

Marketplaces: Meeting Places in Border Zones of Georgia

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Introduction

Georgia is situated on the crossroads of the geopolitical and socio-cultural boundaries of the bipolar West-East and North-South axes. Historically, it was the political and cultural center of the region. Representatives of various ethnic, linguistic, and confessional groups have lived within its borders. Active political relations with neighboring and remote regions were followed by various kinds of economic and cultural influences. In Georgia, which was a part of the great Silk Road, trade has flourished since the Bronze Age (Japaridze 2012: 102-103; Rukhadze and Kantaria 2016: 468). The West Georgian kingdom of Colchis was known for its high level of trade and economic development. The kingdom had trade relations with Greece, Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere (Kopaliani 1962: 255). Historical sources prove the existence of trade centers and bazaars in medieval Georgia (Javakhishvili 1930; Kaukhchishvili 1957; Kopaliani 1962; Rukhadze and Kantaria 2016: 468-469). Georgian cities were founded at the crossroads of trade routes and served as meeting places for representatives of various ethnic groups. The kings traditionally assisted international trade — as long as trade served to establish good relations with surrounding countries. Trade houses and guesthouses were built and supported by the kings and rulers of the lands (Motserelia 1987). The development of trade was stimulated by the need to exchange the various goods and products produced in different regions. The economic connections between the different regions of Georgia were one of the important factors causing consolidation processes. At the same time, highly intense trade relations existed in the direction of the North Caucasus, as well as with Turkey and along an East-West axis. The exchange had a natural character. The goods that were exchanged were cattle, iron, metal tools, salt, fruit, dairy products, clothes, etc. (Rekhviashvili 1980: 82; Rukhadze and Kantaria 2016: 469).

The markets and bazaars created the conditions for peaceful coexistence, especially in those areas of Georgia with a multiethnic population. Thus bazaars were founded in the towns or central settlements of the mountainous part of Georgia (e.g., the Oni bazaar) as well as in the lowlands (Kutaisi, Alaverdi, etc.). The Alaverdi bazaar located in the Kakheti region in the East Georgian lowlands is an example. It was a great annual bazaar held near the Alaverdi monastery in connection with the feast day of the monastery's patron saint each autumn and lasted for one month (Rukhadze and Kantaria 2016: 472). Georgians from all regions of Georgia, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, Dagestanis, Chechens, etc. gathered at the Alaverdi bazaar (Gambashidze 2011: 14-17; Abesadze 1986: 73-75). The square near the Alaverdi church was the designated location for the merchants' stalls, the representatives of nearby villages kept order, and the various commodities were exchanged in peace. Cheese, butter, other agricultural products, handmade textiles, clothes, shoes, jewelry, swords, weapons, leather goods, and cattle were sold (Abesadze 1986: 75). Georgian kings and local rulers encouraged these celebrations and events (Berishvili 2016: 476), since these kinds of activities gave inhabitants of the Caucasus their

best opportunities for meeting, communication, and trade (Rukhadze and Kantaria 2016: 468-473; on the Alaverdoba festival see also Mühlfried 2015: 587-599). The active trade relations of Georgians and North Caucasians are described in several sources by various authors (Guldendstadt 1962; AKAC 1866).

Traders and peasants from the whole Caucasus (especially the North Caucasus) used to come to Georgian bazaars and exchange their goods. This was the place for negotiating, trading, meeting, communicating, exchanging products and ideas, and defining social relations. This reality caused the establishment and/or strengthening of such ethnographic institutions as hospitality and artificial kinship (Kerdzmoketeoba or Konagoba). Of course there were examples of violence too, but peaceful relations were the foundation on which relations among the representatives of different ethno-cultural groups were built. Even in difficult periods (wars, conflicts, and tensions), the bazaars were peaceful meeting places. For example, the Sadakhlo bazaar on the border of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan functioned during the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, and representatives of the conflicting sides were involved in trade relations, which were very important for their survival (Jubarli and Shabanov 2004: 249-280). Trade and smuggling took place in Georgian conflict zones, and as Gotsiridze, Kitsmarishvili, and Chkhartishvili have pointed out, representatives of central and local governmental structures, criminal groups, and other interest groups were involved in these informal activities (Gotsiridze, Kitsmarishvili, and Chkhartishvili 2004: 181). The Ergneti bazaar in the Tskinali region played a positive role in creating economic cooperation between Georgians and Ossetians (Kukhianidze 2004: 96-97). The same thing happened between Georgians and Abkhaz. People from Gagra and Sokhumi visited the biggest market in Tbilisi, Lilo, and ethnic Georgians visited Abkhazia for commercial purposes as well (Kukhianidze 2004: 89-90). Ethnographic data gathered in the Zugdidi region also demonstrates the existence of peaceful economic interactions.

