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## THE OCCUPATION LINE – RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY INSTRUMENT AGAINST GEORGIA

TORNIKE TURMANIDZE

89

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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After the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, the main problem for Georgia's national security is the military occupation of almost 20 percent of its territory by Russia. The attempts by the Russian occupying forces to demarcate the so-called "state borders" of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/"South Ossetia" is a part of this problem as well its consequence. Of course, the occupation line will not disappear unless the occupation itself is over. However, it is still possible to discuss the issue of the occupation line separately as one of the aspects of the Russian military occupation of Georgian territories. This is especially true since Russia has been occasionally moving the occupation line forward, demarcating it as the so-called "state border" (conducting illegal borderization), grabbing additional territories including agricultural land owned by the local population, kidnapping and detaining Georgian citizens for the "illegal crossing of the state border," violating the airspace controlled by the Georgian government and committing other acts which have turned into serious challenges for the Georgian government in the recent years while becoming the most clear manifestations of the Russian occupation for the Georgian public.

For what purpose is Russia drawing up the borders of the occupied territories of Georgia? What does the Russian government hope to achieve by this? According to the Kremlin's official position, Russia is only demarcating the "state borders" of Abkhazia and "South Ossetia" which it recognized as independent countries in 2008.<sup>1</sup> It is quite hard to believe, however, that the successor state of the Soviet empire, which had built the border fortifications of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall, failed to complete the demarcation of the dividing lines on a rather small Georgian territory in almost ten years. This, of course, does not mean that to do so is not among Russia's goals. But, I think that by manipulating the occupation line deep inside Georgian territory, Russia is trying to fulfill more important strategic objectives.

To what ends is Russia using the occupation line in Georgia and how can the effectiveness of the occupation line, as Russia's foreign policy instrument and leverage against Georgia, be reduced? I will discuss these questions below.

### **The strategic purpose of the occupation line for Russia**

Of course, it is very naive to believe the official position of the Kremlin according to which Russia only needs to fortify the occupation line in

Georgia in order to ensure the security of the “borders” of Abkhazia and “South Ossetia” which it has recognized as independent states. Vladimir Putin’s government has never backed down from its intention to include Georgia in its sphere of influence and the territories occupied by Russia, as well as periodically manipulating the occupation line, are merely instruments for pursuing this objective. The independence of Abkhazia and “South Ossetia” and their presence in the Kremlin’s orbit are not the ultimate goals of Russia’s foreign policy towards Georgia – just as the annexation of Crimea and the incorporation of the self-proclaimed republics of Donbas and Luhansk into the “Russian World” is not Russia’s final endgame in Ukraine. The main aim of Russia’s foreign policy is to stop the integration of both Georgia and Ukraine in the West – in NATO and the European Union, and to turn these countries into its own satellites. Hence, the dividing lines created by the Russian occupying forces in Georgia are not, as claimed by Russian state propaganda, defensive but are offensive from both military and political standpoints.

Under the strategy of achieving the above-mentioned foreign policy goals, the occupation line serves several specific functions for Russia.

First of all, the occupation line, as a point of potential contact between the Russian occupying forces and the de facto regime armed groupings, on the one hand, and the Georgian police forces, on the other, can always be used by Russia to stage some sort of a violent incident which it will then deem to be a sufficient cause to start another military aggression against Georgia. Though, unlike the period leading up to the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Russian Special Forces invaded and occupied Crimea in 2014 without any specific pretext, a separation line or zone where the opposing forces are facing each other is much more suited for planning something similar to the Gleiwitz or Mukden incidents. Russia appears to be constantly ready to implement such a scenario in Georgia and its large-scale military build-up on the occupied territories proves this.

