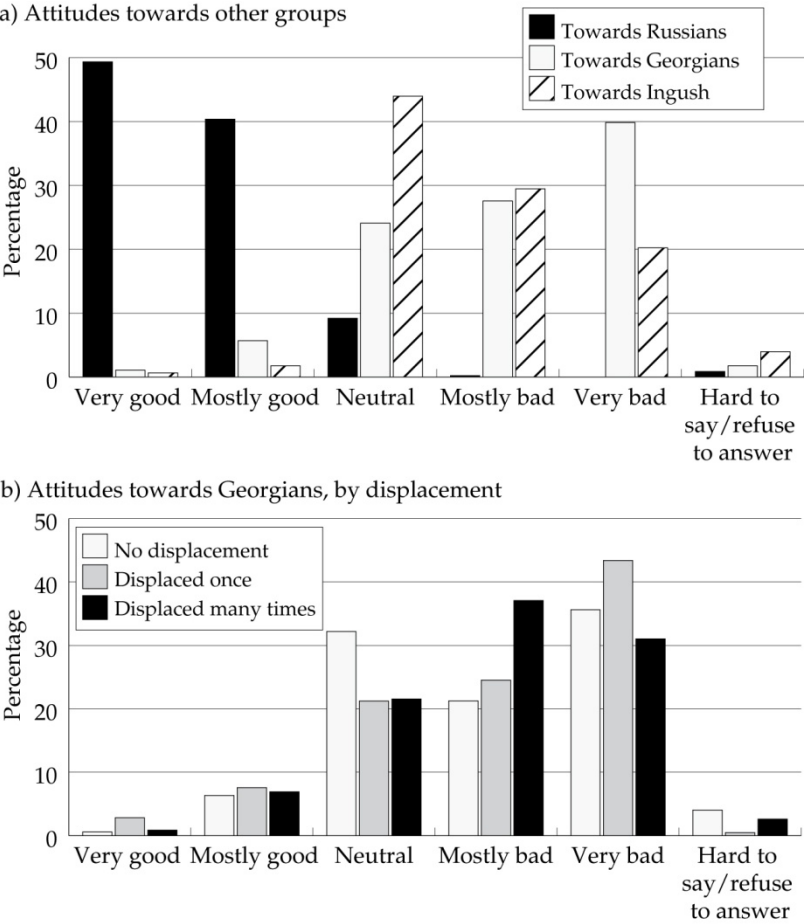


Fig. 4. Respondent feelings (very good to very bad) about Russians, Georgians and Ingush: (a) overall ratios and (b) feelings towards Georgians by displacement experience.

Younger respondents are less conciliatory than middle- or older-age groups with 86 percent of them supporting the ethnocentric sentiment embedded in the statement. As we noted for Abkhazia, respondents who were politically socialized in Soviet times and thus older, were less antagonistic towards other nationalities across a range of questions (O’Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal, 2011). For younger (18-35 years old) respondents, their socialization took place

predominantly in a postwar environment in which political uncertainties and hostile relations between the *de facto* and parent states were the norm during the 1990s and 2000s.

We asked respondents what attitudes they had towards ethnic Georgians and other peoples. It is not only Georgians to whom South Ossetians have poor reactions. South Ossetians display attitudes that are almost as negative towards the Ingush (Figure 4a).¹⁹ While three-quarters of South Ossetians report that they have “mostly bad” or “very bad” feelings about Georgians, over half express similar sentiments towards Ingush. The high ratio of “neutral” responses for the Ingush is related to the fact that South Ossetians are much less likely to encounter Ingush in their daily activities and are also less likely than North Ossetians to have been directly affected by the 1992 Prigorodnyy fighting. The contrast to Russians is stark (almost 90 percent positive feelings) while a distant group such as Americans is scored at 64 percent neutral, again a result of non-contact and lack of information about them with only 21 percent expressing negative views and 5 percent positive views. These strongly negative attitudes toward Georgians do not bode well for reconciliation and are much more hostile than the attitudes of the non-Georgian groups in Abkhazia. In our survey there, little differences existed between Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians who, at a rate of about 50 percent, viewed Georgians positively (“very good” or “mostly good”). This sharp contrast with South Ossetia is partly attributable to the short time that had elapsed since the war, its relative intensity in a small area, and the wide-ranging and deep effects on most residents. By contrast in Abkhazia, the 2008 fighting was quite limited to some mountain communities and did not involve the major population centers.

