

# NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF OSSETIAN COMMUNITY IN KAKHETI



SOCIAL  
JUSTICE  
CENTER

# **Needs Assessment of Ossetian Community in Kakheti**

Social Justice Center

Tbilisi, 2023



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

**Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA**



**SOCIAL  
JUSTICE  
CENTER**

The study was made possible through the project “Promoting equality, solidarity and social peace in Georgia,” supported by the Embassy of Switzerland in Tbilisi in cooperation with Social Justice Center.

Its contents are the sole responsibility of Social Justice Center and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Embassy of Switzerland in Tbilisi.

**Supervisor:** Tamta Mikeladze

**Researcher:** Ochi Kontselidze

**Editor:** Nino Bekishvili

**Translator:** Nino Karanadze

**Cover Designer:** Salome Latsabidze

It is forbidden to copy, reproduce or distribute the material for commercial purposes without the written consent of the Social Justice Center.

**Citation:** *Social Justice Center, Ochi Kontselidze, “Needs Assessment of Ossetian Community in Kakheti”, 2023*

© Social Justice Center

**Address:** Abashidze 12 b, Tbilisi, Georgia

**Phone:** +995 032 2 23 37 06

<https://socialjustice.org.ge/>

[info@socialjustice.org.ge](mailto:info@socialjustice.org.ge)

<https://www.facebook.com/socialjustice.org.ge>

## Table of Contents

Research Methodology .....	4
Social and economic profile of the respondents .....	4
Demography of Ossetians .....	5
Basic needs of villages.....	6
Needs on the examples of Tsitskanaantseri and Kitaani villages .....	7
Ossetian Identity.....	9
Ossetian Language .....	11
Experiences of the conflict in the 1990s .....	12
Migration; Connections with North Ossetia and Tskhinvali region.....	17
Conclusion .....	20
Recommendations .....	21

## Research Methodology

### Research Objective

The objective of the research was to study the multifaceted needs of the densely populated Ossetian community in Kakheti villages, including educational, cultural, social, and other aspects. However, the study also explored several additional areas, including:

- Identity characteristics
- Experiences acquired during the 1990s conflict
- Motivations for migration and the connections with the Tskhinvali region and North Ossetia

### Research Methods

For this research, we employed a qualitative method: in-depth interviews. In total, 18 individual and 7 group interviews were conducted, involving 39 respondents residing in seven villages densely populated by Ossetians. The respondents spanned different age groups and genders, with the youngest being 18 years old and the oldest 80 years old. For details on the number of interviews per village, refer to Table #1. Our research tool consisted of an interview guide containing open-ended questions.

Table #1

Village/Municipality	Number of Interviews	Number of Respondents
Areshperani (Lagodekhi)	5	7
Pona (Lagodeki)	5	10
Kitaani (Gurjaani)	4	4
Tsitskanaantseri (Kvareli)	5	7
Pichkhovani, Argokhi (Akhmeta)	6	11
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>39</b>

### Fieldwork

Fieldwork took place in August 2023, with face-to-face interviews conducted at the respondents' residences, and the interviews were audio-recorded.

**Data Analysis:** The analysis of the data gathered through in-depth interviews unfolded in several sequential steps. Firstly, the audio recordings were transcribed and converted into written transcripts. In the subsequent stage, the data underwent coding and categorization. Finally, the structured content was localized and inclusively integrated, forming the basis for the preparation of an analytical report.

### Social and economic profile of the respondents

The majority of survey participants are engaged in agricultural activities, specifically tending to the land and cultivating various crops such as fruits, vegetables, wheat, and corn. There are relatively few families involved in cattle breeding.

The agricultural produce is primarily consumed within the family, with only occasional sales. An exception to this pattern is found in the village of Kitaani, within the Gurjaani municipality. Here, residents primarily cultivate fruits such as peaches, apricots, and berries for commercial purposes. Fruit processing warehouses and cold storage facilities are available in Kitaani, where the harvest is preserved throughout the winter. As one resident explained, *"If you were to drive alongside the village road, you'd notice fruit processing warehouses along the road. To the best of my knowledge, 98 percent of cold storage farms are situated in Chumlaki and Kitaani villages."* (55-year-old woman; Kitaani village; Gurjaani municipality).

In the villages, men are predominantly employed in various positions within the construction sector, including laborer, carpenter, painter, and similar roles. Seasonal employment is common, with both men and women engaged in activities such as spring agricultural work, harvesting nuts, grapes, watermelons, and other seasonal tasks. A minority of villagers work in the public sector, which includes roles in public schools, kindergartens, and the National Forestry Agency. Families rely on state pensions as a stable monthly source of financial income, and socially vulnerable families receive social assistance. It's noteworthy that some individuals of retirement age, holding dual citizenship, receive pensions from both Georgia and the Russian Federation. During the interviews, respondents did not mention receiving remittances from close relatives residing in North Ossetia as a source of income. Furthermore, there was no indication of young people engaging in circular labor migration.

### Demography of Ossetians

According to the 1989 general population census, 164,055 Ossetians resided in Soviet Georgia, with 48,146 of them living in the South Ossetian Autonomous District. However, the 2002 census reported a significant decline, with only 38,028 Ossetians remaining in Georgia (excluding the occupied territories). By the time of the 2014 general population census, this number had further decreased to 14,385.<sup>1</sup> Statistical data over the last 30 years vividly demonstrate a substantial reduction in the Ossetian population in Georgia.

In terms of geographical distribution within Georgia, the largest Ossetian population is found in Shida Kartli (4,668), with slightly fewer residing in Tbilisi (4,313) and Kakheti (2,526).<sup>2</sup> In Kakheti, Ossetians are densely settled in villages across Akhmet, Lagodekhi, Gurjaani, and Kvareli municipalities. For detailed information regarding Kakheti villages where, according to 2014 census, the ethnically Ossetian population exceeds 20%, please refer to Table #2.

Table #2

Municipality	Village	Rural population (2014 population census results)	Percentage share of the Ossetian population (results of the 2014 population census)
Gurjaani	Kitaani	271	72%
Lagodekhi	Zemo Bolkvi	272	59.6%
Akhmeta	Argokhi	224	51.8%
Lagodekhi	Kvemo Pona	133	48.8%
Lagodekhi	Kvemo Bolkvi	132	48.5%
Akhmeta	Pichkhovani	286	48.3%
Lagodekhi	Zemo Pona	92	47.8%

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that after the 2008 war, the Georgian government lost control over the Akhlagori region

<sup>2</sup> 2014 data, Geostat: <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/739/demografiuli-da-sotsialuri-makhasiateblebi>

Kvareli	Tsitskanaantseri	419	43.4%
Lagodekhi	Kvemo Khechili	160	40%
Akhmeta	Akhalsheni	337	35.6%
Lagodekhi	Lapniani	118	29.7%
Lagodekhi	Areshperani	278	28.4%
Akhmeta	Akhshnisvelebi	227	27.8%
Lagodekhi	Zemo Khechili	47	27.6%
Lagodekhi	Verkhvis Mindori	156	25.3%
Lagodekhi	Pichkhisbogiri	84	22.6%
Lagodekhi	Khoshatiani	129	20.9%

According to the respondents, Ossetians first settled in Kakheti towards the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As one respondent mentioned, *"They would come on their own, by carts, scout the area, purchase the land and then bring their relatives along"* (80-year-old man, Argokhi village, Akhmeta municipality). It's worth noting that during the Soviet era, ethnic Ossetians were the predominant population in the Ossetian villages of Kakheti. However, a significant demographic shift occurred after 1990 when Ossetians left their homes en masse. Today, in most of the historically recognized Ossetian villages, Ossetians constitute roughly half or even less than half of the population. The village of Kitaani in the Gurjaani municipality is an exception where the majority of residents are ethnic Ossetians (see Table #2).

