

WRITTEN STATEMENT

**Olesya Vartanyan
Analyst, EU Eastern Neighborhood, Europe Program
International Crisis Group**

**Hearing Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the
Environment**

**“Antagonizing the Neighborhood: Putin’s Frozen
Conflicts and the Conflict in Ukraine”**

March 11, 2020

Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building

Good afternoon, Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, and distinguished members of the Committee. In recent years, international attention has focused on Russia's efforts to keep its neighboring country, Ukraine, within its sphere of influence. Today, at this important hearing, I will speak about the situation in another country affected by Russian policies and military actions – Georgia.

During the time of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were autonomous regions within Soviet Georgia. When the Soviet Union collapsed, ethnic tensions turned violent, and Georgia lost effective control in the two regions as fighting raged. Thousands of ethnic Georgians fled their homes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia for other parts of Georgia. The regions have been supported by Russia and unstable ever since.

In August 2008, as tensions escalated between Tbilisi and both Tskhinvali (the capital of South Ossetia) and Moscow, fighting flared once again. Before the five-day war was over, Russia had deployed naval, ground and air forces deep into Georgia. At its end, Moscow recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent.

Year after year, the quality of life for those living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has deteriorated, feeding uncertainty inside both regions and in Georgia proper. Weak local administrations are unable to provide basic services and Russia has built up a new militarised divide hampering movement to and from Georgian-controlled territory. Western countries, especially the United States, have focused their efforts on preventing any additional countries from recognizing the Georgian breakaway regions.¹ Meanwhile, humanitarian and social challenges have increased with each year. Allowed to fester, these problems can only raise the risk of protracted instability and further violence, with repercussions for the South Caucasus region and its people, as well as for already complicated U.S. relations with Russia.

Today I will be speaking to you about these issues in my capacity as International Crisis Group's Analyst for the EU Eastern Neighborhood. Founded in 1995, International Crisis Group is a field-based organisation that does research and advocacy on preventing and mitigating deadly conflict. We operate in dozens of countries around the world and have had a presence in the South Caucasus since 2005. Our focus on fieldwork gives us a direct view of all sides of conflicts and crises and on the dynamics that shape them on the ground.² In my testimony, I will speak about three problem areas in particular, and then offer some thoughts about how the United States can help to encourage greater stability in this troubled part of the world.

Life inside the breakaway regions and Russia's role

I have visited Abkhazia and South Ossetia many times in recent years, and every time I go, I see how life there is growing ever more difficult and challenging. At least to the local population, it was not always clear that this would be the case. When Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, many in these regions told me of their hopes that recognition would begin a new chapter in their lives. Many danced in the streets on August 26, 2008, the day that Russia recognized their independence. But soon after, the very same people expressed rapidly rising frustration.

To understand the source of their frustration, it is first important to understand Russia's outside role and presence in the two breakaway regions. If covert Russian support was crucial prior to the 2008 war, since then, Moscow's overt political, military and financial assistance has become yet more central to the way in which both Abkhazia and South Ossetia

¹ Two regions are both recognized by five UN member states: Russia, Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru.

² A fuller description of Crisis Group's mission and methodology can be found – together with our publications on the South Caucasus and other regions – at CrisisGroup.org.

function. Russian border guards control the lines that separate both regions from the rest of Georgia. Russia also has military bases in both regions with missile installations, which have extended the reach of its military over much of the Black Sea coast.³

Russia and its economy are a financial lifeline to both breakaway regions, but this lifeline has proven less than fully reliable. For example, in the aftermath of the 2008 conflict, Moscow flooded Abkhazia and South Ossetia with money for reconstruction and development.⁴ But the local governing elite often lacked the technical skills to allocate and spend these funds effectively, and much of Russia's largesse reportedly wound up in the hands of a small group of local de facto officials with ties to Moscow, as well as Russian officials who work on Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁵ Moreover, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the implementation of Ukraine-related sanctions in 2014, the region has seen an economic downturn. The drop in global oil prices in particular has led to a decrease in Russian financial support for the breakaway regions. Because their economies are so dependent on Moscow, this has created significant strain for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁶

De facto officials in Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain loyal to Moscow. Although local populations vote for their leaders, in almost all cases Moscow's chosen candidates prevail. Russian envoys to the breakaway regions promote local political actors of their choice, particularly in times of crisis. Still, while they do not challenge Moscow's overwhelming influence over local political life, some representatives of the de facto leaderships at least privately express disappointment at Russia's reluctance to support the further development of the regions as viable states. They would like to see Russian investment in and assistance with updates to decaying infrastructure. They see this updating as necessary to underwrite the regions' development.

But Russia has had clear reservations when it comes to greater involvement in the affairs of the breakaway regions. While Moscow has never suggested that it would cut off the political, military and financial support it provides Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it has also appeared reluctant to increase its investment. After the 2014 Ukraine crisis began, Russia signed special agreements with the Georgian breakaway regions that in theory should have led to closer integration in military and police operations, medical support, more business ties and fewer hurdles for those engaged in bilateral trade.⁷ Yet, almost five years have passed and little has changed.

If Moscow is looking to integrate these regions, why is it dragging its feet? For one thing, true integration of the breakaway regions would require substantial investment in and changes to their governance and administration. For another thing, even short of annexation, Moscow is likely conscious that—especially in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis—anything resembling territorial expansion would create yet more strain on its already frayed relations with western governments, which have uniformly declined to recognize the independence of these regions from Georgia.

In the meantime, the regions struggle along—claiming their independence but clearly far from self-reliant—with evidence of sub-par governance and inadequate services everywhere you look. Sewage contamination threatens Abkhaz beaches—once a major draw for Soviet

³ Crisis Group's Europe Report #250, "[Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus](#)", 28 June 2018, p. 23.

⁴ Crisis Group's Europe Report #202, "[Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence](#)", 26 February 2010.

⁵ Crisis Group's Europe Report #205, "[South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition](#)", 7 June 2010, p. 6-7; Crisis Group's Europe Report #224, "[Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation](#)", 10 April 2013, p. 6-8.

⁶ Crisis Group's Europe Report #249, "[Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Time to Talk Trade](#)", 24 May 2018.

⁷ See "[Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Абхазия о союзничестве и стратегическом партнерстве](#)" [Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership], 24 November 2014; "[Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Южная Осетия о союзничестве и интеграции](#)" [Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on Alliance and Integration], 18 March 2015.

tourists and still a major driver for the local economy—because communities lack the professionals who can mend their antiquated systems. Every time there is a heavy rain in Abkhazia, its main town, Sukhumi, is flooded, and rubber boats become the only means of transport because cars can't get down the water-logged streets. Most doctors in local hospitals haven't received professional training for decades, and often lack the equipment necessary for even the most basic health checks. Local policemen pay out of pocket for uniforms and to fuel their cars, motivating them to seek bribes to cover these costs.

Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that locals who saw independence as a path to prosperity and a better life in 2008 express bitter disappointment more than ten years later.

Ethnic Georgians inside the breakaway regions

Those who have suffered most from the instability in the South Caucasus are ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Their numbers aren't large – around 50,000 people out of a combined total population of around 230,000 in both regions – but they represent approximately 25 percent of the population in Abkhazia and almost 10 percent in South Ossetia.⁸ These individuals lack basic legal protections from the de facto authorities and face discrimination: Schools do not teach in their native Georgian language, they lack the right to run or vote in local elections, and they are kept out of many jobs including the police.

Few ethnic Georgians in these breakaways have local passports issued by the de facto breakaway governments, and they are treated as foreigners. This makes it difficult for them to own homes, send their children to school, or get medical care.⁹ Many of their family and friends have emigrated to Georgian-controlled territory, Russia or Europe – especially the younger population. Among those who refuse to leave, some tell me a life in poverty is preferable to abandoning their homeland.

