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The embodiment of post-war reconciliation? The issue of the missing after the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict

Vadim Romashov and Élise Féron

Abstract

Almost all countries that are experiencing or have experienced war or armed conflict are affected by the issue of the missing. The literature on those who go missing after violent conflicts has focused mainly on technical issues related to the retrieval and identification of bodies, families' mobilization, transitional justice and psychological consequences for the relatives of the missing. However, despite the staggering number of people who go missing in wars and the unrelenting mobilization by their relatives in the post-war period, little attention has been paid so far to how the issue of the disappeared can influence reconciliation processes. In addition, the corporeal dimensions of post-war reconciliation have remained largely unexplored, and the extent to which the issue of missing bodies can hamper, derail, or enhance reconciliation is unknown. Therefore, this article explores how and why the issue of the missing as an embodied impact of war has influenced possibilities for reconciliation at the personal, communal, and societal levels after the war. It engages with the case of the missing in the Georgian-Abkhaz war (1992–93) as an illustrative example of such interconnections. The article's conclusions have relevance for other cases of ethnicized secessionist conflicts, notably in the "post-Soviet space", where the issues of the missing and post-war reconciliation remain understudied. The article is based on original research

material collected in Georgia, including interviews with current or former representatives of the key stakeholders: international organizations, government, civil society, and the families of the missing.

Keywords: embodied reconciliation, Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, missing

Introduction

Almost all countries experiencing or having experienced war or armed conflict are affected by the issue of missing people. In our research, we use the definition of the missing as provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (2003, p. 4): “Missing people are those who are unaccounted for as a result of armed conflicts or situations of internal violence.” For instance, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, more than 23,000 people have been missing since the war with Russia erupted in February 2022 (MIA portal, 2023). The human rights group “Citizen. Army. Right” estimated that about 24,000 military personnel from Russia and the Donbass region have gone missing during the same period (Meduza, 2023). Other well-known cases include the disappeared of the dictatorships in Argentina (30,000) and Spain (114,000), the wars in the Balkans (40,000), Colombia (>80,000), Lebanon (17,000), and Syria (>80,000). There are also less known cases, such as the more than 2,300 people who disappeared during the wars of the beginning of the 1990s between Georgia and the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

While each case carries its specificities, like the civilian or military proportion among the missing, or the circumstances of the disappearances (during combat or forced migration, kidnappings...), in each instance, the issue of the missing remains present long after the formal end of the war (Congram, 2016). Relatives of the disappeared mobilize decades or even generations afterwards, asking for information on the whereabouts of their loved ones and, if their deaths are established, that their remains be returned to be properly buried and mourned. In some cases like

Lebanon (Comaty, 2019), the relatives of the missing have faced a lack of will or even reluctance on the part of the authorities, further complicating their search for answers. In other instances, like in Northern Ireland, the families' sustained mobilization triggered public initiatives that eventually led to the resolution of most cases (Dempster, 2019).

To date, the literature on the missing has focused largely on technical issues related to the retrieval and identification of bodies (Congram et al., 2022), on transitional justice mechanisms (Robins, 2011), families' mobilization (Rowayheb & Ouais, 2015), and psychological consequences for the relatives (Boss, 1999). However, despite the staggering number of people missing after wars, and despite unrelenting mobilization by their relatives in the post-war period, little attention has been paid to how the issue of the disappeared influences reconciliation processes.

Admittedly, social psychological factors of reconciliation are difficult to evaluate. Reconciliation involves a wide range of emotions, perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of individuals and groups which are inherently subjective. There is no consensus on what constitutes successful reconciliation, as different individuals and groups may have diverging expectations and definitions for it. Therefore, we do not intend to isolate and measure all kinds of social-psychological factors leading to reconciliation. Instead, we explore a specific context of war-caused traumatic experiences and different stakeholders' practices regarding missing bodies. We discuss a limited number of social-psychological aspects of reconciliation such as trust, recognition and solidarity. The article contributes to discussions on reconciliation with a particular case study shedding light on the importance of the issue of the disappeared for reconciliation, and paving the way for future research.

In addition, the article's original contribution lies in its focus on the embodied aspect of the issue of the disappeared, exemplifying the deep corporeality of wars (McSorley, 2013; Parashar, 2013), but also of post-war contexts. Even in the absence of bodies, the missing are remembered by their relatives through rituals, symbols, and embodied practices. In parallel, the search for bodies,

their retrieval, restitution to families, and reburial are all deeply embodied processes impacting reconciliation processes. However, since the corporeal dimensions of post-war reconciliation have remained largely unexplored (Brett et al., 2022), the extent to which the issue of missing bodies can hamper, derail, or enhance reconciliation is unknown.

