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SOUTH OSSETIA-ALANIA – 10 YEARS SINCE GAINING PARTIAL INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION¹

Barbara Baarová*

ABSTRACT

In 2018, South Ossetia-Alania celebrated the 10th anniversary of its victory in the war with Georgia, to which Russia had contributed decisively. It was also the first state to recognize the independence of the small country *de jure*. However, how does its independence look like in practice? The paper analyses the economic and political ties between South Ossetia-Alania and its patron Russia, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Demographic indicators illustrate the specifics of the South Ossetian population, but at the same time point to the causes of the current situation. Based on sociological surveys and activities of the political structures, the paper gives evidence of the South Ossetian elites' and population's efforts towards a unification with North Ossetia and thus with Russia. An interesting episode is represented by local church activities, which, on the contrary, appear to be independentist. However, they are affected by the specific external environment of religious rules. In the conclusion, various options of the future development are presented and the attitude of the mother state – Georgia, is discussed. It is quite clear that South Ossetia actually wants Georgia to recognize its independence. Which is totally unacceptable to Georgia – from Georgia's point of view, the country was legally trying to liberate its own territory, which had been unlawfully dominated by a group of separatists. For Russia, South Ossetia-Alania is strategically a key country, because direct control of small country allows Russia to keep Georgia in a constant tension and can prevent Georgia's entry into NATO.

Key words: South Ossetia, North Ossetia, Alania, Bibilov, Russia, demography, church

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Introduction

In 2018, South Ossetians celebrated their 10th anniversary of victory in the short war with Georgia. From their point of view, it marked the liberation of territories they had not previously controlled. They certainly would not have managed that on their own, but with the help of the Russian armed forces, they achieved the desired result. Simultaneously with the celebrations of the victory, they commemorated the first international recognition – shortly after the victory, on August 26, 2008, Russia recognized South Ossetia² as an independent state. Despite this, South Ossetia does not behave like a state that seeks full independence. In fact, in the beginning of the separation from Georgia in 1991, the South Ossetian political representation declared as its primary goal its connection with North Ossetia-Alania, a subject of the Russian Federation. In essence, it was an irredentist movement (Toal & O'Loughlin, 2013). At that time, there was a significant decentralization of power in Russia. Individual entities, particularly republics, strengthened their powers at the expense of the Moscow centre, and the Russian Federation seemed to be heading for a more loose federation, under which the united Ossetia could operate (Baar, 2005). The disintegration of the USSR and the decentralization processes in the newly defined Russian Federation, in which the "ethnic" republics gained significantly greater powers over the centre than other federal entities, further strengthened the realization of such intentions. In October 1995, a permanent inter-parliamentary counselling council of both Ossetias was established, in the following year, the two Ossetian capitals Vladikavkaz and Tskhinvali signed an agreement on friendship and cooperation, and the process was completed on 9

² The name South Ossetia was created in 1922 for the autonomous region within the Sovietized Georgia. Following a referendum held on April 9, 2017, the name Alania was added to this name (now officially named the Republic of South Ossetia – the State of Alania, in Ossetian *Республикæ Хуссар Ирыстон – Паддзахад Аллонстон* / *Respublikæ Hussar Iryston – Paddzahad Allonston*). The name Alania was added as a symbolic link between Ossetians and the ancient Alans (of Iranian ethnicity by language), who Ossetians consider themselves to be descendants of. Alans dominated the North Caucasus depression in the 1st Millennium, and they were pushed into the Caucasus Mountains by a massive expansion of Turkic populations and, in particular, the Mongol invasion of the 13th Century. The ethnonym Alan then ceased to be used and was outweighed by the Georgian designation of *Osi* (ოსი), in the plural *Osebi* (ოსებო). The land inhabited by Ossetians was called *Oseti* (ოსეთი) by Georgians. Via Russian, this ethnonym has spread to other languages in different forms. However, Ossetians themselves use the ethnonym *Ir* (ир), plural *Irættæ* (ирæттæ) – they thus call their country *Iryston* (Ирыстон). The name Alania was adopted in 1994 by North Ossetia, a republic within the Russian Federation.

November 1996 by signing a treaty on friendship and cooperation between the governments of North Ossetia-Alania and South Ossetia (Kulova & Fedosova, 2014). Notwithstanding the fact that the South Ossetian government only controlled a part of the Zaak-claimed territory.

At that time, Russia did not want to escalate relations with Georgia, where **Eduard Shevardnadze**, the former foreign minister of the USSR, became the president in 1995. Georgia's policy has lost its strong anti-Russian accent from the reign of the first Georgian president, **Zviad Gamsakhurdia**. The process of inter-Ossetian integration was therefore transferred from the political level to the cultural and economic sphere, and continued after the overthrow of the Shevardnadze in the so-called Revolution of the Roses and after the arrival of the strongly anti-Russian President **Mikhail Saakashvili**. He tried to solve the South Ossetian separatism militarily in 2008 – however, he met with resistance of a prepared Russia, which accused Georgia of "*aggression against South Ossetia*"³ (Roudik, 2008, p. 8), and launched a large-scale land, air and naval invasion of Georgia with the stated goal of "peace enforcement operations" (Allison, 2008, p. 1145).

The result was the defeat of Georgia and the occupation of not only the entire former Soviet territory of the South-Ossetian Autonomous Region (1922), but also the acquisition of control over the entire territory of Abkhazia, whose northeast was still under Georgian control. However, there is a very significant difference between Abkhazia and South Ossetia in terms of strengthening the acquired de facto independence. While Abkhazia has been seeking to strengthen its independence since the beginning of separation and declares it in its development strategy (Baar & Baarová, 2017), South Ossetia is doing the opposite - its representatives are promoting links with Russia, the patron of its independence on Georgia. The importance of Russia for both Georgian entities is unquestionable, yet the Ossetian strategy is significantly different from that of Abkhazians. This contribution seeks to answer the question why it is so. The study focuses primarily on the developments and events in South Ossetia-Alania after the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and in the wake of the brief Russian-Georgian war in 2008. It follows the contribution of **Gerard Toal** (also publishing under his original Irish name **Gearóid Ó Tuathail**) and

³ Paradoxical justification for Georgia's attempt to free its own territory from insurgency; indeed, Russia did the same thing with Chechnya a few years before and defended itself from criticisms by stating that it was "liberating its own territory" (Souleimanov, 2007).

