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A Giant Fence Between Georgians and Ossetians

By Paul Rimple

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Five years ago, I watched Russian jets blast Georgian villages and hundreds of people flee their homes with what they could carry in their hands during the brief but devastating Russian-Georgian war. I recall the blank expressions of thousands of reservists in stiff, ill-fitting uniforms who had been transported in to the center of Gori in yellow city buses. They were mustered around the statue of Josef Stalin, smoking cigarettes and waiting for orders or a bomb to land on their heads, completely clueless of war and its guns and airstrikes and sudden death.

I remember the biting smell of rotting flesh behind the arbitrary "buffer zone" set up by Russian troops, who allowed Ossetian militia to burn and loot Georgian homes. Russian and Ossetian leaders had the audacity to charge Georgia for committing "genocide" while their troops were erasing a dozen Georgian villages off the map. The former village of Eredvi now houses Russian soldiers.

The new Georgian government has radically toned down its aggressive rhetoric as a first step toward resolving the 20-year separatist conflict. Russia has responded by building a giant fence 300 meters deeper into Georgian territory, monitored by video cameras. This fence, which already divides a village with barb wire, threatens to separate more villages if construction continues.

While both the Ossetians and Abkhaz feel assured the Georgians will never attack again, Georgians along the de facto border live in a heightened state of anxiety. They can no longer harvest fruit in their orchards or graze their cattle for fear of being arrested and taken to Tskhinvali. Some who have rebuilt their war-ravaged homes now face losing them to the encroaching fence.

On the eve of the fifth year anniversary of the war, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev appeared on Georgian television and invited Georgia to join the Eurasian Union, the Kremlin's brainchild — something like having the doctor that amputated your arms ask you to play volleyball. Yet Medvedev kept a straight face throughout the insipid interview, stating that any closer ties and dialogue between the conflicting parties "must be based on people's will, not on military force."

He's right. The prewar connections between Georgians and Ossetians have been severed. The only way to begin the long road to resolution is to rebuild confidence between local communities. Yet Moscow's method of encouraging ties is to obstruct them with barb wire.

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