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EU-CAUCASUS DIALOGUE ON GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ RELATIONS

Roundtable, 29th November 2010
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Introduction

Since 2008, International Alert has been facilitating a Georgian-Abkhaz ‘Dialogue through Research’ initiative. This initiative seeks to contribute new thinking on key conflict-related issues to as wide an audience as possible. After two years, this group of experts had gained insights and made recommendations on issues such as security guarantees, international engagement in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict context, the de-isolation of Abkhazia and the politics of non-recognition.

Meanwhile, the official approaches of the sides and popular attitudes have become even more polarised and entrenched. Creative ideas about how to move forward are deemed to be lacking. As a result, those engaged in conflict resolution felt an urgent need to reassess both locally and internationally led peacebuilding approaches.

To this end, International Alert organised a small roundtable, bringing together the leaders of civil dialogue processes, experts and international facilitators of high-level dialogue. The participants collectively analysed the situation and conducted a sober assessment of the current and past efforts. This included exploring what the different ‘sides’ – including the Western international community and peacebuilding international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) – can contribute to conflict resolution.

The format of the roundtable was one of dialogue between Track I (official) and Track II (unofficial) processes, with input from experts on the region. Three sessions were held, focusing respectively on the past, present and future prospects, consisting of presentations from an expert from Abkhazia, Georgia and a guest speaker from the region. This was followed by a discussion in which the international participants were given a chance to respond to the experts’ analysis and invited to offer their own recommendations.

This document is a record of the day’s proceedings, starting with a summary of the day’s discussions followed by the texts of the speakers’ presentations – slightly edited for a readership rather than a live audience.
Summary of Discussion

The discussion evolved during the day, and here we present a summary according to themes that arose. Due to the need to comply with ‘Chatham House rules’ under which the discussion was held, it does not go into any detail that could be attributed to any particular individual.

In talking about the past, the language of “historical justice” and “lost opportunities” featured prominently. Discussants reflected on how far back in history one should go to determine the causes of the conflict, while others spoke of the need to openly acknowledge mistakes made by different sides in more recent times. One Abkhaz discussant asked whether we can realistically come to a resolution today without digging even further into the past and dealing with earlier instances of injustice? For example, the expulsion of the Abkhaz ‘Mahajirs’ in the 19th century and Soviet era settlement of Georgians to Abkhazia arguably cast the issue of ‘return’ of Georgians displaced from Abkhazia in 1993 in a different light. Whichever cut-off date one might use, historical narratives shape perceptions of the conflict and consequently influence political behaviour of the sides, and therefore have to be taken into account.

It was in connection with this historical approach that a proposal was made to conduct an independent investigation into the war of 1992-1993, similar to that of the independent fact finding mission into the August 2008 war (the ‘Tagliavini Commission’). This would help to ascertain the causes of the conflict, in contrast to the over-emphasis that the international community has placed on dealing with the consequences of the conflict over the years (i.e. refugees/IDPs). However, this proposal for an investigation was dismissed as being unrealistic due to the time passed and the huge amount of resources that it would require. In any case, both Abkhaz and Georgian discussants were critical of the absence of outcomes from the ‘Tagliavini Commission’, lamenting that despite the richness and balanced nature of the findings, there had been no political consequences for the perpetrators on any of the sides as a result. Nevertheless, the Tagliavini report was more than once cited during the day to support one argument or another and it was suggested that it could be a good starting point for further dialogue between the sides and mutual examination of narratives. It was noted that it would be useful to have an official translation into Russian and Georgian of the report to make it more accessible to local audiences and less able to be manipulated by the ruling elites who prefer only a selective reading of the findings.

As mentioned already, the question of refugees and IDPs arose repeatedly throughout in the day in different contexts of the discussion. Discussants invoked the humanitarian dimension of the refugee/IDP problem, warning that failure to deal with the issue is only storing up problems for the future. The absence of a durable solution for this category of people – regardless of whether that involves safe return to Abkhazia or more dignified integration into Georgian society - is hindering any chance of reconciliation. As long as basic security and humanitarian problems persist, a whole generation is growing up with deep resentment of the other side. Echoing back to the discussion on historical justice, this discussant stated that ‘this [state of affairs] cannot be considered as a price of the past’.

On a more political level, one discussant proposed that as long as both sides stick to maximalist policies regarding refugees/IDPs, there is unlikely to be any progress towards a political solution. The main sticking point in negotiations in the past has been that Georgia always insisted on restoration of territorial integrity and the unconditional return of refugees, while the Abkhaz...
approach has been to only discuss return of IDPs/refugees after recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. The discussant asked why not to consider recognition of Abkhazia if IDPs & refugees are given the right to return? Or alternatively why not restore Georgian territorial integrity but forget about the unconditional return of all the refugees? Perhaps a compromise solution could be found somewhere in-between these maximalist approaches, that ideally takes into account both historical approaches and international humanitarian law.

The respective EU and Georgian ‘engagement’ strategies which had come up in the presentations were discussed further. While the principle behind the European strategy for engagement was welcomed, it was criticised either as being ‘too late’ or lacking clarity. Across the board, participants were keen to distinguish between the European and Georgian strategies, acknowledging that the ‘political chapeau’ of ‘de-occupation’ in the Georgian strategy is clearly problematic. Both Georgians and Abkhaz advocated for direct engagement between Europe and Abkhazia that is not dependent on Tbilisi, though the Georgians proposed that there could be some conditionality to facilitate some reciprocal moves from the Abkhaz side (for example, requiring progress on human rights and security for the Gal/i population). A number of concrete proposals were made including an easing of the restrictive visa policy for Abkhaz residents of some European states; providing education opportunities in European universities; allowing Abkhaz participation in the ENP civil society forum; the inclusion of Abkhazia into regional cooperation projects in the sphere of culture, tourism or education; and engaging in a thorough discussion about what democracy, governance and human rights mean for Abkhazia. All proposals suggested that meaningful engagement should target the whole of Abkhazia, and not be limited to the ethnic Georgian population, a practice that has fostered resentment towards Europe for its apparently preferential treatment in the past. Most importantly, such engagement would necessarily require Europe to find a way to engage with the Abkhaz ruling elite. With regards to this, the plan to abolish the post of EUSR to the South Caucasus was heavily criticised by both Georgians and Abkhaz alike as very likely to hinder such ‘engagement’.

The EU also came in for some heavy criticism by both sides on its political role. The Abkhaz criticised the EU for its overwhelming support for Georgian territorial integrity, while the Georgians criticised Europe for allowing the Georgian political elite to withdraw from their obligations as they calmly and gradually withdrew from the Geneva negotiations prior to 2008. Different EU representatives tried to put their efforts into context, drawing attention to the intense activity of the post August 2008 period, which saw the remarkably rapid deployment of EU civilian monitors, the renewal of a new phase and format of Geneva discussions and an international fact finding mission (Tagliavini commission). Others acknowledged the limited room for manoeuvre for the European Union, vis a vis differences of opinion within member states regarding their bi-lateral relations with Russia, the need to maintain EU-Russia and EU-Georgia relations at the same time as mediating between them, and still leave open the option for direct lines of communication with Abkhazia. One discussant hoped that recent improvement in relations between EU & Moscow could be used to create a more favourable environment for Georgian-Russian relations (and hence Georgian-Abkhaz relations), rather than assume that this would work against Abkhazia’s interests by putting further Russian support for Abkhaz independence on hold.

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2 Referring to the Georgian Government’s ‘State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation’, published in January 2010 available at http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc204.pdf; and the EU’s ‘non-recognition and engagement’ policy for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the parameters of which were outlined in an unpublished non-paper by the EU’s Political and Security Committee (PSC) in December 2009.

3 In fact, this roundtable took place two days prior to another roundtable organised by the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the office of Peter Semneby, EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, where the EU ‘Non-recognition and Engagement’ policy was discussed with member states and international experts, though without participation of officials or experts from the region itself.

4 Peace negotiations under the Geneva process had been on hold since July 2006 when Georgian special forces conducted an operation in Kodor/i Valley. Georgian and Abkhaz speakers cited a number of actions taken by the Georgian government (such as the establishment of the ‘alternative’ pro-Georgian Sanakoev administration in South Ossetia) which they interpreted as attempts to ‘internationalise’ the conflict, i.e. gain recognition that Russia is a party to the conflict and thus cannot be a neutral ‘peacekeeper’ and therefore carve a greater role for European and US in the mediation process between Russia and Georgia, denying the Abkhaz and South Ossetian elite a seat at the table as a party to the conflict.
In summary, many areas for dialogue and engagement were raised that can be pursued while steering away from the hot political issues, above all regarding political status. In parallel, it was suggested that the EU should develop protocols for relations with ‘non-recognised’ and ‘partially recognised’ entities, which might facilitate more balanced approaches in future. In general, the participants had no expectations that many more countries would recognise Abkhazia as an independent state in the medium term, and indeed some doubts were raised as to how ready Abkhaz society is at this stage for full international recognition and all the responsibilities that that would entail. In the meantime, there is a need for all parties, including the EU, to reconsider their basic assumptions regarding the conflict and its resolution, learning lessons from missed opportunities in the past. Finally, the importance of such dialogue between civil society and track one diplomats was emphasised by all sides – not just for the sake of dialogue, but to continue to ‘unpick the knots’ in the complex array of issues and to develop the substance of the dialogue. Participants from the region extended invitations to the EU representatives to visit them more frequently to allow for more dynamic process of dialogue.
Session 1:

International engagement in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict-resolution process

Achievements and lost opportunities during Track I processes
Advantages and limitations of Track II processes

Speakers
Professor George Anchabadze, Ilia Chavchavadze State University
Liana Kvarchelia, Centre for Humanitarian Programmes
Alexander Iskandaryan, Director, Caucasus Institute, Yerevan

George Anchabadze

Georgia and Abkhazia: Lost opportunities up until 2008
History of Georgian-Abkhaz relations

From time immemorial, Georgians and Abkhaz have lived in the same geopolitical niche, and their histories are closely interwoven. Since ancient times, these peoples belonged to the same states and had forged a common political identity. Nonetheless, Abkhazia was not merely a passive subject of political processes. The significance of the Abkhaz role in the state union of feudal Georgia and the creation of a single Georgian Kingdom in the 11th to 15th centuries is evidenced by the fact that many sources refer to this kingdom as ‘Abkhazia’, in which Georgians and Abkhaz shared many socio-political and cultural associations. However, in the 20th century, especially during the Soviet period, new social phenomena caused a rift in the previously harmonious relations between Georgia and Abkhazia.

Pre-war period (1989–1992)

As the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was breaking up and collapsing, both Georgians and Abkhaz began to promote their national projects for a future constitutional political structure. Their plans differed significantly. If Georgians saw Abkhazia as an indivisible part of Georgia, deserving only cultural or administrative autonomy due to its ethnic specificity, the Abkhaz saw Abkhazia as a self-sufficient unit, choosing its own path of independent development. After the tragic events of July 1989, when inter-ethnic clashes led to casualties in Abkhazia, the leaders of nationalist movements began to listen more readily to their opponents’ arguments. Consultations and negotiations were held to discuss forming an Abkhaz parliament. The Abkhaz suggested creating an electoral system (a bicameral parliament was proposed), which would have ensured that enough ethnic Abkhaz were elected to legislative structures to effectively block anti-Abkhaz projects at their outset. The Georgian side, represented at that time by the popular ‘Round Table’ political bloc led by the Zviad Gamsakhurdia (before he became president), rejected the idea of a two-chamber parliament, and instead proposed a quota system. Moreover, 28 seats in legislative structures were allotted to the Abkhaz, comprising 18% of the population of the autonomous republic. The Georgians, who comprised some 45% of the population, were allotted 26 seats, with representatives of the remaining ethnic groups getting 11 seats. The agreement came into force, and in December 1991 the new parliament of the autonomous republic was elected. It was the first significant success achieved through negotiation. However, later the same month (December 1991), the armed coup which deposed President Gamsakhurdia took place in Tbilisi.
The new Georgian authorities tried to clarify the Abkhaz position towards future relations with Georgia. The Abkhaz proposed a ‘Republic of Abkhazia within the Republic of Georgia’, with the division of responsibilities between Sukhumi and Tbilisi. The administration in Tbilisi rejected this proposal. After this, tensions began to escalate, increasing further following Eduard Shevardnadze’s arrival on the Georgia political scene. Statements were made about the inadmissibility of retaining quotas (28–26–11), which made Abkhazia an ethnocracy.