John O'Loughlin, who analysed the events immediately after the war (Toal & O'Loughlin, 2013, Ó Tuathail, 2008). For older events, we refer to the work of **Charles King**, evaluating the first decade of separatist states (King, 2001), the historical geographic study by **Arsène Saparov**, mapping the development of Ossetian national aspirations in 1818-1922 (Saparov, 2010), a set of works edited by **Stephen F. Jones** dedicated to building of statehood in Georgia and conflicts with ethnic minorities in 1918-2010 published by Routledge Publishing House (Jones, 2013), as well as another collection edited by **Susan Allen Nan** with contributions on South Ossetia (Nan, 2011) or articles by the Norwegian pair **Pål Kolstø** and **Helge Blakkisrud** dealing with the internal problems of the Caucasian de facto states (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012), similarly to the German pair **Silvia von Steinsdorff** and **Anna Fruhstorfer** (2012). The study also provides the latest data on demographic conditions of South Ossetia based on the 2015 census (Itogi ..., 2016), which demonstrate the fundamental changes in the ethnic structure.

The text of the paper is based on the theory of de facto states, which also includes the role of the patron state (see e.g. **Popescu**, 2006; **Allison**, 2008; **Trenin**, 2009; **Hoch, Souleimanov & Baranec**, 2014; **Gerrits & Bader**, 2016). Although the practice shows that the role of the patron state does not have to be unilateral (**Caspersen**, 2008), as it is in the case of Artsakh (**Kopeček**, 2017), in the case of South Ossetia it is, as a result of its geographical location, absolutely dominant, as evidenced by the commercial, economic and financial factors. In addition to secondary literature, the text is also based on an analysis of primary sources, especially official documents and websites, as well as media resources currently responding to the international and national events.

1 Strange independence

The new phase of the inter-Ossetian and Ossetian-Russian relations began to develop immediately after the successful war with Georgia and the relatively unexpected international recognition of the independence of South Ossetia (as well as Abkhazia) by Russia. At the beginning of 2009 at a joint session of representatives of both Ossetian parliaments, North Ossetian Governor **Taymuraz Mamsurov** said "*South Ossetia is a reality ... Unification of our nation is inevitable*" (Kulova & Fedosova, 2014). However, it turned out that the situation is not that easy. The expulsion of most Georgians and the war damage severely crippled the South Ossetian economy, and although Russia annually invested

massive amounts in South Ossetia, there has been no economic recovery. In the "war year" of 2008, Russia provided 3.1 billion RUB, but in the following year, the invested amount more than tripled (10.6 billion)⁴, thus becoming higher than South Ossetia's own budget resources. In the following years, the subsidy was constantly decreasing, but it still accounted for around 90% of the state budget (Table 1). In 2014, when Crimea was annexed, the subsidies again began to increase in the total volume, but the real value of the aid was lower than in 2013 as the international sanctions led to a devaluation of Ruble⁵. Russia's subsequent economic problems have led to a further reduction in subsidies below 90% of the South Ossetian state budget. Russia's total assistance since the war of 2008 has already exceeded RUB 70 billion, and exceeds the annual GDP of South Ossetia-Alania each year⁶. However, it must be emphasized that the direct subsidy to the Ossetian budget is not the only form of Russian aid. If we were to add to Russia's expenditures spent on defence of the country and keeping some 4,000 people at its military base, the entire South Ossetia-Alania budget would be exceeded by over 140% (Tokmazashvili, 2014). The living standard of a small country remains very low and is roughly estimated at around USD 2,000 per capita⁷. The widespread corruption remains the country's Post-Soviet heritage, so considerable part of Russian financial assistance is being stolen by politicians, officials and entrepreneurs who often come from Russia (Yermakov & Mikhaylov, 2017). **Pavel Sedakov** wrote about financial flows in the reconstruction of war-damaged buildings and infrastructure for Forbes magazine. He mentions the so-called Chelyabinsk mafia and literally writes that "*construction and vorovstvo/mafia*⁸ have become synonyms" (Sedakov, 2011). The fact that corruption remains a serious problem is confirmed by President **Anatoly Bibilov**, who described it as "*a priority task for the country's leadership*" in April 2018 (Bibilov, 2018).

⁴ See the numbers listed here: <http://polpred.com/?cnt=257>. The fact, however, is that the numbers differ in different sources (but not significantly), rather according to their intended use. Some sources also suggested that South Ossetia did not actually receive all of the promised finance.

⁵ If the value of 1 USD was around 30 RUB in the period 2011-2013, after the annexation of the Crimea and subsequent sanctions, the devaluation of ruble doubled and it reached the maximum in January 2016 (over 84 RUB for 1 USD). In 2018, it oscillates at the level of 60-70 RUB (see the current development at <https://www.kurzy.cz/grafy/kurzy-men/usd-rub-png-svg-yb10>).

⁶ South Ossetia-Alania does not publish GDP data, experts estimate that its amount currently oscillates at about \$ 100 million, or about RUB 6-7 billion.

⁷ This is roughly the level of Moldova and Ukraine, the poorest states of Europe.

⁸ The specific Russian term *vorovstvo* (воровство) is synonymous with the mafia.

Tab. 1: Russia's financial support to South Ossetia-Alania's budget in 2010-2018

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Russian subsidy in billion RUB	7,2	6,3	5,5	4,3	5,7	6,6	8,2	7,3	6,6
share of the JOA budget	98,7	93,5	84,2	89,9	91,8	91,3	92,1	89,6	86,5

Source: compiled by the author according to the annual reports of the South Ossetian government on the website <http://rso-government.org/>

Even though after the war the South Ossetian economy recovered shortly thanks to Russian subsidies, it fell into a severe crisis as soon as in 2013. In general, it is in a very bad condition, the industry has almost collapsed, and most businesses do not even perform at 10% of their performance before breaking off from Georgia. The number of employees in the industrial sector dropped to seven hundred (Kokoyev, 2010) and the industry's share on GDP is only 2% (Yuthnaya Osetiya i karlikovye strany, 2015). The largest Vibromashina plant of 1958 had a monopoly position in the USSR in the production of vibrating electrical equipment, but today it produces only a small amount of such equipment and has turned towards consumer metal products (fences, dustbins, waste bins, etc.). Emalprovod, the largest plant for production of enamel wires of the entire Caucasus, has ended up similarly. Their production has fallen to a tenth of the Soviet period, and today it produces bearings, nails, but also plastic windows, wooden products, lamps and other consumer goods. In addition to this tiny industrial production covering mainly the country's own needs, agricultural products and wood are processed. This caused a huge trade deficit in foreign trade when the import value exceeded exports up to 20 times in some years (Baar & Baarová, 2017, p. 287). Currently, only half of the original 28 industrial plants operate, with over 50% of the overall industrial production in 2013 being constituted by a large bakery. Services are at a very low level and despite all the efforts, the country is not able to attract tourists. There are only a few hundreds of them per year (Chochiyeva, 2018a), arriving mainly from North Ossetia-Alania, or other Russian subjects. South Ossetian GDP is thus incredibly distorted – just like industry, the primary sector has a negligible share of 3.5% and the rest, almost 95%, falls on the tertiary sector. The hypershare of services with a small amount of tourism is caused by the fact that almost half of

it is comprised of the state run construction (44.5%)⁹, which is, however, completely financed by Russia. However, this sector is much better paid – the average earnings there are 3 times higher than in industry and 4 times higher than in agriculture (Kokoyev 2015). The South Ossetian economy is currently struggling primarily with a lack of investment and a skilled workforce, as people of working age leave for Russia in large numbers (Chochiyeva, 2018a).