These relations were destroyed after the closing of borders between Russia and Georgia in recent years. This paper describes the situation and functions of post-Soviet bazaars in Georgia's border zones.

Trade and Bazaars during Soviet Times and the Transition Period

In the Middle Ages, Georgian cities hosted international trade markets and fairs as well as local bazaars. In the nineteenth century, a special stratum of merchants formed with their own specializations, associations, and trading locations (Beradze 1980). The situation changed after the Soviet order was established. But surprisingly, the Caucasus formed an unremarked exception to the rule in Soviet times. In the Soviet Union, privately organized activities, as well as trade and vending, were forbidden, but such activities continued to be practiced in the Caucasus region and by its people. The people of the region were known as merchants and vendors trading in Moscow and other cities of the USSR, using formal and informal structures for their activi-

ties. Caucasian vendors provided Russian cities with flowers, fruit, and vegetables (Sik and Wallace 1999). Even under the Soviet command economy, trade was one of the most important activities for the region. Different districts were connected to the nearby countryside and territory, neighboring districts, and neighboring republics. Different types of formal and informal relations existed, supporting intergroup relations and the economic well-being of the citizens. The establishment of social networks in the Soviet context was very important.

In the late Soviet period, trade flourished in Georgian cities, especially in regional centers. There were several large agrarian bazaars in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Telavi, Zugdidi, Batumi, and other administrative centers (Khutsishvili 2012: 44). All kind of products and goods were sold in these bazaars. Each bazaar had a specialty and its own system of spatial segmentation according to the kinds of goods that could be bought there. Consumers were able to choose according to their needs, as almost everything was available.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia faced rapid changes, together with the other former Soviet republics. The processes of formation of a civil society in the post-Soviet space, and the mutual adaptation and integration of regional ethno-cultures in new conditions, were attended by the difficulties characteristic of the transition period. In each post-Soviet republic considered individually, the process had individual and specific forms, but it is also possible to trace general laws caused by identical starting conditions and identical tendencies of development. The character of the historical changes occurring in post-Soviet transitional societies was determined by the replacement of the state machine constructed on the Communist principles of a socialist society and the Soviet people by absolutely other values — civil society, individual citizens, and state institutions, along with national identity and predominantly democratic institutional forms.

But the bazaars preserved their function as peaceful meeting places after the collapse of the USSR, which was accompanied by the establishment of new states and borders. Thus bazaars, which have functioned as spaces for trade and communication since medieval times, continued to operate in the border zones between Georgia and Armenia, Azerbaijan, and South Ossetia (Sadakhlo, Ergneti, etc.) (Dabaghyan and Gabrielyan 2011; Dziikaev and Parastaev 2004: 230-239). Their function was still the same: among other things, to maintain relations and contacts between people and countries in the Caucasus, which was extremely significant in the period of post-Soviet wars and tensions in the region (the Abkhazian conflict, the Tskhinvali regional conflict, and the Karabakh conflict in the 1990s). Thus border bazaars like Sadakhlo on the Georgian-Armenian border were famous for not having stopped operations even during the wars (Jubarli and Shabanov 2004: 264-268). The Ergneti bazaar on the Georgian-Ossetian border was established as a post-conflict meeting place, and in spite of its negative impact on the political regulation of the conflict (see Gotsiridze, Kitsmarishvili, and Chkhartishvili 2004; Kukhianidze 2014; Jikaev and Parastaev 2004), it improved everyday relations between representatives of the sides in conflict. In fact, these bazaars were places where representatives of the “enemy” peoples or countries could meet in peace, negotiate, and enjoy peace and collabora-

tion; these were places where war and conflict were taboo. However, in recent years many of them have suffered decline.

