ICR CENTER
International Conflict Resolution Center

Field Visit of the International Conflict Resolution Center to Georgia: An Assessment of the Current Status of **Georgia's Frozen Conflicts**

By Austin Clayton

202 772 1057
www.icrcenter.org
1050 Connecticut Ave NW Suite 500,
Washington, DC 20036

ICR CENTER

International Conflict Resolution Center

About International Conflict Resolution Center

The International Conflict Resolution Center (ICR Center) is an independent, non-profit think tank committed to the advancement of international dialogue, preservation of territorial sovereignty, and resolution of frozen conflicts in Europe and Eurasia. Based in Washington, D.C. the Center is dedicated to promoting ideals of self-determination, international legitimacy, and diplomatic confidence in an effort to ensure cooperation and prosperity in the region.

Author

Austin Clayton
Program Director, ICR Center

Austin Clayton is currently the Program Director at the International Conflict Resolution Center where he also conducts research on the conflicts of the South Caucasus region. He received a Master of Research in Political Science from Pompeu Fabra University and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Johns Hopkins University. Austin developed an interest in the South Caucasus region after studying energy security at Yerevan State University in Yerevan, Armenia as part of an EU-supported initiative. Following the completion of his undergraduate studies, he returned to the region and served as a Research Intern at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Tbilisi, Georgia. He later worked as a political risk consultant and freelance journalist while residing in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Background

Representatives of the International Conflict Resolution Center traveled to Tbilisi, Georgia to gather first-hand information from government officials, think tank researchers, and civil society activists on the history, current status, and future of Georgia's territorial conflicts. Approximately 20% of the Republic of Georgia is occupied, with the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali occupied by Russian military forces. In addition to humanitarian challenges, the occupation of Georgia's territory has geopolitical implications and repercussions in domestic politics amongst other effects.

As part of this research trip, the delegates of ICR Center held discussions with government representatives, notably from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. The delegates also received briefings from policy researchers, including former Georgian Ambassadors and senior advisors to government officials. As one of the items on the research agenda was to collect information on the internally displaced persons within Georgia, the Center was able to travel outside of Tbilisi to Tserovani, a town that hosts the largest IDP settlement in Georgia and is home to several non-governmental organizations working directly with these displaced persons.

The purpose of this report is to highlight the Center's findings, to provide a summary of the current status of the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, and to present topics that ICR Center will be conducting additional research on.

International Conflict Resolution Center would like to recognize and thank the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation) once again for its assistance in coordinating this field visit.

Meeting with Representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Representatives of ICR Center began the research trip with a meeting with Ms. Ketevan Chumbadze, the Deputy Political Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Mr. Alex Iasashvili, the Third Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this meeting, ICR and the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs discussed the occupation of Georgia's territories from a foreign policy standpoint, and how the situation has evolved since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. According to the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Georgia is currently facing a stalemate situation, with relations with Russia only deteriorating each year. As Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali have become further integrated with Russia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes the occupation as "factually the same as annexation" as there was no organized referendum for these territories to legitimately gain independence. Borderization and kidnappings continue to destabilize the situation on the ground, with borderization leading to the division of families and isolating ethnic Georgians from Georgia proper.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs currently has several priorities, which fundamentally all relate to increasing the engagement by foreign partners in conflict resolution. While the European Union and the U.S. Agency for International Development have contributed to many projects related to conflict resolution, such as supporting businesses employing or started by displaced persons, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is calling for partner nations to engage more politically, as it states that Russia is not upholding its obligations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also working to restore the Geneva International Discussions, which have been disrupted in recent times, and to consolidate the country's 'Non-Recognition Policy.'

According to the officials, survey data shows that 90% of displaced persons want to return to their homes with changes to the current situation, meaning that if Georgia's territorial integrity is restored, more than 500,000 internally displaced persons will make an effort to return to the occupied territories.