Middle-aged and elderly Ossetians are primarily residents of the villages. Respondents emphasize that the out-migration of Ossetians from these rural areas is irreversible. At one point, Georgian eco-migrants from Svaneti and Adjara resided in the houses owned by Ossetians, which were purchased from Ossetians by the state in 2006-2007. It's worth noting that, besides ethnic Ossetians and Georgians, Azerbaijani communities have settled in the villages of Pona and Khechili in Lagodekhi. According to the respondents, Azerbaijanis started moving into these villages approximately 10-15 years ago and have been acquiring abandoned houses from Ossetian emigrants. Notably, near the villages of Khechili and Poni lies Kabali, with 3,238 Azerbaijani inhabitants (99.4%; 2014 data), which is experiencing growth. This growth has generated high interest in Ossetian houses and plots of land in the vicinity. As revealed by the research findings, Ossetians maintain distant relations with other ethnic groups, particularly Georgians and Azerbaijanis.

*"Azerbaijanis tend to congregate with other Azerbaijanis, while Adjarians often associate with fellow Adjarians. Ossetians represent the minority in this village,"* (70-year-old woman from Khechili village, Lagodekhi municipality).

*"Coexistence is typical. As it is in apartment blocks, the situation here is similar. Each person tends to their own affairs"* (73-year-old man from Khechili village, Lagodekhi municipality).

### Basic needs of villages

The research findings reveal that villages share some common needs while also presenting unique requirements. Notable among the shared needs are the rehabilitation of rural roads, the development of pastures, improvements to irrigation and drinking water infrastructure, and access to essential services such as healthcare and legal assistance. Some specific needs in certain villages include ecological environment regulation (Tsitskanaantseri village), the transfer of agricultural lands (Tsitskanaantseri village), the restoration of schools (Kitaani village), and a consistent and uninterrupted supply of electricity (Kitaani village). A significant and recurring issue in these villages is the absence or inadequacy of pastures, which has led to conflicts within the communities. Another pressing problem is the lack of

irrigation water, which hampers the local population's ability to manage agriculture effectively. Please refer to Annex #1 for a breakdown of needs by village.

When discussing the needs of the village, the respondents placed significant emphasis on the role and responsibilities of the village authorized representative. These respondents have the contact information of the village representative and reach out when necessary. However, the functions of the village representative are rather limited, primarily involving the transmission of information about the community's needs to municipal authorities. As one respondent explained, "S/he conveys information to the administration, acts as a mediator" (63-year-old woman; Khechili; Lagodekhi municipality). Historically, the villages have been represented by ethnically Ossetian representatives. Nevertheless, the respondents pointed out that the villages are organized in such a way that there isn't a fully Ossetian community. Consequently, Georgians make up the majority within self-government bodies. Interviews conducted with the villagers revealed a passive attitude and relatively low demands from the government in comparison to other villages. Several reasons were cited for this passivity:

1. The aging Ossetian population in the villages, predominantly comprising elderly individuals who tend to be less active due to factors such as health issues and the absence of future plans.
2. Lingering traumatic experiences stemming from the early 1990s. These experiences have led Ossetians to shy away from taking initiative or engaging in active pursuits. As one respondent noted, *"They are not active due to the memories of the 1990s. If they had spoken up, they might have prevented the closure of the village school"* (55-year-old woman; Kitaani village; Gurjaani municipality).
3. The influence of the ruling party, the "Georgian Dream," on the population's perspectives. The ruling party has coordinators in the villages who serve as opinion leaders and wield a certain level of authority, thereby impacting the formation of the population's attitudes. As one respondent mentioned, the ruling party consistently receives over 90% of the votes in elections.

Respondents identified particular infrastructure projects that the government has undertaken in recent years. These projects include the construction of central roads in villages, the renovation of schools and kindergartens, the extension of natural gas services to villages, and the construction or repair of sports facilities like stadiums and fitness equipment. Importantly, respondents do not believe that their villages receive less government attention due to their ethnic composition.

## Needs on the examples of Tsitskanaantseri and Kitaani villages

### Tsitskanaantseri Village

The village of Tsikanaantseri is the most populous village in Kakheti where Ossetians live compactly (419 inhabitants; 2014). The villagers face various challenges, including the shortage of irrigation water, environmental pollution, and insufficient lands and pastures.

During the Soviet Union era, oil factory operated in Tsitskanaantseri village. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the factory closed, and the land owned by the factory was repurposed by the local population for farming and grazing. Subsequently, these arable lands and pastures in the village were sold to private individuals, as explained by one resident: *"We had fields just 100 meters away. It's a village. We used to cultivate corn, we harvested corn, and then when Mikheil Saakashvili came into power, he privatized the areas in a way that took us by surprise. The lands were taken from us"* (53-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri, Lagodekhi).

A portion of the land was allocated to the Georgian population of the neighboring village, Chikaani. Subsequently, the residents of Tsitskanaantseri were granted a limited land parcel of 0.25 hectares, and some families did not even



receive this. This scarcity of land hampers the community's ability to fully benefit from economic and agricultural state programs. The shortage of pastures has also led to a decline in cattle raising, as one resident lamented, *"At one point, there were perhaps 500 cows in the village. Nowadays, if you need milk for medicinal purposes, you'll struggle to find any in the village"* (53-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri, Lagodekhi).

Kvareli Lake, which had been a long-standing source of irrigation water for the village, was acquired by a private individual, and it currently hosts a hotel complex. As per the local population, a small hydroelectric power station was constructed near the lake, resulting in limited supplies of irrigation water to the village. In addition to the shortage of irrigation water, there is a concern about the quality of the irrigation water. This issue is exacerbated by a nearby poultry farm that fails to meet ecological safety standards, leading to water pollution. One resident explained, *"Waste is discharged and ends up in front of the houses, in the irrigation canals. While environmental authorities have imposed fines, the farm owner has the financial means to pay them"* (25-year-old man; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli). Due to the substandard irrigation water, a portion of the population is unable to cultivate vegetables for household consumption. Another part of the community resorts to collecting drinking water for irrigation, which necessitates additional physical labor. As one resident mentioned, *"My husband gathers the potable water, uses it for watering, and produces tomatoes and other vegetables"* (47-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli). The use of potable water for irrigation purposes has recently led to a drinking water shortage.

Aside from the issue of unusable irrigation water with a strong odor, the agricultural activities generate significant noise. According to the respondents, given the current circumstances, living conditions in the village have become intolerable. *"We can't go outside in the evening, and opening our windows is out of the question. We feel like vomiting"* (47-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli).

In an effort to address these problems, the villagers staged a protest, but it yielded no results. While the local self-government is aware of the situation in the village, it remains unresponsive. *"They've submitted their complaints to the authorities, but there has been no response"* (47-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli). Residents maintain a line of communication with the farm's management, and as of the interview date (August 7, 2023), there was a preliminary agreement that the farm owner would address the villagers' demands in August. This included cleaning the channel and adhering to ecological standards.

In recent years, there have been efforts to rehabilitate the public school and kindergarten in Tsitskanaantser. Additionally, training simulators were installed. However, villagers have expressed concerns about the quality of the rehabilitation work, noting that the kindergarden and school are not adequately maintained. During the summer, the presence of numerous reptiles (snakes) poses a threat to the population, especially to children. While a small section of the road at the village's entrance has been renovated, the road within the village remains unpaved, and drainage channels are nonexistent. This lack of infrastructure leads to road and house flooding during heavy rainfall. Furthermore, residents have raised issues about the prevalence of stray dogs, with some suggesting that drivers may intentionally leave stray dogs on the village's entrance road. Respondents find it challenging to explain this behavior, although they do not discount the possibility that it might reflect a negative attitude towards Ossetians. Perceptions and attitudes from the 1990s regarding Ossetians may still be influencing current conditions. As one respondent pointed out *"How else can we explain what's happening here?"* (25-year-old boy; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli).