At present, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/“South Ossetia,” with all the Russian military units and armaments stationed there, are very convenient launch pads for another Russian military aggression against Georgia. The construction of Russian military bases and transport infrastructure on these territories started well before the August 2008 war. After the war, in violation of the Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement signed on August 12, 2008, this process continued with an accelerated pace, also covering the territories occupied by the Russian army during the hostilities (Big Liakhvi Valley, Little Liakhvi Valley, Frone Valley, Akhagori District

and Kodori Valley/Upper Abkhazia).<sup>2</sup> In 2009-2012, Russian forces mostly finished the construction of military bases and transport infrastructure on the occupied territories of Georgia as well as setting up small military bases and outposts for the border guards of the Federal Security Service of Russia along the occupation line.<sup>3</sup> In this period, the 4th military base of the Russian armed forces in the Tskhinvali Region/"South Ossetia" was significantly built up. It includes: the military base located in the village of Ugardanta, Java District, and the military base in the town of Tskhinvali as well as the military camp near the village of Kanchaveti, Akhagori District. The 7th military base of the Russian armed forces situated in Abkhazia was also intensively developed. It includes: the military base at the Bombora airfield near the town of Gudauta and the Ochamchire seaport.<sup>4</sup> According to the official information of the Russian government, since 2009 there are at least 3,700 Russian soldiers stationed in the Tskhinvali Region/"South Ossetia" and another 3,700 soldiers in Abkhazia.<sup>5</sup> In addition to that, 1,200 FSB border guards are deployed in the Tskhinvali Region/"South Ossetia" and 1,300 FSB border guards in Abkhazia who are tasked with protecting the lines dividing these territories from the rest of Georgia in a "state border" regime.<sup>6</sup> It should be pointed out that Moscow has complete freedom of maneuvering its military forces on these territories and can increase their number and equipment at any given time.

According to the assessments made by Russian military experts, the military units stationed in the Tskhinvali Region/"South Ossetia" and Abkhazia are equipped with modern military hardware and weapons which include:

- In the Tskhinvali Region/"South Ossetia" – 41 T-72 B(M) tanks, more than 150 BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, two divisions of 152mm 2S3 self-propelled "Akatsiya" howitzers, one division of 122mm BM-21 "Grad" multiple rocket launchers, BUK-M1 and 2S6M "Tunguska" anti-aircraft systems and other armaments;
- In Abkhazia – 41 T-90 tanks, more than 150 BTR-80 armored personnel carriers, 143 BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, two divisions of 152mm 2S3 self-propelled "Akatsiya" howitzers, one division of 122mm BM-21 "Grad" multiple rocket launchers, OSA-AKM, ZSU-23-4 "Shilka", 2S6M "Tunguska", S-300 PS anti-aircraft systems and other armaments.<sup>7</sup>

Since 2009, the Russian government has also improved the transport infrastructure on the occupied Georgian territories – including for the purpose of being able to move additional military hardware from Russia to the occupied regions and ensure their quick transportation on these territories. For example, the reconstruction of the Roki tunnel began in

2010 and ended in 2014.<sup>8</sup> The construction of the Tskhinvali-Akhalgori road also started in 2010 and was finished in 2014.<sup>9</sup>

In order to patrol the occupation line, the border guards of the Federal Security Service of Russia have set up small military bases: 20 such military objects are situated in the Tskhinvali Region/"South Ossetia"<sup>10</sup> and at least ten in Abkhazia.<sup>11</sup> In addition to this, "Sobol" and "Mangust" type patrol boats are based at the Ochamchire seaport and used by the FSB border guards to control the Abkhazian coastline.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the Russian military bases and infrastructure on the occupied territories of Georgia are well developed and fully ready for carrying out another military aggression. Such a working speed of the Russian occupying forces once again proves that from 2008 to date, they would have definitely finished setting up barbwire, trenches and other fortifications to fully demarcate these territories if they had really wished to do so. It seems that it is more beneficial for Moscow to keep the occupation line in Georgia blurred. Russia uses this situation very well to keep the Georgian government under constant pressure. Despite the fact that after the change of government in Georgia in October 2012, the Georgian Dream coalition led by Bidzina Ivanishvili who assumed power instead of Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement pronounced the "normalization of relations" with Russia as its foreign policy priority (while maintaining the declared pro-Western stance) and even started a direct dialogue with Moscow in the Abashidze-Karasin format<sup>13</sup>, Vladimir Putin's government has not stopped using various tools of leverage, including the occupation line, against Georgia.