¹⁹ In 1992, a brief but bloody conflict over control of the Prigorodnyy *rayon* next to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia occurred near the end of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in the South Caucasus. South Ossetian militias were heavily involved in the Prigorodnyy fighting which resulted in the displacement of Ingush from their villages in the *rayon* (O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolossov, 2008).

The graph of attitudes towards Georgians by displacement experiences enforces the war involvement explanation (Figure 4b). While not dramatic, the differences in attitudes are related to the frequency of displacement—more than two-thirds of those who were displaced by the fighting have “mostly bad” or “very bad” feelings towards Georgians compared to 55 percent of those not displaced. Unlike larger regions where displacement varies significantly by relative contiguity of the locality to the war zone, Tskhinval(i) was the center of the 2008 conflict and with its surrounding area provided about two-thirds of our respondents. While we did not investigate the length of time that the respondents were displaced from their properties, inquiring only if they were forced to leave their homes and how many times it occurred, the trauma and disruption to daily life and security of displacement are likely to enforce negative attitudes towards its perpetrators. The negative attitudes towards Georgians parallel the negative views of the Saakashvili regime. (We did not distinguish between Georgians who formerly lived in South Ossetia and those in undisputed Georgia in our survey).

Property and Return Questions

The fighting in 1991 and 1992 that led to South Ossetia’s *de facto* statehood and the short August war of 2008 both had significant consequences for population and property relations in the area. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, an estimated 60,000 Ossetians left Georgia for Russia and approximately 10,000 Georgians left the autonomous region of South Ossetia (Ó Tuathail, 2008). An unknown number of properties changed ownership, either by consent or force, during this chaotic periods and hundreds of homes were also damaged during the war, especially in the Georgian attack on Tskhinval(i) and in the aftermath of the fighting because of the destruction of the Georgian villages near Tskhinval(i). During the August War, thousands of Ossetians fled to North Ossetia but were able to return later whereas thousands of ethnic

Georgians who fled the violence were unable to return. Approximately 20,000 Georgians from South Ossetia live in accommodation not far from the administrative boundary in conditions that are isolated from the rest of Georgian society (Mitchneck, Mayorova, and Regulaska, 2009).

After these periods of violence an unknown number of properties changed ownership, either by consent or force. Hundreds of homes were also damaged during the war, in the Georgian attack on Tskhinval(i), the Russian counter-attack, and revenge attacks on isolated villages by both sides. Engaged by the Dayton Peace Accords, the international community led a concerted effort to promote population returns in Bosnia-Herzegovina and ended up along the way with notable success in promoting a legal framework for property restitution (Toal and Dahlman, 2011). In the former post-Soviet *de facto* states, however, no programs on this scale have been attempted. The 1983 Soviet Housing Code was in effect when Georgia became independent and both South Ossetia and Abkhazia broke away. It recognized tenancy rights, which could be inherited, not ownership rights over property in Georgia. Part of this code stated that tenancy rights could be lost if a person was absent from his or her home for more than six months without a valid reason. In the aftermath of forced displacement, all sides refused to acknowledge this as a valid reason for absence and used this provision, and civil code adverse possession rules, to reallocate property rights to co-ethnics (Burduli and Dolidze, 2003, p. 317). In effect, property appropriation was legalized through (ab)use of existing housing and civil code law. Since then, property laws have been modified in all locations; no restitution program has ever been acknowledged as necessary by all parties and agreed. For a mix of political and legal reasons, the Georgian government launched a property claim registration process for internally displaced persons, *Chemi Sakhli* (My House), but not as a precursor to a restitution or compensation scheme that might be agreed in a conflict resolution process (Ballard, 2011, p. 50).