Therefore, this article builds on the hypothesis that the embodied impact of wars, as exemplified by the issue of the disappeared, shapes reconciliation possibilities after armed conflict. Using the case of the war between Georgia and Abkhazia (1992–93) as an illustrative example, we explore how and why the issue of the missing influences possibilities for reconciliation at the interpersonal, intergroup, and societal levels. Our research centers on the following research questions: do the missing represent a specific obstacle to intergroup reconciliation? Or can the shared experience of having missing relatives build interpersonal connections and push toward institutional cooperation across political and/or national conflict divides?

The issue of missing persons in the Georgian-Abkhazian war is highly sensitive and unresolved, influencing social relations within the Georgian society, and between Georgia and Abkhazia. Therefore, the Georgian context allows us to understand how the issue of the missing affects reconciliation at various levels, from individuals and families to communities and societies. Since the problem of missing people is a humanitarian issue transcending political boundaries, the Georgian case may also indicate specific, previously unseen, directions for reconciliation efforts in other contexts of ethnicized secessionist conflicts.

In the next sections, we bring together theoretical explorations of embodied reconciliation and the issue of the missing, and explain how we approach them methodologically and empirically. After presenting the case of the missing in the Georgian-Abkhazian war, we focus on the solidarity-based communication between families of the missing across the conflict divide, and on the impact on reconciliation of the public recognition of the issue. In the discussion section, we explore what paths for reconciliation are opened by the issue of the missing. Our conclusion emphasizes the

multilevel aspect of reconciliation processes associated with the issue of the disappeared in the Georgian context, and draws avenues for future research on the relationship between missing bodies and embodied reconciliation.

Embodied reconciliation

There is no consensus on how post-war reconciliation can be enabled and facilitated. In international relations and peace and conflict studies, political institutions and narratives that can foster reconciliation tend to be prioritized (McGregor, 2006). Reconciliation is often linked to transitional justice mechanisms, the reform of political, military, and judiciary structures and institutions, and the promotion of discourses and narratives built on truth and forgiveness (Lederach, 1997). Some studies have also shown that the pace of reconciliation at the individual, institutional, and collective levels can be different (Lansing & King, 1998). Therefore, many approaches to reconciliation underscore its multilevel nature, the need to transform relationships and narratives at the societal and group levels, as well as between individual perpetrators and victims (Rosoux, 2017). Psychology and psychosociology have informed these approaches and demonstrated that changes that need to happen at the individual and group levels are interconnected. The need for a change in group identities and attitudes (Kelman, 2008), and for “regulating” individual emotions and promoting structural relational change between (former) adversaries (van Zomeren, 2016) has been underscored.

More specifically, scholarship on reconciliation can be divided into two groups, with “minimalist” or “thin” views not requiring much more than the cessation of direct violence and establishment of respect and basic cooperation on one hand, and “maximalist” or “thick” views understanding reconciliation in terms of forgiveness, trust, healing, and mutual harmony on the other (Seils, 2017). A common conceptualization of “thick” reconciliation is that of a process comprising different nested circles, starting from the individual level to the family level, the local community level, the national level, and so on (Villa-Vicencio, 1999).

What these diverse approaches have largely eschewed, however, is the importance of bodies for understanding post-conflict reconciliation. This is all the more surprising because wars are deeply embodied experiences, not just for killed, injured, maimed, and tortured combatants, but also for civilians. Even if they are not fighting on the frontline, civilians living in or next to war zones can experience hunger, thirst, disease, epidemics, various forms of physical violence and damage such as sexual violence, and also displacement, death, and disappearance. On the flip side, solidarity during wars, for both civilians and combatants, is often expressed through bodies, for instance through sharing food and water, providing shelter and care, and so on.

So far, international relations and security studies have mostly ignored this aspect, as well as the more general relations between wars and bodies (Wilcox, 2015, p. 2). In contrast, feminist peace research has spearheaded a “corporeal turn” in the study of violent conflicts by focusing on the corporeal nature of wars, and showing how wars expose the intrinsic vulnerability of civilian and military bodies (Scarry, 1987; Sylvester, 2013). Feminist scholars have demonstrated how bodies and body politics are central to the conduct of war and nationalist politics (Zarkov, 2007), although not all bodies affected by war are considered to be equally grievable (Butler, 2009). This literature has shown how bodies are mobilized, but also ethnicized and sexualized, during violent conflicts. For instance, the bodies of the dead perform key nationalist functions, they embody national sacrifice and, as such, occupy a central place in national imaginaries (McSorley, 2013, p. 23).

