

# The Republic of South Ossetia in the Context of Regional Security Threats

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes the security problems in the South Caucasus. The emphasis is placed on the key security threats to the Republic of South Ossetia, which is actually in a state of latent conflict with Georgia. The article uses the method of situational analysis (sitanalysis), which involves considering the problem at the applied level, identifying all the factors that influence the formation of the situation. The author considers that the most important part of the situational analysis is the development of practical recommendations in order to implement a favorable forecast and, if possible, avoid an unfavorable course of events.

According to the author's main conclusions, the Republic of South Ossetia is currently facing a number of serious external threats to its national security in the South Caucasus. The existing threats, challenges and risks for South Ossetia in the South Caucasus region tend to increase, both in local and regional variants. According to the author, efforts should continue to create a sustainable security architecture in the South Caucasus in order to prevent any violent scenarios for resolving existing contradictions and achieving sustainable peace and stability in the region.

**Keywords:** South Ossetia, security threats, regional security system, growth of military spendings, cooperation with NATO, Georgia, political struggle

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## Introduction

Newly formed states face internal and external threats. Among external threats, the most significant are threats to national security, emanating from the immediate surroundings of these states or the region as a whole. External threats create obstacles

not only for regional stability, but also for internal nation-state building, since they divert internal resources of new states to ensuring security. Security threats are one of the most significant problems in the South Caucasus region, which has many contradictions of different levels and natures.

## Materials and Methods

South Caucasus regional threats have long been the subject of close attention and analysis in the domestic and foreign expert community. At various times, these problems were written about by R.Arzumanyan, G.P.Grigoryan, V.V.Denisov, A.K.Dudayti, S.M.Ivanov, D.B.Malyшева, S.A.Markov, G.Novikova, S.A.Ragozina, G.V.Lukyanov, A.Rondeli, Thomas de Waal and others. By general recognition of experts, the security situation in the South Caucasus is not simple. According to G.Novikova, "it should be noted that the situation in the South Caucasus is more than dangerous. The aggravation of insecurity in the zone of any of the conflicts will entail a chain reaction in the entire region"<sup>1</sup>.

The abovementioned problems are also typical for the Republic of South Ossetia, which has been facing external threats to its national security since its formation. In this regard, the question of what threats does the Republic of South Ossetia face in the context of modern political processes in the South Caucasus is of scientific and applied interest.

The article uses the method of situational analysis, which involves identifying all the factors that influence the formation of a specific situation. Situational analysis, as a rule, is aimed at predicting the development of the situation in the near, medium and long term. The author believes that the most important part of situational analysis is the development of practical recommendations in order to implement a favorable forecast and, if possible, avoid an unfavorable course of events.

## Results

### Lack of a regional security system in the South Caucasus

One of the most serious threats to South Ossetia is the lack of a regional security system in the South Caucasus. The creation of such a system is especially relevant after the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, which led to the actual liquidation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was resolved through violence. And this happened when the entire world community is leaning towards peaceful and non-violent schemes for resolving interethnic conflicts. The use of violence, successful for the party that used it, calls

<sup>1</sup> Novikova G. On the brink of war. Or the growth of the security deficit in the South Caucasus. Available from: <https://spectrum.am/ru/article/on-the-verge-of-war-or-increasing-security-deficit-in-the-south-caucasus/>.

into question the need and legitimacy of using a whole range of peacekeeping and conflict management practices that have already been developed, aimed at finding compromises, developing models for managing ethnic conflicts, and are actively used in various regions of the world. Any violent scenarios for resolving interethnic contradictions are accompanied by a huge number of human casualties on both sides, which is not justified in any way.

On the other hand, the liquidation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic by military means creates an unfavorable and dangerous precedent for all unrecognized and partially recognized states, when for the first time in the post-Soviet space the conflict between the right to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity of the state was resolved in favor of the latter.

After the Karabakh events in the former Soviet republics, in particular in Georgia, opinions began to be openly expressed that if the issue could be resolved in this way in Karabakh, then why can't it be done in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. If such opinions are already openly expressed in the sphere of public policy, then it is logical to assume that they can be actively discussed in the political corridors, where political decisions are made. Therefore, there is a potential danger of duplicating the Karabakh scenario in these republics.

