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# ETHNIC INCOMPATIBILITY OR COEXISTENCE?

ARMENIANS AND AZERBAIJANIS IN GEORGIA

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ONNIK JAMES KRIKORIAN & KONUL SHAHIN

## Background

In July 2023, as one of many trips made until September, the authors of this report traveled by bus to the village of Sadakhlo, an ethnic Azerbaijani village in Georgia close to the country's border with Armenia. Before interviewing residents there, however, the first order of the day upon disembarking was to grab lunch from one of a few cafes and *chaikhanas* (teahouses) along the roadside in the center of the village.

As we sat down, the woman who approached us to take our order instinctively spoke Azerbaijani, but after some general conversation, she identified herself as an ethnic Armenian from Armenia. Thinking of us as tourists, she also said her husband, a taxi driver and an ethnic Azerbaijani, would be able to drive us around if we planned any sightseeing.

We agreed, and while waiting for his arrival and as we finished our lunch, she told us her story.

Meanwhile, on the main road, dozens of cars and trucks with Armenian number plates driving to and from Tbilisi passed by as we spoke. A few kilometers down the road in this almost totally ethnic Azerbaijani part of Georgia, dozens more trucks from Armenia awaited customs clearance that can take days.

Fortuitously, as we had not explained the purpose of our visit, our waitress said that she met her husband some thirty years earlier while trading at the Bagratashen-Sadakhlo market straddling the nearby border and once a meeting point for ethnic Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian traders, as well as those from Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It was one of a few places where all sides came together rather than being driven apart.

Following their marriage, she continued, she moved from Noyemberyan in Armenia to live in Sadakhlo. This wasn't during the Soviet era, but as the war in Karabakh of the early 1990s raged. For many in Armenia and Azerbaijan, that might sound confusing. After all, according to conventional wisdom, with Armenians and Azerbaijanis portrayed as sworn mutual enemies, it should not have happened at all.

Indeed, during a trip to Moscow in January 2003, then President Robert Kocharyan declared that Armenians and Azerbaijanis were "ethnically incompatible" in an attempt to bolster the argument that nothing short of independence for the mainly ethnic Armenian-populated former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) situated within Azerbaijan would resolve the conflict between the sides.

Ferhad Naibov, the 75-year-old ethnic Azerbaijani owner of a cafe along the road that Armenian cars and lorries travel every day in the ethnic Azerbaijani village of Sadakhlo. He says Armenians from Armenia often stop at his cafe for a break © Onnik James Krikorian 2023



In retrospect, and certainly given the situation in Georgia, whether Kocharyan took his own words seriously is debatable. His remarks, however, unfortunately shaped and reinforced the nationalist narrative that remains dominant to this day.

The situation between Armenians and Azerbaijanis is undoubtedly complex, involving historical grievances that stretch back more than a century, territorial disputes, and competing national identities, but the notion of “ethnic incompatibility” is highly questionable for *any* nation. Moreover, as this report seeks to highlight, ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis *can* and *do* co-exist elsewhere.

This reality is of course questioned by those who argue that coexistence within an alternative political framework outside of Armenia and Azerbaijan renders it inconsequential, but this also ignores the question at hand – are Armenians and Azerbaijanis “ethnically incompatible” or not? And the answer to that, albeit with some caveats to be expanded upon later, is quite simple.

Not only do the two groups co-exist in various villages, towns, and regions in Georgia, but they also do so without any major incidents. Even during the war of the early 1990s, ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis not only traded with each other at the Sadakhlo market in Georgia but often did so in preference to trading with ethnic Georgians. This reality continues today.

Even a non-report related random visit to a hairdresser in Marneuli, a predominantly ethnic Azerbaijani-populated town with an ethnic Armenian minority, on the road from the border to Tbilisi, offered yet another example. During normal chit-chat, it turned out that the owner of the hair salon had an Armenian mother from Armenia and an ethnic Azerbaijani father from Georgia.

Leyla, who identifies as an ethnic Azerbaijani and holds Georgian citizenship, spoke fondly of her ethnic Armenian neighbours in Marneuli. During Novruz, for example, she shares *plov* and pastries with them, while during Easter, they reciprocate by presenting gifts and holiday delicacies to her. No wonder that at her hair salon, staff consists of two ethnic Azerbaijanis and one ethnic Armenian.

The clientele is just as diverse. Sabina, one of the hairdressers of Azerbaijani heritage, told one of us that sometimes ethnic Azerbaijani customers prefer to choose her Armenian colleague, Rima, over her. At other times, ethnic Armenian clients prefer Sabina's services. None of this was presented as workplace rivalry, however. Tips are distributed evenly among staff.

Even this encounter was fortuitous. When we met with the ethnic Azerbaijani head of a local non-governmental organization and mentioned that we had yet to meet any ethnic Armenians in Marneuli, he had offered to ‘ring some’ to arrange a meeting.



An Armenian truck travels from Tbilisi through the ethnic Azerbaijani village of Sadakhlo to the Georgian border with Armenia © Onnik James Krikorian 2023

However, although one of us had met two ethnic Armenian traders several years earlier, it was decided that this was inappropriate and risked opening this report up to allegations of manipulation.

Instead, just walking for a few minutes in Marneuli resulted in encounters.

At one Turkish-owned cafe, for example, the clientele spoke Azerbaijani at each table but one. At it were two women with two young girls, aged 9 and 7 years old. They freely and openly spoke Armenian, with nobody reacting at all. And upon walking towards a bus stop, among dozens of pedestrians again, all speaking Azerbaijani, two women passed by speaking Armenian.

