

Armed Forces in Georgia 2004

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In any consideration of the Georgian Armed Forces, two major considerations should be kept in mind. Firstly, Georgia is practically a 'failed state', with many regions only loosely under control of the capital. With a weak central authority, informal militias such as the *Mkhedrioni* (Horsemen) played a pivotal role in the civil war of the early 1990s, when several regions broke away from the centre. Second is the role of the former imperial overlord, the Russian Federation, immediately to the north.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, a number of Soviet forces, whose command was assumed by the Russian Federation, remained on Georgian territory. In the early 21st century the remnants of these forces effectively help protect the autonomy of two regions of the country, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, while hindering the central control of another border region, Samtskhe-Javakheti. Russian forces interposed on the Abkhazian and South Ossetian borders are officially described as 'peacekeeping' troops, but effectively their role has been to protect the independent aspirations of these breakaway regions. It is unclear yet whether increased U.S. attention to the country, beginning to be manifested through the Georgia Train and Equip Program, will change this situation; what is apparent is that a 'mini-Cold War' between Russia and the United States over the country is brewing.

US Training for the Georgian Military [RILR]

The program, called the Georgia Train and Equip Mission began in June 2002, with up to a maximum of 150 US Special Force advisors and support personnel participating. While the main combat unit trained is the 11th Brigade, assistance has also been provided for higher-level headquarters and the Georgian Ministry of Defence. The Border police were also trained and the serviceability of their Mi-2/8 helicopters enhanced. At the start of 2003, the US Marine Corps took over training. Each battalion has been trained over a 100-day cycle. The program will be complete by May 2004 when the last unit, a mechanized company group, will be ready. Some of the material being handed over is being misappropriated; U.S. pattern military uniforms are readily available in Tbilisi markets.

As part of the plan, the US gave 10 UH-1H helicopters to Georgia in 2001-02, and Turkey gave two, for a total of 12.

I. The Georgian Armed Forces

The Ministry of Defense is located at No. 2a University Street, Tbilisi, and according to *RFE / RL Caucasus Report*, February 2001 the forces have 38,414 personnel. The IISS Military Balance 2002-03 gives an active strength of 17,500.

All sources report that the Georgian Armed Forces are experiencing a severe financial, as well as psychological & moral crisis, resulting in desertions and repeated mutinies during

the past 3 years. Some 3,000 troops deserted in 1999.¹ Georgia is spending 0.5% of its GNP to the Armed Forces. In comparison, Armenia, with an army of 80,000, is spending 3.6% of its budget. Reforms call for a massive reduction in personnel, achieving 20,000 by mid-2001 and 12,000-13,000 by 2004.

Ground Forces

The Ministry of Defence, Land Forces, is located at 7 Moscow Ave, Tbilisi.² Sources differ on the strength of the Ground Forces. A 2000 estimate gave them 17,000 troops, while the IISS Military Balance 2002-03 assessed strength as up to 8,600, including 1,600 National Guard and 5,600 conscripts.³ Most sources credit the Ground Forces with six or seven motor rifle brigades, but the Military Balance 02-03 estimate gives a lower figure as a result of force reductions which it says are in progress.

The Military Balance 03-04 lists the Georgian armed forces with some 8620 total pers, inc 1578 NG and 5572 conscripts. 1 LF HQ, 2 MR'bde', 1 national guard bde plus trng centre, 1 artillery regiment, 1 recce bn, 2 marine inf bn (1 cadre), PK & SF bns.

The Military Balance 02-03 gives a structure of a Land Forces HQ, 2 motor rifle 'brigades', a national guard brigade, which is probably the 1st Brigade listed below, a National Guard training centre, an artillery regiment, a reconnaissance battalion, two marine infantry battalions of which one is at cadre strength, a peacekeeping battalion, possibly the 16th Battalion, and a special forces battalion. Training establishments include the former Soviet Tbilisi Higher Artillery Command School, now the Georgian national defence academy. However, it is believed the current structure, in terms of brigades, is actually one reasonably full strength brigade, the 11th, three weak 'brigades' in the west with anywhere between 300-600 personnel each, plus the National Guard brigade.