Since the occupation line provides a good opportunity for Russia to organize a provocation, which it might afterwards use as a pretext for another military intervention in Georgia, following the August 2008 war the Georgian government unilaterally refused to deploy its military units near the occupation line and has only kept lightly armed police and special forces there – in accordance with the memoranda signed between the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, on the one hand, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, on the other.<sup>14</sup> This security regime gradually reduced the number of armed incidents across the occupation line but since the EUMM does not have a peacekeeping/policing mandate and is only a civilian mission,<sup>15</sup> which is not admitted by the Russian government on the occupied territories, a sort of a power vacuum has been formed along the occupation line

which encourages Russia and its puppet regimes to further engage in the creeping occupation of Georgian territories.

Hence, the second quite banal function of the occupation line for Russia is to seize more Georgian territory; that is, to expand its zone of military occupation – perhaps, to prepare it for annexation in the future. It seems that the largest country in the world does not consider capturing 200, 500 or 800 square meters of additional land as excessive. In 2009, Russia decided to start working on the delimitation and demarcation of the “state borders” of “South Ossetia” and Abkhazia and signed relevant agreements with the de facto regimes.<sup>16</sup> According to the logic of the Russian government, the demarcation of these so-called “borders” should be conducted according to the Soviet-era administrative boundaries of these two Georgian regions. This, however, does not mean that the geographic area of the illegal demarcation undertaken by the occupying power is clearly known in advance. The problem is that the administrative boundaries of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the Autonomous Oblast of “South Ossetia” in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia existed only on geographical maps (and with different configurations on Soviet maps issued in different years) and have never been demarcated on the ground. Also, from a legal standpoint, the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is maintained as an administrative unit in Georgia while the Autonomous Oblast of “South Ossetia” has been abolished since 1990. Therefore, the administrative boundary of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia does legally exist on maps while the administrative boundary of “South Ossetia” does not (it should be mentioned here that by forming the Provisional Administration of “South Ossetia” in 2007, which was a political step aimed at the settlement of the conflict, neither the Autonomous Oblast nor its boundaries were restored<sup>17</sup>). Nevertheless, whether or not the boundaries of an administrative unit are outlined on a map, the state does not need to demarcate them with physical barriers. Of course, since Georgia regained independence, none of its governments have taken steps in this direction. Therefore, by illegally demarcating the lines drawn on various maps, the Russian occupying forces are creating a new reality on the ground.

According to various open sources, in the process of determining the borders of the occupied territories, Russian border guards are using Soviet military maps issued in the 1970s and 1980s. The scales of these maps are 1:100,000 mm and 1:50,000 mm<sup>18</sup> which means that in the first case one centimeter on the map translates into 1 kilometer on the ground while in the



second case one centimeter on the map equals 500 meters on the ground. Such varying data give the occupying forces the freedom to use these maps interchangeably and interpret them as they wish while conducting the so-called “borderization” process. As a result, they demarcate every portion of the dividing line 500 meters or 1 kilometer deep into Georgian territory. Interestingly, in this respect the Abkhazian occupation line is more stable as one portion of it (about 40 km) runs across the Enguri River while a large portion of the occupation line around the Tskhinvali Region/“South Ossetia” (about 190 km) meets no geographical barriers, namely, in the regions of Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and at certain points comes as close as 400 meters to Georgia’s central highway. Even if the Russians, while conducting illegal borderization, by all calculations cross the administrative boundary lines determined on different Soviet maps, it will still be counterproductive for Georgia to enter into a discussion with them on this issue as this could legitimize the actions of the Russian occupying forces within the abolished or still active administrative boundaries inside Georgia.

The Russian occupying forces first started demarcating the so-called “border” of the Tskhinvali Region/“South Ossetia” in the spring of 2011. However, at that time they only marked the land in several villages of the Shida Kartli region and put iron poles there. After this, in 2011-2012, demarcation work was mostly halted. From spring 2013, the Russians renewed their efforts with great intensity and started installing iron fences, barbwire and “border” signs, including on the agricultural land of the local population, thus expanding the zone of occupation by several square kilometers.<sup>19</sup> In the following years, the Russian occupying forces continued installing illegal fortifications mostly in the villages of the Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti regions. For example, in July 2015, they put several “border” signs near the village of Tsitelubani, in the Gori Municipality, and near the village of Orchosani, in the Akhalkalaki Municipality, placing a part of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline inside the newly marked territory.<sup>20</sup> The most recent incident occurred on July 4, 2017 near the village of Bershueti, in the Gori Municipality, when the local population found out that the Russian occupation line had been moved forward by several hundred meters at the expense of their agricultural land.<sup>21</sup> According to the statement of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, they had noticed these so-called “border” signs much earlier, on June 19.<sup>22</sup> Such actions by the Russian occupying forces are likely to continue in the future since, as I already pointed out, they are deliberately trying to extend the so-called “borderization” process in order to keep the occupation line blurred.