The urgency of creating a regional security system in the South Caucasus is also due to another important factor. The South Caucasus is a complex region in geopolitical, religious, and ethno-political terms, with a large number of contradictions, both modern and past.

On the one hand, there are many political and ethnic entities here. Each of them adheres to its own security concepts, formulated at the expense of the security of others, and builds its own model of relationships with neighbors. On the other hand, there are external actors at the regional and global level in the region, actively participating in regional political processes, playing their own game.

In addition, the South Caucasus is a region of open conflicts, a whole "bouquet" of latent conflicts, which, under certain circumstances, threaten to move into an open phase and create serious threats both at the local and regional levels. The region can quickly approach a critical point, when an ill-considered political step can lead to avalanche-like processes that can get out of control. No one can calculate the consequences of their steps. According to D.B. Malyшева, "the volatile situation in the region, the uncertainty and unpredictability of the internal political development of the Caucasian republics, the presence of unresolved conflicts and, finally, the prospect of extracting energy resources from the Caspian oil fields are turning the Caucasus into an arena of geopolitical rivalry, which means that stability is still very far away" [15].

It cannot be said that there have been no practical proposals for the creation of a regional security system in the South Caucasus for many years. There were quite a few in the 1990s and 2000s. All of them were built according to a certain arithmetic scheme. Thus, following the five-day war in South Ossetia, the so-called five-digit Turkish initiative "Russian-Turkish Platform 2008 (3+2)" was formulated and proposed – three South Caucasus states plus Turkey and Russia. The "Seven-digit Iranian Initiative (3+3+1)" was put on the

agenda – three South Caucasus states plus neighboring countries (Iran, Turkey and Russia) and the EU. Expert proposals were made in the format of 12 participants (3+3+3+2+1) – three recognized states of the South Caucasus, three new states of the South Caucasus (South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the People's Karabakh Republic), three neighboring states (Russia, Iran and Turkey), 2 – the EU and the USA, 1 – China. In the context of China's growing geopolitical power, the expansion of its role in global and regional politics, this country is beginning to play an increasingly active role in the South Caucasus.

However, none of the proposed initiatives were implemented in practice.

### Militarization of Georgia

Another major threat to South Ossetia is the ongoing militarization of Georgia. South Ossetia is concerned about the lack of a peace and non-aggression treaty with Georgia. The talks held in Geneva since 2008 (more than 50 rounds) between Russia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the United States and mediated by special representatives of the UN, EU and OSCE have not yielded results. Work is traditionally conducted in two working groups – on security and on humanitarian issues. The Geneva discussions remain the only platform for dialogue between Sukhumi, Tskhinvali and Tbilisi. Until now, the Georgian side has refused to sign a peace treaty with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, continuing to consider them “territories occupied by Russia”. This effectively means that both South Ossetia and Abkhazia continue to be in a state of war with Georgia, at least de jure.

Military spending in Georgia is growing rapidly. It began to grow back in 2001 under E. Shevardnadze. At first, the growth rates were relatively modest: 27% in 2001, 14.3% in 2002, 11.7% in 2003, 14% in 2004. The record year was 2005 – 165.5% growth! After that, the rates slowed: 69% in 2006 and 63% in 2007. In 2021, Georgia's military budget was \$290 million. In 2022 – \$322 million. In 2022, defense spending in Georgia increased by \$32 million, or 9% compared to the previous year. In 2023, Georgia's defense budget was \$450 million, which is \$128 million more than in 2022. According to the 2024 budget, funding for the country's Defense Ministry, Interior Ministry, and State Security Service will increase by 254 million lari (more than \$94 million). The parliamentary vote on the budget was 83 for and 0 against. The budget of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia in 2024 will be 1.38 billion lari (\$511 million), which is 110 million lari (\$40 million) more than in 2023. For the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2024, the authorities decided to allocate funds in the amount of 1.26 billion lari (\$466 million), which is 114 million lari (\$42 million) more than in 2023. The budget of the State Security Service of Georgia in 2024 will be 210 million lari (\$78 million). This is 30 million lari (\$11 million) more than in 2023.<sup>2</sup>