The only significant impetus of industrial production and employment (prospectively for up to 500 people) was the opening of the BTK-4¹⁰ textile factory in Tskhinvali in September 2013, specializing in working and protective clothing. In 2014, its exports more than doubled the value of South Ossetian exports (from 2.7 to 5.6 million dollars), and the following year they increased to 8.1 million USD. This also completely changed the structure of exports– clothing first appeared in 2013 with a share of 8.5%, but in the following year it was already 80.8% and in 2017 even 97.9%. Traditionally, it was shown that the main component of exports consisted of fruit and vegetables, but it was valid only until 2010, when they accounted for about a fifth of exports – then their importance fell sharply and the main items consisted of various instruments and mechanical equipment, metal products and especially iron scrap (Statistika vneshney trgovli Rossii). Thus, the textile factory brought a significant change and a certain hope for South Ossetia (Table 2).

Table 2: Production changes in South Ossetian exports in 2010-2017 (the share on export in percentages)

Export items	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Mechanical devices	52,9	55,5	41,2	37,0	2,6	4,2	0,9	0,2
Metal products	20,2	32,1	52,4	33,6	14,8	5,1	2,8	1,1
Fruit and vegetables	21,8	0,4	3,8	5,7	0,7	2,6	0,1	0,0
Clothing and textiles	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,5	80,8	86,4	95,4	97,9

Source: Author based on Statistika vneshney trgovli Rossii

⁹ Another 4% falls on private sector construction, 19.5% on education, 11.5% on health and social services, 4% on culture and art.

¹⁰ The factory belongs to the holding of a successful North American businessman, Taimuraz Bolloyev, who established himself in Russia by building the Baltika Brewery - he sold it to multinational companies and since 2007 he has built 16 textile and shoe companies.

Another success was the opening of the Rastdon meat-processing plant (Novyy zavod, 2015) on the 25th anniversary of independence, with a contribution of a Tskhinvali native, **Vadim Vaneyev**, the director of agricultural holding Evrodon, who became successful in farming turkeys and ducks in Russia. The last success was a reopening of the once-successful brewery in Leninogor after years of inaction. Although it resumed its activity with a Turkish investor under the name of Alutor¹¹ after the war of 2008 (resulting in the occupation of the town and its background) and was supported by some important politicians, the brewery closed soon at the order of the South-Ossetian Prosecutor's Office on suspicion of corrupt behaviour. It was reopened in the autumn of 2017 under the name of Irdon and besides beer it exports lemonade and bottles mineral water from a nearby source. Production of special vodka is also expected. Thanks to the brewery, imports from Russia could be reduced, while beverages became an export item (with a share of about 0.5%).

The overall weak economic situation of the country is the result of its inability to meet its energy needs. There are only two small hydroelectric plants and most of the electricity and all gas is supplied by Russia (Tadtayev & Zherova, 2015). By 2008, the situation was similar to Transnistria, which has not been paying for gas for a long time, and Russia has registered the debt as a future financial claim from Moldova. South Ossetia also does not pay, but its debt can no longer be declared as a debt of Georgia after Russia's recognition of South Ossetian independence. In addition, Russia has built a gas pipeline from Vladikavkaz to Tskhinvali at its expense, and Gazprom finances its extension to Dzuarikau. Russia also opened the Transcaucasian highway and built a new power grid in the Leningor region¹² (*Otnosheniya mezhdru RF ...2016*). Dependence on Russia is also intensified by the 49-year contract for the deployment of military crew in the country, with an automatic extension of 15 years. The socio-economic development strategy until 2030 mainly envisages the construction of small hydroelectric power plants, which could help restore the production of building materials and the production of lead-zinc ores. However, the strategy mentions above all efforts to build new prospective

¹¹ *Aluton* is an Ossetian expression for special beer that was brewed as soon as in the Alanian period in large copper vessels. Interestingly, besides the Aluton brand, it also brewed the famous Russian beer *Zhigulevskoye* and their third product was sold under original Czech name of *Karlův most* (most famous Prague Charles Bridge) also depicted on the label.

¹² Leninogor is officially called Akhhalgori by Georgia.

factories for production of silicon crystals, microchips or Kevlar-type para-aramid fibers (Strategiya ... 2013). This vision remains on paper only.

The economic downturn is an evidence of how difficult the path of independent development is for a country bordered by two states, having a completely closed boundary with one of them¹³. The country produces only few products for the population's consumption and has to import everything except some food. Virtually all "foreign" trade is realized with Russia, with only a tiny share (below 0.1% of the value of exports) being re-exported from Russia. South Ossetia, unlike Abkhazia, Artsakh and Transnistria, does not even attempt to penetrate commercially other countries through private entities. According to ALANIAinform, Bagjata mineral water is going to be exported to China (*Alaniya inform*) The same source also brought a report on negotiations with Iranian traders in June 2015. However, relations with Iran are still developing only at the cultural level given the linguistic allegiances of Ossetian and Persian. In 2009, the Ossetian-Persian faculty was opened at the South Ossetian State University with student exchange (Iran nameren ..., 2017). China's relations with South Ossetia have, on the other hand, remained sporadic. The fact is that China sent humanitarian aid in August 2008, but no more significant activities have gone on and direct relations do not exist. Prospectively, South Ossetia could benefit from the agreement concluded between North Ossetia-Alania and Sichuan Province in 2009 – a joint industrial park should bring 1,000 jobs to South Ossetia. However, this has remained only an uncertain perspective after 10 years (Bagaevev, 2015)

South Ossetia-Alania does not even have any economic contacts with the Latin American states of Venezuela and Nicaragua, which have recognized its independence in order to support Russia (which in turn supports the local pro-Russian regimes). Formal recognition by the oceanic Tuvalu did not last long,¹⁴ the question is how long the recognition from another microstate of Nauru will

¹³ By its location in a mountainous landscape between two states, South Ossetia can be compared to Andorra. Although Andorra is almost 9 times smaller and has about half the population, its GDP is almost 50 times higher. The service sector, which employs up to 95% of employees, is completely dominant (80%). Andorra lives mainly from tourism and has perfect relationships with both neighbors. South Ossetia is surrounded by Georgia from 80% and is connected with Russia by one road - the Transcaucasian highway. But it is often impassable in winter. The chances for the country to become a tourist center like Andorra are therefore minimal.