In South Ossetia, the situation of ethnic Georgians is especially dire. More than 30,000 ethnic Georgians fled the region during the 2008 war, a striking figure given that the region's current population is about the same - 30,000.¹⁰ Approximately 3,000 ethnic Georgians remain. Their lives are split between South Ossetia and Georgian-controlled territory, as they must cross into Georgian-controlled territory to earn a living, have access to medical care and receive pensions.

Since 2008, crossing between each of the breakaway regions and Georgian-controlled territory has been difficult. People are often forced to pay bribes on top of the onerous paperwork needed to get permission to cross. Local de facto authorities sometimes close crossing points for long periods of time with no warning and for reasons that often have nothing to do with security concerns. In fact, de facto authorities have closed most crossing points since September 2019 to create a bargaining chip in a dispute with Georgian authorities over a police outpost that the Georgians built close to the line of separation with the breakaway region. With no way to cross, many ethnic Georgians living in South Ossetia were left with no income to buy food or firewood, and went hungry and cold this winter.¹¹

Few ethnic Georgians in the breakaway regions raise their concerns publicly for fear of retribution. It is not a baseless fear. For example, Tamara Mearakishvili, a local activist for

⁸ Up to 50,000 ethnic Georgians live in Abkhazia, which has a total population of 200,000 people. Up to 3,000 Georgians live in South Ossetia, which has a total population of around 30,000 people.

⁹ See Thomas Hammarberg and Magdalena Grono, "Human Rights in Abkhazia Today", *Palme Center*, July 2017; "The Human Rights Situation of the Conflict-Affected Population in Georgia", *Public Defender of Georgia*, November 2017.

¹⁰ Crisis Group's Europe Report #205, "South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition", 7 June 2010, p2.

¹¹ Nina Akhmeteli, "[Южная Осетия закрыла главный пункт пропуска в Грузию. Ахалгорский район оказался в изоляции](#)" [South Ossetia closed the main crossing point to Georgia. Akhagori district found itself in isolation], *BBC Russian Service*, 15 November 2019.

the rights of ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia, has been charged with defamation for critical statements in local media about local authorities' treatment of ethnic Georgians in the region. In charges she says are politically motivated, she was accused of forging her identification documents and has been banned from travel outside the region. She has received death threats.¹²

The population along the lines of separation

Since 2011, the de facto authorities for the breakaway regions and Russian border guards have dug trenches, erected fences and installed video cameras – solidifying the line separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgian-controlled territory.¹³ The goal is to establish new “state borders” - in a process dubbed by many local and international observers as “borderisation.”¹⁴

In recent years, some of you have had the chance to visit the region and see for yourself the barbed wire fences that run through the center of many Georgian villages, separating Georgian-controlled territory from the portion that falls within one of the breakaway regions. Last year, in the village of Khurvaleti—which straddles Georgian-controlled territory and South Ossetia—I spoke to residents who had gone to elaborate lengths to continue visiting family, friends and associates in the portion of the village across the newly erected divide. In response to their efforts, Russian border guards have continued to beef up their fortifications, going so far as to install a watch tower last year.

The current Georgian government has responded with what it calls “strategic patience.” This posture is linked to a 2012 decision by Georgia’s leadership to normalize relations with Russia. The normalization decision has led to a modest increase in trade and greater cultural exchange between the two countries. It has also led Tbilisi to mitigate sources of friction that could undermine the normalization process. Consequently, the Georgian government has not attempted to stop efforts at “borderisation” – in fact, it has even disrupted protests by its own citizens against Russia’s actions.

Nevertheless, there are signs Georgia’s “strategic patience” is wearing thin. As alluded to above, last August, the Georgian government established a police outpost in an area where Russian and de facto South Ossetian authorities had planned to build new barbed wire fences. This led to a serious escalation in tensions between both sides.¹⁵ Since then, months of talks helped to calm the situation, but if no steps are taken to resolve more fundamental the grievances between the two sides, the parties could quickly find themselves at loggerheads again, with the potential for violent clashes.

