



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Disputed Borders in the North Caucasus and Their Reflection on Georgia

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For the past several months, the issue of specifying administrative borders between the republics has become rather important in the North Caucasus. The agreement made between the leaders of the Republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia, according to which Chechnya got 26 hectares of land while Ingushetia got only 1,000 hectares, was followed by a series of protests in Ingushetia. Despite the fact that there were no settlements on the transferred lands, the protest significantly increased tensions between the Chechen and the Ingush. All of this has already raised the issue of the demarcation of administrative borders between Chechnya and Dagestan which caused concern among the Dagestani population. The cause for this concern is that much of the land, which is likely allocated for transfer to Chechnya, is being used by farmers in Dagestan.

Having all of the aforementioned in mind, it is interesting to see if there is a risk for the border disputes in the North Caucasus to spill-over into Georgia.

Georgia borders six subjects of the North Caucasus Federal District; namely, Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia. Much of the Georgian-Russian border is drawn on a natural barrier – the Caucasus Mountain Range; however, Georgian regions such as Khevi (Kazbegi Municipality), the Arkhoti Valley, Pirikita Khevsureti (Dusheti Municipality) and Tusheti (Akhmeta Municipality) are located on the other side of the Caucasus Mountains. It can be argued that geographically, these regions are located in the North Caucasus which increases their vulnerability. The Georgian-Russian border is not demarcated to this day and hence, the risk of a unilateral alteration of the borders is quite high. Apart from the creeping occupation on the occupied territories, such a process is also taking place on the Georgian-Russian border.

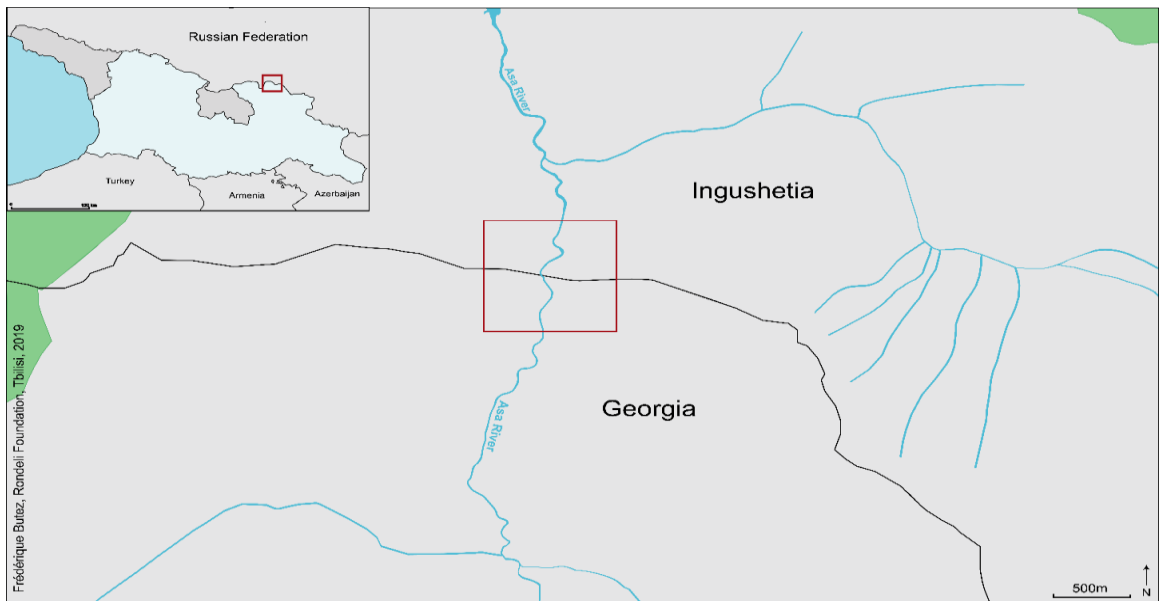
Tusheti – in this region, near the Russian-Georgian border, the villages of Tchero and Intsukhi, that are located in the Tchantchakhovani Valley, are problematic. Historically, these villages were settled by the people of Tusheti; however, they were emptied in the 19th century. These territories border the Russian Federation; more specifically, the Tsunta district of Dagestan which is settled by the Dido people. In 1993-1995, these villages were patrolled by Russian and Georgian border guards in shifts while from 1996 these territories were no longer actively patrolled by the Georgian side. In 2006, an incident occurred between Georgian and Russian border guards after which the Georgian government made a decision to discontinue patrolling in those territories.¹

