

Electricity policy south ossetia

When wars end without an internationally recognised agreement to resolve them, conflicts can become frozen. From Cyprus to Somalia, and across the former Soviet Union, frozen conflicts are not uncommon, and a lack of international recognition can limit environmental cooperation. In this post, Clayton Payne examines how the frozen conflicts affecting Georgia's breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have influenced their environment, and how it is managed.

When the Soviet Union began collapsing in the 1980s, Georgian nationalism grew. In turn this led to increasing nationalism from its Abkhaz and Ossetian communities, who feared losing their autonomy within a new Georgian state. By 1989, this had escalated into Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts; even before Georgia became independent in 1991. Georgia's independence didn't bring stability, instead it led to the 1991-92 Georgian-Ossetian, and the 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz wars.

The wars left South Ossetia and Abkhazia detached from the Georgian state and with de facto governments controlling their affairs, they also led to thousands of people being either expelled or forced to flee. Abkhazia was internationally isolated at this point, whereas a deal brokered by the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) between Georgia and South Ossetia allowed for continued trade between them.

In 2008, the war between Georgia, Russia and the breakaway republics led to a shift in international recognition, with Russia recognising both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. This annulled the previous agreements with Georgia through the OSCE. Russia took on the role of defender of the new states' independence, while Georgia declared the regions to be under Russian occupation.

For my dissertation I studied how the frozen conflicts had affected environmental governance and cooperation, and this post explores some key findings. All interviews were undertaken between July-August 2021, and please refer to this note for more information on place names.¹

How isolation has weakened environmental security

The political void that Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been left in has seen them isolated from international environmental protection systems and cooperation structures. This lack of cooperation has affected the region's ability to effectively mitigate the risks from natural disasters, and ensure the proper management and protection of biodiversity.

The region is highly prone to earthquakes. However, according to one Georgian environmental NGO leader that I spoke to, Georgia is currently unable to access seismic data from the breakaway regions and instead has to use predictive tools to assess activity. This is particularly problematic as the Engur(i) dam and its

hydropower plant sit within an active seismic area. The dam and its 15km reservoir, which are in Georgia, are already at risk from major landslides, and the risks they pose are being studied. The downstream hydroelectric station that uses the outflow of the dam is based wholly in Abkhazia, which in turn is heavily dependent on the energy it generates.

Isolation and lack of recognition are also problematic for coastal governance. Intergovernmental organisations such as the Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea from Pollution and the UN Environment Programme have cooperation structures to protect the Black Sea environment. However, these lack Abkhaz representation and, as a result, this limits its ability to directly influence environmental measures along Abkhazia's coastline. Moreover, these structures provide fora for the exchange of environmental information, and it's noticeable that the few references to Abkhazia on the Commission's website generally relate only to information from Abkhazia not being available.

The barriers to cooperation extend below the governmental level. Georgian environmental NGOs that I spoke with expressed the difficulty in coordinating cross border projects. Some organisations had tried and failed, while another's contacts were limited only to the Georgian population in the ethnically Georgian Gal(i) region of Abkhazia.

A lack of cross border cooperation has led to both the neglect of shared natural resources, and the poor management and politicisation of the environmental problems this has caused. For example, shared resources such as the Liakhv(i) and Engur(i) rivers, which cross the South Ossetian-Georgian and Abkhazian-Georgian borders, respectively, show signs of neglect as a result of the lack of cooperation.

The damming of the Liakhv(i) river for the Zonkar(i) reservoir, and over-abstraction for agriculture downstream, has undermined its ecological value. Sediment capture by the dam, and changes in water flow have eroded the riverbed downstream, making it hostile for insect and fish life. While over-abstraction has repeatedly led to the river being so low that even at its highest points in summer it is unable to sustain a natural ecosystem.

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