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**GOVERNMENTAL ENTITIES OF ABKHAZIA AND THE
FORMER AUTONOMOUS DISTRICT OF SOUTH OSSETIA
IN TBILISI: POWER AND LEGITIMACY IN EXILE**

Tornike Zurabashvili

GIP

GEORGIAN INSTITUTE
OF POLITICS



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tornike Zurabashvili has a lengthy experience of working for non-governmental organizations and think tanks in Georgia and abroad. In 2017-2019, he was the Chief Editor of Civil.Ge, a trilingual online outlet on politics of Georgia. In 2019-2020, Tornike was a fellow of the Eurasia Democratic Security Network at the Center for Social Sciences in Tbilisi. He is currently the Programs Manager at the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), an elections and democracy watchdog in Georgia.

Tornike holds a Bachelor's degree from Tbilisi State University (International Affairs), and Master's degrees from Ilia State University (Public Administration) and Trinity College Dublin (Political Science). He has also completed exchange and short-term programs at Charles, Tartu and Georgetown universities. He is currently pursuing a PhD in political science at Tbilisi State University.

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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge
For more information, please visit
www.gip.ge

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to cast some light on the formation and maintenance of the governmental entities, which have been displaced from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, the two breakaway regions of Georgia. This research contains a detailed study of the history, structure, and function of these entities, which continue their activities in displacement: the Government of Abkhazia, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, and the Administration of South Ossetia. During the formation and maintenance of these displaced government entities, Tbilisi has been led by the notion of legitimacy, and regards these entities as the sole mechanism for the representation of the local population. The stance of the Central Government towards the governing functions of the entities displaced from Abkhazia is also discussed. In this respect, two different phases are observed, the first phase, 1992/93 to 2004, when the displaced entities were invested with a maximum of governing power; and 2004 to 2012, when power became concentrated in the central government. The author also discusses the current status of the displaced entities and concludes that, for the first time in three decades of the independence of Georgia, Tbilisi does not have a comprehensive position towards the displaced government entities of the breakaway regions.

Keywords: Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Occupied territories, Government Structures in Exile, Political Representation.

INTRODUCTION

The violent conflicts in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the Former Autonomous District of South Ossetia have not only caused economic, political and social problems, but placed on Tbilisi the additional burden of hosting exiled government entities. These entities: the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (later the Government), and the Provisional Administration of the Autonomous District of South Ossetia. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians, as well as the administrations and assemblies of local districts/municipalities had to flee these regions. With no territories under their control, these entities have moved to Tbilisi, the Capital of Georgia, and continue to carry out their functions to this day.

Not much has changed within the exiled government entities through the years, no new elections have been held, and no fundamental structural reforms have occurred. Meanwhile, the average age of members grows year by year, placing the long-term existence of these entities into question. Low levels of trust from the side of displaced communities, and almost no influence on the local political processes inside Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia adds to the problem. Despite these facts, the government entities of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region continue to function, they possess property, administer budgets, and continue to engage with and take part in international negotiations.

An examination of the structure of the governmental entities of Abkhazia and the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia is important for several reasons. First, there is the theoretical value, as these government entities are political structures, but function without any territory under their jurisdiction, without elections, and in conditions totally contradicting the universally accepted principles of democratic governance. Government entities carrying out their functions in exile are also interesting from the point of view of governance. These structures are financed by the central state budget and are responsible for delivering certain services to internally displaced persons as well as persons who have stayed inside the occupied territories. At the same time, the process of formation and maintenance of these entities casts some light on the position the central state holds towards the territorial conflicts. Namely, changes to the structures and functions of the exiled government entities reflect shifts towards the territorial issues in Tbilisi.

This research addresses exactly the problems mentioned above by discussing the policies of the central state in regard to the exiled government entities from the 1990's up to today. This paper looks at the rationale for the formation of these entities, and the preconditions underlying them; the reasons why they continue their activities so many years after the end of the armed conflict; and issues of political legitimacy and governance. The research also deals with the variety of policies Tbilisi has implemented to 2020, during the rule of both the United National Movement and the Georgian Dream.

