

**COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES AND
EFFECTS OF THE AUGUST 2008 CONFLICT
IN KVEMO KARTLI, SAMEGRELO,
SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI AND SHIDA KARTLI**



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Community perceptions of the *causes and effects* of the August 2008 conflict in Kvemo Kartli, Samegrelo, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Shida Kartli

Introduction

This report summarises the views of communities in Kvemo Kartli, Samegrelo, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Shida Kartli as to the causes of the August 2008 conflict and its impacts across the country. It first provides shared perceptions of the causes of the August 2008 conflict, grouped into political, economic, socio-cultural and security aspects, followed by shared perceptions of the effects. Perceptions of causes or effects that are specific to a particular region are indicated in separate boxes or by bold text. The findings outlined below are not meant to represent facts, but a range of views and feelings expressed by communities.

This report is one outcome of the first stage of the project *Promoting broader and more informed dialogue on conflict, security and peace in Georgia*. This programme, jointly implemented by the Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development (CIPDD), the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) and Saferworld, is designed to develop the capacity of Georgian civil society to analyse and play a constructive role in conflict and security issues. The process involves a two-way conversation between core groups of community representatives and wider society in the four target regions, with the following objectives:

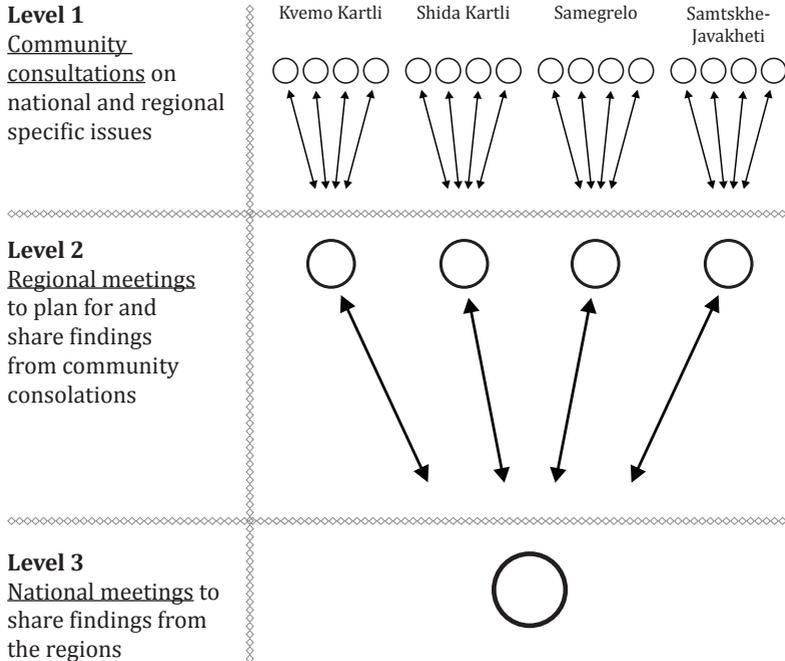
1. to elicit information from community members about their perspectives on conflict issues
2. to provide more balanced and impartial information about conflict issues
3. to stimulate communities to think about these issues in new and wider ways
4. to share perspectives between community members in the different regions.

The process is not intended to provide authoritative sociological data on the attitudes of the Georgian public, but rather to promote a deep

and sustained discussion among a consistent group of interlocutors, that will reveal the diversity of views and feelings, especially as expressed in different regions of the country.

The methodology for the discussion focuses on three levels: community, regional and national. In each of the four regions there are regular meetings to brief a core group of community representatives. The core group members then consult with their respective communities, based on common objectives and guidance for each round of consultations, and they then feed back the outcomes at the next regional meeting. The outcomes in each region are then compiled, before being presented and discussed with representatives of the other regional groups at periodic national meetings. The shared and different perceptions across the country are then fed back to core group members, and subsequently to the communities, in each region. The more nuanced and regionally-disaggregated perspectives of conflict and security issues developed in this process will then serve as the basis for dialogue between Georgian civil society and policy-makers at the national and international levels.

TWO-WAY DISCUSSION PROCESS



Stages in discussion process

1. Causes and effects of the August 2008 conflict
2. Region-specific conflict issues and actors
3. Region-specific recommendations for future peace and stability
4. National recommendations for future peace and stability

1. Shared perceptions of the CAUSES of the August 2008 conflict

1. All four regions shared the perception that the conflict did not start in 2008 and that the causes are in the past. Therefore it is impossible to blame the outbreak of violence exclusively on the actions of one or other party in the days and weeks preceding 8 August 2008. As such, the communities engaged in the process felt that an outbreak of violent conflict was unavoidable since 'frozen conflicts' were perceived to be vulnerable to tensions.
2. When asked about the causes of conflict the four groups most often referred to international or 'geo-political' factors (e.g. dynamics between US/the West and Russia). However, a range of national-level causes (e.g. dynamics between Tbilisi and Sukhumi/Tskhinvali) and local-level causes (e.g. dynamics between communities across the Administrative Boundary Line) were mentioned in each region, on the basis of the communities' knowledge of the local context.