¹⁴ Tuvalu recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as promising Russia's financial support in 2011, but three years later, it established diplomatic relations with Georgia and recalled the recognition of the separatists.

hold. It acknowledged the South Ossetian independence as early as in 2009, and it soon turned out that Russia paid \$ 50 million for the socio-economic development of the small island in return for this move (Tiny Nauru..., 2009). The question of how long Nauru's recognition will last is in place because Nauru broke off international relations with the Republic of China in Taiwan in 2002 and established them with the People's Republic of China instead. This country gave Nauru \$ 60 million and promised to pay \$ 77 million in state debt. However, as soon as in 2005, Nauru again recognized Taiwan, which became the main sponsor of the impoverished island. Moreover, it has kept the position until today. The fact is that the current President **Baron Waqa** (the fourth since the act of recognition) visited Russia as the first president of Nauru, and met with South Ossetian President **Bibilov** in Moscow. It was the second head of state after **Vladimir Putin** who met with the highest South Ossetian representative. While President Waqa visited Abkhazia in person, he did not travel to South Ossetia-Alania because the small country does not have an airport (Panfilov, 2017). An agreement on economic cooperation was signed during the meeting; the question is what products the two small states can offer to each other with regard to transport costs (Panfilov, 2018). In January 2018, a small South Ossetian delegation flew to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the independence of Nauru in order to strengthen their relations.

According to Armenia Today, the independence of South Ossetia (as well as Abkhazia) was recognized by the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia in Moldova, the exiled government of the non-existent Serbian Krajina, as well as the Lebanese Shi'ite movement Hezbollah and the Palestinian Sunni Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip (Gagauziya i Serbskaya Kraina..., 2008). Mutual recognition of de facto states is certainly not surprising, as well as "recognition" by various movements aspiring to grasp power. Nevertheless, we are also faced with the fact that the decision-making process is also influenced by cultural and political aspects - Northern Cyprus has refrained from recognizing any entity in the post-Soviet space, because by recognizing Artsakh's independence it would have betrayed its patron Turkey and its ally Azerbaijan. Interesting was the attitude of Kosovo, which also unilaterally proclaimed independence in 2008 and gained a partial international recognition from 46 states until the date of

Russian recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia¹⁵. The then President **Fatmir Sejdiu** said that *"Kosovo cannot serve as an example for Russia to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia"* (Kosovo is Ossetiya ..., 2008). There is no unity in the European Union in recognition of Kosovo (its independence was not recognized by Slovakia, Romania, Greece, Spain and Cyprus), but the European Union remains united in rejecting the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In addition, if there are any unofficial reflections on a change of this approach, they are exclusively about Abkhazia (Clamadiu, 2017). It was expected that Taiwan would recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia just as it did in the case of Kosovo (two days after the proclamation of independence). This expectation was supported by the fact that the People's Republic of China publicly refused recognition of the de facto states of Caucasus. Although some signals came from Russia aiming at changing Taiwan's opinion, the Head of Representative Office in Moscow, **Antonio Chen** said in a talk about Taiwan-Russian relations for the Kommersant newspaper on November 10, 2011: *"Taiwan is ready for trade, economic and cultural cooperation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But as far as their political recognition is concerned, there has not been a mutual exchange of opinions on this issue yet"* (Taivan gotov ..., 2011). This statement has ended the issue and there has been no exchange of opinions.

South Ossetia-Alania differs from other post-Soviet de facto states in its sole recognition of the proclaimed independence of so-called People's Republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, and the local governments have reciprocally recognized its independence. This fact appeared to be a major obstacle to any further international recognition by other allies of Russia (Gukemukhov, 2018). Although new President **Bibilov** continues to work towards joining Russia, he said in April that it could not be done at the cost of a betrayal of its Donetsk and Luhansk allies (Bibilov: Yuzhnaya ..., 2018). A few months later, in August 2018, he appealed for a quick merger with Russia again by warning that if Ossetians are not connected within one state, it would have a very damaging effect on their further development (Anatoly Bibilov rasskazal ... 2018). He described establishing relations with the Republika Srpska as very successful in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the South Ossetian delegation was received by

¹⁵ As of 31 December 2018, Kosovo was recognized by 111 UN member states, the Republic of China in Taiwan, the Maltese Order and two non-member states of the United Nations, Niue and Cook Islands (two states - Burundi and Surinam have called off their recognition).

President **Milodar Dodik**, with whom they signed a cooperation agreement (Bibilov: Yuzhnaya ..., 2018). It is not without interest that Dodik is known as a supporter of the secession of the Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bibilov immediately started his international activities. The last international success has been the international recognition of South Ossetia-Alania by the Syrian regime of **Bashar Al-Assad** in May 2018. Bibilov personally flew to Syria and signed a treaty on mutual cooperation in the political, cultural, scientific, sporting and, of course economic and business sphere in Damascus (Asad i Bibilov ..., 2018). Bibilov's recent activities include an effort to penetrate the European Union. Moreover, he is aiming high – in August 2018 he invited German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** (Bibilov priglasil ..., 2018) for a visit and also expressed a hope that South Ossetia-Alania would finally host a visit of Russian President **Vladimir Putin**.

2 Strategy for the further development and demographic problems

In its development strategy, South Ossetia defines its primary goal to be recognized first in the post-Soviet area and later in "distant foreign countries", on "*the principle of mutual recognition, constructive cooperation and good neighbourhood*" (Strategiya..., 2013, p. 138). Emphasis is on cooperation with Russia, which first recognized the independence of South Ossetia and helped its economy. The economic policy emphasizes the development of the production of export products – building materials for the Caucasus region and fruit products (peaches, cherries, apples, nuts) for the post-Soviet region. Tourism (ethnic, extreme and health) is mentioned as a key to strengthening international relations. In addition, the need for branding is promoted – the promotion of brands that have a chance to prosper abroad (Ossetian cheeses and apples are named). In tourism, the promotion of Orthodoxy in the Caucasus region and preservation of churches of the 7th - 9th centuries (Tskhavat, Cirkol, Inaur etc.), the oldest existing settlement in the Caucasus (Tskhinval from 262 BC) and the Kudaro archaeological complex. From the above list of priorities, it is clear that South Ossetia has an absolutely marginal potential for international recognition in the economic sphere. Moreover, most of the indicators of further development listed in the strategy are calculated by a simple extrapolation and express the creators' wishes rather than a possible future reality. E.g. the GDP calculation for 2014, one year after the strategy

was issued, was overvalued by more than a third in comparison with reality.

