

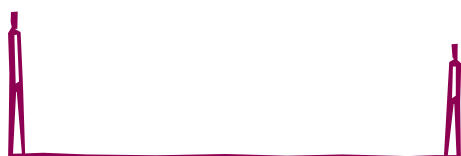
GETTING COLD IN THE CAUCASUS

78

CAN THE EU PREVENT THE FREEZING
OF THE GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN CONFLICT?

Teemu Sinkkonen

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CAN THE EU PREVENT THE FREEZING OF THE GEORGIAN–RUSSIAN CONFLICT?

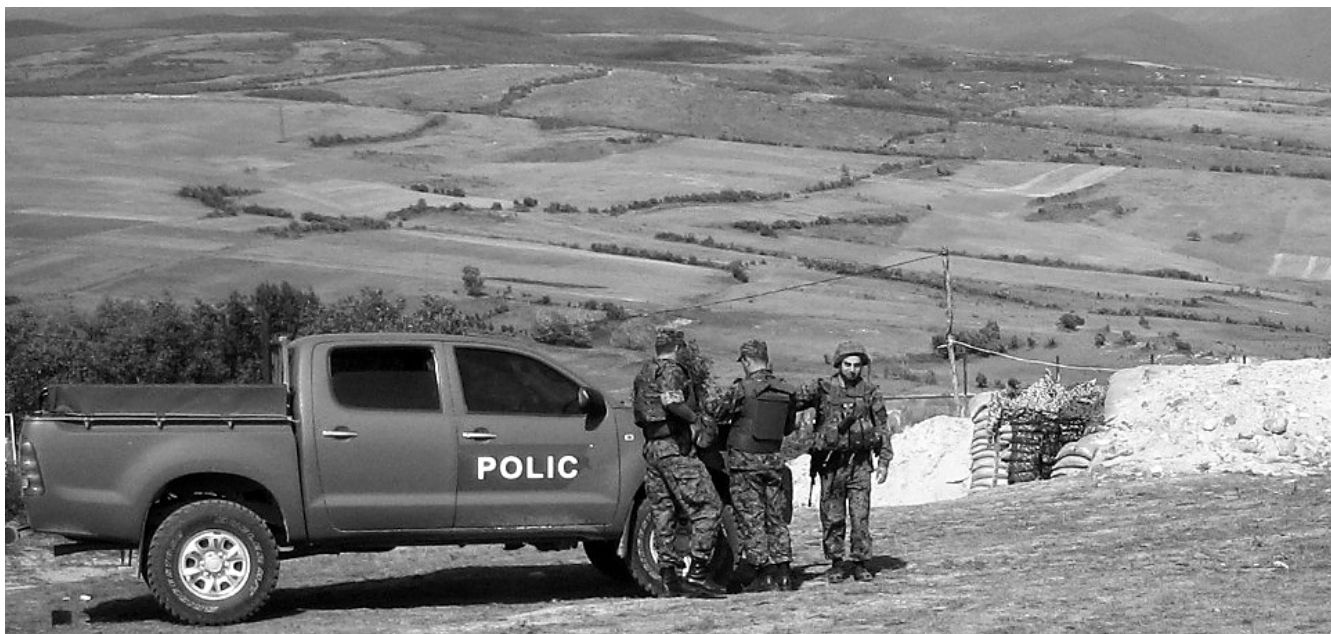


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- Since the stabilization of the Georgian–Russian conflict, no further progress has been achieved and the conflict is in danger of freezing again.
- Leaders on both sides are taking full advantage of the tension that exists between them, while the people living on the boundary line are paying a heavy price because of the conflict.
- The EU has assumed considerable responsibility for the resolution of the conflict, but due to insufficient coordination at the operational level and a lack of coherent political support, it has been increasingly ignored by both parties.
- The Georgian–Russian conflict offers a great window of opportunity for the EU to define its overall strategy for the conflict management it so desperately needs.

The European Union research programme
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs



Georgian “Special Police” observation post on the South Ossetian administrative boundary line, 2009. Photo: Teemu Sinkkonen.

Georgia is of great strategic significance to the EU. Settling the territorial disputes related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is important for the overall stability of the region as well as for the EU–Russia relationship. Developments in Georgia are also significant for the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP)—a policy aimed at enhancing democratic development, trade, sustainable economic growth and social reforms in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood in the absence of an explicit commitment to further enlargement. Against this background, Georgia constitutes a litmus test not only for the EU’s crisis management activities, but also for the Union’s streamlined external action.

The main argument in this paper is that the EU needs to find tools to better equip the mission on the ground to bring about a peaceful settlement. At the political level, it should think strategically about Georgia’s role in the EaP and focus on increasing human security. This would provide much-needed political support for the mission at the operational level and help the EU to retain its key role as a conflict manager on the ground. As a matter of priority, the basic living conditions in the area, particularly on the boundary lines with the breakaway districts, should be improved in order to prevent the conflict from freezing.

