

DEAFENING SILENCE AND EVERYTHING BUT PEACE



Deafening Silence and Everything but Peace

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Preface by the authors

Georgia's recent history is marked by internal conflicts and wars. However, the voices of those directly impacted by these wars, as well as those with memories of the conflicts, have been largely excluded from the political agenda. In light of this, we, the authors sought to address the cohabitation of Georgians and Ossetians, the conflicts, and the imperative to achieve peace, recognizing its multi-layered nature in this report. Throughout our research, we drew upon the experiences of the Georgian and Ossetian populations residing in villages near the dividing line. We constructed the narrative based on the chronology of their stories and their own words. The title of this report is also inspired by the words of one of our respondents. In our efforts to ensure the accuracy of our findings and to avoid misinterpretation, we have extensively incorporated the words of the respondents, presenting their voices in their own authentic form. We acknowledge that this account may not comprehensively capture the diverse and conflicting experiences associated with themes of war and peace, cohabitation, and mourning. Despite this limitation, the report is replete with thought-provoking experiences and visions for the future of the people residing in villages around the dividing line. Consequently, we believe that this text has the potential to broaden perspectives and stimulate new ways of thinking about these events.

We would like to emphasize that, rather than analyzing the findings, we treated the findings themselves as the source for the analysis of events.

We express our gratitude to all participants in the study for their memorable cooperation and hospitality.

Giga Karapetiani
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Research objective and working methodology

The present research report aims to study and analyze the war-related memories and perceptions associated with the peace-building process among the population residing in villages along the administrative dividing line. To accomplish the research goal, the following objectives were elaborated:

- ⇒ Reflections on the conflicts of the 1990s and the Russian War of 2008, as well as the experiences of cohabitation between ethnic groups;
- ⇒ Conceptualization of peace and prospects for engaging the population living near the occupation line in peacebuilding processes;
- ⇒ Living in a state of continuous borderisation: rethinking the past, reflecting on the present, and contemplating perceptions towards the future.

Qualitative methodology was employed to fulfill the research objective. Unlike quantitative methodology, qualitative methodology delves into the study of diverse phenomena and describes them in a manner as understood by the informants, who are the research participants. Additionally, research conducted using qualitative methodology offers the chance to incorporate the voices of the respondents directly into the research report, thereby safeguarding the researcher from potential misinterpretation of the findings (Cooper & Finley, 2014). Within the realm of qualitative methodology techniques, we selected in-depth and group interview methods, and overt observation.

Methods, Selection, and Description of Fieldwork

The initial phase of the fieldwork aimed to immerse the researchers in the context through informal conversations with the population. In this stage, the participant over observation method was applied in two villages, Ergneti and Shindisi, where the researcher spent three days. Throughout the fieldwork, comprehensive field notes were taken, drawing from the information provided by the participants. It is worth noting that employing this method proved particularly effective in collaborating with male participants, as they often declined to engage in in-depth interviews or permit audio recordings of conversations with the researcher.

Following the overt observation, in-depth interviewing techniques were utilized in the same villages—Shindisi and Ergneti. Subsequently, two group interviews took place in the villages of Tirdznisi and Mereti. The application of these methods facilitated active communication between the researcher and the respondents. Before commencing the interviews, participants were briefed on the confidentiality assurances. Moreover, they were aware that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and they had the right to decline answering any undesired questions or cease cooperation with the researcher.

In-depth and group interviews were carried out following a pre-developed semi-structured guide. Within the guide, topics pertaining to the research objectives were incorporated as open-ended questions. Moreover, during the fieldwork, the guide was adjusted to align with the personal experiences of the informants and was supplemented with topics related to the research objective that were not initially outlined during the guide's preparation but became evident to the researcher at the onset of cooperation with the informants.

The research report encapsulates findings collected from 29 respondents and field notes recorded by the researcher. The average age of the research participants was 50 years,¹ with four respondents being ethnic Ossetians, and two from mixed families. Most participants had Ossetian relatives. Fieldwork was conducted from August 15 to September 17, 2023, with an average interview duration of 55 minutes. Given that the primary objective of qualitative methodology is to explore overarching trends within the target group, rather than generalize findings to the entire group (Tsuladze, 2020, pp. 46-47), this research employed a targeted approach to sampling. Based on the research's objectives, it was pertinent to gather experiences and opinions from individuals living in villages adjacent to the administrative dividing line of Shida Kartli—Ergneti, Tirdznisi, Mereti, and Shindisi. These villages were selected due to their proximity to the administrative line, the ongoing borderisation process, and direct experience of conflicts. Ergneti village was selected because of the presence of the Ergneti market before 2004, which served as a crucial bridge between Georgians and Ossetians.

A phenomenological approach

The research focused on the informants' memories of war and cohabitation, the potential for population engagement in peace-building processes, and, along the way, identifying possible limitations. Acknowledging the subjectivity of the perception of events, rather than seeking an objective truth, and exploring the meaning and personal interpretation of these events by the informants (Westlund, 2012, p. 87), the research adopted a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, besides being a philosophical concept, is also a methodological approach (Cooper, 2014, p. 70) that recognizes the socially constructed nature of reality. With this premise, the researcher engages in collaboration with the informants to understand how the opinions and explanations of the research participants are shaped in relation to various events or issues (Atkinson, 2017, p. 35). In light of this understanding, the researchers' standpoint is phenomenological; we acknowledge the subjectivity of the perception of events and endeavor to rely on the experiences of the respondents themselves in elucidating events and synthesizing the findings.

Overview of Georgian-Ossetian conflicts

In exploring the history of Georgian-Ossetian estrangement, it is crucial to recall the 1980s. It is during this period, still under the Soviet Union, that the rise of separatism and nationalism commenced. Consequently, Ossetians residing in the South Ossetian Autonomous District within Soviet Georgia contemplated the establishment of a small Soviet republic, while Georgians pondered the creation of a mono-ethnic country (Gachechiladze, 2011, p. 51). The second half of the 1980s witnessed a noticeable escalation in tension within Georgian-Ossetian relations (Zakareishvili et al., 2005, p. 9).