They had come to Marneuli from a mainly ethnic Armenian village close to Shulaveri, itself an example where ethnic Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians reside, to buy produce from ethnic Azerbaijani sellers at the local vegetable market. As one of those sellers told us, ethnic Azerbaijanis and some Georgians sell at the market, while ethnic Armenians come to purchase their goods.

Today, as discussion increasingly turns to the issue of whether Armenians and Azerbaijanis can live together following the 2020 Karabakh war, the question of ‘incompatibility’ becomes even more relevant. And while the answer might not in itself provide a

solution to what is clearly a political issue, it can at least provide food for thought in the face of prevailing existential nationalist narratives.

Georgia, after all, takes pride in its diversity, a stance that it maintains, albeit with some concerns raised by international organizations and local non-governmental agencies on inadequacies in government policy towards minorities. Knowledge of the Georgian language, for example, remains low, though it is improving thanks to policies introduced by former President Mikheil Saakashvili that continue today.

Despite some criticism of its treatment of minorities, the situation has significantly improved since the mid-2000s. This progress has been especially notable since Saakashvili introduced the 1+4 education program<sup>1</sup> which allows students from minority communities to study at universities in Tbilisi with an additional first year for mastering the Georgian language.

Nonetheless, state-level representation also remains low. Moreover, with many Georgians believing that ethnicity takes precedent over citizenship, a problem that also exists elsewhere in the region, many ethnic minorities are often viewed as ‘guests,’ inferring that the country is not their ‘homeland’ even though they were born and raised there.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://smr.gov.ge/en/page/58/saganmanatleblo-programa>



The Dezerter Bazaar, a market in Tbilisi where both ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis trade among more ethnic Georgians © Onnik James Krikorian 2023





An ethnic Azerbaijani market trader at the Dezerter Bazaar, a market in Tbilisi © Onnik James Krikorian 2023

During the course of interviews conducted for this report, one young ethnic Azerbaijani in Marneuli, for example, remarked that when she started university in Tbilisi, her father warned her never to criticise Georgia or anything Georgian. And even though she never did, she says she still experienced discrimination from some lecturers because of her perceived Muslim faith, even though many Azerbaijanis are secular.

This was a common refrain from other ethnic Azerbaijani respondents one of us met, and who added that other minorities, such as ethnic Armenians, experience the same. Indeed, even though they fare a little better by virtue of being Christians, Armenophobia exists among some of the ethnic Georgian majority, in part because of their involvement in the Abkhaz war of the early 1990s.

Armenia's traditional relationship with Russia, and especially its continued hosting of a military base, has also shaped opinions among some Georgians towards Armenians in the wake of the August 2008 war.

But just as the Armenian government attempted to stay neutral in that war, the Georgian government has also arguably attempted to remain the same in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Karabakh. Demonstrating the complex situation Tbilisi finds itself in given its location, the presence of sizeable Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnic minorities in the country makes it even more so.

Furthermore, as another example of that complexity, when SOCAR Georgia offered to supply free gas to Georgian churches,<sup>2</sup> this also meant it had to supply minority houses of worship in the country. Not only did these mean synagogues and mosques, but also Armenian churches,<sup>3</sup> as the head of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan openly confirmed in an interview that was criticized by the opposition media.<sup>4</sup>

A SOCAR petrol station, incidentally, is the first encountered after crossing from Armenia into Georgia upon entering Sadakhlo. A decade or so ago, an American based in Baku recounted a story from his first visit to Armenia to one of us. Hiring a taxi in Yerevan to drive him back to Tbilisi to later depart to Baku, his Armenian driver instinctively pulled into that petrol station to refuel.

Turning off his engine and looking around for service, it was only then that he noticed the SOCAR logo as well as the Azerbaijani flag. It was also the driver's first visit to Georgia, and he began to feel nervous after noticing that the shops opposite all had signs in

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<sup>2</sup> Azerbaijan to warm Georgian and Armenian churches  
<https://orthochristian.com/86754.html>

<sup>3</sup> Armenian Churches in Georgia will be heated by Azerbaijan  
<https://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/13071/armenian-churches-in-georgia-will-be-heated-by-azerbaijan>.

<sup>4</sup> SOCAR chief admits to funding Armenian churches in Georgia  
<https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/socar-chief-admits-to-funding-armenian-churches-in-georgia/>.

Azerbaijani. So dominant were the narratives of perpetual interethnic strife that the driver began to feel uncomfortable.

He became even more so when the petrol pump assistant approached, noticed the Armenian number plate, and gestured to the driver to roll down his window. “*Barev Dzez, inchpes es* [Hello, how are you?],” the SOCAR employee, a local ethnic Azerbaijani, instinctively said to the driver in Armenian, who then began to feel more relaxed. With just one interaction, a stereotype was broken.

Sadly, the driver did not get to frequent one of the remaining *chaikhanas* in Tbilisi’s Old Town, where ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis not only work together but where a clientele consisting of ethnic Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians congregate.<sup>5</sup> At the time of the driver’s journey to Tbilisi there was even one owned and operated by an ethnic Armenian couple from Ganja in Azerbaijan.

That teahouse shut down in 2017 after the death of one of the owners, but another visited by us in August 2023 was temporarily closed for refurbishment and was due to reopen the following month.

