



USAID
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NATIONAL SECURITY AND THE SOCIAL SECTOR IN GEORGIA

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The events of August 2008 in Georgia underscore the significance of understanding the full spectrum of security concerns in the country – from “national” to “personal” – and links to the social sector. The interplay of economic stress, politics and governance in transition, tangible threats to sovereignty and human security, and large-scale international commitments to the country’s development and stability, place a premium on understanding how these links are perceived by citizens and expert observers. Even in the midst of ongoing threats to the sovereignty and physical security of the country, research in Georgia illustrates the primacy of economic and social issues in security perceptions at the level of individuals and communities.

Moreover, linkages between security and the social sector operate in both directions, with social sector shortcomings affecting security, and *vice versa*. For Georgia, this suggests that the prospects for national security in the narrower sense – the ability to defend the country’s borders and cooperate effectively with security partners – will be heavily influenced by domestic factors of the kind discussed in this analysis, including social cohesion, the preservation of an adequate human resource base, and longer-term investments in education, health and the environment. Given the pervasiveness of these challenges, these findings and their policy implications should have wider relevance for societies in transition and U.S. programs elsewhere.

Approach and In-Country Research

The design of this study draws on analytic literature from the national security and development fields, and a scoping seminar held in Washington in January 2009. The approach encompasses the idea of “security” as a service provided by state and non-state institutions, as well as the increasingly comprehensive and diverse definitions of security current in the strategic studies debate. The study attempts to identify a hierarchy of concerns (“what people worry about”) at the nexus of national security and the social sector. Above all, the methodology reflects a grass-roots approach to understanding perceptions about security and the social sector at the level of Georgian society, and close observers of the Georgian scene. The primary research for this study was undertaken via a series of eleven focus group discussions conducted in Tbilisi, Zugdidi and Akhaltsikhe in May 2009. The respondents were selected to reflect the salient demographic and ethnic characteristics of the locale, gender balance, and age cohorts. These focus group discussions were augmented by a series of interviews with officials, experts and local observers in Tbilisi and elsewhere.

Key Findings

The current environment in Georgian is shaped by two compelling realities: the recent experience of war with Russia and the ongoing risk of conflict; and the deteriorating economic situation, driven by global conditions and exacerbated by the events of August 2008 and their aftermath. There is a powerful sense of unrealized expectations and relative deprivation within Georgian society. After years of high growth, optimism, and steadily improving political stability and governance, the society has experienced a succession of blows to its prosperity, stability and security at all levels. Georgia is not a quite a “fragile” state when viewed in terms of the state’s ability to provide services or guarantee security, but there is now a pervasive sense of insecurity affecting most levels of society. In most cases, this insecurity is closely tied to concerns about economic opportunity and the rule of law – both affecting access to social services. The legacy of the Soviet years, including the communist model of service provision, is not far from the surface and still influences the outlook and expectations of the older generations; all of which underscores the transitional nature of the society.

- **Georgians are keenly aware of the issues explored in this study, and are inclined to seek remedies outside government institutions.** Discussion participants displayed a sophisticated awareness of the actual and potential linkages between security and the social sector, and readily reflect

on the implications for the country and their situation as individuals. Much of this debate turns on declining confidence in the ability of the state to provide predictable access to services, or to assure their security in the broadest sense. Where possible, Georgians are increasingly inclined to organize their social and personal security without reference to the state.