¹ Mtis Ambebi (2018). How and when Chero and Intsukhi in Tusheti are under Russian Control? [rodia da rogor moektsa tushetshi chero da intsukhi rusetia kontrolkvesh] Available at: <https://www.mtisambebi.ge/news/people/item/792-rodia-da-rogor-moeqza-tushetshi-cheroda-inxuxi-rusetis-kontrolqvesh> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)



Khevsureti – in 2000, Russia moved the border in the Arkhoti Valley, planting pine trees where once was a village within its territory. We have scant information about this incident. As we know, in order to move the border, the Russian federal military forces were forced to conduct an entire maneuver. The decision was dictated by the war in Chechnya – the government of Russia believed that Chechen warriors were using the pathways near the pine trees to cross over into Georgian territory and so, in order to control this, Russian border guards established an outpost near the pine trees where they remain to this day.²

² „Radio Tavisupleba“ (2002). Disputed Sections of Georgian Border [sakartvelos sazgvris sheutankhmebeli monakvetebi]. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1525521.html> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)



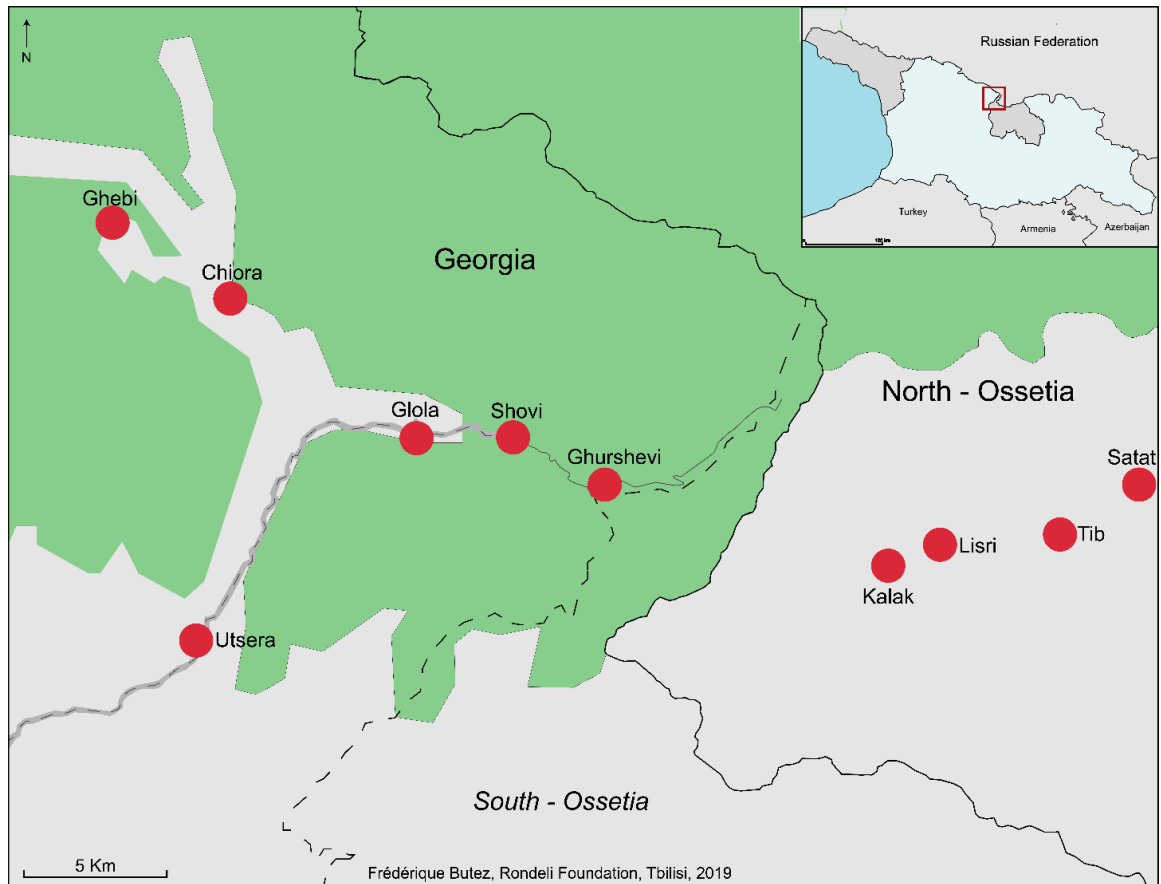
Kazbegi Municipality – in 1998, Russian border guards unilaterally moved the border at the Larsi border crossing point.

