



SENATE SQUARE SOCIETY

Regional Affairs Dispatch I

Appendix A:

SOUTH OSSETIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Ossetia is a breakaway region in northern Georgia that has operated outside Georgian control since the early 1990s, with its separation reinforced after the 2008 Russia–Georgia war. The history of the Ossetian presence in Georgia remains contested: many Georgians argue that Ossetian settlement expanded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that South Ossetia’s autonomous status was imposed during the Soviet period, while Ossetians emphasize their long-standing presence and historical ties with Georgia. Although only a handful of countries recognize South Ossetia as independent, most of the international community considers it part of Georgia. Russia is the region’s primary political, economic, and military patron, providing financial assistance and security support while maintaining influence in the South Caucasus. Looking ahead, South Ossetia is likely to remain politically separate from Georgia and heavily dependent on Russia, while facing ongoing economic and demographic challenges.

I. GEOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

South Ossetia is situated on the southern flank of the Greater Caucasus mountain system and is one of the most mountainous territories in the South Caucasus. The region’s rugged topography, high elevations, and limited agricultural land have constrained economic development and contributed to its dependence on external support. Its strategic importance derives largely from its location astride key mountain passes linking Georgia and Russia, particularly via the Roki Tunnel, which provides one of the few year-round transportation corridors across the central Caucasus. Scholars of Caucasian geography frequently note that the region’s mountainous environment has reinforced both its political isolation and its strategic significance within broader Russia–Georgia relations.

II. HISTORICAL BREAKDOWN

South Ossetia is historically linked to the broader movement of Ossetian populations, an Iranian-speaking group descended from the medieval Alans, into the central Caucasus. Scholarly work suggests that Ossetian settlement south of the Greater Caucasus increased between the late medieval and early modern periods (approximately 16th–18th centuries), often occurring through migration into sparsely populated or politically contested mountain valleys within Georgian polities. Historians note that these communities gradually developed local ties with Georgian noble houses while maintaining distinct linguistic and cultural identities.

During the late Russian Imperial period, both Georgian and Ossetian populations were incorporated into the empire, which helped formalize administrative divisions but did not create a separate Ossetian territorial unit in the South Caucasus. The decisive transformation came after the collapse of the Russian Empire, when competing Georgian and Ossetian political movements

emerged amid the upheavals of the Russian Civil War. According to Arsène Saparov, these conflicts initially had strong social and land-based dimensions but increasingly took on an ethnic character during 1918–1920.

Following the Sovietization of Georgia in 1921, the Bolshevik authorities created the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922. Scholarship emphasizes that this decision was part of broader Soviet efforts to stabilize post-civil war conflicts through administrative autonomy arrangements rather than recognition of pre-existing statehood. However, the establishment of autonomy remains contested in modern historiography: some scholars argue it institutionalized emerging ethnic divisions, while others view it as a pragmatic conflict-resolution mechanism in a rapidly changing revolutionary context.

In the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods, these historical tensions re-emerged amid Georgia's independence movement. The escalation of nationalist politics in the late 1980s led to armed conflict in 1991–1992, resulting in South Ossetia's de facto separation from Georgia. The 2008 Russia–Georgia war further entrenched this division and solidified Russia's military and political role in the region.

III. DEMOGRAPHICS

South Ossetia has a small and declining population, generally estimated at around 50,000–60,000 people, though precise figures are uncertain due to limited international recognition and differing census methodologies. Historically, prior to the conflicts of the early 1990s, the region had a more mixed ethnic composition, with Ossetians forming a majority and a substantial Georgian minority living in rural areas. According to pre-1990s estimates, Ossetians made up roughly two-thirds of the population, while Georgians constituted close to one-third, particularly concentrated in villages outside Tskhinvali (OSW Centre for Eastern Studies; Encyclopaedia Britannica). The wars of the 1990s and especially the 2008 Russia–Georgia conflict led to large-scale displacement of ethnic Georgians, significantly reshaping the region's demographic structure, with many unable to return (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Contemporary estimates suggest that South Ossetia is now overwhelmingly ethnic Ossetian, with only small remaining minority communities, including Georgians and Russians. In addition, the region faces persistent outmigration, particularly among younger residents seeking employment in Russia, contributing to long-term population decline, aging, and limited demographic sustainability (International Crisis Group). These trends reinforce South Ossetia's economic fragility and its structural dependence on external support.

IV. SECURITY AND MILITARY ASSESSMENT

South Ossetia's security system is overwhelmingly dependent on Russia and is widely described in the literature as externally sustained rather than autonomous (Cornell, 2002; Zürcher, 2007; de

Waal, 2010). Following the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, Russia established a permanent military presence in the region and assumed primary responsibility for its defense and border security. Local South Ossetian forces are small and mainly perform internal policing and limited territorial defense functions, with little independent operational capacity. Scholars of de facto states note that this reflects a broader pattern of reliance on external patrons, particularly Russia, for survival and security (Caspersen, 2012).

Tensions with Georgia remain unresolved, with Tbilisi viewing South Ossetia as Russian-occupied territory. The boundary between South Ossetia and Georgian-controlled territory is heavily securitized and often described in policy literature as a “borderization” process involving fences, checkpoints, and restricted movement (International Crisis Group). There are no formal diplomatic relations between Georgia and South Ossetia, and engagement is limited to indirect talks within the Geneva International Discussions framework. Overall, the Russian military presence is the key factor maintaining the current frozen conflict status quo (Cornell, 2002; Zürcher, 2007).

V. OUTLOOK

South Ossetia is expected to remain a de facto Russian-protected entity with no realistic short-term prospect of reintegration into Georgia or widespread international recognition (de Waal, 2010; Zürcher, 2007). The Russian military and financial presence is widely identified in the literature as the primary guarantor of the current political and security status quo, effectively sustaining the “frozen conflict” dynamic (Cornell, 2002). At the same time, the region faces persistent structural challenges, including deep economic dependence on Russia, weak institutional development, and ongoing population decline driven by outmigration and demographic contraction (Caspersen, 2012; International Crisis Group). While periodic political rhetoric about closer integration with Russia, including proposals for formal alignment, continues to appear, most scholarly assessments conclude that the most likely trajectory is continued de facto separation from Georgia under sustained Russian influence, with little change to its unresolved international status.

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