



Russia's quiet annexation of south ossetia

By Maia Otarashvili



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Russia and South Ossetia have ironed out final details of a [“Treaty of Alliance and Integration.”](#) The treaty was drafted in December 2014 and on January 31, 2015 Georgian news agencies [reported](#) that the leader of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, had sent the finalized document back to Moscow. On February 18th Russia and South Ossetia signed a precursor to this treaty, called the “treaty on the state border.” [According to](#) Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the broader treaty is still under consideration, but “the approval process won’t take long.”

Once the Treaty of Alliance and Integration is signed, it is set to be implemented in a matter of three to six months, allowing Russia to absorb South Ossetia. This comes less than three months after the signing of the Russia-Abkhazia treaty of a similar nature, although it is not as comprehensive. The international community and the Georgian government have condemned Russia’s actions and will not recognize either of the treaties but that is not likely to stem Putin’s expansionist policies – if Crimea is any guide.

What is South Ossetia?

The story of South Ossetia is very much a product of complex Russia-Georgia relations that date back to the pre-USSR era. Since 1783 Georgian lands have been under Russian rule, on and off, in one way or another. Czarist Russia, much like Putin’s Russia today, was expansionist by nature, never really giving up on the idea of establishing permanent dominance in the Caucasus.

South Ossetia is named after the ethnic group, the Ossetians. Until up to the second half of the 19th century the majority of ethnic Ossetians lived primarily in the North Caucasus (currently North Ossetia-Alania, one of the sovereign republics of the Russian Federation). Only smaller groups of Ossetians lived on the Georgian territory, in high elevation areas of the Caucasus Mountains. Today’s South Ossetia was previously known as Samachablo, or the fiefdom of the princely house of Machabeli, since the 15th century.

In 1861 the Russian Empire abolished serfdom. However, much like the post-Soviet privatization in 1990s, this was done in a way that benefitted only the elites. While the serfs did receive freedom and legal citizenship rights, most of them did not gain land ownership. The Ossetian serfs fell into a dire economic situation, leading them to seek labor elsewhere – in particular, into the Georgian territories of Inner Kartli and Samachablo. A majority of the migrants were willing to work for very little compensation, and were not afraid to set up homes on local farmers’ lands. This created a great deal of conflict between the locals and the newcomers. The local landlords did not get involved as they had begun to benefit from the virtually free labor of the Ossetians and were not ready to sacrifice their own financial gains in order to protect the local farmers. The Samachablo Georgians were left with two choices – either move away from Samachablo, or stay and live in turbulent conditions. Thus

It was Russia's close involvement in South Ossetia that triggered the Russo-Georgian war in August of 2008. There has been much speculation as to who started the war and why. However, the fact that the war went well beyond the Tskhinvali region as Russia ended up bombing Gori and its surrounding villages leaves Russia at fault. The five day war ended after France and Poland brokered a cease-fire deal. The international community has often supported Georgia's aspirations of achieving territorial integrity, yet Russia managed to walk away from this conflict entirely unpunished. This weak international response laid the groundwork for Russian aggression in Ukraine few years later.

Once the bombing stopped in August of 2008, the situation started to stabilize again, but soon after the war ended the Russian peacekeeping forces began building barricades, infringing upon the rights of those Georgian citizens whose lands happened to be on the Georgia-South Ossetia "border." Additionally, since the Ukraine crisis broke out, the South Ossetian leadership in Tskhinvali began openly talking about closer integration with Russia. There were [talks](#) about a wide range of possibilities from "becoming a subject of the Russian Federation to forming an associated partnership." The end product, created only a month after the drafting of the Russia-Abkhazia treaty of military integration (which was approved by the Russian parliament on January 23rd), looks less like an associated partnership agreement and more like annexation.

The Treaty

Drafted in December 2014, the "treaty of alliance and integration" is meant to "legalize South Ossetia's integration with Russia." Its clauses go well beyond the matters of military integration and include the Russian takeover of South Ossetia's border control, finances, economy, education, healthcare, and social welfare systems. On the other hand the [agreement removes borders and restrictions on movement of goods and people](#) between Russian and South Ossetian territories. The language of this document in itself is all-encompassing, and once the terms of this agreement are implemented, Russia will have truly swallowed South Ossetia, likely irreversibly so.

Some of the particular clauses of this agreement include South Ossetia's handing over all defense matters to Russia, including the defense of South Ossetian borders (Georgia is on the other side of that border). By the terms of the agreement, any aggression by Georgia against South Ossetia would be treated as an act of aggression against Russia.

Below are a few selected clauses from the treaty which have been translated from [Russian](#).

- The Contracting Parties shall conduct a coordinated foreign policy, which involves mutual interests of the Contracting Parties in various fields of cooperation, informing each other of the committed actions in this regard , as well as closely cooperate in promoting peace, stability and security in the Caucasus region.
- The Republic of South Ossetia transfers to the Russian Federation the responsibility to ensure law and order, public safety, and control of drug trafficking, as well as management of the internal affairs agencies, investigative bodies, and penitentiary system in South Ossetia.
- The Republic of South Ossetia agrees to transfer its responsibilities in the field of customs and customs regulation to the Russian Federation. The customs authorities of South Ossetia will become part of the customs authorities of the Russian Federation.
- Citizens of one Contracting Party shall have the right to acquire a nationality of the other Contracting Party under the simplified procedure. The restrictions that the Russian Federation might pose on those who do not possess Russian citizenship will not apply to the citizens of South Ossetia.
- Republic of South Ossetia, with the support of the Russian Federation shall gradually increase the average wages of employees of state and local government agencies to a level comparable with the level of remuneration of appropriate categories of workers in the North Caucasus Federal District of the Russian Federation.
- [Summary of multiple clauses] Russian citizens permanently residing in the territory of the Republic of South Ossetia , are eligible for pensions, benefits and other forms of social security at a level comparable with average level of pensions and other social security in the North Caucasus Federal District of the Russian Federation. Russian laws and regulations as well as benefits of the Russian social welfare system will apply to all those individuals living in South Ossetia who take Russian citizenship.
- The Central Bank of the Russian Federation will assist the National Bank of the Republic of South Ossetia in the implementation of monetary policy and strengthening the financial system of the Republic of South Ossetia.

Crimea, South Ossetia and More to Come?

While the Ukraine crisis continues to dominate the headlines, Russia's quiet annexation of Georgian territories is going on practically unnoticed. Even Georgia is largely silent, given its preoccupation with its own currency crisis and economic troubles.

The Georgian government has been very spare in criticism of Russia's expansionist policies in Ukraine, and hesitant to openly condemn Russian activities there. The Georgian government's (reasonable) fear that Russia would retaliate if Georgia took a bolder stand to declare its solidarity with Ukraine has kept it from waging a full-on anti-Putin campaign. Now, less than a year since Crimea's annexation, Georgia is experiencing painful losses of its own.

Earlier this month, during her official visit to the US, Georgia's new minister of foreign affairs Tamar Beruchashvili told RFE/RL in an [interview](#) that for Russia "the next move is [South] Ossetia; there are signals that the Crimea-like scenario could be repeated and South Ossetia could be annexed." Additionally, Ms. Beruchashvili warned that Russia's involvement in Moldova's Transnistria and Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia are components of one big Russian strategy. But at this point these statements carry no weight as it is probably too late to save South Ossetia from being [swallowed up by Russia](#). If there is to be any reversal, it is crucial that the West look at the events in Ukraine and Georgia (and Moldova) not in isolation from each other but of a piece and address the broader issue of Russian expansionism.