

Russia and Georgia: How Did We Get There and What's Next? David Speedie Interviews Oksana Antonenko

Oksana Antonenko , David C. Speedie

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[Oksana Antonenko](#)

DAVID SPEEDIE: Good afternoon. I'm David Speedie, Senior Fellow and Director of the Global Engagement program here at Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in New York.

I'm delighted to have today as my guest an old friend, Oksana Antonenko, who is Senior Fellow for the Russia and Eurasia program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

Oksana, welcome to New York.

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Thank you. Nice to be here.



[David C. Speedie](#)

DAVID SPEEDIE: Delighted to have you.

Oksana, we are here today to talk primarily about the recent situation in Georgia, dating back to August, the August 7-8 events.

For those of us who would like to have a more balanced and nuanced view of these events, we see the need to put it in some kind of historical perspective. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your sense of the history, how we got to this point, and also very much interested in your own personal role in the recent history of this as part of the Track II discussions between the Georgians and South Ossetians. So can you give us a little bit of contextual analysis and insight?

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Yes.

I think it is important to start from actually talking about the Caucasus as the region. The Caucasus for centuries has been a place where different nationalities, different ethnic groups, with very different histories, have coincided side by side. It also was, of course, the place where both peace and war for centuries defined what the Caucasus really was all about.

Unfortunately, the Georgian-Ossetian relationship, which has a very long history dating back to centuries, went through various stages. Today, after this recent war on the 7th and 8th of August, we really are in the situation perhaps when this relationship is close to the complete breaking point.

But of course, this war which happened in August might have been very surprising and unexpected for a large part of the international community, but it most certainly was not surprising and unexpected for many people who had been watching this conflict for many years.

Just to give you some illustration of where we are coming from, the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict really started to a large extent early in the 20th century, after the collapse of the Russian empire and the emergence at that time of the first democratic Georgian state, which really existed only for a couple of years before the Red Army reincorporated it in the Soviet Union. This was when the first war between Georgia and South Ossetia had broken down. It really was an extremely bloody war. Thousands of people died from this war, and also many thousands died as a result of the war from disease and being refugees. So this is something which really left a deep sense of mistrust and damaged the relationship between the Ossetians and the Georgians.

Of course, during the Soviet period of time, the reconciliation had happened, very much just based on the fact that these two ethnic groups, Georgians and Ossetians, had to coincide side by side in the Soviet Union in the situation where ethnic differences did not exist, although the tensions to some extent continued on the ground.

But I think by the time the Soviet Union was breaking down, in the late-1980s/early-1990s, the Georgian-South Ossetian relations in fact were very good.

Just to illustrate to you that point, the largest percentage of intermarriages between two ethnic groups in the whole Soviet Union was between the Georgians and the Ossetians. They formed joint families. They visited each other. There was a real sense of friendship and community there.

But unfortunately, when the Soviet Union started to break down, this sense of community was interrupted again through a kind of violence which originated from two directions.

On the one hand, on the Georgian side, you probably remember very well how at the end of the Soviet time the Georgians were very much at the forefront of the independence movement, with a very strong sense of nationalism.

The first leadership of independent Georgia, President [Zviad Gamsakhurdia](#), was a very nationalist president, who basically declared "Georgia for the ethnic Georgians" slogan, which was very much supported by the population. So in that sense, the Ossetians once again remembered history and felt very uncomfortable in an environment where they as an ethnic minority perhaps could not be seen as playing an equally important role in Georgian affairs, seeing this nationalist government.

And at the same time, of course, there was a huge pull from across the North Caucasus, where Ossetians also reside, in the Republic of North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation. That is where the Ossetians wanted to reunite, wanted to develop a sense of the common people.

As a result, when the first referendum took place at the end of the Soviet Union, the Ossetians voted to stay as part of the Soviet Union, while of course Georgians voted to leave the Soviet Union.

