



# GEORGIA





U.S. ARMY PHOTO



Lying in the shadow of the Caucasus Mountains, a group of small homes immediately draws attention. Surrounding the homes, there are no signs of commerce or schools. The people who live there view strangers suspiciously. The community they reside in is not home. They have no history there. It is the place they wound up after fighting between Russian and Georgian troops forced them to flee with little more than the clothes on their backs. With the Russian border not far away, there remains a constant threat of more violence.



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01 The Jvari Monastery, a sixth century Georgian Orthodox monastery, sits high on a mountaintop in eastern Georgia.

02 Tbilisi, the ancient and vibrant capital city of Georgia, spreads across both banks of the Mtkvari River and is surrounded on three sides by mountains.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY SFC JESSE BELFORD

03 A woman gazes out of the fence surrounding her small yard in a Georgian IDP camp. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

It is not an unusual occurrence for sentries to return to their post on the Georgia side of the border to find the border has “crept” overnight — sometimes by inches, sometimes by feet. As a result of the problems in Ossetia and Abkhazia, there are a large number of internally displaced persons. It is estimated that more than 300,000 people live in IDP camps.

The Republic of Georgia is strategically located east of the Black Sea and controls much of the Caucasus Mountains and the routes through them. A former member of the Soviet Union, the country gained its independence in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. From 1991 to 2003, a rather ineffectual and corrupt government was in place. An effort to manipulate the elections of 2003, lead to widespread protests that ultimately ousted then-President Eduard Shevarnadze. The movement became known as the Rose Revolution and the new country was solidified in 2004, when Mikheil Saakashvili came into power with the backing of his party, the United National Movement. Since that

time the country has seen great progress, but efforts have been slowed by Russian aggression.

In 2011, the Georgian Dream Coalition, headed by billionaire philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili brought the two Georgian opposition parties together, winning a majority of the seats in the October 2012 parliamentary elections and took control of the government from the United National Movement. Ivanishvili was named prime minister and Giorgi Margvelashvili was named president. On Nov. 20, 2013, Georgia’s legislature confirmed Irakli Garibashvili as the new president. The new government has made integration with the West a priority. The country’s top foreign policy goals are joining the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Under the new constitution, the President is elected by absolute majority popular vote in two rounds if needed for a 5-year term. The President may seek re-election. The prime minister is nominated by the parliament and appointed by the president. The parliament, or *Sakartvelos Parlamenti*, is comprised of 150 seats, with 77 members directly elected in a single nationwide constituency by proportional representation vote and 73 directly elected in single-seat constituencies by simple majority vote. Members of parliament serve for four years.

The Georgian Armed Forces fall under the Ministry of Defense and are comprised of land forces and air defense forces. Naval forces fall under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Citizens between the age of 18 to 34 must serve 18 months of compulsory military service.

The country’s population is by-in-large Georgian, with 83.8 percent of the people claiming Georgian as their ethnic group. Other ethnic groups are Azeri, 6.5 percent; Armenian 5.7 percent and Russian 1.5



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01 The largest IDP camp sits isolated in the Georgian countryside with Russia looming behind the mountains in the distance. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

02 The Holy Trinity Cathedral, known as the Sameba, is the main cathedral of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Tbilisi. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SFC JESSE BELFORD

03 CMSE team members take part in a Wounded Warrior Working Group with key stakeholders at the Georgian Ministry of Defence conference room. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

percent. The official language of the country is Georgian, with 71 percent of the people speaking Georgian. The official religion of the country is Orthodox Christian (83.9 percent), with Muslim, Armenian-Gregorian and Catholic making up the remainder of religions.

More than 50 percent of the people live in urban areas, with rural farms and villages dotting the countryside.

