Chapter 13

Covid-19-Pandemic Measures in Conflict Zones in 2020 and 2021—The Case of the OSCE and South Ossetia in Georgia

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13.1 Background

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on ongoing political and societal transformations deserves closer attention in all areas of social science research. In this short entry, I will highlight the impact that the pandemic had in the conflict zone and occupied territory of South Ossetia in Georgia in 2020 and to what extent the absence of international organizations, such as the OSCE and the WHO, had an impact on the level of vulnerability of people living there.

The systematic interlinkage between international organizations and people living in occupied but non-recognized territories and conflict zone deserves more attention and needs more in-depth and comparative research.

In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate the case of South Ossetia, a conflict zone and a territory that has regularly claimed independence from Georgia since 1992. Despite the fact that Georgia is a country in which governmental authorities responded quickly to the needs of the people, there are regions in this small country that are being especially harmed by Covid-19. In this spirit, the main target of this research is the people who live near the administrative border in South Ossetia, a region on the border between the Russian Federation and Georgia. South Ossetia is only one of the two breakaway regions of the country. People living there have either Georgian or Russian citizenship and often perceive themselves as abandoned by the Georgian government. For example, locally, there is a lack of hygienic products, sanitation, primary care clinics, medicines and so on. People are often obliged to walk several kilometers in order to find a doctor or medicines, which during the pandemic has become a major challenge. Their social conditions had been bad and became worse in the midst of Covid-19. Such a state of affairs increases the perception of the vulnerability of the people living in the fragile and conflict torn region. In sum,

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it affects not only these people themselves but also the security of this region and of Georgia in general. Therefore, during the 2020 Pandemic people in South Ossetia were more affected than people in other regions. But how can both the impacts be measured?

13.2 Case Study

The first case of Covid-19 in Georgia was attested to on February 26, 2020. The new coronavirus is a serious threat to the economic development of Georgia, directly affecting the most vulnerable population in the country. Like other countries, Georgia faces a choice between economy and health care. Social distancing and a global lockdown, on the one hand, can help the country to tackle the pandemic and, on the other hand, limit economic activity and hinder the economic growth of Georgia.¹ All of these factors are especially sensitive for Georgian citizens living near the administrative border with South Ossetia, which is not officially recognized as a separate or independent state. The matter includes not only the actual context, composed of security issues, public policies and local problems, but also the background of the conflict situation in which the OSCE actively engaged until 2009.

Taking into account the developments in the conflict areas of Georgia, in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, especially after the OSCE mission and its observers left the occupied territories in May 2020, we have been testing the following hypotheses. First, I argue that during the Covid-19 pandemic, without the support of a neutral international organization such as the OSCE, the Georgian government was less able to handle the pandemic alongside the administrative borderline with South Ossetia. The OSCE monitoring mission in Tbilisi has no mandate and access to the Russian-occupied region and the staff was evacuated in May 2020 from South Ossetia, leaving a security vacuum. Second, I argue that collaboration with the OSCE mission would have been an important tool to handle the pandemic in order to gain access to the vulnerable and non-state protected population in that zone, namely those who do not see themselves as Georgian or who are non-Georgian citizens.

In order to understand the context and the essence of this research, one must ask the question, what has so far been the main role of the OSCE observer mission in South Ossetia and how did the withdrawal of the Mission staff worsen the situation of the local population along the occupation line?

The OSCE mission has been in the region for over 28 years since its launch in 1992, and was one of the first established by the newly founded OSCE in 1992. Thus, to test the impact and effects of the pandemic on the conflict situation without having OSCE observers and staff in the region, we apply qualitative methods, such as qualitative content analysis, and the case study method, in particular the segment of the

¹ Georgian Parliament Research Center (2020). "Possible impact of covid-19 on economy of Georgia". Accessed August 19, 2020. http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/136520/08_Viewpoint_2020-05-04_Covid_19_and_Georgian_economy.

population living along the administrative borderline that has no Georgian citizenship. I will also look into the OSCE OM mandates such as the political and military dimension of security, including conflict resolution, destruction of surplus stockpiles, assisting police reform and enhancing anti-terrorism capacities, strengthening border management capacities and security. Furthermore, the OSCE mandate includes the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are embedded in the human dimension policies of ODIHR, as well as the economic and environmental dimension of security and co-operation with other international organizations—even if the latter are also absent in the region.²

The research is principally conducted in an empirical way using facts, personal experiences, official and media reports, and context analysis. Certainly, especially regarding the situation of people living along the borderline with separatist South Ossetia, the present research outline has its significant limitations and constraints because of the certainty of analysis of the actual conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, this is due to the fact that all the data are not available at this moment—making it an important matter for future research papers.

