



# CONFLICT IN DMANISI

ethnic derivatives of everyday conflict



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# Conflict in Dmanisi - ethnic derivatives of everyday conflict

Social Justice Center

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## Introduction

The mass clashes between ethnic groups in Dmanisi on May 16-17, 2021, significantly impacted the Georgian media and political agendas. In the wake of the incident, both locals and other stakeholders voiced differing views on the causes of the conflict. On the same day, with the involvement of officials and religious leaders, the parties reconciled. However, per our observations, the residents of Dmanisi, both ethnic Azerbaijanis and ethnic Georgians, are still dissatisfied with the turn of the events, and the feeling of injustice persists.

In analyzing this conflict, we should not see Dmanisi as a separate event but observe the existing civil integration policy in the country as a whole and assess the current situation in this regard. Moreover, it is essential to consider the chain of conflicts between religious groups in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro, Samtatskaro, Chela, Mokhe, Adigeni, Kobuleti, and Buknari and the lack of experience of the state in working on the systemic transformation of these conflicts.<sup>1</sup> In most of the confrontations mentioned above, the authorities refused to employ legal means in relation to specific facts of harassment and violence, which encouraged bias-motivated crimes and created risks of recurrence of conflicts.<sup>2</sup> The government put an end to some of the disputes by relying on informal mediation formats. However, in no case did it work to eliminate the real causes of the conflict, restore trust, and build cooperation between the communities experiencing the conflict. All the more so, in some cases, there are signs of conflict conservation, usually at the expense of neglecting and silencing the rights, needs, and interests of non-dominant groups (Samtatskaro, Kobuleti).<sup>3</sup>

The conflict in Dmanisi cannot but be understood in the general light of integration policy, which is unfortunately largely formal and illusory in nature. According to research on these issues, acceptance of minorities in the general population is still weak. Most ethnic Georgians often perceive ethnic minorities as aliens, strangers, and troubles. According to a 2021 CRRC survey, 30% of the Georgian population believe that only ethnic Georgians should have Georgian citizenship, while 50% believe that only Orthodox Christians can be citizens.<sup>4</sup>

The participation and representation of minorities in public and political life are of particular importance in civic integration. According to a survey conducted by ISSA with the financial support of the Open Society Foundations in 2018-2019, 70% of ethnic minorities have not heard, or reject, the cooperation of political parties with ethnic minorities in any direction.<sup>5</sup> After the 2020 parliamentary elections, the percentage of ethnic minorities in the Georgian parliament has dropped to 4%.<sup>6</sup> The situation is more difficult at local governments. In municipalities densely and traditionally populated by ethnic minorities, 779 ethnic Georgians have one representative in the Sakrebulo. In contrast, 1,116 ethnic Armenians and 2,945 ethnic Azeris each have one representative in the Sakrebulo.

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<sup>1</sup> The crisis of secularism and loyalty to the dominant group <https://bit.ly/3yeiodq>

<sup>2</sup> Review of cases related to restriction of religious freedom and discrimination. <https://bit.ly/3x8apx6>

<sup>3</sup> Religion, Politics, and Social Contexts - A Collection of Studies, Reports, and Articles <https://bit.ly/3ylFBdy>

<sup>4</sup> Future of Georgia, CRRC,

[https://crcc.ge/uploads/tiny\\_mce/documents/Future%20of%20Georgia/Final%20FoG\\_Eng\\_08\\_04\\_2021.pdf](https://crcc.ge/uploads/tiny_mce/documents/Future%20of%20Georgia/Final%20FoG_Eng_08_04_2021.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Research on the Political Participation of Ethnic Minorities <https://bit.ly/3qoxuKl>

<sup>6</sup> List of Members of Parliament of Georgia: <https://parliament.ge/parliament-members>

For years, the Social Justice Center, along with activists from non-dominant ethnic groups and community leaders, has been criticizing the problematic nature of civic equality and integration policies in Georgia and the weak work of relevant agencies. Our work in regions populated by non-dominant groups shows that, on the one hand, the social and cultural spaces and ties shared between ethnic groups in these regions are weak. On the other hand, non-dominant ethnic groups face challenges related to political participation, access to vital resources, and basic social programs. It should be emphasized that the failures of the integration policy, the ineffective work of the political parties in the regions, and the strict security paradigms, also hinder the formation of democratic policies at the local level and the emergence of authentic local leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the dynamics and local context of the conflict in Dmanisi on 16-17 May, to identify the systemic causes of the conflict, and to provide theory and recommendations for change to relevant government agencies.

### Methodology and legitimacy

The assessments presented in the document are based on our observations of the May 17 confrontations in the center of Dmanisi and interviews with ethnic Georgians (Svans) and ethnic Azeris in Dmanisi Municipality in the following days. On May 17, in parallel with directly observing the conflict, we spoke to 2 ethnic Azeris and three ethnic Georgians (including one woman) from Dmanisi. During our visits to Dmanisi, in the post-conflict period, we spoke with eight ethnic Georgian community members in Dmanisi and ten ethnic Azerbaijani community members in Dmanisi. Meetings were also held with political officials of Dmanisi Municipality, including the Mayor of Dmanisi, Giorgi Tatuashvili.

Since the evening of May 16, when a video recording of the store incident was broadcasted through the local media, we have been actively monitoring the opinions expressed on social networks and media.

This document is a preliminary assessment of the events in Dmanisi. Accordingly, we understand that the document may have specific limitations. We requested public information from the relevant agencies, but we received an adequate response only from the Ministry of Reconciliation despite waiting for more than a month. The Social Justice Center plans to conduct a more in-depth study of the events in Dmanisi in the future, describing the historical context and memory and their impact on current public life and existence.

### Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks on the study of conflicts in academia have undergone significant changes in recent years. If conflicts were mainly between nation-states by the end of the 1980s, from the beginning of the 1990s, conflictologists and social scientists focused on civil wars, internal and ethnic conflicts. Definitions of war and peace have also changed. If the most accepted definition of peace was the absence of war for years, the new definition of peace proposed by John Galtung has turned the understanding of conflict and peace upside down. Galtung divided peace into two parts: positive and

negative peace. Negative peace implies the absence of direct violence (conflict), and positive peace is a situation where both structural and cultural violence is overcome.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the conflict is no longer seen solely on the level of action. Conflict can arise and develop on cognitive (perception), emotional (feelings), and behavioral (actions) levels.<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that the sense of conflict on either side, at any level, already indicates an existence of a conflict situation.