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<sup>5</sup> Sabir’s: The Last Chaikhana in Tbilisi <https://culinarybackstreets.com/cities-category/tbilisi/2017/sabirs/>

For those living in Georgia, such stories are not uncommon and are just one of many. They also demonstrate how ethnic Armenian-Azerbaijani co-existence does indeed occur, no matter how much nationalists seek to claim the contrary. It should be noted, however, that this report does not seek to portray the situation as perfect. Since the April 2016 and 2020 Karabakh wars, there have been problems too.

Nonetheless, recent academic research, while also highlighting that relations were strained between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia during the 2020 war, confirms that social cohesion largely held, arguably demonstrating that generalized nationalist narratives are fundamentally flawed in that they purposely ignore positive examples and instead only amplify the negative.

This reality and one of only a few positive examples of co-existence between the sides today, is usually overlooked or ignored by the media and even non-governmental organisations involved in Track II initiatives. This is arguably even more baffling given that many of those projects for participants from Armenia and Azerbaijan are held in Georgia.

Moreover, even though groups from Armenia often involve participants from the diaspora, there are seldom any ethnic Armenians or ethnic Azerbaijanis from Georgia involved that could introduce this dimension into proceedings.



An ethnic Azerbaijani man with his best friend, an ethnic Armenian woman in Tsopi, Georgia © Onnik James Krikorian 2017

## Ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia

According to the 2014 Georgian census, ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis are Georgia's two largest ethnic minorities, numbering 168,000 and 233,000, respectively, among an overall population of around 3.7 million people. Most primarily reside in distinct areas outside the capital, though some 50,000 ethnic Armenians do live in Tbilisi today. The number of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the Georgian capital is much smaller.

It should be noted that the ethnic Armenian community in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia, where they have constituted the second largest group since the exodus of many among the ethnic Georgian majority during the war of the early 1990s, is not included in these figures. Around 40,000 are believed to reside there.

Despite that caveat, among the 168,000 ethnic Armenians documented in Georgia's 2014 census, a significant number reside in the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Collectively, they amount to roughly 80,000 individuals and are the dominant populace in those districts, with percentages of 92.5 and 95, respectively.

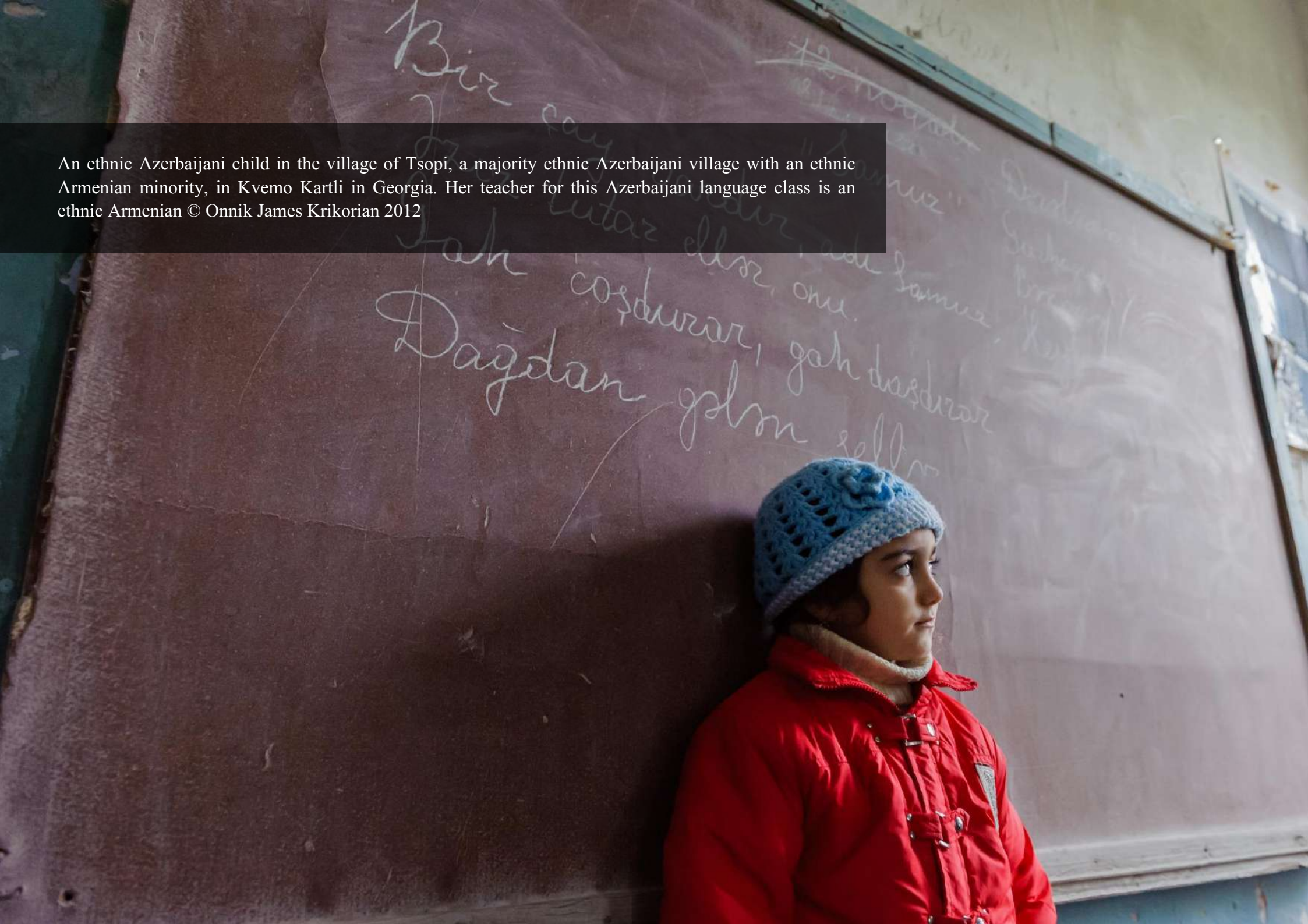
Meanwhile, the ethnic Azerbaijani community totals approximately 233,000, with around 177,000 calling Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia home.