The Georgian political elite remains dissatisfied with the growth of the country's military spending. According to the commentary of Finance Minister L.Khutsishvili, Georgia's defense budget does not meet the challenges the country faces. Chairman of

<sup>2</sup> The Georgian Parliament has adopted a budget with an increase in spending on security forces by \$94 million in 2024. Available from: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19546639?ysclid=lvobqs3a5e136988112>.

the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security I.Beraya said during the committee hearings of the draft state budget of Georgia: “In order to effectively defend and contain existing threats, Georgia needs combat-ready, mobile and NATO-compatible defense forces, for which it is important to increase the defense budget”<sup>3</sup>. Deputy Chairman of the Georgian Parliamentary Committee on Defense and National Security V.Chachibaia called these expenses insufficient so that “no one would even think of hatching aggressive plans against Georgia”<sup>4</sup>. According to him, at least another \$97 million is needed for defense. The argument is based on NATO standards. According to the draft budget for 2023, the defense budget will be 1.58% of Georgia's GDP, while according to NATO standards, the defense budget should be at least 2% of the country's GDP. The NATO standard also stipulates that at least 20% of the defense budget should be spent on developing defense capabilities, while in Georgia's draft budget for 2023, only 13.84% of the defense budget is allocated for this area.

### Expanding Georgia's cooperation with NATO

The third threat to South Ossetia remains Georgia's cooperation with NATO and the United States. Georgia maintains its foreign policy orientation toward Europe and the United States. The United States, in turn, continues to consider Georgia its foreign policy priority in the region. According to the Atlantic Council's 2022–2023 Global Strategy, Georgia has been subjected to “Russian aggression” and needs practical assistance. It is emphasized that “Moscow's expansion” has not received a proper response from Georgia and it is time to change this. According to this document, “to further strengthen Georgia's security, Washington should deploy American infrastructure (logistics, equipment, airfield) for use by the US. Air Force. This is clearly not enough to create an American base, but it will ensure the presence of the US. Air Force in Georgia”<sup>5</sup>. NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia says NATO continues close political dialogue with Georgia: “Thanks to this cooperation, which has been further strengthened over many years, Georgia's defence forces are more capable and interoperable with NATO than ever before”<sup>6</sup>.

Georgia is an active participant in all NATO programs aimed at gradually involving new countries in the alliance. There is talk about liberalizing NATO accession procedures, creating simplified mechanisms, as in the case of Montenegro, which joined NATO through a parliamentary decision, and not a national referendum. There are high-level contacts with NATO and joint exercises.

<sup>3</sup> Tbilisi has announced the need to increase the military budget. Available from: <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2021/10/15/v-tbilisi-zayavili-o-neobhodimosti-velicheniya-voennogo-byudzheta>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> NATO continues close political dialogue with Georgia as its closest and long-standing partner – Secretary General's Special Representative. Available from: <https://www.trend.az/scaucasus/georgia/3551618.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

In March 2022, the Georgia-NATO command and staff exercises were held near Tbilisi for the third time. The Georgian side took full control of the exercises. The military personnel worked out the planning of the alliance's military operations using simulators. NATO members and partners took part in the maneuvers. In total, more than 20 NATO countries and partners were involved in the exercises.

In August-September 2023, large-scale military exercises "Agile Spirit" were held on the territory of Georgia. They involved 3.6 thousand military personnel from 22 NATO member states and partners of the North Atlantic bloc. Agile Spirit is being held in the country for the eleventh time, but these exercises were unique in their scale and territorial scope. They were held for the first time in both Eastern and Western Georgia. In addition, some tasks were practiced in the waters of the Georgian port of Poti together with the Georgian Coast Guard. The exercises began with the landing of servicemen from the 173rd Brigade of the US Armed Forces in Europe on the former Russian military airfield Vaziani (in the suburbs of Tbilisi), where the NATO-Georgia Joint Training Center is now located. The scenario of the exercises was a simulated invasion of a simulated enemy, field exercises with live fire, joint operations of special forces and military doctors were held. According to the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, the exercises "Agile Spirit 2023" were aimed at increasing the operational interoperability between the Georgian Defense Forces, the Joint Forces of the United States, allies and partner forces at the tactical level, improving and strengthening operational capabilities in planning and conducting operations in a multinational environment.