It must be said that the conflict is not a negative event per se. Conflict is often compared to fire and its dual nature, which is one of the attributes of growth and development; however, uncontrolled confrontation usually has devastating consequences. Therefore, openly talking about the conflict and having frank discussions about its foundations may be one of the methods for conflict intervention and settlement. However, this process should not escalate into the violence and intensification of the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the objectives of the present analytical document and the context of Dmanisi, we will rely on three theories to build up a theoretical framework: Basic Needs Theory, Identity Theory, and Conflict Transformation Theory. **The theory of basic human needs** holds that deeply-seated conflicts are caused by the inability to meet basic needs (physical, psychological, social), where identity, security, recognition, participation are crucial concepts. The objective of this theory is to assist the parties in identifying their basic needs and meeting those needs. **Identity theory** proposes that conflict arises when the identity of the parties is threatened (or so it is assumed). This theory aims to create an environment in which opposing parties could identify threats and fears of each other's identities, thereby building empathy and trust in each other. **Conflict Transformation Theory** holds that the root cause of conflict is inequality and injustice within social, economic, and cultural frameworks and structures. Conflict transformation is thus possible if we change the existing frameworks and structures that lead to inequality and injustice, including economic redistribution. In addition, creating a process and system that strengthens the oppressed promotes justice, peace, reconciliation, and recognition.<sup>10</sup> For the conflict transformation and peacebuilding process to be sustainable and effective, it is essential to plan a bottom-up peace process involving communities with the experience of conflict beyond the vertical framework organized at the institutional and formal levels. This process recognizes the importance of community members' agency and participation. It acknowledges that the visions and interests of the local community in the peacebuilding process may differ, so it focuses on the inclusiveness of the process and the stakes involved. This approach believes that the peace process attained with the involvement of the local communities and actors is more sustainable because community members exercise their **Local Ownership**.<sup>11</sup> The bottom-up peacebuilding process provides communities with the experience of violence with the opportunity to voice their views on the causes of conflict, strengthen their strategies in response to the violence they have experienced, and change

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<sup>7</sup> Galtung, J. *Cultural Violence. Violence and its Alternatives*. 1999 St, Martin Press, New York.

<sup>8</sup> Mayer, B. *The Dynamics of Conflict: A Guide to Engagement and Intervention* 2012, A Wiley Imprint

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, S et al. *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action*, 2000, Zed Books, New York.

<sup>11</sup> T. Donais, 'Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-conflict and Consensus-building'

the broader relationship patterns and structures underlying this violence.<sup>12</sup> This process aims to amplify weakly heard voices, but if an institutional, vertical peacebuilding process does not accompany it, it could even be detrimental to peace. That is why the state must see the importance of and work on construing the horizontal and vertical peace-build building simultaneously.

### What happened on May 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>

On May 16, three young ethnic Georgians wanted to buy a beer on store credit at a local ethnic Azerbaijani shop on 9 April Street in Dmanisi. The store employee (the wife of one of the shop's owners) told them that the store owner was not on the spot and she could not give out the beer on store credit. This response angered the young people in the store, resulting in a minor verbal confrontation between them and the cashier. The fight was then moved outside the store, in the street, where neighbors and relatives of the cashier got involved. Footage of the confrontation shows that the relatives of the shop cashier are aggressive. However, it is not clear what was the underlying reason for the hostile attitude of the locals. The incident soon ended. The store staff called the police and went to the police station to give a statement. The Police officers explained to the store staff and owners that they would launch an investigation, and there was no need for the police to take any further action at that stage. The police also did not carry out proactive work to conciliate the young people involved in the confrontation.

Within a few hours, several dozen ethnic Georgians arrived in the shop's vicinity and started beating the shop owners, their family members, and the people working in the shop. CCTV footage clearly shows how the conflict was started by the young people who arrived on the spot and how the people in the store brought out sticks and clubs from the neighboring (hardware) store during the conflict. The video was soon circulated on the internet and social networks by the Azerbaijani-language local web-media, 24news.ge.<sup>13</sup> After that, the CCTV footage soon came to the attention of the national media.

The mentioned video footage caused anger and dissatisfaction in the Azerbaijani community of Georgia. The same evening calls appeared on social networks that it was necessary to express solidarity and support for the Azerbaijanis from Dmanisi. One of the Facebook users wrote on their page on the evening of May 16: *"The local Azerbaijani people living in Dmanisi municipality were attacked by the Svans living there, literally in the wild and inhuman manner. This was a sign to Azerbaijanis by the Svans who attacked them that there is no place for them in Dmanisi! I consider this a massive insult and a crime. This is Nazism. I demand the punishment of each attacker to the fullest, in accordance with the law!"*<sup>14</sup> It was also reported that a peaceful rally was planned in Dmanisi on May 17 at 11 am, demanding the arrest of the perpetrators. Civil activist Samira Bairamova wrote on her Facebook page on the evening of May 16 that "tomorrow the people of Dmanisi will hold a rally (it was announced live)."

On May 17, at 11:00 am, the Azerbaijani community of Georgia (including those from neighboring municipalities) started gathering in the vicinity of Dmanisi City Hall. Local Georgian residents of

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Campbell, 'Construing Top-down as Bottom-up: The Governmental Co-option of Peacebuilding 'From Below' in Vis-a-vis: Explorations in Anthropology, 11, no 1 (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Footage of the confrontation in front of the store <https://24news.ge/read/id/51725>

<sup>14</sup> Elvin Tagiyev Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/elvin.tagiyev.33633>



Dmanisi say that by this time, seven people involved in the attack on the store had already been arrested; however, this information was not made public by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. As respondents explain, soon after, there was a feeling among the protesters that the police were not going after the perpetrators and that the protesters themselves needed to take justice into their own hands. The participants decided to go to the Dmanisi district, where ethnic Georgians (eco-migrant Svans) involved in the May 16 conflict lived. According to the local Azerbaijanis, the goal of their arrival in the Svan settlement was to detain the perpetrators and hand them over to the police. However, they cannot remember precisely where the initiative came from, and they see the decision as a spontaneous action rather than a deliberate act. Mass protests of the ethnic Azerbaijani population of Georgia, which also showed signs of violence in separate episodes, were perceived as a threat in the Svan settlement by the community living there. The local Svans perceived this action as an attempt at violence against them, which led to the mobilization of the local Svans, which later escalated into spontaneous and collective violence between the said groups.

Soon the situation in Dmanisi became unmanageable. A small number of police officers mobilized on the spot were unable to separate the parties from each other and prevent a violent confrontation promptly. It is difficult to determine whether these processes were deliberately organized and whether they had organizers. This is more the subject of law enforcement work and investigation. However, the fragmentation and dynamics of community mobilization, movement, and violence episodes speak more about their spontaneity. While the respondents we interviewed generally point to interested forces and actors, this reasoning resembles more hypertrophied geopolitical notions and sentiments, and it does not contain specific information or knowledge. Although large numbers of people were seen moving and mobilizing in the center of Dmanisi, and before that, this dissatisfaction was also discussed on social networks, the police failed to properly assess the risks of violence and escalation and take timely and effective preventive measures. In the streets of Dmanisi, ethnic Azeris and ethnic Georgians (Svans) confronted each other with stones, clubs, and sticks. Several dozen people were injured. The research team was on the ground during this period, and we experienced the safety issue ourselves. In the initial hours of the escalation of the situation, the police were unable to manage the situation and restrain and control the movement of the mass groups involved in the conflict.

The Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia, the head of the State Security Service, several members of parliament, religious leaders, etc., later arrived on the spot. The Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia stated that the cause of the conflict was everyday matters. According to him, "we will not allow this topic [ethnic confrontation]. Ethnic Azerbaijanis are our citizens, Azerbaijan is our strategic partner, our ally, our friend, and we must not allow this. Anyone who says this is an ethnic conflict is an enemy of the country."<sup>15</sup> Statements of similar content, referring to the state of Azerbaijan, were repeated by the head of the State Security Service, Grigol Liluashvili, and member of parliament, Eliso Bolkvadze, from Georgian Dream.

While officials discussed reconciliation behind closed doors, a second mass clash between ethnic Azeris and Georgians took place in the middle of the day at the Dmanisi entrance, blockaded by the police, where several people were injured again.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gomelauri statement : <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31259048.html>

<sup>16</sup> Confrontation at the Dmanisi entrance: <https://1tv.ge/news/dmanisis-shesasvleltan-sadac-cota-khnis-win-dapirispireba-mokhda-damatebiti-sapolicio-dzalebi-arian-mobilizebuli/>

On the same day, on May 17, the parties reconciled with the involvement of officials and religious leaders in the evening hours.<sup>17</sup> However, after the reconciliation, the local Georgian population erected a wooden cross in Dmanisi Municipality and prayed.<sup>18</sup>

It should be emphasized that from the respondents we interviewed, neither ethnic Georgians nor ethnic Azeris take this reconciliation effort seriously. In meetings with both groups after the incident, they described this act of reconciliation as "superficial, not sincere, an example of turning a blind eye, a staged scene, etc." At the same time, local communities openly emphasize the importance of peace, confidence-building, and in this process, they seek the support of government agencies and civil society organizations." "What happened cannot be repeated" "We should not go back to the 90s" - these are the calls that were most often heard from the locals.

It should be noted that after the end of the conflict on May 17, many police forces were mobilized in Dmanisi. Patrolling was carried out in the center and villages of Dmanisi for several days. According to the residents, on May 25, ethnic Azerbaijani and Georgian criminal authorities arrived in Dmanisi and agreed on peace. However, tensions did not ease in the following days. Several minor incidents were reported, and on June 10, four ethnic Georgians (Svans) from Dmanisi attacked an ethnic Azerbaijani person from Dmanisi, claiming that he had been actively involved in the events of May 17 on the Azerbaijani side.<sup>19</sup>

After the events of May 16-17, local community members spoke to us about serious security concerns, which led them to temporarily send away their children (especially boys) from the city. This concern was particularly evident in the narratives of women who, in separate episodes, were the addressees and victims of the negative experience of the attack.

After the events of May 16-17, the police had to put aside detaining the persons involved in the violence to promote the normalization of the situation; however, after the repeated violence on June 10, the police arrested four people, N.A., N. M., N.M., and L.O. According to the information provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, the mentioned persons physically assaulted L. N. and their spouse E.N., which is a group assault against two or more persons and is provided for in Article 126<sup>1</sup>, subparagraph "b" of the Criminal Code of Georgia. In addition, other alleged criminal acts committed by the detainees were uncovered; as a result of the investigation, one of the detainees, L.O., allegedly illegally kept a firearm and was cultivating marijuana. Detainees N.A. and N. M. were also growing marijuana. All four detainees were subjected to pretrial detention by the Bolnisi District Court for the alleged criminal offenses and the purposes of the restraining order.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that all four detainees are under the age of 30; only one of them, N. M., has a conviction record, and he was charged in 2019 for a physical assault.

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<sup>17</sup> Reconciliation achieved in Dmanisi: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/542469/>

<sup>18</sup> Crossed was erected in front of Dmanisi City Hall: <https://bit.ly/3iExnlx>

<sup>19</sup> Another confrontation in Dmanisi: <https://24news.ge/read/id/53142>

<sup>20</sup> As of June, 2021

### Who are the interested parties?

To identify the parties to the May 16-17 conflict, it is essential to recognize all the people or groups who have a significant impact on the existing situation, those interested in leaving the current situation unchanged, and those who have the opportunity to make a difference.

One of the main actors in the May 16 conflict is the store owner and his family. Interviews with shop owners and people working there reveal that incidents such as that of May 16 have occurred more than once in the past. They refer to a specific group of Svani young men disturbing the peace and safety of a part of the population, using similar means. The wife of an ethnic Azerbaijani man injured on June 10 also speaks about such a group, repeating the same names from the May 16 incident.

The group, consisting mainly of young people from eco-migrant families, should be singled out as a separate group of actors. It must be said that other Svani young people say that this group is somewhat unacceptable to them as well. One of the young men who often appeared on television on May 17 on behalf of the Svans recalls that specific individuals summoned him and demanded an answer to his actions in the days following the conflict. He called for the Svans to calm down and refrain from violence.

According to the 2014 census of the National Statistics Office, 19,141 people live in Dmanisi Municipality, of which 66.5% are ethnic Azeris, and 33.1% are ethnic Georgians. Two thousand six hundred sixty-one people live in Dmanisi, where 81% of the population is ethnic Georgian and 14.5% - ethnic Azerbaijani. Ethnic Georgians can be divided into two groups: the population with historical roots in Dmanisi and the eco-migrant Dmanisians from Svaneti. For local Azerbaijanis, the difference between these two groups is substantial.

The most significant intersection of ethnic Azerbaijanis and Georgians in Dmanisi is the Dmanisi market and its surrounding area. In terms of numbers, local shops and stores in the Dmanisi market belong equally to Georgians and Azerbaijanis. The Azerbaijani population lives mainly in the villages of Dmanisi. Therefore, they sell their agricultural products at the Dmanisi market.

One of the main stakeholders in Dmanisi is the local self-government. Before the 2020 parliamentary elections, the city mayor left the Georgian Dream party. However, the Georgian Dream has a critical role to play among Sakrebulo members. During the 2020 election period, Dmanisi was one of the epicenters of tension. The mayor and their administration supported the majoritarian opposition candidate, Kakha Okriashvili, a local oligarch in Dmanisi, who is particularly influential. On the second day of the elections, November 1, a relative of Kakha Okriashvili, the chairman of the Dmanisi City Council, was shot in the leg, which the locals perceived as a continuation of the election-related confrontations.<sup>21</sup> We think that the existing party landscape influences the reality in Dmanisi, and it acquires the content of passivity and improper work of the local government. Despite having opposition-minded views, the mayor of Dmanisi has not taken substantially new and essential approaches.