The National Guard was formed in December 1990, as the Internal Troops, as a counterweight to the opposition-controlled *Mkhedrioni* (Horsemen). It was fully mobilised in April 1991. The Guard was involved in a power struggle with President Zviad Gamsakhurdia in August 1991, which led to an armed confrontation and the ousting of the president in January 1992. It became part of the Georgian Ministry of Defence in 1994 as a Main Department and was then officially disarmed in 1995. Among its former units from 1990 to 1995 were the Sheverdeni Legion, the *Tbiliseli* Unit, the *Chito – Gvrito Unit*, the *Choloqashvili* Battalion and the *Shavnabada* Battalion. The new role of the National Guard was drafted in September 1999, and specified that in **peacetime** it would carry out reserve training, training of "additional Special Forces" for the Army; ceremonial functions; disaster relief operations; and material-technical maintenance of peacekeeping troops. In **wartime** it would conduct local defense & protection of vital sites. Its previous commander, Koba Kobaladze, resigned on February

¹ RFE / RL *Caucasus Report*, January 2000

² HQ addresses are from Tbilisi Yellow Pages 2003, p.314.

³ IISS, *The Military Balance*, 2002-03, p.73

4, 2004, and was replaced by Brigadier General Zaza Kutateladze.⁴ It is speculated Kobaladze may face criminal charges.

The following Order of Battle is based upon the latest information available, but in some places may be up to three to four years old. At that time most of the brigades and battalions barely existed, due to the deprivations the Georgian Armed Forces are suffering. One of the units actually operational, the *Kojori* Rapid Response or Commando Battalion, intervened 25 May 2001 to prevent the elements of a National Guard battalion which had revolted marching on the capital. The detailed order of battle for the 11th Brigade is a result of information resulting from the GTEP program. After the Vaziani base was evacuated by the Russian forces in 2001, the 11th Brigade was relocated to Vaziani, though it includes a former Soviet and Russian airfield capable of landing heavy transport aircraft.

While there is a Georgian brigade, the 25th, located in Ajaria, previously it would be difficult for the Georgian Government to use it against the Ajarian regime. Given that most of the soldiers are from Ajaria, and that the unit receives considerable financial and other support from the Ajarian government, it was unlikely that it would ever act against the Ajarian authorities.⁵ Indeed the armoured vehicles that blocked the Choloki bridge against Tbilisi during the early 2004 confrontations were from this unit. The long-serving brigade commander, Maj. Gen. Roman Dumbardze, held the post for twelve years, and was loyal to the Ajaran leader Aslan Abashidze. Following the Choloki checkpoint crises of March and April 2004, the Georgian government is attempting to remove him; he was formally relieved of command by new Georgian Defence Minister Gela Bezhuashvili in early April 2004.⁶ He was finally removed after the Georgian central government took full control in May 2004.

16th Mountain Infantry Battalion
1st Brigade, National Guard (HQ Tbilisi)

11th Motorised Brigade (Vaziani, near Tbilisi)⁷
'Kojori' Army Commando Battalion [550 soldiers] (Kojori)
111th Light Infantry Battalion (about 560 soldiers) (Telavi)
113th Light Infantry Battalion 'Shavnabada' (636 personnel)⁸
1 mechanized company group [250 soldiers]

21st Motorised Brigade (HQ Kutaisi) (inc btn from disbanded 2 Bde)
22nd Motorised Brigade (HQ Akhaltsikhe) ('several hundred' men)(ex Soviet 10th MRD?)
25th Motorised Brigade (Batumi, Ajara) (300-350 soldiers)⁹

⁴ 'National Guard Commander steps down', Tbilisi *Messenger*, Feb. 6, 2004, p.4

⁵ Source: Anatol Lieven, 'Partners in Despair: The Georgian Army', 6 June 2001, EurasiaNet.org, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060601.shtml>

⁶ Tea Gularidze, 'Batumi Based Military Unit Mutinies', Civil Georgia, 20 April 2004.