Feminist scholars have also used bodies and embodiment as theoretical and methodological keys for challenging and rethinking core concepts such as violence, security, and sovereignty (Wilcox, 2015, p. 3). Bodies affected by war complicate and even derail nationalist projects by enabling sympathy and solidarity and by exposing the artificial nature of nationalist cleavages (Cole, 2009). Feminist scholars have highlighted the body’s importance for understanding how humans experience wars (Sylvester, 2013), and how shared embodied experiences enact and feed solidarities beyond political cleavages. The phenomenological concept of inter-corporeality, or

embodied copresence, that “grounds our ability to relate to the world” and to “take the other’s different perspectives on ourselves” (Johnson, 2018, p. 19) helps conceptualize the importance of bodies for wars and post-war reconciliation processes. As McSorley (2013, p. 7) explains, “It is when corporeal co-presence occurs that the boundaries of enmity and friendship may blur, and an alternative empathetic recognition of humanity, often rooted in bodily frailty and mutual vulnerability, may emerge.” However, even the rich feminist scholarship on bodies in wars has largely neglected to study the embodied dimensions of reconciliation, and the role that bodies might play in rapprochement after war (Brett et al., 2022). So far, research on this subject has mostly focused on specific techniques using the body for reconciliation purposes (Cohen et al., 2011), without reflecting on the role bodies and corporeal experiences play in reconciliation as such.

When examining the relationships between wars, bodies, and reconciliation, the question of the missing presents itself as a pressing one. This issue has generated a lot of research, focusing on truth, reconciliation, transitional justice, and methods for recovering the bodies, including forensic and DNA analysis (Congram, 2016). Anthropological research on the missing also explores the consequences of disappearances for their families. Some studies highlight the deep emotional toll of having missing relatives, whilst others focus on the promises and limits of forensic investigation for bringing closure to the relatives (Rosenblatt, 2015). Political mobilization surrounding cases like the missing in Lebanon (Comaty, 2019), Bosnia (Ball, 2015), and Argentina (Gallo-Cruz, 2021) has also attracted academic attention. From another perspective, legal experts concentrate on the families’ needs, including the right to truth, to retrieve the remains of the disappeared, and to compensation (Ott, 2011; Baranowska, 2021).

The literature on the missing also underscores the fact that although the disappeared are invisible, paradoxically, they remain present sometimes for several generations after the violent conflict’s end (Edkins, 2011). One important concept developed in that respect is that of “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 1999), a situation in which individuals are physically or psychologically

missing but their loss is experienced as incomplete by family members. Such a situation, in turn, “defies closure and prevents the resolution of grief” (Brnčić, 2022, p. 185), leaving relatives stuck in the war period. Those whose relatives are missing, and those who wish to “move on”, often inhabit different temporalities. Paradoxically, for those who miss them, the absent bodies are (omni)present, leaving survivors in a state of liminality (Comaty, 2019). Brnčić (2022, p. 186) defines it as living in a “toxic hope” where relatively insignificant news relating to the disappearance can awaken hopes only to lead to further disappointment.

This suggests that missing bodies act as a permanent reminder of the war, allowing war to continue in “peace times.” Contrary to dead bodies that are given specific mourning rituals and resting places, the bodies of the disappeared disrupt post-conflict orders at the spatial (they are not confined to specific spaces like cemeteries) and temporal levels (they are rarely remembered at specific times such as war commemorations). For those who miss them, they prevent the closure of the war period. From that perspective, it would be logical to assume that they can disrupt reconciliation processes. But could they also act as a focal point and as a source of solidarity for grieving families, and perhaps also as an impetus for broader reconciliation processes? The existing literature on the disappeared has not yet explored the relations between missing bodies and embodied processes of reconciliation, whether at the interpersonal, intergroup, or societal levels. Using the example of the missing in Georgia after the war in Abkhazia (1992–93), our contribution addresses this research gap.

A note on methods and data

The article is based on original research material collected in Tbilisi in May 2022, including but not limited to 5 in-depth interviews with current or former representatives of the key stakeholders: government, experts, civil society, and the families of the missing, as well as a focus group discussion with four International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) team members working on the issue of the missing in Georgia and Abkhazia. The discussions lasted between 45

minutes and two hours, and were conducted either in English or in Russian. Because of the sensitivity of the issue, and risks of re-traumatizing relatives of the missing, formal interviews constitute only a small part of the collected data. We also informally discussed the issue with several local and regional experts, conducted observation sessions in, and took dozens of photographs of the main commemoration sites such as cemeteries, including four brothers' graveyards (memorial burials for the deceased in Georgian armed conflicts), the Tbilisi Missing Memorial, the Tsminda Sameba cathedral which has an icon devoted to the missing, and the main organizations helping the families of the missing such as the ICRC office in Tbilisi and the Georgian Association for Psychosocial Aid "Ndoba." In addition, we collected extensive written and visual material on the issue of the missing since 1993, such as official documents and statements, and several dozens of media reports, pictures, and newspaper articles. We also analyzed the material given to us by our research participants, such as brochures and souvenirs for commemorating the disappeared.