Political dimension

3. All four regions shared the perception that the August conflict was partly due to 'bigger politics', meaning that the conflict was related to differences in the policies and agendas of the US/Europe on the one hand and Russia on the other, especially in the context of the deterioration in Russia-US relations at the time.
4. In this regard, Georgia's pro-West orientation was cited as contributing to an environment in which violence could re-emerge, since it was likely to provoke a negative response from the Russian Government concerned to protect its political influence in the region – "*Russia was irritated by the inclusion of Georgia in Western projects*".
5. Linked to the above, another commonly expressed view was that the conflict was partly a result of Russia's 'imperialist policy' – this is the perception that the Russian Government has ambitions to restore the Soviet Union, and that conquering Georgia is part of such a wider project. In **Kvemo Kartli** it was felt that this policy included the intention to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and that the conflict provided a pretext for this.
6. A related cause commonly raised was that that the Georgian Government felt provoked by the Russian Government, by measures including the distribution of Russian passports in

Abkhazia and South Ossetia (described as ‘illegal passportisation’) and the development of stronger political, economic and social ties with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. As such, many thought that the Georgian Government felt it had no option but to pursue more aggressive policies, and that these contributed to the resumption of violence.

7. Indeed, one of the most frequent perceptions conveyed during the consultations in all four regions was that some policies and practices of the Georgian Government contributed towards the resumption of violence in August 2008, with some making reference to ‘ineffective’ or ‘inadequate’ government policies.
8. More specifically, it was thought that an over-emphasis in government policy on relations with the US/West at the expense of relations with Russia increased regional tensions and made a return to violence more likely – “[a contributing factor was the] *unbalanced internal and foreign policy of the Georgian Government, with Russia and with Western countries*”.
9. In addition, communities in all four regions shared the perception that the Georgian Government’s public statements and rhetoric regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and on conflict-related issues, contributed to increased tensions and were in some cases irresponsible – “[contributing factors are] *irresponsible rhetoric and PR of the Government*”.

Perception of Government policies in Samegrelo & Shida Kartli

Communities in **Samegrelo** and **Shida Kartli** were much more explicit about how government policies and public relations activities contributed towards the conflict. In both regions there was a shared perception that the construction of entertainment venues and other infrastructure in South Ossetia and near the administrative boundary with Abkhazia was negatively perceived by the other sides and contributed to increased tensions. In these two regions it was also thought that the establishment of parallel authorities (e.g. the Sanekoev government in South Ossetia) was negatively perceived and contributed to increased tensions.

10. Another perceived cause frequently mentioned was the information vacuum and that information on conflict issues is not accurate or is misrepresentative. Access to information about con-

flict was considered a particular problem in **Kvemo Kartli** and **Samtskhe-Javakheti**, where a significant part of the population cannot speak Georgian. People in these areas are consequently reliant on the Russian media or rumour. At the same time communities in **Samegrelo** and **Samtskhe-Javakheti** complained about the lack of access to balanced and objective information.

11. Some of the interlocutors from all four regions had a negative perception of the role of the international community. In general, the attitude was one of disappointment at the nature and level of international responses, both before and during the conflict period. In particular it was felt that the USA and Europe did not take effective action and did not help prevent the conflict.

Economic dimension

12. Communities consulted in all four regions shared the perception that the economic agendas of the parties were also important contributory factors to the August 2008 conflict. In particular, it was felt that the war was partly caused by Russia's interest in controlling lucrative oil and gas supply routes.
13. There was a shared view that the Russian Government was interested in expanding Russia's economic interests in the region, whether to access the potential oil reserves in Abkhazia (**Samegrelo**), to support the forthcoming Sochi Olympic games (**Kvemo Kartli**), or because of the opportunity to acquire land (**Samtskhe-Javakheti**).
14. Greater integration of Georgia with Western markets, and especially with the European Union, was also cited as contributing to the conflict. As with the response to Georgia's pro-Western political orientation, it was felt that the Russian Government viewed such integration with suspicion and was determined to take measures to block it.
15. Further, some considered that the Russian Government may have engineered the conflict in order to divert domestic attention from internal economic problems.
16. Similarly, there was a shared perception that the Georgian Government may have planned for the conflict as a means of attracting greater international financial and development support. It was also suggested that the government sought to use the war as a means of 'writing-off expenses' or even 'money-laundering'.