As was the case with most countries that claimed independence at the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgia's economy has struggled and for a time was hampered by corruption, which was a hallmark of the Soviet regime. The country was largely dependent on Russia to meet its energy needs. In an effort to distance itself even further from Russia, the country is now capable of supplying its own energy and gas supply through renovations of hydropower plants and by importing gas from Azerbaijan instead of from Russia. Utilizing its strategic position between Europe and Asia, Georgia is seeking to become a hub for gas, oil and other goods through a number of projects like the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus gas pipeline and the Kars-Akhalkalaki Railroad. The south Caucasus gas



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pipeline alone will bring \$2 billion in foreign investment to the country. In 2014, Georgia published its 2020 Economic Development Strategy, which is driven by a \$6 billion private equity fund set up by by former Prime Minister Ivanishvilihe, that will invest in tourism, agriculture, logistics, energy, infrastructure and manufacturing. **SW**



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# CMSE GEORGIA

BY JANICE BURTON

Perched on the divide between Europe and Asia, the Republic of Georgia is a melting pot of people and cultures. Georgia has known centuries of conflict with clashes between the ancient world powers to modern day clashes with Russia. At one time, Alexander the Great even ruled over the country. With such an eclectic influence of cultures, the country has a unique blend of architecture, literature, music and religion. The lush countryside is dotted with crumbling castles, monasteries and fortifications standing testament to its long history.

Today, Georgia continues to strive against those who would take its freedom. The most recent assault was in 2008 when Russian troops moved into the contested areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Those living near the Russian border are reminded daily of the threat that looms on the border. Many were displaced from their homes, while others wake to find the Russian border has crept even closer to their

lands. And, for those who were forced from their homes new, very real threats face them every day.

Georgia is also facing several threats from within: threats from Russia, threats from extremists and from foreign fighters. Other internal problems such as unemployment, an aging infrastructure and a distressed economy further exacerbate the problems faced by not only the people, but by the government to whom the people are looking to make things better. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Internally Displaced Persons camps located throughout the countryside. An IDP is an internally displaced person who is forced to flee his home, but who, unlike refugees, remain within the country's border.

In an effort to showcase the ability of the government to take care of the populace, the CMSE has been working closely with Georgian residents living in Internally Displaced Persons camps. The IDP camps resulted from the 2008 conflict with Russia. The people who were displaced because of the conflict now live in small camps that are dispersed in the region. Since gaining

independence, Georgia has continually faced threats from separatist movements in the regions of Adjara, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In the Abkhazia region alone, more than 200,000 people were forced to flee their homes due to unrest in the region.<sup>01</sup> When fighting broke out in South Ossetia between the Government of Georgia and Russia, an additional 160,000 people were forced to abandon their homes. The fighting destroyed many homes, schools and infrastructure, and brought the number of IDPs in excess of 300,000.<sup>02</sup>

The majority of the IDP settlements are located in rural areas, far away from commerce and potential employment. The camps are comprised of rows of small houses. Dark smoke curls out of the chimneys of each of the homes. They are heated by coal. The settlements themselves are fenced for the protection of the people. The roads leading into and through the camp are unpaved. During the rainy season, the roads become unpassable, a little more than mud bogs. Livestock belonging to the residents roam freely down the roads — cows and horses amble past a group of people who are visiting the camp. Chickens scratch



the dirt, clucking at the visitors as they pass by. Each family is allocated a small patch of land for farming. Floods often wipe away their efforts.

It is on these communities that the Civil Military Support Element of the 92nd Civil Affairs Battalion, 95th Civil Affairs Brigade focuses. The goals of the CMSE are complex. First, their presence and connections to the settlements allow them to understand the sentiments of the residents and what factors change the way they look at the government. Second, through gained understanding and communication, the team is able to help meet some of the more pressing needs within the settlement and bring them to the attention of the government. By building these relationships, the team can help counter violent extremists who may play on the problems of the residents in the camp to stir up discontent or recruit residents to support their cause. The presence of the CMSE along with government officials, establishes a persistent presence of the United States Government's engagement with the people and the Republic of Georgia, while building support for the Republic.

