

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Georgian Strategy Towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia

On January 28, 2010, the Georgian government released its “Strategy on Occupied Territories,” a report outlining Georgia’s game plan for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On February 22, Temur Yakobashvili, Minister of State for Reintegration of Georgia, and an orchestrator of the report, came to the Harriman Institute to elaborate on Georgia’s approach. “We have been looking back and trying to understand what happened with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but there is another obvious question, what is going to happen next?” The report attempts to provide an answer.

“We’ve come up with a human-centric strategy, which will address the needs of the people, not politicians,” stated the Minister. In light of this, the Georgian government has decided to shelve two emotional issues—status and security. Barnard Professor Alexander Cooley, the discussant for the event, commends this decision. “I would almost call it a breakthrough—actual engagement can’t take place unless the two sides set these questions aside.”

“Security is a matter between Georgia and Russia, and should be handled internationally, in the Geneva format,” Yakobashvili explained. “Since we are facing occupation, security (or insecurity) is provided by the occupying force.” The Minister regrets that Russia, whose tanks are in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has not adhered to its obligations under the cease-fire agreement signed in August 2008. He hopes that international peacekeepers will handle security in Abkhazia and South Ossetia without the use of Russian tanks. “Georgia is not looking for a military solution,” the Minister emphasized. “This would mean war with Russia, and no one wants that. At this point we should try something else.”

Cooley agrees with Yakobashvili about the importance of emphasizing the international nature of the conflict. He pointed out that in addition to the local and international realms, the conflict bears a transnational dimension. “It is geopolitical and the international community has to take part in the solution.” He advocates that as part of its strategy, Georgia should approach the international community with transnational issues

such as the potential environmental consequences of the Sochi Olympics.

Regarding status, Yakobashvili believes that the matter should be up to the residents of the occupied territories,—“and not only to those who claim to be separatists, but to the entire population—those who live there and those who have fled. It should be dealt with either after or alongside the repatriation of refugees.” The Minister contends that the population of the Tshkinvali region in South Ossetia has dropped to 12,000—“plus 6,000 or so Russian soldiers.” Before the war it had been around 70,000. “Half of the population, which was pro-Georgian, was expelled,” recounted Yakobashvili. He elaborated that many have continued to flee because of the dire economic conditions in South Ossetia. Tshkinvali is impoverished, “It costs \$10 to buy a tomato because you have to import it from Georgia—in order to do that you have to bribe your way through an infinite number of Russian checkpoints. The so-called Russian humanitarian aid has barely reached the region. People can’t live like this,” said the Minister, “that is why they just leave.”

The Georgian strategy, “compliments the non-recognition policy,” commented Yakobashvili, adding that Georgia “should be careful not to isolate the occupied territories,” because it will force them even further into Russia. Cooley concurs with the Minister on the importance of non-recognition. “It’s not a strategy—it’s what we should be doing.” He disclosed his opposition to the recognition of Kosovo’s independence, which he feels was “quite dangerous in the way it was formulated.”

According to Cooley, Russia, which has been offering economic aid packages to countries in exchange for recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, “is setting a dangerous precedent”—in December, Nauru, the smallest state in the international community, became the fourth nation to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after receiving a hefty aid package from Russia—Cooley lamented that “this

behavior further erodes the sovereignty regime,” which he would argue, “is on the brink.”

In efforts to engage the breakaway regions, the report focuses on issues such as healthcare, education, environment, infrastructure, and cultural heritage, “anything you can imagine,” boasted the Minister. He stressed that the strategy is “a collective document.” The Georgian government collaborated on the report with national and international experts, residents of the occupied territories, as well as the political opposition both inside and outside of the parliament. In addition to envisioning a strategy, the report outlines a means to implement it. “We have an action plan,” noted Yakobashvili.

Cooley prodded Yakobashvili about how far Georgia is willing to go in terms of engagement. “The international community doesn’t have a lot of leverage with Abkhazia and needs to develop more links—a carrot and stick reward strategy,” he said, wondering if Georgia would consider allowing travel on an Abkhaz passport, since most citizens have denounced their Georgian ones. Cooley stressed that this would not be recognition of independence, but a concession.

The Minister responded that in the case Abkhazian citizens would refuse to travel on Georgian passports, “we should find a third way—perhaps we can recognize some part of the documents issued, like birth certificates.” He assured that Georgia is “determined to find a solution,” adding that the government might issue travel documents selectively—to young people, or those in pursuit of education, “except if they want to study in Moscow.”

Georgia is working to publicize the document, “that is one of the major reasons I am here today,” the Minister said. So far he has traveled to Paris, and will be going to Brussels, London, Berlin and Ankara. “We want to familiarize five international organizations with our strategy—the EU, the Council of Europe, the UN, NATO and OSCE.”

*Reported by Masha Udensina-Brenner*