Of note, ethnic Azerbaijanis in the Marneuli municipality in Kvemo Kartli are the majority at 83.8 percent, while the ethnic Armenian community makes up 7 percent of the total population. As mentioned earlier, the primary highway connecting Yerevan to Tbilisi passes through the region, entering Georgia via Sadakhlo.

This highway not only passes through the region itself but also the main urban centre, Marneuli. It is one of Armenia's few lifelines to the outside world, given its closed borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Another route through Iran, incidentally, passes through an even larger concentration of ethnic Azerbaijanis that number in the millions. As with Georgia, Armenian trade and traffic pass through freely.

At the same time, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline makes its way through Samtske-Javakheti, specifically passing through Akhaltsikhe, where ethnic Armenians account for 26.7 percent of the population. Similarly, the route of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway follows a similar path, though in this case it passes

An ethnic Azerbaijani child in the village of Tsopi, a majority ethnic Azerbaijani village with an ethnic Armenian minority, in Kvemo Kartli in Georgia. Her teacher for this Azerbaijani language class is an ethnic Armenian © Onnik James Krikorian 2012



through Akhalkalaki, where 93.8 percent of the population is of ethnic Armenian origin.

It is also worth noting that despite the significant presence of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in areas of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, sizeable separatist movements have not emerged to pose any threat to Georgian statehood. True, various Armenian nationalist groups, particularly those operating in what Armenians call Javakhk, have remained active, but not sufficiently enough to represent any risk.

In actuality, the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought Saakashvili to power effectively curbed any secessionist tendencies. Indeed, during his last term in office, then-Armenian President Robert Kocharyan engaged in regular meetings with Saakashvili to quell nationalist ambitions within the region. As mentioned earlier, this pragmatic choice was driven by the fact that Armenia depends on Georgia for connectivity.

Similarly, while there was never any real chance for a Borchali independence movement to emerge in Marneuli, though some attempts were made, Azerbaijan also depends on Georgia for transporting oil and gas to Türkiye. This demonstrates how unblocking regional trade routes, as foreseen in the November 2020 ceasefire statement and prior peace initiatives, can serve as a foundation for peace.

As mentioned already, the Sadakhlo market has also played a significant role in regional trade for all three South Caucasus countries, and particularly for Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This role persisted from 1993 until it was finally closed in 2007, prompted by concerns related to smuggling. Again, it stands as an example of how trade has the potential to foster connections between the two groups.

Indeed, the opening of daily and weekly markets were even part of the OSCE Minsk Group's 1997 package deal,<sup>6</sup> while on 10 August 2023, former de facto Karabakh official Samvel Babayan also called for a common trade market to be established between Askeran and Aghdam to “ensure not only the solution of socio-economic problems in Artsakh [Karabakh], but also the security of the population.”

However, it is the very presence of villages co-inhabited by ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia that will serve as the focus for the subsequent sections of this report. These villages, rarely covered by the media compared to numerous stories of mutual hostility, raise the question of how this is even possible if the 'ethnic incompatibility' that underpins much nationalist discourse is correct.

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<sup>6</sup> Minsk Group proposal ('package deal') <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/4b2ddb/pdf/>

An elderly ethnic Azerbaijani resident of Khojorni, a co-inhabited village in the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia. Like most of the residents, she speaks both Armenian and Azerbaijani © Onnik James Krikorian 2021





Moreover, how do these villages navigate relations between two groups that are usually portrayed as distinct, especially considering their strong connections to relatives and friends in Armenia and Azerbaijan and their very existence both within an often-shared physical environment and now within the respective information spaces of both?

## Co-inhabited villages in Georgia

In 2008, Danish journalist Michael Anderson visited the South Caucasus to film a documentary for Al Jazeera English. The documentary focused on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and throughout the production process, Anderson engaged with all parties involved and coincidentally enlisted the assistance of one of us for his filming in Armenia.

At that time, Anderson expressed his intention to visit the village of in Georgia.<sup>7</sup> Situated close to the border with Armenia, just 5.5 kilometers from Sadakhlo, Tsopi is characterized by its demographic makeup. Approximately 73 percent of its population, totaling around 600 residents, is made up by ethnic Azerbaijanis, while the remaining inhabitants are predominantly ethnic Armenian.

It is one of several villages and towns in Kvemo Kartli that are co-inhabited by the two ethnic groups. Intrigued by this unique situation, one of us first visited Tsopi the following year, in late 2009.

