

Georgia: a toponymic note concerning South Ossetia

1 The Ossetian people inhabit both the northern (Russian) and southern (Georgian) flanks of the main Caucasus mountain range. They are believed to be descendants of a Sarmatian tribal confederation named the Alans, who reached this area from the east in the 4th Century BC. Unusually for the Caucasus region, the Ossetians speak an Indo-Iranian language¹. The Ossetian self-designation for their people is *Ir*; for their language *Iron*; and for their lands *Iryston*².

2 Two notable toponyms reflect the Alan background to this region. The first of these is the name Daryal Gorge³, applied to the famous feature on the Georgian Military Highway, joining Russia's North Ossetia with a part of Georgia just to the east of South Ossetia. This name has its origin in the Persian toponym *Dār-e Alān*, meaning "Gate of the Alans". The second prominent toponym is found in the Russian Federation's official designation of North Ossetia, namely Respublika Severnaya Osetiya-Alaniya.

3 The Ossetian people are at least 75% Orthodox Christian, though there is a small Sunni Muslim minority in some western parts of North Ossetia. Their Orthodox faith has helped over the centuries to secure a reasonably successful *modus vivendi* with Russia; in general Ossetians have suffered less from the successive Tsarist and Soviet depredations that have afflicted many of their neighbouring peoples, and in their turn Ossetians have traditionally been the least independence-minded of the Caucasian peoples. When the Soviet Union was created, the traditional lands of Ossetia were divided between Russia (North Ossetia) and Georgia (South Ossetia), separated by the Caucasus.

4 South Ossetia was an autonomous oblast within Georgian territory from the beginning of the Soviet Union in 1922 until 1990, shortly after Georgia achieved independence. Although it has not featured as part of the official administrative-territorial structure of Georgia since 1990, South Ossetia nevertheless remains of topical significance. It covers roughly 3900 sq km (1505 sq ml), geographically centred at approximately 4220N 4400E. Its principal town is Ts'khinvali, on South Ossetia's southern border with Georgia proper⁴.

¹ It is paradoxically a language of the north-eastern Iranian branch, despite being spoken at the very north-western periphery of the Iranian language sphere.

² The words *Ir*, *Iron*, *Iryston* and indeed also *Iran* are all related, traceable to the *Aryan* people who about 1500BC settled in Fārs, a region centred on Shirāz in the south-central portion of the Iranian plateau.

³ Located at 4244N 4437E. The Ossetian name is *Dayrany Kom* ("Daryal Gorge"). The Russian name is *Dar'yal'skoye Ushchel'ye* (also "Daryal Gorge"), though sometimes informally *Alanskiye Vorota* ("Gate of the Alans"): The Georgian name is believed to be *Alant'a Qari* ("Alan Doorway"), but it appears that relatively few Georgian sources apply a name to this feature.

⁴ Located at 4213N 4358E. The Ossetian form of the name is *Cxinval*, though the genuine (unofficial) Ossetian name is *Čhreba*. Between 1934 and 1961 the town was known as *Staliniri* in Georgian; *Stalinir* in its Ossetian form. **For a note on Georgian and Ossetian spellings in this paper see page 6.**

5 A Roman alphabet was used for the Ossetian language from 1923 to 1938, at which point a script based on Georgian was introduced for Ossetian in South Ossetia to emphasise the autonomous oblast's place within the Georgian SSR⁵. Simultaneously in 1938, Ossetian in North Ossetia switched to a modified Cyrillic script, and this same Cyrillic was subsequently imposed on South Ossetia in 1954, as part of a wider all-Union move to bring as many languages as possible into the same script family as Russian. This 1954 move unified the script for Ossetian as a whole, reinstating the visual difference between Ossetian and Georgian as written languages.