ICR Representatives with Ms. Ketevan Chumbadze and Mr. Alex Iasashvili of Georgian MFA

Demonstrators Calling for Action Against Borderization Outside Georgian Parliament
Source: Eana Korbezashvili, civil.ge

Map Highlighting Occupied Territories of Georgia: Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Meeting with Scholars of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation)

Giorgi Badridze

ICR Center met with Giorgi Badridze, a Senior Fellow at GFSIS (Rondeli Foundation) where the delegates received a comprehensive review of the history of the conflict as well as the domestic politics of Georgia. Mr. Badridze established that there is always a risk in the international relations community of attributing all problems, including the occupation of Georgia's territories, to Russia. While not all problems stem from Russian influence, Mr. Badridze indicated that Georgia is highly susceptible to Russian influence, which has severe implications for conflict
resolution and mediation.

Mr. Badridze provided ICR Center with a detailed description of the events leading up to the 2008 war. In 2006, relations with Russia continued to decline, but this was amplified when Russia launched economic warfare on Georgia in response to
Georgia's rapid development. Despite the economic actions that Russia took against Georgia, Georgia reported growth of GDP in 2007. By 2008, Mr. Badridze explained that Russia's only way of preventing the proliferation of Georgia's soft power and imploding the progress towards ascension to NATO and the European Union was to launch a military attack.

While Mr. Badridze acknowledged that some groups of people do not want to be part of Georgia, he explained that disinformation campaigns have been used by Russia to exacerbate the division between society in Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. Mr. Badridze noted that anti-Georgian sentiment is particularly strong in Abkhazia, where a lower penetration of Georgian media has led to the invention of a new 'national history' for Abkhazia in which officials state that Stalin gave Abkhazia to the Georgian SSR.

Mr. Badridze concluded by stating that the territorial conflicts are being used as leverage against Georgia for developing stronger relations with the West. He noted that Russia wants failing states in its proximity in order to increase its chance of gaining more control. Mr. Badridze recommended further patience and the
development of a 'proper strategy' to advance the resolution of these conflicts.

