





TSOPI, GEORGIA

Where Azerbaijanis
and Armenians
are living side-by-side

by **Klaudia Kosicińska**

The Georgian village Tsopi is situated around eight kilometers from the border with Armenia.

The majority of the population are Azerbaijanis, who account for 73% of the village population or 596 persons. It is a small village but Tsopi is well-known for being a place where Armenians and Azerbaijanis live side by side in a relatively peaceful way. Researchers and journalists come here to describe their co-existence as a model of a peaceful neighborhood in the context of two conflicting nations, and some of them make a comprehensive analysis of local relations. One might see difficulties with examining the contradiction between the majority of Azerbaijanis and Armenians living in Armenia and Azerbaijan who rarely communicate with each other owing to nearly thirty years of conflict, and Azerbaijanis and Armenians who interact and live in the same small village in Georgia. One obstacle to understanding the complex situation may be that there is an existing taboo, among both Azerbaijanis and Armenians, of not talking about the conflict with outsiders.

If we scratch the surface of this idyllic image of co-existence in the village of Tsopi, we may better understand what the limits are to the good relations among neighbors. This is especially interesting in light of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, that broke out in 2020. In January 2022, I stayed in Tsopi with an Armenian family to learn more about their life and the lives of the other villagers. Having four years' experience of research in Shulaveri, another ethnically mixed village in Marneuli district, and staying with an Azerbaijani family all that time, I was wondering what I could learn when sharing everyday life with an Armenian community.

I soon found out that in Tsopi, residents' relations have been constantly negotiated. Armenians claim that the Armenian population is steady diminishing, and that in their place Azerbaijanis arrive and buy houses abandoned by Armenians. Armenians assure me that there are no conflicts in this situation between the two groups. On the other hand, sentiments related to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh are strong. The taboo regarding the war can be broken, but only in a controlled manner. 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 and, as a result, an outbreak of conflict in the neighborhood.

Silencing the war

One example of the sensitiveness of the topic is given by my host, Lora (name changed), a 30-year-old Armenian woman. In 2020, when some Azerbaijani residents were celebrating the victory in the Karabakh war, this were upsetting for, and caused resent among, Armenians. She tells me that her neighbor, a young Azerbaijani girl, wrote on her Facebook page: "Our people won". "Our?" Lora repeats to me with emphasis, evoking the emotions of that moment. Lora went straight to her neighbor's house and complained to the young girl's mother. The mother in turn ranted at her daughter for writing inappropriate statements. Lora told me that the girl's fiancé is from Baku, and she was probably "influenced by him in a bad way". But my host believes that for the sake of maintaining good neighborly relations, such an incident should never happen in their village again. Finally, she added: "Here is Georgian land, so there should not be any talk about the war to make sure that no incidents related to the war will happen."

Obviously, she found the story upsetting and felt uncertain about the whole situation. Later, Lora said that in 2020, when the war was on-going, she went to the hospital in Marneuli to have surgery. However, when she found out that she was to be operated on by an Azerbaijani woman she got frightened and decided to postpone her treatment, and left the hospital. This feeling of insecurity seems to be built on fear of the potential outcomes if the conflict abroad crosses national borders, which could have consequences for daily life in the village and region. In the case of Lora, it is also the result of long-term remembered and transmitted experiences and stories heard about the first Karabakh war, stories that were revived at the time of the 2020 conflict and contrasted with the relatively peaceful everyday life in the village.



Silencing friendship across borders

I spent most of my time in Tsopi in the company of Lora, her family, neighbors, and relatives. I was able to observe how instant messaging through WhatsApp is an important tool of connecting not only with relatives living in another city or country, but also with friends from the same village. One evening, Lora told me about her two friends, both female medical doctors from Marneuli. One is Georgian, another one is in fact – despite

the previous story – Azerbaijani, and a friend whom she likes and appreciates very much. She kept in touch with the latter on WhatsApp. She added however that for a time, she stopped looking at the content she added in her group account since the doctor went to Baku for a while and did not want her clients from Baku to see that one of her contacts was Armenian. Therefore, the Azerbaijani doctor turned off Lora during her stay in Azerbaijan, and Lora waited patiently for her return, sure that she understood the situation. I will call this social phenomena "silencing contact", trying not to provoke in the wake of war. At the same time, Lora keeps lively contact with some of her Azerbaijani friends, at least from what I could observe while conducting research: Women meet and help each other in various circumstances.

Rimma Marangozian, an Armenian journalist, notes after conducting interviews in Khojorni, another ethnically mixed village near Tsopi, that disagreements between the two ethnicities exist, but during visits by "outsiders", such as foreign journalists or researchers, residents present only a positive picture of relations in the village, hiding any information that could lead to a disturbance of the mutually beneficial image of the village. In the moments of encounter with the "Other", the inhabitants produce for him/her the image that they imagine that she/he wants to see.

Silent agreement of solidarity

Despite the rule of not talking about neighbors with visitors from outside, I noticed that Lora does not always control herself when it comes to this silent agreement. For example, once her husband's phone broke down and they tried to fix it in the nearby larger village of Sadakhlo which is inhabited by Azerbaijanis. After unsuccessful attempts, Lora lamented to me that not only did they have to pay, but the phone was not fixed. She was convinced that her and her husband's ethnicity probably influenced

this, and use the term "scoundrels" ("aferisty", a term taken from Russian), a common term used in Georgia to describe someone who cheats at getting something done or messing around in their own interest.

However, the residents of the village share a common memory of working together in the past. They often recall

“THE RESIDENTS OF THE VILLAGE SHARE A COMMON MEMORY OF WORKING TOGETHER IN THE PAST. THEY OFTEN RECALL THEIR MEMORIES IN THEIR ACCOUNTS.”

their memories in their accounts. The collapse of the USSR and the closure of factories left the region in an economic slump, which contributed to changing people's relationships. In addition, the political situation made it difficult to maintain contact with neighbors from Armenia and Azerbaijan since the majority of Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia are not allowed to enter Armenia, and Armenians from Georgia cannot visit Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh is an unhealed wound that reopened after the 2020 conflict. In particular, people who frequently visit their "kin states" are prone to be hostile towards other groups. There is still uncertainty about the role played by public media in influencing local residents. I even heard some criticism of some TV programs and the way the community was presented in them. They are available on YouTube so this could be shown to me, with comments.

Representatives of both ethnicities have limited access to Georgian television due to the language barrier and broadcasting problems. Thus, many of them watch Azerbaijani, Armenian, or Russian programs.

During the war, the situation in the regions inhabited by Armenians and Azerbaijanis was tense, especially where the possibility of dialogue and daily confrontation was virtually impossible due to the absence of one of the nations, but also in places inhabited by both minorities. The villages where inter-ethnic relations were particularly affected were those where the inhabitants were confronted with a choice between two mutually exclusive needs – on the one hand, a sense of obligation to the ethnic homeland, and on the other, to the neighbor and the Georgian state. This led to cognitive conflicts and the breaking of many personal relationships. Now relations between residents are partly frozen, just as they were after the first war in the 1990s, but now the situation is made maybe even more difficult by the fact that access to the media, to information propagated by Azerbaijan and Armenia, and to news hindering dialogue distributed by both nationalities through Internet channels, can make it much more difficult to mentally detach from the war and stabilize relations. Environmental pressure towards both ethnicities is also a cause. For this reason, despite the fact that living on Georgian territory contributed to neutralizing the tensions between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, nowadays more depends on the policies and cooperation of three countries situated in the South Caucasus than ever before. ❌

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From above: 1. The village seen from the Armenian cemetery. 2. One of the houses in the village. 3. At the local shop and tea house.

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