At the end of October 2015, the CMSE traveled several hours away from the capital, to visit two large IDP

settlements populated by people displaced by the Russian incursion in South Ossetia. The two settlements Akhalsopeli and Mokhisi are not far from the Russian border, a line that the CMSE cannot go near. Each of the IDP settlements has its own kindergarten program that runs in the community. Those programs were the focus of the visit.

The camps are located about two hours away from Tbilisi, where the CMSE spends the majority of their time. Traveling to the camp is via fairly modern roadways. It's when you leave the highway that you begin to realize how different the settlements are from the storybook streets of the capital. It had rained quite a bit before the visit. It was cold. The roads were muddy. Along with the CMSE on this visit is a representative of Spirit of America. The nonprofit organization steps in to help fund projects that the military cannot fund.

Driving into the first camp, residents step out of their homes and peer at the convoy as it passes by. A stray horse ambles down the road, and chickens peck at the ground alongside the road. The convoy stops at what appears to be the center of the settlement. Two community buildings sit in the center of the settlement. One hosts the daycare/school; the other is a

community center for use by all of the settlement's residents.

If the older residents appear to be defeated, the children seem filled with hope. Each day the children gather in the school. They sing songs, read books and learn. On this particular day, they were dressed in their best. Parents who were made aware of the visit (mostly mothers) lined up behind the students. The students had prepared for the visit of the American team, and they performed for them. They sang and recited poems. With the hearty approval of the team, the children became more excited. Then the CMSE gave the children a gift. On this particular day, the CMSE brought boxes of toys and books. Additionally, they brought a new heater to replace the wood burning stove that heats the building, which will provide cleaner air for the children. Like kids at Christmas, the children rushed to the toys. The CMSE demonstrated how to use some of the toys. Some of the children fanned through the books. The parents and teachers who watched smiled. The donation benefitted the kindergarten by providing educational products to enhance the educational opportunities for the children. In total, three settlements benefitted from the efforts of the team and Spirit of America.

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01 CMSE team members and a Spirit of America rep talk with a local official while conducting a walk-through of an IDP settlement. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

02 A CMSE team member and a Spirit of America rep install a heater in a classroom to create safer and healthier conditions for students in the IDP camp. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SFC JESSE BELFORD

03 CMSE team members are treated to a show of songs and poem recitals from kindergarten children in thanks for donated supplies. U.S. ARMY PHOTO



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## THE SCHOOL IS HOME TO SEVERAL VULNERABLE POPULATIONS, WHICH ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE INFLUENCED BY OUTSIDE ACTORS

work was completed using local contractors and met the principal's desire to have a safe place for children to practice. It met the U.S. Ambassador to Georgia's goal of countering violent extremism and recruitment in Georgia, while establishing a persistent engagement by the U.S. in the region and show cased the ability of the government to meet the needs of the people. Numerous projects of this kind were conducted in schools throughout affected areas in Georgia.

With its troubled history as a backdrop and the current problems facing the country, it would seem implausible that the Armed Forces of the Republic of Georgia would focus on anything other than national defense. The exact opposite is true. Since 2010, the country has deployed more than 12,000 troops in support of International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan; second only to the United States. Beyond Afghanistan, the country has answered the call sending soldiers where they are needed in support of international security.

In Afghanistan, Georgian soldiers serve without caveats, meaning they can be assigned any mission, including direct combat. From 2010 to 2014, they carried out combat missions in Helmand Province alongside U.S. Marines. During that time, 31 Georgians paid the ultimate price and an additional 282 soldiers have been wounded. The United States Government is helping Georgia care for the wounded warriors through U.S. Security Assistance programs to strengthen their military medical facilities into institutions able to adequately treat and care for its wounded military personnel. Leading the charge is the Civil Military Support Element, which has routine engagements with the Georgian Ministry of



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The CMSE also developed close relationships with local schools located in predominantly ethnic minority area of Georgia. In the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region, the CMSE worked with Public School Number One, which is often referred to as the Armenian School. The school is home to several vulnerable populations, which are more likely to be influenced by outside actors. All of the classes are conducted in Armenian.