ICR Delegates with Mr. Giorgi Badridze of Rondeli Foundation

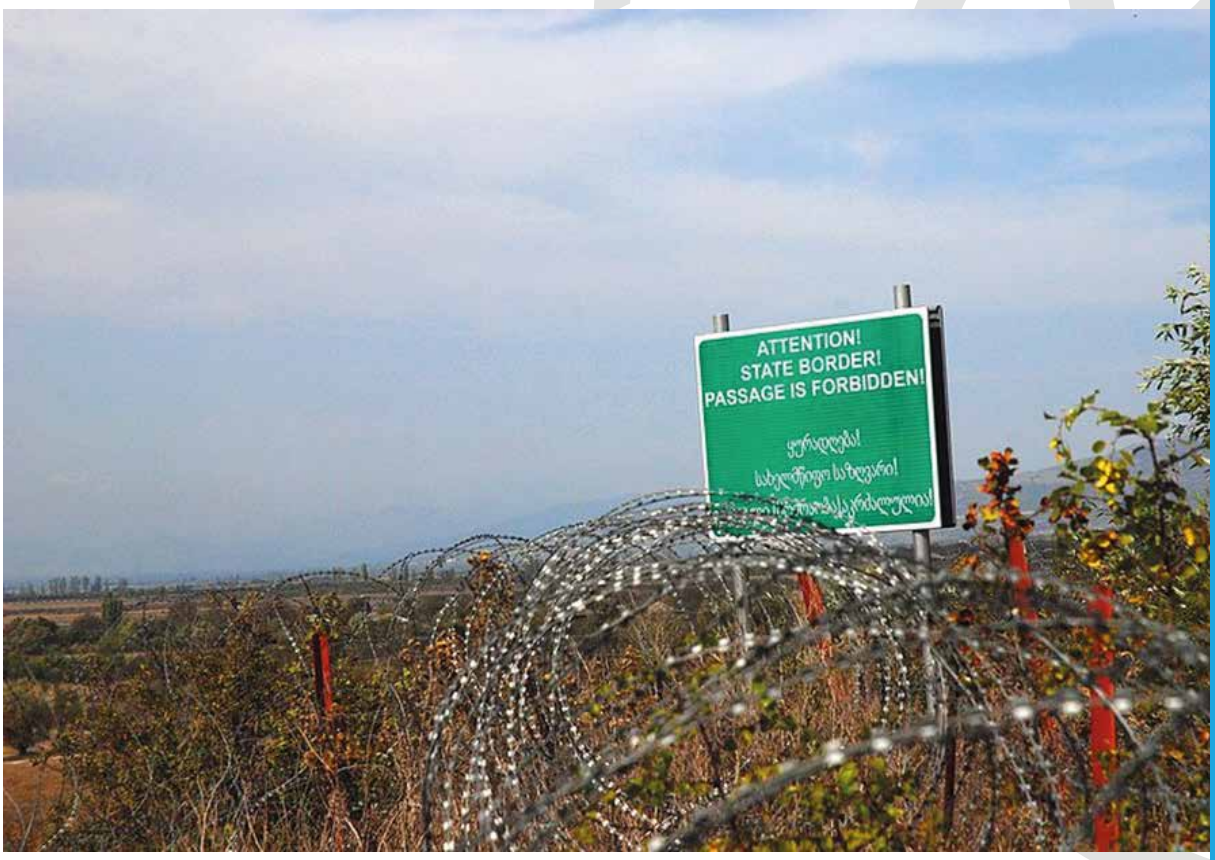
Shota Utiashvili

The delegates from ICR Center also met with Shota Utiashvili, also a Senior Fellow at GFSIS (Rondeli Foundation), to gather an additional perspective on the most pressing issues related to the ongoing territorial occupation of Georgia.

Mr. Utiashvili explained that while the long-term goal is conflict resolution, the current goal is conflict management. He stated that the most pressing issue is the continued annexation of Georgian territory through borderization, noting that because of the size and population of a territory such as South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, the international community would likely not care about the loss of a seemingly small territory.

Mr. Utiashvili also highlighted the dire humanitarian situation related to the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, ethnic Georgians have been restricted from traveling to Georgia proper to receive basic medical care. This has often resulted in unnecessary and easily-preventable deaths that were simply caused by a lack of freedom of movement. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Utiashvili explained that Russian forces have largely restricted humanitarian assistance to these territories, with the UNDP only having a partial presence in Abkhazia, for example.

Additionally, Mr. Utiashvili provided an explanation of the domestic political situations in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. According to him, the de-facto authorities of both regions are experiencing long-term, domestic political crises, with high crime rates, high unemployment, and poor education infrastructure. There is public frustration over these issues as well; while Russia heavily subsidizes both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, many of the people in these regions hoped that the territories would be fully absorbed by Russia. Instead, Russia recognized them as independent states, leaving the 'domestic' matters to be dealt with by de-facto leaders.



Barbed Wire Used by Russian Forces to Annex Additional Territory in Georgia
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Enguri Bridge Crossing Between Abkhazia and Georgia Proper
Source: Apsnypress

Visit to Tserovani

Visit to the Wounded Warrior Rehabilitation Center, Tserovani

The representatives of ICR Center visited the recently-constructed Wounded Warrior Rehabilitation Center in Tserovani, a village built up by the Georgian government to house IDPs coming from South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. The Rehabilitation Center provides comprehensive services for improving the physical and mental health of soldiers, including those who fought in the conflicts during the late 1980s, early 1990s, and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Notably, the Center not only provides services for soldiers, but their families as well. Facilities include centers for individual and group physical and psychological therapies, as well as centers for art and sports therapy. The Center was largely supported by the U.S. government, which provided over $4 million for its construction.

In addition to providing services to soldiers and their families impacted by the wars between Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, the Rehabilitation Center serves as a center that promotes regional connectivity. The coronavirus pandemic has significantly impacted the services offered by the Center, but a sizeable group of Ukrainian soldiers and their families have received rehabilitation services, representing Georgia's intention of strengthening its relations with its fellow GUAM countries. According to officials from the Center, the Center also offers rehabilitation services for Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers, which the Georgian government hopes will contribute to regional stability and confidence building in the post-conflict environment.