Applying the methodology of a case study, this research undertakes a comparative analysis of similar cases. Information on the government entities of Abkhazia and the Former Autonomous District of South Ossetia was gathered (books, legislation, articles in media) and similarities and differences between the cases were identified. By applying this method, the author has identified policies characteristic of the Georgian government and can make generalized conclusions. During this process, the author has applied the method of document analysis which has allowed him to carry out an in-depth study of the issue under research.

LEGAL STATUS

According to the Georgian Legislature, the legal statuses of the government entities of Abkhazia, and the Former Autonomous District of South Ossetia are different. This difference is explained by the political statuses of these regions, which reflect the pre-war/soviet administrative and political designations of the regions. The primary difference being Abkhazia enjoying the higher status of, an autonomous region, while South Ossetia held the lesser status of, an autonomous district. It is important to note that Abkhazia's status as an autonomous region is included in the Constitution of Georgia, whereas the status of the Provisional Administration of the Former Autonomous District of South Ossetia is defined by law, at the level of a legislative act.

Along with the difference between the political statuses of the two regions, the regulation of the government entities of the breakaway regions by law is equally complex. According to the constitution of Georgia, the status of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia shall be determined by the Constitutional Law of Georgia, "on the Status of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia". However, the Parliament of Georgia has not adopted such legislation. The region's rights, and manner of demonstrating of these rights, is defined by a decree issued by the Parliament of Georgia on the 24th of February 1995, "on Supreme Authority of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia" (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1995). The decree claims that the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, "shall carry out its activities in conformity with the Constitution of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic adopted in 1978". However, unlike the constitution of Adjara, the constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia as of yet is not approved by the Parliament of Georgia.

The decree of the Parliament of Georgia on March 10, 1994, grants the Council of Ministers of Abkhazia a status of being, "temporarily displaced" and recognizes it as the supreme body of the region until new elections are held. This is the only document approved by the parliament of Georgia on the issue of the Council of Ministers of Abkhazia. Detailed competences and rules for carrying out its activities are defined under the laws and legislative acts of the Council of Ministers itself.

As for South Ossetia, all government structures recognized by Georgian law that had functioned inside the territory of the district are illegitimate as the status of Autonomous District itself was removed by Tbilisi. From a legal point of view, the sole legitimate political structure inside the region was formed in 2007 on the basis of the, "Law of Georgia on creating appropriate conditions for the peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Former Autonomous District of South Ossetia" (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 2007). According to this document, a new temporary administrative-territorial status has been granted to the region, and a provisional administrative structure for governance has been formed. The rights and competences of the latter are detailed in the May 10, 2007, Order of the President of Georgia, "on the establishment, functions and boundaries of the provisional administrative-territorial unit on the territory of the Former Autonomous District of South Ossetia". The legal status of the Administration of South Ossetia remains solely based on legislation and is not backed by the constitution of Georgia.

Five municipalities functioning in exile are recognized by Tbilisi: Azhara, Tighvi, Eredvi, Qurta and Akhalgori. These political units (except the Akhalgori municipality) were first created as administrative communities (თემი) by the organic law of 16 October, 1997 on, "local self-governance and governance" and were later turned to municipalities on the bases of the 9 January, 2006 organic law. It is also noteworthy, that in 1998-2004, in the Azhara community (Gulripshi district, Kodori Gorge) based on the Order of the President of Georgia the state representative/envoy of the President of Georgia had functioned.

THE SUPREME COUNCIL AND THE GOVERNMENT OF ABKHAZIA

The 1992-93 armed conflict in Abkhazia divided the two government entities, the Supreme Council and the Council of Ministers, into two rival camps. After the armed conflict ended, the, “Georgian” part of the council moved to Tbilisi, while the, “separatist” part stayed in Sukhumi (პაპასტირი 2007). A similar process happened to all other organizations in the autonomous republic, among them, almost all district administrations (უმალღესი საბჭო 2000).