- ***Insecurity has bred short-term thinking and inhibits future planning and investments at all levels of society.*** The prevailing environment in Georgia is characterized by pervasive insecurity, although there are notable regional and generational differences in exposure and perspective. One important consequence of this sense of insecurity has been the compression of time horizons, affecting expectations for the future and perceived remedies. Short-term thinking predominates, with implications for social sector priorities and development.
- ***Economic security concerns are paramount.*** Economic insecurity, above all the fear of unemployment and its consequences, is a leading, perhaps *the* leading driver of perceptions about security and social cohesion. Accusations of nepotism and social exclusion are pervasive in the debate over jobs and access to social services.
- ***Personal security is a growing concern.*** Focus group participants and expert observers identify criminality as a looming threat to Georgian society and the future stability of the country. This is especially pronounced in Tbilisi and the border regions, and closely tied to youth unemployment, drug use and smuggling. There is also a more diffuse concern about generational drift and loss of identity as elements in urban crime. Anxiety about the safety of children at or en route to school and other activities is one prominent example of the concern about personal security.
- ***Concerns about the rule of law and human rights are at the top of the “community security” agenda.*** Interlocutors acknowledge that by some measures the police have become more effective, but there is little trust in the competence and impartiality of the security forces and the judiciary. This concern interacts with the growing sensitivity to personal security to produce a heightened sense of insecurity in society.
- ***Health and access to healthcare are prominent issues for Georgians, and high on the hierarchy of personal concerns.*** Here, too, the cost of healthcare looms larger in the context of a deteriorating economic climate, and the declining ability of average citizens to pay for more expensive procedures. This view is accompanied by skepticism about privatization efforts in the health sector. Health issues are also closely linked to environmental risks in the view of many interlocutors. For the regions, difficult access to advanced health services in Tbilisi is the main concern. Those in Tbilisi worry about inept governance in the health sector.
- ***The uneven (“asymmetrical”) development of the country is seen as undermining Georgian prosperity and security.*** Infrastructure is part of this equation. The urban-rural divide is another. With the exception of some specific parts of society (e.g., young couples), housing does not appear to be a priority concern within the security-social sector equation in Georgia. Not surprisingly, questions of physical security loom large in border regions.
- ***Social challenges are undermining “national security” in the narrower sense.*** In the view of expert respondents, Georgian security and sovereignty are negatively affected by unfavorable demographic trends, emigration, internal displacement, and declining social cohesion and “morale.” The short and long term risks associated with these problems are fueled by shortcomings in the economy and the social sector. These challenges, many associated with the country’s human capital base, could become acute and undermine Georgia’s ability to staff its armed forces and operate effectively with international

security partners. The education system is widely seen as rigid and detached from modern economic and social needs.

- **External actors are an integral part of the equation.** Georgians are inclined to see their national security as hostage to the actions and preferences of external actors. With regard to the social sector *per se*, Georgians view foreign governments and NGOs as leading providers of services and welfare. Between the role of international donors and advisors, on the one hand, and the growing inclination toward private arrangements for access to services of all kinds, on the other, the space for the Georgian state as a services provider in the traditional sense, is declining – at least in the perception of citizens.

Broader Implications for U.S. Policy, Programs, and Strategy

These findings suggest a close connection between national security perceptions and conditions in the social sector. Beyond the specific findings relevant to the Georgian case, the analysis also suggests a number of wider observations about the nexus of national security, stability and social conditions in Georgia, which can inform U.S. thinking and USAID programming in Eurasia and elsewhere. Some of these conclusions are in line with established thinking about security in transitioning states. Others are “non-canonical” and point to the need for critical thinking about what is stabilizing, what is destabilizing, and the importance of public perception as a variable in this equation.

- **History and culture matter.** Social transitions and security perceptions are strongly conditioned by established historical narratives, political and strategic culture, and other “qualitative” factors. These elements can easily be overlooked, not least because they are difficult to measure. Our research in Georgia suggests that historical and cultural issues can drive expectations and strongly condition views of the state as a security provider. A “retreat to history” can also be an indicator of problems on the horizon (see indicators for security risks on the next page).
- **Ethnic tolerance and inter-communal relations are at the core of the social sector/national security equation.** Ethnically mixed regions (e.g., Akhaltsikhe in the Georgian case) are particularly exposed, and can serve as bell weathers for overall perceptions about security, from access to employment and social goods, to treatment by the police and security services. At the same time, shortcomings in the rule of law and behavior of security personnel can spill over to affect inter-communal relations even in traditionally tolerant settings. In the Georgian case – and arguably elsewhere – external threats to national sovereignty and security can leave ethnic minorities exposed to economic and political exclusion, or worse.
- **Security sector reform should be a priority for U.S. and international engagement in Georgia.** At the level of the police and the security services, issues of competence and impartiality will increasingly be seen as key measures of progress on governance and transition, closely linked to perceptions of personal and community security. Georgia will also benefit from a greater capacity for warning, planning and crisis management. This can contribute to improved public confidence and can enhance Georgia’s ability to cooperate with security partners, including the U.S., NATO and the EU.
- **Insecurity is isolating, and especially damaging to societies critically dependent on external ties.** Georgia is critically dependent on cross-border links and connections to the wider world for trade, investment, education and exchanges of all kinds. Conditions of social crisis and perceived instability can have a profoundly isolating effect. They can also “feed back” into the security equation in significant

ways. In the Georgian case, one clear manifestation of this has been the growing diffidence of key international partners and the more distant prospect of NATO membership – precisely when these are needed for strategic reassurance. Constraints on national and personal-level interactions with the outside world appear to have a pronounced effect on security perceptions. These dynamics will be worth exploring in other cases.