ICR Representatives Visiting the Wounded Warrior Rehabilitation Center, Tserovani

Art Therapy Room at Wounded Warrior Rehabilitation Center, Tserovani

Visit to 'For Better Future' NGO

In Tserovani, the delegates from ICR Center also met with staff members of the local NGO 'For Better Future.' This organization is operated and managed by IDPs from South Ossetia/Tskhinvali and works with the IDP families from the same region. The organization has several foci, including peacebuilding, social entrepreneurship, providing support and opportunities for women and children, and civil society development. Many of the organization's initiatives are supported by international agencies including USAID, the European Union, the Estonian Development Cooperation, and various embassies in Georgia.

While most of the 8,000 IDPs in the Tserovani settlement want to return to their homes in South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, 'For Better Future' aims to improve the quality of life for women and young people to improve their ability to integrate with local Georgians. 'For Better Future' has previously organized trainings and provided funding for women to participate in professional development programs and for launching small businesses. Despite the difficulty in securing funding for this type of project, there have been many success stories, including cases in which the recipients of training and funding are then able to hire other IDPs as their businesses grow.

For young people, the NGO primarily focuses on educational initiatives. There is a large emphasis on organizing programs that promote STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) skills. Another focus is on improving accessibility to education. In addition to contributing to the reconstruction of schools, 'For Better Future' works with the U.S. Embassy on the 'Bookmobile' project. The 'Bookmobile' is a mobile library that travels throughout IDP settlements to provide English language resources, internet access, and information about U.S. history and culture. This project is particularly valuable for young people; as students get older, they can seek additional services from 'For Better Future' such as free university preparation courses which sometimes require English language proficiency.

ICR Representatives with Staff of 'For Better Future' NGO in Tserovani, Georgia

Tserovani IDP Settlement in Tserovani, Georgia
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Meeting with the State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia

The ICR Center delegates concluded their field visit to Georgia with a meeting with Ms. Tamar Kochoradze of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. The purpose of this organization is to offer new peacebuilding initiatives to bridge the gap between Georgia and its regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali.

According to Ms. Kochoradze, one of the priorities of this Office is to increase the number of interactions between people on both sides of the divide. This department has also led numerous efforts to implement and coordinate various social benefits to those living in the occupied territories on behalf of the Georgian government. For example, beginning in 2010, the Georgian government began to offer free healthcare to those living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. Additionally, young people living in these regions were granted simplified access to Georgian universities.

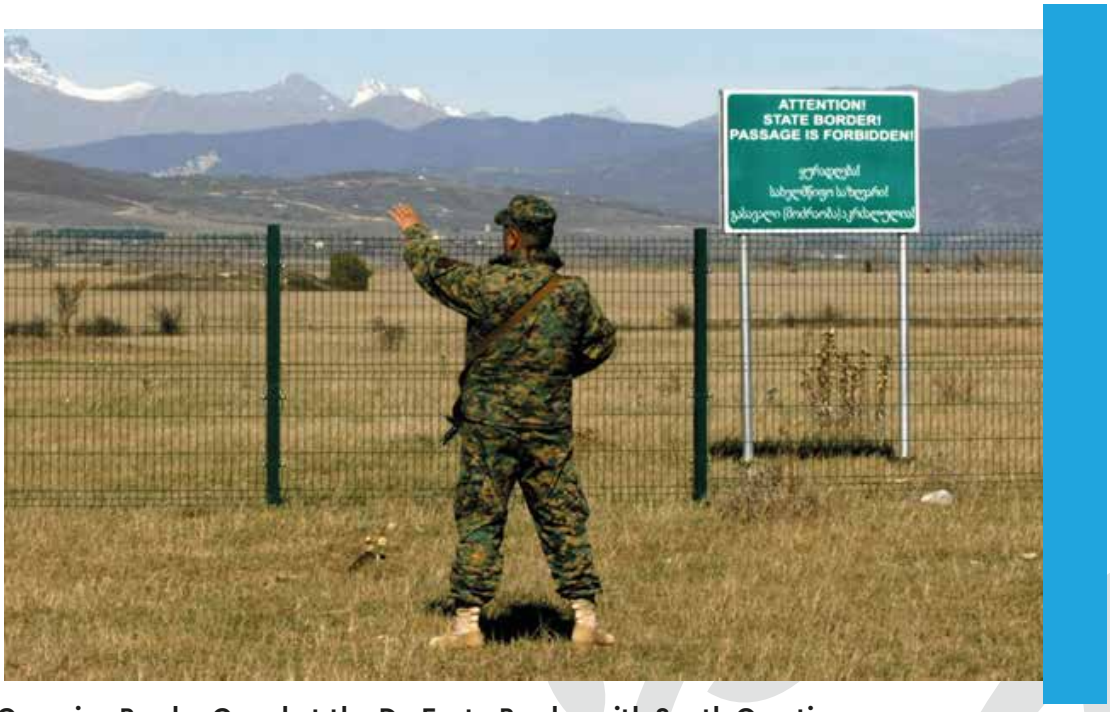
The Ministry also introduced a policy of 'status neutrality' which allows those living in the occupied territories to use a 'personal number' for services in Georgia. This personal number allows individuals to access services in Georgia without taking Georgian citizenship. These individuals are not recognized as Georgians, but rather as people living inside the occupied regions of Georgia, and thus eligible to receive various services on Georgian-controlled territory though status-neutral registration.