6 In the late 1980s Georgia attempted to promote Georgian as the predominant language throughout the Georgian SSR, downgrading the Ossetian language and barring it from official use altogether. This inevitably caused great concern among Ossetians, most of whom used Ossetian (or even Russian) as their language. In a bid to acquire enhanced legal authority to counter such moves, the South Ossetian authorities pressed Tbilisi in 1989 to upgrade the autonomous oblast to the status of an autonomous republic. Tbilisi however spurned this request and proclaimed a state of emergency in South Ossetia, which countered by declaring Ossetian as its official language.

7 Violence ensued, causing ethnic Ossetians to flee northwards over the Caucasus to North Ossetia within the Russian Federation, and ethnic Georgians to flee southwards into Georgia proper. In December 1990 South Ossetia elected its own "government", upon which the Georgian authorities abolished South Ossetia's status as an autonomous oblast altogether. Tbilisi, by now under the control of Zviad Gamskhurdia's government, also tried to enact legislation limiting citizenship of Georgia to those who could prove settlement in that country before the Russian annexation of 1801, a move almost designed to inflame Ossetian antagonism further. Violence duly increased during 1991, during which year Eduard Kokojty became "president" of South Ossetia. By 1992 the region's demands had escalated to include unification with North Ossetia; *ie* unification with Russia. The principal town Ts'khinvali gradually became unsafe for ethnic Georgians, who were forced to abandon their homes. Although Gamsakhurdia's proposed legislation was dropped after his downfall in 1992, conflict continued until his successor Eduard Shevardnadze succeeded in helping to establish a Joint Peacekeeping Force⁶ later that same year.

8 Since late 1992 an uneasy peace has mostly prevailed, but with both Shevardnadze and his successor (since 2003) Mikheil Saakashvili finding it impossible to resolve a stand-off whereby the Georgian and South Ossetian authorities each control part of South Ossetia and ethnic Georgians remain unable to return to Ts'khinvali. Violence flared again in 2004, after which Saakashvili announced a new peace initiative, claiming that he wished South Ossetia's autonomous status to feature again in the Georgian constitution⁷. Russia remains supportive of the Ossetian population in South Ossetia, maintaining the tradition of Russian-Ossetian cooperation, but has so far desisted from acceding to Ts'khinvali's demands for incorporation into the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, Russia's stance is inevitably seen by Tbilisi as interference in Georgia's internal affairs. Many of South Ossetia's Ossetian inhabitants have been accorded citizenship of the Russian Federation, and the Kokojty administration has developed a programme for the Ossetian language designed to incorporate this "national language" compulsorily into university and school education⁸.

⁵ The Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the 15 constituent republics of the Soviet Union.

⁶ Consisting of Georgian, Russian and Ossetian military units.

⁷ Rustavi-2 TV, Tbilisi, 10 July 2005, reported by BBC Monitoring.

⁸ South Ossetian Press & Information Committee website, Tskhinvali, 23 March 2006, reported by BBC Monitoring.

9 Georgia's present unwillingness or inability to establish a comprehensive administrative-territorial structure⁹ for the country as a whole renders it difficult to see how the question of South Ossetia can effectively be addressed. Yet, in a classic Catch-22 situation, it is equally difficult to see how Georgia's final structure can be determined until South Ossetia's status is resolved. And, Saakashvili's claims notwithstanding, a solution still seems distant. Georgia remains reluctant to employ the term "South Ossetia" – which would literally be *Samkhret' Oset'i* in the Georgian language¹⁰ – at all. Georgians have instead traditionally referred to South Ossetia as *Samach'ablo*, a name meaning "Land of the Machabeli", a family of princes who from the 17th Century employed Ossetians there as serfs. Georgians dispute the generally held view that Ossetian settlement in South Ossetia can be traced back to the Alans, instead regarding Ossetians as immigrants from Russia brought to an already Georgian region only at the time of the Machabeli princes. Since the revocation of South Ossetia's autonomous status in 1990, even *Samach'ablo* has fallen out of favour with Tbilisi, which now disguises the existence of the region altogether by officially subsuming it within *Shida K'art'li*, a Georgian region of much greater extent and population than South Ossetia¹¹. Where there is a need to refer to the specific area of South Ossetia, Tbilisi names it dismissively as the "Tskhinvali region", with one Georgian website regarding South Ossetia as no more than an illegal claimant to part of *Shida K'art'li*¹².