Reduction in economic links between South Ossetia & Shida Kartli

Communities in **Shida Kartli** thought that the reduction in economic interaction and dependency between Ossetians and Georgians was one of the primary causes of the conflict. It was felt that high levels of economic interaction reduced the likelihood of violence because people across the divide had stronger and mutually beneficial relations. In this light, closure of the Ergeneti market, which provided the principal place of interaction, was regarded as a significant error.

Socio-cultural dimension

17. There were no shared perceptions of the socio-cultural causes of the August 2008 conflict. However, **Shida Kartli** and **Samegrelo** did share the perception that the conflict was in part caused by the social and cultural estrangement over time between (respectively) Ossetians and Georgians, and Abkhaz and Georgians. In other words, as contact between these communities reduced, there were fewer restraints on violence. Indeed, it was thought that this reflects a lack of integration by ethnic minorities across the whole of Georgia

Security dimension

18. The presence of a large number of armed forces (Russian peacekeepers and Abkhaz/South Ossetian forces) in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was considered a major destabilising factor. It was thought both that their presence increased insecurity at the local level, and that (perceived) increases in their numbers forced the Georgian Government to respond with aggressive measures. Interlocutors from **Shida Kartli** further thought that there were systematic military provocations by Russian and South Ossetia forces that forced the Georgian Government to respond.
19. All the groups felt that the low capacity of the Georgian armed forces was a contributing factor to the conflict. In particular, it was thought that poor strategic planning and leadership led to incorrect decisions about how and when to start military operations, and ultimately to the army's collapse.
20. Reference was also made by all groups to the US/NATO's strategic interest in the Caucasus region, and to Georgia's aspiration to join NATO. It was thought that the Russian Government

strongly opposed this, as it thought that NATO integration would threaten Russia's military dominance in the region.

21. It was felt that the Russian Government undertook a series of measures to stop Georgia joining NATO and to maintain its military dominance in the region. More specifically, interlocutors thought that the Russian Government was prompted to take action by NATO's refusal to grant Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP). The Russian Government viewed this as offering a window of opportunity in which to engage in a conflict with Georgia and destroy Georgia's military capability; and that such actions would ensure Georgia is not granted MAP in the future.
22. Finally, there was a common perception that the uncontrolled (by Georgia) Georgian-Russian border was a contributing factor. This was partly because it increased insecurity at the local level; but also because the Georgian Government felt that it needed to take more aggressive measures to prevent 'contraband' moving across the border, and against perceived high levels of criminality in South Ossetia.

2. Shared perceptions of the EFFECTS of the August 2008 conflict

1. The most frequently mentioned effects of the August 2008 conflict were increased human and economic insecurity. While these impacts are perceived to be most keenly felt in the two regions bordering Abkhazia and South Ossetia (i.e. **Samegrelo** and **Shida Kartli**) they are also considered to be relevant to minority groups in **Kvemo Kartli** and **Samtske-Javakheti**. It is evident that some two years after the conflict, communities in all four regions continue to feel vulnerable and anxious about their future, as a result of the August 2008 conflict.
2. At the same time, communities in all four regions are questioning a range of values and their understanding of reality. For example, understandings of international politics (should Georgia be so pro-Western?) or of the level of Georgia's democratic development (is Georgia more or less democratic than it was a decade ago?). The conflict continues to have an impact in forcing communities to question their fundamental understandings of the best way of ensuring future peace and security – that is, their understandings of what is 'right' for Georgia. This process is leading to a good deal of confusion and contrasting opinions.

Political dimension

3. All regions felt that the political landscape had fundamentally changed for Georgia following the conflict. The strongest expression of this is the perception that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are now fully controlled by Russia (for example, the creation of Russian bases was cited as evidence of this). Part of the communities consulted felt that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are permanently lost to Georgia, while others felt that reintegration of the regions will take more time than was needed before the conflict.
4. Linked to this was the common perception that the Russian Government's influence in the country and in the region had increased following the conflict.
5. In contrast, it was felt that the US and Europe had proved unable to counter Russian 'aggression', and had been reduced to making statements rather than taking action, and were unable to enforce agreements (such as the six-point plan) or resolutions.

As a result, it was felt that the US and Europe had lost influence over processes in the country and the wider region.