The scheme remains stuck in the conflict paradigm. South Ossetia, for its part, has restricted access by international and non-governmental organizations helping IDPs and promoting return. The UNHCR operates in Abkhazia but it does not operate in South Ossetia. The last major international organization with a permanent presence there was the OSCE but this was terminated in June 2009.

South Ossetian authorities are opposed to the return of displaced persons without broader agreement with the Georgian state; “We are not against people returning to their homes but there are several conditions for possible returns: one, Georgia must provide compensation for the Ossetian refugees of 1991-92, and two, refugee return must be voluntarily under secure conditions. We have proposed the non-use of weapons to Georgia but Saakashvili refuses to agree” (Dzhioev, 2010).²⁰ The claim of forced migration or ethnic cleansing was even challenged by President Kokoity. “Those who voluntarily left their houses [in August 2008] are not considered refugees. Neither are those who voluntarily burned their houses in order to prevent Ossetians and Russians taking them over. These people are not refugees. They are citizens who voluntarily left their houses.” Like all the South Ossetian officials we spoke to concerning the possibility of return by ethnic Georgians, he harked back to the events of 1989-1992 to emphasize the plight of the Ossetians who fled Georgia for Russia. “Everybody talks about Georgian refugees today...More than 100,000 refugees are on the territory of Russia... Who will speak up for the rights of Ossetians who left Truso Valley, which has always been the territory of Ossetia and has suddenly become the territory of Georgia? Who will protect the rights of ethnic

²⁰ It should be noted that President Saakashvili subsequently announced a “non-use of force” policy for Georgia. One unarticulated dimension here is that returnees recognize South Ossetia as an independent state. For a further elaboration of the South Ossetian discourse on displaced persons see Chigoev (2011).

Ossetians who do not have the possibility to come and look after the graves of their ancestors?”²¹

To try to resolve the claims and counter-claims of victimization and persecution, the 2010 ICG Report suggests that to lower tension “all sides should consider designing and implementing mechanisms for addressing property claims and allowing the step-by-step return of IDPs, with the help of international organizations.” Unfortunately, so far there has been no progress on this in the Geneva Process talks.

In this article, we consider survey findings on two questions about the legacy of displacement and the willingness of current ethnic South Ossetian to reconcile with their former Georgian neighbors. Once again, we see significant differences in the answers according to the respondent’s own experience of displacement. The first question concerned the rhetorical formula that accompanies return questions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the “we are not against returns but there are conditions” cited above. Asking for ordinal scale (dis)agreement on the statement that “some people who left should not be allowed to return” allowed us to probe the degree of strength of this sentiment. (We use the more neutral language since as noted earlier in the Kokoity statements, many Ossetians do not believe that Georgians were forcibly removed). Overall, 65 percent “strongly” or “mostly agree” with this sentiment.

The most intransigent views are expressed by those who have been displaced most often, with over half “strongly agreeing” with the statement, a marked contrast to the more conciliatory views (less than 25 percent strongly agreeing) of those displaced once or not at all. The direction of the relationship between displacement experiences and lack of support for a step towards post-war resolution is no surprise (Figure 5). Even if one wishes to put a positive spin on the

²¹ All quotes are from the interview conducted by the International Crisis Group team with President Kokoity in March 2010 (ICG, 2010, pp. 17-18).