10 As an autonomous oblast, South Ossetia comprised four administrative divisions (*raioni*), namely those of Java, Leningori, Ts'khinvali and Znauri, but since the 1990 abolition of autonomy and incorporation into *Shida K'art'li* most of the territory finds itself notionally under administrative control from Gori, the administrative centre of *Shida K'art'li*. The final Soviet census of 1989 gave a figure of approximately 98,000 for the population of South Ossetia, of whom 65,000 (almost two-thirds) were ethnically Ossetian and 28,000 (just over one quarter) ethnically Georgian. This total figure was already a reduction on the 1974 Soviet figure of 103,000, and after the troubles of the past fifteen years it is likely that the total figure is even lower today. One estimate suggests that perhaps only 70,000 people now inhabit South Ossetia; a 40% drop on the 1989 figure¹³. Any equation of South Ossetia with *Shida K'art'li* is rendered obviously meaningless not only by the difference in area¹⁴ between the two entities but also by the discrepancy of population; the estimated population of *Shida K'art'li* in 2007 is 320,000¹⁵, well over four times the best estimate for South Ossetia alone.

11 Ossetians probably continue to form a two-thirds ethnic majority within South Ossetia, with the Georgian minority living mainly in three areas: (a) scattered villages near the principal town of Ts'khinvali; (b) scattered villages along the lower reaches of the central Didi Liakhvi river valley; and (c) a comparatively lengthy string of villages along the eastern K'sani river valley. Using the estimate of a total population of 70,000 as a basis, it is possible that South Ossetia currently possesses an ethnic Ossetian population of some 45,000 and an ethnic Georgian population of perhaps 17,500. If these figures are valid they show a drop of 30% and 37% respectively on the final Soviet population figures of 1989.

⁹ See "System of local government and self-government in Georgia and its administrative-territorial division", <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=6&sm=5>, eg the following statement: "...due to the internal conflicts the issue of Georgia's state territorial structure is still open in the constitution".

¹⁰ The Ossetian language form is *Xussar Iryston*; the Russian language form is *Yuzhnaya Osetiya*.

¹¹ See paragraph 10.

¹² See <http://www.aboutgeorgia.net/regions/divisions.html>, which states that South Ossetia "claims the northern part of *Shida Kartli* region as its territory".

¹³ BBC News website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/3797729.stm.

¹⁴ The area of South Ossetia is 3900 sq km (1505 sq ml); the area of *Shida K'art'li*, which extends considerably further south, is 6200 sq km (2393 sq ml).

¹⁵ Figure from <http://www.aboutgeorgia.net/regions/divisions.html>.

12 The map accompanying this paper portrays, albeit in no more than a highly schematic manner, the distribution of the Georgian population in the three main areas listed in the above paragraph. Villages in South Ossetia which are 100% ethnically Georgian include the following¹⁶

Ardisi	4216N 4421E
Argvits'i	4214N 4401E
Atsriskhevi	4217N 4413E
Avnevi	4211N 4352E
Balaani	4220N 4428E
Belot'i	4217N 4407E
Charebi	4215N 4407E
Ch'igoiani	4224N 4426E
Doret'kari	4217N 4425E
Dzarchemi	4218N 4357E
Dzeglevi	4206N 4431E
Eloiani	4223N 4429E
Eredvi	4214N 4402E
Garubani	4205N 4428E
Ikoti	4209N 4430E
Kekhvi	4218N 4356E: <i>believed to be known in the Ossetian language as Chekh</i>
K'emerti	4218N 4357E
Khmidi	[not known]: <i>believed to be near Nik'ozi</i> [qv]
Korint'a	4211N 4429E
K'urt'a	4217N 4357E
K'vemo Zonkari	4217N 4409E
Largvisi	4216N 4429E
Makhiaret'i	4219N 4432E
Monasteri	4211N 4434E
Mosabruni	4206N 4429E
Nakhidi	4213N 4424E
Nik'ozi	4211N 4357E: <i>comprises the neighbouring hamlets of Zemo Nik'ozi + K'vemo Nik'ozi</i>
Nuli	4212N 4351E
P'khvenisi	4209N 4359E
Sabarklet'i	4221N 4423E
Sadzeguri Pirveli	4213N 4428E
Shulauri	4225N 4417E
T'amarasheni	4215N 4358E
T'okht'a	4218N 4433E
Ts'ikhisop'eli	4216N 4435E
Vanat'i	4216N 4402E
Zodekhi	4217N 4431E