From the 1990s onward, ethnic conflicts erupted, which could be defined as a civil war (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2011, p. 6)². During these conflicts, there was a blatant disregard for even the most basic moral or humanitarian rules of warfare (Gachechiladze, 2011, p. 51). It is essential to consider the collapse of the Soviet Union when recounting these events, leading to Georgia's independence in 1991 (Sartania, 2021, p. 1). Post-independence, Georgian-Ossetian relations failed to evolve into mutually beneficial cooperation. Instead, they were marked by recurrent periods of tension and occasional appeasement (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2011, p. 6).

¹ The youngest of the respondents was 17 and the oldest was 82.

² Please find the definition of Civil War here: Cederman, L.-E., & Vogt, M. (2017). Dynamics and Logics of Civil War. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61(9), 1992-2016.

The Georgian-Ossetian conflict of 1991-1992 exhibited economic, political, or criminal determinants (Zakareishvili et al., 2005, p. 9). Nevertheless, the conflict was characterized by a Georgian-Ossetian ethno-national confrontation, influenced in part by the ethno-nationalist discourse of Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was elected in 1991 (Sartania, 2021, p. 5). The president's exclusive rhetoric played a significant role in the alienation of Ossetians from the Georgian national project (Chankvetadze & Murusidze, 2021, p. 2).

Due to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, hundreds of people lost their lives, and thousands of Georgians and Ossetians were compelled to abandon their homes (Sartania, 2021, p. 5). In the conflicts of the 90s, 117 Ossetian villages faced complete looting and destruction, while 15% of the housing in Tskhinvali was also impacted (Kharebov, 2011, p. 8).

It is noteworthy that before the conflicts of the 90s, the 1989 census reported 164,055 Ossetians residing in Georgia, with 65,232 in the South Ossetian Autonomous District and 98,823 in other parts of Georgia—such as Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, Shida Kartli, Kakheti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Rustavi, etc. (Human Rights Center, 2022, p. 5). Harassment based on ethnic grounds affected all Ossetian residents in this region. Moreover, according to the 2002 census, the number of Ossetians living in the territory controlled by Georgia decreased to 38,028, and based on the latest data, the number has further declined to 14,385 (ibid., p. 6).

"Frozen" conflict and the 2000s

After the conclusion of the initial acute phase of the Georgian-Ossetian conflicts in the 1990s, the subsequent period was termed as 'frozen.' This phase neither ruled out the potential for a change in the existing situation nor was immune to the risk of initiating a new phase of conflicts. Following the conflicts of the 90s, Georgian-Ossetian relations experienced a brief deterioration in the summer of 2004 (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2011, p. 6) when the Erneti market was closed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. The Ergneti market, referred to by Ossetians as "Tek" (Kharebov, 2011, p. 10), played a vital role after the conflicts of the 90s, reestablishing contacts between Georgians and Ossetians at a household level (Chigoev, 2011, p. 44).

The reduction in the intensity of the armed conflict enabled the local Georgian and Ossetian populations to rebuild relations and solidarity. The late 90s and early 2000s are frequently described as a period of transformed conflicts, as during this time, the populations engaged in extensive interactions, traveled in both directions, traded, collaborated in various fields, and reestablished kinship and friendship ties. However, following the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Georgian-Ossetian relations have not evolved into a similar form of mutually beneficial cooperation;

The August 2008 war significantly altered the dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian relations. While, in the conflicts of the 90s, mostly Ossetians considered themselves victims of violence, after the 2008 war, Georgians began to see themselves in the same category (Khaindrava, 2011, p. 46). Additionally, following the 2008 war, 24 thousand new internally displaced persons were added to the number of displaced persons from South Ossetia,³ including those who were forcibly displaced multiple times (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2011, p. 18-19). After the war, Georgia lost control over 189 villages, and 125 of them remain under the occupation regime. The Kremlin gained complete political, economic, and military control of the Tskhinvali region.

³ As a result of the Georgian-Ossetian conflicts that developed in the 90s, until 2008, the number of displaced people from South Ossetia was 13 thousand.

Fifteen years after the 2008 war, the borderisation process persists in the adjacent territories of the occupied region.⁴ This is accompanied by periodic arrests of civilians by the occupying forces, presenting significant challenges to the population in the region and heightening their sense of insecurity. In the conditions of continuous borderization, the Georgian political discourse is primarily confined to the issue of Russian occupation and does not allow for the independent actions of the Ossetians, or the consideration of their will (Chankvetadze & Murusidze, 2021, pp. 3-4). Due to such policies, there is a neglect of recognizing the specifics within the conflict regions and the fact that these regions are isolated from the rest of Georgia.

When discussing Georgia's peace policy, it is crucial to emphasize the periods before and after the 2008 war. In 1992, following the conclusion of the armed conflict, the parties reached an agreement in Sochi, resulting in a ceasefire. A mixed control commission, with the participation of Georgia, Russia, South and North Ossetia, and peacekeeping forces were established.⁵ The OSCE was also engaged in the process, initially mandated to facilitate negotiations in 1992 and later assuming the role of monitoring the situation on the ground. In 2005, President Saakashvili introduced a three-step plan to address the conflict. The plan included rebuilding trust through the restoration of human ties, demilitarization, and enhanced security, as well as granting greater autonomy to conflict regions. Additionally, with the support of the OSCE and the European Union, resources were allocated for the economic strengthening of the region (Firanishvili, 2020) (*ibid.*, p. 5). The OSCE representation remained a guarantor of security in the region until 2008, however, in 2009, Russia vetoed the continuation of the OSCE monitoring mission.

Following the 2008 war, the conflict took on a fully international dimension, and the peace policy was built upon the principle of non-recognition. This entailed that the central government of Georgia did not acknowledge the historical experience of conflicts or the significance of engaging in direct dialogue with the *de facto* government based on these experiences (Firanishvili, 2021). The 2008 Law on the Occupied Territories of Georgia officially designated South Ossetia as a territory occupied by Russia. In 2010, the government formulated a strategy known as "Engagement through Cooperation," which explicitly ruled out the option of resolving the conflict through military means. It endorsed a human-centered approach encompassing humanitarian aid, protection of human rights, improved access to healthcare and education, and economic projects. Additionally, the strategic document highlighted the goal of restoring the territorial integrity of Georgia. While this strategy was viewed as a proactive step toward establishing peaceful relations, experts noted challenges in its implementation from the outset (Gegeshidze, 2011, p. 34). From 2012 to the present, there have been no fundamental changes in the strategy, rendering it inadequate in addressing population challenges and adapting to social or political changes (Firanishvili, 2021).