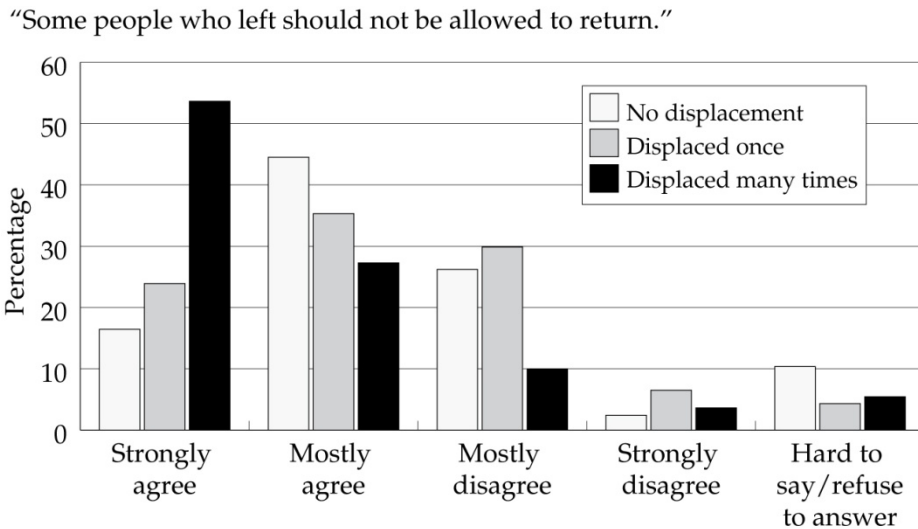


Fig. 5. Responses to a statement about the possible return of people left during and after the 2008 war (scale “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) by displacement experience.

responses, it is hard to ignore the small ratio (less than one-third of responses) that disagrees with the sentiment. But it is difficult to conceive of this return given ongoing antagonism between the parties and since most Georgian properties are uninhabitable. Furthermore, when South Ossetians talk of return at all it is to a recognized Republic of South Ossetia. Merab Chigoev, prime minister of the Republic of South Ossetia from August 1998 to June 2001, summarizes this sentiment when he writes: “It should be taken into consideration and clearly explained to the refugees from Georgia and South Ossetia that by agreeing to return to their previous permanent residences, they are also agreeing to return to a different country” (Chigoev, 2011, p. 39).

The second question we wish to present was a provocative one and included only after assurance by Professor Dzutsev that it would be okay to ask. Here we asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that “property was taken by South Ossetians” after the war. Our poll showed that the majority (61 percent) were in agreement (Figure 6). This question had the highest ratio of respondents (14 percent) who either could not give an answer or refused to

answer. It is plausible that respondents may not know if they were not close to locations where “Property was taken by South Ossetians”

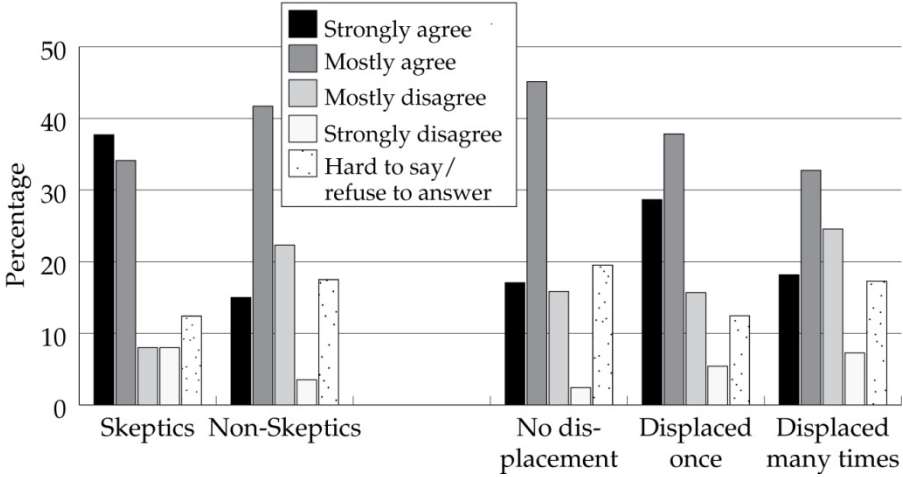


Fig. 6. Responses to a statement about the disposal of Georgian property after the 2008 war (scale “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) by skeptics/non-skeptics on the nature of the South Ossetian regime and by displacement experience

properties were taken but it is also probable that the high ratios of non-response for this question reflect an understandable sensitivity about the illegal occupation of the property of families forced to flee. It is also noticeable that the respondents whose families were displaced multiple times are less likely to agree (strongly or mostly) with the statement (50 percent) than the others, 14 points higher. It is also evident that skeptics about the nature of the political arrangements in South Ossetia agree (72 percent) with the statement about the taking property more than the non-skeptics (56 percent). While the extent of real property appropriation is unclear since so many houses were looted and destroyed, it is clear from the responses that most people in South Ossetia believe that these reports are true. There is little possibility for those who lost their homes to reclaim them under the current political circumstances and without the active involvement of a more neutral international agency as a mediator, as was the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Like the situation in the southern districts of Abkhazia where the Georgian

