

The South Ossetia case

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Although a full-scale political settlement to the Georgia–South Ossetia conflict remains elusive the negotiation approach and the synergy between formal and informal channels show more promise of a positive outcome than in the Georgia–Abkhazia case.

Internal and external factors deter both South Ossetia and Georgia from committing themselves to firm decisions on status now. With the conflicts in Abkhazia, Chechnya, North Ossetia–Ingushetia and Nagorno-Karabakh unresolved both hope to gain more by waiting. Russia's shifting policies and influence in the region continually alter the balance of power, and Georgia's internal divisions over federalism and vocal opposition leave its parameters for a settlement unclear. In South Ossetia deep bitterness among the population and eight years of de facto self-rule have created strong resistance to real concessions. Elections in both Georgia and South Ossetia in 1999–2000 will further reduce incentives for compromise in the short term as candidates do not want to appear too soft. The May 1999 parliamentary vote in South Ossetia has already returned a Communist Party majority opposed to the leadership's stance.

Georgian and Ossetian leaders have as a result put the issue of political status on the back burner. Though status negotiations were launched in Moscow in March 1997 the process has been allowed to founder. Proposals for an interim agreement have also stalled. The lack of protest over this slow pace suggests that neither side views a quick political settlement to be in its best interest.

However, through formal and informal channels progress has been made on issues such as demilitarization, refugee return, trade and reconstruction. Unlike in Abkhazia, economic and humanitarian programmes have not been made conditional on a final political settlement but have been supported by the injection of international funding.

Since the 1992 ceasefire the Russian-sponsored Joint Control Commission (JCC), involving Georgia, South Ossetia, the Russian Federation and the Republic of North Ossetia has played a key role along with the OSCE's mediation efforts and military monitoring. With the stabilization of the security situation the JCC has steadily reduced the joint Russian–Georgian peacekeeping force to symbolic levels. In 1997–98 the JCC programme of voluntary refugee return, with participation and funding from UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), helped eight hundred families return to the conflict zone. Roughly fifty thousand people remain refugees or IDPs, more than thirty thousand of whom are in North Ossetia, ten thousand in Georgia and five thousand in South Ossetia.

Lack of resources and political uncertainty have prevented the implementation of agreements and impeded investment. However, a \$2 million UNDP reconstruction programme, praised for its joint Georgian–Ossetian decision-making model, and a 3.5 million ECU EU project planned for 1999 may prove to be catalysts for economic development.

Informal meetings of key political figures facilitated by the Conflict Management Group and NRC have made an important contribution to progress in the negotiations. The OSCE and NGOs such as Vertic/Links have facilitated direct contact between Ossetian and Georgian journalists, parliamentarians, academics, youth and business people. Often overlooked, these efforts are a critical support to the basic premise of the negotiations – that Ossetians and Georgians can only reach a mutually acceptable political solution once personal, community and economic ties are rebuilt.