Social, Economic and Security Challenges

There are persistent social, economic, and security challenges faced by the population residing near the administrative line, significantly influencing their perceptions of the peace-building process. In 2023, a research study conducted by the Association "Tankmoba," the Women's Information Center, and the Women's Foundation "Sukhumi" revealed that 75% of participants living near the dividing line stated that there was no hospital in their settlement or nearby, while 93% reported that there was no pharmacy in their villages (p. 10). According to the same survey, 58% of respondents identified limited access to preschools as one of the primary issues. Challenges such as poorly maintained roads, inadequate public transport, and issues related to the supply of drinking water pose significant obstacles for the local population (Displaced Women's Association Consent; Women's Information Center; Women's

⁴ See: <https://rb.gy/ecyk3>, <https://rb.gy/5jdu9>, <https://rb.gy/ij76x>.

⁵ Sochi agreement, June 24, 1992, available here: <https://peacemaker.un.org/georgia-sochi-agreement92>

Foundation Sukhumi, 2023, p. 11-12).

As a consequence of the conflict, a significant portion of the population lost access to agricultural lands, pastures, and water resources (Amnesty International, 2019). In some instances, lands are entirely encircled on the other side of the dividing line, preventing people from cultivating their own land (UN Women, 2019, p. 20). This issue is closely tied to food security. In many villages around Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, barbed wire traverses agricultural lands directly. According to the survey (2023), conducted by Tankhmoba, 52% of the population in villages located on the dividing line reported that their land plots are not legally registered as their property (p. 12).

Both national and individual security challenges remain pertinent for the population residing along the administrative dividing line. Due to the "borderisation" process, the population lives in constant fear of arrest and kidnapping. According to the "Tankhmoba" survey (2023), 63% of the population near the dividing line of Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia reported the absence of police stations in their villages, and 39% mentioned the absence of even a single police officer in their villages (p. 38). Furthermore, villages near the occupation line still lack an early warning system, crucial for timely threat identification and preventive measures. The analysis of the existing socio-economic situation indicates that the state's developed special approaches to social support for the population in the vicinity of the administrative line are insufficient. Additionally, there is a need for context-adjusted approaches to be developed.

Theoretical principles of research

The complex and evolving socio-political context in the region has significantly influenced the perception of peace among the population living near the administrative line. The unresolved conflict and ongoing crises have repeatedly altered the daily lives, relationships, and future outlook of the residents. Therefore, the experiences and perspectives of the population along the administrative line are crucial for developing well-informed and context-appropriate peace strategies. The theoretical framework of the study is constructed around theories of peacebuilding, conflict transformation, collective trauma, and chronic nature of the crisis.

Theory of Peace Building

Peacebuilding theory allows us to perceive peacebuilding not merely as an abstract goal, but as a tangible process that profoundly influences the daily lives and well-being of individuals and communities. While the negative understanding of peace implies solely the absence of war and only partially grasps the intricate dynamics in conflict regions, the positive understanding of peace focuses on structural forms of violence, such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, and oppression (Galtung, 1996). Therefore, a positive and holistic approach to peacebuilding encompasses not only the eradication of violence but also reconciliation and the establishment of sustainable relationships. According to this approach, it is crucial to scrutinize the root causes of conflict, transform relationships, and create new structures or institutions to support peace (Lederach, 1997).

Peacebuilding is a dynamic process that constantly evolves depending on the nature of the conflict, in response to existing realities and dilemmas (ibid.). Peacebuilding theory envisions both a top-down approach, involving high-level negotiations, diplomatic intervention, and

political agreements, and a bottom-up approach, where local communities, civil society, and their perspectives and initiatives determine efforts in conflict areas. Peacebuilding theory provides an intellectual and practical framework for examining peace as a dynamic and multi-layered process.

An integral aspect of the bottom-up approach is the daily peace perspective. Everyday peace pertains to the practices and norms that individuals and groups in "deeply divided societies" employ to prevent conflict and alleviate tensions (Mac Ginty, 2014). This approach concentrates on the agency of individuals and groups within the context of everyday life in conflict-affected areas. Examples of daily peace include micro-solidarity practices, involving cooperation and mutual support among people, everyday diplomacy, etc. (ibid). Everyday peace practices hold significant potential for conflict transformation.

The theory of conflict transformation

The theory of conflict transformation provides a more comprehensive perspective on the evolution of conflict and the process of shifting it from a destructive to a constructive force. According to the theory, following the elimination of violence, the subsequent stage of transformation prioritizes the creation and maintenance of sustainable, peaceful relations, the restoration of power post-conflict, and addressing its underlying causes (Kriesberg, 2011). This theory underscores that conflict often originates from factors such as inequality, injustice, historical grievances, and identity-related disagreements. To attain sustainable peace, transformations in relationships, structures, and social norms are deemed necessary (Lederach, 2015). Conflict transformation theory acknowledges the psychological and emotional dimensions of conflicts and emphasizes the cultivation of trust, empathy, and relationship-building among conflicting parties.

According to the theory of conflict transformation, conflict and its subsequent changes constitute an integral part of human life, with these changes manifesting in personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions (Lederach, 2015). In the personal dimension, conflict impacts the physical and mental well-being of individuals, as well as their perception of events. The dimension related to relationships focuses on alterations in personal relationships and power dynamics, aiming to foster open communication for mutual understanding and a shift in the parties' attitudes. The structural dimension addresses the root causes of conflict and the influence of social structures and institutions. It advocates for the establishment of structures that ensure the satisfaction of basic human needs and the involvement of conflict-affected individuals in decision-making processes. The cultural dimension pertains to the impact of culture on the perception of conflicts and actions taken in response to them (ibid.). In summary, it becomes evident that conflict transformation is a multidimensional approach examining the changes conflicts induce in the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of people's lives, striving to utilize the acquired information for constructive changes.