population was concentrated and where properties have lain abandoned for two decades, it is highly likely that the properties of former residents in South Ossetia will not be returned to their rightful owners. What will become of the wasteland of destroyed homes and communities directly north of Tskhinval(i) in the long run is uncertain. President Tibilov recently indicated the area will never be used for settlements again but cleaned up to allow agriculture and industrial development (see Reports, 2012).

Other questions on which side should receive material compensation affirm unsurprising results: Ossetians overwhelmingly feel they should receive compensation while Georgians should not. Combined with the strongly negative attitudes towards Georgians, these reactions explain why there is little substantial progress in the Geneva Process talks. Tentative attempts to start a process of dialogue and peace-building under the auspices of international non-governmental organizations are occurring, nevertheless, but the obstacles to conflict resolution are immense (see Allen Nan, 2011 for a recent example that indicates the difficulty facing such efforts).

Views of Current Relations with Russia and Georgia

While it is true that ordinary people have little interest in or sophisticated knowledge of world affairs (see our surveys of Russians about global affairs after September 11: O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, and Kolossov, 2004), the residents of small vulnerable regions have little choice but to pay attention to their entity's relations with their parent and patron states. *De facto* states in the post-Soviet space rely on Russia for economic, military, and moral support but at a cost to their aspirant sovereignty and perceived status of independence. In Abkhazia, it was possible to detect such mixed feelings about relations with Russia, especially amongst the ethnic Abkhaz (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal, 2011). But as Kolossov and O'Loughlin (2011) show, the

situation in South Ossetia is dramatically different due to its almost complete economic dependence on Russian aid and the single route to/from the republic through the Roki tunnel to North Ossetia. This recognition is closely reflected in the comparative responses; while 12 percent of the Abkhazian population believed that relations between their state and Russia were too close (22 percent for the Georgian respondents there), the parallel question in South Ossetia is only 6 percent, with three-quarters of the respondents satisfied that the relations are correct. While the answers to the questions about relations with Georgia either show a lot of indecision, perhaps motivated by a lack of knowledge of the exact nature of the relations, or unwillingness to give an answer with almost half of responses either “hard to say” or refusals, the clarity of the responses about relations with Russia suggest that close cooperation with Moscow is widely supported. Since relations between South Ossetia and Georgia in 2010 were almost completely severed, a response that “relations are fine” indicates that almost 40 percent of South Ossetians want to keep them in deep freeze. Only 11 percent want closer ties. While there are few differences between skeptics and non-skeptics, skeptics preferring more cooperation with Georgia (19.5 to 9 percent) than supporters of the regime in Tskhinval(i). A more evident contrast appears between the responses according to the experience of displacement. Those more affected by displacement view the non-relations as fine (60 percent), more than double the rate at which the other categories of displacement chose this answer (Figure 7). It is the individuals most affected by conflict who are consistently the most unenthusiastic about the pursuit of policies to change the state of antagonism that currently exists between Tskhinval(i) and Tbilisi.

The overall impression from the graphs and figures presented here about the nature of South Ossetian public opinion is quite pessimistic for those who wish to see improved relations with the regime and people of Georgia. Attitudes have been hardened considerably because of

