

The Georgia conflicts: What you need to know

Today's South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts have their roots in Georgia's pursuit of independence in the late 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Under the Soviet Union's esoteric federal structure, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been quasi-autonomous subunits of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (1989 population: 5.4 million, according to the Soviet census that year), itself one of the 15 constituent republics of the Soviet Union. For much of the Soviet period this arrangement was only occasionally a source of ethnic and inter-elite friction. But the Soviet Union began to fray in the late 1980s and Tbilisi pursued ever-greater sovereignty for Georgia, especially after Soviet troops violently suppressed peaceful demonstrators on April 9, 1989, resulting in 19 deaths. A zero-sum dynamic between the Georgian drive for independence and the Abkhaz and South Ossetian preference for maintaining a reformed Soviet Union, coupled with demagogic politics on all sides, led to rising insecurities and perceptions of ethnic victimization.

Georgians increasingly identified Abkhaz and Ossetians as pro-Soviet "fifth columns" as Abkhaz and South Ossetians worked to remain part of a crumbling Soviet Union. Until 1991 their dispute manifested itself through a "war of laws" (with the autonomies and Tbilisi passing laws to countermand each other's), public protest, and occasional bouts of low-level conflict. A tragic example of this conflict came in July 1989 when a dispute over dividing the Abkhazian State University led to ethnic clashes that killed at least 16.

Armed conflict broke out in South Ossetia (population: 98,500; 66 percent ethnic Ossetian, according to the 1989 Soviet census) in January 1991, a year before the Soviet Union's collapse. The month before, the first post-Communist Georgian government under Zviad Gamsakhurdia abolished South Ossetia's status as an "autonomous region" of Georgia in response to South Ossetia's own declaration of "sovereignty" from the independence-leaning authorities in Tbilisi. War broke out when Tbilisi sent armed forces to reassert control in South Ossetia.

The South Ossetian conflict was really a series of intermittent battles largely among informal militia. It stretched past the Soviet Union's final days and through Georgia's short-lived civil war that saw the demise of Gamsakhurdia and the return to power of Eduard Shevard-

nadze, Georgia's former first party secretary. The fighting escalated in 1992 and tensions spread to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. Russian President Boris Yeltsin pressed Shevardnadze to conclude a peace agreement with the South Ossetians in June 1992. Approximately 1,000 died as a consequence of the war and many more fled their homes, including Ossetians living in other parts of Georgia.

The conflict in Abkhazia (population: 525,000, according to the 1989 Soviet census) was entirely a postindependence war, in contrast to the conflict in South Ossetia. After the July 1989 violence, tensions between Georgians and Abkhaz were partially alleviated by a power-sharing deal struck under Gamsakhurdia. It provided for disproportionate representation in Abkhazia's political institutions to the Abkhaz, who according to the 1989 census were 18 percent of Abkhazia's population compared to 46 percent who were ethnic Georgians, many of whom had settled in Abkhazia during czarist and Soviet rule.

Upon Georgia's independence the Abkhaz sought a loose confederal arrangement. Tbilisi failed to consider it and Abkhazia's power-sharing arrangement broke down as the Abkhaz prepared to unilaterally implement their plan.

The war itself began in August 1992 in confused circumstances. Georgian forces crossed into Abkhazia to free Georgian officials taken hostage by Gamsakhurdia supporters, who had launched their own insurgency in the region of Mingrelia, which abuts Abkhazia. The troops were tempted to settle two problems at once: free the officials and reestablish control over Abkhazia. They pushed on toward Sukhumi but met armed Abkhaz resistance.

Georgian forces controlled Sukhumi during much of the war while resisting Abkhaz forces and allies from Russia who sought to retake the city from the north. The Abkhaz finally retook Sukhumi in September 1993. As the Georgian army retreated, virtually all of Abkhazia's ethnic Georgian population (approximately 220,000) were forced to flee in its wake. Threatened with further destabilization in Mingrelia, Georgia reluctantly joined the Russia-initiated Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS. A ceasefire agreement was signed under Russian auspices in May 1994.

Russia subsequently dominated the peacekeeping structures responsible for preventing a renewed outbreak of hostilities. The South Ossetian ceasefire agreement introduced a joint peacekeeping force of 1,500 Russians, Georgians, and Ossetians. In Abkhazia a predominantly Russian CIS peacekeeping force implemented the agreement. These were joined by two small international missions of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE (in South Ossetia), and the United Nations (in Abkhazia).