#### Village Kitaani

Tsitskanaantseri village in Kvareli municipality and Kitaani village in Gurjaani municipality are the only villages where Ossetians reside predominantly. The primary occupation of the rural population is agriculture. According to the villagers, the lands in Kitaani are fertile, allowing them to cultivate both annual (vegetable) and perennial (fruit) crops.

Due to the limited dissemination of information about agricultural and economic state programs, the residents resort to taking loans from private financial institutions (such as banks) to support their farming endeavors.

*"When we require pesticides, we obtain credit from banks. Currently, I have borrowed 2,000 GEL from TBC for purchasing chemicals. By the end of the year, we aim to repay the loan. I cannot take on a substantial debt because I may not be able to manage the repayment. Unfortunately, I lack information about state programs. We rely on loans for plowing and applying pesticides to the land. Fortunately, our neighbor does not charge us and assists us with pesticide application"* (68-year-old woman from Kitaani village in Gurjaani municipality).

The absence of drinking water constitutes a significant issue for the village. Drinking water is delivered to the residents through a reservoir. *"We don't have water from the tap. Access to drinking water is a major concern. A reservoir is placed along the street, positioned on the road, and we fill our containers from it"* (a 55-year-old woman from Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality). The village hosts a rural outpatient clinic where a doctor is available for a few days each week. This clinic offers essential medical assistance and prescriptions to rural residents facing health-related problems. The village experiences irregular electricity supply due to damaged electrical wiring, particularly during adverse weather conditions.

The school in the village of Kitaani has been non-operational for approximately 15 years. According to one of the respondents, the school was closed because the Gurjaani Educational Resource Center showed more interest in having a school in the village of Chumlaki. This was because the primary teaching staff came from other villages. The distance between the village of Kitaani and the village of Chumlaki is six kilometers. Children are provided with transportation; however, younger students finish their studies at 12:30, which means they have to wait for an hour and a half for the older students to return home using the transport. In recent years, a stadium was constructed in the village, and physical activity equipment was installed. Apart from the kindergarten, there are no other functioning educational or cultural institutions in the village. Respondents recalled the cultural center that operated during the Soviet Union. This center hosted various educational and cultural events, including film screenings, clubs, and a library (as mentioned by a 55-year-old woman from Kitaani village, Gurjaani). Considering that the majority of the rural population (72% as of 2014) are ethnic Ossetians, the presence of a community center could help preserve Ossetian identity, including the Ossetian language and traditions.

Respondents also mentioned that during the persecution of Ossetians in the early 1990s, agricultural lands were confiscated from Ossetians in rural areas. Although these lands were returned after some years, a portion of the rural population has yet to complete the legal registration process for these lands, awaiting systematic registration. The respondents noted that they have not encountered any issues with the Ministry of Justice.

*"There was supposed to be free registration in January, but it was postponed. No one in the Justice Hall is interested cares about nationality. Everyone is served equally"* (55-year-old woman; Kitaani village; Gurjaani municipality)

## Ossetian Identity

When discussing Ossetian traditions, some of the respondents noted that the Ossetian community in Kakheti region was primarily raised in accordance with Georgian traditions, and they do not possess fundamentally distinct customs from Georgians. The respondents attribute the high level of Ossetian integration to the cultural similarities.

*"To be frank, we don't have distinct Ossetian traditions. We were born in Georgia and raised following Georgian customs,"* stated a 47-year-old woman from Tsitskanaantseri in Lagodekhi.

The primary distinguishing feature between Ossetians and Georgians is the Ossetian language, which is actively used in the daily lives of Ossetian families. It's important to note that the respondents gauge knowledge of the Ossetian language based on spoken language rather than reading and writing in Ossetian. As one respondent expressed, *"I haven't written or read in a long time. I believe I can't read anymore"* (a 53-year-old woman from Tsitskanaantseri in Kvareli). Among the Ossetian traditions, one noteworthy custom is the celebration of village festivals, often accompanied by pagan elements. For instance, in the village of Kitaani in Gurjaani, they celebrate "Eliaoba," during which they make requests for favorable weather to gain bountiful harvest and avoid hail (as described by a 55-year-old woman from Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality). "Eliaoba" takes place on Mount Elia, near the Red Spring. A vital aspect of these festivities is the lighting of a candle. On the Feast of the Virgin Mary of the Harvest, villagers gather to light candles, and they also extend invitations to the Adjarians (shared by a 23-year-old young man from Areshperani village, Lagodekhi municipality).

The way village holidays are celebrated is quite similar. During these celebrations, a table is set with Ossetian dishes, as described by a 44-year-old man from Khechili village in Lagodekhi municipality, "Everyone brings their contributions, such as wine, chicken, and khachapuri, and the table is set." For instance, the Feast of the Virgin Mary of the Harvest is celebrated in a field near the church, while "Elijah" is commemorated at homes", as explained by a 55-year-old woman from Kitaani village in Gurjaani municipality.

"Kostaoba" is celebrated differently in the village of Areshperani, which stands out due to its grand scale and diverse activities. This is because local self-government bodies and the Provisional Administration of South Ossetia play a role in organizing "Kostaoba." As noted by a 48-year-old woman from Areshferani village in Lagodekhi municipality, *"There are games, horse races, wrestling, and at times, we bake khachapuri. We work together, and sometimes people come from Ossetia for the celebration. Visitors from other villages also join in. This holiday tradition began during Saakashvili's time and is coordinated by the South Ossetian government representatives."*

State institutions do not play a role in the celebration and organization of holidays in other villages. It's worth noting that, in order to maintain social connections, both with relatives and friends, village festivals are celebrated even when people migrate, particularly in North Ossetia. Russian Federation's decision to eliminate the visa requirement for Georgian citizens on May 15, 2023, has made it more convenient for Ossetians in Kakheti to travel. As one person shared, *"My sister-in-law and my brother were among the first to attend the village festival, the Tsitskanaantseri festival in Vladikavkaz, which took place at the end of July"* (mentioned by a 46-year-old woman from Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality).

*For information regarding the names of holidays and their celebration dates by village, please refer to Table #3.*

<b>Areshperani (Lagodekhi)</b>	<b>Khechili, Pona (Lagodekhi)</b>	<b>Kitaani (Gurjaani)</b>	<b>Tsitskanaantseri (Kvareli)</b>	<b>Pichkhovani, Argophi (Akhmeta)</b>
Religious today – St. Mariam Day; It is celebrated on September 21 Village holiday - "Ketsobia"; It is celebrated in the last week of June	"Trinity" is celebrated on the day after Easter in Pona	Eliaoba is celebrated on the Monday after Ascension	<i>Tsitskanaantseri</i> is celebrated in the last week of July	"Soslanoba"; It is celebrated in Pichkhovani in the first week of November

	Khetagurovi lastname day celebrated in Zemo Khechili	Feast of the Virgin Mary of the Harvest is celebrated on the Monday after the Ascension.	"Usanetoba" is celebrated one week after Easter	"Kostaoba" is celebrated in October in Argokh
"Kostaoba" - holiday after Kosta Khetagurov; It is celebrated on October 15				

One of the respondents who took part in the research recollected a traditional holiday that is no longer observed in the village.

*"In my childhood, we used to celebrate Shoishoi. During Christmas, we would craft special sticks and gather grass in the field, tie the sticks together with wire, and set them on fire. This was a way to ward off evil spirits and invite good angels. When everyone lit their sticks, it was a signal for the feast to commence outdoors. This celebration is no longer observed,"* reminisced a 55-year-old woman from Kitaani village in Gurjaani municipality.

Ossetian cuisine holds a significant place within Ossetian tradition. Particularly during holidays, Ossetians prepare a special Ossetian pie known as pichini. Additionally, Ossetian beer and khachapuri, often referred to as khabizgina, are distinctive aspects of their culinary heritage, featuring various versions that incorporate ingredients like rich cheese, potatoes, beets, and/or cabbage.