The members of the Supreme Council in office at the time of the armed conflict had been elected in the 1991 elections of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Socialist Republic of Abkhazia (ASSR). At that time, 64 members were elected to the legislature: 28 ethnic Abkhaz, 25 Georgians and 11 representatives from other ethnic communities. Shortly after the armed conflict, on March 10, 1994, the Parliament of Georgia dissolved the Supreme Council of Abkhazia (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1994). However, on February 24, 1995, it again recognized this body as the supreme representative and the sole legislative power in the region (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1995). This reconstituted council had a considerably reduced number of members. Only those who did not have a history of cooperation with the separatists were accepted as members. As such, only 26 candidates were accepted, 24 ethnic Georgians, one Circassian and one Ukrainian. In 1995, the Parliament decided to add ten more members to the Council based on the so-called principle of “co-optation”. These were the ten members elected in 1992 to the Parliament of Georgia from Abkhazia. In the years following, the membership of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia has not changed. However, the number of members has profoundly reduced through years mostly due to death. Currently the Supreme Council consists of only 21 members.

Similar developments were observed in case of the Council of Ministers of Abkhazia (Government from 2004). This entity was officially recognized by the Georgian state in a decree on March 10, 1994, issued by the Parliament of Georgia, where it was granted the status of being, “temporarily displaced”. In the same decree, the Council of Ministers was entitled to act as the, “supreme body of Abkhazia” until elections were held in the region. Later, the Council of Ministers was made a supervisor of the social assistance program for IDPs from Abkhazia (საქართველოს პრეზიდენტი 1996). It is noteworthy that other government bodies from the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia have also resumed their activities in Tbilisi, i.e. the Court, the Prosecutors Office, and the Chamber of Control.

Throughout the first decade of displacement, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, the Council of Ministers, and the MP’s [i] of the region played an active part in discussions over the issues of Abkhazia and IDPs. The main reason for this was that Tbilisi encouraged the delegation of powers to the displaced regional entities, and it was considered beneficial from the point of view of governance as well. The displaced government bodies also enjoyed some control over local developments, mostly in the southern parts of Gali district. Things changed drastically in 2004 with a new government coming to power. Unlike its predecessor, Mikheil Saakashvili’s administration decided to centralize the IDP issues. Supervision was now shared between the ministries of the central government, mainly the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories of Georgia, and the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation. Meanwhile, the number of ministries in the Government of Abkhazia was reduced, with several sub-organizations being dissolved. The MPs from Abkhazia who functioned inside the Parliament of Georgia were also dismissed. The political role of the Abkhazian government entities was further narrowed with the relocation of the governmental administration in 2006 from Tbilisi to the considerably far Kodori gorge. Tbilisi preserved the displaced government entities in order to mirror their counterparts in Sukhumi, but they were no longer important actors in the decision-making process.

After the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the Government of Abkhazia, together with local ethnic Georgians, were forced to flee from Kodori. Fundamental reforms have not been carried out in the years following and it remains active within the same structure and power that it had before 2008. It must also be noted that the Government of Abkhazia is involved in projects delivering educational and healthcare benefits to the population remaining inside the occupied territory. According to data from 2020, the budget of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is 19.9 Million Georgian laris and covers five ministries: Education and Culture, Healthcare and Social Assistance, Finance and Economics, IDPs, and Justice and Civil Integration.

THE ABKHAZIAN SUPREME COUNCIL AND GOVERNMENT AS THE LEGITIMATE POWER

The restoration of the Abkhaz Supreme Council and Government by the central authorities of Georgia had several purposes. First, the Georgian state was able to, “provide employment” for a large number of the ethnic Georgian political elite from Abkhazia, thereby mobilizing the representatives of hundreds of thousands of IDPs and, in this way, successfully managing the existing discontent inside this group. The special importance of the Abkhazian government entities lay in the fact that, shortly after the end of the war, the immediate political future of the region was still unknown. The central government under Eduard Shevardnadze had hoped that the displacement was not going to last very long and the population, as well as the displaced government, would be able to return to Abkhazia. For this reason, the readiness of the government and the ruling elites to return was vital. This decision also meant that the Government of Georgia recognized these entities as the sole legal state representative body, which voiced the interests of most of the population of Abkhazia. The, “Georgian” part of the Supreme Council, unlike the separatist one, looked more legitimate in the eyes of Tbilisi, as long as its Georgian members represented the majority of the local population. This was the sticking point of the position of Georgia locally as well as internationally. From the very beginning, the members of the Georgian government, in official documents as well as during the public speeches, pronounced the displaced government entities as the, “legitimate powers of Abkhazia” which represented the interests of, “the majority of Abkhazia’s multiethnic population” (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1995) or, the “entire population of Abkhazia” (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1996).