This approach to conflict resolution characterized by Russian-dominated peacekeeping forces with some international observers made sense in early years. The structures that emerged, however, led to stalemates instead of progress toward resolution, earning these conflicts the “frozen” label. Within this context the sides largely avoided further bloodshed and occasionally reached agreement in the spheres of trade, transport, and the return of a small number of internally displaced persons. However, Georgia denounced as “creeping annexation” the issuing of Russian passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the practice of “seconding” Russian officials to their governments, and increasing Russian investment in both.

Georgia’s Rose Revolution of 2003, which brought President Mikheil Saakashvili to power, marked a new phase in the conflicts. President Saakashvili made clear upon assuming office that he intended to peacefully restore Georgia’s territorial integrity. His statements were accompanied by a soft power offensive, including new conflict resolution proposals. But his summer 2004 antimuggling operation in South Ossetia convinced many there and in Moscow that his intention was actually to achieve reunification by deposing the local authorities.

The low-level conflict that resulted ended with all the ethnic Georgian-populated villages in the region under Georgian government control. But it

also raised fears of new war, restricted trade and social interaction across conflict lines and among communities, and increased the South Ossetian and Abkhazian authorities’ suspicions about the Georgian government’s intentions. It also generated an acceleration of Moscow’s efforts to prevent Georgia from imposing its writ over the two regions.

This shift in the status quo was followed two years later by Georgia’s seizure of Abkhazia’s remote and ungoverned Upper Kodori Gorge, which led to a halt in conflict resolution talks between the government and the Abkhazian authorities. Tbilisi also established an “alternative” South Ossetian-led government in the villages under its control. The Georgian government further demanded internationalization of the peacekeeping forces.

The escalation of the two conflicts was not the only source of tension between Moscow and Tbilisi, however. Prior to 2004 many irritants already existed in Russia-Georgia relations. These included Georgian participation in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which created the first means for Caspian oil to reach the Black Sea without passing through Russia; Russian allegations of Chechen terrorists finding safe haven on Georgian territory; and increased U.S. military support to the Georgian armed forces. Georgia also accelerated its



AP PHOTO



AP PHOTO

▲ Pictured (from left to right) are Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze after talks in Moscow in September 1992.



AP PHOTO

▲ Deported Georgians disembark from a Russian Emergency Situations Ministry plane on arrival in Tbilisi.

Timeline of the Georgia Conflicts

1989

Ethnic Abkhaz convene a forum advocating formation of an Abkhazian Soviet republic separate from Soviet Georgia. Georgians counterprotest and are forcibly dispersed by Soviet forces.

1990

The South Ossetian legislature forms a separate South Ossetian Soviet republic. Georgia’s legislature abolishes South Ossetia’s autonomous status in response.

1991–1992

As the Soviet Union collapses, clashes between Georgians and South Ossetians ensue with 1,000 lives lost. A ceasefire agreement allows for Russian peacekeepers in the region.

1992–1993

War between Abkhaz and Georgians claims at least 8,000 lives and the dislocation of more than 200,000. A ceasefire agreement allows for a mainly Russian contingent of peacekeepers.

May–August 2004

Newly elected Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili launches an antimuggling operation in South Ossetia. The worst fighting in the region in 12 years ensues.

2006

Moscow bans import of Georgian wine and mineral water. After the Georgian government announces the arrest of four Russian officers accused of spying, Russia suspends all transportation links with Georgia and deports migrant workers amidst what appeared to be a campaign of intimidation against ethnic Georgians in Russia.

August 7–8, 2008

Following several days of firefights between Georgian and South Ossetian forces, the August war formally begins with the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali and Russia's invasion of Georgia.



August 12, 2008

A ceasefire agreement is signed in Moscow by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

August 26, 2008

Russia recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.



August 2009

After year-long procedures, Georgia leaves the Commonwealth of Independent States

January 27, 2010

Georgia releases a strategy for peaceful engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

March 1, 2010

The Russia-Georgia land border reopens.

August 23, 2010

Direct Moscow-Tbilisi commercial flights resume.

November 23, 2010

President Saakashvili renounces the use of force in a speech to the European Parliament. Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities subsequently issue their own statements on the nonuse of force.



integration with NATO after the Rose Revolution and it sought greater commitments for a clear path to membership against Russia's strong objections.