While this varied research material allowed for a careful cross-checking of the gathered information, the article does not aim at providing a full and final overview of the issue of the missing in Georgia, especially since attitudes and policies with regard to this issue keep evolving. Rather, it offers a discussion on the impact of missing bodies on reconciliation processes, three decades after the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Finally, it is worth mentioning that neither of us originates from Georgia or Abkhazia. However, both of us have been working in and on Georgia for the past decade, allowing us to build this research upon pre-existing knowledge and connections.

In our analysis, we provide a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the embodiment of reconciliation through the issue of the missing, as we aim to answer how and why personal, communal, and societal nested circles of reconciliation interplay with regard to missing bodies. Thus, we interpret interviewees' narratives, observed symbols, and structural elements related to the issue of the missing through a reconciliation perspective. Reflecting on our observations, we try to

uncover the meaning and significance of the issue from “within” the lifeworlds of our respondents. We pay particular attention to the transformation of personal attitudes towards the other side through experienced solidarities and shared grief, and to the chronological development of communication between the various stakeholders as they are searching for missing bodies. Eventually, our analysis provides a contextualized understanding of how and why the process of searching for the missing unfolds in a post-war situation in relation to reconciliation as experienced by people on the ground.

The case of the missing in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict

According to the ICRC (2022), 2,315 people, including combatants and civilians, are reported to be still missing in connection with the armed conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the early 1990s. The vast majority of those missing are male, and most of them are ethnic Georgians. The first attempts to find the missing in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict were made by their relatives while the hostilities were still going on. However, these individual efforts were often fruitless. Moreover, scammers and charlatans, particularly active in the 1990s and early 2000s, offered to provide information about the missing in exchange for money, but this information was either false or already known to the formal parties involved in the search (ICRC, 2007; Vashakmadze, 2010; Zakareishvili, interview, May 11, 2022).

Shortly after the armed conflict in Abkhazia, state commissions on missing persons and associations of families of the missing were created on both sides. In addition, the joint Commission from Georgian and Abkhaz Sides on Search for Missing Servicemen in the Abkhaz conflict in 1992–93 was established and operated as part of the UN-led negotiations. In the immediate aftermath of the armed conflict, their coordinated work was effective and facilitated the release of all known prisoners. However, after this initial thrust, the authorities involved in the search concluded that the remaining missing people were most likely dead. Subsequently, the Commission’s work primarily focused on collecting information about the location of the missing

people's bodies (Zakareishvili, interview, 2022). Overall, the issue of missing was low on the political agenda, and it was primarily the family associations on both sides that continued the systematized collection of information. By the mid-2000s, the process was in effect stalled, and the political conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia re-escalated as their elites focused on state-building and nation-building. Although the exchange and meetings of the relatives continued, albeit at a slower pace, not much progress was possible because providing exact information on graves, exhumations, and reburials was precluded by the authorities (Liklikadze, 2007).

Despite these difficulties, by the late 2000s, the remains of 165 military and civilian persons had been reburied on the Georgian side and 236 persons had been brought out alive to Georgia, while 49 dead had been reburied on the Abkhazian side and 87 persons had been transferred there alive (Molodini, n.d.). However, the families of the missing did not trust the process, and they often refused to recognize the exhumed remains as belonging to their missing relatives, even when both Georgian and Abkhazian authorities formally agreed on the evidence. Therefore, the authorities on both sides had to work together scrupulously to win the trust of the missing persons' families. At the same time, the authorities increasingly believed that all the bodies that could be found had already been found, and that it was practically impossible to find and/or identify any others, so their interest in the work waned. This pragmatic approach was not acceptable to the families who retained hope, remained in the corresponding commissions, and tried to force the authorities to continue the search for their relatives (Zakareishvili, interview, 2022).

In this situation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which already supported the cooperative efforts on the disappeared in the region, assumed the proactive role of a neutral and independent intermediary, and eventually that of the main implementer of the search for the missing and the exhumation, identification, and repatriation of human remains. In 2010, two coordination mechanisms (one working in connection with the 1992–93 armed conflict in Abkhazia and the other one in connection with the armed conflicts of the 1990s and 2008 in South Ossetia)

were created under the auspices of the ICRC. Thanks to its expertise and professionalism, the ICRC gained wide support and trust from the families of the missing on both the Georgian and Abkhazian sides (Ndoba, interview, May 12, 2022; relative of the missing, interview, May 16, 2022). Its actual work on the ground started in 2012 when the authorities were finally persuaded to open graves and confidence between the two sides was re-established (Zakareishvili, interview, May 11, 2022). Since the inception of the two coordination mechanisms in 2010, the remains of around 598 people have been recovered. Of these, the remains of 230 people have been identified and handed over to their families (ICRC, 2022).