At the same time, the existence of the Supreme Council and the Government enabled the authorities in Tbilisi to present the conflict in Abkhazia in the light of political confrontation between two communities living in the region, and not as a Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic conflict. It is important to note that, along with its legislative functions, the Supreme Council was granted the power to participate in, “all negotiations” on the Abkhazian issue by the Parliament of Georgia in 1995 (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1995). The next year, it declared the, “legitimate Government of Abkhazia” and the, “Abkhazian Separatist Group” as the two opposed sides in the conflict. (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1996). A decree of the Parliament of Georgia in 2002, “on the state of affairs in Abkhazia” also speaks of the legitimate Government of Abkhazia as, “one side of the conflict”, to be fully involved in negotiations and the decision-making processes (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 2002).

Despite the fact that during the rule of the United National Movement reforms had considerably reduced powers of the government entities of Abkhazia, changes did not apply to the issue of their legitimacy. Between 2004 and 2012, both the Supreme Council of Abkhazia and the Government have been actively referred to as the sole legitimate governance bodies of Abkhazia, representing the majority of the population living inside Abkhazia (საგარეო საქმეთა სამინისტრო 2007).

Moreover, shortly after the 2008 War, the Georgian government successfully managed to add representatives of the displaced government of Abkhazia to the Geneva international discussions (საგარეო საქმეთა სამინისტრო 2008). The same practice has continued through the rule of the Georgian Dream and representatives of the displaced government entities still continue to participate in the Geneva negotiations.

PROVISIONAL ADMINISTRATION OF SOUTH OSSETIA

The history of the government entities of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia is shorter than that of its Abkhazian counterparts. After the armed conflict in 1991-1992, control over the governmental entities of the region by Tbilisi was ended by separatist groups. This ruled out the possibility of, “employment” for exiled the political elites from the very beginning. Additionally, in accordance with the decision of the Supreme Council of Georgia on December 11, 1990, the Autonomous District of South Ossetia was dissolved, making the further existence of a regional government entity impossible from a legal point of view. The number of IDPs from the region was also relatively small, around 10,000 people, rendering creation of a new governmental body politically less relevant.

Despite the fact that the autonomous district was abolished, Tbilisi later made several important decisions concerning the administrative-territorial structure of the region. According to the decision made by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia on April 27, 1991, two out of the four regions of the Autonomous District, the Znauri/Kornisi and Tskhinvali regions were merged into the neighboring Qareli and Gori districts respectively. However, at that time Tbilisi only controlled the parts of Znauri/Kornisi and Tskhinvali populated by ethnic Georgians (the greater and lesser Liakhvi gorges in Tskhinvali, and villages of Nuli and Avnevi in Znauri/Kornisi). Later, on the basis of Tighvi (alternative name for Znauri/Kornisi), Eredvi and Qurta communities, the respective municipalities were formed. As for Akhalgori, Tbilisi retained control over most of the area until 2008.

Fundamental changes took place in the political representation of the region between 2006 and 2007. In May 2007, the central Georgian government formed a provisional administrative-territorial entity on the territory of the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia. Dmitry Sanakoev, the former ‘minister of defense’ and the ex-chairman of the ‘government’ of the separatist regime emerged as the winner of a November 12, 2006 election with 94% of votes (სამოქალაქო საქართველო 2007). The elections were mainly held in areas under Tbilisi’s control, however officials in Tbilisi have claimed that ethnic Ossetians also actively participated (სამოქალაქო საქართველო 2006). On the same day, November 12, the presidential elections were also run by the separatist regime, with Eduard Kokoity receiving a decisive majority of votes. According to media reports, 41,737 voters cast their votes in the so-called alternative elections, with Tskhinvali reporting their voter turnout at 52,443.