6. At the same time, there was the perception that all sides – Russia, the US and European countries – had benefited politically from the conflict; although interlocutors were not able fully to articulate how the US and European countries had benefited. In its extreme articulation, there was thought to be some form of ‘Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’ among the super-powers interested in dividing up Georgian assets (this perception came from **Samegrelo**).
7. Another significant political impact of the conflict was considered to be the increase in domestic political instability, in part demonstrated by the opposition rallies in the first half of 2009. As a result, there was an overall negative perception of role of politicians (both those in the ruling party and in opposition) and of the political system. Indeed, there was the perception in **Shida Kartli** that internal turmoil could be used by the Russian Government as a lever to start a new conflict.
8. At the same time, there was the perception that the conflict had led to a slight shift in public attitudes towards the Georgian Government and its policies. More specifically, while the public mostly blames international politics and Russia for the conflict, there is a feeling that the Georgian Government did not adopt the right policies towards the conflicts, and did not make decisions in the best interests of the country in the days and weeks leading up to and during the conflict.
9. Finally, there was the shared perception that the conflict had demonstrated the weakness of Georgia’s democratic institutions, that the state as a whole is unstable, and that it is unable to look after Georgia. Indeed, in **Shida Kartli** it was thought that Georgia had lost its primary role as political leader in the region – “*the Government losing the war within 36 hours really indicates problems that need to be dealt with immediately*”.

Economic dimension

10. All four regions shared the perception that the conflict has had a major impact on Georgia’s economy, which is now believed to be in decline; and that the majority of Georgians now suffer from greater economic insecurity. In **Kvemo Kartli** this decline was

- thought to have shifted attention away from basic development needs, such as the provision of roads, water and irrigation.
11. The major contributory factor to economic decline/increased economic insecurity is the deterioration in Georgian-Russian economic relations and the suspension of trade between the two countries. Much of the population in Georgia depended on these economic and trade links, and thus far there is no alternative – this was a particularly emotive issue in **Kvemo Kartli** and **Samtskhe-Javakheti**. It was recognised that this was an issue before the conflict, due to the fact that some Georgian products were banned from the Russian market, but it was felt to have further deteriorated as the conflict directly damaged trade negotiations.
 12. In addition, interlocutors cited the return to Georgia of many Georgian citizens working in Russia, who were forced to return by a Russian Government crackdown on illegal migrant labourers during the conflict. This was felt to be important for two reasons: firstly, because it has resulted in an influx of unemployed people, and hence greater competition for jobs and greater demands on social support; and, secondly, because returned migrant labourers no longer send remittances to Georgia, thus reducing the income of a large number of families in the country. This problem was thought to be especially significant by communities in **Kvemo Kartli** and **Samtskhe- Javakheti**.
 13. The creation of a ‘new generation’ of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from South Ossetia as a result of the conflict was also thought to have had a significant impact on the economy as these IDPs would also be in competition for jobs and put further strain on social support.
 14. Interlocutors in **Shida Kartli** mentioned that the conflict had prevented or reduced access to certain natural resources (such as water or land) by the Georgian communities living along the Administrative Boundary Line.
 15. All four regions shared the perception that the conflict had made Georgia less attractive to foreign investors. This was thought to be most evident in the crisis in the banking sphere, which has had a substantial impact on small businesses (although it was acknowledged that the banking crisis was partly related to the global economic situation).
 16. All regions mentioned that increased fear of a future outbreak of

war (see 'Security dimension' below) has led to people storing food and other supplies as a contingency measure. Conversely, it was felt that the same fear meant that people saw no point in saving money for the future or long-term investment because the future is insecure – in other words, future conflict would make any savings or investments redundant.

Socio-cultural dimension

17. Interlocutors in all four regions shared the perception that the conflict has had a massive impact on the social fabric in the country, most significantly through the creation of a new generation of IDPs. There was great concern about the living conditions of these IDPs and the psychological strain they have suffered due to displacement. At the same time, all regions expressed concern over the impact of the new IDPs on Georgian society, and the potential for negative relations between IDPs and existing communities (especially in non-ethnic Georgian communities).
18. Linked to displacement, was the perception that the new generation of IDPs would suffer because they are no longer able to access their ancestors' burial sites. This was an especially emotional issue in the two regions bordering Abkhazia and South Ossetia – **Samegrelo** and **Shida Kartli** respectively.
19. Indeed, interlocutors in these regions were worried that all remnants of Georgian culture in Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be destroyed. This was thought to include the 'Mingrelisation' of Georgians in the Gali/Ochamchire/Tkvareli districts (that is the policy of persuading the Mingrel to identify themselves as a separate nation from Georgia) and the destruction of churches – *"they are destroying everything that was created by the Georgians, to wipe us from history"*.
20. All four regions also mentioned that a significant proportion of the population has relatives in Russia (migrant workers), and that they fear losing contact with them due to bad diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia (e.g. due to problems obtaining visas), and that these relatives in Russia would not be able to assist them financially if they experience any difficulties.
21. Another emotional issue in all four regions was a strong sense of disappointment with the perceived lack of support from West. This has led to a loss of confidence regarding the Europe and US, as summed up in the phrase – *"US/Europe let us down"*.