The Post-Soviet Economy

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a market economy started to develop, and trade relations were unstructured and wild. Spontaneous street bazaars became common and popular in cities. Later on, state policies influenced further developments and affected the social structure of trade and of the city itself. But it is evident that the bazaars survived in spite of everything. They are a part of the public life of the cities.

Analysis of the events of the last decade enables us to state that a painful process was going on of the “death” and “rebirth” of the “old” societies, during which they went through a complex process of adaptation to the new environment. This process by its nature was extremely inconsistent. Unlike Western societies, with their self-adjusting legal, social, economic, and cultural systems and institutions and their long traditions of the joint residence and integration of people originally from various societies, post-Soviet transitional societies have followed a difficult path of trial and error to achieve an alliance between civil consent and general state interests.

In this transitional period, the new economic environment has appeared to play a major role in the formation of new societal structures and a stable environment for further development. Post-Soviet society since the 1980s has moved from living in conditions of planned economic order to a market economy. Owing to a reassessment of Soviet priorities, personal and public predilections have changed considerably, and rights to property have become a determining factor.

In post-Soviet societies, trade interests have sharply increased, and their influence has increased accordingly. Quite often, forms of economic activity play a corresponding political role, e.g., trade relations, and various kinds of economic exchange strategies and infrastructural frameworks are established, reestablished, or destroyed according to political preferences and interests. Trade, communication, and state priorities impact all spheres of ordinary citizens’ everyday life. On the other hand, individual activities also influence the general situation. In this process, formality is highly bound up with informality. Today, informal networks are still meaningful and sometimes more important than other—new—trade structures. As an article by Polese, Rekhviashvili, and Morris states, “recent trends of informality research depict it as a myriad of (economic, social and cultural) practices spread on a spectrum between the legal, the extra-legal and illegal, some of which cause direct harm to fellow citizens while others undermine the state as institution or its symbolic power and others may be regarded not only as non-harmful but even as positive, allowing an organization or a state to perform its function more effectively and efficiently” (Polese, Rekhviashvili, and Morris 2016: 15). The social situation pushes people to choose those behavior models that will be a “reasonable response to their present situation” (Granovetter 1985: 506).

Economic development in Georgia is also influenced by political problems. Georgia has two frozen conflicts (in Abkhazia in West Georgia and in the Tskhinvali region in East Georgia), and self-declared states (the so-called Abkhazian Republic and South Ossetian Republic) have detached some important territories from the Georgian state. *De facto* borders have appeared, and former exchange systems or social networks have been fragmented or totally destroyed. During Soviet times, bazaars were regulated by the state, and cities had just agrarian bazaars. In post-Soviet times, marketplaces where all kinds of goods were for sale joined these agrarian bazaars. Regional differences in economic activities defined the profiles of the regional markets, and interregional exchange was quite active. But conflicts have changed the reality again — borders have appeared, and communication has been hindered.

The Georgian-Abkhazian Border

Abkhazia, situated on the east coast of the Black Sea, was a constituent part of the ancient West Georgian kingdom of Colchis. Later, it was part of the united Georgian kingdom. During the Soviet period, the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic was included in the Georgian Soviet Republic. Starting in the 1990s, as in the whole former Soviet Union, the painful processes of the reestablishment of national identity began in Abkhazia. As this process is always of a political nature (Sunny 1999/2000: 141), it is not surprising that nationalistic ideas were bound up with separatist-secessionist processes. Such developments, in turn, later evolved into open conflict. These political aspirations rearranged the cultural “soft boundaries” (Sunny 1999/2000: 146) between Georgia and Abkhazia.