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<sup>7</sup> Video Excerpt  
<https://twitter.com/onewmphoto/status/862939719025471489?s=20>

During that visit, Tsopi's residents mentioned the absence of tensions between residents. Instead, concerns centered around issues such as the village's run-down school, which was finally replaced over a decade later in 2021. True, because of a lack of Georgian language proficiency, classes are separated by mother tongue, but on the school's playing field, pupils engage in collective play.<sup>8</sup>

The school also plays an important role in serving as an intercommunal-meeting point where both groups regularly come into contact with each other, not only children but also their parents. This is borne out by the fact that most residents of Tsopi speak each other's language as well as their own. There is no formal education that allows them to learn them.

Furthermore, an ethnic Armenian teacher took on the responsibility of instructing Azerbaijani first-grade students in the Azerbaijani language. In 2012, during a visit to the school, this teacher extended an invitation to one of us to attend the sixth birthday celebration of an Azerbaijani pupil from her class.

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<sup>8</sup> Class Struggle: The problem of Tsopi's school  
<https://soundcloud.com/onewmphoto/class-struggle-the-problems-of-tsopis-school>



The Armen Hovhannisyian puppet theatre performing a story on ethnic co-existence in a multicultural village at the culture house of Marneuli, a majority ethnic Armenian-majority town with smaller ethnic Armenian and Georgian minorities © Onnik James Krikorian 2023

Notably, the event was attended by his ethnic Armenian classmates and their mothers.

The party included dishes common to both ethnic groups.

The same year on another visit, there was an ethnic Azerbaijani wedding where ethnic Armenian neighbours were also invited. However, during the event, one young Georgian journalism student accompanying one of us raised the issue of Karabakh and was quickly asked to leave. This was an example of how the conflict is considered taboo in public and especially at celebrations.

This has been borne out by academics that have since visited Tsopi post-2020.

“The taboo regarding the war can be broken, but only in a controlled manner,” one academic wrote in January 2023. “Such conversations are mostly kept between people close to each other who are not afraid that their counterpart would think that they are crossing a line or saying too much, which could lead to a drastic change in relations.”

Unexpectedly, however, academic research has shown how conflict did become a reality of life. In the early 1990s, for example, when Georgia was stricken with its own conflicts and divisions, ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Tsopi also

formed their own joint self-defence group to defend against potential attacks by ultra-nationalist Georgian paramilitaries.

Regardless, the same experience in Tsopi is also replicated in another nearby village, Khojorni, where both ethnic groups again reside, albeit this time with an ethnic Armenian majority and a minority of ethnic Azerbaijanis. Subsequent to this 2023 visit to the village, one of us made many trips there from 2009 to 2021, i.e., including those in the aftermath of the 2020 war.

Even differing opinions on whether the church on the surrounding hills is Armenian or Caucasian Albanian do not disturb the calm. Again, such disagreements are not publicly discussed, or when they are, it is among close friends. Nonetheless, one of us was told by an ethnic Azerbaijani resident that Armenians were visibly sad following the end of the 2020 war.

But upon arriving unannounced and heading straight to the central square, there was already a mixed group of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis sitting under the shade of the trees playing backgammon. A local ethnic Azerbaijani teacher, who also writes poetry not only in his mother tongue but also Armenian, says that at Novruz, the children celebrate it together and make decorations and sweets at the school.



An ethnic Armenian child at Tsopi's school. Both ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis study at the school in Georgia © Onnik James Krikorian 2012

Ethnic Armenians in the majority ethnic Azerbaijani village of Tsopi in the Marneuli municipality of the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia © Onnik James Krikorian 2010



And just as an ethnic Armenian teaches Azerbaijani to pupils in Tsopi, the Georgian language teacher at the school in what is a majority ethnic Armenian village is an ethnic Azerbaijani. This could hardly be the case if inter-communal relations were not robust enough or if there were major divisions in the village. Indeed, at the end of the 2020 war, police were reportedly sent to the villages as a precautionary measure but there were no incidents and were thus withdrawn.

“During the years I have lived here, I have not encountered any conflict in this village,” 77-year-old Terlan Suleymanova, a Khojorni resident, told one of us in July 2021.<sup>9</sup> “People have always treated each other well, visited each other’s houses, and congratulated each other on their birthdays. We have always had a good relationship. At school, our relationship was even better.

[...] We have a good relationship in school, and the same between children.”

Her words were repeated by others on this visit too. Recent long-term research by various academics also confirms this.

Of particular note, Polish academics undertaking research on ethnic Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Georgia over a period of

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<https://twitter.com/onewmphoto/status/1421168529244577796?s=61&t=JgXx0nbjWGz1iUcuru2nHQ>

two years,<sup>10</sup> including during the 2020 war, found that where the two groups inhabited the same location or were in close proximity, social cohesion was largely maintained. Attitudes, however, were different in those communities geographically isolated from each other.

Around 300 ethnic Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti, for example, are believed to have gone to fight during the 2020 war via Armenia despite closed borders at the time because of the coronavirus pandemic. Some 400 ethnic Azerbaijanis also attempted to do the same from Georgia via Azerbaijan but were prevented. This was in part because the Azerbaijani government had said assistance was unnecessary.

Even so, if a decade ago the main medium for information was television, the situation has deteriorated with the exponential spread of social media. There was also significant peer pressure from ethnic kin to engage in the online information war. Protest rallies by both groups in Georgia did occur during the 2020 war, but they were small and certainly did not result in confrontation or violence.

