

South Ossetia-Georgia

Despite the lack of progress in negotiations on the status of the breakaway region, there was a noticeable decline in the number of armed incidents between Georgia and South Ossetia in 2006. Working in collaboration with observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) maintained stability in the conflict zone and increased border security. On the political front, a breakdown in relations between Georgia and the Russian Federation contributed to the stalemate. Statements by Russian leaders linking South Ossetia's future to the outcome of the Kosovo status talks caused deep unease in Tblisi, while the Georgian parliament's resolution in early spring to expel Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia and Abkhazia was met with opposition from both Moscow and the international community.

The conflict in South Ossetia broke out in 1989. After the Georgian government denied the request of Ossete officials to receive autonomous status within Georgia, the first clashes between ethnic Georgians and Ossete civilians followed. In September 1990, the South Ossetian region declared its full independence from Georgia and its status as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. War raged from January 1991 until June 1992, destroying the South Ossetian administrative center of Tskhinvali and displacing over 70,000 civilians from both sides. A cease-fire was reached in 1992, when Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze and Russian president Boris Yeltsin signed the Sochi Accords, ending the hostilities and establishing the Joint Control Commission (JCC) and the JPKF.

Peacekeeping operations of the Commonwealth of Independent States are unique in involving significant numbers of troops from parties to the conflicts involved. The JPKF is commanded by the Russians, and composed of 1,320 troops from the Russian Federation (500), Georgia (320), and North/South Ossetia (500). It is responsible for the restoration of peace and the support of law and order. Although it is a "joint" mission, the Georgian peacekeepers frequently do not patrol with their Russian or Ossete counterparts. Since 1994, observers from the OSCE have monitored the JPKF, accompanying patrols, patrolling independently, and liaising with local civilian and military authorities.

Neither the Sochi Accords nor other signed protocols mandate the return of South Ossetia to the control of the Georgian government. Since 1992 the region has established state institutions, including a presidency, a parliament, and armed forces. For over a decade, the separatist region and Georgia existed side-by-side, with only occasional flare-ups between the two. In early summer 2004, newly elected Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili closed a famous smugglers' market in Georgian-controlled territory near Tskhinvali—moving a significant number of Georgian troops into the vicinity of the conflict zone. Georgian and Ossete troops were at a standoff all summer, and the ensuing hostilities killed over twenty people, necessitating a renewal of the peace agreement.

The JPKF has struggled through a year of political wrangling over its status and fate. In mid-February 2006 the Georgian parliament

passed a nonbinding resolution demanding the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the conflict zone. Both Moscow and Tskhinvali decried the Georgian resolution as a violation of international law, and the United States urged the government of Georgia to act with caution. While no move has been made to enact the legislation, it is still a possibility. On the Russian side, President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have both expressed their support for South Ossetia's right to self-determination based on the Kosovo and Macedonian cases.

In November 2006, a referendum on independence was held in South Ossetia, and the region's Central Electoral Commission declared that 99.88 percent of votes cast had been in favor. However, the poll was open only to those holding newly acquired South Ossetian passports and was condemned by the OSCE, EU, Council of Europe, and US. While Moscow did not endorse the vote's outcome, it described it as an "expression of free will" by the Ossetes. A second poll, held in ethnic Georgian villages in the region, favored negotiations toward South Ossetia remaining part of a federal Georgia. These referenda narrowly preceded two sets of elections for the region's president—again, one involved ethnic Ossetes and the other ethnic Georgians.

By the end of the year, tensions were high in the conflict area. On 3 September 2006, a Georgian helicopter carrying Minister of Defense Irakli Okruashvili was fired upon while flying over the peacekeeping zone. Days later,

CIS–South Ossetia Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF)

• Authorization date	24 June 1992
• Start date	July 1992
• Head of mission	Marat Kuakhmetov (Russia)
• Strength as of 30 September 2006	Troops: 1,320

OSCE Mission to Georgia

• Authorization date	6 November 1992
• Start date	December 1992
• Head of mission	Roy Stephen Reeve (United Kingdom)
• Strength as of 30 September 2006	Military observers: 68 Civilian staff: 71

four South Ossetian militia members and one Georgian police officer were killed in a clash in the conflict zone. Although not directly related to the conflict in South Ossetia, the diplomatic crisis surrounding Georgia's arrest and detention of four Russian citizens in late September deepened political tensions and brought international attention to the region. While diplomatic and peacekeeping efforts succeeded in preventing a further expansion of conflict in autumn, the year 2006 ended without significant improvement in relations between the two sides, and with Georgia still debating the status of the peacekeeping force.