After a period of open conflict in 1992-1993, Georgia lost control over Abkhazia, and the latter established itself as a *de facto* independent territory. Georgia considers Abkhazia a territory occupied by the Russian Federation. The border was established at the Enguri (Ingur) River. This river flows from the high Caucasus northwest through the mountain valleys before turning southwest to empty into the Black Sea between the villages of Anaklia and Ganmukhuri near Zugdidi, the main city of Samegrelo, a West Georgian district.

Since the conflict, Georgia, Abkhazia, and Russia keep troops on the river. Six legal crossing points between Georgia and Abkhazia remained after the war: Nabakevi-Khurcha, Otobaia-Orsantia, Pichori-Ganmukhuri, Tagiloni-Shamgona, Saberio-Pakhulani, and the Enguri Bridge. The first to close were the Pichori-Ganmukhuri and Tagiloni-Shamgona crossings in 2015; since 5 May 2017, Nabakevi-Khurcha and Otobaia-Orsantia are also closed. Saberio-Pakhulani is a pedestrian bridge in the so-called high zone. Thus the only connecting route appears to be the Enguri Bridge. This 870-meter-long bridge was built between 1944 and 1948 by German prisoners captured during the Second World War. Before the conflict, the river was considered an administrative boundary between the two districts of Gali and Zugdidi. After 1993, the Enguri line emerged as a *de facto* border dividing the Zugdidi and Gali municipalities, i.e., territories controlled by Georgian forces on one side and Abkhazian forces on the other. De-

pending on political events, the border is strictly closed or is open in general or for certain groups of people.

Zugdidi municipality borders Gali district. Zugdidi is a major city in the West Georgian territorial-administrative unit of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti. The territory of the municipality of Zugdidi consists of the city of Zugdidi and 30 territorial units encompassing 58 villages. The whole population including IDPs is 161,351 people, 98% of them Georgians. Abkhaz, Russians, Ukrainians, and others live in Zugdidi municipality¹. Zugdidi is the location of the headquarters of the *de jure* government of Abkhazia. It is mainly concerned with the problems of IDPs and the population of Gali district. In general, all residents of the whole of Abkhazia are considered citizens of Georgia, and thus their problems are also within the competence of this government. Government agencies direct several state programs concerning healthcare or cultural issues affecting the population on both sides of the border.

Gali district is in the territory of Abkhazia. This district is smaller than the eponymous one in the *de jure* subdivision of Georgia, as some of its former territory is now part of Tkvarcheli district, formed by the *de facto* Abkhaz authorities in 1995. Gali district was populated almost entirely by Georgians (Mingrelians, members of a Georgian regional subgroup) in prewar Abkhazia. The majority of Georgians fled the district following the inter-ethnic clashes in 1993–1994 and again in 1998. Since 1998, a group of refugees has returned to Gali district, including persons commuting daily across the ceasefire line and those migrating seasonally in accordance with agricultural cycles. Gali district is now the only district of Abkhazia in which ethnic Georgians constitute a clear majority. Together with the Kodori Valley, Gali district is one of the two real trouble spots, while the situation is relatively peaceful in the rest of Abkhazia. It was a battlefield in the 1998 escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

***De facto* Border Interaction (between Zugdidi and Gali)**

Zugdidi and Gali municipalities are both rich agricultural areas for citrus, hazelnuts, and vegetables. The Enguri hydroelectric station, a major supplier to Abkhazia and part of Georgia, is located on the Abkhaz-Georgian ceasefire line and is operated jointly.

As Gali district is mostly populated by ethnic Georgians, the *de facto* border and the ethno-cultural frontier do not align with the physical border, i.e., the Enguri River. This kind of intermingling impacts the perception of the border and the forms of relationships between people on both sides. In addition, large groups of IDPs are living in Zugdidi district, and their perceptions are even more complicated.

Both districts were highly bound together in trade relations in the past. The Zugdidi bazaar was the central one for the region in the Soviet period. The building was built in the 1950s as an

¹ For further information see: <http://www.zugdidi.mun.gov.ge>

agrarian market, where the peasants of the region sold their goods. It was modern and spacious for that time and of course attracted customers and vendors from both districts (Zugdidi and Gali). The conflict separated these districts, and their usual economic interrelations were interrupted by the emergence of the border.