⁷ -> to First Brigade, according to wwwwebsite, <http://www.mod.gov.ge/?l=E&m=6&sm=4>

⁸ 'Shevardnadze reiterates Tbilisi's desire to join NATO,' Interfax, Saturday, Aug. 30, 2003, at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/33048>

52nd Support (Artillery) Brigade (HQ Telavi) (may have been disbanded)

Georgian Air Force

In June 2000, the agreement of CFE Treaty accords for the post-Soviet states left Georgia with permission to field 100 aircraft & 50 helicopters. *Air Forces Monthly* (August '00) places all assets at Marneuli airbase, however, local Georgian and Russian sources both report helicopter units at Telavi and combat aircraft at Kopitnari, near Kutaisi.¹⁰ The Kopitnari base was in Soviet times the home of the 145th Bomber Aviation Regiment. To add to the information mix, it seems that the seven operational UH-1H Iroquois helicopters are based at Alexayevka, the military side of Tbilisi's international airport.¹¹ One crashed in 2003.

The IISS Military Balance 2002-03 attributes to the Georgian Air Force 1,250 personnel including 490 conscripts, 7 Sukhoi Su-25 'Frogfoots', 5 non-operational Sukhoi Su-17 'Fitters', 3 Mi-24 'Hinds', 4 Mi-8/17s 'Hips', and 8 Bell UH-1H Iroquois.¹² Transport aircraft are given as 4 An-2s, 1 Yak-18T, 2 Yak-40, 1 Tu-134 serving in the VIP role, along with 4 Yak-52, 9 L-29 and 2 Mi-2 helicopters for training. Surface to air missile are assessed at 75 SA-2/-3/-4/-5/-7 systems.

Fighter Ground Attack Regt/Sqdn (Kopitnari AB, Kutaisi) (Su-25, Yak-18T(?))
Helicopter Regiment, Telavi AB (2 Mi-8MTV-1, 10-12 UH-1H, Mi-2/24)
Aviation Training Centre, Marneuli, Su-25s (training), An-2, Yak-52, L-29

The following is currently a straight insert from ASG:

Air Defence

At present Georgian Air Defence has several military radar stations (P-15 and P-18) inherited from the Soviet air defence troops. They are deployed in Poti, Kopitnari, Marneuli, Makhati and Kvishiani. Normally, they must operate round-the-clock. In reality, however, they fail to do so for a lack of fuel and electricity. In contrast, two navigation radar stations of the Civil Aviation Department are capable of implementing 24-hour control. They are deployed in Senaki (western Georgia) and Kvishiani (near Tbilisi), and are equipped with US-made radars covering almost entire Georgian air space. There is, however, one important aspect: these radars can detect an aircraft only if its onboard identification device is on. If it is off, an incoming aircraft may safely sneak up on Georgia. To eliminate such security loopholes and improve efficiency of air defence, military experts propose to build up an integrated radar control system, which will accumulate and analyse data from radars of the Civil Aviation, Navy, Coast Guard and Border Troops in real time.

⁹ Tea Gularidze, 'Batumi Based Military Unit Mutinies', Civil Georgia, 20 April 2004.

¹⁰ Teimuraz Chachanidze, 'Air Force of Georgia', Army and Society in Georgia Sept. 1999, as well as Teplitskiy's website.

¹¹ <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=487>

¹² IISS Military Balance, op. cit.

Timely detection of aircraft is only one part of the problem. Enemy fighters must be downed by air defence troops. From this viewpoint, Georgia is also ill prepared. First of all, it has no interceptor fighters at all and must rely only on ground-based artillery and missiles. At present Georgian air defence troops are equipped with rather aged ZU-23 anti-aircraft artillery and S-60 automatic artillery systems, and more effective ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft artillery system ("Shilka") and S-125 surface-to-air missiles. In addition, Georgian air defence troops have a number of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles "Strela-2M" and "Igla".¹³ *ends*

The Georgian Navy

The Georgian Ministry of Defence, Naval Forces, have their headquarters at 2a University Street, Tbilisi, collocated with the Ministry of Defence. Naval Bases are located at Poti (main base) and Batumi in Ajaria. It has an estimated 2,000 personnel.