DAVID SPEEDIE: So to some extent, the North/South Ossetian is an artificial parlance. I mean to talk of North Ossetians and South Ossetians is surely something rather artificial. It's something that happened when the Soviet Union collapsed and the North Ossetians found themselves within Russia, the North Caucasus and Russia, and the South Ossetians in Georgia.

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Yes. It is very hard to know when the South Ossetians appeared in the southern part of the Caucasus Mountains. The history—not commonly agreed but generally accepted history—is that they moved there in the 11th century after the Mongol Tatar invasion. But of course, since that time the Ossetians existed.

Within the Ossetian society, so to speak, there are three different communities, very much defined on the basis of the three gorges in which the Ossetians live, because it is a very mountainous area. So the South Ossetians, just one community was in the Ossetian ethnos, so to speak, and two others live in North Ossetia.

But of course, during the Russian empire for many centuries, and also during the Soviet Union, they didn't feel divided, because of course they were part of the same country. When Georgia went independent, Ossetians of course wanted at least to have greater autonomy.

Of course, then we had the second conflict, when the Georgians basically refused Ossetians rights for greater autonomy and moved in the paramilitaries and armed men. The war which broke out in 1992 and 1993 was again very bloody and left hundreds of people dead on both sides, and again left a tremendous scar on the relationship between the two nations.

Then we had for 15 years, after 1993, pretty much a situation where there was no peace, no war. There was no final agreement. The South Ossetians claimed that they were building an independent state. Of course, Georgians refused to recognize its independence and claimed them to be part of Georgia.

And of course, in the case of South Ossetia, as opposed to other separatist conflicts, it is particularly complicated by two factors.

First of all, within South Ossetia itself there is a real mixture of villages, some of them populated by Ossetians, some by the Georgians. The fact that the Georgians have not actually left South Ossetia after the conflict in the early 1990s really showed that although there was a situation of conflict, a kind of trust between the two peoples still existed there. So they still were able to live side by side, but that was a kind of a difficulty, which meant that the kind of instability continued.

And then, secondly, because there was this presence of North Ossetians on the northern side of the Caucasus Mountains and the relationship between the South Ossetians and the North Ossetians was developing throughout this period of time, with North Ossetians providing support and Russia providing of course very much support to

South Ossetia, that of course was seen by the Georgians in very negative terms, as though Russia was supporting separatism.

That support, I think, strengthened particularly after two events. The first one was the [Beslan school massacre](#), which of course was a terrible massacre which happened in North Ossetia when the terrorist group representing partly Chechyan, partly Ingush and other jihadi groups, had captured a school and taken hundreds of schoolchildren hostage. And then of course, the violence that broke out eventually led to more than 250 children being killed.

DAVID SPEEDIE: And the co-called rescue attempt.

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Yes, exactly, that's right.

That actually encouraged the wave of Ossetian nationalism. The Ossetians really went into soul searching, saying that, "How is it that 300 of our children died? We want to see our cause and our identity to be strengthened in the community, to be bringing together, to be able to go through that very difficult stage." That is when the links between North and South Ossetia strengthened particularly.

The second event was very much the fact that Russian-Georgian relations started to break down after the [Rose Revolution](#) in Georgia, when the new president of Georgia, who came in 2003, in the wave of a kind of democratic sentiment in Georgian society, initially very much came with the intent, I think, to—

DAVID SPEEDIE: This of course is [Saakashvili](#).

OKSANA ANTONENKO: President Saakashvili, yes, who came with the intent to kind of reaffirm Georgia's territorial integrity. But unfortunately, in the case of South Ossetia, this attempt very quickly, within months—and we are talking about the summer of 2004—had really resulted in an escalation of violence again on the ground in South Ossetia.

Luckily, at that time this violence lasted for a few days and it didn't escalate into a full-blown conflict. But it brought back memories of the 1992-1993 war. So we have another generation of Ossetians who, in a way, had almost forgotten about the war and had lived now for 15 years in the situation of relative stability on the ground—they had learned how to interact with their Georgian neighbors—but again went through yet another stage when they had to take up weapons and look at each other as enemies.