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<sup>10</sup> Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Georgia, Uneasy Peace and Conflict Mobility in the Context of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371139155\\_Azerbaijanis\\_and\\_Armenians\\_in\\_Georgia\\_Uneasy\\_Peace\\_and\\_Conflict\\_Mobility\\_in\\_the\\_Context\\_of\\_the\\_2020\\_Nagorno-Karabakh\\_War\\_Research\\_and\\_Media\\_Report](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371139155_Azerbaijanis_and_Armenians_in_Georgia_Uneasy_Peace_and_Conflict_Mobility_in_the_Context_of_the_2020_Nagorno-Karabakh_War_Research_and_Media_Report)

The central square in Khojorni, a majority ethnic Armenian village in the Marneuli municipality of the Kvemo Kartli region in Georgia with an ethnic Azerbaijanian minority © Onnik James Krikorian 2011





The one exception was when Armenian trucks traveling through Ponichala, a settlement outside of Tbilisi where a large number of ethnic Azerbaijanis reside, were reportedly pelted by stones. But there were positive examples in Tbilisi too, with weekly prayers for peace<sup>11</sup> held by the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia during the 2020 war and attended by clerics from the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities.

Moreover, during the April 2016 war, two ruling Georgian Dream MPs – one ethnic Armenian and one ethnic Azerbaijani – released a joint statement calling on both groups not to aggravate a “centuries-old tradition of peaceful coexistence of these two ethnic groups on Georgian territory.”<sup>12</sup>

In July 2023, we also attended a puppet show in Marneuli by a Georgian-Armenian, Armen Hovhannisyian, that was funded by the Embassy of the Netherlands in Georgia. It sought to represent the notion of a harmonious village where a multicultural population lived side-by-side together in peace. As of July 2023, the play was due to be performed in Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian.

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<sup>11</sup> Opinion: religious diplomacy should be factored into the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process  
<https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-religious-diplomacy-should-be-factored-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-process>

<sup>12</sup> Karabakh: the view from Georgia  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/karabakh-view-from-georgia/>

The embassy is also supporting<sup>13</sup> Aram Akopian, a youth activist and sports coach in the ethnic Armenian village of Tsitelsopeli who works with children from other ethnic communities in the surrounding villages. When one of us met Akopian in July 2021,<sup>14</sup> he said that there had been no conflict with ethnic Azerbaijanis and that SOCAR Georgia also assisted the youth football team.

Hovhannisyian told us that not only does he teach ethnic Armenian children the art of puppetry but also ethnic Azerbaijanis.

Again, however, that is not to say that the recent war did not test relations. Although there were tensions between the two groups studying in Tbilisi during and after the 2020 conflict, Polish academics discovered that most of the individuals they interviewed expressed a desire to build friendships with each other and to see the conflict resolved peacefully.

Again, and as highlighted by individuals such as Arnold Stepanian, the head of the Public Movement Multinational Georgia NGO, positive dynamics, though strained, continued where ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijan came into contact with

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<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/MaaikevanKoldam/status/1677387753447718914?s=20>

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/onewmphoto/status/1677412587871281156?s=20>

An ethnic Azerbaijani child in Khojorni, a majority ethnic Armenian village in the Marneuli municipality of the Kvemo Kartli region in Georgia with an ethnic Azerbaijan minority © Onnik James Krikorian 2017



each other. Markets are again an example of where this can happen on a regular and frequent basis.

Even if the Sadakhlo market is no longer operational, ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis continue to do so at markets in Tbilisi, Marneuli, and elsewhere. At a market in the Samgori district of Tbilisi, for example, a trader who spoke in fluent Azerbaijani to one of us turned out to be of Armenian descent and worked next to another of ethnic Azerbaijani origin.

And as per the findings of the Polish study, ethnic Armenians residing in Samtskhe-Javakheti also frequently journeyed to Marneuli for the purpose of purchasing goods and merchandise from ethnic Azerbaijani vendors. During these trips, one trader often stayed overnight in this predominantly Azerbaijani town at the homes of his Azerbaijani counterparts.

In another example mentioned, a married couple of Azerbaijani origin were engaged in trade at Tbilisi's Lilo market. Their son had parted ways with his ethnic Armenian girlfriend amid the events of the 2020 conflict. Following the war, however, they reconciled and rekindled their relationship.

Certainly, at Tbilisi's Dezerter Bazaar visited for this report, one shop employed both an ethnic Armenian and an ethnic

Azerbaijani, and the former was particularly open in her conversation.

Svetlana, an ethnic Armenian from the Georgian capital with relatives in Armenia and ethnic Azerbaijani friends in Tbilisi, criticised Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for “giving away lands,” but her rationale was more straightforward.

If that was going to be the outcome of the war, then why didn't he reach an agreement earlier on to end the fighting and save thousands of lives on both sides, she said. “When the war broke out, we were worried about both the Armenian soldiers and the Azeri soldiers,” she continued, [but] we didn't use the words Armenian and Azerbaijani. There was no difference for us. [There are] children who should be alive right now, but they are not. We feel equally sorry for both sides.”

She also spoke fondly of her ethnic Azerbaijani friends. Not only is she invited to their weddings, but at the wedding of one of her relatives, an ethnic Azerbaijani was invited to sing. Politics, it seems, though part of ethnic identity, is not sufficient to prevent interpersonal relations between many ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia, especially in terms of trade.

