
Georgia on their minds

By Simon Reeve
Guardian/UK - 20/4/2008

Russia wants South Ossetia and Abkhazia back - and so does Georgia. When I met soldiers in these breakaway regions, they were ready for a fight

During lunch in a quiet café, the tough young South Ossetian soldiers downed mugs of vodka to celebrate their sergeant's birthday, then linked arms and sang patriotic songs of war and independence. After a few rounds, as if remembering their duty, they sobered up, gathered their Kalashnikovs, and headed off to man defences and pillboxes on the frontline with Georgia.

A breakaway region of Georgia, South Ossetia is one of several separatist republics scattered across former Soviet states that are at the centre of rumbling conflicts largely forgotten by the rest of the world. Despite being the cause of regional wars after the Soviet Union collapsed, the issues that provoked fighting in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, or Transnistria, a renegade sliver of a country between Moldova and Ukraine, have never really been resolved.

Visiting several of these breakaway states a few years ago, including South Ossetia, was a trip through a timewarp. Fields were ploughed by horses and old trucks belched soot. Development had been slow and most people were poorer than during Soviet times. I was struck by a sense that both sides were waiting for the other to make a bold, decisive move. Either the separatists would finally declare full independence, or the former mother country - be it Georgia or Moldova - would attack and invade.

These tense situations need careful, patient diplomacy. But Russia has been meddling in the former Soviet states, partly to discourage Nato and the west from moving closer to its borders, and partly in the hope of recovering fragments of the old empire.

So the Kremlin has openly wooed, funded and encouraged separatists in areas of Georgia and Transnistria, which split from Moldova. Russia has also established military bases in both regions, with hundreds of soldiers and heavy weaponry on the ground. The Kremlin calls them "peacekeepers"; Georgian officials wryly describe them as "piece-keepers".

Now, as revenge for western recognition of Kosovo, and because Moscow has never really accepted the collapse of the Soviet empire, Russia has announced it is further strengthening economic and political links with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

It is a bold attempt to encourage the two separatist states to join Russia and ultimately accept annexation. But the new move by the Kremlin dramatically increases the risk of war with Georgia, which has long vowed to take back control of its separatist republics.

So what do South Ossetians and Abkhazians want? When I visited South Ossetia, the state was on a war footing. Locals stressed they were Ossetes, not Georgians, and wanted unification with their brothers in the region of North Ossetia, across the border in Russia. Like the separatists in Abkhazia, who view themselves as an ancient ethnic group, they would prefer full independence, but would settle for rule from Moscow over rule from Tbilisi.

Even if this crisis can be resolved peacefully, which seems unlikely, others still simmer across the former Soviet Union. Transnistria and Nagorno-

Karabakh, now an almost entirely Christian enclave inside Azerbaijan since Muslim Azeris were forced out, are both at the centre of possible future wars. Troops on both sides seemed ready for a fight. Surely it is time the European Union took a more active role in resolving these festering conflicts. The alternative could be war on the EU's eastern border.

Leaving South Ossetia, I chatted with heavily-armed Russian "peacekeepers" on the border with Georgia. All clearly felt they were defending an enclave of Mother Russia. I asked what they would do if Georgian troops tried to retake South Ossetia. One pointed to the Russian flag velcroed onto his uniform.

"We will take off our badges," he said adamantly, "and we will fight."