Dmitry Sanakoev soon formed a government with the 12 seats of the cabinet of ministers divided between ethnic Georgians and ethnic Ossetians, and with former high-ranking officials of the separatist regime among them. As a result, two political centers had been created on the territory of South Ossetia. First, the pro-Georgian administration headed by Dmitry Sanakoev headquartered in the village of Qurta in the Tskhinvali district. The second, pro-Russian, headed by Eduard Kokoity in Tskhinvali. At first, Tbilisi firmly refused to have anything to do with Dmitry Sanakoev and the so-called alternative elections, however it had expressed its readiness to accept the “new reality on the ground”. Despite its denial, it soon became clear that this was in fact Tbilisi’s attempt to shift status quo of the region and create conditions more favorable to Georgia.

The Georgian government recognized Sanakoev's administration shortly after the elections and assigned it to manage issues of political, economic, social and infrastructural nature. Sanakoev's administration was also assigned the mission of discussing and negotiating the possible political status of the region.

Shortly after the provisional administration was recognized at the level of the legislature, Dmitry Sanakoev became actively involved in discussions over the political future of the region which were held both in Georgia, and abroad. Several conferences had been organized under the aegis of Sanakoev and a broad discussion over the status of Tskhinvali region had begun. At the same time, Sanakoev, as a representative of South Ossetia, delivered political speeches at a number of international events. Despite this, the provisional administration did not have enough power to manage local logistical issues; and, both financially and politically, the administration relied entirely on Tbilisi.

After the events of 2008, the administration of South Ossetia moved from Qurta to the capital of Georgia and resumed its activities with Dmitry Sanakoev still at the helm. The administration, without any territory under its control, soon faced the risk of being left without politicians. After the August War, some of the ethnic Ossetian politicians left Georgia. With a reduced number of leaders, the role and functions of the Provisional Administration declined. To date, it only hosts sport, educational, healthcare and charity events. Unlike the governmental bodies of Abkhazia, the administration of South Ossetia is less active in the media as well. However, it still functions, administers its budget, and participates in the Geneva international discussions.

For the year 2020, the budget of the Provisional Administration equaled 2.4 Million Georgian lari. The administration consisted of five functional departments: culture and sport, educational, IDP issues, healthcare and social assistance, and people's diplomacy and civil reconciliation services.

Together with the provisional administration, the four municipalities which were established on the territory of Tskhinvali region – the Tighvi, Qurta, Eredvi and Akhagori – have also turned to exile and continued to function from Tbilisi, with the exception of the mayor's office and municipality assembly of Akhagori which are situated in the village of Tserovani near Mtskheta. Like the provisional government, the displaced municipalities also retained their budgets and employees, however their functions include only providing social assistance to the IDPs, and management of minor infrastructural projects. It should be noted here that these municipalities function independently from the provisional administration.

PROVISIONAL ADMINISTRATION AS THE LEGITIMATE POWER

The formation of the Provisional Administration on the territory of the former District of South Ossetia had several goals. First, the Georgian central authorities had hoped to gain the trust of the Ossetian society thus laying a foundation for the smooth integration of the region into the rest of Georgia. At the same time, for the international community, the existence of the provisional administration served as a demonstration of the existence of an alternative point of view regarding the political future of the region and proved that most of the local society (both ethnic Georgians and ethnic Ossetians) was positively disposed towards Tbilisi. The fact that this was voiced by a former separatist and ethnic Ossetian was especially important. In this aspect, the provisional administration mirrored the model of the Abkhazian government entities. With the creation of Sanakoev's administration, a new political entity, elected by the local population had emerged. As of today, it is the sole legitimate entity that represents the local population for officials in Tbilisi.

It is noteworthy that the provisional administration does not enjoy the same level of political legitimacy which the Abkhazian government entities do. From the point of view of the legislature, the administration is a provisional unit with the mission of discussing the political status of the region in the name of the local political forces; and preparing favorable conditions for the elections to be held across the entire territory of the breakaway region. It must be also mentioned that the so-called, "alternative elections," were not officially recognized by the Georgian side. Therefore, the provisional administration is a body formed on the transitional level, before the final political status of the region is defined and has been granted the power of governance not by the people, but from the authorities of Georgia. Despite this fact, in 2007-2008, Georgian authorities constantly stressed the fact of Sanakoev's administration being the sole representative of the region's political forces, and that this body protected the interests of the local population (საქართველოს პრეზიდენტი 2007) or the interests of a, "considerable part" of the Georgian and Ossetian population (საგარეო საქმეთა სამინისტრო 2007) better than the separatists' regime did.