South Ossetia-Alania is aware of the fact that it is a very small state – by its area it would be the 30th and by the number of inhabitants the 10th smallest country in the world. In the case of gross domestic product, however, South Ossetia-Alania, if granted international recognition, would have surpassed only Tuvalu¹⁶, which has five times less population and 150 times smaller size. The small dimensions of the economy naturally lead to the fact that both politicians and most people see their future in connection with Russia. The very disadvantageous geographical position contributes to such a belief. In the world, there are several states with a similarly closed position between two states (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Swaziland, Bhutan, Nepal and Mongolia), but South Ossetia-Alania has the disadvantage that one of the neighbours is the mother country from which it is separated by a closed border barrier that prevents economic contacts and effectively forces the country to co-operate with the other neighbour.

The strategy of integration with Russia is understandable with regard to the situation and the South Ossetian leaders are preparing for the accession. According to the law of April 4, 2012, Russians became equals with Ossetians, regardless of the fact that most Russians had left the country and only 610 (1.1% of the population) stayed to live there according to the 2015 census. Moreover, almost a sixth of them indicated Ossetian as their mother tongue, and out of all 265 couples in which the Russians live, only 13 are of a single nationality (i.e. 4.9%). And more than one seventh of them declare Ossetian as their native language (Table 5). After the war in 2008, most of Georgians left (or were expelled), and their share dropped from 29% to just 7.4%. Even in their case, the largest part of Georgian remained in SOA because they created mixed Georgian-Ossetian marriages. Of the 1164 couples, only 44.9% (523 couples) are purely Georgian. And according to the census, only 42 Georgians have kept Georgian citizenship. Almost 60% of all the Georgians live in the Leningor region (most of which was seized only in 2008), where they even slightly outnumber Ossetians (Table 3), while only five hundred remained in the Tskhinvali metropolis. Thus, the capital gained a significant Ossetian character with 94.3% of the Ossetian population. However, the dismal economic situation forced several tens of thousands of Ossetians to leave, and the population of

¹⁶ As already mentioned, South Ossetia-Alania's GDP is estimated at about \$ 100 million. GDP in Tuvalu was \$ 38 million in 2017, followed by Kiribati (180 million) and Nauru (182 million).

the country has declined by half compared to 1939 (when it exceeded a hundred thousand limit for the first and last time) (Table 4). Nevertheless, by the departure of members of minorities, Ossetians, who had previously amounted to about two thirds of the overall population, have reached 90%. However, the population decrease has other disastrous consequences. According to the 2013 report by **Gennady Kokoyev**, a member of the South Ossetian Parliament, the population is aging (this has been confirmed by the census); the qualification level is decreasing; the number of the unemployed is increasing; the health condition of the population is significantly deteriorating - compared to 2007 (the last year before the Russian invasion) to a two- to fourfold increase in occurrence of various serious diseases (Kokoyev, 2013). In addition, the tough socioeconomic situation is, of course, a fertile ground for corruption and the shadow economy.

Table 3: Ethnic structure of population by administrative regions (census 2015)

	Tskhinval city	%	Tskhinval district	%	Dzau district	%
Ossetians	28 712	94,3	7 391	94,8	6 148	93,6
Georgians	535	1,8	309	4,0	354	5,4
Russians	479	1,6	54	0,7	39	0,6
Armenians	339	1,4	8	0,1	12	0,2
altogether	30 432	100,0	7 793	100,0	6 567	100,0

	Znau district	%	Lenino-gor d.	%
Ossetians	4 051	89,4	1 844	43,8
Georgians	431	9,5	2 337	55,5
Russians	28	0,6	10	0,2
Armenians	10	0,2	9	0,2
altogether	4 531	100,0	4 209	100,0

Source: Author, based on *Itogi vsjeobščej perepisy naselenija Respubliki Južnaja Osetija 2015 goda*

Table 4: The development of population and the share of main ethnicity according to the census 1926-2015

census	1926	%	1939	%	1959	%	1970	%
altogether	87,4	100,0	106,1	100	96,8	100	99,4	100,0
Ossetians	60,4	69,1	72,3	68,1	63,7	65,8	66,1	66,5
Georgians	23,5	26,9	27,5	25,9	26,6	27,5	28,1	28,3
Russians	0,2	0,2	2,1	2,2	2,4	2,5	1,6	1,6

census	1979	%	1989	%	2015	%
altogether	98,0	100,0	98,5	100,0	53,5	100,0
Ossetians	65,1	66,4	65,2	66,2	48,1	89,9
Georgians	28,2	28,8	28,5	29,0	4,0	7,4
Russians	2,0	2,1	2,1	2,2	0,6	1,1

Source: Author, based on *Itogi vsjeobščej perepisy naselenija Respubliki Južnaja Osetija 2015 goda*

South Ossetia-Alania is specific in the fact that it harbours only a small part of Ossetians (less than 10%). Their majority is located in the Russian Federation, mainly in neighbouring North Ossetia-Alania. While this subject of the Russian Federation consists of the Ossetian population by 65%, in South Ossetia-Alania it is 90%, and the local Ossetians declare Ossetian language to be their mother tongue (see Table 5). In Europe, a similar model case of a "non-state" nation can be found in Spain, where there is an autonomous Basque Country with a Basque crossover to France. South Ossetia, however, constitutes less than a tenth of all Ossetians, so it is a paradox that this small community, together with Abkhazia, acquired the status of a state with partial international recognition.