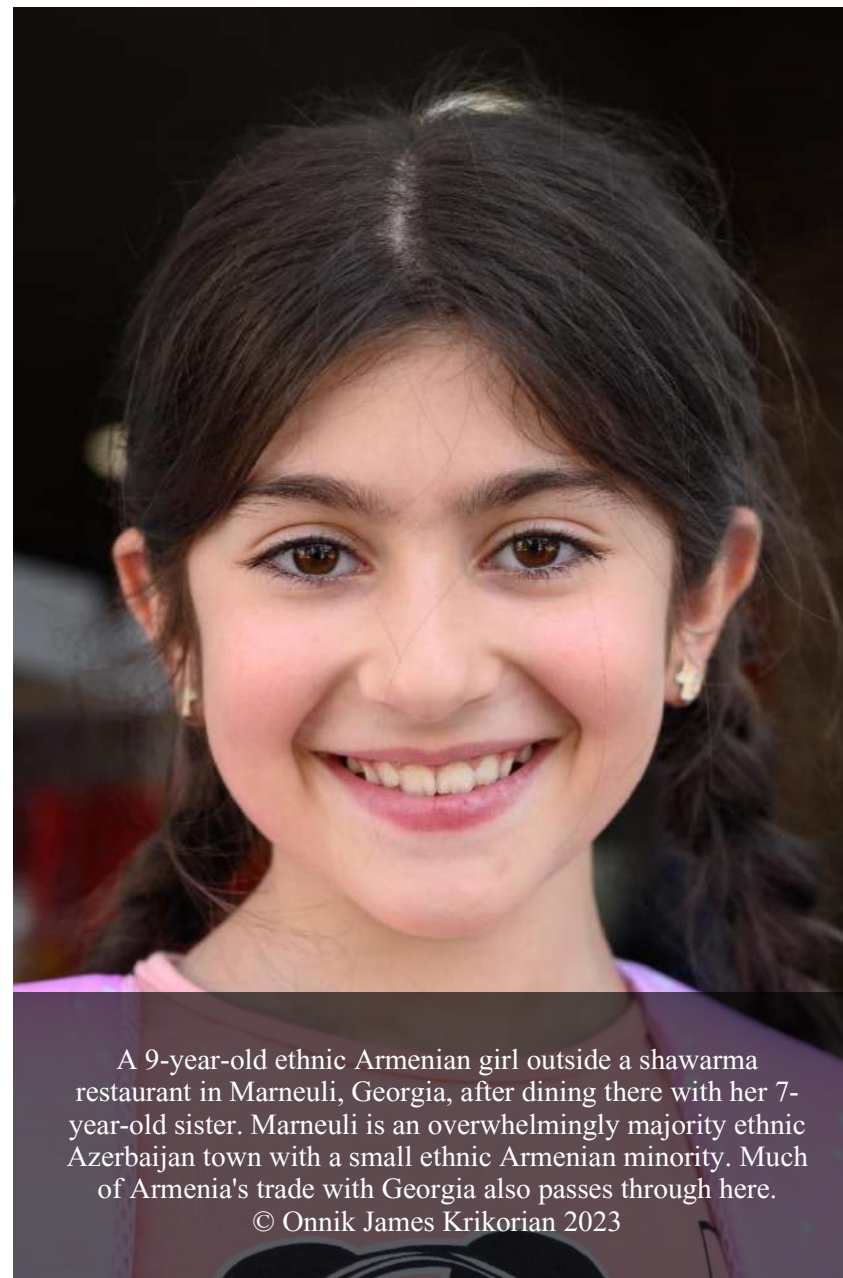
Indeed, Svetlana's Azerbaijani colleague, Elvira, summed up the situation succinctly. “We have been working here for seven years, and there has never been a situation that would shake our trust in each other,” she said. “During the war, of course, there were

people from both sides who said bad things, but I didn't want to hear those who said bad things about the people I love and value.”

Naturally, there are instances when mutual suspicion arises due to circulating propaganda, but on the whole, relationships remain positive. “The relationship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia depends mainly on whether people encounter representatives of the opposing group during their daily activities,” one of the academic papers referenced in this report again concluded.

“[...] in mixed villages,” it continued, “residents are more determined to maintain good neighbourly relations since they live side by side and are related to each other through economic and social ties. The conflict remains taboo, which should be followed to maintain the delicate equilibrium. As for the Lilo marketplace, Armenians and Azerbaijanis who work there prefer to maintain good business relations [...].”

Such a reality was highlighted when we traveled from Sadakhlo to Khojorni. Though the taxi driver, the ethnic Azerbaijani mentioned earlier, highlighted which villages were also co-inhabited by both groups en-route, he responded spontaneously when asked if there were ever any problems. “Do not seek to drive these two peoples apart,” he demanded.



A 9-year-old ethnic Armenian girl outside a shawarma restaurant in Marneuli, Georgia, after dining there with her 7-year-old sister. Marneuli is an overwhelmingly majority ethnic Azerbaijan town with a small ethnic Armenian minority. Much of Armenia's trade with Georgia also passes through here.

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Ethnic Azerbaijani villagers in Tsopi prepare food for a wedding in the majority ethnic Azerbaijani village in Georgia with an ethnic Armenian minority. Ethnic Armenians were among the guests © Onnik James Krikorian 2012



Ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani children at the school in the majority ethnic Azerbaijani village of Tsopi which has an ethnic Armenian minority © Onnik James Krikorian 2011

An ethnic Armenian resident of Tsopi, a majority ethnic Azerbaijani village of Tsopi in the Marneuli municipality of the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia © Onnik James Krikorian 2011



## Conclusion

This report does not seek to offer itself as an exhaustive study, but it does hope to suggest that there are examples and lessons to be learned from the experience of Armenian-Azerbaijan co-existence that can be found and should not be under-estimated. From schools to markets, the two communities have found ways to manage inter-communal relations despite the difficulties.