Respondents have highlighted a key distinction between Ossetians in North Ossetia, Tskhinvali, and Kakheti Ossetians, and it revolves around the way traditions and character traits are upheld. As one respondent remarked, *"Ossetians in Kakheti are perceived as more gentle, while Ossetians in Tskhinvali are often seen as resilient and resolute. In North Ossetia, there's a strong commitment to preserving Ossetian traditions"* (shared by a 47-year-old man from Fichkhovani village, Akhmet municipality).

It's worth noting that the majority of respondents, particularly among the younger generation, possess limited knowledge about the origins and significance of their holidays. This has led to concern among older respondents, as Ossetian traditions such as hospitality and holiday celebrations, as well as culinary practices, appear to be fading away and mostly reside in their memories.

### Ossetian Language

Out of the 2,526 Ossetians living in Kakheti, 1,953 (77.3%) have Ossetian as their native language, and 1,729 (68.4%) are proficient in the Georgian language.<sup>3</sup> It's worth noting that in 2009, UNESCO classified the Ossetian language as one of the endangered languages.<sup>45</sup> Presently, Ossetian is taught as an optional subject in public schools in three

<sup>3</sup> 2014 data, Geostat: <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/739/demografiuli-da-sotsialuri-makhasiateblebi>

<sup>4</sup> How Ossetian language is vanishing; Radio Liberty - <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%92%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A0-%E1%83%98%E1%83%99%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%92%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%90-%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98-%E1%83%94%E1%83%9C%E1%83%90/32412867.html>

<sup>5</sup> Georgia's Last Ossetian Classes <https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/484/georgias-last-ossetian-classes>

Kakhetian villages: Areshperani, Tsitskanaantseri, and Khechili-Pona. Ossetian language classes are conducted twice a week, catering to students across various grade levels. As one respondent shared, *"A total of 15 children are studying the Ossetian language, with 2 in the first grade, 1 in the third grade, and so on. The number of students in each class decreases every year"* (a 63-year-old woman from Khechili village in Lagodekhi municipality). According to the respondents, in the face of migration and demographic changes in the villages, the desire to learn the Ossetian language has been dwindling annually. As one respondent stated, *"It is a mixed village. The newcomers who are settling here do not see the need for Ossetian language"* (a 53-year-old woman from Tsitskanaantseri, Kvareli Municipality).

Interestingly, a mother of two school-age children residing in Areshperani village relocated her children to North Ossetia due to concerns about the low quality of education in the local school. She explained, *"Teaching in Areshperan is conducted in Georgian, with Ossetian classes being sporadic. That's why I moved my children to Vladikavkaz. My husband remained here in Areshperan"* (a 49-year-old woman from Areshperan village, Lagodekhi Municipality).

It's important to mention that the Ossetian language was never taught in the schools of some Ossetian villages, such as Pichkhovani, Argokhi, and Kitaani. In these villages, Ossetians have traditionally learned the language within their families, and all generations are capable of speaking it. However, the study revealed that younger generations are less proficient in Ossetian compared to the older members of the family. Notably, some respondents are pursuing higher education in Tbilisi, with several young individuals from Ossetian villages in Kakheti enrolling in higher education institutions in Georgia each year.

### Experiences of the conflict in the 1990s

From the Soviet era to the present day, Ossetians stand out as the most integrated ethnic group in the society, especially when considering criteria such as their proficiency in the Georgian language, the frequency of interactions with Georgians, and the tradition of forming mixed families.<sup>6</sup> When discussing the conflicts of the 1990s, respondents found it challenging to pinpoint specific reasons for the tension between Georgians and Ossetians. According to them, there were no inherent conditions for strife between the two ethnic groups, let alone mutual enmity. Respondents express their sorrow that, despite the close bonds between Ossetians and Georgians, they were unable to avert conflict. The particularity of the Ossetian villages in Kakheti lies in the fact that ethnic harassment was one-sided, primarily originating from Georgians. Respondents attribute this to the political elite of 1990-91, particularly the leaders of the national liberation movement, and especially the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, for fostering a negative attitude towards Ossetians.

*"The aggression against the Ossetians came from the government of that time, and unfortunately the local population followed the lead. There was no real tangible reason why Ossetians could be hated. Before the conflict, there was a normal relationship. I was 24 years old when the unrest started, and before that I did not feel that I was an Ossetian, it was not emphasized. People's thinking turned 180 degrees during that period"* (55-year-old woman, Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality)

*"I blame Zviadi. This war between Ossetians and Georgians should not have happened. Because there are many blended families. There is no Ossetian family without a Georgian daughter-in-law or son-in-law"* (46-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality)

---

<sup>6</sup> "Ossetians in Georgia"- [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/106675/working\\_paper\\_45\\_geo.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/106675/working_paper_45_geo.pdf)

One of the survey participants pointed out that during the conflict, negative attitudes towards Kakheti Ossetians were further exacerbated by the actions committed by Ossetians against Georgians in the Tskhinvali region, which in turn fueled a desire for retaliation among the Georgian population. Throughout the war, there was a substantial amount of unverified information circulating about the Ossetians in Kakheti.

For instance, a respondent shared, *"During the war, a Georgian young person from Kvareli was apprehended in Tskhinvali. Some of the young men from Kvareli made threats, saying they intended to retaliate by killing Ossetians in Tsitskanaantseri. However, they never acted on those threats. Our school director, who came from Pshavi, was a respected figure, and he calmed them down"* (a 47-year-old woman from Tsitskanaantseri village, Lagodekhi).

The pervasive fear sown in the early 1990s compelled many Ossetians to make hasty and drastic decisions, often resulting in their departure from their homes. As the research findings reveal, the most severe security challenges were faced in the village Areshperani. Along with harassment, incidents of theft, and robbery, isolated cases of physical violence also occurred. The Ossetian population in Kakheti lived with the constant dread of physical violence, largely due to widespread reports of violence in Ossetian villages in Shida Kartli. For instance, a 70-year-old woman from Khechili village in Lagodekhi municipality recounted, *"In Kareli and Gori, acts of rape and robbery were committed against Ossetian families."* In an effort to mitigate the prevailing negative sentiment towards Ossetians, some chose to modify the endings of their surnames. They altered suffixes such as "evi/eva" to "shvili." This surname change allowed Ossetians to continue working in public service, with fewer complications and less frequent harassment. One respondent noted that the practice of changing surnames was also prevalent during the Soviet period, but it was voluntary. *"In the Soviet era, changing surnames was not mandatory. No one was coerced into doing so,"* recalled an 80-year-old man from Argokhi village in Akhmet municipality. It's important to highlight that certain Georgian-Ossetian families identify themselves as ethnic Georgians.

The period under the rule of Zviad Gamsakhurdia is remembered by the respondents for the criminal activities, such as theft and robbery, carried out by the military organization known as "Mkhedrioni" in their villages. However, it's important to note that crime wasn't exclusive to Ossetian villages; it also troubled the Georgian population. One respondent commented, *"There was theft. They came armed with automatic weapons and confiscated cars. They were involved in stealing. This was during the era of Mkhedrioni, but it wasn't limited to just our area; it was widespread everywhere"* (shared by a 47-year-old man from Pichkhovani village, Akhmeta municipality).

During the interviews, the respondents recounted numerous personal stories of Ossetians facing harassment from Georgians. They also shared stories they had heard from their relatives and friends. The narratives from the respondents were strikingly similar, with very few respondents whose families had not experienced harassment or heard about it from others. The exception to this trend was the young people who participated in the research, as they had limited awareness of the events that occurred during that period. In Table #4, you'll find 20 quotations that convey the stories and the distressing experiences of the Ossetians in Kakheti during the early 1990s. During the interviews, most respondents made an effort to speak candidly and recollect the painful and unpleasant stories from the past. They also tried to identify the causes and contributing factors behind the negative attitude towards the Ossetians.

Table #4.

