

Overcoming Geopolitics:
**Grassroots Transformation and
the Georgian-Abkhazian and
Georgian-Ossetian Conflicts**
- Executive Summary -

Conflict
Analysis

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2014 Summer Field Research Intern
The University of Oxford

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Research Conducted

This report was completed for the non-profit peace-building organisation, Generations For Peace (GFP), which has run activities in Georgia since 2011. It has two main aims: firstly, it analyses varying interpretations of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts; and, secondly, it assesses GFP's current organisational capacity in the country to provide recommendations for future programmes. The report builds on previous literature to provide an analysis of how Georgians perceive the conflict as well as an extensive comparison of the interpretations of the different sides involved. The analysis is grounded at a grassroots level with the intention of helping to improve the lives of the people most affected by these conflicts.

The findings are based on fieldwork conducted in Georgia between 24 July and 13 August 2014. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews with 17 Georgians from Tbilisi (including three academics), seven Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and four individuals from Abkhazia and South Ossetia to map the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts. The researcher interviewed a total number of 35 people. Individuals from each group were sampled according to age, gender, and occupational background.

Georgia's post-Soviet history has been dominated by two ethno-territorial conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Following the wars in both territories in the early 1990s, the disputes became two of the region's so-called 'frozen conflicts'. The situation temporarily unfroze with the Georgian-Russian war of August 2008, which resulted in the increase of Russian influence in both territories. The situation remains one of protracted conflict with the border disagreements, forced displacements and contradictory interpretations at the core of these disputes unresolved.

To map the conflict, this report uses Galtung's ABC Triangle to depict attitudes, behaviours and contradictions within the conflicts. The report also uses theories of psychocultural interpretation and identity frames to understand how individuals use cognitive shortcuts to build simple, coherent narratives that shape their interpretations of events. To analyse the data collected through interviews, this research used the qualitative content analysis method to identify units of analysis by looking at themes or ideas that occurred in the data.

Argument

Georgia's ethno-territorial disputes have often been regarded as backdrops to a larger geo-political contest. While this report does not deny Russia's role in the conflicts, it regards the focus on the geopolitical level as counterproductive for any attempts at grassroots conflict transformation. Blaming Russia for these conflicts erases the complexity of the situation. It focuses on national and international dynamics at the expense of community-level conflict. Challenging this understanding of the conflict forms the backbone of this report's argument. The community and ethnic dimensions of these conflicts need to become a central focus once more in order for grassroots actors to be able to bring about positive change. In other words, individuals on the ground cannot change the politics of the Kremlin but they can change the attitudes, perceptions, and stereotypes in their own societies. Forging trust and rebuilding relationships will remain impossible to achieve if explanations for the conflicts among the Georgians continue to rest on the actions of a handful of men in the Kremlin.

Findings

Unlike previous works, the analysis includes a thorough exploration of perspectives on the conflicts in their historical, contemporary, and potential future manifestations, as well as an assessment of what other conflicts exist in Tbilisi and Georgia. On the latter question the Georgians from Tbilisi sample discussed homophobia, generational and religious conflict as being the main ones existing in their country. However, half of the sample believed that there were no conflicts in Georgian society.

The findings on Georgia's ethno-territorial conflicts revealed that Russia's role dominated Georgians' and IDPs' understanding. Eleven out of twelve Georgians from Tbilisi and all IDPs cited Russian interests and its desire to maintain control in the Caucasus when discussing the origins and causes of the conflict. This resulted in a simplistic interpretation of events that overlooks Georgian complicity and denies the Abkhazians or Ossetians a full role in the conflict process. In this interpretation, Russia is regarded as a constant menace working to undermine Georgia; and, as a smaller, weaker country the Georgians are unable to challenge this situation. Eight out of twelve Georgians from Tbilisi and five out of seven IDP respondents believed that without Russia the conflict would not exist.





The data showed that there were extremely divergent views of the conflict among the different sides: while Ossetians and Abkhazians understand the conflict as a product of Georgian aggression, the Georgians interpret the situation as a result of Russian meddling. Among the Georgians from Tbilisi and IDPs there was a widespread view that the Abkhaz and Ossetians are manipulated and taught to fear Georgians. This was coupled with an acknowledgement that the lack of communication among the different sides perpetuates the conflict, especially among younger respondents. Seven Georgians from Tbilisi and five IDPs stated that the lack of dialogue entrenches negative attitudes.