PLEBISCITES, REFERENDUMS

To better understand the role of the displaced entities, the elections held in the regions must also be considered. The last general election in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia was held in 1992 [ii]. After that, nationwide elections as well as the local governance elections were held in the Kodori gorge only. As for the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, the last region-wide general election was also held in 1992. Throughout the following years, parliamentary as well as the presidential elections were held in the communities of Qurta, Eredvi and Tighvi [iii], as well as in the Akhalgori region. The last local governance elections were held in 2006.

Regional-wide elections/plebiscites held under the aegis of Tbilisi is also worth considering. The precedent was set by a plebiscite on November 23, 1996, the day when the parliamentary elections were held in breakaway region of Abkhazia. 224,925 refugees as well as the internally displaced voters (the total number of IDP and refugee voters being 239,451) voted against holding parliamentary elections until the IDPs and refugees returned to their homes in Abkhazia (საქართველოს რესპუბლიკა 1996). The ballots were cast outside Georgia as well, including in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Greece, Israel and Turkey.

The same scenario repeated on November 12, 2006, when two presidential elections and two referendums were held simultaneously in the Tskhinvali region. The population living in the separatist controlled area had to decide whether they supported the independence of South Ossetia. The other part of the population, on territory controlled by the central government, had to determine if they supported starting negotiations with Tbilisi on the issue of forming a united federal state (რადიო თავისუფლება 2006). In both elections over 90% of participants voted in the positive.

Both cases reveal that Tbilisi used the plebiscites as tools to strengthen its positions. Tbilisi tried to undermine the political decisions taken by Sukhumi and Tskhinvali in order to delegitimize the breakaway governments. At the same time Tbilisi attempted to demonstrate that it enjoyed wide support among the local population. It should be noted that the Georgian authorities have used this method only twice, and it had not been applied on a broader level.

THE PRESENT DAY STATUS OF THE DISPLACED GOVERNMENTS

The government entities of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali have observed a new reality after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Left without any territorial jurisdiction, these organizations had to flee to Tbilisi where they have stayed and continued their activities to the present day. As times go by, nothing has really changed in these government entities; neither new elections have been organized, nor have any fundamental structural reforms been implemented. However, during the last decade, the necessity of such reforms has been frequently discussed by leading Georgian political parties (რეზონანსი 2015).

The Georgian Dream's pre-election program of 2012 promised to undertake reforms of Abkhazia's and Tskhinvali's administrations. Namely, "all issues connected to IDP's" were to be decentralized, and, in accordance to the Constitution of Georgia, representative organs of IDP's "must be elected" (ბლოკი ბიძინა ივანიშვილი-ქართული ოცნება 2012). This reform was included in the government programs of 2012 and 2013; however, it has not been yet implemented and the displaced administrations continue to carry out their activities within the limits of their old structures and functions.

Calls for reforms have been heard from civil society organizations too. On September 27, 2014, a civic movement 'Conference of the Abkhaz' introduced an initiative to reform entailing dismissal of the Supreme Council and electing a new one (Newposts.ge 2014). The central government did not officially respond to the message; however, the Supreme Council itself expressed its skepticism over the issue. In an official statement, the Supreme Council argued that a legislature elected outside the territory of Abkhazia would automatically lose legitimacy and would threaten the integrity of the territory of Georgia. At the same time, any elections organized by Sukhumi would automatically gain a legal basis (უმალღესი საბჭო 2014).

On November 6, 2019 the political party, European Georgia, shared the idea of, the 'Conference of the Abkhaz' and addressed the Parliament of Georgia with a legislative proposal (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 2019) according to which the Supreme Council had to elect 30 members serving four year terms, in fully proportionate elections [iv]. However, the proposal did not reach committee discussions as it was blocked by representatives of the ruling party citing procedural reasons.