1	<i>We used to go to the village Apen to buy bread because there was a furnace (a bread oven) there. Once, we had to spend the night and finally, as it turned out, they gave us dough. When we brought it home, it turned out spoiled. This incident occurred because of our Ossetian identity, "</i> (53-year-old woman, Areshperani, Lagodekhi Municipality)
---	--

2	<i>"When I used to come by bus, I was also afraid to request the stop here (at the village inhabited by Ossetians). Because the passengers would start shouting - these Ossetians should die and things like that" (51-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality)</i>
3	<i>"In 1990, I was a student in Rustavi and tried to avoid everyone. The teacher announced – whoever is Ossetian here, I will not give you a grade" (51-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality)</i>
4	<i>"There was an essential oil factory right here in our village. My mother worked there. Well, they gathered the Ossetians working in the factory and told them to leave" (51-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality)</i>
5	<i>"When Zviadi was going to villages and districts and holding rallies, that day I was going from Akhalsopeli to Rustavi. There was a meeting in Akhalsopeli. Zviad said that we should deport Ossetians and Lekians. I heard this with my own ears" (53-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality)</i>
6	<i>"My husband's classmates, good friends, would come to our family, and my father would make a feast for them at 3 o'clock in the night and drink with them until the morning. These people started protests in the villages, demanding Ossetians to get out and leave. When father came from the factory, he wanted to cry. He didn't expect this" (53-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality)</i>
7	<i>"The apartment was taken from us in Rustavi during Zviadi. We were supposed to get an apartment in the center. My father worked as a loader at the factory for 20 years. They let someone else into the apartment instead of us. It was 4-bedroom apartment, everyone got it except us. My mother doesn't tell me exactly what happened. She does not want me to get angry and do bad things. I do not know the exact address of the apartment. My mother doesn't tell me" (40-year-old man; Areshperani village; Lagodekhi Municipality)</i>
8	<i>In 1991, they took away our apartment in Rustavi. We fought a lot to get the apartment back, but nothing worked. My husband worked in construction in Rustavi. I was working in the store as a cashier. I was five months pregnant with my second child and they told me why you should lose one room for 2 months, wait. They would give me a four-room apartment in case of having two children. I waited and that's when the situation got messed up. In 1991, they took away the apartment that we had almost received. A Georgian family moved in without asking. Janelidze was his lastname, was the prefect of Rustavi. I told him that I have a sweet family, I have an Ossetian husband and two children. This Janelidze answered me - you are a beautiful girl, what, there are no Georgian boys, for you to marry Ossetian? I was very upset. After that, we went to Orjonikidze" (58-year-old woman, Ossetian form her mother's side, Areshperani village, Lagodekhi municipality)</i>
9	<i>"Top performing Ossetian students at school, became low performers, they were not addressed by name, but by ethnicity" (53 year old woman; Village Tsitsinaantseri; Kvareli Municipality)</i>
10	<i>During Mkhedrioni time, a car passed by and explosives were thrown into the yards. The explosion shattered the windows and the families got up and left that morning. I also took my son to Ossetia then" (67-year-old woman, Areshperani village, Lagodekhi municipality)</i>
11	<i>"They were asking, as if jokingly, Ossetian, are you still here?" Some were afraid to go to the doctor. The doctor was asking the same thing - are you still here?" (47-year-old man, Khechili village, Lagodekhi municipality)</i>
12	<i>"At that time, I lived in Varketili. Every day in the elevator I saw an inscription - Ossetians, get out of here while it's time" (80-year-old man, Argokhi village, Akhmeta municipality)</i>

13	<i>"A checkpoint was set up in the village of Maghraani, and those entering Argokhi were checked and searched. People who grew up together, went to school together, they were doing things like that" (80-year-old man; Argokhi village; Akhmeta municipality)</i>
14	<i>"In 1989, I was studying in Tbilisi, and during that time, there were rallies where people advocated for limiting non-Georgians to having no more than two children. They believed that demography should be controlled." (55-year-old woman, Pichkhovani village, Akhmeta municipality)</i>
15	<i>"My uncle (from mother's side) worked in the prosecutor's office in Gurjaani. When the unrest began, he was initially let go due to his Ossetian nationality. However, during Shevardnadze's rule, he was reinstated, and they provided compensation. The current negative attitude towards Russians reminds me of the 1990s, which I find to be misguided to focus on nationality." (Statement by a 47-year-old man from Pichkhovani village, Akhmeta municipality)</i>
16	<i>"My husband was compelled to submit a 'rashot' (notice of dismissal) at his workplace, where he worked as a carpenter. He was subjected to harassment on the job, often working longer hours than others. Consequently, he had no choice but to resign from his position. Despite many years passing, he has never opened up to me about what transpired at work and how he was treated." (a 56-year-old woman from Areshperani village, Lagodekhi municipality)</i>
17	<i>"In the 1990s, unrest began. Before that time, nobody had made me feel like I was an Ossetian. Can you tell that I am Ossetian. It was like that, nobody distinguished ethnicities. In the early 1990s, however, the issue of ethnicity came to the forefront, and the village endured significant harassment. I recall that the electricity was cut off during that period, and we lived without it. There was also a shortage of bread and limited transportation, mainly because the majority of people in the village were of Ossetian ethnicity. All of a sudden, aggression emerged. During that period, many families relocated to Orjonikidze (now Vladikavkaz)." (a 55-year-old woman from Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality)</i>
18	<i>"During that time, I worked at a kindergarten which closed and remained shut for 6 years. I have vivid, painful memories of the Ossetian population evacuating the village. Families loaded their cars and left, tears in their eyes. I contemplated leaving as well. All my sisters moved to Russia. One of my sisters approached me before her departure and urged me to go with them. However, my husband insisted that I remain, saying he'd rather die than leave (a 68-year-old woman from Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality)."</i>
19	<i>"When things were getting worse, my brother bought a new ZIL truck, intending to use it for transporting cargo and earning a living. However, he was put through such conditions that he could not work. He eventually sold the truck and moved to North Ossetia, and later, my other brother followed suit. I chose not to go because my parents didn't want to." (50-year-old woman; Pichkhovani village; Akhmeta municipality)</i>
20	<i>"Now, we are on vacation in Kitaani. My husband was born in Tbilisi. They told him at school that because he was Ossetian, he shouldn't have a picture of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. He faced harassment at school, which led to them leaving Tbilisi. They sold their apartment at a very low price and bought a tiny place in Vladikavkaz with that money. Ironically, my husband had to change his last name for the second time because he was a dancer in the North Ossetian State Ensemble and could not keep the last name with a Georgian ending. On the other hand, my husband has many relatives who are Georgian, so he doesn't hold a single-minded attitude." (a 35-year-old woman from Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality)</i>



The respondents have noted that there were ethnic Georgians around them, mostly relatives, friends, and neighbors, who did not adopt a negative attitude towards the Ossetians and even offered help to them during the harassment. One respondent shared, *'When the electricity was cut off and we had no water in the village, my husband's friend suggested that we go to his place, so that we could get cleaned up'* (a 68-year old woman, village Kitaani, Gurjaani).

However, the majority of Georgians generally attempted to distance themselves from the Ossetians or displayed a negative attitude towards them. It's interesting to observe that during the interviews, the respondents refer to the harassment of Ossetians in the early 1990s as "unrest": *"They went to Vladikavkaz en masse when the unrest started..."*, *"I was 24 years old when the unrest began,"* *"my uncle worked at Gurjaani Prosecutor's Office when unrest started.."*

According to the respondents, the period of the 2008 war in Kakheti passed without any significant tensions.

*"In 2008, there was no harassment, only some verbal remarks, but, overall, there was peace"* (55-year-old woman, Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality).

During the interviews, respondents mentioned only a few unpleasant incidents.