- **Employment is a security issue in Georgia and a key measure of state legitimacy.** Therefore, focus on employment, economic security, and mitigation of the social costs of unemployment is of vital importance. Job creation, and the related challenges of education and training for employment, will remain key measures of progress for most Georgians, closely tied to the outlook for stability and security. Longer-term questions of economic reform, and even prosperity broadly defined, do not appear to drive society’s perceptions in the same manner. Employment, and particularly employment that conforms to professional and other expectations, are the *sine qua non* for improved perceptions of security at the level of individuals and communities. This reality may be driven by the current economic crisis, or may be indicative of an underlying trend. In either case, the Georgian example offers a pointer relevant to other settings where USAID is engaged. Reversing the outflow of trained individuals will be essential to the longer-term outlook for development and national security in Georgia. Support for small businesses and the rehabilitation of idle manufacturing facilities can pay dividends, as can effective public-private partnerships in training for employment and other areas.
- **Promote the establishment of effective institutions for forward-looking public policy debate and analysis.** Ideally these would be independent but officially “vested” to perform an advisory role for the Georgian government. They could be tasked with national-level studies, planning and training of analysts. These organizations could address foreign, security and domestic public policy issues in a multi-disciplinary way– with special attention to the national security/social sector equation. The American Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) model offers one useful model, among others. These institutions could offer a pole of attraction for professionals who would otherwise turn to employment abroad, and could contribute to the overall development of Georgian civil society.
- **Reinforce programs for urban youth.** The economic crisis and unstable conditions in the wake of the August 2008 crisis are fueling a particularly acute problem among young people, especially in Tbilisi. Civil society organizations and training centers oriented toward younger Georgians should be strengthened, alongside efforts to address the mounting problems of drug addiction and urban crime.
- **Support improvements in the urban environment.** Small, visible features can weigh heavily in security perceptions, broadly defined. Quality of life, especially in the urban environment, can drive perceptions of security and political legitimacy. Attitudes toward the government as a provider of social services and security can be shaped by apparently marginal or symbolic features, from the condition of buildings and public spaces, to the collection of refuse. These and other questions may prove surprisingly significant in other national settings (conditioned, as always, by historical expectations). Provincial areas and areas such as forestry and water management also deserve attention, but Georgian perceptions will be most heavily affected by new investments in municipal sanitation and the rehabilitation and maintenance of the urban environment. Making Georgia’s cities more attractive and livable can contribute substantially to confidence in the social, economic and security future of the country.

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- ***A contraction of time horizons*** – an apparent characteristic of individuals and societies under stress;
- ***Reversion to traditional spheres of allegiance and trust*** – the “retreat to history” – accompanied by shrinking circles of trust in political and commercial life, with implications for transparency at multiple levels;
- ***The rise of mistrust and anxiety along ethnic or regional lines*** – especially where these have not been prevalent in the past;
- ***A deteriorating sense of personal safety*** – and the perception of being “unprotected”;
- ***Fear of de-professionalization*** – a more specific aspect of the employment challenge, and a driver of migration and internal instability among politically active elites;
- ***Sudden demographic shifts*** – including declines in birth rates and life expectancy, an increase in migration, and the rapid emergence of a national diaspora in societies unused to this phenomenon. The role of the new and substantial Georgian diaspora in the future stability of the country is uncertain. But the question will surely arise in other transitioning states, in other regional settings. Can these diasporas contribute to USAID’s development and security objectives?

Finally, our research suggests a number of gaps in our knowledge and open questions for future study. Some of these concern demographic trends, human capital, and the sensitivity of developments in these areas to national security factors – and vice versa. The role of the Georgian diaspora and its ability to serve as an element in the social development of the country is another promising area for analysis, along with a clearer assessment of the role of “identity” in Georgian modernization. It will also be worth exploring how the Georgian case can inform the analysis of similar challenges elsewhere, and comparative lessons learned from cases where social, economic and external security problems interact in transitioning states.

Re-establishment of Georgian confidence in effective governance and defense, and the reassurance of closer ties to the West, can help provide the necessary conditions for longer-term national planning and investment in the social sector. In the absence of this, Georgian society could become increasingly inward-looking and parochial, with negative consequences for security at all levels. In this sense, the success of U.S. and international efforts to improve economic conditions and governance in Georgia will be closely tied to the success of efforts to bolster Georgia’s sense of strategic reassurance, as well as deterrence of external risks. Overall, this analysis suggests that a strengthened social sector can make a leading contribution to Georgian national security, broadly defined. Progress in this area will be a key measure of successful transition from the perspective of Georgian citizens in the years ahead.