The border is considered an “administrative boundary line” (ABL) by the Georgian state and official institutions, or a *de facto* border as defined by official documents and on the level of international communication. It is also a state border for Russian and Abkhazian officials. The population of Gali and Zugdidi districts uses the word “border” (*sazghvari*) when speaking of the checkpoints. “Border” for them means guards, checkpoints, and documents. “Crossing Enguri” is the term usually used by locals to mean crossing the border, i.e., passing over the Enguri Bridge. At the same time, crossing the Enguri River by illegal means is subjectively considered a sometimes-dangerous action, but not criminal, as the border’s delineation is contrived and contested.

If during the first years of the conflict Georgians did not recognize or were unwilling to recognize the *de facto* border as a border, with the years, reality changed their minds. Now everyone talks about a border. Still, the perceptions of it are different. There are still individuals in Zugdidi district who cross the border for various purposes, mainly for trade, but these are rare cases. It is mainly Gali residents who make use of this possibility.

Gali residents are allowed to cross into the neighboring Georgian districts relatively freely. They (mostly ethnic Georgians) have a special local ID card that gives them freedom of movement. Quite a large share of Gali’s population crosses the border daily. Some of the border-crossers are studying in Zugdidi, while others have trade interests or are coming to visit their relatives. But they must pay customs duties on any goods they carry into or out of Georgia proper.

Zugdidi residents and other citizens of Georgia are actually also allowed to cross the border. If they are not on official business, they do so on their own responsibility.

The traffic mainly runs from Gali into Zugdidi district in the morning, and returning in the afternoon. As I have observed during fieldwork on the Enguri Bridge, the bridge is mostly crossed on foot or by horses and buggy carriages. In recent times, motor vehicles can also be seen crossing the border as well. But usually, horse carriages are used to transport people or goods. For the last two years, UN minibuses have also offered free transportation services. Vehicles belonging to the hydroelectric plant facilities, as well as minibuses and coaches with Abkhazian license plates, have permission to cross the border. To go to Abkhazia from Zugdidi across the bridge, it is necessary to pass three barriers, guarded by Georgian, Abkhazian, and Russian forces. I have observed the checkpoints during my fieldwork.

Changes in the general political context influence the intensity and character of the use of these communication channels. There are also a number of illegal crossing points along the river. The river serves as a border, but it is not guarded along its entire length. In some places, lo-

cals from both sides cross the river. At some points, informal communication comes into play: locals negotiate with the commanders of the checkpoints, who sometimes allow them to cross the border. Both facts — the closing and opening of borders — have influenced and changed formal relationships. They have also stimulated the development of new informal types of relationships, especially when it comes to economic interaction. Trans-border contacts transgress conflict norms from below. Even if signs of tension are continuously present in the borderlands, the local population often does not conceive of the border as an impermeable institution. Border-crossing happens by means of various communication channels, which are based on or might lead to deeper social relationships.

Those people living along the border have constantly put stronger emphasis on crossing the border, ranging beyond the places where they live instead of integrating their life better within their given environment (Cosmin 2010: 414).

The Enguri border is relatively easy for locals to cross, legally or illegally. The relations between localities on both sides of the river are almost permanent; all sorts of crossing and smuggling had a long and not always peaceful history until the middle of the 1990s. Several actors are involved in this interaction, and the relations are based on various factors, including kin connections, economic interests, criminal issues, etc.

People living on both banks of the Enguri River belong to the same ethno-cultural group. They are mainly Megrelians, members of a Georgian ethnic subgroup. The residents of Gali and Zugdidi districts were previously a culturally and territorially united group, the members of which were related to each other as a kin group. The kin system is a very important element of Georgian ethno-cultural organization. Kin gives meaning to all social interactions within and outside the group. Responsibilities and obligations within the kin group are extensive, and the whole of everyday life is organized according to kin belonging. Kinship through “blood” and through “ritual” enabled and enables people to achieve fullness of being, to become a “real human” (Dragadze 1988: 95). It is necessary to maintain these relations in spite of any kind of hindrance. Relatives support each other during the cardinal moments of their lives. Even separated by the border, relatives try to keep up communication. The border is not expected to be a barrier for receiving news regarding the marriage or burial rituals to be held within the kin group. Mourning is a key reason for the Abkhazians too to accept transgressions of border norms.

