



## Shida Kartli after the August 2008 War: Challenges and Solutions

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### Executive Summary

The August 2008 Russian-Georgian war had a major impact on the Georgian region of Shida Kartli<sup>1</sup>, adjacent to South Ossetia, the main theatre of war operations. Given that for about two months after the war a large part of this region constituted a buffer zone controlled by Russian troops, much of its population fled. A large majority of residents have since returned to their native villages, though the security situation remains precarious and frequent abductions represent a major challenge, adding to the general sense of insecurity. The economic and social situation in Shida Kartli deteriorated considerably as a result of the war, as local residents have had to cope with the loss of homes, transport, livestock and agricultural equipment. There appears to be a general confusion and discontent among the locals regarding the volume of government aid, while IDPs from South Ossetia, who live in special settlements built in Shida Kartli, face a number of significant problems, including the lack of access to information.

The Georgian government, NGOs and international actors have conducted various activities in the region since the end of hostilities and have taken some important steps in order to solve the problems of local residents and IDPs and to prevent a new conflict. However, further measures are required in order to address the existing political, security, economic and social challenges of Shida Kartli. This report examines these challenges and offers a number of recommendations for the actors operating in the region.

International actors interested in preserving peace and stability in Georgia are advised to assist the Georgian government in devising effective security arrangements for the population of Shida Kartli, while the government itself should examine the economic and social needs of the local residents more closely. Meanwhile, nongovernmental organizations could undertake to provide IDPs with a better access to information.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term Shida Kartli refers exclusively to the areas presently controlled by the Georgian authorities, namely the Gori, Kaspi, Kareli and Khashuri districts. Parts of South Ossetia (the city of Tskhinvali and the Java district) have also been considered part of Shida Kartli by the Georgian government since the abolition of the South Ossetian Autonomous District in the early 1990s even though these areas have remained under the separatist control. The Georgian parliament established a temporary administrative and territorial entity in South Ossetia in 2007 and the region was declared an occupied territory under the special law adopted by the legislature in October 2008.

## Overview

Due to its close proximity to the South Ossetia conflict zone, Georgia's Shida Kartli province was affected by the August 2008 Georgian-Russian war to a much greater extent than any other part of the country.

Along with some 25,000 ethnic Georgians who lived in South Ossetia prior to the war, around 100,000 residents of Shida Kartli were forced to leave their homes as a result of the armed conflict. The parts of Shida Kartli adjacent to South Ossetia remained under Russia's control until mid-autumn 2008 and were turned into a kind of buffer zone where Ossetian militias engaged in looting and destruction. As a result, considerable damage was inflicted on a number of Georgian villages of the area. For example, according to the International Crisis Group, around 80% of houses were "heavily damaged or destroyed" in the village of Ergneti near the administrative border.<sup>2</sup>

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The overall security situation remains precarious too. International Crisis Group has warned of a "dangerous atmosphere in which extensive fighting could again erupt."<sup>3</sup> While the Georgian government has accepted the EU Monitoring Mission's proposal to establish a 15 km-wide zone free of heavy weapons, no such commitment has been undertaken by the Russian and the South Ossetian sides. Although the Georgian authorities have so far refrained from taking any drastic steps that could trigger a large-scale conflict, the need to protect the local population could eventually force them to step up security measures, which could, in turn, lead to greater instability.

Although a large majority of IDPs from Shida Kartli have now returned to their homes, their

living conditions have deteriorated considerably, especially in the former buffer zone, because of the loss of their homes and livelihood.

Developments in the separatist-controlled Akhalkgori District affect the situation in Shida Kartli to some extent, since the district still has a population of ethnic Georgians, many of whom frequently travel to Georgian-controlled areas. Events taking place in Akhalkgori are constantly monitored by the Georgian media, with particular attention being paid to the rights of Georgians living there.

The situation in Shida Kartli (and Akhalkgori) thus presents the Georgian government (and the international actors interested in preserving stability in Georgia) with a number of serious challenges.

Specific areas of concern within the broad categories of political and security challenges and social and economic challenges are reviewed in this report and some recommendations are offered. The analysis is based on studies published by a number of local and international organizations, as well as Georgian media coverage of the developments in Shida Kartli and South Ossetia.

The present report focuses on the problems of Shida Kartli and the separatist-controlled Akhalkgori. The events in breakaway South Ossetia are discussed only insofar as they have had an impact on the situation in the aforementioned areas.