The theory of collective trauma / chronic nature of crisis

After the constructive transformation of conflicts, emotional and psychological injuries often persist, both at the individual and group levels, necessitating further study. In this regard, **collective trauma theory** provides a framework for examining the impacts of traumatic events on groups of people. It underscores that traumatic events can have enduring consequences not only for individuals but also for the broader community, focusing on collective approaches to coping with trauma. Research indicates that collective trauma and the memory of trauma can influence future generations who did not directly witness the events (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013).

More precisely, the term "collective trauma" does not simply denote a historical fact or tragedy that a group of people endured; rather, it describes their psychological reactions and coping

mechanisms in response to the trauma (Hirschberger, 2018). Following collective trauma, both individuals and groups attempt to make sense of these events in diverse ways. This process can be intricate and challenging, involving complex emotions such as guilt, responsibility, grief, and worry. Despite these challenges, this process is crucial for the rehabilitation journey (ibid.). Historical traumas impact the perceptions, identities, and behaviors of groups of people. However, according to trauma researchers, it is possible to transform historical trauma into an opportunity for understanding, empathy, and reconciliation (Li, Leidner, Hirschenberger, & Park, 2023). One of the pivotal aspects of collective trauma theory is recognizing the significant role that collective memory plays in relation to historical trauma. Both individual and collective memory can either deepen conflict or promote dialogue and reconciliation. Discussing and acknowledging pain and loss while fostering empathy and understanding is a challenging and lengthy process, yet it creates the potential for peaceful coexistence.

The present study emphasizes the need to reconsider the concept of a crisis. In the conventional sense, a crisis is commonly perceived as an isolated period of time with a notably adverse impact on people's lives. However, for a significant portion of the world's population, the crisis is not an episodic occurrence but rather chronic in nature (Vi, 2023). For those who are structurally disadvantaged, socially marginalized, and economically underprivileged, the world is defined not by peace, balance, and prosperity, but by the persistent threat of conflict and chaos (ibid.). Henrik Wis suggests that while wars may have distinct start and end points, their causes and effects are ongoing. Individuals and institutions often find themselves adapting to life in crisis conditions, having to "adjust to ambiguity" (ibid., p. 9). Living with a chronic crisis prompts critical reflections on society and the ongoing changes within it, leading to the development of new strategies for coping with difficulties. Simultaneously, individuals in such circumstances endure constant uncertainty, as they are not in a state of emergency yet are unable to resume their normal lives (Dunn, 2018).

In summary, the study relies on an analytical framework that integrates the notions of peacebuilding, conflict transformation, collective trauma, and crisis chronicity. Peacebuilding theory enables us to conceptualize peace as a tangible, multidimensional process that encompasses the absence of violence, reconciliation, and the promotion of sustainable relationships. A bottom-up approach and daily peace practices are integral components of this process.

Conflict transformation theory provides a more profound perspective on the transformation of conflicts from a destructive to a constructive process, emphasizing the causes and structural problems of conflict. In conclusion, collective trauma theory underscores the enduring effects of conflicts and the potential of collective memory to transform historical trauma into an opportunity for empathy and reconciliation. Rethinking the concept of crisis helps us better understand the reality of populations adjacent to administrative lines. The mentioned theoretical framework facilitates the study of the multi-layered meaning of peace in a complex and evolving context.

Research findings

In the three main sections presented below, we, the authors discuss the findings obtained as a result of the fieldwork. The research employed a phenomenological approach, starting from the development of the guide and continuing through the presentation of experiences related to the research objectives, the chronology and language of the respondents' narratives were thoroughly followed.

It is noteworthy that, subsequent to the completion of the fieldwork, the analysis of the findings involved two main phases: coding and typology. Coding refers to the creation of thematic frameworks based on the collected findings, while categorization involves grouping the findings according to these frameworks. Finally, we amalgamated the narratives of the

respondents, incorporating the verbal material collected from them, into three main categories: (1) the dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian relations, (2) the perception of war and conflict: deafening silence and everything but peace, and (3) the multi-layered nature of peacebuilding.

Dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian cohabitation

Speaking about the dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian relations, the research participants considered three main periods: (1) the period before the '90s, (2) the period from the '90s to 2008, and (3) from 2008 to present. Most notably, the respondents fondly recalled their relationships and experiences of cohabitation before the '90s. Retired participants in the study described a harmonious coexistence between Ossetians and Georgians during that time. According to them, there was no distinction between Georgians and Ossetians, and people lived peacefully together. They were closely connected through common work, kinship, and other close relationships. Many of them had Ossetian relatives and friends with whom they maintained constant contact and communication. Mixed families were also common. The respondents expressed that during this period, tensions and alienation toward Ossetian relatives were foreign concepts to them, and therefore, they did not even have to contemplate these issues.

“Through good times and bad, we were very super friendly. We attended birthdays, christenings. Regardless of the business at hand, we visited Tskhinvali. We felt that everyone trusted and respected us”⁶

“Growing up, I have never heard 'Oh, you are Ossetian, and you are Georgian.' Had that been the case, I might not have married a Georgian, and a Georgian might not have married an Ossetian”⁷

Respondents recalled that Georgian-Ossetian relations became strained after the war of the '90s. Many lives were lost during the unrest, people lost their homes and property, and there were frequent incidents of robbery, house burnings, revenge, and murders. The resentment between Georgian-Ossetian relationship was deeply ingrained, leaving a lasting imprint in the memory of the people in the region. According to the respondents, the period from 1989 to 1993 was particularly tense due to political processes and military confrontations. Participants in the study with Ossetian relatives experienced, for the first time, a cooling of relations between Georgians and Ossetians. They recalled strong attempts to incite discord, which affected even mixed families. One ethnically Ossetian respondent mentioned a noticeable distance between her and her ethnically Georgian spouse, despite years of cohabitation, illustrating the ongoing processes. Despite the tense situation during the same period, Georgians and Ossetians with family ties still managed to visit each other. Additionally, there were business relations between Georgians and Ossetians at the Ergneti market. The research participants referred to these relations as "public diplomacy." According to them, the market provided an opportunity to restore and maintain connections with acquaintances and establish new relationships, despite many negative aspects. Against the backdrop of the political events of that time, this was deemed important.

⁶ The respondent from the village of Mereti;

⁷ Ossetian respondent from the village of Mereti.

