

Batumi and Sokhumi: A tale of two cities



Unresolved conflicts in Georgia don't serve the interest of local populations on either side of the artificial divide and may not serve Russia's own interests in the long term, writes Ketevan Tsikhelashvili.

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Batumi, the Georgian city perched on the southwestern coast of the Black Sea, recently hosted European leaders to mark the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership and to take stock of Georgia's progress on its path to integration with Europe. At the conference, Donald Tusk, the outgoing President of the European Council, remarked, "When I say Georgia, I mean "freedom", when I say Georgia, I mean "pride", when I say Georgia, I mean "courage". You are a small country, but a great nation. You have achieved impossible things, because you were, despite all the differences, united around a common goal, that was a free, independent and modern state."

Today, over 80 percent of Georgian society supports Georgia's European integration. With the new incoming EU leadership, Georgia remains as committed as ever to its goals of cementing its close partnership, political association, and sectoral integration with the

EU through a robust reform agenda. Despite external challenges, this commitment—or, what we call our “civilizational choice”— makes Georgia a front-runner in the Eastern Partnership.

In a tale of two cities, Sokhumi, on the northwestern Black Sea coast of Georgia’s Abkhazia region, meanwhile, remains out of this race. Occupied by Russia, Abkhazia has become increasingly militarized and physically isolated under exclusive Russian dominance. This is even more true for the Tskhinvali/South Ossetia region in the heartland of Georgia, which has been turned into a heavily militarized ghetto with 80% of its original population depleted. Russia has kept a tight grip on over 20% of Georgia’s territories since its invasion in August 2008.

The subsequent unilateral recognition of “independence” for these regions kick-started their complete dependence on Russia. This rampant Russification is undertaken against the will of more than half of the original population, ethnic Georgians remaining in exile, who are denied access to their homes. It is neither to the appeasement of many still living there.

Unresolved conflicts in Georgia don’t serve the interest of local populations on either side of the artificial divide. It may not serve Russia’s own interests in long term. But now, they are part of the larger geopolitical strategy of Russia to foment conflicts in its vicinity. Russia then uses these conflicts to influence the course of development of countries concerned and keep them within its shallow orbit. However, this is against the rules of gravitation. The lack of power of attraction gets then compensated by tanks, soldiers, economic restrictions, and amply funded propaganda. An ensuing network of grey zones then magnifies security challenges for Europe at large. Therefore, there is a tremendous and timely need to address these unresolved conflicts in a thorough and peaceful manner.

Yet, there’s an even more pressing need to alleviate the daily suffering of thousands of families. The Russian policy of division has profound real-life consequences for people in the occupied regions or in vicinity. Families are split apart and people are denied freedom of movement across the divides even for basic human needs. Human rights are infringed upon, especially those of the remaining few ethnic Georgians in the two territories. Locals are often detained for “crossing the line”. At times it ends in tragedy, as with three young Georgian civilians who lost their lives in illegal custody, and one shot in front of cameras. The perpetrators remain at large.

This year, several episodes of closing all crossing points led the regions to the brink of a humanitarian crisis. Yet, against all odds, people-to-people contacts have increased considerably and interest in cooperating across artificial barriers is unprecedentedly high. The threat remains, however, that as contact between people rises, the barriers also rise, a blunt effort to thwart such contact for their true potential for reconciliation and peaceful conflict transformation.

We have no choice but one: to redouble our efforts to promote these contacts across the barbed wires, to help people and to foster confidence and peace.

This constructive, win-win agenda is at the heart of Georgia's engagement and reconciliation policy. The government's major peace plan, "A Step to a Better Future", launched last year, was widely applauded by the international community for its focus on facilitating trade, education, and cross-border services. This initiative lowers the political temperature by offering status-neutral solutions.

The plan is gaining traction and has already proven to be successful and attractive for local communities. The first small grant program received 15 times more applications from both territories than was expected. Now the task is to mobilize more resources to meet this high interest since investing in projects across artificial divides is a direct investment in peace.

It is also a way to deliver benefits stemming from Georgia's European integration process to the population of the occupied regions. Providing that alternative will ultimately equate to Georgia's success on its European path.