Table 5: Mother languages of population of South Ossetia-Alania (census 2015)

	altogether	Ossetian	%	Russian	%	Georgian	%	Armenian	%
Ossetians	48 144	48 004	99,7	85	0,2	49	0,1	0	0,0
Georgians	3 966	323	8,1	43	1,1	3 598	90,7	0	0,0
Russians	610	96	15,7	508	83,3	4	0,7	0	0,0
Armenians	378	155	41,0	79	20,9	21	5,6	121	32,0

Source: Author, based on *Itogi vsjeobščej perepisy naselenija Respubliki Južnaja Osetija 2015 goda*

The geographical position between Georgia and Russia, the full economic dependence on Russia, and the dissatisfaction with Georgia's administration in the past are the main reasons for the vision of a merger with Russia. Moreover, a sociological survey carried out on 2 October 2011 clearly declares the effort to join Russia and connect with North Ossetia-Alania, although there were significantly fewer respondents for the merger (Table 6). Declared South Asian independence is completely formal, and although part of the population is opposed to joining Russia (there were anti-Russian demonstrations in 2011), the South Ossetian-Alani political representation does not have room for manoeuvring. In 2011, the country underwent a deep national crisis that arose after President Eduard Kokoity (born in 1964, he ceased to use the original Russian version of his name, Kokoyev, although his political orientation was profoundly pro-Russian) tried to push for a referendum which would allow him to run for re-election for the third time (which the South Ossetian constitution does not allow). However, the Supreme Court rejected the referendum. Kokoity was associated with extensive corruption, which was criticized by Alla Dzhioyeva, Minister of Education and Russian teacher (born 1949, Allæ Dzhioity¹⁷ in Ossetian), who was immediately removed from her function¹⁸. She was the leader of the opposition in the presidential election in November 2011, while Kokoity supported a professional soldier, Lieutenant-General Anatoly Bibilov (born in 1970, Bibylty in Ossetian). This was supported by the ruling parliamentary Unity Party and unofficially as well by the Russian leadership. In the competition of 17 candidates, Bibilov won the first round by just 14 votes, but Dzhioyeva won the second round. However, two days after the announcement of the victory, the Supreme Court annulled the results, saying that the Dzhioyeva's followers "threatened the free expression of the will of the citizens" (VS Yuzhnoy Osetii ..., 2011). However, Dzhioyeva appointed new members of the State Council and announced her inauguration on February 10, 2012. For the first decade of December, demonstrations were held in support of

¹⁷ Unlike Kokoity, other politicians continue to use the Russian forms of their surnames publicly, but Ossetian sources use Ossetian version.

¹⁸ She was subsequently accused of abuse of function and misappropriation - she spent two years under a house arrest and eventually was ineffectively sentenced to an unconditional punishment and a high fine. However, she appealed against this, and in 2012, after the election of L. Tibilov she even became the Deputy Prime Minister, and in the parliamentary elections of 2014, she was elected a member of parliament for the Nykhas party (the name evokes a traditional meeting place of representatives of the Ossetian municipalities).

Dzhioyeva, which were referred to as the Snow Revolution by her followers, because a lot of snow had fallen in those days (Frolov, 2011). This attempt to change the country ended with the resignation of Kokoity on December 10 and a compromise that neither Dzhioyeva nor Bibilov will run in the new presidential election. These were won by the consultant of the plenipotentiary deputy of the RJO President for the post-conflict settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian relations Leonid Tibilov (born 1952, Tybylty in Ossetian, graduated teacher of mathematics and physics, member of the KGB in 1981-1991, then the South Ossetia's Security Force Commander, Major General). Bibilov responded by leaving the ruling Unity Party which had been losing the public support and established a new party of United Ossetia, with which he won the Parliamentary elections in 2014 (see Table 7) and became the Prime Minister (Perevozkina & Avakov, 2017). From this position, he succeeded in winning the presidential election in 2017 in the first round. Although Tibilov visited all the villages in the country, his opponent had a strong party base. His corruption affairs appeared on Wikipedia (Panfilov, 2018) and that finally decided.

Table 6: A 2011 opinion survey on the unification of Ossetians into one political body

Answer	North Ossetia-Alania	South Ossetia-Alania
Agree	39,7	87,9
Rather agree	13,3	5,6
Neutral	23,0	3,1
Rather disagree	5,3	0,3
Disagree	14,1	2,1
Not sure	4,5	0,8

Source: Author, based on *Sotsiologicheskiy opros v Yuzhnoy Osetii: 86 procentov – za russkiy yazyk, 88 – za vossojedineniye*

It has to be added that Dzhioyeva did not intend to follow anti-Russian politics (as a minister she was an advocate of bilingual education of children). The less so Tibilov, who had been a member of the KGB. During his presidency, the Treaty on Alliance and Integration (*Dogovor mezhdru ...2015*) was concluded with Russia on March 15, 2015, which tied the country closer to Russia. A half a year after, in October 2015, the president announced in the press that in the following year he would propose a referendum on merger with Russia (*Prezident Yuzhnoy ...2015*). In April 2016, however, he announced a shift of the date of roughly a year, apparently under a pressure from Russia, which feared that the outcome of the referendum would significantly weaken the

position of pro-Russia oriented parties in the autumn parliamentary elections in Georgia¹⁹. The following year, the referendum was postponed again, this time indefinitely.

Table 7: Results of the parliamentary elections in South Ossetia in 2009 and 2014

	Year of foundation	Share of votes in % 2009 (number of seats)	Share of votes in % 2014 (number of seats)
Unity	2003	46,38 (17)	6,00 (0)
United Ossetia	2012	-	43,10 (20)
Nation's unity	2013	-	13,24 (6)
People's party	2003	22,58 (9)	9,08 (4)
Communist party	1993	22,25 (8)	4,39 (0)
Nykhas	2013	-	7,47 (4)

Source: Author, based on *Centralnaya izbiratel'naya komissia Respubliki Yuzhnaya Osetiya* - <http://cikruo.ru/>

3 Interesting developments in the Church

After the Georgian-Ossetian conflict associated with the break-up of the USSR in the last decade of the 20th century, most Ossetian believers refused to subordinate to the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). Ossetians therefore asked Moscow Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) **Alexei II** to take them under his jurisdiction and create an autonomous church structure for them, like in Belarus, Moldova or Ukraine. Although with the inauguration of President **Vladimir Putin** the Russian Orthodox Church has become an important part of enforcing Russian influence within so called soft power (Solik & Baar, 2017; Maliukevičius, 2017), in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia it preferred to follow the principles recognized by autocephalous Orthodox Churches - not to change canonical boundaries without the consent of the church concerned²⁰. In order to maintain

¹⁹ Only one party with pro-Russian orientation - the Georgian Patriots' Alliance – got in the parliament. With 5.01% of votes, it was given 6 mandates.