In this context, the Abkhaz side tried to launch a new initiative – a proposal for a broad Georgian-Abkhaz federation. However, on the very day that this proposal was being discussed in local parliament, 14th August 1992, Georgian troops entered Abkhaz territory.


The deployment of troops led to large-scale military conflict, during which Georgia lost control over its autonomous republic. The war caused an exodus of the Georgian population from Abkhazia and drastically changed the balance of power in the region. The Abkhaz side saw themselves as the victors, while the Georgian authorities wanted revenge. Compromises which had been acceptable prior to the war were no longer realistic.

Beginning of international involvement

International involvement in Georgian-Abkhaz affairs was already evident before August 1992, when the election of Eduard Shevardnadze to Chairman of the State Council of Georgia speeded up the process of international recognition of Georgia. However, the first Western representatives who visited Georgia did not take Abkhaz demands particularly seriously. They gathered most of their information in Tbilisi and their reports were one-sided, in my view. This conclusion is based, among other things, on my own impressions from meeting representatives of several official missions during that period.

Post-war period (1993–2008)

Following the Georgian-Abkhaz war, international attention increasingly focused on the conflict, as reflected in relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council. However, even the proposals of the United Nations (UN) were sometimes met with incomprehension in Tbilisi. This apparently deterred the international community from playing a more active role in the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In particular, the Georgian parliament reacted negatively to Annex II of the then UN General Secretary Boutros Ghali’s report of 3rd May 1994, which included the statement: “Abkhazia will be a subject with sovereign rights within the framework of a union State to be established as a result of negotiations after issues in dispute have been settled.” This statement, among other points, prompted the Georgian parliament to voice concerns that some provisions in the report posed a threat to the ancient Georgian state and could provoke a new wave of hostilities (24th May 1994).

The ‘Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces’, signed in Moscow on 14th May 1994, was a step towards stabilising the situation on the frontline and marked the beginning of peacekeeping operations by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The agreement was endorsed in UN Security Council Resolution No. 937 of 21st July 1994. The arrival of the UN Mission in Georgia was also of great importance.

By the mid-1990s, it appeared that the international community would soon manage to unpick the knot of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. However, two drafts of a ‘Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz settlement’ were rejected in July 1995 and June 1997. The first was rejected by the Abkhaz side and the second by the Georgian side.
Russia plays a prominent role on the front stage of Caucasian politics. It is difficult to assess Russia’s role in the 1992–1993 war as positive, if only because Soviet weapons provided to Georgia under the Tashkent Agreement in 1992 and later delivered to both sides of the conflict contributed significantly to the start and scale of the military conflict. Nevertheless, Russia participated in a number of peace initiatives as part of the UN Secretary General’s ‘Group of Friends’. Perhaps one event which attracted the most attention was the visit to Tbilisi by Vladislav Ardzinba, President of the unrecognised Republic of Abkhazia, to meet President Shevardnadze of Georgia on 14th August 1997 – a meeting that was mediated by Russian Foreign Minister Evgeny Primakov. A statement signed by both presidents called on people to “end the divisive conflict”, “under no circumstances to allow the bloodshed to be resumed” and to “act in a spirit of compromise and reconciliation”. However, in May 1998, less than a year after this meeting, fighting broke out in the Gali district of Abkhazia between Georgian troops and Abkhaz militias. Shortly after this, on 12th October 1999, the ‘Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia’ was passed in Sukhumi, thereby providing Abkhaz representatives with an official reason to reject any further discussion of a federal arrangement.

In this way, each outbreak of hostilities reduced the range of possible solutions to the conflict. This was demonstrated yet again by the ‘small wars’ in the Kodori Valley in October 2001.

In December 2001, the then head of the UN mission in Georgia, Dieter Boden, put forward another plan for resolving the conflict. The document proposed a political system in which Abkhazia would be “a sovereign entity” in the “State of Georgia”. This was not a constitutional concept proposed as a ready-made solution to the conflict; rather, it was a framework document, the underlying principles of which would form the basis of an agreement reached through negotiation. At that time, the plan got a cool reception in both Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Recently, on 18th November 2010, Mr Boden, speaking at ‘European House’ in Tbilisi, stated that: “strong resistance came not from the Abkhaz, but from the Georgians. It came from the faction of the parliament that represented the interests of the Abkhaz government in exile. They were categorically against the use of the term ‘sovereign’ to describe Abkhazia.” Mr Boden noted: “When the Abkhaz learned of the feud in Tbilisi, they decided to ‘seize the moment’ and back out.”

On 15th May 2006, the Abkhaz side proposed a comprehensive new plan for the resolution of the conflict to the Georgian government, entitled ‘Key to the Future’. The essence of this plan was to develop radical, new neighbourly relations between the conflicting parties in exchange for Georgian recognition of Abkhazia independence. In response to this, the Georgians presented their ‘Roadmap’ on 9th June. This proposed the return of Abkhazia to Georgian sovereignty, ensuring broad internal autonomy based on the principles of federalism and Abkhaz representation in central Georgian leadership structures. The plan also addressed the mandatory return of Georgian refugees, the protection of their rights, and the rebuilding of Abkhazia’s infrastructure and economy.

In the end, the contrasting ideas underpinning the proposals did not help the rapprochement of the parties’ positions.

On 25th July 2006, troops from the Georgian Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior began special operations in the Kodori Valley, a mountainous region in Abkhazia that remained under Georgian jurisdiction after 1993. The aim of the operation was to remove the local authorities, which Tbilisi believed were only weakly controlled by central government. However, according to the 1994 Agreement, the presence of any military troops, except local police, was prohibited in the strategically important Kodori Valley. Therefore, the Abkhaz side demanded the immediate withdrawal of Georgian troops. This demand was not met, whereupon Sukhumi broke off all talks with the Georgian government until troops were withdrawn from Kodori.
Despite the deteriorating situation, the international community continued to search for a resolution to the conflict. Notable efforts included the visits of Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, to Tbilisi, Batumi and Sukhumi in June 2008, along with the so-called Steinmeier Plan (named after the German Foreign Minister) in July 2008.

The Steinmeier Plan included three phases: 1) confidence building between the parties, including the signing of an agreement on the non-use of force and the start of returns of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia; 2) reconstruction of Abkhazia, with funding from donor countries; and 3) the resolution of Abkhazia’s political status.

However, this plan included points that were unacceptable to the conflicting parties, especially the Abkhaz. In addition, the Russia-Georgia war soon put a stop to such peacebuilding initiatives and the Steinmeier Plan ended without concrete results.

In summing up the 15-year post-war period, it can be said that the numerous attempts to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict have resulted only in a ceasefire, but no political resolution.

Liana Kvarchelia

International approaches to resolution of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

It is important to analyse official international (Western) approaches to the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, not least because the approach being followed today has not changed significantly since the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993. The key starting positions have remained unchanged, despite their failure to resolve the conflict and the dramatic changes in the context since August 2008. However, some new tendencies have emerged: the Georgia-Abkhaz conflict has been replaced by the Russia-Georgia conflict in official Georgian discourse; Georgia actively uses the term ‘occupied territories’ when referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thereby diminishing the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts; and Georgia’s position on the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the negotiation process has become increasingly rigid – representatives of these sides to the conflict can participate only in their personal capacity. Georgia’s radical stance is partly due to the fact that it still has international support. Nonetheless, recognition (of independence) by the Russian Federation and the strengthening of links between Sukhumi and Moscow have prompted the European Union (EU) to begin to talk about ‘engagement without recognition’ in relation to Abkhazia.

Before talking about the lessons that can be gleaned from the official negotiation process, it is first necessary to define its goals. At least until August 2008, it appeared that the main goal of the official process was “the peaceful settlement of the conflict while maintaining Georgian territorial integrity”. This goal was near unattainable, as it met the political aspirations of only one party while conflicting with the aspirations of the other. Nevertheless, pressure on Abkhazia from all mediators resulted at times in the talks coming close to formally achieving this goal; the Primakov project is one example of this. However, it was Georgia in particular that refused to compromise.

Important agreements were achieved under UN auspices in 1993–1994, with relevant structures established such as the UN Observer Mission and peacekeeping forces deployed. Later on, the Coordinating Council’s Quadripartite Committee on Security Issues also worked quite well. For many years, the international presence contributed to the absence of large-scale violence. Maintaining the status quo ensured stability without a final settlement being reached and made it possible for negotiations on particular issues to continue. A draft treaty on the non-use of force and international security guarantees was drawn up. The signing of such an agreement is crucial not only for security considerations, but also to build trust between the parties. Some analysts believe that the signing of such an agreement is not so pressing today, because it is obvious that
agreements exist primarily on paper but can be violated in practice. However, in light of the current total absence of trust between the parties, the negative consequences of refusing to sign such an agreement could well outweigh its positive impact if signed.

When Georgian forces entered the Kodor Valley in 2006, it was already clear that Georgia’s President Saakashvili was doing all he could to upset the status quo. The argument that the Georgian president ran out of patience having exhausted all possible channels for peaceful resolution is not tenable, if only because ‘settlement’ (of the conflict) and the restoration of ‘territorial integrity’ are not one and the same thing. On the other hand, the position of the international community seemed in many ways to facilitate the line taken by the Georgian leadership, especially after the Rose Revolution, namely: the avoidance of meaningful dialogue with the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides; deterioration of relations with Russia; a shifting of the focus to disputes between Russia and Georgia; finally culminating in direct military action in August 2008.

Overall, the shortcomings of the international approach to resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict include the following.

The mediators of the process were not neutral with regard to the final outcome of the settlement – this meant that resolution of the conflict was unambiguously linked to the restoration of territorial integrity.

- The mediators were not neutral in the sense that the third parties involved had competing geopolitical and economic interests. Despite the denial of such a thing as a ‘sphere of influence’ in Western politics, competition between Russia and the West in the region looked like a struggle for influence. Accordingly, Russia perceives local stakeholders’ links with the West as a challenge to its national interests. At the same time, the West reveals double standards in relation to stakeholders who partner with Russia. This was particularly clear in light of the recognition of Kosovo’s independence.

- Official approaches to the resolution did not sufficiently take into account the fact that the conflict had a military phase, that the war was started by the Georgian side, and that war and its consequences severely limit opportunities for political compromise when widely disparate political aims are being discussed. It is probably no coincidence that there was no international investigation into the events of 1992–1993. Had an investigation similar to the one undertaken by the independent international commission after the August war of 2008 been carried out after the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993, it would have determined Georgia’s responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities. If this had happened, the negotiations would not have been so directly tied to the issue of the ‘territorial integrity’ of the former Georgian Socialist Soviet Republic. Additionally, without international condemnation of the events of 1992–1993, it is difficult to initiate constructive debate about ‘dealing with the past’ within the communities themselves.

