I Introduction

Following nearly three years of irregular armed confrontation, the breakaway region of South Ossetia has been enjoying relative peace brought about by a ceasefire in 1992. Unfortunately, formal peacemaking has ceased there. The conflict has remained politically ‘frozen’ as negotiations have failed to yield any genuine settlement for more than a decade. In the absence of a formal settlement, however, a rather peculiar informal peace arrangement emerged out of local and international initiatives and needs-driven transactions.

Initially, segmented functional interactions were maintained by previously opposed groups. Over time, internationally-sponsored bilateral contacts and joint activities of all conflicting sides have gradually forged multifaceted interactions that are based upon an informal/semi-formal power-sharing principle. This ‘bot-
tom-up’ development of power-sharing, from incremental cooperation at the ‘grassroots’ level towards more formalized arrangements, may ultimately pave the way for a congruous settlement, possibly embracing ‘vertical’ components of conflict resolution. Currently, however, the existing network of field-specific arrangements exclusively targets ‘horizontal’ aspects of self-regulation. Provisionally, such a pattern could be described as ‘grassroots’, ‘horizontal’, or ‘informal/semi-formal’ power-sharing.

The South Ossetian experience suggests that a formal agreement may not be a necessary prerequisite for meaningful movement towards dispute settlement. It demonstrates that genuine and practical grassroots cooperation can function without an overarching political settlement spelling out the terms of engagement. In South Ossetia, these terms of engagement tend to be dictated by the needs of daily life that transcend ethnic barriers and cannot wait for a long-overdue political resolution. Mostly unwritten and largely assumed, these rules govern an intricate and delicate pattern of needs-based and project-specific interactions at informal or semi-formal levels. What remains puzzling and compelling about this case is the exceptional combination of internal and external factors that has prompted significant low-level cooperation without a comprehensive settlement.

South Ossetia can be viewed as unique in comparison to the other case studies in the Resolving Self-determination Disputes using Complex Power-sharing project, where officially recognized complex power-sharing arrangements have been implemented or are being implemented. This case thus may challenge the conventional understanding of resolving self-determination conflicts. It goes beyond the existing framework that complex power-sharing theory has offered for dispute settlement. Perhaps, it may even offer a novel way of addressing self-determination issues, at least in the short term.

II Approach

Because of its unique qualities, South Ossetia does not readily fit into the traditional analysis of complex power-sharing arrangements. To date, there has been no systemic exploration of conflict settlement with a focus on practical achievements at the horizontal level such as in South Ossetia. Research thus far has mainly concentrated on the ebb and flow of political developments with regard to a long-awaited but still uncompleted formal solution. The lack of systematic data on informal power-sharing practices in South Ossetia further complicates the analysis.

A tailored approach was developed for the exploration of the South Ossetian case. During field research in Georgia in the summer of 2001, information was collected from various primary sources such as official documentation and interviews with officials, independent experts and representatives of international as well as local governmental and nongovernmental organizations. The objective was twofold: firstly, to identify case-specific factors, whether internal or external, that have enabled and continue to facilitate bilateral or multilateral cooperation; and, secondly, to examine the areas, channels, and patterns of the existing power-sharing practices.