Lagodekhi Municipality – on June 28, 2018, in the Lagodekhi Municipality on the Dagestani part of the Georgian-Russian border, Russian border guards kidnapped two of their Georgian counterparts, releasing them after several days.³



³ reginfo (2018). Russian Military Kidnaped Georgian Border Defence Officer in Lagodekhi Municipality [lagodekhis raionshi rusma samkhedroebma karveli mesazghvre gaitatses]. Available at: <https://reginfo.ge/people/item/8009-lagodexis-raionshi-rusma-mesazgyvreebma-ori-qartveli-mesazgvre-gaitazes> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)

Oni Municipality – the Mamisoni mountain pass is located in the Oni Municipality, connecting Georgia with the Russian Federation. In 2010, Russian border guards occupied a meteorological station located on this mountain pass where Georgian border guards used to patrol earlier. It must be pointed out that according to old Soviet maps, part of the Mamisoni mountain pass was located within the boundaries of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast; however, after occupying the meteorological station, Russian border guards are patrolling the place.⁴



Aibga – the border has also been moved on the occupied territories. There is a disputed territory called Aibga on the border of the Gagra Municipality and Krasnodar Krai which was being administered by the unrecognized regime. De facto border guards were also holding this territory. In 2014, the abandoned village of Aibga was occupied by Russian border guards. The occupation of Aibga caused severe protests in the

⁴Radio Tavisupleba (2010). What is Going on at Mamisoni Pass? [ra khdeba mamisonis ugheltekhlize?]. Available at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/2038614.html> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)

population of Abkhazia.⁵ Historically, Abkhazians who were deported to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century used to live in Aibga.

Borders and Ramzan Kadyrov – the issue of administrative borders is one of the recent priority issues for the leader of the Republic of Chechnya – Ramzan Kadyrov. The issue of the borders of the Republic is used by Kadyrov to strengthen his political project. More specifically, he is attempting to present himself as the “unifier of Chechen lands.” The recent events connected with the Chechen-Ingush administrative border make it clear that Kadyrov has full support from the central Russian government in this. So far, neither Kadyrov nor any of his official representatives has made any statements about the demarcation of the Chechen part of the Russian-Georgian border; however, Kadyrov has, on multiple occasions, expressed his will of restoring the road connecting Chechnya with Georgia. He even visited the border infrastructure in the Itum-Kalinsky district where he inspected the issue of constructing a road.⁶



Truso Valley – numerous Ossetian nationalists have expressed territorial claims towards Georgia, both within the occupied Tskhinvali region and also in the Republic

⁵ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2014). Aibga – Disputed Territory Between Russia and Abkhazia [Aibga - Spornaya Territoria Mezhdru Rossiei i Abkhaziei] Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/253312/> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)