Interviews with the residents reveal that one of the most potent and vital actors in Dmanisi is the so-called "thieves in law." Members of the criminal world play an essential role both in the Azerbaijani

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<sup>21</sup> Attack on the chairperson of Dmanisi Sakrebulo: <https://report.ge/law/dmanisis-sakrebulos-tavmjdomaris-dachrashi-braldebuli-daakaves/>

community and among ethnic Georgians. Nadir Salipov, nicknamed "Guli," who was killed in Turkey in 2020, was from the village of Mamishlo in Dmanisi. However, the influences of his circles are still significant. At the end of May, Georgian media reported that Dmanisi ethnic Azeri criminal authorities held meetings in Dmanisi with ethnic Georgians from the criminal world to resolve the May 17 conflict. The mentioned information was also confirmed by the residents in the conversations with us. In our interviews on May 26, before the news broke in the media, they mentioned several names that match those from the media.

Dmanisi police should also be considered as an important actor. According to the population, the local police are weak. Both ethnic Georgians and Azeris say that similar conflicts are common in Dmanisi. However, the police are primarily passive. The weakness of the police is indicated by the victims of the May 16 conflict. Store owners claim that before the May 16 conflict, they had several confrontations with members of the above group over non-payment of a price for a store-bought product. They addressed the police. However, there was no response to these appeals. Store owners say they contacted police during the first phase of the May 16 conflict. However, the police have not taken adequate measures to prevent the conflict. Moreover, after the mass physical confrontation on May 16, due to the lack of good communication with the population, the Azerbaijani community in Georgia felt that the perpetrators were not held accountable, after which the community decided to assume the role of identifying the perpetrators and handing them over to the police. Our conversations with the locals and the desire of citizens to take on the role of law enforcers show that trust in the police is low in the community. Residents have a feeling that police actions have certain limitations and specific individuals enjoy immunity from law enforcement.

The state of Azerbaijan should be considered as a separate actor, which on May 17, during the day, through various agencies (Embassy of Azerbaijan, Diaspora Service) issued statements calling on the ethnic Azerbaijani population of Georgia to calm down.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that ethnic Azerbaijani citizens were often referred to as the state of Azerbaijan as the guarantor of their rights and security. Unfortunately, even the Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia used similar language in his statements to the media and connected the residents of Dmanisi with the state of Azerbaijan.

There are no local media in Dmanisi, and local NGOs are particularly weak. A non-governmental organization, "the First European," founded by an ethnic Georgian community, is not known for its diligent work promoting local diversity and multiculturalism. In addition, there is a Youth Center of the Civic Integration Fund in Dmanisi, where public meetings are held from time to time. The center operates in a building built with the financial support of the Foundation for the Former President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, which was transferred to the entity under the Dmanisi City Hall, "Dmanisi Education Center" in previous years.

Also, the stakeholders in the conflict are the ultra-right, ultra-conservative groups, trying to accumulate political capital by producing hostile attitudes towards ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Kvemo Kartli. Alt Info, a media outlet that elaborates and spreads these views, has repeatedly arrived in Dmanisi to cover the confrontations.<sup>23</sup> Alt Info's propaganda strategy is to pedal Islamophobic sentiments and label Georgian Muslim citizens as agents of other countries. The assertion that ethnic

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<sup>22</sup> Statement of the embassy of Azerbaijan: <https://www.facebook.com/azembassy.ge/posts/4031518813599697>

<sup>23</sup> Alt info news: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t20XHUp-OMo&t=12s> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z0WTJhWJ0s> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXYp5NfnzRo&t=5s>

non-Georgians in Georgia are much more privileged precisely because of the Georgian government's vulnerability to outside forces, while the ethnic Georgian Christian population is most vulnerable and oppressed because it has no one to represent or defend its own interests. Kvemo Kartli or other regions of Georgia where Georgian citizens of non-dominant ethnic or religious identities are living compactly are marked by Alt Info as an area of influence for neighboring Islamic states where "Georgian" interests need to be protected. The confrontation in Dmanisi was a fertile occasion for this propaganda narrative. Alt Info claimed that on May 17, ethnic Azeris attacked an ethnic Georgian settlement, which naturally led to a defensive retaliation by ethnic Georgians. The arrest of ethnic Georgians by the police was an opportunity for Alt Info to say that most ethnic Georgians in Georgia are oppressed, and even when they defend themselves, the repressive state machine works about them.

Georgian media, in general, should be considered as another actor in this process. It should be noted that the largely negative, crisis-like coverage of ethnic minorities in the Georgian media prevents them from seeing their real needs and promoting dialogue and mutual understanding between different ethnic groups. It should be noted that despite the media's active coverage of the Dmanisi events, which contributed to demonstrating the complexity of integration policy and police work, there were no attempts in the media to show the in-depth causes of the conflict. In some cases, the media covered the incident superficially as a "hot" event, and there was almost no public discussion about the conflict.

We must also separately mention the leaders identified during our field research meetings in both communities who are aware of the mistakes made by their community and the problems of inter-community relations and are willing to contribute to peacebuilding and confidence-building processes. Identifying the existing human resources and involving them in the peacebuilding process is fundamentally essential for the peaceful and substantial transformation of the conflict.

Dmanisi is a peripheral rural space, and the trauma of conflict in such a social environment leaves a much heavier and deeper trace than in a relatively fragmented urban setting that allows anonymity. Due to more profound social constraints and connections in the rural area, the risks of conflict are also low; However, the experience of the 1990s and its traumatic traces in the Azerbaijani community of Georgia, the weak integration policy, and the social isolation between the communities on the ground over the years has led the residents to experience the heaviest toll of conflict. Nevertheless, the rural environment, connections, and social networks per se have more significant potential for conflict transformation and confidence building, and these resources need to be adequately recognized by the state.

### [Where does the problem lie?](#)

For a full-scale analysis of the May 16-17 conflict in Dmanisi, it is necessary to see the cultural, economic, social, and political context in which the incident took place. While the May 16 store incident started on everyday domestic grounds, on May 17, the process escalated into a large-scale conflict where the dividing line was ethnicity. For the parties to the conflict, their race was more important than establishing the truth. To analyze the conflict between ethnic groups, it is essential to observe the relations between these groups.

Preliminary observations in Dmanisi show that there are no inter-ethnic ties between ethnic groups. There is no space in the municipality where representatives of different ethnic groups would promote equality, solidarity, and diversity. Apart from the Dmanisi market and trade relations, communication

and ties between the ethnic groups are largely weak. The vast majority of ethnic Azerbaijanis live in rural areas of the municipality. There are, however, cases when ethnic Azerbaijanis study in Georgian schools in the city of Dmanisi. There are almost no mixed families in the municipality. Ethnic Azerbaijanis describe the experience and relations with eco-migrant Svans as particularly problematic. According to them, the tense relations with the Svans date back to the 90s. However, the majority avoids talking in detail about the experiences of the 90s. Ethnic Azerbaijanis distinguish local Dmanisi Georgians from eco-migrant Svans and note that they have strained relations with the Svans. During the meeting with the ethnic Azerbaijani Dmanisians, the respondents often repeated that they feel like second-class citizens in Dmanisi. According to one Azerbaijani community member, "they look at us as a non-human, like a dog."