There are 400 students in the school, which is open to students grades 1-12. The school is 70 percent male. The school's gymnasium had fallen into disrepair. During the long winter months, the students had no place to play or practice for sports activities. The CMSE met with local contractors to get price estimates to repair the floor, paint and repair the walls of the gym and replace the basketball backboards. The





Health and the Defence Ministry, and in particular the wounded warriors' program working group, to discuss not only the care for wounded warriors, but also the facilities in which the soldiers will be treated. The goal is for Georgia to become the regional experts in amputee care.

Members of the CMSE have developed a close-working relationship not only with the government that addresses these issues, but also with the veterans themselves. They have been working closely with both parties to choose the location for the new veterans rehabilitation center, which will be located just outside of Tbilisi, the Georgian seat of government. The CMSE frequently meets with both parties to work out compromises between what the veterans want and what the Georgian Government can actually provide. Since 1998, Georgia has received more than \$220 million in Foreign Military Financing, with funds from that pool being specifically used to provide equipment, training and advisory support to strengthen Georgia's ability to care for its wounded warriors. The government showed its commitment to the veterans by establishing a new agency devoted to caring for Georgia's veterans.

Throughout their assignment in Georgia, the CMSE participated in a number of events that focused on the wounded soldiers. In June 2015, the

CMSE represented the U.S. Embassy at the grand opening of the Parasports Development Center, which is designed to further the rehabilitation assets available to wounded Georgian warriors. The facility, which will work with disabled people throughout the country, signed a formal agreement between Parasports and the Ministry of Defence that will allow wounded warriors to utilize the facility and its coaches to increase their level of mobility and activity.

In July 2015, another agreement was signed between the Chichua Medical Center Mzera in Tbilisi and the Ministry of Defence Medical Department and the Georgian Wounded Warrior Program that will allow wounded warriors with eye problem and disease to receive world-class care at the medical center at no expense to the soldier. The initiative shows that the Georgian Ministry of Defence Medical Department is utilizing all possible approaches to improve the care for their wounded warriors by reaching out to private organizations.

In July, the CMSE, along with the Georgian Inter-Disciplinary Amputee Rehabilitation Team and the Georgian Wounded Warriors, held a 10-day rehabilitation course at the Tserovani Rehabilitation Center for wounded warriors who live outside of Tbilisi. The wounded warriors had varying degrees of disability from a variety of conflicts. While at the

camp, they played basketball, soccer and table tennis. One of the main objectives of the event was to gauge participation and mobility of the wounded warriors, while developing a spirit of community among the rehabilitation community.

In August 2015, the same team welcomed seven Ukrainian wounded warriors for treatment. The Ukrainian soldiers will receive occupational therapy, physical therapy and behavioral health rehabilitation treatment at the Tserovani Rehab Clinic. The seven soldiers underwent therapy for injuries that they received during the Ukraine conflict. This was a major step forward for Georgia in terms of setting the regional standard for wounded warrior care.

In October 2015, another 15 Ukraine soldiers came to Georgia. This time the soldiers spent two weeks at Tserovani Rehabilitation Center undergoing physiological rehabilitation care for wounds received during the ongoing Ukrainian conflict. The Ukraine Government does not have the facilities or programs to offer the same level of behavioral health rehabilitation to their Soldiers who have been fighting in the ongoing conflict. Programs like this showcase Georgia's ability to support its allies effectively and serve as a major step in becoming the regional wounded warrior care center.

In October, the CMSE hosted a meeting between the Ministry of Defence medical Department, the Wounded Warrior Support Department, the Sports Department and the interdisciplinary rehabilitation group, to discuss current wounded warrior care, issues and initiatives.