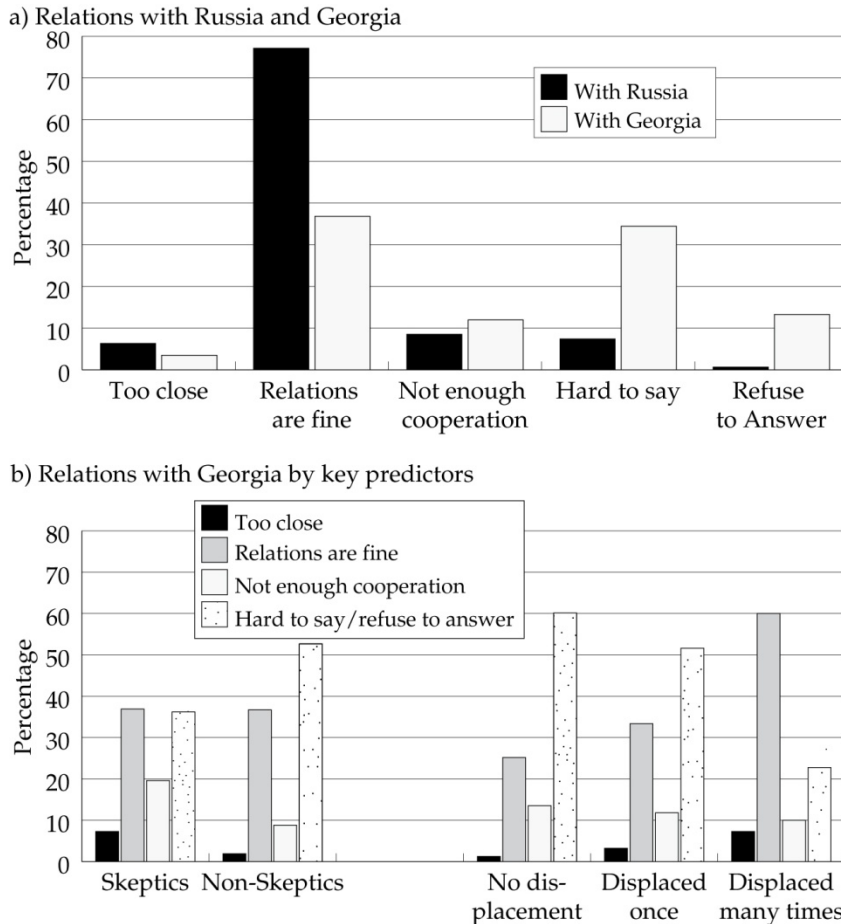


Fig. 7. Responses to the question about the state of the political relations between the South Ossetian republic and Russia (and Georgia) . (a) Overall ratios by response and (b) ratios to the question about relations between South Ossetia and Georgia by skeptics/non-skeptics and by displacement experience.

the sense of victimhood that emanates from the belief that the Georgian attack on Tskhinval(i) was unprovoked, criminal, and deliberately targeted civilians. Merab Chigoev underscores the widespread personal experience of war in South Ossetia: “There is not a single family in South Ossetia who did not lose a relative or was not somehow injured as a result of the conflict with Georgia between 1989 and 2008” (Chigoev, 2011, p. 39). An added obstacle, he notes, is that “after living for the last twenty years in almost total isolation from each other in South Ossetian

and Georgian communities, a new generation has inherited feelings of enmity and mistrust of each other as a result of the conflict.” Our survey findings echo this pessimistic summary, for South Ossetia at least.

CONCLUSION: MORE THAN OCCUPIED TERRITORY

South Ossetia is a region that has received international attention out of all proportion to its size because of the short war between the Russian Federation and the US-supported government of Georgia in 2008. For a brief moment this confrontation triggered fevered speculation about a renewed Cold War. The more South Ossetia became a Great Power frontline and geopolitical symbol, however, the more the local circumstances, conditions, and tragic realities of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict faded from view. In the corridors of power in Washington, DC and elsewhere the war was instantly scaled up to a Russian-Georgian conflict, and, by some, to a broader conflict between Russia and “the West” (Asmus, 2010).²²

This article seeks to return the focus to the local features of this conflict, and, in so doing, problematize glib geopolitical framings like South Ossetia as “occupied territory.” This conception is intellectually useful only to the extent that it signals the importance of the Russian troop presence in South Ossetia to the current dimensions of the longstanding conflict between Tskhinval(i) and Tbilisi over the post-Soviet Georgian state. It is quickly misleading when inflected with Cold War analogies to the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe. Whereas Soviet occupation came to be widely opposed in Eastern Europe, in South Ossetia the Russian troop presence is firmly welcomed by the vast majority of local Ossetians. When we asked about the Russian troop presence, 82 percent of our respondents choose the strongest option we provided in the questionnaire: “they are our allies and must remain in South Ossetia indefinitely”; 13.4