Communication of the families of the missing across dividing lines: Reconciliation through shared grief

For our research, we spoke with Paata Zakareishvili, the former Georgian government's minister for reconciliation and civic equality with a long track record for peacemaking in the South Caucasus both as a politician and as a civil society member. During the 1992–93 Georgian-Abkhazian war, Zakareishvili worked on the issues of military and civilian prisoners, missing persons, and fatalities. During our interview on May 11, 2022, he recalled that initially the relatives of the missing were irritated with the authorities' work. However, their anger decreased when they got involved in the process and realized its complexity. Zakareishvili noted that some Abkhazian families were aggressive towards the Georgians, refusing to talk to them. And those few parents participating in joint meetings often reproached the Georgian families for not preventing their relatives from going to fight in Abkhazia. Bella Zaldastanishvili, who has four people missing in her family, and took part in the first meetings, recalled that the initial encounters with the Abkhazian families in Ochamchira were difficult (quoted in Liklikadze, 2007):

The Abkhaz mothers were very aggressive to start with. They rebuked us for having let our sons fight in an unjust war. But when they listened to our stories, they were deeply moved. Later, we remembered our dead sons together and wept.

Zakareishvili recollected that Abkhazian mothers sympathized with the Georgian mothers because of their shared feelings of grief over their lost children. Thus, the Georgian families of missing people, particularly mothers, by presenting their stories to the Abkhazian families, found a way to relate to them, even if this approach was primarily driven by the pragmatic purpose of finding their missing relatives.

The consistent cooperation on the issue of the missing was fostered by two family associations on both sides – Georgia’s “Molodini” and Abkhazia’s “Mothers of Abkhazia for Peace and Social Justice.” Molodini’s chairman, Vladimir Doborjginidze, explained in an interview how the two organizations began to cooperate (quoted in Ellena, 2014): “We agreed we had to trust each other. . . . We were not enemies, just parents, equals in our grief . . . I lost Zurab [his only son] but I can’t be angry at them (the Abkhazians).”

A shared feeling of grief coupled with a desire to find the bodies of loved ones can, thus, bear the potential of interpersonal and intercommunal reconciliation, transcending the pain caused by loss. This can be illustrated by a story shared by a Georgian woman (over 60, displaced from Abkhazia), seven members of whose family went missing during the war. She told us about an accidental meeting with a friend from Abkhazia in Turkey a couple of years after the war:

She comes up to me: “N., is that you?” I turned away. . . . “N., turn around. You know, my only brother died in the war. I know your situation, your life, what you’ve been through, but it’s not my fault,” she says. “It’s all politics. Is it your fault that my brother died? It’s not my fault that yours died! I sympathize with you,” she said. And then she... we... well, then we got lost. She does not know that I now live in Tbilisi. What I want to emphasize: maybe something can be restored? Maybe something can be done... What happened has happened. God will not return her brother to her, and these seven people to me... I want to contact this Abkhazian woman later, if I find the contacts, so that [the body of] my mother can be found... brought here and buried while I’m alive.

Currently, there is much less direct contact between the families of the missing from both sides than there was during the 1990s and early 2000s. The process has been purposefully depoliticized as the ICRC offices in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i organize the work in Georgia proper and Abkhazia respectively, including collecting information and communicating with the families. Nevertheless, some signs of solidarity and support can reach the other side through the ICRC. For example, some families whose relatives' remains were found asked the ICRC to convey their gratitude and inform their counterparts on the Abkhazian side that there are people on "this" side helping the families on the "other" side to obtain information and find the bodies of their loved ones (ICRC, interview, May 11, 2022). Hence, the reconciliation potential of the search for missing persons remains despite the overall technocratization of the process, and the lack of direct meetings between Abkhazian and Georgian families of the missing.

From public recognition of the missing to joint commemoration and reconciliation

As in many other countries affected by mass violence and disappearances, the families of the missing in Georgia faced the problem that the society and the state were largely unaware or indifferent to the scale and significance of the issue. While in the immediate aftermath of the Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict, stories of families who had suffered directly from the war were often heard, it was also a period of dramatic post-Soviet transition with a degraded quality of life for most people, political turbulence with elements of civil war, and criminal redistribution of power. At that time, most people were primarily concerned with finding resources to sustain their households rather than with helping the war-affected citizens. The disordered state institutions were unable and/or not willing to organize official commemorative ceremonies for war victims. At best, the authorities assisted families with the repatriation of bodies from Abkhazia and with burial in home cemeteries (Zakareishvili, interview, May 11, 2022; ICRC, interview, May 11, 2022).