Taking a lead in these programs, initiatives, the CMSE is able to bring the pertinent players to the table to further the goals of the Ministry of Defence and to ensure that the wounded warriors are provided top-notch medical care. Further, the relationships Georgia is building in the region through these programs shows the people that it is capable of meeting their needs. **SW**



01 A Georgian wounded warrior receives medical care.

02 CMSE team members along with a Spirit of America rep deliver educational supplies to an IDP settlement kindergarten class.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS

**NOTES** 01. Georgia IDP Project, <http://georgia.idp.arizonaeduc>, accessed March 2016. 02. Ibid



## SPIRIT of AMERICA

**A small civil military support element is operating out of the embassy. They see a need, but they have no funding to meet that need. What do they do? Since 2005, they have had the ability to turn to Spirit of America, a non-profit organization whose mission is to support the “safety and success of Americans serving abroad and the local people and partners they seek to help.” Retired Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, calls the group a “philanthropic rapid response team.”**

The organization's advisory board, a veritable who's who in the Department of Defense, boasts members like Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Charles Cleveland, Gen. (Ret.) Jack Keane, Dr. David Kilcullen, Adm. (Ret.) Eric Olsen and Gen. (Ret.) James Mattis, who said he buys into the idea of Spirit of America because it opens “a whole new vista for direct support when U.S. Government money is not the answer.”

Founded by Jim Hake — a technology entrepreneur, who started one of the first Internet media companies — following the attacks of 9/11, Spirit of America provides private assistance in direct response to needs identified by American military and civilian personnel. Support comes in a variety of ways. For some, support is given through project funding. Working with a unit, Spirit of America can develop and fund solutions for U.S. civil-military teams, which include employment and job training, education, livestock health and small business assistance and village stability.

Help can also come in the form of know-how. Working with GLG Research, Spirit of America offers U.S. civil military teams access to more than 300,000 private-sector subject-matter experts. Of course, sometimes needs are more pressing and that's when Spirit of America steps in and provides a variety of materiel goods from blankets and clothing to computers and school supplies. They also have access to wheelchairs and water purification, as well as sewing machines and playground equipment. The list really has no bounds, and when the need is made known, Spirit of America staffers find a way to make it happen, which includes delivering the supplies to the team.

In Georgia, a Civil Affairs team assigned to the 97th Civil Affairs Battalion recently put Spirit of America to work to support displaced children in a contested area of the country. In 2008, armed conflict broke out in Georgia when the Russian Army started peacekeeping operations in South Ossetia

and Abkhazia. During the five-day conflict, 170 servicemen, 14 policemen and 228 civilians from Georgia were killed and 1,747 wounded. Sixty-seven Russian servicemen were killed, 283 were wounded and 365 South Ossetian servicemen and civilians (combined) were killed, according to an official EU fact-finding report about the conflict. Georgian citizens fleeing from the ongoing tensions have found home in an Internally Displaced Persons Camp.

In the camp, a large number of families live in small homes. Each camp has its own school and community center. The schools are not well funded and are heated by wood heaters. In an effort to improve the living conditions and the efforts of the school, the CA team partnered with Spirit of America to provide books and toys to the children as well as a more efficient means of heating the center, where the children spend their days and nap.

Traveling with the CA team was Isaac Egan, a former Soldier who now works with Spirit of America and the staff of *Special Warfare*. Spirit of America's goal isn't just to help the military, it also puts former Soldiers to work. Egan's job is to facilitate the organization's work with the military. He gets to know the teams, he sees what they are doing and what they need. And then, as in this case, he helps them meet a need and in doing so, builds rapport with the Georgian people.

Members of the CA team speak easily with Egan. He understands them. He understands their limitations and he helps them build on their previous successes. During the day-long trip, the team visited two internally displaced persons camps and brought smiles not only to the children, who lined up to play with the toys and flip through the books, but also their teachers who work so hard to ensure the children have a safe place to learn. The team members are quick to point out that they couldn't do what they were doing without the assistance of Spirit America. For Spirit of America, the goal is making U.S. troops and diplomats safer and more successful in their missions by helping local people who are not reached by large-scale aid programs. **SW**



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# GEORGIA IN DEVELOPMENT

## NATO, RUSSIAN AND DAESH INFLUENCE IN GEORGIA

BY ROMAN TEROFF

*The views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Defense Department or the U.S. government.*

Georgia faces many challenges as a developing post-Soviet country with aspirations for NATO membership and integration into the European Union. As the government continues to strengthen its cooperation with its partners in the United States and Europe, Georgia's northern neighbor, Russia, continues to obstruct development efforts and puts pressure on NATO and its allies to keep the relatively small country in limbo.