Some term this a *community of practice*.<sup>15</sup>

Though radicals do exist in both communities, their impact remains minimal despite the recent war and the loss of lives among their ethnic kin in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, they arguably represent a much-needed positive narrative when much of the information space is instead defined by an endless flow of negativity and nationalist rhetoric.

Nonetheless, as talk of the future (re)integration of Karabakh's ethnic Armenian community remains despite the recent exodus, and certainly in terms of transboundary relations, there are some points that do stand out. First, people-to-people contact matters. From our experience, as well as that of those academic papers

cited, interaction between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis is perhaps the main factor in nurturing amicable relations.

Secondly, although the issue of school textbooks remains a problem with both communities, even in co-inhabited villages using materials from Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is clear that living and working side by side is enough of a counter to any nationalist narratives contained within. As one ethnic Armenian teacher said, when an ethnic Azerbaijani child reads about their 'enemy,' they remember her.

It should be remembered that in a post-peace environment, school textbooks will likely change, but it will take time even when such a day comes.

Indeed, schools can play a positive role in bringing both children and parents together, even when classes are segregated along ethnic lines in communities made up of both groups. This might well become a reality in Karabakh when, for example, Azerbaijani IDPs return to locations once previously inhabited by both. They can also be helpful in developing mutual linguistic skills.

Arguably, however, a first step as a confidence building measure could be markets, though it is important not to forget any regional dimension. Here, Georgia offers a unique opportunity to start the

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<sup>15</sup> Communities of Practices: Prospects for the Armenian-Azerbaijani Everyday Engagement across the Conflict Divide  
<https://caucasusedition.net/communities-of-practices-prospects-for-the-armenian-azerbaijani-everyday-engagement-across-the-conflict-divide/>



ball rolling with cross-border markets effectively on ‘neutral ground.’ The Bagratashen-Sadakhlo market, for example, is a definite model that should be examined, including identifying the issues that led to its closure.

“There is no problem between us and Armenians,” 75-year-old Ferhad Naibov, the owner of the cafe in Sadakhlo which employs an Armenian from Armenia, told us. “The rule is that you should not quarrel with the Armenian nation and there should not be enmity between Azerbaijanis and Armenians living in Georgia. We have the benefit of the [Yerevan-Tbilisi] road and Armenians come to my cafe.”

But while Naibov benefits financially from the road, others do not. “It would be good if the market was reopened,” he says. “If there is a market, then there is a livelihood. It is difficult for young people to find a job here. Every morning, many have to travel to Tbilisi to work.”

Initiatives such as regional markets were but one hope of the late Armenian peace activist, Georgi Vanyan, who launched his Tekali project in the early 2010s. With regular meetings between Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian citizens, including ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the regional dimension was never forgotten. All three nations have more to benefit from each other than outside forces, he believed.

Tekali, an ethnic Azerbaijani village in Georgia situated on the intersection of the country’s borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan, allowed Armenians and Azerbaijanis from the regions of their respective countries to also meet there. Today, most Track II efforts until this day only bring together a select few, usually only English speakers from the capitals, and represent an ‘elite’ group of civil society actors.

At Vanyan’s Tekali meetings, everyone was welcome and included academics, activists, and local villagers from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Meanwhile, even Track II meetings in Tbilisi still do not impart among their participants from Armenia and Azerbaijan, let alone introduce them to, numerous examples of co-existence between the two ethnic groups in the Georgian capital or in areas that are literally reachable less than 60-90 minutes away by road. Yet they all offer many examples of a reality that challenges dominant nationalist narratives.

Vanyan’s hopes were that such trilateral meetings could also lead to regional media projects as well as the resumption of cross-border trade in the same way that Sadakhlo once was. It should be noted that Radio Marneuli in Kvemo Kartli broadcasts and reports in the Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Georgian languages. Georgian Public TV also has a minority language broadcasting schedule.

These should be factored into future Track II initiatives held in Georgia, while it should also be remembered that any escalation in the online information war could potentially threaten such positive examples of co-existence unless effectively countered. However, the sensitivities of co-existence in the context of an often-acrimonious conflict should be taken into account.

Unexpectedly, at the very end of this research, one of us was invited to present on conflict and the media at a European Union and Norwegian Embassy-funded summer school<sup>16</sup> in Georgia for Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian participants. Refreshingly, some of the Georgian participants were ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis from Samtskhe-Javakheti and Marneuli.

Moreover, the 10-day long gathering outside of Tbilisi also included day trips to Tbilisi, where participants visited the ethnic Azerbaijani-run mosque and the St. Gevorg Armenian church in the city's old town, and optionally to Tserakvi, a village in the Marneuli municipality that each year since 2014 has hosted the One Caucasus festival<sup>17</sup> where bands from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia perform.

There could be no better end to this report.

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<sup>16</sup> Young people from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia gather for first South Caucasus Youth Peace Summer School

<https://www.commonspace.eu/event/young-people-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-gather-first-south-caucasus-youth-peace-summer>

<sup>17</sup> [https://onnik-krikorian.com/new\\_site/?s="one+caucasus"](https://onnik-krikorian.com/new_site/?s=)

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## FRONT COVER

An ethnic Azerbaijani in the village of Tekali, Georgia, during a grassroots Track II meeting meeting organized by Georgi Vanyan  
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