“Public diplomacy proved effective in the subsequent years. Specifically, it found expression in the Ergneti market, where both parties reconciled and began working together. Public diplomacy thawed the ice”⁸

“After 1995, the situation calmed down somewhat, largely due to the people. The Ergneti market existed, where contraband goods may have been sold, but it provided a significant opportunity for the population. In addition to the material aspect, the Ergneti market played a role in fostering warm relations”⁹

According to the respondents, the Ergneti market was utilized by both the Georgian and Ossetian populations to mend relations, giving this space the potential to contribute to conflict resolution. **As one respondent noted, relations that had cooled over the years appeared to warm up, bringing people closer together, albeit slowly;**¹⁰

Nevertheless, the respondents expressed that political forces were unable to see and effectively leverage the mentioned public diplomacy. According to one respondent, both the presence of political will and a willingness to restore relations among the population were, and still are, crucial for conflict resolution. The existence of only one would not have the potential to resolve the conflict:

“If it is not initiated from above, what can only people do? Both Georgians and Ossetians did what they could. After so many years of strained relations, we became friends again. We couldn't do anything more. The rest was someone else's responsibility, and someone else had to see it through”.¹¹

During the interviews, the respondents recalled that the relatively stable situation in the region and warm relations between Ossetians and Georgians continued until 2004, up until clashes occurred between the armed forces in the Tskhinvali region. In the same year, the Ergneti market was also closed, and all these factors collectively damaged the improved Georgian-Ossetian relations of the previous decade.

Respondents couldn't pinpoint a specific moment when relations cooled down but noted that the situation gradually worsened, culminating in the 2008 war. One respondent angrily recalled, **“Russia did a good job in 2008; they made us hate each other and killed so many people.”¹²**

According to the respondents, the 2008 Russia-Georgia war brought isolation, fear, and alienation. The social and economic problems of the population on both sides of the dividing border worsened, and restrictions on movement made it impossible to maintain friendly relations between Georgians and Ossetians. It became impossible to continue the public diplomacy and grassroots efforts that created a bridge between Georgians and Ossetians in the period from the '90s to 2008.

⁸ The respondent from Ergneti village

⁹ The respondent from Mereti village

¹⁰ The respondent from Shindisi village

¹¹ The respondent from Ergneti village

¹² The respondent from Shindisi village

The study participants mentioned that their relations with relatives living beyond the administrative line have become cold. Today, some respondents communicate with their relatives through social networks, although this communication lacks regularity. Additionally, the respondents noted that efforts to maintain connections using social networks exist on both sides today, although it cannot replace the importance of physical relationships:

"They are my relatives, and I don't want our relationship to be a victim of politics. I want to visit, and them to visit as well. We have to endure the oppression; no one else. Her mother [another respondent's] is from Tskhinvali and has no connection with anyone anymore"¹³

According to the respondents, Georgians and Ossetians should have the opportunity to talk together, argue, and remember the past. Additionally, respondents often noted their interest in warming relations, expressing that in the absence of restrictions on movement, people would be better able to work on restoring ties than politicians.

During the fieldwork, the research participants expressed anger and disappointment, stating that since 2008, Georgian-Ossetian relations have not been renewed or changed for the better in any way. According to them, no one has made significant efforts to build relations between the peoples. During the conversation, the respondents could not recall any politician who voiced their real concerns and needs. In discussing the same topics, one of the respondents mentioned, ¹⁴ ***"It's as if we don't live in Georgia. Those of us here on this line, it's as if we live separately. Nobody cares about what is happening here"***.¹⁵

According to the elderly respondents, the current estrangement between Georgians and Ossetians has also affected young people. The new generation has grown up isolated from each other, and as a result, they seem less interested in restoring relationships today. They have no memory of Georgian-Ossetian friendship and coexistence, often being influenced by false historical and political narratives. Respondents expressed concern about this fact and noted that without working with young people, they have little faith that relations will warm up again.

We note here that during the fieldwork, we spoke with several teenagers and 18-20-year-old boys. While discussing Ossetian-Georgian relations, they mentioned that they primarily receive information about the past from their grandparents. According to the young respondents, the memories they hear from their grandparents about Georgian-Ossetian relations are ***sometimes warm and sometimes cold***.¹⁶ The young people noted that the elderly individuals they know in the region are particularly concerned that the 2008 war completely erased the friendly Georgian-Ossetian relations built over the years after the conflicts of the '90s. During the discussion on this topic, we asked the young people how they would define the current Ossetian-Georgian relations. Some of them had difficulty or did not want to talk about this topic, while a few mentioned that the physical barriers on the dividing line not only make it impossible for Georgians to maintain relations with their Ossetian relatives but also separate Ossetians from Georgians. For example, one of the respondents told us, ***"This border is not only on this side, right? This is also a border for those who live on the other side. As, for***

¹³ The respondent from Mereti village

¹⁴ Meaning the Administrative Border Line

¹⁵ The respondent from Ergneti village

¹⁶ The respondent from Ergneti village

example, my grandmother can no longer see her Ossetian relatives or other relatives, neither can they”.¹⁷

The work with the participants of the research also revealed that assigning responsibility for conflicts today, in the context of Georgian-Ossetian relations, involves many layers. According to the respondents, it is unfair for the Ossetians to entirely place the responsibility on the Georgians, especially on ordinary people living close to the administrative line who have never had the opportunity to participate in the process of making broad political decisions. The respondents see Russia as the main hostile force. They believe that the Ossetians have become victims of Russian manipulation, making understanding the question of responsibility even more complex. According to the respondents, recognizing responsibilities on both sides requires appropriate work, and this is an issue that should be clarified through dialogue between Georgians and Ossetians. Without dialogue, responsibility will be imposed unilaterally, which is unfair. According to them, the issues related to the imposition of responsibility today are generally characterized by a lack of consensus.