From quick response success to stagnation

Although the EU was a key player in the area prior to the 2008 war, its role was highlighted during the war.

The peace agreement between Russia and Georgia was mediated by France holding the EU presidency, namely by President Nicolas Sarkozy. Shortly after the war, the EU launched a civilian monitoring mission (EUMM) and appointed a special representative (EUSR) for the crisis. Such a rapid EU response was possible because all the member states agreed on the necessity of the EU engagement and the role of the mission. This can be seen as an achievement given the different positions among the member states towards the war.

The annual renewal of the mission’s mandate has been smooth in spite of some budgetary issues and there has been very little questioning of the EU’s overall strategy to find a lasting solution to the conflict. This is somewhat puzzling as the peace talks in Geneva are not moving forward and the operation is facing challenges on the ground. While it has contributed to the stabilization of the situation, it is having increasingly marginal significance for the different stakeholders in the conflict. The work on the ground is inevitably one-sided because the monitors lack access to the breakaway districts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Related to this, the underlying security dilemma that led to the 2008 war still exists: the measures taken to increase the security of one party are decreasing the sense of security of the other parties. Consequently, people living on the boundary lines feel insecure, not least because they face severe economic and social challenges, which may have repercussions on the political stability of the country in the future.



Electricity company cutting off houses from delivery due to non-payment of bills in Didi Khurvaleti IDP settlement. Photo: Teemu Sinkkonen.

Post-war development in Georgia

The post-war development in Georgia has been quite encouraging. Georgia is showing signs of willingness to engage in cooperation with the breakaway districts, primarily when it comes to documentation requirements for citizens, which would enhance freedom of movement. While this does not imply recognition of the *de facto* authorities in the breakaway districts, it is a notable development in terms of confidence-building and in comparison to the previous isolating policy.

Another positive step—albeit controversial from the point of view of Georgian territorial integrity—is the transformation of the administrative boundary line (ABL) into a *de facto* border. This has decreased the number of security-related incidents between conflict parties and stabilized the security situation. The EU monitors have also noted that the distrust between Abkhazians, Ossetians and Georgians is not necessarily as deep as one might expect, given the inflammatory rhetoric portrayed in the media. At the same time, some developments suggest improvements in Russia-Georgia business relations. Russian companies are investing in Georgia again, and direct flights from Tbilisi to Moscow have resumed.

In spite of the stabilization, a security dilemma similar to the one that prevailed before the 2008 war is still present. Inflamed personal relationships between the current leaders on different sides of the conflict divide show that there is little to be expected

when it comes to finding a lasting solution at the political level in the near future.

If there is one message that comes out of the rhetoric of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, it is this: “Russia has not given up” its plans “to overthrow the Georgian democracy and to occupy our entire territory” and due to this fact “There should be small, trained teams in each village [...] with the minimum amount of arms necessary.” Saakashvili’s words from December 2010 were not merely figures of speech, but an integral part of his policy to strengthen control over Georgian society. During his presidency and in the shadow of his ambitious plans to make Georgia a “Caucasian Singapore”, Saakashvili has made heavy investments in the military and in policing the region. As witnessed in the 2009 demonstrations when several key opposition figures were “played out” on suspicious grounds, they are also useful instruments for political purposes.

On the other side of the conflict divide, Russia has been concerned about the armament of Georgia, but due to its border protection agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Russia recognized as independent shortly after the 2008 war, Russian armed forces have been guilty of the same policy. While replacing the rather unprofessional local militias guarding the ABL, it has built several military instalments on territory that is still considered Georgian by the international community, in addition to those that were located there before the most recent war. According to the International Crisis



EU monitor following the delivery of humanitarian aid in Perevi 2010. Photo: Tarja Rantala.

Group analysis conducted in 2008, the conflict with Georgia has chimed well with Russia's overall policy to stand against the "Westernization" of the former Soviet countries, and the intervention in the conflict in the South Caucasus serves as an example to others, especially Ukraine, not to go down the same path.

Importantly, a new form of security dilemma is emerging from the disputed border areas. People living in these areas face a number of challenges. Many homes were destroyed during the five-day war and the breakaway districts are not allowing ethnic Georgians to cross the boundary line and return to their villages. According to Georgian government figures, there are still 236,000 internally displaced persons originating from the war in the early 1990s, and 22,000 from the 2008 war. The conditions are also harsh for those who remained in their villages. Unemployment is soaring, freedom of movement across the ABL is limited, and hardened security measures as well as problems in enhancing the rule of law pose obstacles for positive development and hinder people's income possibilities.

