

## **South Ossetia: Everyday Fears**

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The residents of the unrecognised republic live in daily fear of new conflict with Georgia. Like other residents of the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval, Marina Parastayeva, not her real name, regularly travels to the Lilo marketplace on the outskirts of the Georgian capital Tbilisi where she can find goods at prices that are affordable for her meagre income as a seamstress. On February 19, she bought a couple of chairs there and was returning home when she found herself in the middle of the latest dispute between Georgian and Russian peacekeepers.

All roads leading to Tskhinval were blocked that day from both sides after Russian and Ossetian peacekeepers refused to let a new group of Georgian peacekeepers enter the conflict zone, as the Georgian side had not coordinated its decision on the rotation of its battalion in the Joint Peacekeeping Forces.

The row was resolved only the next day and the passengers on the buses that were stopped at the checkpoints in the conflict zone had to stay there for several anxious hours.

Incidents like this have been taking place in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone almost every day since the beginning of this year, causing increasing fears among the residents of Tskhinval who again have the feeling that they are under siege.

The unresolved dispute over South Ossetia used to be regarded as the least dangerous in the Caucasus, but since an outbreak of violence there in the summer of 2004 it has been perhaps the most volatile. Ordinary people in South Ossetia, despite generally good relations with ordinary Georgians, show increased distrust of the Georgian government and its intentions towards them.

In early February, everyone was disturbed by reports about the Georgian police putting up checkpoints on the outskirts of Tskhinval and detaining food cargoes intended for Ossetian villages. Villagers reported that the police would not even allow through vehicles carrying bread. The Georgian side rejected these allegations.

Alexander is around 60. He used to be a well-known sports coach, but now spends all his time growing vegetables in the orchard near his home. His relatives say it's not a way of supporting his family, but rather a method of beating depression.

"It would be better if something had already started," said Alexander. "Let them send their army against us. If they kill all of us, they will have their land, if not - we will finally be able to live in peace."

This year, 2006, is the 15th year of South Ossetia's existence as an unrecognised republic, having de facto seceded from Georgia under the patronage of Russia. Military clashes followed the unilateral decision of the former South Ossetian Autonomous District to break away from Georgia in 1991. Around 2,000 people died in the clashes, tens of thousand became refugees doomed to a miserable life.

Unemployment, the tragic memories of the war of the early 1990s as well as the presence of victims of war in almost every family, and the constant fear that hostilities may resume, are a daily reality for local

residents. Both the authorities and ordinary residents also say they must be ready to defend themselves.

"Peace in an independent state, even if it is unrecognised, would suit me well," said Vladimir, 30, a resident of Tskhinval. "However, if I have to, I will take up arms again. Even if our president prohibits this, I will defy him."

Together with hundreds of other local men, Vladimir spent the whole summer in 2004 at impromptu checkpoints set up by volunteer corps. His uniform and weapon that he bought with his own money are still at his home ready for use.

Many locals say that the tense summer of 2004 destroyed the hopes that had been pinned on the new Georgian leaders who came to power after the Rose Revolution in November 2003. As part of an anti-smuggling campaign, the new Georgian authorities decided to close the wholesale market in the village of Ergnet inside the conflict zone, where Georgians and Ossetians had traded together. Violence escalated and 40 people were killed on both sides over several weeks.

Lira Tskhovrebova is a human rights activist who has spent all her life in Tskhinval without leaving it in the most difficult years of the war.

"When [President Mikheil] Saakashvili came to power, I listened to his speeches attentively," she said. "He said the Ossetians are his brothers. However, I no longer trust him after the shooting in the summer of 2004."

Tskhovrebova said that since then she has always slept with the window open so she can hear if war has broken out.

Everything has been calm in Tskhinval so far, but regions adjacent to the conflict zone have become tense.

On February 3, the Georgian interior minister Vano Merabishvili said that an Igla anti-aircraft weapon had been found on Georgian territory. He claimed it come from South Ossetia and was intended to shoot down a helicopter carrying President Saakashvili.

On February 8, three Russian officers were detained by Georgian police because they did not have Georgian visas. Immediately after this, the authorities in Tskhinval accused Tbilisi of dispatching 250 regular army soldiers to the conflict zone. The Georgian leadership denied this categorically.

The Georgian parliament's resolution on February 15 calling for the Russian peacekeeping force in South Ossetia to be replaced has also caused agitation in the unrecognised republic.

"I cannot even allow myself to think about the Russian military departing from here and Europeans from other countries or Americans coming instead," said Tskhovrebova. "The Russians still remain the closest to both the Georgians and Ossetians and it is only the Russian soldier who think a hundred times before shooting in any direction, unlike the Americans who are fighting not against Iraq but against its population."

Retired teacher Marina Shakhbazova lost her husband in that war and is now alone with her three children. She also worries all the time about a new war breaking out. "Some time ago, I heard a woman speaking on one of the Georgian TV channels. She had lost one son in a war and was speaking about sending another of her sons to war. I do not believe her or probably she is not a mother," she said.

Like thousands of other South Ossetians, Shakhbazova watches Georgian television and sees discussion of the situation, but feels excluded from the debate. The Georgian government has never formally shown its peace plan to South Ossetia – and the latter’s residents feel as though they live in a parallel reality.

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