Talking about the dynamics of Ossetian-Georgian cohabitation seemed especially important to the Ossetian respondents. One of them said, **“I still cannot figure out what happened or why it's happening... This war happened so suddenly, and it's been going on for so long”**.¹⁸ The respondents mentioned that after the conflicts of the '90s, the Georgian population living in the village did not talk about this period with them, the Ossetians, and in this way, they tried to maintain a peaceful daily coexistence. Additionally, the respondents mentioned that after years, this silence was slowly broken, and often, **“in times of trouble and in good times, we talk about these tensions and war. We didn't talk at first. It seemed like some kind of inconvenience. It was as if I was feeling uneasiness that these events went down, and so were my fellow villagers”**.¹⁹ During the research, several Georgian and two Ossetian respondents mentioned that it is still unclear to them **“what happened, why it happened...²⁰ They didn't even let us think about it, and then the 2008 war already happened”**.²¹ According to them, in the '90s, it was really felt that the Tskhinvali region wanted independence, and **“it seemed that the people, the Ossetians were ready for it, but not all. Many, but not all, because there was a lot of back and forth between us, and some people really didn't understand what was going on. We couldn't tell the truth from the lie. Even here, no one asked the common people, and there was also the fact that not everyone was involved in what was happening”**.²²

In summary, it can be said that despite constant tension and many difficult challenges, Georgians and Ossetians have managed to maintain relations for decades. However, movement restrictions, physical isolation, and strict military control imposed after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war have eroded these ties and separated new generations. Despite the many obstacles, the study participants express a strong desire to restore the relationship, which they say will require appropriate willingness and effort on both sides.

The findings of the research related to the dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian relations confirm the relevance of peacebuilding and conflict transformation theories. These theories are grounded in the understanding of the complex nature of conflicts in peacebuilding processes and, in this regard, emphasize the development of informed strategies. Within the framework of the research, through cooperation with the population, it was observed that, alongside the weight of collective memory imposed by the war, there still exists a desire for mutual

¹⁷ The respondent from Shindisi village

¹⁸ Ossetian respondent from Ergneti village

¹⁹ Ossetian respondent from Ergneti village

²⁰ The respondent refers to the Georgian-Ossetian conflicts of the 90s

²¹ Respondent from Mereti village

²² Ossetian respondent from Shindisi village

understanding of traumatic memories, empathy, and reconciliation. This desire for mutual understanding and reconciliation holds significant potential for achieving peace.

In addition to researching the memory of Georgian-Ossetian relations, we endeavored to understand from the respondents the phenomenological, context-sensitive perception of the conflict and the ways of achieving peace. In this process, we sought to identify possible limitations. The views collected from the respondents on these two central issues are outlined in the following two sections.

Perceiving War and Conflict: Deafening Silence and Anything But Peace

At the outset, it's worth noting that despite the respondents' willingness to discuss the chain of Georgian-Ossetian conflicts and their perceptions, it proved challenging for them to retrieve memories related to these conflicts and share them with us. This difficulty stems from the fact that a significant number of respondents had family members or relatives who either perished in these conflicts or were part of mixed families. Despite acknowledging the challenge of broaching these sensitive topics, the respondents emphasized that revisiting and reflecting on conflicts is a necessary process because crucial experiences are embedded in their memories.

The respondents began discussing the perception of conflicts by recalling the 90s. They asserted that it is from this period that the chronic tension in the region, which persists to this day, originated. According to them, in the 1990s, confrontations between informal groups and criminal acts such as robbery, kidnapping, and murder were daily occurrences. Throughout the conversation, research participants frequently emphasized that, despite relatively stable periods, a constant tense atmosphere prevailed in the region, and this situation persists today. Moreover, several respondents we interviewed in the village of Mereti highlighted the palpable ongoing tension, especially in the villages near Tskhinvali. Furthermore, during the interview, we asked a respondent from the village of Ergneti to describe the current situation in the region. According to him, today is labeled as "**deafening silence**"²³ a silence that is "**uncomfortable and tense**". This description resonates with other respondents who stated that, "**peace does not solely mean the absence of military conflict**".

We will clarify that during the interviews, the respondents found it challenging to pinpoint the exact periods of the conflict. For them, the conflict was perceived as a permanent situation and a part of everyday life. The narratives of the research participants also underscore how long-term conflict experiences can influence people's perception of their environment and the potential long-term social and psychological consequences this situation may have on them. Collective trauma and the absence of space to overcome this trauma continue to impact respondents' perception of reality and their ability to identify threats.

*When I left in the '90s, up until now, it has been all about war; my family perished in it. This is not a mere conflict for me. Conflict, for me, is now when I might yell at someone, fight, and then, after two weeks, we will be together again. I left in 1989, what year is it now? My entire family was sacrificed for what is called conflicts; this is war for me*²⁴

*When I was a child, up until 2008, I believed that war was a normal situation. I grew up with it, not knowing what peace was at all. It was a normal situation for me*²⁵

²³ Respondent from Ergneti village

²⁴ Respondent from Mereti village

²⁵ Respondent from Tirdznisi village

Several respondents conveyed to us that the conflict had become so normalized for them that they did not take the tensions that started in 2004 seriously. It was customary for them to temporarily leave their place of residence and return after a few weeks once the situation had stabilized. In 2008, many of them left their homes with the hope of returning in a few days. The respondents recalled that they did not anticipate the 2008 Russia-Georgia would escalating so severely. Based on the respondents' narratives, **we conclude that the normalization of conflict is such a complex social and psychological phenomenon that it may create false feelings of security.** The 2008 Russia-Georgia war represented a significant escalation of the existing conflict and had a broader scale than the population expected:

By 2004, tens of years of living in this situation had already passed. We did not anticipate that. Yes, there were attacks and tense situations, but we did not expect something like this. In 2008, we left Eredvi in the same manner as always, thinking we would return the next day. I didn't take anything with me; we were completely unprepared"²⁶