I think that was really the point when the trust really broke down, when the South Ossetians said, "If the first president of Georgia sent in troops and now the new president of Georgia again sent troops, how can we trust the Georgians to live in the same community?"

And the Georgians then for a number of years after that tried really hard to put on the table a number of the peace proposals for the Ossetians. But the problem with that was that many of those proposals were very much unilateral proposals. They were the proposals which were agreed with the international community, presented to the international community, but not those proposals that were agreed and presented to the Ossetian people. Therefore, oftentimes we believe that the Georgians were engaged in the peace process from their perspective, but from the Ossetian process they only saw that as kind of Georgia's attempt to impose their own settlement on the situation, and something which they resented very much.

This is where our initiative in the Track II peace process really started, because we saw an opportunity after 2004—when the situation was really escalating on the ground, when there was no trust, no dialogue; the official peace process was frozen, was really nonexistent—we saw an opportunity to provide the platform for informal exchange of views among the very influential policymakers on both sides. The people who were engaged in our process were not NGOs. They were mostly officials on both sides.

But that was a unique peace process which actually provided opportunity for a dialogue in a kind of bilateral format. So it was an opportunity to sit around a table for the Georgians and South Ossetians, with no third parties really present, apart from us, several people who were simply facilitators of this dialogue, and really discuss all the concerns that they had, put on the table any proposals they had, and try to find some ways and some issues on which they agreed. That was extremely difficult, I have to say.

DAVID SPEEDIE: So, if you can just say a little bit more about who were the "us" and how were you selected to this delicate task, and what went wrong four years later?

OKSANA ANTONENKO: I think for us it was quite clear that we could not provide the answer. That was just one of the platforms in which a dialogue was possible.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Provided the venue for discussion.

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Yes. That was a platform. That was a table around which the Georgians and the South Ossetians could sit to discuss whatever they wanted to discuss and really have a chance to, without a defined agenda, just to kind of discuss and share their views and their perceptions.

Of course, that could not represent a real negotiating platform, because of course it was clear that these negotiations cannot be structured on a purely bilateral basis. But these negotiations have to also involve a platform where these bilateral discussions take place.

As for us, this initiative really came out from the [International Institute for Strategic Studies](#). We were proposing as IISS to have this process. But luckily, IISS was supported by the European Union, which at that time only was starting to find its own niche, so to speak, and participating in the resolution of those protracted ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus.

At that time officially they were not really yet present around the negotiating table, but they had an opportunity to support some of those Track II initiatives. They had this instrument, which was called Rapid Response Mechanism, within the European Commission, and they supported and funded this dialogue.

We also did it in cooperation with the [OSCE](#) [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe], so the Chairman-in-Office at that time of the OSCE, a Slovenian Foreign Minister, Dr. [Dimitrij Rupel](#), hosted the first meeting in Slovenia, which was very interesting. It was in one of those castles. One belonged to the [Karadjordjević](#) family and later was [Tito's](#) summer residence. We had five days of discussions between the Georgians and the South Ossetians for the first time.

DAVID SPEEDIE: In beautiful [Lake Bled](#).

OKSANA ANTONENKO: It was very interesting. Near Lake Bled, yes, in Brdo. It was a very interesting setting.

The second round of meetings took place in Brussels. We had a chance to bring the Georgians and the South Ossetians together to meet with the European Union, with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and various think-tanks.

DAVID SPEEDIE: So this was Track II, but very much with an official stamp of approval and a relationship between the OSCE, EU, and IISS as the interlocutors?

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Yes, that's right. I think it was something which we called Track I-1/2, which meant really an informal peace process but on the level of the officials.

It was interesting that after these two meetings, which really in some sense were historic, because for many of the participants on both sides—and I would say particularly for the Georgians, because after the Rose Revolution we have seen a completely new generation of Georgians coming to power and taking on very responsible positions in the Georgian government, and those people really did not remember almost this war of 1992.

