

## **South Ossetia: Surprise Peace Initiative**

**Author:** [Irina Kelekhsayeva](#)

Can a letter from the president of South Ossetia breathe new life into the moribund peace process? There is renewed activity in the peace process over South Ossetia after the leader of the breakaway region Eduard Kokoity unexpectedly published new proposals this week, offering to form a new working group with the Georgian side on resolving the conflict between them.

However, most observers remain sceptical that the new letter on December 13 marks a breakthrough in the unresolved dispute that has plagued the region since the early Nineties.

“In so far as unilaterally proposed plans on the settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict do not yield positive results, I deem it necessary to start jointly elaborating a Georgian-Ossetian programme on further steps for a just resolution of the conflict,” Kokoity wrote in a letter addressed to Russian and Georgian presidents, Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili and the heads of the member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Kokoity proposed setting up a joint working group by February 1 next year.

The proposal was welcomed by many as signalling the hope of new dialogue between the two sides, who fought a still unresolved conflict in 1992 that took the lives of hundreds, made tens of thousands homeless and ended with the de facto secession of South Ossetia from Georgia.

The letter surprised many in the region, especially after an autumn which had seen an upsurge of tension in South Ossetia with shooting, murders and kidnappings. Moreover, the South Ossetian authorities had refused to consider a Georgian peace plan on the grounds that it had been drawn up unilaterally without the participation of the South Ossetian side.

Kokoity’s letter is encouraging because it sets out a series of concrete steps that need to be taken to achieve peace. The Ossetian leader proposes dividing the peace process into three phases. He proposes starting with a demilitarisation of the conflict zone and the creation of security guarantees for the population; then starting a programme of socio-economic rehabilitation; only then, says Kokoity, should talks begin on the political settlement of the dispute. The South Ossetian side, as opposed to the Georgians, pointedly does not mention the issue of status.

The new proposals also contain a new ambitious idea – the creation of a zone of economic prosperity which, besides South Ossetia, will include the Gori region of Georgia and the Alagir region of North Ossetia in Russia.

Calling a press conference on the same day the new plan was unveiled, Georgian prime minister Zurab Nogaideli welcomed the initiative and said it was “almost identical” to a Georgian plan published this autumn. However, he stressed that Georgia still wants to conduct “parallel” discussion of the issue of the political status of South Ossetia - something that is unacceptable for the government in Tskhinval.

“We will focus on all sides on the need to go through these stages one after the other,” South Ossetia’s minister for special assignments and top negotiator Boris Chochiev told IWPR. “Let’s hope we don’t trip up at the first stage. In that case no one should have any illusions that we could move on to the next one. Haste could cause us to break agreements we have already made.”

Some Georgian experts agree that raising the bitterly disputed issues of politics and sovereignty early on could be counter-productive.

“I think it’s absolutely impossible to discuss the issue of political status, as that threatens all the other aspects of the negotiations,” said Georgian political analyst Paata Zakareishvili, a member of the opposition Republican Party. “We need to resolve economic issues, to restore trust. You can’t solve the issue of status without that anyway.”

For the first time in recent years the conflicting sides are in agreement that they need to work together jointly. Nogaideli even suggested forming the proposed working before group before February 1.

However, the proposal comes at a time of tension in the conflict zone, with constant incidents of violence. There was an escalation of tension in the region in November and December, with dozens of shooting incidents and abductions which some considered politically motivated and others criminal.

“A year ago they were putting on a show, digging trenches on the north side of Tskhinval,” one resident of the city who asked not to be named noted sceptically to IWPR. “They did their work for the TV cameras and that’s how it all ended. And now people are sitting in these trenches, doing their patrols, both Georgians and Ossetians.”

He was referring to the declaration made by both sides last November that they were withdrawing their armed units from the conflict zone after an upsurge of fighting in the summer of 2004. Each side had hundreds of men in the area and each side accused the other of breaking the 1992 agreement whereby only peacekeepers could be in the conflict zone.

The agreement of November 20, 2004 stipulated that the conflict zone had to be demilitarised but it has only been partially fulfilled and both sides still accuse the other of keeping “illegal armed formations” in the region.

The South Ossetians complain of an “information war” being waged by Georgia against them. A new Georgia-based television channel Alania, began broadcasting into South Ossetia in November causing indignation there because it mocks the local leadership and also broadcasts pornographic films every night.

The Georgian interior ministry website also angers the South Ossetians by accusing two of their leaders, Kokoity and Chochiev, and other officials of involvement in drug trafficking and kidnapping.

Most experts agree that Russia’s role in the peace process has been crucial to the change of mood but there are different interpretations as to exactly how.

One version has it that the Kokoity plan originated in the Russian foreign ministry which is trying to wrest back the initiative in the South Ossetian peace process from Georgia.

“I think Russia has decided to push the Ossetians towards compromise with the Georgians after which it

hopes to get additional influence over both,” said political analyst Paata Zakareishvili.

Others think that Moscow has simply betrayed its ally, South Ossetia. There was confusion in Tskhinval after the recent ministerial meeting of the OSCE in Ljubljana, when Russia appeared to support Georgian proposals to resolve the conflict, with one possibility being the final integration of South Ossetia into Georgia. An article in the Moscow newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta bore the headline “What kind of friend are you after this?”

However, a press release published in Ljubljana then said that the council of ministers of the OSCE had only “approved steps, taken by the Georgian side towards settling the Georgian-Ossetian conflict”. The press release noted that “the peace plan, based on the initiatives of the president of Georgia, put forward at the 59th session of the General Assembly of the UN and supported by the parties, will serve as the basis for the resolution of this problem”.

Russian foreign ministry spokesman Mikhail Kamynin clarified Moscow’s position when he said that Moscow supported the peace plan put forward last year by Saakashvili at the UN, but was not familiar with the revised version of Georgia’s most recent plan for South Ossetia.

“Eduard Kokoity’s appeal puts the emphasis above all on the need for a conflict settlement programme which corresponds to the interests of all parties,” the foreign minister of South Ossetia Murat Jioyev told IWPR. “That is the difference. After all the Georgian leadership and also Georgia’s non-governmental organisations have put forward more than one plan, but they all proceeded from the perceptions of just one side, they only reflected the Georgian position.”

Jioyev was referring to a series of big conferences on the issue organised by the Georgian government, which Ossetians refused to attend on the grounds that they had not been invited to help devise the programme.

Official discussions about the new initiative have been going on all week between the main parties. But despite the renewed contacts and triumphant reports in the Georgian media, ordinary South Ossetians are pessimistic about what will happen next.

“Until Georgia condemns all the criminals who killed people during the years of aggression and does not give its political and legal verdict on the events of the early 1990s and of the summer of 2004, a peace process is impossible,” said Vladimir Valiev, a businessman. “Even if some kind of agreement is possible and then tomorrow, let’s say, someone gets killed or blown up by a mine, everything will fall apart again immediately.”

Irina Kelekhsayeva is a freelance journalist in South Ossetia. Mari Betlemidze, a correspondent of IWPR’s newspaper Panorama in Tbilisi, also contributed to this article.

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