- A priori support for the ‘territorial integrity’ of Georgia did not motivate the authorities in Tbilisi to make compromises on a political resolution. Georgia did not even agree to solutions proposed within the framework of a common state. Meanwhile, Abkhazia came under political and economic pressure through CIS sanctions and political isolation.

- The official peace process failed to analyse the conflict and its root causes. Instead, it focused primarily on the consequences of the military phase of the war in isolation from the causes of conflict. In particular, one of the main issues under negotiation was that of refugees and displaced persons. Persistent demands were made of the Abkhaz to allow the return of refugees, yet Georgia was never condemned for starting the 1992–1993 war. Thus, there was no discussion of the circumstances that caused the refugee flow or of the liability of the party that started the war. Instead, the party which was the object of aggression was condemned for not providing
a complete process for the return of refugees following a bloody conflict. It is worth noting, however, that as time went on, the international approach changed in emphasis, and policies began to encourage the temporary integration of refugees in their current place of residence.

• The fact that Georgia was not condemned for sending its troops into Abkhazia in 1992 meant that, in effect, there was no condemnation of the use of force. This could be interpreted by Tbilisi as a signal that Georgia could continue unhindered to use force to achieve its aims. What is clear is that on the eve of the August 2008 war, Georgia did not receive any clear messages that the use of force was inadmissible. Since the war, only the report of the international fact-finding commission led by Heidi Tagliavini recorded and condemned the use of military force by Georgia against South Ossetia. However, this did not lead to any sanctions being taken against Georgia.

• Unfortunately, international intervention was more effective in stabilising the post-war situation than in preventing violence. An example of successful intervention was the French President Sarkozy’s 2008 mission, which managed to steer the situation into negotiations and contributed to the achievement of important agreements. However, it was precisely the change made to point 6 of the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan that determined the further course of events. Apparently, fearing that international negotiations on the political status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would follow the Kosovo example, the Georgian president insisted on changing the sixth point of the plan, calling Russia’s military presence in the region into question. This, in turn, accelerated Russia’s recognition of the independence of the two republics.

• The Geneva process, with all its limitations, is the only official communication channel since August 2008. The most important achievement to date is the creation of an incident prevention mechanism. However, no progress has been made on the major issues under negotiation (an agreement on the non-use of force and the refugee question); neither has progress been made on the deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to Abkhazia. If the EU took a status-neutral stance on Abkhazia, then some form of EUMM presence would not be so clearly unacceptable. Furthermore, it was the reluctance of Georgia and the United States (US) to support the UN Secretary General’s proposal for a neutral wording of the mandate for the UN mission in Abkhazia (a ‘stabilization mission’ without geographical indications) that in fact led to the curtailment of the mission. This significantly reduced the international presence in Abkhazia, limiting it to a few humanitarian organisations.

• After the events of August 2008, the Georgian leadership completely shifted the focus to Russian-Georgian relations, thereby consigning the events of 1992–1993 to oblivion. The Georgian side’s use of the term ‘occupation’ and refusal to sign an agreement on the non-use of force with Abkhazia is essentially a denial of the conflict with Abkhazia. Unfortunately, the international community remains biased on this issue. Although the main international executive structures avoid the term ‘occupation’, they continue to talk about the ‘territorial integrity’ of Georgia. International mediators do not support Abkhazia’s call for Sukhumi and Tbilisi to sign an agreement on the non-use of force, referring to the Georgian side’s belief that the agreement should only be between Moscow and Tbilisi, and due to fears of legitimising the status of Abkhazia as an independent state. Nevertheless, the conflict between Russia and Georgia does not override the fact that a conflict still exists between Abkhazia and Georgia. As far as legitimising the status of Abkhazia is concerned, in 1994 Georgia signed a series of agreements with Abkhazia which were not automatically perceived by international actors as constituting the international recognition of Abkhazia.

• The unwillingness of Western institutions to publicly criticise Georgia gives it de facto complete freedom in relation to the conflicts. Even a document as odious as the ‘Modalities for the Engagement of Organisations Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia’ was not publicly rebuffed. This was despite the fact that it was known that international structures
(donor organisations, diplomatic missions and INGOs) were unanimous in their criticism of the
document in private discussions. As a result, after minor amendments, the Georgian government
adopted a document that international organisations consider violates international standards.

- The Georgian discourse definitively establishing Russia as a party to the conflict is not the only
characteristic of the post-August situation. The idea of Georgia as an infallible victim is gradually
being discredited in the West, especially after the publication of the International Fact Finding
Commission report. This will force the Georgian leadership to devise politically correct formulae
that indicate Georgia’s ‘peaceful’ intentions. However, the framework (‘occupied territories’,
‘territorial integrity’) in which the ‘New Georgian Strategy’ is being widely publicised in the
West suggests that we are talking instead about new Georgian tactics. Such tactics aim to assume
control of Abkhaz contacts with the West or, most likely, to fully exclude Abkhazia. Senior
Western diplomats formally welcomed the Georgian ‘strategy’, ignoring the fact that its political
framework completely undermined the purpose and meaning ascribed to the document – which
were namely to build trust between opposing sides of the conflict. However, if there were any
doubts about the true intentions of the authors of the ‘strategy’, these were dispelled by the
document on modalities for international organisations working in the ‘occupied territories’.

Unfortunately, there is a wide gap between the level of experience of the expert community (local
and international) and international solutions and approaches to the conflict. Expert and civil
society activists’ opinions on conflict-related issues, as well as on internal development in Georgia
and in Abkhazia, are not often taken into account by international stakeholders and influential
organisations. Often, international institutions are interested merely in fact that dialogue between
civil society from the two sides takes place at all, rather than in the content of this dialogue.
However, a civil dialogue can provide a comprehensive and fairly detailed analysis of the real
situation. It appears that a more regular exchange of views between civil society activists and
experts, on the one hand, and official diplomatic representatives, on the other, would provide
international mediators with a more balanced perspective of the real situation.

Alexander Iskandaryan

Challenges and prospects for Georgian-Abkhaz reconciliation

Ever since the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, and especially after Russia’s recognition of
Abkhazia and the signing of bilateral treaties, some political analysts would say that it has been
impossible for any actor to engage meaningfully on Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution – either
at the official diplomatic level or, indeed, through ‘Track II’ or ‘public’ diplomacy. However, it
would be a mistake to give up trying altogether, if only because it would be wrong to lose the entire
potential for resolution that had been built up during earlier negotiation efforts. This potential, in
terms of human resources and contacts, scenarios and visions, will prove essential when external
conditions are more favourable for the renewal of conflict resolution efforts; preserving it to at
least some extent is worthwhile.

Therefore, some level of activity needs to be sustained. To this end, actors need to be well aware
of the main stakeholders’ positions and options.

It is easiest to describe the position of the West5 with regard to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In
brief, the West does not know what to do, which is perfectly understandable. Russia has burnt all
its bridges by recognising Abkhazia; even if it wished to, it would be practically impossible or at
least painstakingly difficult for the Russian political elite to ‘de-recognise’ Abkhazia. This being
so, direct diplomacy is not an option and indirect diplomacy is constrained to say the least.

5 The ‘West’ is understood here in a very wide sense, including the positions of various Western countries and international organisations.
Ironically, Russia’s position is rather similar to that of the ‘collective West’. Whatever Russia’s motives had been to recognise Abkhazia’s independence, the recognition has created grave constraints for Russian politics in the area. It can no longer enter any kind of negotiations on the status of Abkhazia. Moreover, it can barely deal with Georgia at all, what with the war and the severing of diplomatic ties. Efforts to convince any but the most marginal countries to join in the recognition of Abkhazia clearly stand no chance. As a result, Russia, just like the West, does not know what to do next and, apart from fortifying its presence in and influence over Abkhazia, is not really doing anything. The difference is that Russia, while having no idea about potential next steps, does not really wish to change the current political reality for the simple reason that the changes which are desirable from their perspective are impossible, while undesirable changes are preventable.

Georgia’s position on Abkhazia has recently been evolving: there are fresh trends towards discussing options for Georgian-Abkhaz reconciliation and a potential quest for normalisation. This would seem to be quite positive if it were not for the timing: all this talk about ‘engagement’ has begun at least two years’ – and probably as many as 15 years’ – late. Right now, it is the wrong time to propose compromises that involve the inclusion of Abkhazia within Georgia. In the current reality, such an attitude – which would have been constructive prior to the war – automatically rules out the participation of actors from Abkhazia in the discussions.

The position of Abkhazia is the most ambivalent of all. On the one hand, the Abkhaz welcomed the recognition of their independence by a world power and the dissolution of the threat that they constantly perceived to be coming from Georgia. On the other hand, the consequences of Russia’s recognition are not easy to handle. Abkhazia is by no means looking forward to ‘moving’ from the South Caucasus to the North Caucasus, although the Abkhaz as an ethnic group do feel a degree of kinship to some of the North Caucasus nations. Abkhazia’s experience of having a vibrant civil society, incomparable to that in any of the North Caucasus republics, contributes to its dread of being totally controlled by a huge country and of having its economy and security monopolised. This naturally creates apprehensions within Abkhaz society. Russia has sensed such apprehensions, which have already led to the emergence of a discourse about Abkhazia’s ‘ingratitude’ not only within expert circles, but also in the news media, including media with mass readership.

The positions of the stakeholders being what they are, it appears that the only way to sustain interaction is by establishing links between the Abkhaz and the Georgians on a non-governmental level via the West. Ideally, Russian experts and civil society activists should also be involved, and preferably not only outspoken liberals and prominent pro-Western figures but some mainstream actors too.

In order for this to work, the first step should be to completely suspend any discussion of Abkhazia’s status. Obviously, many Georgians feel the loss of Abkhazia strongly, but there is still a long way to go from feeling to acknowledging.

The second thing that must be done is to establish a multilateral framework, because in a bilateral format, such a project is certain to remain marginal to the point of insignificance. One way to ensure a multilateral format is to involve neutral countries, for example, some of the CIS member states.

The third requirement is that Abkhaz participants need to do some work internally within their own society, and the Georgians in theirs. This internal work should be focused on de-politicising issues such as language policies, border-crossing procedures, minority rights, or the problems of Georgians living in the Gali region. Any success in this respect may eventually serve to widen communication channels and networking potential. Under the current circumstances, this would be a considerable achievement.
Session 2:
Analysis of current situation from different perspectives and sides
Political, economic and human security

Speakers
Nadezhda Venediktova, Journalist and author
Archil Gegeshidze, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS)
Leila Alieva, Centre for National and International Studies, Baku

Nadezhda Venediktova

Policy of isolation/non-recognition and security of Abkhazia

This paper attempts to consider from different perspectives how the policy of isolation/non-recognition affects the security of Abkhazia and its people.

Military security

Being unrecognised by the international community and consistently forced back towards Georgia, Abkhazia welcomed Russia’s recognition of its independence. People believe that this recognition ensures complete security of Abkhazia from a military invasion by Georgia, which has been the main concern for Abkhazia in the past decade. Two Russian military bases in Abkhazia, Russian capital investment to strengthen the border between Abkhazia and Georgia along the Ingur River, and Russian naval patrols of Abkhaz territorial waters have indeed provided a reliable shield, given the superiority of Russia over Georgia in all resources.