13.3 Background

By the end of December 1990, Ossetian separatists backed by the Russian authorities decided to hold elections for the Supreme Council, centering around the arrangement of the Soviet Republic of South Ossetia. Naturally, the Georgian authorities considered this illegal and condemned such an aspiration because it was a serious threat to the territorial integrity of Georgia. On December 11, 1990, the Supreme Council of the Georgian Republic adopted the 363th law Regarding Abolishing the Autonomous District of South Ossetia, declaring that “the separatist forces in the Autonomous District of South Ossetia try to commit usurpation of the state authority by means of creating the so-called ‘Soviet Republic of South Ossetia’.”³ Shortly after, in 1992, the situation in the area of Georgian Ossetia became seriously strained. In May 1992, the so-called Supreme Council of South Ossetia adopted an act of state independence for South Ossetia. In the Russian parliament in Moscow, the Kremlin was aware of the need to make an immediate decision to search for a possible cease-fire and stop military actions in the conflict area. Following brief discussions, the Sochi Agreement was reached between the Russian Federation and Georgia in June of that year. The agreement became a certain guarantee for the further regulation of tensions between Georgian and Ossetian parties; many of the latter wanted to become a part of Russia or an independent country. The agreement was a cease-fire

² OSCE (2008). “Overview”. Accessed November 20, 2020. <https://www.osce.org/georgia-closed/43383>.

³ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2009). “Georgian Foreign Policy: The Quest for Sustainable Security”. Accessed August 20, 2020. <http://gip.ge/georgian-foreign-policy-the-quest-for-sustainable-security/>.

and did not mean that the conflict would be settled in favor of Georgia's territorial integrity. Rather, the situation deteriorated through the years and in 2008 the August War between Russian and Georgia was a culmination of Russia's foreign policies and for Georgia's further disintegration.

13.4 OSCE Mission in Georgia

The OSCE has worked in Georgia for almost 17 years, but its mission was suspended on January 1, 2009 because the 56 member states did not achieve a consensus to continue the mission mandate. Indeed, it was the result of a Russian endeavor—and a consequence of the August 2008 war—to not allow the OSCE representatives in the conflict zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead, the Russian government asked the OSCE to recognize the two breakaway regions as independent states after the Russia-Georgia August War in 2008. Russian deputy foreign minister Grigori Karasin stated that “What happened with the OSCE mission to [Georgia] and the UN Security Council resolution on the UN mission in the region is a supreme act of diplomatic cynicism... Our impression is that Tbilisi—and perhaps some other capitals—have decided to seek a solution to the problem in the waters of instability.”⁴ It seemed that the suspension of the OSCE mission in that part of Georgia was in the vital interests of Russian foreign policy in the region. The Georgian government responded and claimed that in August 2008 military observers of the OSCE had to suddenly leave the capital city of the autonomous district of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, and that this leave was very harmful to any peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. And up to now, they have not been able to return there. It was seen as a failure of conflict resolution on all sides because, as journalist Silvia Stöber stated, “all the OSCE's efforts over the years to build confidence between Ossetians and Georgians, to work together with international organizations to build up the economy and infrastructure, and to develop civil society were negated.”⁵ But the suspension of OSCE confidence-building efforts was the greatest loss for both Georgians and Ossetians. The then OSCE Chairman-in-Office at the time, Alexander Stubb, condemned Russia's policies and stated that “Russia should follow OSCE principles by respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. Russia should immediately withdraw all troops from Georgia and implement the cease-fire agreement, including the modalities defined in the 16 August letter of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The international community cannot accept unilaterally established buffer zones.”⁶ It was aggravated by the fact that “the South Ossetian

⁴ EurasiaNet (2009). “Georgia: OSCE terminates its 17-year Georgian mission”. Accessed August 21, 2020. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a532cc419.html> [accessed 21 August 2020].