What can be done?

The situation in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is bleak. While Tbilisi has not controlled these regions for decades, they have also not been able to function as independent states. Russia provides a lifeline of sorts, but it is insufficient, and Moscow seems to have made a cold calculation against the kinds of investments that would improve the lives and prospects of the regions’ residents. Meantime, a “borderisation” policy seeks to entrench the separation of the breakaway regions from Georgia proper, severing many ethnic Georgians from family, essential services and livelihoods. Communities on both sides of the line of separation suffer.

¹² Public Statement by the Amnesty International, “[Georgia: De facto authorities in a disputed region stifle freedom of expression](#)”, 21 August 2017.

¹³ See discussion of borderisation processes in the [EUMM bulletin #4](#) published in April 2017.

¹⁴ See report by the Amnesty International about hurdles that borderisation creates for the population of the boundary areas: “[Georgia: Behind barbed wire: Human Rights toll of “borderisation” in Georgia](#)”, 3 July 2019.

¹⁵ “[Chorchana Checkpoint Escalation: an Incident or a Trend?](#)”, *Civil.ge*, 1 September 2019.

Let me now offer some concrete steps the United States can take to address some of the aspects of the situation I have just described. Since 2008, U.S. policy has focused principally on both its own non-recognition of the breakaway regions as independent entities and discouraging recognition by other countries (including, since 2017, through the threat of sanctions). The United States should continue its clear non-recognition policy, which sends a strong and important signal against entrenchment. Meanwhile, I believe there is room for Washington to do more to promote peace and security in Georgia and the breakaway regions.

First and foremost, Washington should encourage steps that can lead to humanitarian and economic improvements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and not let these be held hostage to east-west tensions. Russian cooperation and acquiescence is crucial for any progress, which means that Tbilisi must find ways to cooperate with Moscow. While Russia's goals, Georgia's goals, and America's goals are far from aligned in Georgia, Washington can and should work with both its partners in Tbilisi and with Moscow to improve conditions, security, and livelihoods for conflict-affected people of all ethnicities and on both sides of the line of separation. While the humanitarian benefits should be sufficient to justify these measures, they could have broader benefits as well – constituting first steps toward a longer-term reconciliation process between Georgia and its breakaway regions, which will be important to regional stability regardless of the regions' ultimate political status.

In this connection, Washington should communicate clearly to Tbilisi that that outreach to Abkhazia and South Ossetia will not jeopardize its relations with the United States. This outreach could take many forms.

For example, the U.S. and other western countries should encourage counterparts in Tbilisi to seek smoother trading relations with the breakaway regions and use their good offices to facilitate negotiations to this end. Increased trade could improve living conditions in the conflict-affected regions, create new links with Georgian-controlled territory and foster a greater interdependence that would raise the cost of arbitrarily closing of crossing points to and from Georgian-controlled territory. Crisis Group has published a report detailing what other measures could be taken to facilitate trade. Among other things, we recommend that the US support EU-led efforts to launch talks between the sides on the potential extension of the EU-Georgia Free Trade Agreement to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁶

Another step that could be politically difficult but may be worthwhile would be to increase considerably the level of bilateral and other engagement that Washington itself has with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—and encourage Tbilisi and other governments to do the same. There is a reason contacts with the de facto authorities are so thin: Both Georgia and its partners are concerned about conferring legitimacy on these governments. But both Tbilisi and Washington can reiterate their non-recognition positions even as they work with the individuals who effectively control these territories when they need to. International law creates responsibilities for the administration of occupied territory that western governments may see as relevant and that might serve as a basis for shaping pragmatic relationships that do not confer recognition.