When the search for bodies stalled in the 2000s, the families of the missing were left without any significant support from either the state or society. Before the ICRC increased its involvement

in the process, it had commissioned a survey among the relatives showing that they had lost all hope of finding their loved ones, and that they felt abandoned by the state and society (ICRC, interview, May 11, 2022). Since 2010, while re-engaging with the relatives of the missing, the ICRC, in cooperation with local non-governmental organizations such as Ndobá, started a program of psychosocial support for the families of the disappeared (Ndobá, interview, May 12, 2022). In an interview, a beneficiary of this program expressed her gratitude for the support and noted that it had helped her recover and become a sociable person after many years of social withdrawal stemming from the trauma of her loss (relative of the missing, interview, May 16, 2022).

A major contribution to the social reintegration of the families of missing persons was the growing public awareness about disappearances, which has been an important aspect of the ICRC's work in Georgia (ICRC, 2016). The relatives of the disappeared are actively involved in public awareness campaigns too. In addition to public commemoration events held traditionally for the International Day of the Disappeared on August 30, they organize with the Georgian Orthodox Church a special day of commemoration on December 8, celebrating the Saint Maria icon created in 2014 for the families of the missing. The icon is installed in the main cathedral of Georgia, Tsminda Sameba, and draws the attention of many church attendees and tourists (Tbilisi, observations, May 2022; relative of the missing, interview, May 16, 2022). The family committees, supported by the ICRC and in cooperation with local authorities in different regions, have erected memorials for the missing. Commemorative ceremonies are held at these memorials on the International Day of the Disappeared, and attended by the relatives of the missing, authorities, representatives of the ICRC, and Georgian civil society organizations. Some family associations have succeeded in convincing municipal authorities to name streets, squares, and playgrounds after the missing (Ndobá, interview, May 12, 2022). The media coverage of these events, and of the problem of the disappeared in general, has also increased considerably in recent years (ICRC, 2016; ICRC, interview, May 11, 2022; Zakareishvili, interview, May 11, 2022; relative of the missing, interview, May 16, 2022).

In addition, the relatives visit universities and schools to raise awareness of the issue among young people. A family member (interview, May 16, 2022) who participated in these activities told us that she was “offended” by the fact that the youth were unaware of the scale of the problem. She believes it is important to inform them about the large number of individuals, both combatants and civilians, who went missing during the recent armed conflicts. The main objective of such campaigns is to ensure that the missing are not forgotten, and that the younger generations know that they have also contributed to the public good of the country. According to the interviewee, while it is common to remember military men as heroes, civilians who go missing during wars are celebrated as heroes only by their families, and they also deserve public commemoration, memorials, and acknowledgment. The ICRC personnel acknowledged this problem too. They noted that the public speeches of Georgian authorities on the missing have long been highly patriotic, referring only to soldiers as heroes and defenders of the motherland. Initially, these speeches did not mention civilians, children, women, and the elderly, who form a considerable share of all missing people. However, a change in official rhetoric occurred recently, and tribute is now paid to missing civilians too (ICRC, interview, May 11, 2022).

Noteworthy, this interviewed family member sees the increased public attention to the missing as a *victory*: “We’ve been through so much. We’ve lost people, we’ve lost everything!... and for us, it (greater attention) was such a victory!.... that they learned about us, they heard us!” The growing public awareness about the missing grants her a certain psychological closure, although her relatives remain missing. In turn, this form of closure led her to suggest the opening of a reconciliation center near the bridge over the Inguri River, a natural divide between Georgia proper and Abkhazia, which could “put an end to the war” and “unite Georgians with Abkhazians, Ossetians, and Russians.” She envisions this center as a place where the International Day of the Disappeared could be commemorated and the Georgian, Abkhazian, and Ossetian relatives of

missing people could meet. She imagines this center as a step toward a lasting reconciliation between the two sides:

There will be a Georgian side with photos, [and] there will be an Abkhazian side with photos. And we somehow concentrate, apologize. We are not to be blamed for what has happened, right? Let's leave this past behind, let's start living from scratch. And if we do this, nothing wrong will happen, right? And we (the Georgian side) would take the first step. We would not enter there, [cross over] Inguri, [but] let them come here to us... We won't know about everyone (every missing person). And this is what I am worried about. We won't find everyone. There will be missing people as long as Georgia exists, as long as I will be, you will be, my children. Not everyone out of 2400 will be found. But there will be such a center... It won't bring my [loved ones] back... So, we need to look ahead. My children are growing. It is necessary to reconcile, everyone must be somehow united into one. They are in grief; we are in grief. That's it. Let's start living from scratch.

Thus, for this Georgian woman, the reconciliation center is also a way to accept that not every missing person will be found, including her relatives. Such acceptance cannot happen without a genuine reconciliation process centered on a joint commemoration of the missing and a mutually apologetic encounter with the other side, which is assumed possible because of their shared feeling of grief. Eventually, from her perspective, only this process can end the war that the Georgian and Abkhazian societies are still fighting despite the cessation of the military hostilities 30 years ago, and allow them to finally start building a new relationship.

