

## Planting a Seed of Peace in the Republic of Georgia

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**BACKGROUND:** In 1991 the Republic of Georgia declared independence from the crumbling Soviet Union. Since then, Georgia has struggled to maintain its sovereignty. Despite seemingly insurmountable political obstacles, including a bloody coup d'état and brutal inter-ethnic civil war, Georgians maintain a strong hope for peace. In an attempt to sustain the Union, the Soviets supported separatist groups in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—two geographically and politically expedient regions within Georgia. These separatists sparked a destructive sectarian uprising against the Georgian majority. As a result, in 1995, these regions won de facto independence from Georgia. During that time, Russia forced Georgian nationals out of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, uprooting more than 272,000 people from their homes. Seeing their separatist allies in the region begin to chafe under their control, Russian authorities initiated a set of changes to the educational system. They altered history books and banned the instruction of Georgian—teaching students to speak only Russian and Abkhazian. Their actions only helped to exacerbate tensions, sparking fresh conflict. This time, rather than covert attacks, Russia opted for more direct and open hostilities, which resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands of displacements.

Today, the younger generation of Georgians would like to believe that peace is more than just a time between two wars. These children of war understand that living in fear of imminent conflict is not a peaceful way to live. We believe that the choice of peace is a conscious one, informed by education and open dialogue. Our aim is to make this choice visible and possible for a group of Georgian youth.

**PROJECT GOALS AND DESCRIPTION:** The objective of our project is to cultivate understanding between the offspring of the Georgian-Abkhazian civil war in order to promote peace. This goal will be achieved primarily by educating and empowering 20 Georgian high school students—over the course of a month—to understand the sources of conflict and learn ways to overcome them. Our ambition is to “plant the seed of peace in Georgia” and watch it blossom into a tree of peace. The project is divided into three distinct stages, in which each of the 20 students will participate: Educational, Medical, and Political.

Our team will organize and conduct the project in Zugdidi, a city in Georgia's Samegrelo province. Participants will come from Zugdidi and the small nearby town of Gali. Zugdidi is an ideal location because it's the closest safe city to occupied Abkhazia. Gali, near the border of Samegrelo and Abkhazia, is still under Russian control, but its people maintain a sense of Georgian nationality. Schools there and throughout Abkhazia are supplied with history manuals that were altered by Russia. Gali is only one small place, but it is accessible, safe, and possesses great potential for fruitful cooperation and progress. If we can help change the mindset of young people in this village, we can perhaps plant the seed of peace.

Twenty high school students will be invited to participate. We will contact high school administrators and ask them to recommend students who have shown academic excellence, have leadership potential and are proficient in English—the working language of the project.

In order to ensure diversity, representatives from both sides of the war will take part in the project. To accomplish this, we will invite ten students from Gali, five from Zugdidi without direct connection to the wars, and five students who are Abkhazian refugees currently living in Zugdidi.

On the one hand, it is important for young people who might not have a personal connection to the war to see its impact, so that they might avoid and prevent future conflict. On the other hand, people whose lives have been shattered by the war can carry a desire for revenge. Bringing together these 20 young people with different perspectives will help them learn from one another. We believe these people carry the same amount of potential for peace as for conflict, and we hope to guide this potential toward more peaceful and constructive ends. We will create an opportunity for these students—but especially those from Gali—so that they may return and change the lives of hundreds in their village. All stages of the project will be documented on film and all the participants will be expected to share their experiences with their respective schools via the documentary.

**Stage 1: Education.** The 20 students will participate in a two-week training at the conference room of the “American Corner” in Zugdidi. This stage of the project will encompass three important types of education:

**a) Liberal Education.** Seminars will meet twice a week for 90 minutes. The group will discuss Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, a trilogy of Greek plays dealing with revenge, ending revenge, and creating a stable polity. We believe a well-directed seminar will allow students to cultivate the ability to listen and respond to one another in discussion, which is the best alternative to conflict. In addition, a theater director will work with the students to stage the plays in Georgian for refugees in Zugdidi on World Refugee Day, June 20, 2012.

**b) Conflict Resolution Training.** Classes will meet twice a week for an hour, led by team member Bilsana Bibic, who has education and practical experience in conflict resolution. The 20 students will have a chance to share their experiences of conflict and test their conflict resolution training through role-playing. All the activities will be linked to conflicts they encounter in their everyday life.

**c) Introduction to the History of Georgia.** Classes will meet once a week for 90 minutes. A native history professor will give brief lessons that, in order to avoid ideological bias, will compare and contrast history manuals from both sides of the conflict. Students will thus be prompted to broaden their perspective and encouraged to reach their own conclusions. Subsequent discussions, led by team member Elene Gvilia, will address critical issues, such as: What does nationality depend on? What is the relationship between past, present, and future? Is peace only a time between two wars, or can it be sustained? At the end of the educational stage, the team expects students to be able to listen, think, and make decisions together. The theatrical performance of the *Oresteia* will be a culminating point: young people whose parents fought one another on the battlefield will appear on the same stage, in front of refugees to whom they will provide an example of reconciliation.

**Stage 2: Medical Mission.** For one week, our 20 participants will visit a refugee camp and help provide basic medical assistance. Refugees in Samegrelo have been dispersed into camps that lack medical facilities. Since seeing a doctor tends to be unaffordable, our team will bring doctors to them. A group of 10 Georgian doctors have agreed to volunteer their services for this purpose. Assisted by program participants, they will see some 300 refugees, provide diagnoses and treatment, and offer a one-day session on disease prevention. The 20 students will work together and assist doctors to help victims of the very wars in which their relatives fought, learning first hand about the human costs of conflict and the value of each life.

**Stage 3: Political Conference.** The 20 students will attend a three-day conference on the future of Georgia, that brings together young Georgian leaders and retired politicians. This conference will take place in a conference hall in Zugdidi. Ms. Gvilia has secured support from the local government and contacted a group of proven young leaders willing to participate. These men and women have studied politics, economics, international relations, and law abroad and returned to Georgia. They are beginning to forge the future of Georgia and aspire to civic roles and are as yet unburdened by constricting political affiliations and pressures. Retired politicians who were in the government during the wars will also be invited to participate. Because they are no longer in politics, they have the freedom to speak their minds without pressure.

Thus, sitting on one side of the table will be representatives of Georgia's past and, on the other, representatives of Georgia's future. Discussion will focus on the experiences of the politicians, particularly on what it meant to be involved in politics during the civil war. Leading the conference will be team member Noam E. Freshman, who has experience leading discussions on political issues.

At the conclusion of the political conference, aspiring young politicians will sign a resolution developed during the three days. This resolution will spark an ongoing movement for conflict resolution and reconciliation in Georgia. Furthermore, this stage will empower the 20 students who are auditing the conference to become active participants in their communities.

We see the political phase of our project as a seed of the tree that will be planted in the soil of health and fertilized with education. The educational stage will give the students critical thinking skills as a tool to promote cooperation. The medical stage will offer an opportunity for the 20 young students to witness the ramifications of war and put the theory of cooperation into action by providing basic medical support. Finally, the political stage will allow them to conceive a way to overcome conflict through peaceful policy.

Each stage has its own value and targets critical issues within Georgia, but only when combined can they have a significant impact on conflict resolution and plant seeds for a peaceful future.