The humanitarian impact of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict

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Although the issues of security, culture, and national identity remain at the center of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict, the two sides have made steady strides to end violence, hostility and improve the humanitarian conditions of those affected by the conflict. While negotiations and relations between the two sides are in a stalemate, the presence of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), has allowed citizens in both sides of the conflict to live a normal life. The European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, which has in operation since 2008 has helped reduce incidences of cross border violence, ensure stabilization, facilitated demilitarization of the border, encouraged trust-building between the two sides, and encourage a smooth movement of people and goods (Fischer, 2009, p.382). However, recent activities by both Abkhazia and Georgia pose a threat to cross-border trade, movement and are likely to contribute to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation between the two. In 2015, Abkhazia enacted the Law on the Status of Foreign Citizens and Law on the Procedures for Exit and Entry which limits services for people without Abkhazian citizenship (Jasutis, 2018, p.8). Similarly, Georgian Law on Occupied Territories continues to be an impediment to the peace process by derailing the resolution of the humanitarian crisis that has resulted from perennial conflicts between the two sides.

**Current Context: Free, secure, and open Border**

Negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia mainly revolve around resolving the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict. Both sides accept that having a free, open, and demilitarized border is the first step towards restoring close birder relations, trade, and improving living conditions for those affected by the conflict. In the document “‘*A Step to a Better Future*’, Georgia detailed plans to ease cross border restrictions, improve access to education for Abkhazians and help citizens of the breakaway region to benefit from services and opportunities obtained through Georgia’s close integration with the European Union (Jasutis, 2018 p.9). Georgia reiterated this stance in a 2018 speech, where its foreign affairs ministry pledged to improve cross-border relationships with Abkhazia through engagement, trust-building, and by supporting Abkhazia’s trade with Georgian and external markets (Blakkisrud et al.,2018 p.12). Citizens from both sides viewed this as a positive step in improving humanitarian conditions, enhancing cross-border relationships, and helping people affected by the war to get back to a normal life.

Despite pledges by both sides to improve cross-border relations, the idea of a secure, free and open border is yet to actualize. The hostility and distrust between the two sides remain the greatest impediment to the attainment of a free border or resolution of the humanitarian crisis surrounding the conflict. Both sides are unwilling to take broad steps towards supporting people affected by the conflict, demilitarizing the border, or facilitating cross-border trade and interactions. In 2015, Abkhazia enacted two laws, Law on the Status of Foreign Citizens and Law on the Procedures for Exit and Entry. The two laws required ethnic Georgians living in Gali to obtain Abkhazian citizenship as a condition for accessing any services (Blakkisrud et al., 2018 p.8). Despite its pledge to improve humanitarian conditions for ethnic Georgians, Abkhazia has refused to repeal or amend the laws. On the other hand, Georgia has failed to implement its pledge on the open and free border through fencing, border controls, and passportization, fencing, and borderlization. In 2018, Georgia issued the OtkhozoriaTatunashvili list which sanctioned individuals alleged to have committed atrocities against Georgian citizens (Blakkisrud et al., 2018 p.9). The steps by both parties have negatively impacted cross-border relationships and hampered the resolution of the humanitarian crisis by increasing suspicion and mistrust between the two sides.

**Importance of free and open border and its impact on Georgians and Abkhazians.**

Having a free and open border is an essential step in improving cross-border relations and resolving the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict. An open border is essential in building trust, facilitating cross-border trade, and allowing families affected by the conflict to visit their relatives on either side of the border or return to their homes (Buzaladze, 2020, p.8). An open border and free movement of goods are also viewed as solutions to the economic hardships and humanitarian challenges facing ethnic Georgians and Abkhazians displaced by war. Mistrust between the two sides and several incidences of border violence have forced the two sides to tighten security at the border. For instance, a 2016 murder of an Abkhaz border guard forced Abkhazia to tighten security at the border, and close two crossing points to Georgia (Blakkisrud et al., 2018, p.7). Such incidences not only highlight the delicate situation but also stress the need for trust and improved relationships between the two sides. An open border is only the first step in solving the humanitarian crisis that has plagued citizens of both sides in the aftermath of the conflict. Thus, additional steps are needed to end hostility, encourage cross-border dialogue and challenge both governments to take steps to take step to resolve the humanitarian crisis surrounding the conflict.

**References**

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