Another issue also looms large for the transitioning state and could be an even bigger setback to stability than Russian interference. Daesh has turned its attention to Georgia's Muslim communities, and reports of Daesh recruitment and influence in these regions have begun to emerge.

How Georgia addresses each of these challenges will determine whether the state moves toward growth and stability, or finds itself in a grave struggle to free itself from harmful outside influence — whether from Russia or extremists groups. This article examines these challenges and what possible futures Georgia may experience.

### RUSSIA, NATO AND GEORGIA IN THE MIDDLE

In a recent visit to the United States, Georgian Minister of Defense, Tinatin Khidasheli noted that Georgia is a strong ally to the West and has demonstrated its military and diplomatic capabilities. Minister Khidasheli stated that Georgia deserves NATO integration and NATO needs Georgia as a member. Georgians are pursuing the path to NATO integration and anticipating an upcoming decision on the issue from NATO at the 2016 Summit in Warsaw.

A Georgia-NATO partnership has the potential to stabilize the security environment in the Caucasus region. Despite what Russia may think, Georgia's possible NATO membership offers an opportunity to strengthen the security of Russia's southern border and help stabilize the North Caucasus.

Dr. Mamuka Tsereteli, a senior Research Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, argues that Russia has not learned its lesson from the 1990s when it supported the separatist war in Abkhazia against the Georgian central government, which helped

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A woman surveys the damage from the what's left of her balcony in hard-hit city of Gori following the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia. DoD PHOTO BY LT. CMDR. JIM HOEFFT



destabilize and radicalize the region. According to Tsereteli, Chechen fighters who fought against the Georgian government soon turned their arms against Russia. The same pattern can be observed in the North Caucasus Region after Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 with the stationing of Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Georgia's NATO membership would also provide collective defense, which would be efficient and cost effective. According to the article, "Economic Benefits of NATO Integration" by Nina Chitaia, collective defense through NATO could advance Georgia's economic development through the reduction of its defense spending and establishing an attractive business atmosphere, increasing the flow of foreign investments.

## THE RUSSIAN IMPEDIMENT TO STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Presently, Georgia's main challenge to stability is Russian aggression and Russian influence over Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia is facing the process of demarcation, also known as "borderization," which has resulted in the manipulation of Russian-occupied territory lines called Administrative Boundary Lines. "Borderization" has created nearly 23,000 internally displaced persons in proximity of the South Ossetia ABL. Nongovernmental organizations are primarily helping to support this population working on issues of poverty and social inclusivity since the government response to the issue is largely tied up in legislative efforts. With an estimated 270,000 IDPs in Georgia since the '90s, it's evident that Russia's efforts to dominate its neighbor have a large human impact.

Unfortunately, humanitarian assistance and basic development programs are becoming part of a geopolitical chess match. While IDP communities continuously work with nongovernmental organizations to build a more a stable environment, Russia continues to move its troops and the Administrative Boundary Line further into Georgian territory largely in protest to the Georgia-NATO relationship.

There are tough decisions ahead for Georgia if it wants to continue to attract investors, foreign assistance and tourists. According to Khidasheli," the Russian sphere of influence is dangerous for the region" and "Russia does not care about democratic participation in anything" as seen by the events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. With Russian check points being marked half a kilometer from Georgia's main east-west highway and a mile of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline now falling within Russian control, the negative effects on Georgia's development as a transit country for commercial goods, oil products and military cargo may undermine the economic viability of investors and potential donors.