For the first two years after the war, the situation was somewhat bearable due to extensive international humanitarian aid. The EU Commission alone gave an assistance package of €500 million to Georgia, and the World Bank, together with other donors, donated €3.44 billion. However, this recovery aid only lasted until 2010 and the remaining unresolved problems should now be taken care of by enhancing development in the area. The existing EaP policy

offers a good framework for this, but the emphasis should be on the boundary lines. Stability will be shaky if this is not achieved.

What future for the EU in Georgia?

Even if the EU has now streamlined its policy tools and funding mechanisms more than ever before due to the EaP policy and external relations reforms, the will and capability to engage politically are still lacking. The EU regards the breakaway districts as an integral part of Georgia, but it has not been strong enough to stand against Russia and demand access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This partly reflects the continuing internal divisions within the EU, particularly regarding the disagreement over the EU's Russia policy. As a result, Georgia still prefers to seek out U.S. support on security-related issues and the breakaway districts rely entirely on Russia.

At the operational level, the EU's "toolbox" is based on the EUMM, the EUSR for the crisis in Georgia and the EU delegation to Georgia. The EUMM's main tasks in the area include facilitating stabilization, normalization and confidence-building between the conflict parties, in addition to monitoring compliance with the six-point agreement and the immediate effects of the 2008 war. The EUSR is mainly responsible for the coordination of the Geneva talks, while the EU delegation oversees the implementation of the Union's Georgia policies based on the EaP and bilateral agreements.



A drawing from a psycho-social recovery project directed for primary school children living in the conflict zone, Mereti 2009. Photo: Teemu Sinkkonen.

According to the EUMM's self-assessment, it has succeeded in stabilization, but significant work remains to be done with regard to confidence-building, which is one of the main tasks of the operation. The reason for not being able to contribute more to the confidence-building effort is that Russia has not complied with the peace agreement and withdrawn from the breakaway districts, allowing the EUMM to step in—a situation which the EUMM cannot tackle without a strong and coherent EU policy towards Russia. However, there are other aspects that have placed the EUMM in a situation where its *raison d'être* is at stake. People on the boundary lines have criticized the EUMM because it can do little more than record incidents after they have occurred. Although the EUMM is a civilian mission, its mandate is limited to monitoring mostly military issues. As a result, the human security-related dilemma that has emerged on the boundary line has not received sufficient attention.

The strong focus on military monitoring was understandable in the immediate aftermath of the war. Due to the stabilization, this need has been alleviated while the need for human security-related monitoring has increased. Even if human security ranks high on the EaP agenda, it is open to question whether the EU delegation in Georgia has sufficient resources to deal with the special needs of the boundary line alone, since it is focusing on Georgia as a whole. Due to its presence and experience on both the Abkhazian and South Ossetian boundary lines, the EUMM could easily support the delegation

and the EaP policy if its mandate were interpreted in a more flexible way.

In light of the above, there is still a role for the EU and the EUMM in Georgia. Politically and economically, the EU is still the main international actor in the area, which justifies its role as a key conflict manager and highlights its responsibilities. At the operational level, recording the incidents is very important because it provides neutral information for peace negotiations. Moreover, one advantage of having a civilian monitoring mission on the ground instead of a military mission is its broader applicability. In the EUMM, the need to amend the operation's focus has been observed. The monitors are increasingly engaged with human security-related questions, which might extend beyond the strict interpretations of its mandate. Recent examples include the monitoring of cattle theft cases and social-economic development, such as unemployment and inflation. This indicates that the monitoring mission is responding to the need on the ground.

There is also some evidence of a more coordinated approach among the EU's key actors in the region. A good step in the right direction was the scrapping of the EUSR post for South Caucasus in February 2011. The tandem arrangement with two special representatives was confusing since they were doing overlapping work in many aspects. However, the EUMM, the EUSR for the crisis and the EU delegation in Georgia, are suffering from the same problem, highlighting the need for improving the EU's coordination even

further at the operational level. It would be more effective and coherent to work as a unified body and speak with only one voice to the Georgian public. Furthermore, possible synergies as a result of having both military and civilian structures and expertise on the ground could be developed further. Achieving this in Georgia would be helpful for the EU in the future since—as part of the new EAS—the EU should have a coherent and comprehensive conflict management strategy, which could be reflected at the operational level in the form of a dedicated, well-resourced, cross-institutional conflict management instrument.

At the political level, one of the key challenges for the EU in Georgia has not yet been addressed: the EUMM cannot deal with the confidence-building aspect of its mandate alone without the strong support of the EU. So far, the EU has officially regarded the conflict as being between Georgia and its breakaway districts, and has neglected the evident fact that Russia is one of the key players in it. Abkhazia and South Ossetia in particular are dependent on Russia, which means that the confidence-building measures should also be focused on the Russian-Georgian relationship. Since success at an operational level requires strong political support and coherent institutional solutions, the remaining question is: Will the EU get its act together *vis-à-vis* Russia?

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