However, immediately the question arises over the cost of such security to Abkhazia. On the one hand, the sense of security felt by the population is stimulating the revival of economic activity and a significant influx of population, not only of returning former residents of Abkhazia but also of new immigrants, mostly from Russia. Moreover, the sharp reduction in the contingent of Abkhaz border guards and the number of Abkhaz army personnel removes from the Abkhaz budget an additional burden, allowing human resources to be channelled into other productive areas.

On the other hand, having its safety guaranteed at the highest level obliges Abkhazia to follow the lead of Russian foreign policy. Contacts with the West are severely restricted, the UN mission in Abkhazia has been closed and Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue has all but stopped.

Currently, there is no disagreement between Abkhaz and Russian foreign policy, with the exception of Russia’s dissatisfaction over a few attempts by Abkhazia to strengthen ties with the ethnic Abkhaz community living in Turkey and to encourage their return to their historic homeland. Russia tries to limit these contacts, creating obstacles for Turkish Abkhaz to cross the Russian-Abkhaz border and, from time to time, publishing articles in the Russian press on the ‘pro-Turkish’ orientation of the Abkhaz leadership. For objectivity’s sake, it should be added that a significant proportion of the population of Abkhazia (including a considerable proportion of ethnic Abkhaz themselves) are worried about the return of Turkish Abkhaz because of their Muslim faith. Therefore, in theory Russia could play on these fears if the process of return suddenly takes off, blocking it and citing the unwillingness of the population. Therefore, it is not really possible to predict the real foreign policy differences between Abkhazia and Russia in the coming decade.
At the same time, local experts are concerned that should there be an abrupt change of policy in Georgia – which is very unlikely since August 2008, but nevertheless cannot be excluded completely – Russia could sacrifice Abkhazia to restore its political influence in Georgia.

In short, we can say that military security has been secured at the cost of complete loyalty to Russia in the sphere of foreign policy.

**Economic security**

The issue of economic cooperation with Russia raises much greater concern among the population.

On the one hand, Russian money flowing into the Abkhaz budget has yielded benefits for the development of Abkhazia (although it is still a subsistence budget, rather than a development budget) and for gradually reviving municipal housing. Russian money is being spent on repairing roads and major construction projects. Moreover, Russia has provided substantial grant assistance in the fields of medicine, culture and so on. In addition, Russian tourists make up the vast majority of the holidaymakers, and Russian business is investing in the Abkhazia hotel and tourism sector.

Without Russian money, the development of Abkhazia in recent years would have been impossible, taking into account its international isolation.

However, Abkhazia’s close proximity to the Sochi region, where preparations for the 2014 Olympics are underway, without respect for private property rights and the observance of environmental considerations, have raised serious concerns. More generally, news about criminal lawlessness and raids in Russia mean that the population of Abkhazia is very concerned about the arrival of large sums of Russian private money.

Therefore, the majority of the population supports a legislative ban on the sale of land in general and the sale of property to foreign nationals in particular – although such sales do take place illegally, but not on a scale to be too concerned about.

The ban on the sale of property to foreigners severely restricts the flow of foreign investment, which slows down the development of the Abkhaz economy. Nevertheless, the population is willing to put up with this to protect their security.

All major economic agreements with Russia are immediately a cause for concern among the ethnic Abkhaz community (the rest of the population are indifferent). Currently, the proposed agreement on the 49-year lease of property to Russia (the Tatra complex in Gagra, Gorbachev’s dacha ‘Myussera’ and the Pitsunda complex) has met with sharp criticism in the press. Those who take an interest in such issues are concerned that such economic agreements will lead to a gradual economic takeover of Abkhazia by Russia.

**Political security**

After recognition by Russia, the level of political and social activism in Abkhazia has fallen. Sensing the reduced urgency of the struggle for survival, people appear to have taken ‘time out’ to have a break. This is partly explained by the fact that there are neither fresh political ideas or personalities, nor competition of ideas in general. At the same time, there is a lingering struggle between two camps of government and the opposition, which lost power not so long ago that they can still taste defeat.

If the elections of 2004–2005 were volatile and conducted under the masquerade of a promise (as it turned out) to restore order and democratic institutions – the platform on which the opposition fought and won the election – the 2010 elections were much more relaxed and characterised by
a complete absence of effective slogans. The ruling authorities did not even trouble themselves to prepare an election manifesto. Moreover, of the three contenders for the presidency, only one put forward a programme – namely, Beslan Butba, a local oligarch and leader of the ‘Economic Development of Abkhazia’ Party (ERA), although his programme was far from realistic.

The work of the legislature is often limited to the Abkhaz parliament rewriting Russian laws, and the role of parliament in the political life of Abkhazia is negligible. Political parties have not yet developed according to ideological principles, and they are mainly engaged in pre-election activities for the benefit of the candidate.

The political storms that swept through Abkhazia before the collapse of the USSR and the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993, along with the active role of parliament in the post-war period, are consigned to the past. Abkhazia is experiencing an ideological vacuum – as though it is building a democratic state and market economy, yet the administration is working to the Soviet model.

There appears to be no clear demand from within society for modernisation, but only a vague desire for a change for the better. Thus, a focus solely on Russia – which itself only talks about modernisation but has not started it for real – will not help to stimulate sustainable development in Abkhazia.

The ineffectiveness of the administration is causing deep resentment within the population. However, because the opposition is so weak, fragmented and incompetent, it cannot make use of this discontent. In principle, the political situation follows the situation in Russia. The similarity of the situations further binds the political elites of both countries, and these relationships are fuelled by horizontal economic relations in that many officials have joint enterprises in both countries.

**Civic security**

Some 17 years have passed since the Georgian-Abkhaz war, yet the concept of a nation of citizens of Abkhazia has not yet materialised. The main groups in the population identify themselves first by ethnicity and only then by citizenship, while the possibility of dual citizenship (Abkhaz and Russian) is widely regarded as a guarantee of a particular security.

The main explanation is that the war with Georgia was fought for the survival of the Abkhaz, who after winning had the opportunity for the first time in the past 150 years to develop themselves. The difficult conditions of post-war survival, the lack of developed democratic institutions, and the inertia of a traditional society based on kinship and clan relations have all contributed to the fact that the ethnic Abkhaz, who constitute approximately 40 percent of the population, have taken a marked dominance.

The Abkhaz hold the leadership positions in management structures at all levels. They form the bulk of the middle class, and only in the past two years have there been several middling businessmen from among other nationalities.

There is a growing dissatisfaction within other sectors of the population that has not yet been expressed publicly. Tensions have risen especially with regard to the property of non-Abkhaz citizens who have left and whose property is then fraudulently expropriated and distributed mainly to ethnic Abkhaz. This happens not because of anti-Russian or anti-Armenian sentiments, but on the basis of the ‘weakest link’: other population groups do not have strong mutual support mechanisms, helping to defend their rights.
I do not exclude the possibility of a growth in nationalist sentiment in the country, endangering the sovereignty of Abkhazia. Knowing the mood of the non-Abkhaz population rather well, if a referendum on joining Russia was held today, it is possible that more than half the citizens of Abkhazia would vote in its favour.

The efforts of NGOs alone, which themselves are not particularly active in fostering a civic nation, are clearly inadequate. At a government level, the seriousness of the situation is clearly misunderstood, because no competent public opinion polls are conducted on the matter.

**Security of the population of Gal district**

The main developments taking place in Abkhazia have little effect on the people of the Gal district who live quite separately. After Russian recognition of the independence of Abkhazia, a new period has begun for the population of the Gal district. Previously, while the Gal population suffered most from the unsettled post-war period, they could still use the ambiguity of their situation – being counted as refugees and receiving benefits in Georgia, while at the same time tending their fields on the Abkhaz side. Recently, with the strengthening of the border along the Ingur River by Russian border guards, residents of the Gal district are facing a dilemma – either to integrate into Abkhaz society with all its consequences, thus relinquishing Georgian citizenship and adopting Abkhaz instead, or to finally move to Georgia.

However, a significant proportion of the population of Abkhazia remains predominantly negatively disposed towards the Gal population. For instance, as demonstrated in August 2009, many are opposed to issuing them with Abkhaz passports, continuing to regard them as a ‘fifth column’. Therefore, the situation of the Gal population remains uncertain, and there is no constructive public debate on their circumstances at all. However, the criminal situation in the district has somewhat stabilised. Moreover, Russia is providing humanitarian assistance, including free medical care, seeking to draw the people on their side.

**Conclusion**

The policy of isolation leaves Abkhazia in rigid confines with little freedom of choice, compelling it towards increasingly close cooperation with Russia. In these circumstances, the political and economic assimilation of Abkhazia is only a matter of time. Already, Abkhazia is bringing its legislation into conformity with Russian legislation, and judicial decisions are frequently made with reference to Russian precedents.

For the moment, domestic life in Abkhazia still retains some of its own identity. There is real freedom of speech, the electoral processes have dramatically improved (as demonstrated by the recent presidential elections in 2009–2010, which were conducted to high democratic standards), and there is no yawning gulf between rulers and the ruled. There are no political prisoners, and while there have been sporadic attempts to intimidate journalists, these were strongly condemned by the public and were therefore unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, Abkhazia’s sovereignty is under threat, and the possibility that Abkhazia’s political independence may become a fiction is very real. The policy of isolation holds Abkhazia hostage to Russia in all respects. This is a dangerous and unfair situation, which does no credit to the international community, including the EU.
Archil Gegeshidze

“The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: Addressing the post-August status quo”

1. What the war meant for the region

The Russia-Georgia war of August 2008 has been a significant development for Georgia and the entire region. For many, it has been a moment of truth: for some, the war is a source of concern and disappointment; for others, it is a source of new opportunities. First and foremost, however, the war has been a tragedy, whose consequences will long be felt within and around the region. Moreover, the war, although not fought between Georgia and Abkhazia, has naturally had an impact on their bilateral relationships.

Consequences of the war

• In Georgia, which suffered the most, the enemy image of Russia has further strengthened and popular support for territorial unity has further consolidated. Georgia quite logically and justifiably applied the term ‘occupation’ to the consequences of the August war and developed measures against Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These measures include two primary elements: (a) a strategy of reintegration towards occupied territories; and (b) a policy of ‘non-recognition’.

• In the new circumstances, since the pre-war security mechanisms and negotiations have ceased to exist, the ‘Sarkozy-Medvedev-Saakashvili ceasefire agreement’ is the only document that regulates the armistice. The situation can well be defined as a ‘security vacuum’ that does not provide the conditions for lasting peace and stability. Of particular concern is a direct confrontation between Georgia and Russia, in the absence of formal bilateral relations and channels of direct dialogue. Non-resumption of hostilities is based on the goodwill of the parties and, more importantly, on the external factors – such as the quality of Russian-Western relations. In the meantime, Georgia is advised to exercise “strategic patience” without specifying how long it should last and what is to be expected in exchange for it.

• As a result of the war, the conflict parties’ attitudes to the conflict have changed. For the first time in many years, Abkhaz society has acquired a sense of physical security due to the formalised Russian military presence. This has created an illusion in Sukhumi that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has essentially disappeared. It is symptomatic that none of the political forces in Abkhazia have so far come up with a plan to integrate the Gali residents, and this rightfully concerns the Georgian side. On the Georgian side, however, those who had been claiming that there is no Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, insisting rather that it is Russia that has been trying to cast off Abkhazia from Georgia, have consolidated their positions.

2. Georgian policy (A consequence in focus)

Against this background, a new Georgian policy vis-à-vis Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] has emerged and been put on track. The main premise of this policy is: “So much the worse for Abkhazia, so much the better for Georgia.” In other words, it is a typical zero-sum approach.