*"In 2008, I took my child to a dentist in Telavi, and he didn't want to go to the doctor. He said, 'Let me eat ice cream first, and then we can go inside.' There was ice cream at the hospital entrance, so I had to buy it. The child was speaking to me in Ossetian. When other people heard us, they treated us very badly"* (55-year-old woman, Pichkhovani village, Akhmet municipality).

*"In 2008, the situation was normal, although there were rumors that the Ossetians who left this village were fighting on the other side, which was a lie. The people from here did not get involved in the conflict. There was nothing like that. No one from this village was involved in either 1991 or 2008"* (55-year-old woman, Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality).

One of the respondents noted that several mixed Georgian-Ossetian families broke up due to political disagreements. *"In 2008, three Georgian-Ossetian families separated due to political differences"* (53-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli municipality). A resident of Areshperani village recalled the period of her stay in Vladikavkaz after the 2008 conflict:

*In 2008, after the conflict, I was at the market in Vladikavkaz. I was conversing with the my sisters-in-law in Georgian when suddenly someone grabbed my hair from behind and began shouting at me, 'Georgians killed my husband in Tskhinvali, and how can you speak Georgian here?' My sisters-in-law barely managed to help us. They told her that I also apartment in Rustavi, due to my Ossetian ethnicity. I remember this difficult encounter very well"* (53-year-old woman; Areshperani; Lagodekhi Municipality).

Some of the respondents expressed the opinion that the prolonged continuation of the 2008 conflict would inevitably strain the relationship between Georgians and Ossetians. Since the early 1990s, Ossetians in Kakheti had to continually emphasize that they had no connection to the Ossetians living in the Tskhinvali region - *"Where I work, sometimes people start talking about this, they are interested what I think"* (46-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality). During the interviews, respondents clearly stated that they have no connections with the Tskhinvali region. Only a few respondents mentioned having relatives in Tskhinvali. According to the respondents, ties with the Tskhinvali region were especially severed after the 2008 war.

Young people participating in the survey lack in-depth information about the traumatic experiences of their parents and grandparents in the 1990s. Families rarely discuss the Georgian-Ossetian conflict that occurred in the 1990s. As

one of the respondents pointed out, recalling the traumatic events won't bring any benefits to the younger generation. According to observations by representatives of the younger generation in the survey, the older generation still harbors resentment - *"When they drink alcohol, they recall wars, old stories. I avoid it. We don't need to discuss the war when we are young. What's the point of talking about the war today?"* (23-year-old boy, Areshperani village, Lagodekhi municipality). Some Ossetian youth desire to obtain unbiased information about the historical events of the 1990s and beyond.

*There are different attitudes and opinions in the school. I've heard various opinions about the events of the 90s and who was responsible for them* (19-year-old girl, Pichkhovani village, Akhmeta municipality).

Today, there is no harassment of the Ossetian community in Kakheti.

*"The relationship between Georgians and Ossetians is good. There is no tension based on ethnicity. There was no difference when serving in the army. The sergeant told us directly that we are all one, and we shouldn't oppress each other"* (23-year-old boy, Areshperani village, Lagodekhi municipality).

However, some of the respondents fear that if the political situation changes, tension may arise again - *"right now, the conflict is dormant. If something happens in politics, everything (referring to the conflict) might flare up again"* (55-year-old woman, Pichkhovani village, Lagodekhi municipality).

The research results indicate that the respondents lack a vision for conflict resolution. They primarily focus on the role of politicians, who should be responsible for peacefully resolving the conflict ("Nobody asks us," "Decisions are made on the top," "It will be as the politicians decide"). The lack of vision can be explained by the fact that the Kakheti Ossetian community has no contact with the Ossetian population living in the conflict region. Therefore, there is no need to discuss or think about conflicts.

### Migration; Connections with North Ossetia and Tskhinvali region

The results of the survey show that the migration of Ossetians from Kakheti during the Soviet period was connected to reasons such as pursuing higher education, serving in the Soviet army, etc. Some of them did not return. The mass emigration that started in the 1990s was primarily due to the persecution of Ossetians. Some of the respondents share the opinion that Ossetians might have migrated even without this harassment, but: 1) in smaller numbers, and 2) not all at once over a short period - *'As I recall, the villagers left very unprepared'* (55-year-old woman, Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality). The primary contributing factor to migration was the challenging social and economic situation of families.

It was interesting to determine the basis for the decision in favor of migration. As the research results show, the following two factors primarily influenced the decision of Kakheti Ossetians to stay: 1) the ethnic composition of the families - *'mixed families felt safer than Ossetian families'* (63-year-old woman, Fona village, Lagodekhi municipality), and 2) the health status of the head of the family members - *'Then my parents were ill, and we could not leave them. That's why we didn't consider leaving'* (65-year-old man, Pona village, Lagodekhi municipality). *Additionally, the climatic conditions of North Ossetia were cited, such as humid weather, which posed challenges for Ossetians with chronic diseases to adapt to."*

*We sought refuge in Orjonikidze (now Vladikavkaz) as refugees. We had no relatives or acquaintances there. I had undergone multiple surgeries and couldn't adapt to the climate there; I was frequently ill. My husband told me that if I couldn't be by his side, he didn't want to stay there either. In 1999, we returned and settled in Areshperani" (55-year-old woman; Areshperani village; Lagodekhi Municipality).*

In the early 1990s, the majority of Kakheti Ossetians migrated to the Russian Federation, specifically North Ossetia. Some had relatives there, while others had no connections. Adaptation to the new environment went relatively smoothly. *'We were received well, despite having received numerous people and facing economic difficulties'* (55-year-old woman, Pichkhovani). The primary challenges and issues faced by migrants were of a social and economic nature. During the initial Georgian-Ossetian conflict, Ossetians who migrated to North Ossetia were granted refugee status, which allowed them to access various social and economic services. For instance, some received residential houses and plots of land free of charge.

However, those Ossetian immigrants who changed their surnames to Georgian endings received negative attitudes from Northern Ossetians, and the immigrant Ossetians were urged to change their surnames.

*Our relatives are Jioevs, who became Jioshvili in the 1990s. Then they moved to Ossetia, and when their children grew up there, they kept hearing remarks: if you are Ossetian, you should keep your original name. Parents faced problems in Georgia due to their Ossetian surname, and their children in Russia due to their Georgian surname (53-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri, Lagodekhi).*

Today, the challenging environment in rural areas, characterized by a lack of employment opportunities and limited opportunities for self-fulfillment, prompts young Ossetians to migrate. The research results indicate that young people migrate for employment and/or education, either to North Ossetia or Tbilisi, where close relatives usually reside, or to European countries. The following countries were mentioned during the interviews: Poland, the Netherlands, and Ireland.

*My husband works in a winery. My boys also worked at the winery. As a senior and junior operator, they processed wine. But the salary was not enough, so they went to the Netherlands, to be honest, they went in search of a better life (46-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality).*

According to the respondents, there are more employment opportunities in North Ossetia, especially in the city of Vladikavkaz, compared to the villages of Kakheti. In Kakheti, individuals are primarily engaged in low-paid physical labor in the agricultural sector or, less frequently, in administrative roles in the public sector. The labor market in Vladikavkaz is diverse, and wages are considerably higher than in Kakheti's villages. This is why the migration of young Ossetians from Kakheti continues to this day.

*The primary reason for current migration is economic. Here, physical labor is demanding, individuals often have debts in banks, and income remains low. Work is undervalued, which is why young people leave the villages. They migrate not only to Vladikavkaz but also to other locations. Young people do not see a promising future here (23-year-old boy; Areshperani village; Lagodekhi municipality).*

According to the respondents, the young generation living in North Ossetia does not envision their future in Georgia. However, the stance of representatives from the middle and older generations differs. Some of them contemplate returning to Georgia after reaching retirement age.