²² It should be noted that there is some sentiment in the US Congress for greater knowledge about public opinion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. See the question by Senator Roger Wicker (R-Mississippi) in United States Senate (2010, p. 24).

percent chose the option “they are our allies but must leave South Ossetia” and only 0.6 percent that “they are our allies and must leave South Ossetia in the near future” (3.9 percent choose “do not know” or refused to answer). If there is any analogy from this period, it is perhaps more approximate to the so-called US “empire by invitation” in Western Europe after World War II (Lundestad, 1986). The related Georgian government call for the “de-occupation” of South Ossetia is interpreted darkly by Ossetians: Georgia wants the territory of South Ossetia without its Ossetian inhabitants. “De-occupation” means getting rid of the Russians and local Ossetians who support them.

There are three alternative conceptions of South Ossetia that are more meaningful than “occupied territory.” The first is to see South Ossetia as the site of a massive failure of Georgian state-building in the post-Soviet context (George, 2009). There was nothing inevitable about the clash between Tskhinval(i) and Tbilisi from 1989 onwards necessarily producing territorial secessionism. South Ossetian nationalist forces did not initially speak in such terms. Some were open to a renegotiated status within a post-Soviet Georgia if given securities on language and local autonomy. To this extent, Georgia, like Serbia, is a victim of its own nationalist chauvinism, disastrous initial leadership, and collapse into lawless criminality at a moment of great consequence.

The second conception is to see South Ossetia as the site of a tragic ethnic security dilemma. Like many places transitioning from communist authoritarianism towards an uncertain political future, South Ossetia had a history of both early twentieth-century ethnicized violence and of generally positive ethnic relations during the communist era. In the chaos of the post-communist transition, ethno-political competition induced fear, polarization, and violence. Ethnic segregation was produced on the ground and its particular geography in South Ossetia left

all parties insecure: Ossetian forces could generally block the access of many ethnic Georgian villages within South Ossetia to undisputed Georgia while ethnic Georgian villages north of Tskhinval(i) could block Ossetian access to North Ossetia, and vital necessities like water. This geography became consequential when the Saakashvili government began rebuilding the Georgian state, and, in the wake of the violence of 2004, porous boundaries became hardened barricades. The endgame came after the August 2008 war when Ossetian forces deliberately destroyed the Georgian enclave to its north, a crime against the property of their ethnic Georgian neighbors but logical in the grim zero-sum calculations of an ethnic security dilemma. The legacy of this violence has left everyone manifestly worse off than before. Ethnic Ossetians are condemned to live in a fortified outpost cut off from their natural hinterland and, in many cases, family relatives within undisputed Georgia. Ethnic Georgians from South Ossetia are condemned to live in displacement settlements, cut off from their family property, homes, and former lives. And, last but not least, communities near the administrative boundary have had their lives and livelihoods negatively impacted by the blocked state of affairs in the region (Care International, 2009; Huseynov, 2012).

A third conception is to see South Ossetia as an impossible state, a fiction sustained by Russia to shore up a fantasy image of itself as a benevolent protector of small vulnerable Caucasian peoples. In this respect, South Ossetia is completely dependent upon its relationship with Russia and the continuation of its largess and subsidies. In certain ways the Republic of South Ossetia has a similar relationship to Georgia as contemporary Georgia has to the Russian Federation. It is fated by physical geographical location to always remain next to the power it seeks to break from, to remain in the South Caucasus and to be close to if not part of Georgia despite a desire to “escape its geography.” If it is to secure for itself a more prosperous future as

something more than a defiant outpost, then whoever is in power in Tskhinval(i) has little choice but to work on reconciling itself to Georgia. There is no immediate prospect of that occurring any time soon though shifting political leadership within Georgia might open up some possibilities.

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