²⁰ However, this rule was commonly violated in the past by the Russian Orthodox Church. The consent of all canonical churches (there are 16 of them and they recognize each other) is also necessary for the creation of every new Orthodox Church, which leads to the fact that many Orthodox churches exist de facto (e.g. in Ukraine, Macedonia and Montenegro), but not de jure (the canonical churches simply do not recognize them). Moreover, in the past, the Russian Orthodox Church had been waiting for its recognition for more than a century (it broke away from the Constantinople Orthodox Church in 1448, but its autocephaly was not recognized until 1589).

good relations with the Georgian Orthodox Church, the ROC refused the request and recommended that the representatives of the Nicosia-Tskhinvali eparchy (NTE) discuss possible autonomy with the Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch **Ilia II**. This was rejected not only by the Georgian bishop of the NTE²¹, but also by most priests and believers of Ossetian origin. After the refusal by the ROC, they tried it with the non-canonical Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA), which complied with their demands. However, in 2001, after the retirement of ROCA Metropolitan **Vitali**, who did not trust the Moscow ROC, when **Lavr** became the new metropolitan, the ROCA started a rapprochement with the ROC. This culminated in the inclusion of the ROCA as an autonomous church within the ROC in 2007. Immediately after his inauguration, Lavr cancelled the decision of his predecessor to accept the South Ossetian eparchy, and the church leaders had to start looking for new possibilities.

The reaction of the Russian patriarch was surprising for many, but in principle, it was expected, because Patriarch **Alexei II** had rejected the same request from Abkhazia before the Ossetian demand. In the 1990s, the churches in the post-Soviet area were only recovering from long-term atheization policies, and moreover, Russia's and Georgia's relations improved significantly with former Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs **Eduard Shevardnadze's** taking the presidential office in Georgia. However, even after the inauguration of President **Putin** and the deterioration of Russian-Georgian relations, the attitude of the new Russian Patriarch **Kirill** has not changed. Indeed, the Russian patriarch was very cautious even after the annexation of the Crimea, in which he did not make any statement whether positive or negative. He refused to transfer the Crimean believers from the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (autonomous within the Russian Patriarchate) under the direct administration of Moscow.

The restraint of the Russian Orthodox Church is related to its entirely new ecclesiastical geopolitics. In the past, the ROC proceeded, in accordance with the state directive, towards a violent transfer of believers from annexed territories under its jurisdiction, within the traditional model of the Orthodox Churches, "one state, one church". In the conquered territories of the future states of Ukraine and Moldova, where believers fell under the Constantinople Orthodox Church (COC), they simply took the possessions of the COC and

²¹ The Nicosia-Tskhinvali eparchy continues to exist within the GOC in wider borders than South Ossetia-Alania.

(despite the protests of the Constantinople patriarch) transferred the believers under the Russian Patriarchate (Baar & Jakubek, 2017). After the annexation of Georgia, they even completely dissolved the GOC and incorporated its eparchies into the church's own structure (Hoch & Khunandze, 2017). During the communist period, this practice continued (for example, by the liquidation of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church), although for pragmatic reasons **Stalin** allowed a formal renewal of the Georgian Orthodox Church during the war (1943). With the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of new states with an Orthodox population, ROC tactics focused on the new "one church, multiple states" model. In the territory of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, autonomous "national" churches were established from the local eparchies, but they are still subject to the Russian patriarch (in Ukraine, however, they decided to establish an independent Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church with its own patriarch, which now competes with the aforementioned autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow patriarch).

After Abkhazians were rejected by the Russian patriarch with their request, they created their own Abkhaz Orthodox Church (Hoch & Khunandze, 2017). However, the Ossetian priests responded somewhat differently. Since in South Ossetia the idea of complete independence was not as strong as in Abkhazia, they did not unilaterally declare the autocephality of their own church, but sought help from other Orthodox churches. Because they realistically assessed that they would not receive support from any of the other official (canonical) autocephalous churches, they turned to one of the so-called non-canonical, old-calendar Orthodox Christian churches – the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece (the Holy Synod of the Opposition). This church agreed to their requests and accepted them as the Eparchy of Alania on November 17, 2005. Although the patriarchs in Tbilisi and Moscow reacted very negatively to this change, the Eparchy of Alania was officially registered by the South Ossetian Ministry of the Interior – the name of Alania was thus established in the church structure 12 years earlier than in the political sphere. Unlike Abkhazia, where some, mostly Russian, priests refused to submit to the new Orthodox structure²², there was no split within the Eparchy of Alania, which is undoubtedly due to the fact that the Russian minority in South Ossetia is absolutely marginal.

²² The split took place in 2011 when the Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia separated from the non-canonical Abkhaz Orthodox Church (Hoch & Khundadze, 2017).

Connection with the non-canonical church can be perceived as a step of the South Ossetian priests to forcing Russian Patriarch **Alexei II** to change his opinion on taking South Ossetia into his jurisdiction. After all, the first bishop of the Eparchy of Alania, **Georgi** (civilian name **Alyksandr Puchaty**) declared it publicly (Kublumbegov, 2011). However, the relations of priests at the episcopal level are very good, and it is common for the North Ossetian Vladikavkaz²³ and Alan eparchies to interfere in the church affairs in South Ossetia. However, in the spring of 2017, there was an interesting situation – the Synod of the Old Calendar Greek Orthodox Church approved of the creation of a separate Alanian Orthodox Church (Yugoosetinskaya Alanskaya eparchia ..., 2017). Logically, its autonomy has not been recognized by any of the canonical Orthodox churches; however it operates *de facto*, like the whole state, although not officially registered under the South Ossetian laws. Strongly pro-Russian President **Bibilov** made it clear that he does not like the new structure because he sees it as an obstacle to his goal of connecting the country to Russia. At his command, on 18 April 2018, the new Bishop **Ambrosios**²⁴ was deprived of his South Ossetian passport at the border (Chochiyeva 2018b). Subsequently, he visited the lower church representatives and persuaded them to seek again to enter the Russian Orthodox Church, respectively its autonomous ROCA (Dzhioyeva 2017). They have, however, denied, saying that Russian Patriarch **Kirill** has a very good relationship with the Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch **Ilia II** and cannot change the canonical boundaries. They pointed to the fact that in three churches in the Leninogor region, the mass is still served by priests of the Georgian Orthodox Church, who publicly designate South Ossetia-Alania as an occupied Georgian territory (Khuybiaty 2017). And also to the fact that a church of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is occasionally attended by President **Bibilov** (Dzhioyeva 2017), was built in Tskhinval a few years ago. The priests of the Alanian Church have said that they do not mind the existence of this church, but until the Russian Orthodox Church recognizes that South Ossetia-Alania is

²³ This eparchy has changed its name many times, and until 2012 it included not only the territory of North Ossetia-Alania, but also Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan (in all three cases with a totally marginal number of believers). Obviously, as a reaction to developments in South Ossetia, a reorganization was made on 26 December 2012, the eparchy was limited only to the territory of North Ossetia-Alania, and the adjective "Alanian" was also added to its name. It has to be added that the territory of South Ossetia is still the Nicosia-Tskhinvali eparchy within the Georgian Orthodox Church.