“The so-called ‘borderization’ process, and the further tightening of the state’s already strict regime for crossing the dividing lines, dramatically worsened the living conditions of conflict-affected populations, restricted some of their rights; in the secessionist regions, discriminatory policies based on ethnicity have become even more visible” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2015: 4).

As already mentioned, a majority of IDPs have settled in the Zugdidi region, most of them from the Gali and Ochamchire districts of Abkhazia. Some of the displaced managed to bring

some livestock with them when they fled, but the majority were unable to develop farming activities in the Zugdidi region, because of the lack of land, poor soil, or many other reasons. For this reason, some of the displaced prefer to go back to their villages in Gali district to tend and harvest their crops there, in spite of the dangers involved in doing so. Many families who lived in Gali district owned their own nut plantations. By April 1996, some 25,000 to 30,000 people were regularly crossing the Enguri River to work on their lands, trade, and rebuild their homes in Gali (Kharashvili 2001: 229). During the annual nut harvest in September and October, displaced persons (mainly women) cross the river to and from Gali district to collect nuts in Gali and bring them to Zugdidi to sell in the market or to the nut-product companies that have opened in Zugdidi. But their attitudes are politically influenced; the change in IDs and passports on the side of the *de facto* government is causing problems for the majority of the population on both sides, especially for those living on the “Georgian” side of the river.

Economic Activities Shaped by the Border

Economic relations are mainly displayed in trade and smuggling connections. The Zugdidi bazaar provides Gali district’s population with all kinds of supplies. From the Abkhazian side, Russian chocolates move through Gali district to Zugdidi, as well as some other supplies. The communication channels are well elaborated and tested. From Gali district, citrus and nuts come to Zugdidi, mainly through less organized, sporadic connections. Sometimes relatives support each other by sending or bringing goods and crossing the border, legally or even illegally. Cigarettes are also transported, but this is forbidden, and only small amounts are able to reach the Zugdidi bazaar. From Zugdidi, mainly household goods and food are taken to Gali district. There is a bazaar in Gali as well, but my informants say that the prices there are higher and the population prefers to buy in Zugdidi. They take minibuses (*marshrutkas*) or taxis from Zugdidi to the bridge. After the Georgian checkpoint, where their documents are checked, they cross the bridge with their goods on foot or using horse carriages.

According to my informants, the border is crossed every day by locals who have the necessary papers. They come to trade or shop in the Zugdidi bazaar. Those individuals who have nut-tree gardens cross rarely, only to gather the nuts during harvest and mostly illegally, as the preparation of the necessary documents makes no sense in terms of time and in terms of expenses as well. Additionally, the change in documents might cause problems.

The nut harvest is a very important income source for the locals. But in the last two years a new problem has arisen: the brown marmorated stink bug (*Halyomorpha halys*) caused enormous damage to the harvest in West Georgia, and the nuts were almost entirely spoiled. Now the nuts must be sorted, and those that are not good enough for food are diverted to industrial use. This means that the shells are used to produce biofuel briquettes or pellets. The Georgian-

Ukrainian company Ecoline Energy is one of the producers that have factories in Zugdidi². The factories that manufacture industrial products are situated in Zugdidi and Batumi. So Gali residents try (if possible) to bring the nuts to the Zugdidi side and at least get a small payment for a “bad harvest.”

The river is still crossed illegally but not as often as earlier, because it has become too risky. Before, people crossed at night. Somebody would call from the other side, “Nobody here, way free” (in Mengrelian), and people knew that they could cross. But Russian soldiers learned the phrases and used them to catch the locals to make them pay fees. Women were usually released directly after payment. Men were often taken to the Gali prison and released later after further payment.