For them it was really difficult, I found throughout those meetings, to discover what kind of psychological trauma and baggage those conflicts really left on the Ossetian population, how much for them it not only became a personal tragedy for many people but also a myth for the whole nation about the suffering which they endured from the Georgians.

Yes, maybe some of those myths are really not proportional to reality— I mean some of them were extremely exaggerated; for example the Ossetians always talked about the genocide of the Ossetians by the Georgians, something which I suppose does not really fit the classical definition of genocide. But, in a sense, for many ethnic groups, particularly small ones like the Ossetians, the minority group, those myths are really sometimes more important than the truth.

I think for Georgians it was really important, in my opinion, to understand through that process the kind of deep sense of hurt which the Ossetians felt, and something which the Ossetians kept at that time bringing up again and again—"All that we want to hear from the Georgians is a kind of genuine acceptance of what happened in our history and a sense of genuine regret and kind of open condemnation of what has happened." This is really what they were seeking.

I think this is something that it was very unfortunate that the Georgians were not able to offer, because in a sense for this generation of the Georgian politicians that was a unique opportunity, because they themselves had not participated in that war. They were able to distance themselves and really offer that.

I remember this very interesting episode when the third round actually of this meeting happened and took place in North Ossetia, in Vladikavkaz. I brought at that time a delegation of ten Georgian officials to come and visit the refugee camps where the Ossetians were living, those Ossetians who left in the early 1990s.

For 15 years there was not a single Georgian official who simply visited those people. Those people still lived in those horrible refugee camps. For them to see Georgians simply coming to the refugee camp and wanting to talk to them, engage in discussion, was such a sense of kind of historic justice and something which they really welcomed. There was no sense of animosity. There was no kind of confrontation. It was just a conversation which those people had been longing for for 15 years.

It was very important from my point of view that out of our process what really came out is that the Georgian Parliament eventually adopted the restitution law, with also support of the Council of Europe, the Venice Commission, which provided kind of legal advice on this draft law. But eventually it was passed in 2006 by the Georgian Parliament. That was basically a law which accepted the responsibility of the Georgians for all those refugees and basically, in principle, provided a path towards helping those people to return back home.

That, from my point of view, could have been a great opportunity for Georgians to start really healing those deep psychological wounds that existed in this conflict, and maybe moving on to slowly starting to build trust, and as a result of that really reconciliation and conflict resolution. But unfortunately, since 2006, this law has really never been implemented. It was passed, but not a single step was made to actually start implementing that.

Now, after the war started now the third time in the last 15 years, I think we probably have lost any prospects of the Ossetians being able to accept Georgians now as part of their community for a long time.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Let me shift gears, if I may, to the question of Russia's role, and certainly the notion of the U.S. view or the West's view of Russia's role. I'd be interested also if the view that you see here is different from the view from Europe. I suspect that may depend where in Europe you are.

Clearly, on the one hand, immediately after there was this sort of rush to say this is yet another bullying tactic by the Russians, that jackboot coming down on poor, defenseless, young, democratic Georgia. So it was hardly, to use the term again, a nuanced view of how even the events of the 7th and 8th had come about.

Of late there has been more, even in Washington, a sense that it would be shortsighted and foolish to "punish" Russia for whatever happened, however it happened.

How do you see this playing out in the longer term upon maybe more a sober reflection on the events of the 7th and 8th in terms of the West in relations with Russia? Any deleterious effect? Anything that can be built upon in a more constructive way? How do you see that playing out?

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Well, this is quite a difficult question, I think, partly from my point of view because we are still at the stage where there are kind of diametrically opposed perceptions of what really happened on the side of the Russians and on the side of many Western governments.

From the Russian perspective—and I had a chance to speak to many Russian policymakers, including Prime Minister [Putin](#), but also Russian analysts on that repeatedly in the last month—I have to say that they see it as Russia that was attacked. For them what Georgia did in South Ossetia was really in many ways equal to an attack on Russia. Of course, that attack does not mean that the Georgians have attacked Russian territory.