On the other hand, according to ethnic Georgians and Svans, ethnic groups in Dmanisi live harmoniously on equal terms. Moreover, according to one of the Georgian (eco-migrant) women involved in the May 17 conflict, they do not want to return to the experiences of the 90s. Local Svans have a particularly strong sense that they protect Georgian land in Dmanisi and have a unique role in the region. Therefore, in their opinion, the state should pay special attention to them. Local Svans can not recall examples of tension or conflict between ethnic groups. However, after these events, security concerns increased among the local Svans, and women in particular point to the dire emotional consequences of this experience.

In addition to observing the relations between ethnic groups, it is essential to observe the local system in which these relations are formed. According to the 2016 Green Caucasus Survey, the disproportion between the population of Dmanisi Municipality and the public servants employed in the municipality is 60%.<sup>24</sup> After the 2017 local self-government elections, Dmanisi Sakrebulo has 31 members, of which only 11 members are ethnic Azerbaijani, while 66% of the municipality's population is ethnic Azerbaijani. None of the heads of departments or services of the City Hall are ethnic Azerbaijani.<sup>25</sup> According to the people, land resources in the villages of Dmanisi Municipality belong to one person, Kakha Okriashvili, and his family members, resulting from the policies and realities of the 90s and the subsequent period. Ethnic Azerbaijanis work in the local police. However, the exact percentage is unknown. It is noteworthy that local ethnic Azerbaijani youth describe the work of the police as problematic. One of the young people told us that "when we enter Dmanisi from the village, they stop us and even have us take off our shoes." This experience increases the feeling of dissatisfaction and oppression among young people.

According to initial observations, the work of the Dmanisi House of Culture does not reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of the municipality. Conducting a multicultural policy in multicultural municipalities, which on the one hand promotes the preservation, development, and promotion of ethnic minority cultures and, on the other hand, strengthens intercultural dialogue and connections, is essential for building an inclusive social environment. Unfortunately, the experience of making such connections in Dmanisi Municipality is nonexistent. In contrast, local Azerbaijanis express concerns

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<sup>24</sup> Ethnic minorities at Kvemo Kartli Municipal bodies, Green Caucasus, 2016

<sup>25</sup> <http://dmanisi.gov.ge/>



about the negative experiences of erasure of their own culture.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, locals most often recall the canceled Elat holiday,<sup>27</sup> the issue of unrecognized mosques in the historical sites of Dmanisi.<sup>28</sup>

There is a feeling among the local Azerbaijani population that local resources are not being spent equally between Georgian and Azerbaijani villages. According to the residents, all basic infrastructure and needs are provided in Georgian villages. However, roads, water, kindergarten, etc., are still problematic in Azerbaijani villages. These feelings of asymmetry, being of secondary importance, deserve attention and an adequate response from the authorities.

When talking about systemic issues, the activities of the Minister of State for Reconciliation and Civil Affairs and their office should be mentioned here. According to our observations, neither during the events of May 17, nor before this incident, nor after this incident, the diligent work of the Ministry cannot be seen in Dmanisi. According to the public information provided by the Ministry, the agency has not planned any special activities to deal with the consequences of the conflict in Dmanisi.<sup>29</sup> It is a direct responsibility of the sad Ministry to build civic equality, strengthen inter-ethnic dialogue, and cultivate inter-ethnic solidarity. However, even during May 17, when the Minister of Internal Affairs, the head of the State Security Service, and other officials arrived on the scene, the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality did not appear in Dmanisi. The Ministry stated the matter only late at night on May 17, when all incidents were exhausted.<sup>30</sup> The Azerbaijani community and ethnic Georgians say that local or central authorities have not worked with ethnic groups individually or collectively to build reconciliation and peace even as a month has passed since the conflict.

In Dmanisi, one of the reasons for the systemic and structural inequality at the local level may be the country's existing social and cultural norms, which significantly determine the relations between ethnic groups. The Social Justice Center, along with activists from non-dominant ethnic groups, has for years criticized the practices of seeing ethnic groups as different, alien, and problematic. However, the rhetoric and policies of government agencies or officials do not change. In the 2019 and 2020 State Security reports, minority-populated regions are seen through the prism of security, and the rhetoric of officials, including even the May 17 incident, was linked to the neighboring country. Added to all this are the divisive statements and positions of the Georgian Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church. On May 18, Andria Jagmaidze, head of the public relations department of the Georgian Patriarchate, described Dmanisi on his Facebook page as a "region with an unfavorable ethnic balance."<sup>31</sup> And on May 17, in parallel with the Dmanisi controversy, the Facebook page associated with the Marneuli and Hujab Dioceses in Alilo Marneuli posted a video of Zviad Gansakhurdia on its Facebook page, quoting

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<sup>26</sup> Signs of cultural domination and erasure of minority culture in Kvemo Kartli region, Nargiza Arjevanidze, 2020, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/kulturuli-dominatsiis-da-umtsiresobebis-kulturis-tsashlis-nishnebi-kvemo-kartlis-regionshi>

<sup>27</sup> Dmanisoba - Copied Holiday and Mechanism of Cultural Domination, Mariam Shalvashvili, 2019, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/dmanisoba-gadatserili-dghesastsauli-da-kulturuli-dominatsiis-mekanizmi>

<sup>28</sup> Platform Salami statement, May 24, 2020, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SalamGeorgia/posts/248080936606635/>

<sup>29</sup> Letter of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality 06.07.2021 N1070.

<sup>30</sup> Response of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality <https://www.facebook.com/SMRCEgeorgia/photos/a.240150132706853/3933882403333589/>

<sup>31</sup> Post of Father Andria Jagmaidze: <https://mtavari.tv/news/43923-arasakharbielo-etnikuri-balansis-mkone-regioni>

him: "Georgia is a country of Georgians, everyone else is a guest, they should know that." <sup>32</sup> It is noteworthy that the Diocese of Marneuli and Hujab has a history of sharply ethnocentric statements and calls, which has caused social tensions in Marneuli Municipality.<sup>33</sup>

Our field research shows that local communities have been critical of inefficient state work, weak trust in state institutions, the disappearance of democratic political life, and the need for substantial social, political, policy, and cultural reforms in the municipality. Our observations show that mistrust and the dire consequences of democratic institutional frameworks and practices are apparent in both communities for different reasons and to varying degrees. That is why the state needs to acknowledge and respond to these underlying causes and factors in conflict transformation.

### Why did the May 17<sup>th</sup> conflict happen?

It is difficult to discuss the exact causes of the conflict without conducting a complex study; however, based on general experience and observations of working in the region, it is still possible to single out a few reasons to analyze why the everyday conflict has escalated to this degree.