According to this policy, as long as there is no prospect for the resolution of the conflict in the foreseeable future, the primary goal for now is to retain the chance of reunification until better times. There are two conditions needed for attaining this goal:

• Conflict transformation – meaning a gradual establishment of mutually beneficial cooperation in humanitarian, economic and other areas, without touching on politically sensitive issues;
• Preventing the process of recognition of Abkhazia’s independence – that is, ensuring the sustainability of the ‘non-recognition’ policy on the part of the international community.

While the first condition is supposed to be realised by means of the implementation of the aforementioned Strategy towards occupied territories, the second condition is expected to be ensured as a result of the ‘non-recognition’ policy. More specifically, Tbilisi seeks to achieve two objectives within the framework of the non-recognition policy: a) ensuring non-recognition of Abkhazia’s independence on the part of the international community; and b) limiting the travel of Abkhaz residents who are holders of Russian passports by blocking the issuance of visas.

3. Western approach

For their part, Western institutions and governments – for example, the European Commission, NATO and the US – did not recognise the post-August 2008 ‘new realities’ in Georgia. The policy of non-recognition is a reaction to the unilateral actions of Russia. Thus, the non-recognition policy has two implementing parties: on one hand, Georgia and, on the other, most of the international community, first and foremost the West. It is noteworthy, however, that for Georgia the target for this policy is Abkhazia, while the West’s ‘non-recognition’ targets mainly Russia. Accordingly, the motivation and goals of two versions of ‘non-recognition’ policy differ. In the first case, the goal is to isolate Abkhazia, while in the second instance the goal is more global – to hinder Moscow’s anti-Western and expansionist policy in the region. More specifically, the latter goal can be subdivided into three concrete tasks: a) to support Georgia’s territorial integrity; b) to force Russia to withdraw its troops from Georgia; and c) to prevent from Russia consuming Abkhazia.

This divergence of motivations behind the policy of non-recognition puts at risk its sustainability. The issue has become especially topical after the government of Georgia adopted the ‘Modalities for Engagement of Organisations Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories’. These rules and regulations confront the West with a dilemma – either to follow these rules and put at risk its ability to influence Sukhumi, or to quarrel with Georgia. Finding the ‘golden mean’ is a real challenge.

Meantime, the political and international legal foundations of the non-recognition policy are rather solid. Its major pillars are: (a) occupation of Georgian territories; and (b) continuing violation of the international humanitarian law as the authorities in Sukhumi keep preventing the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from returning. This makes the policy of non-recognition sustainable in the foreseeable future.

There are no grounds for presuming that the non-recognition policy will further deteriorate relations between the Georgians and the Abkhaz given their already poor quality these days. It is doubtless, however, that the process of alienation will continue and that Russia will obviously encourage it.

4. Need for paradigm change

Given the circumstances, Russia seems to be the only beneficiary of the post-August status quo in the long run. Therefore, the issue of paradigm change becomes increasingly important, and this equally pertains to Georgia and the West. The point in focus here is the need for a new approach towards de-isolation of Abkhazia within the framework of non-recognition. Otherwise, the peacebuilding efforts such as the Geneva discussions will prove useless, because the existing fundamental differences and lack of trust between the parties, which are its major limitations, will persist. As part of the paradigm change, the Georgian strategy for ‘reintegration’ (engagement through cooperation) should give way to a strategy for ‘reconciliation’, while concurrently adopting the deferred status approach. Georgia should allow Abkhazia’s de-isolation but as a
phased and conditioned process. As a trade-off, Georgia could expect, for instance, improved
human security for the Gali residents, as well as more responsible policies on the part of the
Sukhumi authorities regarding the property of the Georgian refugees/IDPs. Instead, the overall
isolationist character of Georgian policy towards Abkhazia has rendered the Georgian strategy of
reintegration an absolute evil for Sukhumi and ultimately a non-starter from the outset.

For their part, Western institutions and governments should offer Abkhazia de-isolation, including
the simplified procedures for getting entry visas to the Schengen area and the US. However, the
pace of the proposed de-isolation of Abkhazia must be linked with the progress of Sukhumi’s
engagement with Tbilisi in economic and humanitarian spheres.

Importantly, however, under no circumstances should international institutions admit strategic
disengagement from the area. Effective mediation and facilitation would ensure a political
environment in which the parties could begin juxtaposing their positions. In this regard, the
planned abolishment of the position of the EU Special Representative in the South Caucasus is
clearly a step in the wrong direction.

5. Georgian domestic and foreign policies two years since the August 2008 war

Despite the severe consequences of the August war, Georgia continues to pursue its development
agenda. In terms of its domestic politics, the following points are noteworthy.

• The Georgian economy survived the global financial crisis largely due to massive foreign
  assistance. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate is very high against the decreasing purchasing
  power of the average Georgian.

• Modernisation of infrastructure is in full swing. The construction and upgrading of roads,
  regional airports and hotel facilities are in focus to promote economic development, including
  tourism as one of the priority sectors. Batumi, a Black Sea port and subtropical resort, has
  become the fastest developing city in the whole region of the South Caucasus.

• Petty corruption has been uprooted. This is quite unusual and largely unique to the post-
  Soviet area (with the exception of the Baltics). Interestingly, the average citizen will hardly
  recall recent instances of government officials being bribed.

• Partly owing to the transformative power of the EU integration process, the institutional
  and administrative reforms are advancing at a relatively high speed. Many authoritative
  international institutions and ranking agencies single out Georgia as a regional leader.

• Regrettably, however, this is not the case for democratic institutions. Over the years following
  the Rose Revolution, Georgia’s democratic backsliding has been evident in several important
  areas – such as media freedom, the judiciary and the electoral code.

• International as well as local watchdogs also point to the lack of transparency of Georgia’s
  Interior Ministry. While, on one hand, they commend the leadership of the ministry for raising
  professional standards; on the other hand, they find it discouraging that the leadership uses
  the police force for political purposes.

• Despite the Venice Commission’s recommendations put forward for strengthening Georgia’s
  system of checks and balances, the parliament of Georgia has adopted amendments to the
  Constitution that, in fact, transfer power from the president to the prime minister instead of
  redistributing it between the presidency and the parliament. Some think that this may tempt
  President Saakashvili to use these constitutional amendments for his personal political agenda,
  a move which would hinder the first ever constitutional transfer of power in 2012–2013.
The August war did not change Georgia’s foreign policy priorities, as follows.

- EU and NATO integration remain major pillars of Georgia’s Western foreign policy. While it remains a regional leader with pro-Western ambitions, this, however, creates a major irritant in its bilateral relations with Russia and makes the national projects of the two countries irreconcilable.

- Therefore, the primary foreign policy challenge remains an absence of a vision for Georgia’s relationship with Russia.

- The last months of 2010 saw a dramatic recovery from the diplomatic isolation of the Georgian government which transpired after the August war. This could be either due to the successful ‘reset’ policy between Russia and the West, or indicative that Georgia’s reforms have not gone unnoticed especially when compared with other countries in the region.

At any rate, it remains to be seen what impact these policies may have on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict further down the road.

Leila Alieva

EU, South Caucasus and conflict resolution

The unresolved conflicts continue to pose a serious obstacle to political, economic and social development in all three republics and their breakaway regions. The almost daily shelling on the Karabakh frontline in South Caucasus is a permanent reminder of the fragility of ceasefire. The current regional dynamics and balance of power both promote the preservation of the conflicts, while hindering the states from integrating into the greater regional and European context. The latter is something that would help them to end the vicious and mutually reinforcing circle of unresolved conflicts and political and economic stagnation.

EU’s involvement: capacity and limitations

There is an obvious diversity in the EU approaches to major secessionist conflicts on the territories of three former Soviet republics – members of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership Program – Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan. In some cases, such as in relation to Moldova and Georgia, the EU policies on support for territorial integrity are more assertive than in the case of Azerbaijan. Moreover, in the case of Moldova, the EU put a ban on visas for the leaders of the Transnistrian republic, in contrast with the leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Nagorno Karabakh.

Besides some differences between the conflicts, these divergent EU approaches reflect the influence of different political factors and interests. These include EU policies towards Russia and Turkey, the Armenian diaspora as a domestic political factor in many EU countries, as well as EU security interests in times of crisis and the individual interests of states. This is expressed in the resolution of the European Parliament, where it is recommended not to tie together the Armenian-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Turkish peace processes, despite the fact that the two are closely connected. At the same time, the EU preference not to get involved in the negotiations of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on the Karabakh conflict means reconciling with an ineffective process that has dragged on for almost two decades under the Minsk group co-chairmanship.

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6 See, for instance, the ENP action plans of Georgia and Azerbaijan.
7 See the European Parliament Resolution of 20th May 2010 on the need for an EU strategy for the South Caucasus [INNI/2009/2216].
8 The perception of the effectiveness of the Minsk group is often strikingly different in the region, on the one hand, and abroad, on the other. See, for instance, the statement of Angela Merkel during her visit to Armenia about the OSCE Minsk group being “the best format for Nagorno-Karabakh resolution” (Times.am, 22nd June 2010).
Similarly, the European Parliament resolution recommends including all three states of the South Caucasus in energy cooperation projects without tying this to the resolution of the conflict\(^9\). This reveals another problem not only for the EU, but for any external actor trying to promote conflict resolution.

In the absence of a regional security organisation playing the role of normative arbiter in the conflicts on the one hand, and regulating and addressing security issues in the region on the other, the prospect of economic development and prosperity resulting from friendly relations with the neighbours may become the mechanism through which relations are regulated. In any other region, the prospect of being left outside of major energy and economic projects would serve as a powerful motivation for a resource-poor, landlocked country to normalise relations with its neighbours and to discourage secessionist movements on its neighbour’s territory\(^{10}\).

The regulating effect on regional relations of the direct economic consequences of conflict was greatly weakened not only by Russia’s support for Armenia, but also by the extensive aid of the EU and the US. This enhanced the perception that one can survive without normalising relations with neighbours. Obviously so far, in relation to the Karabakh conflict, the EU through “addressing the root causes” was at the same time indirectly following the patronage policies, rather than promoting conflict resolution.

However, the EU may make a powerful and value-added contribution to the resolution of the conflicts. The experience of the successful resolution of some conflicts – such as in the South Tyrol region of Italy – proved that integration into Europe, in particular the prospect of membership, may serve as a lever of influence on the state’s responsible behaviour both in domestic and foreign affairs.

Of course, there are quite a few substantial differences between the cases in Europe and in the South Caucasus. First and foremost, the contract relations between the EU and the states in conflict are different. In the case of the South Caucasus, these contract relations do not promise membership. The international factor in Europe was much more conducive to the conflict resolution, than in the South Caucasus. Europe was no longer divided into two camps, unlike the South Caucasus. Besides, there was a legal arbiter – a regional organisation that would promote resolution of the issues on a normative basis due to the shared acceptance of its authority by all actors in the conflict. In contrast, the South Caucasus is torn by different trends: some of the states are looking to the West and are united with this purpose in mind, as seen in the case of the member states of GUAM\(^{11}\); other actors, such as Armenia and the autonomous entities, are looking towards Russia for protection. Moreover, in this instance, there is no regional arbiter whose authority would be accepted by all the parties. Additionally, UN resolutions are not implemented, while the OSCE is only offering a framework for negotiation, which is influenced by the consensus-based decision-making mechanism of the OSCE.