This situation enables Russia to also use the occupation line for a third purpose. I suppose that Russia wants to turn the territories adjacent to the occupation line into depopulated areas – especially on the southern perimeter of the Tskhinvali Region, which would make the continued creeping occupation easier for it in a long-term perspective. Seizing the agricultural land of the local population living in the villages near the occupation line, as well as their frequent detention on the charges of “illegal crossing of the state border” by Russian border guards, most probably serves this goal. In the first case, the families are left without sources of income and vital resources while in the second case, they are forced to pay a fine – in fact, a ransom – of 2,000 Russian rubles<sup>23</sup> (about 80 GEL) in order to be released from Tskhinvali’s prison which further aggravates their socio-economic conditions. According to the statement of the Federal Security Service of Russia, in 2016 and in the first quarter of 2017, they have arrested about 441 people for violating the “state border of South Ossetia,”<sup>24</sup> most of whom appear to be Georgian citizens. Such circumstances create the risk of the gradual depopulation of the villages adjacent to the occupation line. While there are no official statistical data on this matter, most of the young people seem to be leaving these villages and only the elderly are staying there.

The fourth function for which Russia uses the occupation line is intelligence. By utilizing its military infrastructure along the occupation lines of both the Tskhinvali Region/“South Ossetia” and Abkhazia, the FSB conducts visual and electronic reconnaissance of the nearby Georgian regions. Multiple cases of Russian unmanned reconnaissance aerial vehicles violating the airspace controlled by the Georgian central government have been discussed at meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).<sup>25</sup> The highest value, in terms of intelligence, is probably attributed to one of the portions of the Tskhinvali Region/“South Ossetia” occupation line which starts near the village of Karapila, in the Kaspi Municipality, and ends at the village of Tsitelubani, in the Gori Municipality. It is highly likely that from this territory the Russian forces can best spy on the movement of transport, including military cargos, on the central highway of Georgia.

The fifth function of the occupation line is connected to an intermediate goal of Russia’s foreign policy towards Georgia which is to involve Tbilisi in a direct dialogue with the de facto regimes of Tskhinvali and Sokhumi regarding the demarcation of “state borders” and other political issues.<sup>26</sup> This would grant international legitimacy to the puppet regimes, amount to the recognition of the independence of the occupied regions and again

mistakenly portray Moscow as a neutral side and peacekeeper in the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian “ethnic conflicts.” Thus, taking any diplomatic steps in this direction would be detrimental for Georgia.

And finally, taking the above described factors into account, Russia can also use the occupation line against Georgia for one more and probably the most important purpose. By committing various violent acts near the occupation line, Russia is trying to present Georgia as an unstable country in the eyes of the West, suggesting that Georgia’s national security faces serious threats on a daily basis. The Russian occupation line approaching the central highway at the distance of just 400 meters creates the effect of the sword of Damocles and is a symbolic manifestation of these constant threats. All this serves Russia’s goals to make the United States and its European allies think that Georgia’s integration in NATO will bring problems to the alliance; also to leave Georgia’s potential application for EU membership without any prospects, put the reliability of Georgia as a transit corridor under question and discourage major foreign investments in the country.

Thus, fully understanding the strategic functions of the Russian occupation line in Georgia is important for developing an effective counter-strategy for neutralizing the existing threats which the Georgian government clearly does not have at the moment.