First of all, the painful experiences of the 90s in Kvemo Kartli and other parts of Georgia populated by different ethnic minorities are noteworthy. During this period, a wave of ethnic nationalism was followed by confrontations and persecution in these parts, about which academic and public knowledge is scarce. In the process of settling eco-migrants in these regions, there was an idea of "Georgianization" of these places in the discourse of the elite of that time, which is still much alive in some circles. Ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Dmanisi recall the resettlement of eco-migrant Svans, which began during Soviet rule. They say that the local government of the then district committee – Dmanisi local government, started to build houses for eco-migrants, and these houses with decent living conditions were made ready for them. Despite the initial goodwill of the Dmanisians, the region still could not escape ethnic strife in the 1990s. As in other settlements, some ethnic minority families living here escaped pressure from the "National Movement" by fleeing to neighboring countries. Especially since the difficult economic situation in Georgia and the impunity of the perpetrators made it unbearable for them to live here, the trauma of the 1990s among ethnic minorities has not yet been subdued. The government's political rhetoric is drastically weak in support of equality and diversity, which can not replace the clergy's sharply chauvinistic calls and rhetoric. For example, the statement of Father Andria Jagmaidze, the head of the press service of the Patriarchate, about the "undesirable balance of the population of Dmanisi" is not rejected by the state authorities, which contributes to the normalization of these ideas and promotes their social acceptance.

After conducting meetings with the residents in Kvemo Kartli municipalities, the study of the existing infrastructure, the work of the local self-government, and the observation of the distribution of economic resources and power, it becomes clear that the integration policy in the region has failed.

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<sup>32</sup> Alilo in Marneuli, Facebook post:

[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1420084001688717&id=359561074407687](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1420084001688717&id=359561074407687)

<sup>33</sup> CSOs call on the government to establish a political process regarding the Narimanov monument, 2020, available:<https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sazogadoebrivi-organizatsiebi-mtavrobas-narimanovis-dzegltan-dakavshirebit-politikuri-protsisis-shekmnisken-moutsodeben>

Also, the influences of the silent MP in Marneuli, Ifact, 2020, are

available:[https://spark.adobe.com/page/L9feDelzBTvhE/?fbclid=IwAR0Pq89UPmV\\_ZALyHyxNn0PVBRw6T\\_BI4gTR-RrdQBy-lmNzkdQkhmxCACQ](https://spark.adobe.com/page/L9feDelzBTvhE/?fbclid=IwAR0Pq89UPmV_ZALyHyxNn0PVBRw6T_BI4gTR-RrdQBy-lmNzkdQkhmxCACQ)



The only success in this direction may be the education program for ethnic minority youth under the 1 + 4 system, which has given many young people the opportunity to embark on higher education in Georgia. Despite the various shortcomings of this program, it still performed an integrative function. For example, it allowed Georgian Azerbaijanis to establish social contact with other Georgian citizens outside their immediate settlement. Of course, overcoming the language barrier thanks to this program is also one of the ways to facilitate integration. However, the program's positive results are virtually exhausted at present, and this process poses other challenges. Due to nepotistic and clan ties in the region, ordinary citizens have limited employment opportunities in public institutions and political positions in Kvemo Kartli municipalities; the share of employment is marked by a sharp imbalance in favor of ethnic Georgians. Consequently, the prospects and attractiveness of getting an education in a Georgian higher education institution may not be so significant for ethnic Azerbaijanis in the end. Today, most young people are still eager to get higher education in Georgia. Still, this drive may soon be replaced by frustration if young people with higher education in Georgia fail to participate in the country's public and political life and overcome additional barriers due to their ethnicity. Added to these problems is the lack of a de facto cultural integration policy. Neither cultural institutions nor self-governing bodies express an interest in promoting the culture of local Azerbaijanis and do not make reasonable efforts in this direction.

Meetings with locals show that connections and communication between ethnic groups in Dmanisi are insufficient for solving their common everyday problems. It may be said that ethnic Azeris and ethnic Georgians do not even know each other. Dmanisi Azerbaijanis think that all resources are spent on Georgian villages, while Dmanisi Georgians think Azerbaijanis are privileged in Dmanisi. In these circumstances, the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality and the local self-government should be responsible for strengthening the work of inter-ethnic groups on everyday issues. However, the functions and work of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality have become merely formal over the years.

The role of local self-government, which is the political power closest to the community, is essential in building social ties and an equal environment. Although the local government is better aware of the realities on the ground, in the face of weak decentralization, low political confidence, and opportunity, it cannot set the agenda independently and produce policy.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the work of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the issue of trust in the police, which local community leaders have repeatedly emphasized. Tolerating the activities of criminal groups and their political instrumentalization encourages an environment of impunity and reduces confidence in state institutions.

The issue of proper police work in religiously / ethnically diverse regions is crucial. Due to social isolation and political alienation, the trust of minority groups in state institutions, especially the police, is often generally low. The problem of trust and nihilism in locals often leads to refraining from using legal mechanisms, creating impunity and weak legal protection. In some regions, confidence in the police is further weakened by the security-oriented work of the police, as evidenced by frequent inspections, summonings, searches, stops, raids, fines, profiling, and other arbitrary practices targeting the locals. Behind these practices, there is usually the interest in labeling a particular social group as a risk group and ensuring social control. To make police policies against minorities more democratic and

community-oriented, it is essential that police representation (distribution of police departments) in these regions be based on objective data and research approaches and do not over-concentrate or ignore policing altogether in some areas. At the same time, community members must also be represented on various positions in the police stations operating in the minority populated areas, and the employment policy in this regard must be fair. Beyond the policing, the police can involve members of the local community in various social services related to the police. This circumstance is of great importance for those regions where there are linguistic differences and barriers. The issue of the proper communication strategy of the police with the local community should be mentioned separately, which should be based on the police officers' adequate knowledge of the history, culture, ethics, traditions of the religious/ethnic group, and respect for the cultural identity of the locals. The police need to have active communication with the community religious leaders and other traditional leaders to hear from them about the community's needs and concerns. This communication should not take the form of their control and interference in their affairs. There may be tension or risk of conflict between different religious groups in ethnically and religiously diverse communities, so police must conduct a thorough study of the existing context and adhere strictly to the principles of neutrality and equality in conflict resolution. Despite essential reforms in the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia regarding discriminatory crimes, the Ministry does not have a strategy and action plan on the specifics of police work in minority populated areas, which is why we see significant challenges in some regions. The problem of police trust and efficiency in the Kvemo Kartli region is apparent at a glance, and it requires a proper response from the state.

### Theory of change

Based on the description and analysis of the current situation, several theories of change may be considered. This section presents three theories of change, discusses each of them, and makes recommendations for the various agencies based on the best change theory.

**Theory of Change 1:** If the media and non-governmental organizations do not intervene in the events of Dmanisi and do not escalate the situation further, **then** the people of Dmanisi will be able to continue living together peacefully.