All of this brings us back to the argument of the ‘euro-integrationists’, who assert that integration into Europe and ‘europeanisation’ through reform processes and implementation of relevant policies, including approximation of legislation, will help to address both the conflicts and the development of the states.

Integration into Europe will weaken the importance of formal borders – the issue which is at the heart of conflicts in the South Caucasus. It will promote the policies and skills of multiculturalism, the principles of treatment of minorities, along with a culture of co-existence and mutual respect,

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\(^{10}\) A few cases of such behaviour could be quoted in relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia, when the public or official leaders of each republic positively influenced the emerging inter-communal problems in the neighbouring territory.

\(^{11}\) GUAM stands for the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. It is a regional organisation of four post-Soviet states – Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova.
even following a military conflict. It will promote democratic and liberal reforms, including the creation of institutions for conflict resolution, as well as promoting conditions for prosperity.

Most importantly, it will help these states to develop a common perspective of the South Caucasus, instead of being caught up in archaic debates on history and borders. This, in turn, will help them to overcome together the persistent legacies of the Soviet era and the other difficulties of post-Soviet transition.

Conclusions

To conclude, the ‘regionalisation’ of conflicts leads to their ‘provincialisation’, as it hinders putting the actors’ identity into the wider context of integration into European and global affairs. As a result, the parties to the conflicts are trapped within a limited local perspective, which leaves them without a common vision of their country’s and the region’s future. The idea of a common future based on common prospects could promote cooperation between the states and autonomous entities. So far, however, European and Euro-Atlantic multilateral institutions have not offered the prospect of membership. Therefore, the EU has not offered a real alternative to the states of the region and thus could not create a sufficient incentive for any party to the conflict to cooperate, compromise or foster reforms.

- Lack of progress in the Karabakh conflict resolution process, even after the outbreak of the Russia-Georgia 2008 war, proves that the major stakeholders have a solid interest in the status quo, a change in which would entail higher risks than its preservation.
- The status quo does not substantially obstruct major European or US interests in the region, mainly energy and security interests. The current level of stability still allows the realisation of major energy and transport projects, along with security cooperation, on an international level.
- Russia supports and uses the secessionist conflicts as means of influence in the region, to compensate for its weak competitive capacity in the political or economic area.
- The unresolved conflicts and the current status quo create a vicious circle of delayed reforms and lack of democracy which in turn impede conflict resolution.
- There is no regional or sub-regional normative framework to regulate international relations that would influence third parties’ involvement in the conflicts or other violations of the international law. The OSCE Minsk group, through its inclusiveness, plays more of a stabilisation role than offering a resolution mechanism.
- The EU lacks a unified approach to the four conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood.

Recommendations for the EU

1. EU integration, namely the prospect of membership, is the most powerful tool at the EU’s disposal to promote peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus. Integration can enhance co-existence and cooperation through:

- design of aid – that is, for cooperation projects between the centres and the breakaway regions;
- Europeanisation – that is, through the promotion of values, institutions and policies;
- declaring the prospect of membership for “united republics”;
- thus bringing the issue of borders to the level where the borders lose their primary significance.
2. The EU needs to clearly express a principled position on the involvement of the third parties (Armenia, Russia) in the secessionist conflicts as being unacceptable from the point of view of the norms of international relations and major treaties and agreements, which the countries are party to.

3. The EU should seek to promote a weakening of radicalism in the breakaway regions; at the same time, it should aim to help the centres develop policies directed towards the accommodation of minorities' needs, along with guarantees of their rights and security.

4. A fourth objective should be to promote dialogue between the centres and breakaway regions, with the aim of confidence building and finding a common solution; this should be accompanied by efforts to promote cooperation in the areas of common concern –namely, democracy building, human rights and economy.

Recommendations for civil societies

1. Civil society should seek to influence the governments of their countries to renounce the use of force in relation to the conflicts. With regard to Armenia and Russia, this would mean the unconditional withdrawal of their troops from the territories within the internationally recognised borders. In Georgia and Azerbaijan, this would mean abandoning the use of military rhetoric and any attempt to restore territorial integrity by means of force. It should also try to conduct dialogue with Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with the aim of guaranteeing security and equal rights as well as opportunities in terms of cultural identity, economic and political participation.

2. Civil society should try to publicise the most successful European models of co-existence (such as Tyrol or Aland islands), and their creative application or development of new models of co-existence and conflict resolution, in a joint process with the representatives of Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

3. Promoting intense democratisation in the respective countries in cooperation with the civil societies of Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia could constitute a third aim.
Session 3: Future prospects

Readiness of the international community to respond to challenges

Approaches to the de-isolation of Abkhazia through different stakeholders: Georgia, Europe and Russia

Speakers
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Paata Zakareishvili

Future Prospects and Challenges – a Georgian Perspective

Future prospects for Georgian-Abkhaz relations are unclear. Therefore, it is important at this stage that they at least listen to each other and try to avoid serious mistakes, so that discussions about ‘missed opportunities’ are not repeated in the future. As the theme of this roundtable is the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, this analysis will limit its remarks to this. However, in order to better understand how the Georgian authorities behave in relation to conflict transformation and management, it would be useful to also draw parallels with the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.

The fluid situation in Abkhazia depends on how the different stakeholders – Georgia, Russia, the EU and Abkhazia – interact with each other. The Abkhaz side deserves particular attention. After the events of 2008 and at the instigation of the Georgian authorities, the international community began to distance itself from Abkhaz interests.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz goal of nation-building could not be reconciled with Georgian state interests. Therefore, at the beginning of the 1990s, Abkhazia willingly allowed itself to get drawn into the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. One pre-war phrase that comes to mind is attributed to Vladislav Ardzinba, who allegedly remarked that: “We will force the Georgians to shoot at us yet.” If this was indeed the real position of the then leaders of the Abkhaz nationalist movement led by the organisation ‘Aidgilara’, then it is fair to ask whether the Abkhaz people got the result for which they were willing to allow a military escalation of the conflict.

If one was to analyse Abkhaz society, one might conclude that it is unlikely that they actually aspired to or devised the situation in which they find themselves 20 years on. A similar question could be asked of Georgian society – what has actually been achieved through its principled intransigence and its unwillingness to satisfy or even explore the interests of Abkhaz society?

Today, the Abkhaz face many distinct challenges, which are quite different to those of other European conflict zones. If one compares Abkhazia to Kosovo or Nagorno-Karabakh and Northern Cyprus – conflicts in which European institutions play a leading transformative role – it is evident that in each of these self-proclaimed states, the majority of the population belongs to the ethnic group which has sought to secede from the internationally recognised state. In Kosovo, the absolute majority are Albanians, in Nagorno-Karabakh they are Armenians and in...

12 Then chairman of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, later to become first President of Abkhazia in 1994.
Northern Cyprus they are Turks. However, even today in Abkhazia, the 60,000–65,000 ethnic
Abkhaz remain a minority. They number less than half of the total of other ethnic groups – such
as the some 55,000 Georgians, 45,000 Armenians and 15,000–16,000 Russians. Moreover, if the
current proportions change, it is unlikely to be in favour of the Abkhaz.

Another challenge is Abkhazia’s lack of ethno-cultural support from abroad. The situations in
the other breakaway territories are more stable and predictable than in Abkhazia. Albania, with its
‘brewing’ Albanian nationalism, provides support to Kosovo. Similarly, in Nagorno- Karabakh,
Armenian nationalist ideas are ‘brewing’ in Yerevan; Turkey supports Northern Cyprus. However,
in the ethno-cultural sense, no one supports the Abkhaz. The idea of Abkhaz identity is being
‘brewed’ in Abkhazia, where nobody except the Abkhaz cares about the idea of statehood. Indeed,
over two thirds of the Abkhaz population is indifferent to Abkhaz independence. They do not
oppose independence, but neither do they fight for it. The idea that everyone in the Republic,
part from the Georgians, is struggling for independence is somewhat exaggerated. Armenians
and Russians would prefer the option of becoming part of the Russian Federation than an
independent Abkhazia. It is a case of the body not obeying the mind– and the resulting situation
is a serious challenge for the Abkhaz society as a whole.

This situation will not resolve itself. The Georgian population in Gali will not simply disappear.
It would, of course, be fairly easy to resolve the Georgian issue – to force them to leave Abkhazia,
as was the case for over 200,000 ethnic Georgians in 1993. However, even measures such as
this would not solve the problem. It would lead to the depopulation of the Gali district, which,
together with the devastated Ochamchira district, would turn eastern Abkhazia into a ghost
territory – despite the fact that modern Gali is an economically developed and self-sufficient
region of Abkhazia. This, I believe, would not be in Abkhaz interests, and the international
community would not allow it to happen. Neither would ethnic cleansing suit Russia, given its
security interests in the region. The main challenge facing Abkhaz society in the years ahead is the
discrepancy between the aspiration of the ethnic Abkhaz for an independent state and the wishes
of the rest of the population.

In this context, another main challenge for Abkhazia is, bizarrely enough, democracy.
Representatives of the Abkhaz authorities and civil society alike constantly emphasise that
democracy is a main priority. However, I think that Abkhaz society needs to examine for itself
whether democracy is a resource or a problem for Abkhazia. The Abkhaz elite face a dilemma:
either to put their trust in democratic institutions and work to fully integrate all ethnic groups, thus
potentially threatening Abkhaz independence and identity; or alternatively, to restrict democracy
and set out along the long path of non-recognition and limited opportunities, with large numbers
of its population remaining unintegrated and alienated.

In the summer of 2009, the Abkhaz authorities attempted to resolve the citizenship issue in
the Gali district. However, they came up against fundamental opposition from the majority of
Abkhaz society. This episode showed that Abkhaz society prefers to tolerate the limitations of
Abkhaz statehood than to take the bold step of engaging the Georgian population in building a
more sustainable state.

The next challenge is that of demographics, which, unlike the other challenges, is discussed
all the time in Abkhaz society. Due to the absence of an ethno-cultural state to back up the
Abkhaz nation, the reproduction of the necessary ‘raw material’ for the nation will remain a key
challenge for quite some time. I believe that this issue needs to be treated with sensitivity by both
the international community and Georgia. If, under international law, Georgia is responsible
for what goes on in Abkhazia, it should play a more sensitive and responsible role regarding
the demographics issue. Georgia should have long ago offered legal support to descendents of
the Abkhaz mahajirs living in the Middle East and Turkey. They should be offered Georgian
citizenship and provided with the necessary conditions to return to or visit Abkhazia. Numerous
other states, such as Germany and Israel, have experience in this area. This is a subject that the Georgian authorities could usefully discuss with the Abkhaz.

If Abkhaz society does not manage to avert a demographic crisis, with or without outside help, then quite a radical change might be visible in the Caucasus in 15 years’ time. Provided that Georgia poses no threat, there is a possibility that the situation might swing back in Georgia’s favour at some point in the future. For example, if Abkhazia’s bid for statehood fails and the Russian leadership realises that Abkhazia is an unreliable partner unable to solve its own problems, Russia may find it easier to partner with Georgia on problems that arise in the Caucasus. It is safe to say that Russia would never attempt the formal appropriation of Abkhazia. This would be too great a challenge to international law and could not be justified by any humanitarian or other noble motivation. If one agrees with this assumption, the only way for Russia to promote its interests more effectively in the Caucasus is to find more stable partners than Abkhazia. Both Abkhazia and Georgia need to be prepared for such a scenario.