## Political and Security Challenges

### Overall Security Situation

The Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner noted in his May 2009 report that the "security situation in the conflict-affected areas has not stabilized entirely", emphasizing that "there is a need for viable security arrangements in the relevant areas".<sup>4</sup> Though some 95% of the residents of villages of Shida Kartli bordering South Ossetia are believed to have returned to their homes,<sup>5</sup> the

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<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous* (Tbilisi/Brussels: ICG, June 2009), p 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 1.

<sup>4</sup> Report on human rights issues following the August 2008 armed conflict, by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 15 May 2009, p 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

situation remains tense there. Exchanges of fire are frequent and there have been incursions by South Ossetian militias engaged in kidnapping and robbery.<sup>6</sup> A general sense of insecurity and vulnerability among the population has also been reported. At least some of the local residents believe that the level of protection provided by the Georgian police forces stationed in the area is inadequate.<sup>7</sup> It appears that the Georgian police units have been ordered to avoid confrontation in order not to spark a larger conflict.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of a clearly established borderline between the Georgian-controlled areas and those controlled by the South Ossetian and Russian forces has resulted in numerous incidents in which civilians from different villages of Shida Kartli were detained by the separatists. The frequency of such incidents even led some Georgian analysts to describe the actions of the South Ossetian side as a “kind of ethnic cleansing” and to suggest that the separatists were aiming to force the Georgian population out of the villages bordering with South Ossetia in order to turn the areas into a “buffer zone”.<sup>9</sup> Shota Utiashvili, head of the Georgian Interior Ministry Analytical Department, who accused the South Ossetians and the Russians of resorting to “psychological terror” against civilians, told a newspaper that it was often impossible for the authorities, let alone ordinary citizens, to determine where the de facto border was.

There have been reports suggesting that some Georgian villages are gradually becoming deserted because of the difficult security situation and could eventually be taken over by the South Ossetian forces.<sup>10</sup>

The security problems have led to a considerable deterioration of communication between Georgian and Ossetian settlements located on both sides of the de facto border,<sup>11</sup> which could prove to be a major obstacle to confidence-

building efforts and thus undermine the wider process of conflict resolution in the future.

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#### Hostage-taking incidents

Despite the relative improvement of the security situation in the areas adjacent to South Ossetia since the 2008 war and the post-war months, abductions are still common.

There were some notable incidents of this sort in recent months that drew considerable attention from the Georgian media, politicians and the general public. In late October, 16 residents of the Georgian village of Gremiskhevi were detained by the separatists, who claimed that the civilians had crossed into the Ossetian-controlled Akhagori District. The Georgian authorities, however, asserted that the civilians had been abducted from Georgian-controlled territory,<sup>12</sup> while the EUMM called for the release of the detainees and urged the parties to the conflict to collaborate closely in order to prevent such incidents from repeating.<sup>13</sup>

However, despite the eventual release of the 16 Georgians, the situation remained tense, as four Georgian teenagers from the village of Tirdznisi were detained by the separatists in early November. The teenagers were charged with carrying explosives and were placed in a two-month pre-trial detention by a Tskhinvali court. Georgian officials strongly condemned the arrest and demanded the release of the teenagers, while President Saakashvili announced his intention to discuss the matter with French

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<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous*, p 6.

<sup>7</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia, October 2009* (Tbilisi: CIPDD, 2009), pp 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous*, p 6.

<sup>9</sup> “A Kind of Ethnic Cleansing”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 9 November 2009.

<sup>10</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia, November 2009* (Tbilisi: CIPDD, 2009), p 11.

<sup>11</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia, November 2009*, p 4.

<sup>12</sup> “Georgian Citizens Abducted by Russian Invaders”, Khatuna Jangirashvili, *24 Saati*, 27 October 2009.

<sup>13</sup> “Monitoring Mission Categorically Demands Release of Georgian Citizens”, Tamar Ivanidze, *24 Saati*, 30 October 2009.

President Nicolas Sarkozy and US Vice President Joe Biden.<sup>14</sup> The Georgian opposition also reacted to the incident: a group of the Christian-Democratic Movement MPs led by party leader Giorgi Targamadze travelled to Shida Kartli to meet the families of the detainees.<sup>15</sup> Two of the four teenagers were released in early December following a visit to Tskhinvali by Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, while the other two were given a one-year jail sentence by the South Ossetian court. They were released in mid-December, along with another Georgian teenager who had been kept in the Tskhinvali prison since the summer, after Hammarberg travelled to the South Ossetian capital again.