However, the findings also demonstrated that the contradiction over territory at the core of both these conflicts remains unresolved in people's understanding. When asked what their ideal future would be with regard to both conflicts no respondent mentioned independence for the territories; while all people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia felt fully recognised independence was their ideal future. In terms of what is likely to happen in the future half of the Georgians from Tbilisi sample and six out of seven IDP respondents believed that nothing could be achieved unless Russia was weakened.

The findings on GFP's capacity in Georgia reveal that the organisation has a hard-working, ambitious and imaginative core of volunteers who are pleased with their progress. When discussing their greatest success, all seven interviewed spoke of their recent programme, which was described as an achievement that brought about tangible change.

When discussing future programme ideas, a number of respondents articulated legitimate doubts about working with either Abkhazia or South Ossetia. GFP volunteers will not be able to organise a programme addressing the conflicts alone, due to issues of trust, poor communications, and a lack of contacts (four out of seven respondents mentioned these issues).

Nevertheless, GFP volunteers expressed a strong desire to address these conflicts and, through participating in the research, became increasingly optimistic that this could happen. GFP will need to build capacity in these two regions separately before a joint programme can be organised.

Recommendations

Short-term priorities for GFP Georgia

- Possible future programmes for Georgian volunteers: A dialogue programme addressing interethnic conflict in Tbilisi and a programme working with IDPs.
- Steps to improve capacity and outreach in Georgia: These include the expansion of GFP operations outside of Tbilisi and local registration to boost capacity. There is also a need to increase the diversity of GFP volunteers within Georgia and broaden their skillset. Finally, creating greater horizontal connectivity among GFP volunteers, both regionally and globally, to allow for the sharing of ideas, experiences, and best practice.

Long-term priorities for GFP Georgia and GFP HQ

- Building Capacity in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Building up capacity in Abkhazia and South Ossetia separately to Georgian operations and holding programmes that address ethnic tensions in the territories prior to a programme involving Georgians.
- A programme addressing the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts: The most appropriate programme would be Dialogue For Peace (DPP). This would allow for the creation of a safe space for facilitated honest exchange to raise mutual understanding and trust.
- Suggested plan of a DPP programme: Given the border disputes and geographical separation at the core of these conflicts, it is difficult to bring both sides together. One way to overcome this problem would be to hold programme activities online. Programmes done in this way would run for as long as ordinary programmes.

Conclusion

This report has expanded on previous literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of how the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts are understood by Georgians from Tbilisi and IDPs.

To the author's knowledge, it is the first time a survey of prevailing sentiments towards the conflicts has been carried out among the Tbilisi population. What is most striking is the lack of dialogue and interaction, which is entrenched by militarised borders and unaddressed displacements. Altering this situation needs to be the top priority for peace-building practitioners.

As Russian foreign policy and the geopolitics of the post-Soviet region increasingly dominate headlines around the world, the communities and people directly affected by the region's 'frozen' conflicts should not be forgotten.

This report suggests that it is time to overcome the geopolitical situation by empowering grassroots actors to bring about change at their level and help rebuild trust in societies that have been deeply divided for more than two decades.



About the Summer Field Research Intern

Edward Beswick

Edward Beswick grew up near Leeds, in the North of England. Between 2009 and 2012 he attended the University of Manchester where he completed a BA in History, focusing specifically on the 20th century history. In 2013-2014 Edward attended the University of Oxford to study for a MSc in Russian and East European Studies. For the course, his research focused on Russia, minority rights, and globalisation. Throughout his studies, Edward has developed interests and gained knowledge of current affairs, international politics, the history of war, development and human rights. Edward's specific interests include inter-group perspectives in conflict, the sociocultural dynamics of conflict, and conflict mapping. The main geographical focuses of his research interests are in Europe, Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. When not working, Edward enjoys music, reading, hiking, cooking, travelling and photography.

About the Summer Field Research

Generations For Peace awards two research grants annually to selected postgraduate students pursuing Masters or Doctorate studies at the University of Oxford. The awardees conduct a field research which takes place during the University's summer vacations. The multi-disciplinary field research is focused on an activity or programme implemented in one or more countries in which Generations For Peace volunteers operate. In terms of outputs, each awardee is expected to provide a full research report focused on the local activity/programme, including a detailed write-up of the research conducted and any practical recommendations for the activity/programme organisers; and a supplementary report with further meta analysis and recommendations for Generations For Peace regarding activity/programme adjustment and opportunities for further research. A key objective of Generations For Peace in supporting research grants is to support knowledge transfer and capacity development therefore, it is also expected that the awardees will use their best endeavours to demonstrate (within the limits of practical context of their particular research situation) some knowledge transfer to and capacity development of the local actors.



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