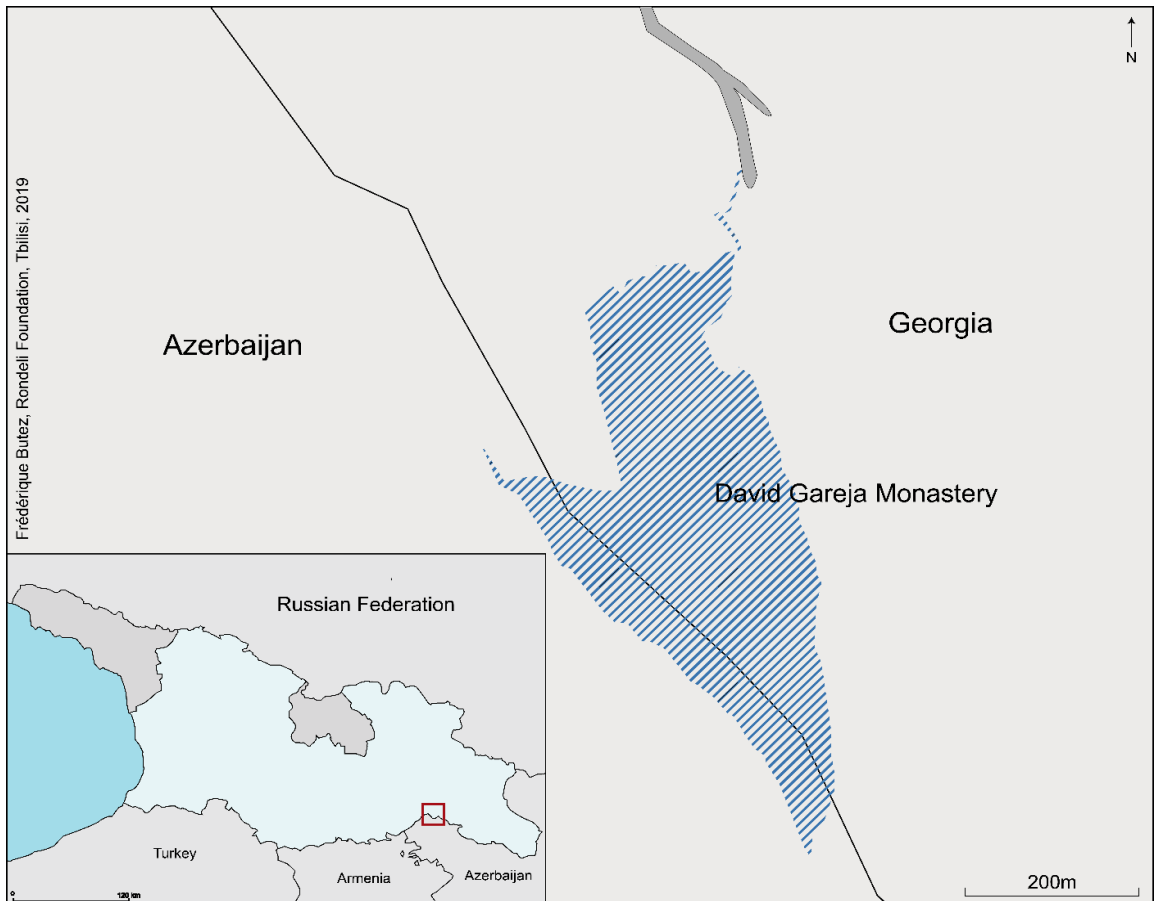
⁶ ChGTRK Grozny (2015). *Ramzan Kadyrov Posetil Pogranzastavu na Granitse Chechni i Gruzii*.

ხელმისაწვდომია <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNI3GNobM-Q> (ნანახია 2019 წლის 17 მაისს)

of North Ossetia. More specifically, this concerns the Truso Valley which is located in the Kazbegi Municipality. There were Ossetian villages in the Truso Valley; however, in the 20th century, most of the population left the Valley and moved to North Ossetia. The Truso Valley borders North Ossetia as well as the Java Municipality of the occupied Tskhinvali region. Neither of these regions has a motorway to the Truso Valley which means that theoretically, in the case of the occupation of the Valley, the whole Kazbegi Municipality will be occupied. An opinion has been expressed numerous times on Ossetian nationalistic websites that the entire Kazbegi Municipality (including Kobi and Gudauri) is an ancient Ossetian land which was referred to as “East Ossetia.”