**Explanation of the first theory of change:** During the visits to Dmanisi, similar views were actively voiced by officials and ethnic Georgians in Dmanisi. It should be noted that the actions of external actors in similar types of conflicts may aggravate the situation and escalate the conflict. However, a description and analysis of the current situation show alienation, tension, and minor conflicts have long existed in Dmanisi between ethnic groups, especially between ethnic Azerbaijanis and eco-migrant Svans. June 17 was a blend of emotions and resentments accumulated over a long period, not an isolated incident. Of course, in the process of covering events and working with stakeholders, the media and human rights actors need to be extra careful, but this alone will not be enough to neutralize the troubled situation and strained relations in Dmanisi.

**Theory of Change 2:** If the state identifies all the participants in the May 16-17 and any other conflict, punishes all perpetrators, and maintains in the society its image as a guarantor for holding the perpetrators accountable, **then** similar types of conflicts will not reoccur.

**Explanation of the second theory of change:** After the Dmanisi incident, the demand of the population, media, and political and civil actors was to punish the perpetrators. Both ethnic Azeris and ethnic Georgians argued that their actions stemmed from insecurity where the state could not create a sense of justice for the population. Of course, the events of May 16-17 in Dmanisi require an in-depth investigation by the state. However, in the current situation, when the number of those involved in the conflict on May 17 numbered several hundred people, it is essentially impossible to detain and/or punish all those who took part in this conflict. Especially when the state focused on peacebuilding and reconciliation rather than punishment, it should be emphasized that it is necessary to punish all the people who organized these processes and deliberately tried to increase the tension; however, punishing every person who threw stones or punches would aggravate the situation. The focus on punishing the perpetrators alone will not solve the alienation, tension, or deep-rooted conflict between ethnic groups in Dmanisi. Strict police control and governance (as it was under the previous government) will create negative peace between ethnic groups, and tensions and conflicts will eventually reoccur as the police authority weakens.

**Theory of Change (Recommended) 3:** If spaces of inter-ethnic dialogue are created in Dmanisi, the population will be able to see each other and develop ties with each other, and a sense of justice will be formed **then** similar incidents will not be repeated in Dmanisi.

**Explanation of the third (recommended) theory of change:** The description and analysis of the current situation reveal that one of the biggest challenges in Dmanisi is the problematic nature of relations between ethnic groups. There is a strong sense of dissatisfaction, inequality, and injustice among the population often blamed on the other ethnic group. Due to the lack of real connections, the absence of information about each other's way of life, and the social alienation between ethnic groups, there is always the danger of everyday conflicts shifting into ethnic lines. In Dmanisi, state and local authorities fail to respond adequately to feelings of inequality and dissatisfaction on both sides. There is no proactive work of the state with ethnic groups. Moreover, ineffective police investigations into minor conflicts and incidents often exacerbate feelings of injustice among Georgia's ethnic Azerbaijani population and impunity and privilege among criminal groups in the dominant group. In the existing situation, the state needs to think about punishing the perpetrators, increasing the police's efficiency, and building real ties and relations between the ethnic groups, effectively preventing such conflicts in Dmanisi.

## Conclusion

The religious conflict in Dmanisi should be analyzed in the light of the structural challenges in terms of integration policy, on the one hand, and the historical experiences of the Dmanisi municipality itself, on the other, with its traumatic collective memory, social isolation between communities, and local social needs. Unfortunately, the indifference shown by the authorities over the years in building an inclusive, equal, and fair social and political setting creates high risks for social isolation and conflict between communities. The state does not adequately assess the severe consequences of these risks and often takes on the approach of not recognizing the problem. The statements made by the authorities in the very first days of the mass violence and conflict between the communities that it was only an everyday conflict and its other interpretation was inconceivable and anti-state were a clear example of

suppressing the discussion of the causes of the conflict and effectively minimizing the problem. Sadly, this approach has been evident not only in political language. Even now, two months after the conflict, the work of the state authorities aimed at long-term transformation and confidence-building between the communities in the municipality is largely missing. It should be noted that in the case of religious conflicts in other regions, the government has taken the same approach and has never established processes aimed at rebuilding trust, dialogue, and cooperation in conflict-ridden communities. When, in fact, creating strategies for hearing and discussing problems is one of the essential means of transforming conflicts and easing tensions.

It is clear, there is no sense among community leaders that the conflict is over and resolved, and all respondents showed weak confidence in the symbolic process of reconciliation that took place on July 18. They do not even recognize the persons involved in the reconciliation process, and this fact alone shows how much political and civil life has disappeared in Dmanisi municipality. Nevertheless, this process is fundamentally important because local community leaders acknowledge their mistakes, building trust and peace between communities. These conditions and expectations require timely recognition and support by the state.

Even more concerning were the statements of government officials who linked the Azerbaijani community in Georgia to a neighboring country and allowed the issue to become geopolitical. Affixing one's citizens to a neighboring country indicates that the idea of a democratic state is misunderstood, and its content and impact are, in fact, demolishing.

In our view, the transformation of the conflict in Dmanisi requires change both at the vertical (strengthening integration policy, building a fair political, social, and cultural environment for ethnic minorities) and the horizontal level (encouraging dialogue, connections, and cooperation between local communities). Over the years, the illusory and superficial content of integration policies has led to the fragmentation of the social fabric of our society and the deepening of the isolation and polarization between communities. Despite the predominance of a security perspective in ethnic minority politics, this process of fragmentation and alienation (as seen in the negative experiences of conflict in recent years) is not adequately problematized and recognized by the state, even for social and political security purposes. Unfortunately, the understanding by state agencies that an inclusive, fair and equal social and political environment is the direct and only way to build a safer and less conflict-ridden society is still weak.

We lack special mechanisms in our political system that would bolster the low political representation and participation of ethnic minorities, encourage access to public services, employment in the public service. Despite the bottom-up criticism, state and party policies are indifferent to the concerns and interests of ethnic minorities. Over the years, state institutions and parties have failed to contain the ideology of prevailing ethnoreligious nationalism and to create and cultivate consolidating, fair, and inclusive political ideas. Political ideals and calls for equality, citizenship are almost no longer heard in the statements of political actors and leaders. Reforms in the formal education system remain the weakest in relation to equality and diversity policies.

The role of local self-government in integration policy is sharply weak. Creating common educational, cultural programs, respecting and promoting the culture of minorities, implementing joint social and economic projects, and institutionalizing inter-community discussion formats are essential tools for overcoming social alienation at the local level. However, there is no room even to discuss these processes and practices at the local level. Weak decentralization of power at the local government level, its depoliticization, and technocratization is another process that hinders public participation and inclusion and the creation of political life at this level. This process is twice more damaging for ethnic minorities, for whom the institutional spaces of national/central politics are even more inaccessible and closed.