⁵ Stöber (2011). “The Failure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia—What Remains?” OSCE Yearbook, 204. Accessed August 21, 2020. <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/10/Stoeber-en.pdf>.

⁶ OSCE (2008) (August 26). “OSCE chairman condemns Russia's recognition of South Ossetia, Abkhazia independence”. Accessed August 28, 2020. <https://www.osce.org/cio/50011>.

conflict, more than the Abkhazian conflict, was treated in Western capitals as a local problem and its potentially explosive nature underestimated.”⁷ The government in Tiflis however, considered Abkhazia and South Ossetia as two separatist regions that are part of the territory of Georgia. The cease-fire agreement adopted as of September 2008 was a supplementary document of an earlier Six-Point Agreement and provided for the continuation of the OSCE observers’ activity within the territory of South Ossetia like before August 2008, taking into account further corrections in their mandate. As a consequence, the Russian government blocked any possibility of continuation of the OSCE Mission mandate and aimed for “new realities” to be reflected in a new mandate, namely the recognition of the separatist regions’ as independent ones. Georgia, on the other hand, has stated ever since that it would be the equivalent to crossing the “red lines.”

13.5 Covid-19 and People Living Near the Administrative Border with So-Called South Ossetia

The Covid-19 pandemic hit strongly the people living in the capital city Tskhinvali. On May 10, 2020, two months after the first Covid-19 cases in Georgia, the self-declared authorities of South Ossetia closed their border with the Russian Federation and to Georgia. From the outset, the Georgian authorities did not trust coronavirus statistics both in Abkhazia and in so-called South Ossetia but had no access to the region. At the same time, in social media, many people from Tskhinvali reported on the deficiencies of the local health care system and did not trust doctors’ professionalism.⁸ It was assumed that several thousand had been infected and many people died.⁹ The International Crisis Group (ICG) published a report reviewing the coronavirus situation in these occupied territories of Georgia. As for Tskhinvali, the ICG mentioned that “South Ossetian authorities have even been reluctant to work with the WHO and other international organizations. Because these organizations are accused of collaborating with the Georgian government, the de facto leadership in Tskhinvali and elsewhere sees collaboration with the WHO as undermining their own demand for international recognition of the region’s independent status. Hence, South Ossetia arguably is at greatest risk and, as elsewhere, a significant part of the population, namely up to 20 per cent, is elderly. Hospitals are severely under-equipped. One of the few doctors in the region refused to work due to a lack of basic protective gear at the hospital. A local official said disinfectant was in short supply,

⁷ Eiff (2009). “The OSCE Mission to Georgia and the Status of South Ossetia”. OSCE Yearbook, 43. Accessed August 21, 2020. <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/08/Eiff-en.pdf>.

⁸ Radio Liberty (2020) (May 7). “11 infected in Tskhinvali, de facto Republic totally closes so-called border with Russia”. Accessed August 22, 2020.

⁹ Gukemukhovi (2020) (November 5). “Tskhinvali in terms of Russian Restrictions”. Accessed November 20, 2020. <https://netgazeti.ge/news/495540/>.

and de facto authorities have asked local clothing makers to sew masks and protective gowns for medics.”¹⁰ The issue is complicated due to political considerations because the de facto authorities worry that co-operation with officials arriving from government-controlled Georgia would undermine their claim to independence.”¹¹ Only in September 2020 did the Russian Federation provide supplies and medical aid to South Ossetia, but this step could not replace proper state policies to deal with the pandemic.¹² Officials from South Ossetia received help from Russia in October 2020 after the first wave of the pandemic, according to media agencies.¹³ There are no official data about infected people that could be investigated by international observers.

At the same time, one could also argue that the security vacuum and the ‘moderating role of the OSCE’ that was left behind since its withdrawal in March 2020 especially made it harder to respond to the needs of people during the pandemic despite the fact that some international organizations are actively engaged in the process.¹⁴ This may have increased the casualties and death rate of those affected by Covid-19 during the pandemic in the region.

In this way, the response of local authorities in Tskhinvali was very destructive and did not go in line with Georgian governmental policies. There has been no access to the sick and vulnerable people by international organizations, except for the International Red Cross that could irregularly distribute hygiene items and food. An especially vulnerable population was in the community of Akhagori, an adjacent municipality of the conflict zone between Georgia and South Ossetia. The place was in total isolation, and they did not have access to basic health care services.