Greece granted a patrol craft (about \$10 mln worth, some 100 tons of displacement) to Georgia in Greece on September 1, 1999. The craft is now named "Mestia". It is the second Greek gift to the Georgian Navy - the first one ("Iveria") was granted in February 1998. On the whole, the Navy has got three patrol craft from foreign countries: two were granted by Greece - "Iveria" and "Mestia" - and one by Turkey - "Kutaisi" (in November 1998).¹⁴

Naval Assets

12 patrol craft, 4 coastal minehunters, 6 amphibious landing craft
2 former Greek patrol craft: *Iveria* (February '98) & *Mestia* (September '99)
1 former Turkish patrol craft: *Kutaisi* (November '98)
1 patrol craft (unknown origin): *Batumi*

II. Georgian Para-Military Forces

The **Troops of the Ministry of the Interior** include the Police, Internal Forces & Special Forces. Their strength was estimated at 6,300 by the Military Balance 2002-03. A brigade of airborne assault troops, possibly numbering 2,500, was in 1998 also transferred to the Interior Ministry. The **State Department of Border Defence** numbers some 4,000 personnel.

Coast Guard

The Coast Guard's role is protection of the 12-miles coastal zone in co-operation with the Navy.

One *Tarantul* & 5 *Grif*-class patrol boats, 2 UI corvettes, 4 *Aist*-class armed hovercraft, 2 former USCG craft (probably including *103*).

Adjara, an autonomous republic in the south-east of Georgia which has quite a degree of freedom from central control, maintained before Aslan Abasidze's fall maritime assets

¹³ "Kviris Palitra" No. 42, October 15-21, p. 9, in ASG, Sept-Oct 2001

¹⁴ "Dilis Gazeti" No. 200, September 3, p. 2 "Kviris Palitra" No. 36, September 6-12, p. 9 via Army and Society in Georgia, Sept. 1999

consisting of 1 *Grif* class patrol boat, 3 *Aist* class armed hovercraft, and 1 armed fishing boat.

Vessels noted in Batumi, 15 February 2004: western-type patrol craft, P104, up on blocks labeled 'Coast Guard' in English, P101, armed trawler, 0116, small western-type 'Lady Liz II' craft.

Ministry of State Security

Former National Security Ministry. Performs Counter-Surveillance & Anti-Terrorism duties.

Services and Troops unknown.

State Intelligence Department

Organisation is unknown.

State Safeguard Service

Presidential service, some 6,000 personnel.

Protects all strategic objects (Parliament, Presidency, vital industrial installations...).

III. Russian Forces

There are between 6-7,000 Russian troops on Georgian territory, stationed in three military bases – Gudauta, Batumi, and Akhalkalaki - and two peacekeeping forces, on the Georgian/Abkhaz border and in South Ossetia. The Russian Group of Forces in the Transcaucasus (GRVZ) has its headquarters in Tbilisi, with some 30 officers assigned. General Major Aleksander Studenikin, former deputy commander of the 20th Army, commands the Group with General (Major?) Andrei Popov as his deputy.¹⁵ Russia formally agreed in November 1999, by a joint statement between itself and Georgia, forming part of the CFE Final Act, that:

“No later than 31 December 2000, the Russian Side will withdraw (dispose of) the TLE located at the Russian military bases at Vaziani and Gudauta and at the repair facilities in Tbilisi.

The Russian military bases at Gudauta and Vaziani will be disbanded and withdrawn by 1 July 2001.”¹⁶

However, withdrawal has not been completed from Gudauta in the separatist region of Abkhazia, and it is not clear whether all treaty-limited equipment (TLE) has been withdrawn from the 142nd Tank Repair Factory in Tbilisi either.

The 10th Separate Airborne Regiment, formerly the 345th Airborne Regiment of Afghanistan fame, was based outside Gudauta, Abkhazia, at the Bombora military airfield, with some 1,045 troops, until it was disbanded in 2000-01, with personnel apparently going to strengthen the 7th Airborne Division at Novorossiysk in the North

¹⁵ Nino Kopaleishvili, ‘Bomb Injures Russian Military Official’, Tbilisi Messenger, April 8, 2004, p.5

¹⁶ Annex 14, Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and Georgia, Final Act of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, 19 November 1999, at <http://www.osce.org/docs/english/1990-1999/cfe/cfeinact99e.htm>

Caucasus Military District. Russian forces are still in place in Gudauta, with different reports agreeing that some 500 personnel with light weapons and some vehicles are at Bombora, but not agreeing on whether the troops there comprise a motor rifle battalion or not.