The police work on the ground and security concerns arising in local communities require the special attention of the state. Existing reality should be the driver for a critical analysis of the Ministry of Internal Affairs work in this municipality (as well as in other ethnically and religiously diverse municipalities) and the start of reform. The difficulties in maintaining law and order and the accumulated criticism in terms of confidence in the police require a compelling and urgent response from the authorities.

In these circumstances, central and local government agencies must develop a coordinated, multilevel, and consistent action plan for conflict transformation that includes, in its first phase, the research and analysis of the causes of conflict. In this process, government agencies must hear the perspectives and explanations of the locals and experts, and human rights actors. The next phase of the work should include a chain of short-term and long-term changes in institutional policy, education, culture, social protection, public education, and civic activism.

Following the state-centered approaches, building informal, inter-community relationships and cooperation is crucial in this process. That is why public and donor organizations in the region have a special role in the peacebuilding process, which, as mentioned above, is weak in this region.

We hope that the facts, assessments, concepts, and recommendations presented in the report will help develop a coherent policy to transform our society's religious and ethnic conflicts, and instead of dismissing and brushing off the problem, the state will study the underlying reasons and factors and take on the systemic problem-solving approach.

### [Recommendations](#)

Given the above, we would like to present our recommendations to the Government, Parliament, and other relevant state and local authorities of Georgia:

#### **Government of Georgia**

- **Critically evaluate the work of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality and pay special attention to (1) addressing structural difficulties facing ethnic minorities, including strengthening political representation and participation of ethnic minorities at national**

and local levels; promoting employment at the public sector, increasing access to public services, resources and participation in public life, eliminating low trust in state institutions; 2) Dissemination of ideas based on equality, diversity and solidarity in the society through formal education and educational-political campaigns; (2) building inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation and ensuring a multicultural setting;

- Establish a democratic and effective advisory body for ethnic minorities with the Government of Georgia (an inter-agency human rights council chaired by the Prime Minister) to facilitate the participation of ethnic minorities in public life, also in line with the recommendations and consultations from international and local actors;
- Develop and implement long-term and complex work on conflict transformation, confidence-building, and inter-community dialogue and cooperation in Dmanisi and other municipalities with conflict experience and/or at risk of conflict with the participation of various agencies and expert circles;
- Take emergency measures to increase trust in state institutions in ethnically and religiously diverse regions. Among other things, strengthen the proactive work of various agencies in Dmanisi Municipality and study and address local communities' social, cultural, educational needs and concerns.

#### Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality

- The Action Plan of the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration should pay significant attention to the prevention of conflicts in ethnically and religiously diverse communities and incorporate the issues of building inter-community trust, dialogue, or cooperation, among other things, with a particular emphasis on Dmanisi;
- In coordination with various government agencies, initiate and support inter-ethnic cooperation projects and initiatives (including in the fields of agriculture, education, culture, civic activism) in areas with conflict experience or at similar risk;
- Plan and conduct community meetings oriented at trust-building and inter-ethnic dialogue with representatives of different ethnic groups in democratic and inclusive formats to discuss the conflict and its negative impact on their lives;
- Launch campaigns against ethnic stereotypes in Dmanisi, both in the Georgian and Azerbaijani communities.

#### Parliament of Georgia

- In the light of the recommendations of international actors, the Public Defender, local and international human rights actors, initiate legislative changes that will help create an equal environment for ethnic minorities (including developing special mechanisms to strengthen ethnic minority political participation and promote their employment in the public service);
- Establish an ethnic minority advisory body under the Parliament of Georgia to facilitate the participation of ethnic minorities in public life, based on the recommendations of international actors and democratic consultations with local CSOs and human rights actors.

- Strengthen parliamentary control over ethnic/religious conflict-related policies and periodically hear and make recommendations to relevant executive bodies for ensuring fundamental conflict transformation;

#### Ministry of Internal Affairs

- Develop and implement policies and guiding principles for the detection, prevention, and appropriate response for religious and ethnic conflicts based on the best practices and human rights standards of other countries;
- Further strengthen the effective investigation and monitoring of crimes committed on the grounds of ethnic intolerance;
- Ensure community trust in the police in ethnically and religiously diverse municipalities, which shall be based on a systematic analysis of the challenges in this area and, at the same time shall include raising the awareness and sensitivity of police officers about the culture, history, everyday life of ethnic minorities, promoting employment of ethnic minorities at the police, increasing public control over the police, strengthening police analytical and preventive approaches;
- Eliminate the influence of criminal and quasi-criminal actors by maintaining law and order and building trust in the police.

#### State Security Service

- In coordination with other agencies, investigate the underlying causes and factors of conflict in ethnically, religiously diverse regions and respond to them within your capacity. This process must be conducted in the form of open, transparent coordination with the Public Defender and CSOs and other agencies;
- Develop a unified policy for combating violent extremism with the participation of various agencies and promptly, effectively address the risks of violence and conflict posed by growing right-wing extremism in recent years.

#### Prosecutor's Office

- Scale-up oversight of the investigation into religious and ethnic intolerance crimes and ensure a proper, adequate legal response.

#### Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

- Re-evaluate school textbooks through the lenses of ethnic minorities and ensure that existing books are more inclusive and diverse;
- Critically assess the challenges and structural inequalities in Georgia's general education system for ethnic minorities and take special steps to address the existing inequalities;
- Establish special educational and cultural programs in public schools in places of religious/ethnic conflict and implement, evaluate, and monitor their effectiveness;
- Develop guidelines, frameworks, and programs for building an equal, diverse and solidary environment in public schools and begin implementing them, prioritizing ethnically and religiously diverse schools;

- Plan exchange programs for school children from ethnic minorities in the rest of Georgia and vice versa.

#### Dmanisi Municipality City Hall and Sakrebulo

- In coordination and agreement with other agencies, develop a long-term conflict transformation action plan with the participation of local communities.
- Develop and implement social, educational, and cultural programs aimed at building trust, dialogue, and cooperation between ethnic groups in Dmanisi Municipality;
- Strengthen the work of the Dmanisi Youth Council in building civic equality, where young people will play a crucial role in building inter-ethnic solidarity.
- Enhance the knowledge of the staff in the areas of equality, conflict transformation, and management;
- Bolster the employment of ethnic minorities in local self-government;
- Introduce and regularly measure the access and participation of ethnic minorities in implementing the programs and services, and take positive support measures to eliminate barriers and asymmetries in this regard.

#### Public and donor organizations

- Strengthen the work in the regions, especially in the diverse areas, and align the implementation of the programs and projects closer to the real, local needs, concerns, and interests;
- Prioritize and enhance peacebuilding programs in areas of conflict with religious and ethnic connotations.

#### Media organizations

- Enhance systematic coverage of social, cultural, and political challenges in ethnically and religiously diverse regions, *among other things*, by promoting the visibility of ethnic/religious minority communities and representatives;
- Bolster educational and political programs based on equality, inclusion, and democracy; promote other ways of advancing these ideas.