²⁴ Bishop Ambrosios was born in London as Adrian Baird and holds a British passport - a pretext for seizing the South Ossetian passport he received after replacing Bishop Georgi in 2011, who retired.

canonically not under the Georgian Church anymore, there is no point in asking to join ROC again (Chochiyeva, 2018b). In fact, the ROC did not transfer even the Crimean eparchies under its direct administration - they remain part of the autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Therefore, it is clear that the Alanian Orthodox Church is the only institution that does not officially follow Bibilov's policy towards joining Russia.

Conclusion

Estimating the future development of South Ossetia-Alania from the successes and failures of the de facto states' governments to date is relatively simple. From the view of international politics, the overwhelming majority of UN members insist on reintegration with Georgia, political, economic and cultural factors have long been working against such developments. With the support of Russia, South Ossetians managed not only to conquer the entire claimed territory, but as a result of war conflicts to almost completely homogenize the ethnic structure of the population. This, however, happened at the cost of a significant reduction in the absolute population, but with its strong resistance to returning to Georgia. Indeed, Georgia does not offer any acceptable version to Ossetians. The Georgian Constitution abolished South Ossetian autonomy and divided the territory into 4 administrative units, with the bulk of the area falling into the Inner Kartli area (*Shida Kartli*). In 2006-2007, an attempt to form an oppositional South Ossetian government in territories under Georgia's control failed, and the formal representative of the "Provisional Territorial Administrative Unit on the Territory of the Former South Ossetian Region," **Dmitry Sanakoyev** does not have any influence that goes beyond the walls of his modest office. South Ossetian politicians in the separated republic alternate in positions according to the results of more or less legitimate elections, and all winners promote their future connection to Russia. This is supported by a very large majority of the existing population (*Sotsiologicheskiy opros ...*, 2011). Of course, the expelled Georgians have a different opinion, but the possibilities of their return are rather in the realm of dreams. Russia has settled in this strategically important region, has enough military power to prevent any further attempt of Georgia to reintegrate it, and invests high sums of money every year in improving the infrastructure, electrification and gasification. Russia knows that South Ossetia-Alania has no chance but to cooperate. It formally recognized the country's independence and explains its support by fulfilling the wishes of local

people. The fact that in the past, in the case of the same wish of the Chechens, Russia had chosen a policy of a very hard destruction of the separatists, defended by a claim that it was protecting its own territorial integrity. Apparently, disturbing the territorial integrity of Georgia does not seem to be a problem. In addition, by the control of Georgian territories, Russia seeks to prevent this country from joining NATO. In addition, the same tactics is practiced against Ukraine and Moldova by supporting the separatists in Transnistria and Donbas.

Practice shows that when goodwill prevails between opposing parties, mutually beneficial business relationships can be built by creating various non-governmental non-profit organizations (Mirimanova, 2015). Unfortunately, the Georgian-South Ossetian relations have been frozen since the 2008 conflict and limited to sporadic visits of the Leninogor residents. However, business relations have ceased completely. The non-profit organization International Alert, supported by the European Union, is trying to find a platform for talks between the separatists and Georgian politicians, but faces widespread reluctance on both sides in the sense that "dealing with the enemy is inadmissible." This was probably the reason why South Ossetian President **Leonid Tibilov** did not succeed in defending his post in the first round of the March 2017 election because *"there were reports that some members of his team illegally traded with Georgia"* (Novyye podchody..., 2017). Much hope for the improvement of Ossetian-Georgian relations was put into the new Georgian Prime Minister **Giorgi Kvirikashvili** and the winning coalition of the Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia, which won for the second time in the last parliamentary elections in 2016. Kvirikashvili was a strong opponent of **Saakashvili's** policy, he even retired from politics and went into the business sphere after Saakashvili's Revolution of Roses to return back only after his 2012 defeat. In these elections, Georgian billionaire **Bidzina Ivanishvili** – the founder of the Georgian Dream coalition, triumphed. However, he personally remained in the practical politics as a prime minister for only 13 months, but he stayed as the chairman of the coalition and pushed for strengthening of the state's role in the economic sphere. Kvirikashvili did not like this and resigned from the post of prime minister in June 2018 (Premier-ministr Gruzii..., 2018). The responsibility for improving relations with South Ossetia-Alania was thus passed onto the new Prime Minister, the previous Minister of Finance **Mamuka Bakhtadze**. Whether he tries to break through a frozen conflict is a question of the future.

The situation is very similar on the South Ossetian side. President **Bibilov** clearly declares joining Russia as his priority objective. Formally, he is not

against negotiations with Georgia, however he conditions it by demands that are impossible to fulfil. In the backstage of the Petrograd Economic Forum in May 2018, he said: "*of course we are ready for direct communication, but there are conditions we present. First of all, Georgia must officially recognize that it was in fact Georgia who attacked Ossetia.*" (President ..., 2018). From these words, it is quite clear that Bibilov actually wants Georgia to recognize the independence of Ossetia. Which is totally unacceptable to Georgia – from Georgia's point of view, the country was legally trying to liberate its own territory, which had been unlawfully dominated by a group of separatists. It is certainly not surprising that the same source stressed that Bibilov had spoken for the remaining of Russian troops in South Ossetia.

For Russia, South Ossetia-Alania is strategically a key country because the highest quality road called the Transcaucasian Highway passes through. Direct control of its highest sections along with the deployment of military facilities allows Russia to keep Georgia in a constant tension. Russian politicians are also convinced that lost territories can prevent Georgia's entry into NATO. Although Ossetian mountain dwellers may not be enthusiastic about the post-Soviet heritage and the political system which is currently in power in Russia, their fears of living with Georgians completely offset these negatives. Links to Russia are strong also because according to the census of 2015, 82.2% of South Ossetia-Alania's citizens have dual citizenship, 5.1% have only Russian citizenship, and 4.6% say they have no citizenship. On the other hand, only 42 people had Georgian citizenship (0.08%). Altogether, South-Ossetian citizenship was given by 90.1% of all counted population (Itogi ..., 2016). To add to this, a whole new generation has already grown outside Georgia and was brought up in a spirit of hostility towards Georgians, who are being accused of Ossetian genocide, and thus it is unlikely that this generation would agree with reintegration with Georgia in the future. It remains only a matter of Russia's decision. Whether it meets the wishes of most of South Ossetians and accepts them in its federal structure, or leaves the small country in the state of partial international recognition.

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