The Issue of Borders and Ethnic Strife – the concept of borders has high importance in the Caucasus. Due to this, Russian security forces will be trying to create conflict between Georgia and neighboring Caucasian peoples by underlining the issue of borders. Such provocations are especially to be expected in the direction of Georgian-Chechen relations. Any statements from the Russian side about the revision of borders will cause sharp reactions in both Georgian as well as Chechen societies. Furthermore, the recent confrontations between the law enforcement structures and the local population in the Pankisi Gorge can be used by Russian propaganda as a demonstration of an emerging Georgian-Kist conflict. Traces of this have already appeared in social media where various fake pages or accounts are spreading such disinformation.

Apart from the North Caucasus, Russian propaganda can also put forward the border issues of Georgia and its South Caucasus neighbors and deteriorate relations between the states. During the most recent events, when Azeri border guards closed off certain parts of the Davit Gareji Monastery Complex which caused great concern in the Georgian public, various far-right and xenophobic groups were activated. Such propaganda is also to be expected in the direction of Armenian-Georgian borders as well where the Khujab Monastery is currently controlled by Armenian border guards. The Sighnaghi Municipality part of the Georgian-Azerbaijan border is also problematic where several houses of the village of Erisimedi are located on a disputed territory.



Apart from this, fake news about the Georgian government transferring six hectares of land to Turkey is being actively circulated in Georgian media as well as social networks. In reality, what happened was that the riverbed of the Jakistskali River was altered which put part of the Turkish territory on the Georgian side. Based on a mutual agreement, this part of the border was corrected and the riverbed axis was set once again. Despite this, many xenophobic and pro-Russian organizations, such as the Centrists, manipulated the facts and presented this case as the “transfer of Georgian lands to Turkey” whose aim was to stoke anti-Turkish sentiments.⁷

The media also periodically disseminates information about the Khujab Monastery which is located on an area of disputed territory between Georgia and Armenia. Currently, the territory of the Monastery is controlled by Armenian border guards. Anti-Armenian sentiments are also being stoked when putting forward the issue of Khujab.⁸

Besides Georgia, the issue of the demarcation of borders also touched upon Azerbaijan. In September 2010, based on a mutual agreement between Russia and Azerbaijan, two villages settled by ethnic Lezgins, Khrakh-Uba and Uryan-Uba formerly controlled by Russia; more specifically, the Republic of Dagestan, were given to Azerbaijan which stoked anti-Azeri sentiments among the Lezgins.⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the re-surfaced territorial disputes in the North Caucasus have significantly worsened inter-ethnic relations in the past few months. Despite the small scale of the disputed territories, any process of the alteration of borders is painfully perceived in the region. This is further confirmed by the public unrest in connection with Davit Gareji. This is further compounded by the fact that the Russian-Georgian border is not demarcated which enables Russia to exert additional pressure over Georgia. As for the disputed territories with Georgia’s southern neighbors, the government of Georgia must, on the one hand, take care of correctly informing the public and neutralizing fake news and, on the other hand, avoid activating these disputed issues

⁷ *FactCheck* (2017). Georgia Handed 6 Hectares of Land to Turkey [sakartvelom turkets 6 ha mitsis nakveti gadastsa]. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/28371-saqarthvelom-thurqeths-6-ha-mitsis-nakvethi-gadastsa> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)

⁸ *Timenews* (2019). Georgian Territories Transferred after 2012 to Armenia and Turkey [2012 tslis shemdeg sakartvelos mtavrobis mier somkhetistvis da turketistvis gadatsemuli mitsebi] Available at: <http://timenews.ge/2826-2012-.html> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)

⁹ *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2019). The Government Officials Reported the Total Displacement of Residents of Khrakh-Uba and Uryan-Uba [Vlasti Otchitalis o Pereselenii Vsekh Zhiteley Khrakh-Uba i Uryan-Uba]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/330441/> (Accessed 17 May, 2019)

with the neighboring states and instead work on creating joint mechanisms for the availability of visiting cultural heritage sights located on disputed territories.

Frédérique Butez, an intern at the Rondeli Foundation, created the maps.