Additionally, there are growing concerns in Georgia about the risks of civil society organizations working in proximity of the Administrative Boundary Lines. Most recently, Russians have advanced the Administrative Boundary Line approximately two kilometers deeper into Georgian territory, cutting off villages' and farmers' access to their lands and fields. With reports of arrests and abductions common around the ABLs, some donors are becoming skeptical of providing assistance.

How can civil society organizations build capacity in communities that wake up to barbed wire fences splitting them in half? Efforts to establish cross-community dialogue and peace negotiations between split communities are ongoing, but the uncertainty of the shifting borders constantly raises Georgia's fear of apprehension and arrest.

This is Russia's strategy to undermine Georgian efforts to advance regional stability through provocative action that creates uncertainty among NATO members concerning Georgian

integration. While Georgia maintains its position that it won't be provoked into action and looks for support from its Western partners, Georgian borders continue to shift and, at times, shrink.

## AN INTERNAL THREAT: ISOLATED COMMUNITIES

While Georgia focuses on NATO and Russia, the threat of Daesh to Georgia's vulnerable communities, specifically in the Pankisi Valley Region, Kvemo-Kartli and Adjara, is expanding.

Specifically, the Pankisi Valley Region has a history of jihadist activity and remains geographically isolated from the rest of the country, making it difficult for the Georgian government to control and influence. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia's wars against Chechen separatists led to the establishment of Pankisi as a sanctuary for thousands of refugees.

Chechen, Arab and allegedly al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters used the area to launch insurgent strikes into Russian territory. In 2002 and 2004, Georgian security forces largely cleared the area of militants and criminal networks; however, the inflow of foreign fighters over the years left a lasting impact on the area and a Wahhabi influence over a traditionally Kist population.

Russian security services have accused Georgia of working in tandem with jihadist organizations for years, suggesting Georgia does so to secure additional defenses against future Russian altercations. Yet the notion that Georgia could be *harboring* terrorists — regardless of the veracity of this claim — could give Russia another reason to invade.

With reports of Daesh recruitment of youth and even women in the Pankisi Valley region and other Muslim communities, Georgia should seize the

**WHILE GEORGIA MAINTAINS ITS POSITION THAT IT WON'T BE PROVOKED INTO ACTION AND LOOKS FOR SUPPORT FROM ITS WESTERN PARTNERS, GEORGIAN BORDERS CONTINUE TO SHIFT AND, AT TIMES, SHRINK**



opportunity to establish closer links with these isolated communities and pursue social integration and cross-ethnic inclusivity within these vulnerable populations.

### “DISAPPEARING” YOUTH

While men and women may be recruited through a hub of passing foreign fighters, excited to join the fight and make some money in Iraq and Syria, youth are often enticed through a virtual world of social media where former residents of the valley now fighting in Iraq and Syria, are regarded as role models and heroes.

Outside analysts may argue that the main problem is unemployment and marginalization, but locals have



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voiced that the number one problem is the extremely powerful ideological propaganda coming from Daesh.

Aside from small trade and meager land cultivation, there are few promising life choices available in the valley. However, poverty alone is not enough to cause radicalization.

The prospect of a mercenary lifestyle is not hard for these young men to envision. For example, many young Pankisi men know the story of Tarkhan Batirashvili — a well-known Georgian jihadist who rose to be one of the leading commanders in Daesh. His rumored wealth and reputation have not helped to dissuade them from this path.

Daesh has established a massive, solid media network for online recruitment to capture the minds of those vulnerable to radicalization. Currently, there are a number of former Pankisi residents communicating online straight from the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. This has created a sense of admiration and pride among the youth, who view their former neighbors and friends fighting in Syria and Iraq as opportunists who were able to escape the dull life of the valley for a second chance at adventure, wealth and fame.

In his article in *The Intercept* entitled “The Mujahedeen’s Valley,”

Marcin Mamon explains that residents of the valley have repeatedly told police that their villages have become recruiting grounds for young people enticed to join the jihad in Syria. A representative of the Chechen diaspora in the valley said explicitly that if the Georgian state does not stop recruitment, “the valley’s youth will disappear,” according to Mamon’s article.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Regional experts generally conclude that there is little opportunity for men, women and youth in the valley, except to tend to their farms and livestock, go to school and attend the local mosque.