What it really meant for Russians to see Georgians attacking their peacekeepers, who were killed of course in the first hours of this war before Russia sent their troops there, but also attacking the population of the Ossetians, many of whom have had Russian passports and in a way were in a close relationship with Russia, was seen as an attack not only of the South Ossetians by the Georgians but on Russia itself.

In that sense, Russians are deeply resentful and hurt again by the kind of Western reaction, which only presented this crisis as a kind of Russian attack on Georgia, but completely, completely ignored the fact that before Russia introduced forces into Georgia, Russian peacekeepers and the population of South Ossetia were attacked by the Georgians.

I think for them this kind of reaction—and Russian officials, including President [Medvedev](#), constantly say that "that was our 9/11, that was something which kind of galvanized—"

DAVID SPEEDIE: [Lavrov](#) said the same thing in New York about a month ago.

OKSANA ANTONENKO: Yes. And that is something which galvanized the kind of public attitudes all across Russia and galvanized the public outcry over this tragedy.

At the same time, of course, in the West the way this crisis is perceived is that "Well, maybe the Georgians started it, but certainly they started it because Russia set up a trap and the Georgians walked into this trap."

So for them it doesn't really matter who started the conflict; what really matters is that at the end it was the Russians who sent the troops into Georgia, et cetera, and it is Russians who basically went too far, who had a very disproportionate response, and who to a large extent undermined Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and basically committed an aggression on its neighbor—which of course is also true, because certainly Russia has sent its troops beyond South Ossetia and Abkhazia, has occupied parts of Georgia, has bombed Georgia outside of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and certainly stayed there for a very long time.

I think, of course, both Russians and the Western governments have a point. But the problem is that it is now time to start recognizing the full picture.

Russians have to recognize that yes, they were attacked, but they went too far in responding, their response was disproportionate, and therefore it provoked that mistrust and opposition from the West.

And for the international community, for the United States and Europe, it is very important to also start to acknowledge the way this conflict really started—it started from the ethnic conflict between the Georgians and South Ossetians, which has a long history, and at the same time also it started with the Georgian aggression—and therefore it is very important to make sure it doesn't happen again, that now we have to find a way for the Georgians and the South Ossetian Georgians and the Abkhaz to resolve their relationship under the new circumstances, when Russia has recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

So in that sense, if one summarizes, there is a kind of different picture. The policy choices that are being made are made on the kind of perceptions that are being perpetuated by the press and by the public discourse. I see that in the future, though, we have a chance to move beyond that crisis and looking ahead.

And if we are starting looking ahead, I think one task is to set up an independent commission, which should have enough credibility both in Russia and in the West to be able to investigate and to put together a clear fact-finding report on what happened, how this crisis happened. We need almost an hour-by-hour account to be able to provide a commonly agreed discourse on this crisis so we can reconcile these two positions.

But if we look forward, it is absolutely obvious that whatever is now going to be developed as a kind of peace process in the South Caucasus cannot be done without participation of both Russia and the United States and the international community, be it the European Union, the OSCE, or the United Nations.

Therefore, it is very important, in my opinion, as we are looking forward to find a way to overcome the divisions and the confrontations which have emerged now in the last couple of months, and try to set up a common plan, a common vision, because if we fail to do that, what I am afraid is going to happen is that we will create an environment in which the instability is going to continue.

We already see now in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia and in the adjacent areas of Georgian regions violence almost on a daily basis. I think this violence is going to continue, and I think it will really create a problem, both for the West and for Russia, to be able to control the situation on the ground. I think if those divisions will persist in Russia and the West, this conflict is going to continue to escalate, and sooner or later it could lead to another wave of violence.

DAVID SPEEDIE: On that both sobering but forward-looking note, thank you, Oksana. The time has gone by altogether too quickly.

Again, our guest has been Oksana Antonenko, Senior Fellow at IISS. Thank you for the view from London. Enjoy your time in New York. Thank you, Oksana.

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