Missing bodies and paths towards reconciliation

The Georgian case demonstrates that the issue of the missing creates possibilities of reconciliation at least at the interpersonal and intergroup levels. The grief that families of the missing share, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality, enables the building of intercommunal solidarities. In the digital artwork dedicated to the families of the missing in Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia,

one family member commented: “The war might have turned us into opposing sides but, according to our Caucasus tradition, we share the same pain and we, the mothers, should support each other... Grieving people have no nationality” (ICRC, 2020, p. 7). Elsewhere, another mother explained: “I express condolences to all mothers – Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians. This is our common tragedy. Mother whose child died does not have a nationality. Her nationality is motherhood” (quoted in Imerlishvili, 2011).

Signs of solidarity across conflict divides, as identified in our case study, show that missing bodies act as catalysts for recognizing that some issues transcend the nationalist divide. Thus, our findings confirm feminist insights positing that embodied copresence (in our case, including copresence with a missing body) is crucial for post-war rapprochement (McSorley, 2013), and that bodies affected by war have the potential to enable solidarities and to expose the artificial nature of nationalist cleavages (Cole, 2009). The family associations, Georgia’s “Molodini” and Abkhazia’s “Mothers of Abkhazia for Peace and Social Justice”, have been key actors in these processes of rapprochement as they have facilitated the building of bridges and cooperation between “conflict sides.” Within their societies, they also have provided crucial community-based psychosocial support to the relatives of the missing and helped them deal with ambiguous loss.

The Georgian case also demonstrates how important it is for the concerned families that the issue of the missing is publicly recognized and commemorated. Although the bodies are still missing, this can help them “move on” from the war period. While the existing literature on the missing suggests that closure happens when the missing bodies are found and returned (Brnčić, 2022), the Georgian case indicates that a form of closure can be triggered when the problem of the missing is widely acknowledged in society. For the relatives of the missing, public awareness of the issue signals not only that their suffering is acknowledged, but also that it is officially recognized as part of the wounds caused by war. Public recognition allows the relatives of the missing to feel less

isolated and welcomed back into the (post-war) national fold. As such, they have the option to walk the path towards reconciliation, not just with the “other” side, but also with their own society.

In the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, calls for public recognition of the issue of the disappeared have been primarily issued by civil society actors such as family associations, and supported by international agencies like the ICRC. Beyond the creation of memorials, specific ceremonies, and places to pray like the Saint Maria icon, they have also shown that the missing include combatants and civilians, men and women, young and old. This is crucial because nationalist narratives usually focus on missing combatants and exclude missing civilians from the collective postwar memories. In addition, the fact that authorities on both sides did not spearhead the movement toward recognition is likely to have lessened nationalist and antagonistic discourses around the issue of the missing. As discussed above, the process of searching for and recovering bodies was purposefully and gradually made more technical and depoliticized. This prevented the political instrumentalization of the issue, while forcing authorities in Georgia and Abkhazia to cooperate.

While this article focuses on *missing* bodies, it is worth briefly discussing what recovering and reburying the *found* bodies produces in terms of reconciliation options. For families, accepting that the remains are indeed those of their missing relatives can be difficult (ICRC, interview, May 11, 2022; Ndobu, interview, May 12, 2022). However, once the process of acceptance starts, it triggers a series of important changes for the concerned individuals, who, from then on, have a place to mourn and remember their relatives. Spouses of the missing can officially become widows and widowers, leave the liminal state in which they were trapped (Comaty, 2019), and perhaps start living again (Ndobu, interview, May 12, 2022). While this can help them move past the war period, it remains unclear if recovering the bodies of their loved ones makes them more or less open to reconciliation with the “other side,” as the process itself can reopen old wounds.

At the national level, a clear politicization process of the *found* bodies emerges, especially when the found body is that of a combatant. These bodies are reintegrated into nationalist narratives and sites of memorialization, notably through official ceremonies of memorial service in the central cathedral and reburial in “brothers’ cemeteries” (observations, May 2022). These ceremonies have “a political and patriotic function of reintegrating the dead back into the community of the living nation” (Drake, 2013, p. 214). The reburied combatants are celebrated as national heroes, which can trigger tensions between the state and families’ associations, as the latter sometimes resist these instrumentalization attempts. While the combatants are described by authorities as having “died for their country,” and thereby reintegrated into the national fold, some families prefer to rebury them in civilian cemeteries (ICRC, interview, May 11, 2022; observation, May 2022). The impact of such nationalist heroization of found bodies on reconciliation processes can be twofold. It may reactivate the “us vs. them” narratives between the two sides of ethnonational conflicts, or it may trigger a process of reconciliation between the concerned family and the wider society, as the person who was missing and socially invisible finally receives public recognition.