The nature of Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia is quite ambivalent. Recognition has been the dream of the Abkhaz for the past 20 years. Having now achieved this, which in reality means the integration into Russian political space through the volatile North Caucasus, the Abkhaz could face deep disappointment as Russia appropriates Abkhazia for itself rather than facilitating its wider international recognition. This would present international law with the opportunity to offer Abkhazia an alternative to unilateral and insincere recognition – namely, the protection of their true and historic interests in federal relations with Georgia through international law. Unfortunately, the current policy of the EU does not offer much prospect for this. While the policy of ‘non-recognition’ is fully understood and accepted as logical even within Abkhaz society, the second strand of EU policy – ‘engagement’ – remains completely incomprehensible and appears to be of a purely declaratory nature. How exactly has Abkhazia been ‘engaged’ in the context of non-recognition? The most harmful and counterproductive Georgian policy – geared towards the isolation of Abkhazia – has been implemented precisely under the auspices of ‘engagement’. Moreover, it has not met with any apparent resistance from European institutions. Even if international organisations do object in private to such forcible policies, it has had no real effect on the Georgian authorities. Quite on the contrary, Georgian laws, regulations and rules are increasingly contributing to the isolation of Abkhazia from the rest of the world, leaving it one-on-one with Russia.

So what can be done in this situation? First of all, the EU should convince the Georgian authorities to allow free movement to the EU for people living in Abkhazia. The current visa system should be thoroughly reviewed, and the pre-August 2008 visa regime should be reintroduced. This would make life easier at least for people who wish to travel to Europe for non-political reasons. There is already sufficient information available about which categories of people have been refused European visas. These categories comprise: young people; people who wish to get educated in Europe; people who want to travel to Europe for medical treatment; cultural leaders; sportsmen and women; and people who work in humanitarian fields. First and foremost, engagement should be applied in a humanitarian sense. Active engagement cannot be achieved by imposing restrictions.

A change of attitude towards Abkhaz passports would be another step towards engagement. If Georgia would recognise the Abkhaz passport as an internal Georgian identity document, it would significantly help thousands of Abkhaz residents to cross the administrative border along the Inguri River. It would also become easier for them to receive social or economic assistance from the Georgian authorities. For example, many people living in Abkhazia travel to Kutaisi and Tbilisi for medical treatment. It is hard to deny parents the right to take their children to Georgia for professional medical treatment that they cannot get in Abkhazia. However, in order to receive free or subsidised medical treatment in Georgia, one has to obtain the status of an IDP – in other
words, the person needs to become a Georgian citizen. A few Abkhaz opt for this route for the sake of their children, but many find this an unacceptable requirement. If the Georgian authorities would provide free or subsidised medical treatment on the basis of Abkhaz identity documents, significant numbers of people living in Abkhazia would benefit. This would encourage Abkhaz people to rebuild some trust in Georgia, or at least in the Georgian healthcare system. Similar initiatives could be started in other areas.

Due to time constraints, this analysis is limited to reviewing the situation in Abkhazia, as that is where the problems are felt most acutely. Any problem that remains unresolved will inevitably prove more costly to Abkhazia than to those countries that are under the protection of international law. While unresolved issues in Georgia, Russia or the EU are not insurmountable obstacles that totally block future development, in Abkhazia any unresolved problems will have a direct impact on the future of the country.

Now a few words about Georgia: just as Russia’s recognition of Abkhaz independence is uncertain for Abkhazia, so the continued non-recognition of Abkhazia’s independence by the Western democratic community could be an uncertainty for Georgia. How long will the EU keep its word on the non-recognition of Abkhazia? EU interests now extend to the Black Sea region since the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, while cooperation between the EU and Turkey is becoming increasingly dynamic. At the same time, Ukraine and Georgia are constantly declaring their desire for closer cooperation with the EU, while Russian-European relations are becoming more strategically important.

With full European engagement in the Black Sea area, questions of the unknown quantity and illegitimate nature of Abkhazia will be ever-present. It will never be quite clear how many and which type of weapons are held there, who controls migration and how, whether it is a haven for money laundering, or whether contraband goods are produced or stored there. If, by the time the EU starts to look for ways to minimise the damage resulting from the non-recognition of Abkhazia, Georgia does not have concrete answers or proposals, the policy of non-recognition by Western countries and international organisations may well come under question.

If Georgia is not able to face these new challenges, the EU might take a similar course of action to the one taken in Kosovo, if only to protect itself and maintain its position in accordance with international humanitarian law. Georgia needs to reflect on this. Today, it is reclining quite comfortably on the ‘cushion of non-recognition’, but if Georgia fails to do anything soon, in 10 or 15 years’ time it will find itself paying for its unforgivable laziness.

Arda Inal-Ipa

**Why is the engagement strategy not working?**

From an Abkhaz perspective, the development of the European ‘non-recognition and engagement’ strategy towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia is a significant step, which could help break the deadlock in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. This European approach presents an opportunity for liberation from the ‘totalitarianism’ of the principle of territorial integrity. Europe, of course, continues to respect the principle of territorial integrity, while not allowing it to paralyse all interaction with Abkhazia. This approach could mark an end to sanctions that are still in place against Abkhazia, as until recently no European country except Russia has reconsidered decisions to oppose economic, political and cultural ties with Abkhazia. The idea is that de-isolation, establishing contacts, cooperation, and the promotion of European standards and practices can all be nurtured even in the absence of political recognition. This is in the interests of Europe, Abkhazia and the region as a whole.
The Abkhaz reaction to the proposed European strategy was pragmatic. The Abkhaz authorities and the majority of the public avoided getting overly preoccupied with the first part of the wording (non-recognition), despite the significance and sensitivity of the issue. Instead, they welcomed the ‘cooperation’ part of the strategy. This reaction was an illustration of the Abkhaz multi-vector foreign and economic policies, as well as their openness to contacts with all political actors who are ready to cooperate with Abkhazia.

Unfortunately, both Russia and Georgia interpreted the European proposal as going against their interests. However, we feel that in the long term this strategy will lead to more balanced relations. This would strengthen stability in the region, something which is in the interest of all stakeholders in the Caucasus.

Although the Russian side made some clearly negative assessments of the European initiative, it mainly voiced some disturbing assumptions about the future political alignment of forces in the South Caucasus. Despite this, however, there has been no official announcement or concrete steps taken by the Russians. Georgia also responded actively to the new intonations and intentions of the European policy on partially-recognised states. Shortly after the circulation within EU structures of the document ‘Parameters for non-recognition and engagement policy for Abkhazia and South Ossetia’, which outlined the main part of the EU strategy, the head of the Georgian Ministry for Reintegration unveiled Georgia’s own strategy for the ‘de-isolation’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This was followed by the ‘Action Plan’ and regulations for the work of international organisations (the infamous ‘Modalities’). Despite the rhetoric, the content of these documents leaves no doubt that the Georgian proposals are nothing more than an attempt to intercept the European initiative and to hinder its implementation by imposing unacceptable conditions on Abkhazia. Such conditions oblige all contacts with Europe to be made through the mediation of Georgian government structures. It must be acknowledged that, on this matter at least, the European and Georgian positions differ.

Europe’s ultimate aim is the de-isolation of Abkhazia, because a closed state with frozen external communications does not in any way contribute to the positive transformation of the conflict. Georgia is trying to use Abkhazia’s desire for de-isolation and the strategy itself as tools to coerce Abkhazia to interact with Europe exclusively through Georgia. The Georgian authorities are trying to distort the picture, so that an Abkhaz refusal to cooperate with Georgia will be interpreted as Abkhazia turning its back on Europe. It is not surprising then that Abkhazia views the Georgian strategy as an attempt to intercept and manipulate European intentions to serve its own political aims.

But what is really happening? What has changed since the European engagement strategy was launched? Despite the stated intentions to promote Abkhazia’s participation in European projects, the situation has not recently improved and there has been no revival of contacts with Europe. Instead, Abkhazia is facing complications in its engagement with European countries, which suggests that the approach is failing. Firstly, there are no signs of liberalisation of the visa regime for travel to European states. Moreover, this has become increasingly complicated for citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia who have Russian passports. This significantly inhibits exchanges, networking and participation, even in the European projects which were already underway before the new strategy was in place.

Abkhazia is also concerned about Brussels’ plan to abolish the post of EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus. Since 2004, this office has been the most active in promoting EU-Abkhaz cooperation. It seems that opponents of Abkhaz de-isolation are lobbying for the removal of the EUSR in order to obstruct the engagement approach. There is, of course, a different motivation behind this. However, it could result in South Ossetia and Abkhazia being effectively cut off from European structures, because they find communicating through mediation of the Georgian national representation unacceptable. It is not clear to what extent this is in Europe’s interests.
Observing these tendencies, the Abkhaz are posing a question which is not easy to answer – what exactly was Europe’s goal when it proposed the ‘engagement’ approach, given that it has not taken any steps to implement it? Analysing the situation suggests some reasons for the ‘slippage’ of the European strategy. Firstly, in my view, it was caused by the influence of and overlap with the Georgian strategy, which has completely different aims. Secondly, it is down to the cautious approach on doing anything which could be interpreted as approval of Russia’s actions. Strong inertia followed the negative evaluations of 2008 events, which have not been revised even in light of the Tagliavini Commission’s conclusions. The latter brought into question the unequivocal condemnation of Russia’s actions during the Georgian-Ossetian war. Unfortunately, Europe’s ambivalent attitude towards Russia, an important economic partner and old political opponent, often has a negative influence on Abkhazia’s fate today.

So what then, from an Abkhaz point of view, would help to implement this strategy that is so important for the normalisation of the situation in the South Caucasus? What would constitute a constructive EU approach to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and to Abkhazia in particular?

Let me make a few suggestions and comments.

**The Russian factor**

- I think it would be advisable not to define the European engagement approach as an ‘either/or’ strategy, where Abkhazia has to choose between Russia or Europe. The ‘and/and’ approach is much more promising in all respects: that is, Russia and Europe. De-isolation should mean the removal of obstacles and restrictions, allowing for freedom of choice and freedom of contacts. If European strategists assume that Abkhazia is interested in exchanging one type of unidirectional regime for another, then they are severely mistaken.

- Consistency in relations between Europe/the West and Russia are important for stability in the South Caucasus. Sometimes, one gets the impression that Abkhazia has been chosen by the international community as a stage where symbolic and often irrational battles with Russia can be played out. Abkhazia has been excluded from the ‘re-boot’ policy, while on other ‘fronts’ such as NATO, the World Trade Organization (WTO), energy or other economic issues, fairly peaceful relations fortunately exist between the West and Russia.

**The Georgian factor**

- For the European Strategy to be properly implemented, Europe must distance itself from the policies of the Georgian Ministry of Reintegration. These policies are misleadingly similar to the European formula and copy certain external features, such as the title. However, they actually refute the very essence of the European proposals for the de-isolation of Abkhazia. As mentioned above, Georgia, unlike Europe, sees the de-isolation of Abkhazia not as a goal, but as a means by which to bind Abkhazia into new conditions.

**European structures and missions**

- An important factor for promoting the new strategy to stabilise the situation in the South Caucasus is the preservation of the office of the EUSR in the South Caucasus. In the absence of other suitable mechanisms for dialogue, contact with European politicians becomes problematic. It is possible that, in other regions, this institution has ceased to perform the necessary role. However, if Europe is indeed serious about contributing positively to conflict transformation in the South Caucasus with its multiple conflicts and partially recognised governments, the office of the EUSR is simply irreplaceable.