22. Significantly, interlocutors in all four regions shared the perception that the perceived ineffectiveness of the West, and subsequent loss of confidence, is prompting many Georgians to re-evaluate their attitudes towards the West and sometimes even western values. Many feel that the faith they had in the West was misplaced and they are now looking for alternative sources of support, including Russia.
23. At the same time, there was a common perception that the August 2008 conflict had contributed to a progressive weakening of the 'centuries old relationship between Georgia and Russia', notably as a result of Russian 'aggression', the deportation of ethnic Georgians, and the economic embargo. This has been manifested in increased resentment and hatred towards the Russian State; as well as in increased patriotism.

Security dimension

24. Interlocutors in all four regions shared the feeling of general insecurity and fear following the August 2008 conflict. There is a common view that another war is inevitable as the conflicts have not been 'solved', and there is great fear of a resumption of violence. This is especially the case in the two regions bordering Abkhazia and South Ossetia – **Samegrelo** and **Shida Kartli** respectively. However, the conflict also engendered a sense of insecurity among communities that had previously felt secure – *"Nowhere on earth is safe"; "the Population of Poti had never doubted their security, but the war proved that the threat is always there and still remains"*.

Increased fear of inter-ethnic violence in Kvemo Kartli

The nature of insecurity amongst ethnic-Azeri communities in Kvemo Kartli is somewhat different from the other regions, as it relates to the perceived potential for violence from ethnic-Armenians in the event of renewed conflict. For example, Azeris fear that a future invasion will include Russian troops stationed in Armenia, and that this will enable Armenian irregular forces to move into the region. This was proved to be a serious concern by the reaction of ethnic-Azeri to the mock invasion of Georgia broadcast in the Chronica program aired on Imedi TV. The ethnic-Azeri population in Kvemo Kartli believed the simulation was real, panic and fear followed and they thought to flee to Azerbaijan.

25. The general feeling of insecurity has been reinforced by the perceived failure of the Georgian military (in terms of leadership and effectiveness) and the perception that the military abandoned ordinary people to their fate. Ordinary Georgians in all four regions now feel unprotected and fear that the same would happen again in the future – *“The myth of a powerful Georgian army is dispelled”*; *“The Government openly stated that it would protect Tbilisi and surrounding territories, but it did not think about protecting (the outlying) regions”*.
26. The feeling of insecurity also contributes to a high degree of uncertainty about the future. As a result, communities in all four regions feel that they cannot make long-term plans (including, as noted above, financial savings and investment), and are instead preparing for a return to violence.
27. Meanwhile, interlocutors in all four regions described feeling under greater threat from state bodies. There is a widespread feeling that somebody is listening to telephone calls or taking note of conversations or comments on conflict-related issues. It was felt in **Samegrelo** and **Shida Kartli** that this has generated a widespread fear of expressing opinions freely.

This report is based on the consultations conducted by the following core group members in the four regions, and has been validated by them:

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The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD)

The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) is a public policy think-tank specialising in the broad area of democracy development. CIPDD was founded in 1992 in Tbilisi, Georgia. It is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organization. It advocates policy goals such as the development of a vibrant and diverse civil society, effective and accountable public institutions based on the rule of law and an integrated political community, one which at the same time respects and preserves identities of different ethnic and religious communities. CIPDD's main activities include public policy research and publishing and disseminating its results, and organizing different forms of debate - professional, political or public - about this work.



The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA)

The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) is a non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting human rights and the rule of law. We adhere to the Constitution of Georgia, legislation and our Statute on the whole territory of Georgia. GYLA is a membership-based organisation.

Goals of GYLA:

- Promote the rule of law;
- Protect human rights and freedoms;
- Increase public legal awareness;
- Promote norms of professional ethics among lawyers;
- Develop the skills and competence of lawyers;
- Develop legislative basis for the civil society and rule of law country.



Saferworld

Saferworld works to prevent and reduce violent conflict and promote co-operative approaches to security. We work with governments, international organisations and civil society to encourage and support effective policies and practices through advocacy, research and policy development, and through supporting the actions of others.