The Georgian Foreign Ministry announced in mid-December that 14 Georgians, who had been detained since the August 2008 war, were still being held in South Ossetia (the figure included the three teenagers who were eventually released).<sup>16</sup>

In response to the Georgian outcry over the incidents involving detainment of civilians, the South Ossetian leadership raised the question of Ossetians who have gone missing since the August 2008 war and are allegedly being held in Georgian custody. In November, the South Ossetian delegation brought up the issue at the conflict settlement talks in Geneva,<sup>17</sup> while separatist president Eduard Kokoyty also discussed it with Thomas Hammarberg during his visit to Tskhinvali.<sup>18</sup> The South Ossetian media released the footage showing three young Ossetians being verbally and physically abused by unidentified individuals (allegedly Georgian police officers), while the separatist government published a list of some 20 people who, it believed, had been arrested by the Georgian side. The Georgian authorities denied possessing any information regarding the whereabouts

of the missing Ossetians.<sup>19</sup>

Georgian officials continue to assert that all residents of South Ossetia who are presently kept in Georgian prisons have been arrested for specific crimes. The Georgian leadership has therefore ruled out the possibility of exchanging them for the civilians detained by the South Ossetian side.<sup>20</sup>

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has urged the parties to the conflict to “put an end to the practice of hostage-taking”.<sup>21</sup>

### Situation in Akhalkgori

The situation in Akhalkgori poses another serious challenge to the Georgian authorities since the district is the only part of the South Ossetian-controlled territory with a sizeable population of ethnic Georgians (though a large majority of the Georgians who lived there before the war have fled). Even though the district is presently outside the area of the Georgian government’s control, the government is still perceived to bear at least some degree of responsibility for the security and well-being of the Georgians living there, particularly as many of them often travel to Georgian-controlled areas.

Some residents of Akhalkgori (including many employees of state-funded organizations like schools and hospitals) have moved to the IDP settlement in Tserovani, while others have opted to stay. There have been reports suggesting that the Georgian authorities have been using various methods to prompt the teachers and doctors working in Akhalkgori to move permanently to Tserovani and fears have been voiced regarding the possible exodus of the Georgian population from the district.<sup>22</sup>

Travel between Akhalkgori and Georgian-controlled territory is presently controlled by checkpoints set up on both sides of the de facto border. There has been at least one incident in which the separatist administration of Akhalkgori did not allow local residents to travel to Georgian-controlled areas<sup>23</sup> and there have been cases when locals returning to Akhalkgori

<sup>14</sup> “Red Cross representatives Have Visited Abducted Teenagers”, Dato Gamisonia, *24 Saati*, 10 November 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “Tskhinvali Regime Holding 14 Georgian Citizens”, *24 Saati*, 16 December 2009.

<sup>17</sup> “Eight Hours of Wasted Time in Geneva”, Lali Khmaladze, *Rezonansi*, 12 November 2009.

<sup>18</sup> “Hammarberg’s Visit to Tskhinvali Will End in Exchange”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 1 December 2009.

<sup>19</sup> “Tskhinvali’s List Includes Those Who Are Dead or Missing”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 29 November 2009.

<sup>20</sup> “People in Tbilisi Hope That Tskhinvali Will Release Children”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 15 December 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Report on human rights issues following the August 2008 armed conflict, by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, p 2.

<sup>22</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia*, October 2009, p 8.

<sup>23</sup> “‘Border’ Is Closed, Says Deputy Chief of ‘Leningori’ Administration”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 4 November 2009.