The day-to-day conditions of people have dramatically worsened during the pandemic, and both improvement efforts by international organizations such as the OSCE or the Georgian government are far from being seen. In many villages, there is no pharmacy and food store. People walk several kilometers in order to buy products and necessities.¹⁵ In this matter, there are two examples of the villages of Tvaurebi and Odzisi. The Democracy Research Institute (DRI) reported that in Tvaurebi, there is no school or kindergarten in the village. The village has an outpatient clinic but does not have a pharmacy or a grocery store. People have to walk about four kilometers

¹⁰ International Crisis Group (2020) (May 7). “The Covid-19 challenge in post-Soviet breakaway statelets”. Accessed August 22, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/b89-covid-19-challenge-post-soviet-breakaway-statelets>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Russian News Agency TASS’ Russian medics arrive in South Ossetia to help it fight coronavirus ‘<https://tass.com/society/1202381>’ 28 September 2020.

¹³ Jam News ‘S. Ossetian officials turn to Russia for help following coronavirus outbreak’ <https://jam-news.net/coronavirus-south-ossetia-outbreak-russia/>, 29 October 2020.

¹⁴ Lomsadze (2020) (July 2). “UNICEF Helps Vulnerable Families Affected by Covid-19 Pandemic”. Accessed February 13, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/stories/unicef-helps-vulnerable-families-affected-covid-19-pandemic>.

¹⁵ Democracy Research Institute (2020) (June 26). “The needs of people living along the occupation line (Tvaurebi, Odzisi)”. Accessed August 23, 2020. <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/330>.

to buy essential products in another village of Lamiskana.¹⁶ The situation deteriorated during the pandemic when the administrative borders to Russia and Georgia were closed for months. As for the village of Odzisi, for example, it is reported that there is no pharmacy or shop, although it is possible to buy bread in several private houses. Locals have to go to a nearby village to buy food and other essentials.¹⁷ The 2020 pandemic worsened the situation in South Ossetia. Hence this case study only illustrates the failures and shortcomings of domestic vis-à-vis international politics in similar regions.

13.6 Consequences of Covid-19

To test the hypotheses on the interconnection or causal links between the absence of an OSCE mission (independent variable) since 2008 and the higher vulnerability of non-Georgian citizens (dependent variable) in South Ossetia, especially since 2019, during the Covid-19 pandemic, led to a higher number of people in risk near the administrative border with so-called South Ossetia. The pandemic has led to the evacuation of the OSCE mission due to health risks, and hence left a moderating vacuum that could have provided access to people in need during the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic can be measured by the absence of the OSCE and the rise of cases of Covid-19 affected people, and the day-to-day public needs, such as health and human security for people living near the occupation line. Security conditions deteriorated for the population near the so-called border with South Ossetia after the OSCE observers left the region, after Russia's recognition of South Ossetia, after Abkhazia's independence, and recently with the hardships of living along the occupation line during the Covid-19 pandemic. All of these lead to a cause-effect relationship in the conflict area situations before and after the OSCE mission evacuation.

13.7 Further Research

This case study illustrates how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected Georgian citizens and, in particular, those living in regions that are not internationally recognized, and to which international humanitarian aid either has no access or is totally absent there—it can be evidenced among people living along the occupation line with South Ossetia. Such a state of affairs is particularly harmful to those vulnerable people affected by conflict tension for years.

The effects of the pandemic are tangible in ordinary people's daily life even today. Responsibility for this situation can be found on all sides of the spectrum, including the governments involved, the de facto leadership, the international organizations and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

so on, not to mention the lack of attention from the central government of Georgia. It is the most vulnerable part of the population that suffers the consequence of not having access, in many cases, to water, food, health and other needs. There is no doubt that in 2008 the suspension of the OSCE mission to Georgia, and the evacuation in 2002 from the mission office in Tbilisi, largely influenced the conditions of people living along the occupation line, in a negative way of course. Other missions in the region, such as the European Union Monitoring Mission was not able to take these specific functions due to similar policies as the OSCE and because Russia is not a member of the EU.

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