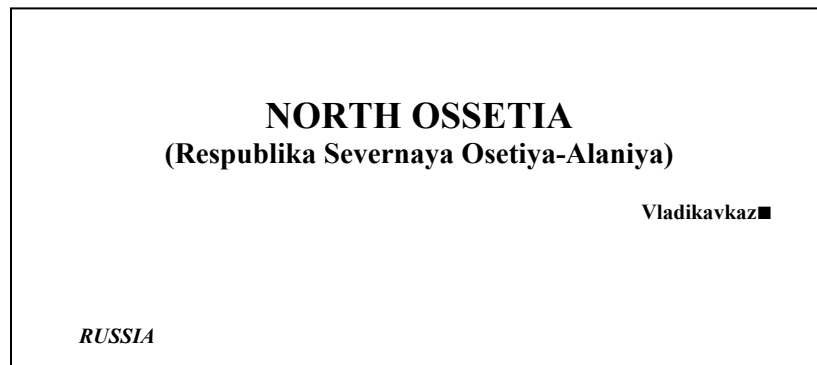
(Geographical coordinates are taken from the GEOnet Names Server of the US Board on Geographic Names, housed on the website of the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency: see <http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html>).

¹⁶ This list is probably about 75% comprehensive of all the exclusively ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia.

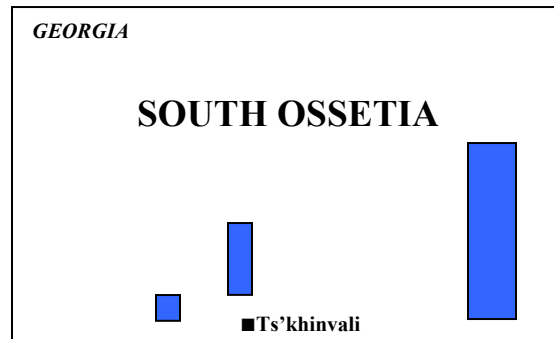
SCHEMATIC MAP OF SOUTH OSSETIA (Georgia)

SHOWN IN RELATION TO NORTH OSSETIA
AND SHOWING THE PRINCIPAL AREAS OF
ETHNIC GEORGIAN SETTLEMENT IN SOUTH OSSETIA

*(These areas are shown in the 3 blue boxes below;
see paragraphs 11 & 12 of the text for explanation)*



CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS



Note on the spelling of names

Toponyms in the Georgian language are romanized in this paper by means of the BGN/PCGN 1981 Romanization System for Georgian, though *Tbilisi* is spelt conventionally rather than in its romanized form *T'bilisi*. The personal name *Saakashvili* is identical in conventional and romanized form. There is no internationally recognised romanization system for Ossetian. The Ossetian toponymic forms and personal names in this paper follow the romanization system employed by the Institute of the Estonian Language (*Eesti Keele Instituut*: EKI); see <http://www.eki.ee/knab/lat/kblos.pdf>. In fact, this romanization system produces results in Roman which exactly match the Roman spellings for Ossetian used in the period 1923-38 as noted in paragraph 5 (PCGN is grateful to Dr Peeter Päll of EKI for this information).

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