**The Georgian Foreign Ministry announced in mid-December that 14 Georgians, who had been detained since the August 2008 war, were still being held in South Ossetia (the figure included the three teenagers who were eventually released). In response to the Georgian outcry over the incidents involving detainment of civilians, the South Ossetian leadership raised the question of Ossetians who have gone missing since the August 2008 war and are allegedly being held in Georgian custody.**

Even before the war, the incomes of the local residents had been affected by Russia's decision to impose a ban on the import of Georgian agricultural products. Predictably, the situation was aggravated by the armed conflict, especially in the villages adjacent to South Ossetia. Along with the destruction of their homes, the residents of these areas have had to cope with the loss of transport, livestock and agricultural equipment.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, a considerable part of the cropland, pastures and other types of agricultural land owned by the residents of these villages is presently either controlled by the South Ossetian and Russian forces or located so close to the separatist-controlled territory that it is dangerous to conduct any work there. Some locals also refrain from using their land as they fear the possible presence of unexploded ordnance left from the August war.<sup>30</sup>

Agriculture has been affected by poor irrigation as some villages that used to receive water from South Ossetia have had their supply suspended after the war. In one notable incident, the separatist administration of Akhagori cut off the water supply to the nearby Georgian

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villages in early November, claiming that the Georgian authorities had suspended the supply of electricity to the district. The Georgian Energy Ministry denied involvement, suggesting that the disruptions in the power supply were likely to have been caused by damaged equipment in Akhagori and emphasizing that Georgian technical crews had no access to the area.<sup>31</sup> Adding to the problems of agriculture is the fact that, because of security issues, the movement of transport between the villages adjacent to South Ossetia and the other parts of Georgia is limited, which makes it difficult for the locals to sell their produce.<sup>32</sup>

Unemployment is a major issue in most parts of Georgia outside the capital. In Shida Kartli, the situation was made worse by the decline of the local agriculture caused by the war. Also, according to locals, the problem was exacerbated by the fact that many of the region's residents who served in the army and police lost their jobs after the war.<sup>33</sup> A considerable number of locals worked for the organizations engaged in the removal of unexploded ordnance from the 2008 war, which means that they are set to become unemployed again now that the work has effectively been completed.

#### Education and Healthcare

Predictably, the region's education and healthcare facilities were affected by the war. Some schools and hospitals located near South Ossetia have ceased to operate because of the damage to their buildings. The remaining schools often face a shortage of textbooks. The residents of a number of villages have complained about the poor quality of medical care or complete lack thereof.<sup>34</sup>

It has been suggested that the Georgian government wants the teachers who opted to stay in Akhagori after the August 2008 to move to the school opened in the Tserovani IDP settlement. The speculation was further stirred by media reports that the Georgian authorities are plan-

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<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous*, p 6.

<sup>30</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia*, October 2009, p 6.

<sup>31</sup> "Ossetian Administration Did Not Let Children From Akhagori Travel to Tbilisi", Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 2 November 2009; "Water for Electricity: Tskhinvali's Revenge", Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 3 November 2009.

<sup>32</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia*, October 2009, p 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p 8.

ning to stop funding Akhagori's schools from January 2010. According to a Georgian newspaper, the government wants to avoid paying double salaries to the teachers who are registered both in Akhagori and in the IDP settlement. The information was confirmed by the head of the Georgian teachers' labour union though the Ministry of Education and Science has yet to make an official statement.<sup>35</sup>

A similar problem has been reported regarding the healthcare facilities of Akhagori. A considerable proportion of the doctors who worked in Akhagori prior to the war have now moved to Tserovani, which has resulted in the deterioration of the quality of medical services in the district. Moreover, local medical staff faces significant problems whenever there is a need to transfer a patient from Akhagori to Tbilisi. According to some sources, the ambulance service stationed in Tserovani needs verbal permission from the regional governor in order to pick up patients from the checkpoint on the de facto border.<sup>36</sup>

#### Government Aid

There seems to be a sense of dissatisfaction over the (perceived or actual) inadequacy of the volume and quality of the aid offered by the authorities to the residents of Shida Kartli affected by the August 2008 war. Also, there seems to be some degree of confusion among the locals about the size and types of compensation they are entitled to.

A common complaint among the locals is that the payouts offered by the government to those whose homes were damaged or destroyed during the war are too small for them to fully restore their houses. It has been reported that, in some villages, the owners of destroyed houses are moving out after receiving the payouts instead of staying and rebuilding their homes.<sup>37</sup>

The human rights ombudsman's latest report cites the example of the Gori Administration refusing to repair some houses damaged in the 2008 war, claiming that the damage was

caused by the fact that the houses were old. According to the ombudsman, the administration failed to provide any documents to prove that the houses had been examined by experts in order to determine the cause of damage.<sup>38</sup>

**A considerable number of locals worked for the organizations engaged in the removal of unexploded ordnance from the 2008 war, which means that they are set to become unemployed again now that the work has effectively been completed.**

Concerns have been voiced over the quality of products provided by the authorities for free as part of the aid.<sup>39</sup> Residents of the IDP settlements have complained that the process of aid provision is "extremely chaotic" and they cannot plan for its arrival in advance.<sup>40</sup>

#### IDPs

The majority of the 25,000-some people who were forced to leave South Ossetia and Akhagori District as a result of the August 2008 war presently reside in IDP settlements built in Shida Kartli.