In March 2024, Georgia hosted a two-week military exercise, Trojan Trail 2024, which brought together servicemen from Georgia, the United States, and NATO member states. The exercises included land and sea exercises in the eastern and western parts of Georgia. The goal of the exercises was to exchange experiences between the countries and improve combat training. Trojan Trail 2024 was aimed at enhancing interoperability between the participating countries. This was the third time that the Georgian Defense Forces participated in the multinational exercise. Trojan Trail was led by the United States Special Operations Command Europe. This year, Georgia and the United States will reportedly hold another joint exercise, Noble Partner, which will be held in the country for the seventh time. According to the International Republican Institute, 79% of Georgians surveyed support the country's accession to NATO.

### Internal political struggle in Georgia

The growing internal political struggle in Georgia should be recognized as a threat factor for South Ossetia. A characteristic feature is the promotion of the ethno-national card. The Georgian political opposition actively uses slogans taken from the 1990s about the return of the "lost" territories in the political struggle. And these slogans ("Su-khu-mi, Tskhin-va-li", "Abkhazia is Georgia", "Samamchablo is Georgia") find support in various strata of the population who retain faith in the need for the violent return of these territories. A new wave of ethno-nationalism from the time of Gamsakhurdia is growing in

Georgia. Fortunately, the political ratings of nationalists lag behind the ratings of the ruling "Georgian Dream" in a ratio of 1:2, but the use of "color" technologies once again cannot be ruled out. If the United National Movement manages to come to power in Georgia, this could lead to another outbreak of violence in the region.

## Conclusions

According to the general opinion of experts, it is not "regional arithmetic" that will work in the South Caucasus, but "regional algebra". According to R.Arzumanyan, "at best, projects reflect not only arithmetic, but also multidirectional vectors in the domestic and foreign policies of actors, when it becomes appropriate to talk about "regional algebra", which also does not stand the test of reality, forcing us to speak and reason not in terms of static structures and architecture, but a dynamic picture and processes in a complex nonlinear system"<sup>7</sup>. As R.Arzumanyan writes, "it is necessary to come to terms with the fact that there are no simple solutions in the South Caucasus and the thesis of strategists is correct that any complex problem has a simple, clear and wrong solution."<sup>8</sup> According to experts, in this situation, applied policy should be based on the principle of basic common sense ("do no harm"), and, first of all, avoid decisions that could contribute to instability and chaos in the region.

In this regard, representatives of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Russia participating in the Geneva discussions on April 4-5, 2024, expressed concern about the growing NATO presence on the territory of Georgia and the build-up of military training activities and the intensification of measures to integrate Georgia into the North Atlantic military alliance. At the same time, the South Ossetian delegation emphasized the need to continue marking the line of the South Ossetian-Georgian border and installing engineering structures on this line and once again called on the Georgian side to work together on the delimitation and demarcation of the state border between South Ossetia and Georgia. The participants in the discussions noted the contradictory approaches of the parties to the development of a document on the non-use of force, but the South Ossetian participants called for continued work in this area, which is key to the goals of the Geneva format.

To summarize the above, we note the main points:

1. The Republic of South Ossetia faces a number of serious external threats to its national security in the South Caucasus.
2. The existing local and regional threats, challenges and risks for South Ossetia in the South Caucasus region are growing.

<sup>7</sup> Arzumanyan R. The regional security system of the South Caucasus and problems of sovereignty. Available from: <https://theanalyticon.com/ru/новости/система-региональной-безопасности-ю/>.

<sup>8</sup> Arzumanyan R. Armenian-Turkish relations through the prism of the regional security system of the South Caucasus. Available from: [http://www.noravank.am/rus/issues/detail.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=4604](http://www.noravank.am/rus/issues/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=4604).



3. Efforts should be continued to create sustainable security in the South Caucasus in order to prevent any violent options for resolving contradictions and achieving sustainable peace and stability in the region.

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