The sharing of memories of conflicts by the respondents also yielded interesting findings related to the differentiation between war and conflict. According to several respondents, the Russian-Georgian clashes of 2008 were considered **a war**, while the confrontations between Ossetians and Georgians that started in the 90s were deemed **a conflict**. Some respondents expressed the view that Georgians and Ossetians **did not discuss the conflicts of the 90s enough**, with one respondent even stating that **there was no discussion at all.**²⁷ Respondents emphasized the importance of resolving the Russia-Georgia war through diplomatic means, suggesting that in this process, people may lack sufficient knowledge and experience, necessitating the involvement of international actors. According to the respondents, addressing the Georgian-Ossetian conflict should be considered an internal state interest, **requiring the participation of both politicians and residents.**²⁸ The respondents stressed that this distinction between war and conflict should be taken into account when seeking ways to address or resolve them.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia war significantly altered the situation in the region. According to the respondents, this war is **still ongoing today and has not concluded.** We asked several respondents to describe what it means to have an endless war. They mentioned that villages are becoming deserted, and residents are afraid to stay at home; no one knows how what began in 2008 will ultimately resolve. Due to continuous border tensions, the local population is forced to live in a perpetual state of anxiety. According to the respondents, the depopulation of villages is not solely due to the challenging economic conditions in the region but is also fueled by the pervasive fears of living in this environment. The respondents highlighted that living in fear and insecurity is a shared experience for people of all ages in the region today. One respondent mentioned that often, **"a person who went to pick a bucket of apples was detained by the Russian border guards".**²⁹ Despite these fears, the severe economic situation today leaves a portion of the population with no choice but to rely on the small harvest they cultivate on their land.

We would like to emphasize that the fieldwork in the village of Shindisi coincided with the 15th anniversary of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war;³⁰ The villagers expressed that the government

²⁶ Respondent from Mereti village

²⁷ Respondent from Shindisi village

²⁸ Respondent from Ergneti village

²⁹ Respondent from Ergneti village

³⁰ Auth. note: Field work in Shindisi village started on August 15

acknowledges the war only on this specific day. According to the respondents, it appears that the 2008 war is **generally forgotten**. One of the respondents shared:

"They come here once a year.³¹ They bring flowers with wreaths, take photos, and leave. They drive by without stopping at the houses to understand what is happening and what we want. Then we sit and watch on TV, as if they were here, and they come out with empty words, as if they got the job done".³²

Since the fieldwork coincided with the 15th anniversary of the Russian-Georgian war, some respondents emphasized how the media covered the war. Several respondents mentioned that the media dedicated considerable time to determining the exact starting date of the war. According to them, the war did not commence on either August 8 or August 7. Instead, it started much earlier, but went unnoticed by many. As one respondent expressed:

They stood there,³³ Questioning who started the war and when. One said it was seven [August], the other said eight. In the end, it was as if they knew the war better than us. No, the war did not start on 7th or 7th. The war started a long time ago. Come down here and ask us when the war started. Where was August 7th or August 8th when there was already a smell of war here? This war started much earlier".³⁴

Reflections on the perceptions of the conflict, both past and present, indicate that the conflict persists for the population residing in the region. Those living in the villages, grappling with constant tension, **experience difficulty distinguishing between periods of stability and conflict**. This underscores the imperative of considering the enduring psychological and social impacts of conflicts in the peacebuilding process. The research unveiled a nuanced perspective from the conflict-affected population on the past and present, which differs from prevalent views in Georgian society and political circles. During the fieldwork in the villages, the local population, after discussing their perceptions of the conflict, placed significant emphasis on the necessity of achieving peace. Consequently, we have endeavored to present the findings related to this topic in the subsequent section of the report.

The multifaceted nature of peacebuilding

The research aimed to explore the perceptions of the population residing near the occupation line, focusing on their perspectives on peace and peace-building solutions. However, the findings indicated that respondents seldom discussed specific methods to attain peace. Moreover, a majority expressed uncertainty regarding **the existence of a state-level strategy for achieving peace**. According to them, achieving peace is futile and is unlikely to yield tangible results without a comprehensive reconsideration of the conflict's history.

For the study participants, peace transcended mere absence of armed conflict. Seeking further clarity, we asked respondents to articulate what peace meant to them. Participants expressed that peace encompasses **protected borders, freedom from pressure by Russia,**

³¹ The respondent refers to government officials

³² Respondent from Shindisi village

³³ The respondent refers to one of the television programs

³⁴ Respondent from Mereti village

positive relations between neighbors, a sense of security, and the ability to make independent decisions within the state. Throughout the interviews, all respondents unanimously agreed that peace cannot be attained through warfare. Instead, they emphasized the necessity of diplomatic efforts, constructive dialogue, and active involvement of the population for achieving peace. They highlighted the direct opposition posed by the current presence of Russian forces on Georgian territory to their vision of peace:

*"Where is the peace? What kind of peace are we talking about when there is barbed wire in the yard? This is not peace. Peace is not just that someone is not pointing a gun at you and shooting at you. Peace is when I look at my future with different eyes, where someone does not control me"*³⁵

*"Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace is the feeling of multifaceted security within one's own state. It involves being independent in decisions, considering national interests, and not following anyone's orders"*³⁶

Some respondents expressed disagreement and skepticism toward the state's vision of peace that entails compromising with Russia. They do not believe that peace achieved through such a compromise is sustainable; instead, they argue that this approach heightens fear for the future. In their view, attempting to find common ground with Russia could further harm the region. As one respondent emphasized, **"Russia is not interested in human life here. We all know what is interesting for them: land and taking control."**³⁷ Another group of respondents discussed the idea of finding common ground with Russia but acknowledged uncertainty regarding the form and specific issues on which such common ground could be established.

According to research participants, government representatives are perceived as lacking awareness of the problems, needs, and visions of the population, displaying less interest in these matters. Non-governmental organizations are reported to visit villages more frequently than government agencies. Consequently, the majority of respondents expressed greater trust in the civil sector compared to the government. They emphasized the potential of dialogue facilitation by non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, the participants stressed the importance of active and sustainable cooperation between government representatives and the population, advocating for a more localized approach rather than remote decision-making from the center. They argued that peace cannot be achieved without the involvement of the local population, dialogue, and communication. However, they also highlighted the necessity for appropriate government-level policies. Almost all respondents conveyed the perception that **the current government is not sufficiently interested in addressing the complexities of Georgian-Ossetian relations and is not actively working on these issues.**

"For the government, there are only Russia and Georgia. Ossetians are a third party to them and remain invisible. The government observes from somewhere on the top floor, lacking a direct relationship with the people living in these villages and being

³⁵ Respondent from Ergneti village

³⁶ Respondent from Tirdznisi village

³⁷ Respondent from Tirdznisi village

*unaware of the situation. These Ossetians are considered to be entirely Russian*³⁸

During the fieldwork, it became evident that respondents perceive peace as a dynamic process demanding effort and targeted work on the root causes of conflict. To facilitate this process, there is a need to reassess conflicts, address grievances, and foster mutual compromises. Respondents unanimously agreed on the pivotal role of youth engagement in peacebuilding processes, emphasizing its potential to disrupt the cycle of conflict and instill hope for a more peaceful future. They also stressed the significance of involving women residing in rural areas, as they often bear the brunt of the social and economic consequences of war. Additionally, economic empowerment of the local population, with a particular focus on strengthening agriculture, was highlighted as a crucial aspect of fostering sustainable peace.