- In respect to different Abkhaz proposals – in particular, regarding recognition of Abkhaz
independence – we are often rightly reminded that the recognition of states and borders is a matter for individual states and not for European structures. It is therefore important that this neutrality on border issues is extended to the activities of EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in the Georgian-Ossetian and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zones. If the purpose of the EUMM really is to observe the situation in confrontation zones and prevent the conflict escalating, then adopting a position on the political status of Abkhazia does not help. On the other hand, if the mandate of the European observers were based on a so-called ‘status-neutral approach’ – that is, neutrality in relation to the political status – it would be totally feasible to consider the monitoring mission’s access to Abkhaz territory.

• It would be appropriate to establish a group within the Geneva discussion process to examine the issue of Abkhazia’s de-isolation. All parties could then consider if the de-isolation of Abkhazia would oppose European, Russian or Georgian interests.

Working principles for addressing the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

• In order to establish fair and effective policies in the region, it is important not to dismiss the historical events that played a crucial role in the development of the conflict. The five-day war in August 2008 is well known to everyone, and its consequences have been studied and acknowledged. Conversely, the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 is rarely taken into account. Indeed, it has almost been forgotten by the West. No thorough investigation of the events surrounding the 1992–1993 war has been undertaken, such as the independent fact finding mission led by Heidi Tagliavini which looked into the events of August 2008. Related to this is the important fact – often overlooked – that Georgia has not controlled Abkhazia for the last 17 years, and not just the last two years.

• During discussions on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, it would be useful to avoid putting forward frustrating hypotheses that this problem is not the focus of European interests, and therefore there is no time, energy or particular need to address the issues. However, if there is the strength to put political pressure on the leadership of those countries that were ready to consider recognising Abkhaz independence; if there is time to pursue businesses willing to operate in Abkhazia; and, most importantly, if there is a need to develop and promote a strategy regarding partially-recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia, then this means that interest still exists. It is this interest, by the way, which brought everyone together at this roundtable, whose discussions have formed the basis of this overview report. The discussion of issues important for our region should continue to be based on that interest.

• Unfortunately, we often hear of European structures making some unexpected statement or decision without having the full information or without taking important factors into account. In this regard, more active involvement of political scientists and other experts from European research centres and NGOs in EU discussions could have a positive impact on the decisions taken. Such experts have studied the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in depth and have an understanding of the complexity of regional relationships.

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on the following.

Why are expensive programmes being developed and implemented as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy? It is reasonable to assume that this is because of the desire to create a ring of countries around Europe which share European values, norms, standards and practices in both politics and governance, in economy and in human rights. Why did the neighbouring countries react positively to these intentions? The most plausible answer is because they themselves wish to introduce reforms that bring them closer to the European model – and this in no way conflicts with Russia’s interests. When developing a European Neighbourhood Policy in the Black Sea – and providing opportunities for cooperation with countries or regions such as Turkey, Russia, the
South Caucasus – it would be good to remember that Abkhazia also has borders on the Black Sea with EU states. The European ‘engagement’ strategy could provide the foundations for Abkhazia to become part of the ring of Black Sea countries, rather than some separate segment breaking up the ring.

Andrei Ryabov

Approaches to the de-isolation of Abkhazia: view from Russia

The elaboration of approaches to the de-isolation of Abkhazia is not possible without a clear understanding of the current status of the ‘Abkhaz question’, along with the factors impeding efforts for its peaceful resolution.

Objectively, the ‘Abkhaz question’ has a multifaceted nature that is unfortunately not always recognised in the practice of international relations. In particular, the Abkhaz question has an independent impact as a long-term bilateral ethnic Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. At the same time, the Abkhaz question has become an integral part of relations between two sovereign states – Russia and Georgia – and is one of the main reasons behind the Russia-Georgia conflict. Many experts (and not only in Russia) admit now that Abkhazia has emerged as a new de facto state from within the boundaries of the former autonomy of Soviet Georgia. As a de facto state, Abkhazia has its own interests and tries to implement them in practice. Therefore, it cannot be characterised as a ‘puppet formation’, whose policy is entirely determined in Moscow. This distinguishes the Abkhaz case from the other former Georgian autonomy – South Ossetia – whose ability to develop its own statehood is debatable.

The contradictory nature of the ‘Abkhaz question’ objectively predetermines the duality of the new approach being formulated by the Western community towards Abkhazia. On the one hand, the Western countries firmly adhere to the principle of territorial integrity of Georgia. On the other hand, political circles are forced to take into account the emergence of the de facto state and to recognise that the ‘Abkhaz question’ cannot be solved without active participation of the Abkhaz people themselves. This contradiction gives the impetus behind the new political line towards Abkhazia – namely, ‘engagement without recognition’. However, in practice, implementation of such a policy comes up against the positions of both Georgia and Russia. In trying to avoid a quarrel with Tbilisi, the US and the EU prefer to mention only part of this approach, which emphasises the territorial integrity of Georgia, while leaving out the claim of engagement with Abkhazia.

As mentioned above, the ‘Abkhaz question’ over the past 20 years has become a hostage of the Russia-Georgia conflict. Moreover, the attitudes of both sides today towards Abkhazia do not contribute to an improvement of the situation around the ‘partially recognised republic’. Today, the official Russian position on relations with Georgia may be reduced to a few major points.

- The Kremlin supposes that the status issue of the former Georgian autonomies is already solved. Therefore, it categorically refuses to reconsider its own earlier decision of 26th August 2008 to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

- At the same time, Moscow is not ready to give in to outside pressure to reconsider this decision.

- Russia has reinforced its military presence in Abkhazia. As a result, the government in Moscow does not consider as a serious threat the prospect of renewed armed conflict with Georgia in the near future.
• Neither do the Russian authorities want to conduct any political dialogue with Georgia while President Saakashvili is in power.

• Therefore, all strategic decisions concerning Russia’s official recognition of the independence of the former Georgian autonomies – and which have affected Russia’s relations with Tbilisi and other countries actively supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia – may be postponed to the distant future.

All of these considerations impact directly on Russia’s official approach to Abkhazia. Admitting that, in the near future, no global or regional power is likely to recognise the independence of Abkhazia, the Russian government has no strong motivation to facilitate wider contacts between the authorities in Sukhumi and the rest of the world. Moreover, some influential interest groups in Moscow consider that freezing the current semi-isolation of Abkhazia will facilitate its gradual integration with Russia in economic, political and military matters.

The government in Tbilisi has other motivations behind its policy towards Abkhazia but arrives at approximately the same result. Assuming unconditional support of the US and the EU for its policy towards the former autonomies, the ruling elite in Tbilisi is trying to resolve two different tasks. Firstly, Tbilisi hopes that international pressure on Russia will force it to go back on its recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence – if not now, then in the future. The Georgian government also thinks that debate on territorial issues should precede the normalisation of relations with Russia. This, in turn, leads Georgian ruling elites to underestimate the independent impact of the Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic conflict. As a result, Georgian policy towards Abkhazia formulated in important official documents such as the ‘State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation’ and ‘Modalities for Engagement of Organisations Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia’ in fact reduces prospects of resolution of the ‘Abkhaz question’ to the normalisation of relations between Georgia and Russia. According to this perspective, Abkhazia is not recognised as a side to the conflict and the Abkhaz authorities are excluded from any possible dialogue. Use of the term ‘occupied territories’ means the government in Tbilisi denies Abkhazia of any right to be a party to the conflict with Georgia. Proceeding from this, the Georgian government demands that all international bodies that would like to work in Abkhazia get special permission in Tbilisi. In practice, however, these claims close off opportunities for cooperation with Abkhaz NGOs, because such permission is unacceptable for the authorities in Sukhumi.

Summing up the positions of Russia and Georgia, one can conclude that neither of them have an interest in the de-isolation of Abkhazia. On the contrary, the preservation of current trends in regional political processes will only impede the development of contacts between Abkhazia and the rest of the world and de facto strengthen its semi-isolation.

Under such conditions, one should recognise that engagement between international organisations and NGOs with Abkhazia is impossible without having dealings with the Abkhaz authorities. It means that the international community has to insist that the ‘Abkhaz question’ is an independent issue, and it cannot be resolved without the involvement of those institutions and bodies that represent the interests of the Abkhaz people. In other words, the authorities of Abkhazia and other organisations should be perceived as actors with limited jurisdiction. This should be clearly expressed in all official documents adopted by the international community in relation to the resolution of the Russia-Georgia conflict. It would also be relevant to call on the Georgian government to refrain from unilateral approaches to Abkhazia that would provoke its authorities to curtail remaining institutional contacts with Georgia, including cooperation on humanitarian questions. Simultaneously, the international community should emphasise that this does not imply de facto recognition of Abkhaz sovereignty or an attempt to force Georgia to sign a treaty with the Abkhaz authorities regulating relations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. This is different from the Russian approach, which proposes that a treaty between Abkhazia and Georgia is the only chance for the normalisation of relations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.
It would be useful for international institutions – such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and OSCE – to make a special appeal to the government of Georgia, calling on them to remove any political or legal obstacles to the activity of foreign NGOs in Abkhazia and for the restoration and development of ties between Georgian and Abkhaz organisations. The potential for Abkhaz state-owned (but non-governmental) and private organisations and companies to participate in debates on different projects of regional cooperation – in the first instance, in such bodies as the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) – may be an important channel of engagement with Abkhazia. This approach of course assumes Abkhaz participation only in the working structures of international bodies and should not affect the political level or decision-making mechanisms.

It is necessary to simplify procedures enabling contacts between the people living in Abkhazia and the world outside. The present situation in which many Abkhaz inhabitants are refused entry to foreign countries because they do not hold Georgian passports is unacceptable. This problem will hardly be solved by measures offered in the Action Plan for implementation of the ‘State Strategy on Occupied Territories’, which assumes that people living in Abkhazia will get ‘neutral passports’ issued by the Georgian authorities. If the UN and its agencies refuse to take responsibility to resolve the ‘passport problem’, then the EU should of its own free will allow the people of Abkhazia to visit European countries using the international passports that they hold now.

In order to avoid an intensification of the conflict around Abkhazia in the run up to and during the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, it would be expedient to adopt in advance a political document that would determine the extent of participation by Abkhazia in the Olympics project. This document should be developed only on the basis of consensus between all sides and with actors engaged in the conflict around Abkhazia.

As mentioned above, the Russian government currently does not see anything attractive in the EU policy of ‘engagement without recognition’ regarding Abkhazia. Moreover, Moscow suspects that this policy is offered to tear Abkhazia away from Russia. Even if this is the purpose, however, it does not mean that the policy of engagement with Abkhazia has to damage Russian interests in the Black Sea region. The problem is that, as Abkhaz statehood strengthens, Sukhumi will strive for more independence in its contacts with other countries. This striving will create tension between Abkhazia and Russia. Therefore, it is in Russia’s interests even now to give Abkhazia more opportunities to expand its independent contacts and external ties. The policy of engagement with Abkhazia can contribute to this. The international community should try to persuade the Russian government not to limit the Abkhaz authorities from attempting to expand their own free contacts with the rest of the world.
Annex 1

EU-Caucasus Dialogue on Georgian-Abkhaz relations
Roundtable, 29th November 2010

List of participants

Discussion participants
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Bostjan Malovrh, Political Adviser to EUSR for the crisis in Georgia
Riccardo Lepri, Political Adviser to EUSR for the crisis in Georgia
Frederik Wesslau, Political Adviser to EUSR for the South Caucasus
Isabel Proano, European Commission, Directorate General for External Relations/ Hailu Mamo,
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Alfredo Conte, Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit, General Secretariat, European Council
Guillermo Martinez, Political Adviser, Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC)
James Moor, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK
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