

## INTRODUCTION TO GEORGIAN STORIES

Eight years have passed since the August 2008 war. Many things have changed since then. The moods and approaches that people have toward resolution of conflicts also have changed. I often visit the conflict zone. I've talked to people both before and after the war. The communication with them was especially difficult after the August war of 2008. Internally displaced persons still lived in the tent-city near Gori when I came there to record their stories. Some of the people who escaped the war, brutalities, violence and aggression were unable to say anything. As a result of the shock, some of the traumatized people completely shut down. Others, who lost friends and family, houses and property, were more aggressive and thirsty for retribution. Eight years have passed since then, and again I came to people living in the conflict zone to listen to their personal stories. And again I visited the internally displaced people living in the cottages near Gori. For the "Cost of Conflict" publication I had to collect personal stories and understand what price did people pay during and after the conflict. I already had preliminary information about them, but I did not know the details of the tragic events they went through. Some of these people I did not know personally, and I visited them with my friends Mikheil Chitadze (Gori Information Center) and Natia Nadiradze (Saferworld). When looking at the interviews once they all were transcribed I realized that after eight years peoples' views of the events were more sober, less emotional, and pragmatic approaches prevailed. The feelings of hatred and desires for revenge were gone. I was surprised to hear these people talk about reconciliation, rebuilding of trust and rekindling of relationships. They remembered relatives, friends and acquaintances living on the other side. They remembered the years spent together. What price did they pay during the conflict in 1990s and 2008? The majority of these people are concerned not so much about the material losses, but the moral price that they've paid – lost human relations, erected barriers, and shattered links. Time has passed and these people have started thinking about their relatives left on the other side more and more. After finishing an interview, an elderly man who was telling the story and who lost a lot during the war took a deep breath and said it had relieved his heart. I asked "Why?" and he explained that it has been a while that he wanted to tell his story to somebody.

People working on the processes of reconciliation and confidence building should listen to the people who went through the war more. This is because people living at the epicenter of conflicts see and feel the environment better, including the opportunities for conflict transformation. After

all, that elderly man was pained that nobody listens him. Unfortunately, Georgian journalism is targeting other topics and is oriented towards other types of “heroes.” But media can play a significant role in confidence building, and this process would not be complete if we did not listen, and most importantly, hear these people.

I would like to thank all the narrators for sharing their stories openly and honestly. They were not shy about criticizing the local authorities, for example, for being too slow in rebuilding destroyed houses. They are no stranger to the process of re-evaluation of past mistakes. After all, only an open and free society can break down stereotypes, get rid of the image of the enemy, and take steps towards building peace.

“Who am I? I am an ordinary person, an ordinary Georgian who paid a huge price for the conflict that was unleashed by wicked politicians and that eventually turned into a full scale war. Nobody gained anything from this war – neither Georgians, nor Ossetians. It seems that the wounds have healed and we again yearn for the time when we were living together”, says one of the narrators.

Today these people told their stories. These stories are full of tears and pain, but they want to be heard, understood and for their life story to become a lesson for others so that the tragedy that unfolded eight years ago is never repeated. Politicians and decision makers should listen to these people, because resolution of conflicts, confidence building, and establishment of sustainable peace will be impossible without participation of these people. These people survived the war, they know the price of conflict and better than anyone they know the price of peace.

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