*“Work in the region should be activated, beginning with the youth, as another generation is emerging. Local people have more knowledge, and the government should learn from them and cooperate. Rural women possess great potential for peacebuilding; they understand the value of work, the cost of war, and the price of peace”*³⁹

*“I believe that it is essential for young people to meet, to have a thorough understanding, and to comprehend each other's thoughts. The connection, engagement, and coming together of young people will significantly contribute to everything”*⁴⁰

This nuanced perspective on peace underscores the significance of incorporating the experiences and insights of the population residing along the administrative line into the peacebuilding process. These individuals have firsthand experience with the repercussions of violence and political conflicts. Their daily lives are intricately connected with the dynamics of conflicts, providing them with unique knowledge and perspectives. Leveraging this insight is crucial for developing a more robust and well-informed peace strategy.

As per the respondents, a crucial element for attaining peace is the understanding of concessions, encompassing both the Georgian and Ossetian populations. According to one respondent, it is imperative for the local community to prioritize the pursuit of future peace, even if confronting the past may prove challenging. They emphasized that pain was shared on both sides, with people losing family members and loved ones, leaving their homes and lands. On the matter of concessions, one respondent expressed:

³⁸ Respondent from Mereti village

³⁹ Respondent from Ergneti village

⁴⁰ Respondent from Mereti village

"We had three houses in Tskhinvali. We owned them, but we don't anymore. What should I say now? Should I tell those who currently live there, 'Get up and leave; it's my house?! I can't see it as my home anymore. I love it; I remember it, but so many years have passed. I can't bear it either, but I won't say it again. We must give up something, right?! Should we sacrifice the young generation to war again?!"⁴¹

We highlight that the exploration of concession-related matters may warrant further investigation, given the divergent opinions on this issue, which, according to the respondents, holds significance in achieving peace. Notably, the survey encompassed individuals who conveyed that the houses they were compelled to relinquish were intricately linked to their past, fostering profound emotional connections to the space. In their view, **departing from the house signified more than the loss of physical space**; as expressed by one respondent residing in Ergneti village: **"My whole past is in that house. My parents... I couldn't even start the present, and what to say about the future; I couldn't get used to the past. What is it like to leave everything around you, what you love, and suddenly leave. I miss it, I miss it so much. And I miss it all the time."**

The outlook of the research participants regarding the future emerged as intricate and multi-faceted, mirroring their past experiences. On one hand, they express pessimism about current state policies, while on the other hand, they harbor hope that future generations will be able to transcend the cycle of conflict and tension. The dualism in their perspective stems from the complex historical and social context in which they have spent their entire lives.

"I feel that with such peace, I and many others like me will not remain citizens of Georgia in 10 years. Our class will be emigrating or homeless. We will no longer have a state, a language, an estate, or a religion"⁴²

"I still believe that if not my children, my grandchildren, will be able to make things better. I think everything will be fine if we are together. I don't harbor negative feelings"⁴³

Residents residing along the administrative line grapple with the challenges of coping with both the trauma of past experiences and disillusionment with current policies, all the while holding onto the belief that future generations have the potential to transform the conflict.

Conclusion

The analytical framework of the research encompassed the examination of three key aspects: the dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian coexistence, the current conditions of the population residing in villages near the dividing line, and perceptions related to the peacebuilding process. The study unearthed significant findings on all three fronts and identified specific issues that could serve as subjects for further nuanced research.

As per the research participants, Georgian-Ossetian relations have undergone changes over time, influenced by various social and political factors. They posit that the pre-90s Ossetian-

⁴¹ Respondent from Ergneti village

⁴² Respondent from Mereti village

⁴³ Respondent from Mereti village

Georgian relations were positive, characterized by the absence of distinct identities and close ties in both business and family. However, conflicts in the 1990s created tensions, giving rise to distinct Georgian-Ossetian identities that persist. Both Georgian and Ossetian respondents criticized political actors and influential media outlets, contending that these entities did little to foster reconciliation after the conflicts. The local population, they argued, retains the memory of conflict and war, presenting potential for conflict transformation and broader peacebuilding. The study underscored the detrimental impact of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war on Georgian-Ossetian relations, severely limiting physical contact between the populations. Respondents highlighted that the war has assumed a seemingly perpetual and chronic state. According to them, neither the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 has ended, nor the conflicts of the 90s between Georgians and Ossetians; Moreover, participants emphasized the need for dialogue on these conflicts, creating an opportunity for Georgians and Ossetians to discuss and understand each other's perspectives.

For all respondents in the survey, the realization of peace is an inherent expectation for the future. The imperative of peaceful coexistence between Georgians and Ossetians is rooted in their personal experiences. Their conversations conveyed the idea that a genuine belief in a peaceful future is unattainable without reflecting on the past and engaging in self-reflection. Respondents noted that the ongoing borderisation processes create chronic vulnerability for the population in the region. Consequently, they expressed that the region, in addition to grappling with economic challenges, confronts significant hardships, yet this existence is often overlooked in the prevailing political agenda.

Guided by the methodological framework, this study did not aim for quantitative generalization of findings to the entire target group. With the fieldwork now completed and having gained experience in collaborating with the population, we believe that each of the three central issues discussed in the study merits further in-depth exploration as separate research goals. Furthermore, future studies should consider overarching topics, including an assessment of political processes in Georgia during the 90s, an expanded examination of responsibility for conflicts, and a detailed exploration of the perspectives of the remaining Ossetians in Georgia regarding conflicts and peacebuilding.

We hope that the population residing beyond the administrative border will engage with the research, and we look forward to hearing or reading their reflections.

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