Yet, the region is actually better off than some other under-developed parts of Georgia such as Imereti or Gueria. The residents are not subject to systematic exclusion or discrimination; however the valley’s remote location has prevented many valley residents from engaging in economic activities or benefiting from Georgia’s period of economic growth.

While some experts argue that implementing education, employment and youth-oriented programs may help the region to stem radicalization, others like Onnik James Krikorian, a British journalist and counterterrorism consultant, believes countering



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**Georgian soldiers welcome U.S. troops for Exercise Noble Partner 15. This exercise is a critical part of Georgia's training for their contribution of a light infantry company to the NATO Response Force.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT. DANIEL COLE

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**A Georgian woman talks about living conditions for internally displaced persons following the Russian attacks in 2008.** U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JASON T. BAILEY

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**A Russian missile lies largely intact inside a home in Gori, Georgia shortly after the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia.** DOD PHOTO BY LT. CMDR. JIM HOEFT

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violent extremism initiatives in collaboration with civil society and local communities can reduce radicalization occurrences.

Targeted CVE measures can be designed to minimize radicalization through engagement with local communities and nongovernmental actors in countering extremist narratives. In Pankisi, CVE programs would be best suited to empower youth and families, as well as local religious, cultural and educational leaders.

Georgia's Minister of Defense, Tinatin Khidasheli, has acknowledged the emerging problem in the Pankisi region and noted that the region needs attention. While addressing questions at the U.S. Institute for Peace on Aug. 19, Khidasheli explained that the region needs to be more integrated into Georgian society and young people from the region need to feel a sense of national pride and belonging.

Better employment, economic opportunities and improved social welfare benefits can advance this aim, but peaceful religious education to young people will be essential in order to counter the narratives of violent extremist organizations like Daesh. On top of this, civil society organizations will have to become more involved in addressing the causes of radicalization and countering the recruitment campaigns of violent extremist organizations.

## GEORGIA'S FUTURE AND WAY FORWARD

"Stability is possible in Georgia without Russian rule and without taking orders from Moscow," explained Defense Minister Khidasheli. If Georgia is successful in joining NATO then others may follow and challenge Russia.

Ultimately the decision about Georgian membership in NATO in Warsaw in 2016 will either move Georgia forward or backward. Many Georgians will look at the decision as reassurance of their voting decisions, political strength and whether the risk to pursue Western ideals and NATO was worth the torment from Russian. This decision will also put NATO credibility on the line — either delivering its promise to Georgia or, if not, potentially allowing Russia to internally manipulate an organization of which they are not even a member. While Georgia constantly protests Russian expansion into its territories, with the Administrative Boundary Lines moving further and further into its sovereign areas, it will not take military action without the support of its Western partners.

Meanwhile, the vulnerable regions overlooked by Georgia have attracted dangerous attention from Daesh, and similar organizations in the past.

However, with the right outreach and approach to countering violent extremism, these areas, and the vulnerable youth living there, can still be reached and brought back from the edge.

Georgia will need to collaborate with international partners, nongovernmental organizations and local communities to share in best practices and create new opportunities to counter radicalization by building media and leadership capacity in these vulnerable communities to dispatch counter narratives to extremism and reduce the appeal of joining extremist groups.

Georgia has an opportunity and real potential to counter the Daesh threat. If the Georgian budget and political will can handle it, than the issue can be addressed through a targeted approach that will focus on vulnerable communities in Pankisi, Kvemo-Kartli and Adjara through a combination of development work and countering violent extremism initiatives. **SW**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Roman Terehoff** is a Training with Industry Fellow selected from the U.S. Army Civil Affairs branch on a one-year assignment at Creative. Roman will share with Creative and its partners his skills and experience as a Civil Affairs operator, while learning innovative industrial management practices, techniques and procedures.