A CIS Peacekeeping Force made up completely of Russian personnel monitors the Georgian/Abkhazian ceasefire line under the supervision of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), which has a total of 117 UN military observers. UNOMIG had its mandate extended to 31 July 2004 by UN Security Council Resolution 1524 (2004) of 30 January 2004.¹⁷ The CIS PKF, seemingly made up of rotated battalions from various Russian divisions, now ostensibly uses the Bombora, Gudauta base as a rest centre. In 2002-3 battalions have been rotated in from the 136th Motor Rifle Brigade based at Maykop in the North Caucasus Military District. The extension of the Russian force's mandate is now a contentious political issue, with the UN Security Council now linking the extension of UNOMIG's mandate to the extension of the CIS PKF mandate, a decision the Georgian authorities are severely unhappy about.¹⁸

Other Russian forces inside Georgia consist of a battalion in South Ossetia, which mans four posts along the Georgian/South Ossetian confrontation line, and bases, formerly motor rifle divisions, at Batumi in the Ajarian Autonomous Republic and Akhalkalaki in the difficult to reach region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. The bases are on the lines of former Soviet category 'C' divisions, with shrunken motor rifle regiments numbering in the hundreds of personnel. Recruits are found from the local regions, with many ethnic Georgians serving in Batumi and many inhabitants of the local area serving with the Akhalkalaki units.

In Batumi, the installations of the 62nd Military Base line the main roads of Khelvachauri, with at least two barracks blocks, military family housing, and what appears to be a vehicle park or ammunition storage facility which has been hollowed out of gently rolling terrain and camouflaged. This is probably the 'military depot' referred to below. There is also a military training area on the coast at Akhalsopeli just south of the Batumi airport and a helicopter unit at Batumi airport, with about nine aircraft of Mi-8/17 type.

An unnamed Russian Defence Ministry official, speaking to Iter-Tass on March 29, 2004, said that the two bases had reduced their personnel – 'if there were over 2,000 servicemen at each Russian base at the beginning of 2003, now there are at least 1,000 servicemen.' The reorganization had also meant the disbandment of units at the bases that did not carry out direct combat missions.¹⁹

¹⁷<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sc7993.doc.htm>

¹⁸ See Speech of Mr.R.Adamia, Permanent Representative of Georgia to the UN, 31 January 2003, at <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/cgi-bin/news/archives.cgi?category=2&view=1-03>, and <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig/background.html>.

¹⁹ Iter-Tass, 'RF reduces two-fold personnel of military bases in Georgia', March 29, 2004, via Johnson's Russia List No.8144.

There are also some other small establishments, including the 142nd Tank Repair Works (Tbilisi), which was once a major Soviet tank repair facility. During the war in Nagorny Karabakh in the early 1990s Armenian tanks were repaired at the facility. There are also two camps located close to the Akhalkalaki base, a Tbilisi warehouse & bath, and a Kobuleti (Ajara) military sanatorium.²⁰

Order of Battle, Russian Forces, Georgia

The figures below for the 12th & 62nd Bases and the 142nd Factory's units, personnel and equipment, though the latest generally available, are drawn from 'The Army and Society in Georgia', October 1999, and are thus some five years out of date.²¹

CIS Peacekeeping Forces, Abkhazia (CIS PKF)

This numbers some 1,680 men. The mandate was extended to the end of December 2001 by the CIS summit at Minsk on 1 June 2001. It has been further extended since that time.