The Georgian Dream's unwillingness to reform the displaced government entities, and to hold new elections for the Supreme Council, makes it clear that the ruling party has chosen to preserve these entities in their existing forms. However, due to the constitutional changes initiated by the ruling party in 2017-2018, the 21 members of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia have been included in the college, which elects the President of Georgia (საქართველოს კონსტიტუცია 2018). This has substantially strengthened their legal and political status and goes in contrast to the general, "status-quo policy" the Georgian Dream has held on the issue. Therefore, we can conclude that, for the first time in 30 years of the Georgian independence, Tbilisi does not have a clear position towards the displaced government bodies. Its policies mostly continue of those established over the previous two decades, with the Abkhazian and Tskhinvali regional administrations preserved, and still considered the sole legitimate authorities of those regions as it was previous to 2012. Despite their pre-election promises in 2012, no structural changes have been undertaken, undermining the long-term existence of these entities.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the structures and functions of the government entities of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia has cast light on several important issues. First, during the past three decades, the government of Georgia held a consistent position regarding the displaced government entities. Legitimacy was the issue, which underlined the processes of formation, restoration and preservation of these bodies. For the Georgian government, the existence of the displaced government entities has been a powerful instrument to delegitimize the authorities of breakaway Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. The government entities which had been elected by the local population added to the weight of Tbilisi's legal and political arguments both locally and internationally. It is for this reason that the Supreme Council and Government of Abkhazia have been preserved over three decades; and, why in 2007, another entity, the Provisional Administration of South Ossetia was created.

The research also reveals differences in policies, including drastic shifts in approach towards the governance functions of the Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali administrations. In this respect, the research singles out two phases: the period from 1994 to 2004, characterized by the maximum delegation of power to the displaced government entities. This was the period which witnessed the restoration of the Supreme Council and Council of Ministers of Abkhazia, the extension of the term of office for council members, the establishment of the state representative/envoy of the President of Georgia in the Kodori gorge.

The second phase, from 2004 to 2012, was characterized by the centralization of IDP issues. During this period, the number of ministries of the Abkhazian Government was reduced, several sub governmental organizations were closed, the authority of the group of MPs from Abkhazia was not extended, and issues relating to IDP's was transferred to ministries of the central government. It must also be noted that governance issues were neglected while forming the Provisional Administration of South Ossetia as it did not have enough power to take control of local logistics and relied entirely on Tbilisi in this respect.

The most recent period, the rule of the Georgian Dream, the research determined that for the first time in the last three decades years, Tbilisi does not have a comprehensive position towards the displaced government entities of the breakaway regions, and its decisions mostly reflect the policy models established during the previous two decades. On the one hand, the party prolongs the existence of the structures and formats established before 2012; on the other hand, it refrains from strengthening the governance functions of the entities in exile. This means Tbilisi maintains the displaced bodies just for the sake of their legitimacy, and in order to balance their counterparts in the breakaway regions. It does not however see them in the light of decision- and policy-making.

[i] A group of ten elected to the Parliament of Georgia from Abkhazia in 1992. In 1995, their period in office was prolonged until the restoration of Georgian jurisdiction in the region (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 1995).

[ii] 1992 parliamentary elections had not been held in two regions of South Ossetia (Java and Tskhinvali) and in four regions of Abkhazia (Gagra, Gali, Gudauta and Tkvarcheli). The elections were successfully held in Gulripshi, Sukhumi, Ochamchire and Akhalgori regions. In the convocation of 1992-1995 parliament, the former South Ossetian Autonomous district had one majoritarian member, while Abkhazia was represented by three majoritarian members. Another seven MPs entered the parliament from Abkhazia via the party list.

[iii] In 1995-2012, two MPs had been elected from the Tskhinvali region: Tskhinvali (Liakhvi) and Akhalgori electoral districts. The last election in these two districts was held on May 21, 2008.

[iv] In 2020, the European Georgia together with the Supreme Council also included an appeal for, "regular and direct" elections of the head of the Provisional Government of South Ossetia in its program. According to the Conference of the Abkhaz, the initiative is supported by the United National Movement and the Labor Party as well.

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