The relationship was further strained in the following years. The Georgian government accused Russia of sabotaging gas and electricity transit to Georgia, and of engaging in other acts of violence. Russia banned Georgian wine and mineral

water on "phytosanitary" grounds in the spring in 2006. And Georgian authorities arrested four Russian military officers on charges of espionage in September. Moscow responded by severing transportation links between the two countries and deporting Georgian migrant workers amidst what appeared to be a campaign of intimidation against ethnic Georgians in Russia.

Tensions were building in and around Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well. But in 2008 shootouts and roadside bombs in South Ossetia throughout the summer heightened frictions to a degree unseen since 2004. When Georgian forces newly occupied certain strategic heights South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity promised to "clean

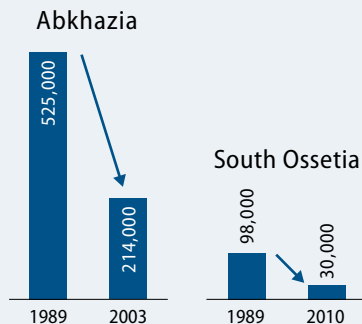
them out"—a promise followed by heavy fighting. On the night of August 7, Georgian artillery began shelling the regional capital, Tskhinvali, and the next morning Georgian troops and tanks began a ground assault that took the city.

That same day Russian tanks entered Tskhinvali and Russian aircraft launched a four-day bombing campaign. Georgian and Russian forces—along with the South Ossetian militia—fought for control of Tskhinvali for two days but the Georgian troops were ultimately overwhelmed. They retreated on August 10 and were pursued by the Russian troops. More than 20,000 ethnic Georgians fled their homes and villages, many of which were subsequently destroyed. Meanwhile, Abkhaz and Russian forces opened a second front in Abkhazia, driving Georgian forces and some 2,000 residents from Upper Kodori. Russian troops also crossed from Abkhazia into Mingrelia, occupying Georgia's main port at Poti. Georgian forces abandoned Gori, a large town south of Tskhinvali, on August 11. The Russian advance halted on the road to Tbilisi.

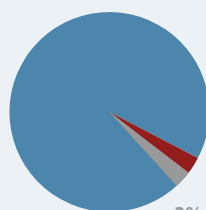
French President Nicolas Sarkozy, holding the rotating EU presidency at the time, flew to Moscow on August 12 to negotiate a ceasefire. The agreement was signed in slightly different forms by all the parties and the Russian command announced the beginning of troop withdrawal on August 18. President Dmitri Medvedev declared Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states on August 26.

The conflicts have had a major impact on the demography of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Populations have declined significantly since the late Soviet period largely due to the displacement of ethnic Georgians.¹



The Georgian population favors a long-term, peaceful resolution to the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²



94%

Percentage of Georgians who support negotiations and peaceful means to resolve the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia

3%

Percentage of Georgians who support the use of force

3%

No opinion

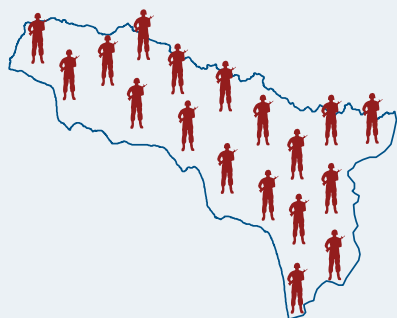
28%

Percentage of Georgians who believe reintegration with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is possible in 10 years or less.³

Russia has significantly increased its military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the 2008 conflict

Abkhazia before 2008 conflict:

As many as 1,800 Russian CIS peacekeepers⁴



Abkhazia in 2010:

As many as 3,700 troops⁵



South Ossetia before 2008 conflict:

500 peacekeepers



South Ossetia in 2010:

As many as 3,700 troops⁶



The details of Russia's deployments have not been made public.

?

Number of border guards

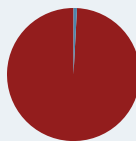
?

Quantity of military equipment

?

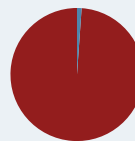
Number of intelligence officials

Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's economies are completely dependent on Russian support.



99%

of foreign investment in Abkhazia is from Russia⁷



98.7%

of the South Ossetia authorities' budget was financed by Russia in 2009⁸

1 Source for 1989 numbers: Soviet Union census data

2 Georgian National Study, October 5, 2009

3 Survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for the United National Movement, July 7-15, 2010, based on 1200 interviews.

4 International Crisis Group

5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

7 International Crisis Group

8 International Crisis Group