*All our relatives who left here live in Vladikavkaz. My sister and brother reside there, and my wife's siblings are also there. Cousins are part of that community too. They maintain connections with this place and visit during holidays. My brother has no intention of selling the house. He says, 'When the children settle down, then I'll come back to live here.' I share the same sentiment; when my eldest gets married, I'll return here to live permanently. I never considered staying there (in North Ossetia). I still prefer it here (63-year-old man; Areshperani village; Lagodekhi municipality).*

It's worth noting that the migrants from the first wave (1990-91) remained without Georgian citizenship, which has become a significant issue for some of the emigrants who still maintain ties with Georgia, such as having relatives or owning real estate, etc.

Ossetians living in the villages of Kakheti maintain close ties with North Ossetia, where the vast majority of respondents have at least one family member, close or distant relative, friend, or former neighbor. On the other hand, only a few respondents mentioned having relatives in the Tskhinvali region. Ossetians who migrated to North Ossetia keep in contact with their native villages. For example, they collect money to repair the graves of their ancestors. Kakheti villages become bustling during holidays and summer vacations. In the summer, those who have sold their houses also come to visit - *"those who don't have a house stay with a classmate or a relative. They miss being here"* (47-year-old man, Pichkhovani village, Akhmeta municipality). The introduction of a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens in the Russian Federation has simplified relations - *"it used to be difficult to obtain a Russian visa due to financial and time constraints. Now it's much easier"* (65-year-old man; Pona village; Lagodekhi Municipality).

According to one of the respondents in the study, some Ossetians may consider returning to Georgia if the political situation in the Russian Federation, particularly in the North Caucasus, becomes tense. As per respondents, maintaining a high rate of Ossetian migration from the villages of Kakheti will likely lead to weakened ties between the Ossetians of North Ossetia and the Kakheti villages. *"Every year, fewer and fewer people have ties to this place. When a parent dies, the relationship ends"* (63-year-old woman, Pona village, Lagodekhi municipality).

## Conclusion

The majority of the Ossetian community living in the rural areas of Kakheti are engaged in agricultural activities. The harvest obtained through agriculture is primarily consumed by the family, and it is rarely sold. Employment opportunities among the rural population are limited. State pensions constitute a stable monthly financial income for families, and state financial assistance is available for socially vulnerable families.

Georgian eco-migrants from Svaneti and Adjara reside in houses at one time belonging to Ossetians. In addition to ethnic Ossetians and Georgians, Azerbaijanis also inhabit Lagodekhi villages like Pona and Khechili. Relations between Ossetians and other ethnic groups (Georgians, Azerbaijanis) are varied, often characterized by a degree of distance. The majority of Ossetians of middle and old age continue to reside in the villages. Given the irreversible nature of migration, it's reasonable to assume that the data from the 2014 general population census is now outdated.

Residents of Ossetian villages share both common and specific needs. Among the general needs, it's worth noting the rehabilitation of village roads, the allocation of pastures, and the improvement of irrigation and drinking water infrastructure, among others. Some villages have distinct needs, such as addressing environmental pollution by private companies in the village of Tsinkanaantseri and restoring the functioning of the school in the village of Kitaani. The Ossetian residents communicate their village's needs with the village representative. However, the village representative primarily serves as an intermediary between the population and the municipal government.

Compared to other communities, especially Georgians, the Ossetian community is generally less assertive and passive in its interactions with the government. Reasons for this passivity include the aging of the Ossetian population, the traumas experienced in the early 1990s, and the influence of the ruling party ("Georgian Dream") through local coordinators in the villages. Respondents don't believe that less government attention is paid to Ossetian villages solely based on their ethnic composition. They also pointed out specific infrastructural projects that the government has undertaken in recent years.

"As an optional subject, the Ossetian language is taught in public schools in three villages of Kakheti: Areshperani, Tsitskanaantseri, and Khechili-Pona (the last two being served by one school). Due to ongoing migration, the number of people interested in learning the Ossetian language is decreasing each year. This declining interest in the Ossetian language can be attributed to changes in the demographic makeup of these villages. Ossetians traditionally learn the language within their families, and each generation continues to speak it. However, young people tend to have a weaker command of the Ossetian language compared to the older generations.

The primary Ossetian cultural tradition is manifested in the celebration of a village holiday, often accompanied by pagan elements. "Kostaoba" is celebrated in different ways in the village of Areshperani, known for its grand scale and diverse activities. Notably, local self-government and the Provisional Administration of South Ossetia are involved in organizing "Kostaoba." State institutions do not participate in the celebration and organization of holidays in other villages. In an effort to maintain social bonds, including relatives and friends, village holidays are also celebrated in North Ossetia. Elderly respondents express sadness over the gradual loss of Ossetian traditions, such as hospitality, holiday celebrations, cooking, and more."

Respondents found it difficult to pinpoint specific reasons for the conflict between Georgians and Ossetians in the early 1990s. They express sadness that, despite the close ties between Ossetians and Georgians, it was not possible to avoid confrontation. Respondents predominantly believe that animosity towards Ossetians originated from the central authorities and subsequently spread to the rural Georgian population. The Ossetian villages of Kakheti had a distinct characteristic in that the ethnic harassment was predominantly one-sided, originating from the Georgian population. In an attempt to mitigate the prevailing negative attitudes towards Ossetians, some Ossetians altered the endings of their surnames, changing suffixes such as "Evi/Eva" to "Shvili." This alteration in surnames provided

Ossetians with opportunities, such as continued employment in government services, and reduced or eliminated harassment from Georgians. The period after Zviad Gamsakhurdia's presidency is remembered by respondents for criminal activities, such as theft and robbery, carried out by the military organization known as "Mkhedrioni" in the villages. Importantly, crime during this period was not based on ethnicity and affected Georgians as well. Throughout the interviews, respondents shared numerous personal stories of Ossetians facing harassment from Georgians, as well as stories they had heard from relatives and friends. Within families, they hardly talk about the traumatic experiences of the 1990s. According to the respondents, the period of the 2008 war in Kakheti passed without any particular tension.

The mass emigration that began in the 1990s was primarily a result of the persecution of Ossetians. Some of the respondents hold the opinion that even without this persecution, Ossetians would have still emigrated, but in smaller numbers and not all at once, and over a more extended period. During the early 1990s, the majority of Kakheti Ossetians relocated to the Russian Federation, specifically to North Ossetia. The period of adjustment to the new environment brought about various social and economic challenges for the migrants. The decision for Kakheti Ossetians to remain was primarily influenced by two factors: the ethnic composition of their families and the health of older family members (mixed or elderly families in need of care were less likely to leave the village). Today, the unpromising rural environment, marked by limited employment opportunities and limited self-realization prospects, motivates the Ossetian youth to emigrate. The job market in Vladikavkaz offers greater diversity and significantly higher wages compared to the villages in Kakheti. Consequently, the migration of young Ossetians from Kakheti continues to this day. According to respondents, young people living in North Ossetia do not envision Georgia as their future.

Ossetians residing in the villages of Kakheti maintain strong connections with North Ossetia, where a significant portion of Ossetians have at least one family member, close or distant relative, friend, or former neighbor. In contrast, only a few respondents mentioned having relatives in the Tskhinvali region. However, if the high rate of Ossetian emigration from Kakheti villages continues, the ties between the Ossetian population of North Ossetia and the Kakheti villages may weaken over time."

## Recommendations

- Local self-government bodies and other relevant responsible agencies should take action to address the needs of the rural population, which encompass both common and village-specific needs.
- Self-governing bodies should ensure that villages have access to drinking water (Tsitskanaantseri, Khechili, Kitaani) and irrigation water (Tsitskanaantseri, Pichkhovani, Areshperani, Kitaani) to support full-scale agricultural activities.
- State bodies should encourage the establishment and operation of cultural and community centers, as well as sports infrastructure, to provide opportunities for non-formal education, including the learning of the Ossetian language, and to promote a healthy lifestyle, especially among young people.
- State bodies should investigate and address environmental concerns within their jurisdiction in the village of Tsitskanaantseri.
- The state should examine the experiences related to land and pasture resource shortages, along with historically unfair distribution, and contribute as much as possible to addressing the needs of the rural population in this regard.
- Proactive information sharing about agricultural and economic state programs with the rural population is essential.
- To enhance the quality of Ossetian language teaching in schools, the development of Ossetian language textbooks is necessary.