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A study published earlier this year by a Georgian NGO identified a number of problems in the region's IDP settlements. These were linked to the quality of newly-built houses and access to water and healthcare. The residents of IDP settlements told the authors of the report that government-sponsored visits by doctors who offered them free examination were random and they could not afford to buy most of the medicines they needed, which made life particularly difficult for IDPs with chronic

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<sup>35</sup> "Georgian Government to Refuse to Provide Funding for Akhagori Schools" Mari Otarashvili, Rezonansi, 18 Dec. 2009

<sup>36</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia*, October 2009, p 8.

<sup>37</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia*, November 2009, p 11.

<sup>38</sup> *Georgian Public Defender's Report on Situation in Georgia in Terms of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms: First Six Months of 2009* (Tbilisi: Georgian Public Defender's Office, 2009), pp 160-161.

<sup>39</sup> CIPDD, *Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia*, November 2009, p 11.

<sup>40</sup> Transparency International Georgia, *Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia: Issues of Concern* (Tbilisi: Transparency International Georgia, 2009), p 5.

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diseases like diabetes. The report emphasized that, since the government is set to stop providing free gas and firewood next year, IDPs are likely to try to collect firewood from nearby villages, possibly triggering conflict with the locals. Allocation of land was highlighted as another potential area of conflict. The report also noted that IDPs in general lack information and rarely know who they should contact about their problems.<sup>41</sup>

Similar issues were noted in the Georgian human rights ombudsman's latest report to parliament,<sup>42</sup> as well as in a report by the International Crisis Group.<sup>43</sup>

It has been reported that some of the new IDP settlements are located close to South Ossetia's administrative border, where armed incidents still occur.<sup>44</sup>

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has voiced concern over the allegations that some IDPs from the villages located near the de facto border were forced to return home by the Georgian authorities.<sup>45</sup> The allegations were also highlighted in a report by the International Crisis Group which noted that the IDPs were told that they were going to be deprived of government aid if they refused to return.<sup>46</sup>

### Recommendations

Given the current political and security situation in Shida Kartli, as well as the economic and social issues described in the preceding sections of this report, it is clear that the Georgian government faces a number of serious challenges in the region that require urgent attention. Certain steps need to be taken by the government, civil society and international actors in order to deal with these challenges effectively.

- International actors must help the Georgian government in devising effective security arrangements for the parts of Shida Kartli adjacent to South Ossetia. The Georgian government is unlikely to be able to resolve the problem on its own and any attempts at this could potentially lead to the resumption of hostilities.
- The Georgian government should avoid setting up any unnecessary barriers hindering the movement in and out of Akhlagori as these are likely to affect the living conditions of the district's remaining Georgian population.
- International actors must monitor the human rights situation in Akhlagori, including the process of distribution of South Ossetian passports there.
- The Georgian government should examine the current state of Shida Kartli's agricultural sector and consider the possibility of allocating additional aid to those affected worst by the war, including the households that lost their land.
- The Georgian government needs to negotiate with the South Ossetian leadership a lasting solution to the continuous rows over the supply of electricity and water in order to avoid further damage to the region's economy.
- The Georgian government must supply the residents of affected villages with accurate and comprehensive information about the volume and types of government aid and compensations they are entitled to receive in order to address the current confusion and discontent.
- The Georgian government must take additional measures to provide IDPs with greater access to information. Georgian NGOs could also conduct information campaigns to ensure that IDPs know who to contact about their problems and are aware of the types of aid they are entitled to receive.

<sup>41</sup> Transparency International Georgia, *Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia: Issues of Concern*, pp 1-5.

<sup>42</sup> *Georgian Public Defender's Report on Situation in Georgia in Terms of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms: First Six Months of 2009*, pp 151-163.

<sup>43</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous*, p 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p 9.

<sup>45</sup> Report on human rights issues following the August 2008 armed conflict, by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, p 6.

<sup>46</sup> International Crisis Group, *Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous*, pp 5-6.