This 'status neutrality' initiative has had a profound impact on several groups, including ethnically Abkhaz individuals living outside the Gali district. The Gali region is home to nearly 40,000 ethnic Georgians, who are prohibited to study in Georgian language and cannot obtain 'local documents' needed for various social purposes, further perpetuating ethnic discrimination.

Ms. Kochoradze highlighted several key points moving forward. While the Ministry has already developed a '10 Year Vision' for conflict resolution, she indicated that special attention should be dedicated towards the humanitarian situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, as well as the increasing amount of disinformation in the occupied territories. As with previous discussions, she indicated that the closure of crossing points as a result of the coronavirus pandemic has created contributed to a worsening humanitarian situation on the ground.

As a result, the Ministry will continue to focus on direct people to people engagement to further promote Georgia's reconciliation and engagement policy.

ICR Representatives Attending a Meeting at the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality



Georgian Border Guard at the De-Facto Border with South Ossetia
Source: U.S. Mission to the OSCE

Road Sign to South Ossetia/Tskhinvali
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Further Research

Following the visit to Georgia, the International Conflict Resolution Center representatives were able to identify several emerging trends related to the territorial occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. Some of these trends have not been explored by policy research centers and think tanks outside of Georgia, providing the ICR Center with a platform to produce new, impactful research for the U.S. audience.

One such topic is that of the rise of disinformation. Disinformation campaigns target those living in the occupied territories, largely to create a negative image of Georgia and therefore stall any progress in conflict resolution. For example, as noted in the meeting with Giorgi Badridze of GFSIS, authorities of Abkhazia have launched a campaign of creating a new 'national history' of the territory, deepening the divide between Abkhazia and Georgia proper. Disinformation campaigns are also used to ensure that the population living in the occupied territories does not seek reconciliation with Georgia proper. As demonstrated by the worsening humanitarian situation in the occupied territories, which was further exacerbated the coronavirus pandemic, disinformation campaigns are needed to distract those living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali from the stark difference in living conditions between the occupied territories and Georgia proper.

The humanitarian situation in the occupied territories is also a topic that deserves greater attention. Before the pandemic, crossing the de-facto borders between Georgia proper and the occupied territories was often affected by arbitrary closures. As a result of the pandemic, freedom of movement became even more restricted, preventing individuals from being able to enter Georgia to access basic health service or even obtain common medicines. This has resulted in numerous easily preventable deaths, and the international community should take notice of the deteriorating situation.

Finally, Georgia will have elections in the very near term. Georgia has been experiencing a high degree of domestic political turmoil, and competing political parties must consider the territorial conflicts as part of their agendas. There are opportunities to conduct research both pre- and post-election on what the shifts in domestic politics could mean for reconciliation efforts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali.

The International Conflict Resolution Center plans to return to Georgia to conduct additional field work. Future field visits may include a visit to Gori, a city in which Russian forces were able to invade during the 2008 conflict. Further engagement with IDPs is also a priority, as well as visiting the de-facto borders between Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali to conduct further assessments on the situation on the ground and how it impacts the local population.