- Local government should provide support for Ossetian traditions, particularly in helping villagers organize village celebrations, which can aid in preserving these traditions.
- Local authorities should promote the implementation of multicultural programs that enhance the cultural visibility of ethnic minorities within the municipality and foster deeper dialogue and cooperation between communities. This is especially relevant for villages in Lagodekhi - Pona, Khechili, and Areshperan, where different ethnic groups (Georgians, Ossetians, Azerbaijanis) live side by side.

## Appendix #1 Needs by Village

Note: The number 1 refers to the needs mentioned by the respondents during the interviews

Needs	Areshperani (Lagodekhi)	Khechili (Lagodekhi)	Poina (Lagodekhi)	Kitaani (Gurjaani)	Tsitskanaantseri (Kvareli)	Pichkhovani (Akhmeta)	Argokhi (Akhmeta)	Quotations from respondents
Improvement of living conditions (need for heating system, repairs, etc.)	1	1			1			<i>Our living conditions are poor. Our small children get cold in winter. The roof is uncovered. We have an unsanitary toilet outside (40-year-old man, Village Areshperani; Lagodekhi Municipality)</i>
Availability of plant protection products, mineral fertilizers, agricultural machinery, etc.	1					1		<i>When we need to do spraying and weeding, we take out a loan from the bank. For instance, I recently borrowed 2,000 GEL from TBC for purchasing chemicals. We usually repay the loan at the end of the year. (68-year-old woman, Village Kitaani, Gurjaani Municipality.</i>
Transfer of agricultural land plots					1			<i>"When agricultural lands were distributed in our village, we were given only 0.25 hectares, which is not enough. 1.25 hectares were distributed in other villages" (57-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri village, Kvareli municipality)</i>
Protection of ecological environment					1			<i>"Businessman Papashvili has a farm here, which is the reason for the unpleasant smell. All the wastewater flows into the channel, making the water unusable. The Environmental Protection agency has fined him many times, but he has the financial means to pay the fines. We are currently waiting for these channels to be cleared in August. This is what we agreed on." (25-year-old man; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli Municipality)</i>
Arrangement of drainage channels	1				1	1		<i>When it rains, water comes downpouring. It enters our yards and plots because it has nowhere to go, so it accumulates." (55-year-old woman; Pichkhovani, Akhmeta Municipality)</i>
Rehabilitation of rural roads	1	1			1	1		<i>"Asphalt is laid in only one part of Tsitskanaantseri" (25-year-old man; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli municipality)</i>



Needs	Areshperani (Lagodekhi)	Khechili (Lagodekhi)	Poina (Lagodekhi)	Kitaani (Gurjaani)	Tsitskanaantseri (Kvareli)	Pichkhovani (Akhmeta)	Argokhi (Akhmeta)	Quotations from respondents
								<i>"Other than the central road in Areshperani, other roads in the village are not in order" (55-year-old man, Areshperani village, Lagodekhi)</i>
Drinking water supply		1		1	1			<i>"They tell us that we cannot get drinking water in Zemo Khechili, there are few families here and it would expensive. We wrote a statement, but they don't pay attention to us" (65-year-old woman; Khechili village; Lagodekhi municipality)</i> <i>"There is a reservoir in the street and I fill it with drinking water. There is no water in the tap" (55-year-old woman, Kitaani village, Gurjaani municipality)</i>
Irrigation water supply	1			1	1	1		<i>"There is very little irrigation water. Before, we had no problem, we were supplied with water from Chaliani Lake (currently called Kvareli Lake). They also removed the irrigation water pipes, sold them and left us without irrigation water" (46-year-old woman, Tsitskanaantseri, Kvareli Municipality)</i> <i>"The irrigation system is also not in order, water was released in old pipes and it is dirty" (55-year-old man, Areshperani village, Lagodekhi)</i>
Uninterrupted power supply				1				<i>"It's bad wiring. A little breeze and the power is already gone. We have a Plant where stones are crushed and electricity is available there 24/7, but not with us. Why should it be like this?" (56-year-old man; Kitaani village; Gurjaani municipality)</i>
Allocation of pastures		1	1		1	1		<i>"We no longer have pastures in the village. They sold it. There is no point in raising livestock" (63-year-old man; Pona village; Lagodekhi Municipality)</i> <i>"Azerbaijanis have many livestock. They bring them from the neighboring village. The place is small. We had an argument because of this" (63-year-old woman; Khechili village; Lagodekhi municipality)</i>

Needs	Areshperani (Lagodekhi)	Khechili (Lagodekhi)	Poina (Lagodekhi)	Kitaani (Gurjaani)	Tsitskanaantseri (Kvareli)	Pichkhovani (Akhmeta)	Argokhi (Akhmeta)	Quotations from respondents
Availability of quality medical services	1	1			1			<p><i>"There are no specialists in Kvareli. That's why we go to Tbilisi, Telavi, or Lagodekhi" (46-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri village; Kvareli)</i></p> <p><i>"It's not a hospital, if you get bitten by a snake or have a toothache, you can't do anything" (40-year-old man, Areshferan village, Lagodekhi)</i></p> <p><i>"The doctor comes twice a week, and what should I do if I need a doctor on the third day?" (63-year-old woman, Khechili village, Lagodekhi)</i></p>
Restoration of school functioning				1				<p><i>"There was a Georgian school in Khitan. Ossetian was not taught there. Ossetian is learned in families. The school has been closed for 15 years. There were few children and that's probably why they closed it. Children started going to school in the village of Chumlaki, which is 6 kilometers from Kitaani. Transport is provided. School for younger students ends at 12:30 p.m., and for senior students at 2:00 p.m. Therefore, younger students have to wait.</i></p> <p><i>"My grandchildren go to school in Chumlaki. They have to go by the bus on a long commute. If it was near here, it would take 10-15 minutes" (68-year-old woman; Kitaani)</i></p>
Improving the quality of Ossetian language teaching in schools (developing an Ossetian language manual)	1	1						<p><i>"We don't have a textbook for the Ossetian language. Sometimes they send us from Vladikavkaz. TSU professor Naira Bestaeva also provides us with books. But we don't have a basic textbook to give the children an assignment" (63-year-old woman, Ossetian language teacher, Khechili village, Lagodekhi)</i></p>
Arrangement and operation of cultural/community center and sports infrastructure	1			1		1	1	<p><i>"Nothing is happening for young people. It would be good to have a cultural center" (23-year-old boy, Areshperani village, Lagodekhi)</i></p>

Needs	Areshperani (Lagodekhi)	Khechili (Lagodekhi)	Poina (Lagodekhi)	Kitaani (Gurjaani)	Tsitskanaantseri (Kvareli)	Pichkhovani (Akhmeta)	Argokhi (Akhmeta)	Quotations from respondents
								<p><i>"The House of Culture was renovated three years ago, but it is mostly closed" (30-year-old man, Argokhi village, Akhmeta)</i></p> <p><i>"There is no stadium or park in the village" (55-year-old man; Areshperan; Lagodekhi)</i></p>
<p>Obtaining legal services (about registration of a plot of land, dual citizenship, residence, etc.)</p>	1				1			<p><i>"Up to 30 residents of the village have applied for citizenship. This year 6 applied and all 6 were rejected, last year 11 applied and 4 were granted dual citizenship. People need help in identifying and collecting documents" (57-year-old woman; Tsitskanaantseri; Kvareli)</i></p> <p><i>"I was told to bring documents to the Justice House in Lagodekhi. I translated the marriage certificate and brought it, but they told me again that I could not get it" (67-year-old woman; Areshperani)</i></p>