Motor rifle unit (battalion?), Bombora airfield, Guduata, Abkhazia

Motor Rifle Battalion, South Ossetia Zone of Control

Group of Russian Forces of the Transcaucasus

HQ: Tbilisi

12th Military Base (formerly 145th Motor Rifle Division)

Batumi, Adjara

Personnel - 1,790 servicemen; - equipment - 41 MBT; 71 AIFV/APC (BMP and BTR); 203 various military vehicles; 76 artillery systems; and 4 pontoon-bridging vehicles. The base includes the 35th (Batumi) and the 90th (Khelvachauri) motor rifle regiments; the 809th artillery regiment (Batumi); the 122nd communications battalion (Medjinstzqali); the 61st artillery detachment (Batumi); and the 773rd reconnaissance battalion (Medjinstzqali). This last counts 69 servicemen and several BRM-1K armoured vehicles.

The Khelvachauri-based (Adjara) military depot employs 56 servicemen. Twenty-nine AIFVs - 5 BMP-1 and 24 BMP-2 - are stored there.

62nd Military Base (formerly 147th MRD, 414th Rifle Division)

Akhalkalaki, Samtskhe-Javakheti

Personnel - 1,964 servicemen - equipment - 41 MBT, 114 AIFV/APC (BMP and BTR); 46 various military vehicles; 61 artillery systems; and 2 pontoon-bridging vehicles. The base includes the 409th and 412th motor rifle regiments; the 817th artillery regiment; the 889th communication battalion; and the 65th artillery detachment.

²⁰ www.Civil.ge 24 February 2003.

²¹ http://www.cipdd.org/cipdd/_a&s/a&s1999/M1099.htm

142nd Tank Repair Works (Tbilisi) Personnel - 20 servicemen; - equipment - 28 MBT (T-72), 103 AIFV/APC, and two 2C3 "Acatsia" self-propelled howitzers.

IV. Breakaway Regions

Abkhazia

Abkhazia declared itself independent from Georgia in 1992. It is not recognised by any state. A ceasefire was agreed in 1993-94, with the interposition of the CIS (Russian) Peacekeeping Force and the UN Mission referred to above. In May 1998, a six-day confrontation took place between Abkhazian military units and Georgian militias (the White Legion and the Forest Brothers). Abkhazia recovered the then occupied territory. The Abkhaz military is estimated at some 5,000 members, with a 30,000 mobilisation capability, though one Russian source says 58,000.

The IISS gives the Abkhaz some 50 T-55s and T-72s, 80+ APCs, 80+ artillery pieces, while a Russian source reports 34 T-55s, 60-70 BMP/BTR/BRDM-2, and 78 artillery pieces.

ASG in Sept-Oct 2001 gave Abkhazian personnel at some 3,000 servicemen, with MOD forces are divided into Ground Troops, Air Force, Navy, and Air Defence. The Defence Minister was reported as Vladimir Mikanba with the Head of General Staff being Vladimir Arshba. Reported also was a guard company and a communications company subordinated directly to the Minister of Defence. The Ground Troops were reported as having 5 Motor-rifle battalions, 1 rapid reaction unit, 2 reconnaissance battalions, 2 armoured battalions and 3 artillery units.

Abkhazia has 23 patrol vessels, most of them converted from fishing boats, except for 6 *Grif*-class patrol craft. A Russian source reports also 3 aircraft: L-39, MiG-21 and Su-24 plus 3 Mi-8 helicopters, based at Gudauta. Earlier reports gave the air element's strength at 250.

Georgian Partisan Forces on the Georgia/Abkhaz border

These include the "White Legion", a guerrilla movement born in the summer of 1996, aimed at protecting ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia. Its leader is Zurab Samushiya, a former Gamsakhurdia supporter. According to Abkhazian statements, it was formed from former personnel from the Sukhumi, Gali & Gulripsh District Militias. Also active is a similar movement, the "Forest Brothers", under the leadership of Dato Shengelia, a former *Mkhedrioni* member. Shengelia has now declared an end to his activities and turned in his weapons to the state, while the White Legion is apparently now also inactive.

South Ossetia

South Ossetia is a northern land-locked province of Georgia, which broke away from Georgia during the civil strife of the early 1990s. A Russian battalion is present as part of a Georgian/South Ossetian/Russian peacekeeping force. Its territorial defence force is

estimated at some 2,000 troops with 5-10 tanks, 30 AIFV/APC, and 25 artillery pieces including BM-21s by the Military Balance 2002-03.

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