It is impossible to provide a comprehensive typology of the specific conditions facilitating or inhibiting reconciliation due to its subjectivity, complexity, contextuality, and multiactoriness. Nevertheless, five main factors contributing to the process of “moving on” for relatives of missing persons can be identified:

- Trust in the technical process of searching and identifying bodies, and commitment of authorities and other stakeholders in finding the bodies;
- Existence of solidarity networks and sustainable communication of affected families within the society and across conflict divides;
- Availability of individual and community-based psychosocial support;
- Broad societal awareness of the issue of the missing;
- Availability of spaces to mourn and commemorate the missing.

Lessons learned

At the practical level, our findings highlight the importance of engaging with affected communities to understand their needs and concerns, and of offering community-based psychosocial support to help them cope with the emotional toll of uncertainty, such as grief counseling, trauma therapy, and different mental health services. Relatives need to be assured that the processes to uncover the fates of their missing loved ones are sustained and professionally conducted. Both psychological and technical support processes can be facilitated by impartial international organizations like the ICRC, specializing in missing persons and providing expertise and resources, and by family associations and local and international experts.

Reconciliation work in the context of missing persons can also be undertaken by peacebuilding practitioners. In the Georgian-Abkhaz case, there are no known peacebuilding initiatives dealing with this issue, and because of its deliberate depoliticized approach, the ICRC cannot directly promote reconciliation between the sides. Hence, peacebuilding organizations could assume the task of facilitating communication and dialogue between families of missing persons from both sides to foster mutual understanding, empathy, trust, and solidarity. They could also encourage and fundraise for cross-community initiatives such as the opening of a reconciliation center focused on the commemoration of the missing near the bridge over the Inguri River, as suggested by one of our interlocutors.

Overall, while the ICRC can continue to collect evidence, undertake forensic analysis, organize the repatriation and identification of bodies, encourage communication between authorities, and provide psychological support, the societal campaigns for raising public awareness and for ensuring memorialization and remembrance could be facilitated by peacebuilders. This would contribute to a more effective use of resources and synergy between peacebuilding and humanitarian relief in the context of missing persons.

In addition, such division of work could free resources for new initiatives on reconciliation related to the issue of the disappeared, such as memorialization initiatives combining intercommunal commemorative events, public ceremonies, solidarity campaigns, or art projects. This could help build trust between the communities on both sides. Everyday peacebuilding initiatives could also include documenting stories and experiences of affected families and sharing them between politically divided families and with wider societies to promote empathy and solidarity. These narratives and empirical knowledge could also inform public campaigns to raise awareness and societal recognition of the missing as well as new educational programs for youth to promote reconciliation and peace in the region and globally.

Conclusion

The issue of the missing after the Georgian-Abkhaz war illustrates the complexity and the multilevel aspect of reconciliation processes. Searching for, recovering, and identifying missing bodies entails communication and cooperation at different levels. First, between authorities across the conflict divide, where despite (and perhaps because of) its emotional sensitivity, the issue is treated by the ICRC mediation as mostly technical and apolitical. Second, between family organizations and individuals on both sides, where the cooperation has led to a rapprochement and to the development of solidarities based on shared grief. Third, within Georgia, where public recognition and acknowledgment of the issue allows concerned families to “move on.” Altogether, these situated and complementary processes shape options for post-war reconciliation.

As our research shows, the issue of missing bodies can be a medium for reconciliation. This can be explained by the liminal status of the disappeared (neither fully dead nor alive), which complicates their instrumentalization for nationalistic and antagonistic purposes. In addition, many missing people are civilian, female, and elderly, not just young male combatants. They do not correspond to the ideal “hero” type, but, rather, illustrate the devastating impacts of war on whole societies. The issue of the missing can generate strong emotions with the potential to build bridges

across national divides. Properly addressing the issue can also help foster solidarity and compassion in the broader society by reminding the rest of the population of the lingering consequences of the war.

Neither of these processes happens naturally or without friction. For instance, the relatives of the missing, as well as family associations and the ICRC, struggle for the missing to be remembered, recognized, and commemorated. While this confirms the idea that the pace of reconciliation at the individual and the institutional and collective levels can be different (Lansing & King, 1998), it also suggests that the issue of the missing is a locus where contestations about war and peace, about reconciliation, and about the identity of the victims and of the perpetrators, are taking place. In these contestations, missing bodies are not just objects of discourse, they are invested by individuals and institutions with meanings and practices, underscoring the deeply embodied dimension of post-war processes. In our view, the lessons learned from the Georgian case bear clear relevance for reconciliation efforts in other cases of conflicts nurtured by nationalistic and ethnocentric antagonisms and characterized by a considerable number of missing people, such as the conflicts in the Balkans or the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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