Economic activities are also supported by several organizations operating in Zugdidi. For example, a project by the non-governmental organization Atinati aimed to support Gali’s population by organizing small businesses. Thus the NGO offered to support small manufacturers producing bed linens. Another business supported by this NGO was the production of *ajika* (a special spice mixture). The goods were sold in the local market as well as in the Zugdidi market.

Atinati also organized shopping tours to Tbilisi’s Lilo market for women from Gali district. Buses drove them to Tbilisi and back home. Thus the women were able to cross the bridge without any additional difficulties. The goods, mainly clothes and linens, were sold and distributed on the Abkhazian side of the border.

Conclusion

Opening and closing borders, inspecting border posts, training border guards, scanning objects and persons as they cross the border, seizing illicit merchandise, waiting in line for permission, or simply crossing the border — all these are potential events in which it is hard to measure, trace, and predict the trajectories of participating entities. Borders as processes involve a diversity of actors and practices. The main actors interacting at the Enguri border are the local residents on both sides of the border, officials, military forces, NGOs, and international organizations.

Borders are perhaps the most obvious political geographic entity in the lives of human beings (Diener and Hagen 2010: 194). Borders, whether physical or cultural, influence identity construction, the development of worldviews and perceptions, and everyday lives and realities. Borders are frames, which can or even on some occasions must be transgressed. But communication is an essential part of human sociability, and borders seem not to be a hindrance. Communication across borders is a very exiting topic for research, one that focuses on trans-border contacts, a topic closely related to the specific empirical phenomena that cut across tensions or

² For further information see: <https://bpn.ge>

conflicts from below. The aim is to consider this communication from below and to develop a shared understanding of differences and similarities, something that along with its theoretical and scholarly importance also has applications in the development of conflict-prevention policies. As this study has revealed, communication channels are intensively used in border conflict zones, in spite of the existence of literal, physical borders. The use of these channels means cooperation in economic activities, healthcare issues, and the fight against crime. The actors involved in these relations are international organizations, NGOs, government agencies, criminal groups, and the local population. The main conclusion may be that the border remains just a relative barrier in a complicated system of relationships that were never cut off even during the most difficult periods. The reason for this situation can be found in the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic homogeneity of the population living on both sides of the *de facto* border and this population's perception of the border as a virtual, comparative line. Thus the border space is permanently "made" by all the agents involved in these interactions, and Cosmin's concept of "becoming borders" (Cosmin 2010: 430) is the most appropriate for deeper analyses of the current situation. The recent (February 2015) declaration by the Russian Federation of the "abolition" of its borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia³ will surely influence interactions on the Abkhazian-Georgian border along the Enguri. Moscow has explained its actions as assistance in facilitating the movement of people and goods across borders by simplifying border procedures and making it easier for citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to acquire Russian citizenship. Of course, these changes will restructure the communication channels, and we will be faced by new circumstances in "making the borders."

Changes in the general political context influence the intensity and character of the use of the communication channels between Gali and Zugdidi, Georgia and Russian-controlled Abkhazia. There are also a number of illegal crossing points along the river. The river serves as a border, but it is not guarded along its entire length. In some places, locals from both sides cross the river. At some points, informal communication comes into play, and locals negotiate with the commanders of the checkpoints to allow them to cross the border. But if in the early years the locals used illegal methods more often, later on this strategy became no longer operational, especially for trade purposes. Locals from both sides have elaborated various strategies to survive and improve their living conditions. Many IDPs try to reestablish connections with their neighbors or relatives living on the Abkhazian side. There are frequent cases of the former citizens of Sukhumi, now IDPs living in Zugdidi, building a kind of network for trading.

The *de facto* border has divided the population and destroyed the old economic order and networks. But locals fighting for survival developed new networks and attitudes. The border remains for them just a relative barrier in a complicated system of relationships that have never been cut off even during the most difficult periods. The reason for this situation can be found in

³ For further information see: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2015-02-18/1_border.html

the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic homogeneity of the population living on both sides of the *de facto* border and this population's perception of the border as a virtual line.

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