### **The Georgian government’s attitude towards the occupation line and the necessity for changing it**

After the Russian occupying forces intensified the so-called “border” demarcation work around the Tskhinvali Region/”South Ossetia” from 2013 and moved the occupation line forward in many places inside Georgia – meaning that Russian border guards established control on the territories which they were not physically occupying before (as happened in the most recent case in the village of Bershueti) – the Georgian Dream government interprets this process as an attempt by Russia to establish the “borders” of the territories occupied as a result of the 2008 August war and not as a further expansion of the zone of Russian occupation;<sup>27</sup> – besides Russia, they put the blame on the previous government of Georgia for creating this situation.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, by denying the real problem of Russia’s seizing additional territories in Georgia, the Georgian Dream government focuses more on its party/electoral interests rather than on Georgia’s national/state interests. I have already explained above why it

is legally and politically, as well as factually, wrong to make statements that the so-called “borderization” conducted by the Russian occupying forces does not extend beyond the administrative boundaries of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/“South Ossetia.” Such rhetoric by the Georgian government arguably results in the fact that the issue of Georgia is often ignored in the current international political agenda, especially in the context of the annexation of Crimea by Russia and its military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. If the Government of Georgia does not attempt to present these problems to the international community clearly and rigorously, our Western partners will certainly not bother themselves to discuss this issue with Russia. The problem of Georgia’s recent disappearance from the international agenda was recently illustrated by the fact that on July 7, 2017, during his first meeting with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, at the G20 Summit in Hamburg, the US President, Donald Trump, did not bring up the issue of Georgia next to the issue of Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

I think that the Georgian Dream government’s foreign policy outlook according to which Georgia “should not be a problem in the relations between Moscow and the West”<sup>30</sup> and that “we should not fall into hysteria” when the Russian occupation line moves forward<sup>31</sup> is completely useless for solving the problem of creeping occupation. In order for Russia to stop easily manipulating the occupation line and using it as an effective foreign policy instrument against Georgia, every fact of the Russian occupation line moving forward by even a meter and putting the green “border” signs on a new territory inside Georgia must be put to the attention of the international community and serve as a basis for the West’s diplomatic pressure on Russia. Moreover, it would be desirable if the sanctions already introduced by the West against Russia because of its actions in Ukraine would be complemented by new sanctions referring to Russia’s violation of the Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement with Georgia, the occupation of Georgian territories and the periodic movement of the occupation line deeper into Georgian sovereign territory. In order to achieve this foreign policy objective, the Georgian government should not ignore the problem of creeping occupation but recognize it publicly and push it vigorously on the international agenda.

The Georgian Dream government often argues that stopping the creeping occupation is possible only by the use of force but since this entails the risk of succumbing to a Russian provocation and renewing the war with Russia, they refuse to resort to this action.<sup>32</sup> However, saying that there are only two drastic ways for reacting to this problem – starting a war or doing

nothing, is incorrect. This is especially true considering that it is never difficult for Russia to find a pretext for military aggression as confirmed once again by its 2014 intervention in Ukraine.

In addition to actively presenting the issue of creeping occupation on the international arena, the Georgian government can certainly strengthen the police checkpoints and their patrolling regime at the occupation line in order to enhance the safety of the local population. Of course, it is very hard to control the full perimeter of the occupation line day and night as it requires huge financial as well as human resources, but making the police more active on certain spots, where the kidnappings of Georgian citizens and other incidents occur more often, would certainly be worthwhile. The need for such measures was clearly demonstrated by the May 2016 incident in the village of Khurcha at the Abkhazian occupation line when a member of Abkhazia's de facto regime armed grouping, Rashid Kanji-Ogli, murdered Georgian citizen, Giga Otkhozoria.<sup>33</sup> The presence of Georgian police/special forces on the ground would probably have prevented the murderer from entering the territory controlled by the Georgian central government.

I believe that formulating other more detailed recommendations regarding the steps to be taken by the Georgian government in response to Russia's actions at the occupation line require a more specific knowledge of the resources available to the state, as well as its intelligence data, which is surely not public information. Consequently, I will not further attempt to list such detailed steps in this article. That said, however, I hold that the analysis of the strategic purpose for which Russia is using the occupation line in Georgia, presented in this paper, sufficiently demonstrates that the approach/policy chosen by the Georgian government for dealing with the problem of the Russian occupation line, does not meet the existing challenges and it has to be changed as soon as possible.

*This article has been translated from Georgian*

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