Additionally, Georgia and its international partners – like the U.S. – should look for concrete opportunities to build bridges to the disaffected people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia who very much need assistance. For example, Georgia already provides free medical care and education to people from the breakaway regions, but these services are provided only on Georgian-controlled territory. The U.S. and other Western countries have made educational and professional opportunities available to residents of these territories, as well, but to take advantage, a Georgian passport is needed. Ethnic Georgians have such passports, but their

¹⁶ Crisis Group's Europe Report #249, "[Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Time to Talk Trade](#)", 24 May 2018.

neighbors do not. Both Georgia and its foreign partners like the U.S. could do much more to help non-ethnic Georgians including by helping to train local professionals, such as medical staff, sanitation workers, fireman or even teachers through exchange programs both in Georgia and further afield.

How might Russia respond to such initiatives? Although Moscow has sought to cast the conflict in Georgia in an east vs. west framework, it also has much to gain from a healthier economy and lower instability in the breakaway regions. Since 2012, Russia's own relations with Georgia have thawed to mutual economic and strategic benefit. Having to pour resources and attention into managing a deteriorating situation in the breakaway regions costs Russia financially and geostrategically. Moreover, when it comes to sponsorship of training programs and other Georgian outreach in support of the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russian diplomats have told me in private discussions that they would not necessarily be opposed to such initiatives so long as they would not throw into question Moscow's recognition of the regions as independent states. Indeed, they said they welcomed efforts to improve the quality of life in both territories.

At the same time, the U.S. should continue its support for mechanisms aimed at preventing and mitigating incidents along the lines of separation between the breakaway regions and Georgian-controlled territory. The U.S. is already part of the Geneva International Discussions – a forum created to help manage the consequences of the 2008 conflict. The Discussions bring together participants from Georgia, the de facto governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia and elsewhere four times per year under the co-chairmanship of the European Union, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Additionally, beyond the Geneva talks, in 2009 the sides agreed to launch two Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) to de-escalate tensions surrounding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These mechanisms were meant to bring together local representatives from all sides with foreign mediators once every three weeks. But no meeting has been held to discuss problems related to South Ossetia since last August, while the forum related to Abkhazia has been defunct for almost two years. This urgently needs to change so that there is a readily available way to bring down tensions when they flare. Washington should exert its influence in the Geneva talks to call for an urgent resumption of the IPRM.

U.S. officials should continue to condemn any disruptions of free movement to and from Georgian-controlled territory, including in meetings with Russian counterparts. As I have explained, for many, especially ethnic Georgian populations, crossing is essential to their livelihood. Abkhazia used to have six crossing points. Now only two function, but with frequent closures.¹⁷ The sides should at least explore temporary crossing points in densely populated areas, especially during periods when people cross more frequently to collect the harvest in the breakaway regions or visit relatives and cemeteries during holidays.

Finally, the “borderisation” issue is probably the most difficult to address. Last week, I was in Moscow to meet Russian officials and analysts. They made no secret of the fact that one aim of “borderisation” is to press the Georgian government to change its pro-western foreign policy and to send political signals to the United States and other western states about Russia's intention to keep the South Caucasus region under its sphere of influence. Georgia, for its part, has said it will never accept new “state borders.” One option for encouraging the parties to step back from unilateral measures at the lines of separation, which was proposed by European diplomats at the latest round of Geneva talks in December, might be to establish a demilitarized zone, overseen by international monitors. While it would be premature to judge the proposal—which needs considerable fleshing out—Russian diplomats say they are considering the idea. This is not entirely surprising. As Russia's mediation

¹⁷ See discussion of problems of the ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia in [“Easing Travel between Georgia and Breakaway Abkhazia”](#), *International Crisis Group*, 5 September 2019.

efforts to resolve tensions around the South Ossetia line of separation last August show, Moscow recognizes the danger of renewed conflict in Georgia. Instability in South Ossetia (and, by the same logic, Abkhazia) is an additional and unwanted point of tension with the West. For its part, the United States should work to further develop the details of a potential demilitarized zone in future rounds of negotiations of Geneva talks.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.