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# Analysis of 30+ years of working with conflict in the Georgian- Abkhaz-South Ossetian contexts



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**Independent Peace Associates**

February  
**2021**



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Published by Independent Peace Associates

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Registered office 34b York Way, London N1 9AB, United Kingdom.



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This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union under the European Union Responsive Resource Fund implemented by the United Nations Development Programme. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Independent Peace Associates and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union nor the United Nations Development Programme.

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## About Independent Peace Associates

Independent Peace Associates (Indie Peace), is a conflict transformation organisation specialising in research and analysis, training and facilitation of dialogue to build confidence between communities affected by conflict. Our geographic expertise is mainly in the former Soviet Union, and our principle is to work inclusively in cooperation with all players and across the multiple conflict-divides in the wider region.

We offer a transformational peacebuilding model that aims to build intellectual and emotional capital for peaceful social change. Our analysis acknowledges the role of perceptions, emotions and human subjectivity, and our interventions foster greater reflectiveness and critical thinking. We believe that transformation on an individual level can influence change on the social and political levels. Only by understanding all dimensions of a conflict – its psychological, social, political, economic, ethnic, historical, gendered, cultural and other roots – can we develop a conflict-sensitive vision, a strategy to build sustainable peace.

Indie Peace is much more than its founders – we work with peace practitioners from around the world who share our vision and values.

Our approach encompasses the following:

- Researching and analysing conflict causes, consequences and dynamics
- Facilitating dialogue processes and exchange between stakeholders in conflict
- Consultancy on conflict transformation for conflict stakeholders, third-party mediators
- Training in conflict-sensitivity, mediation, critical thinking, community engagement
- Peacebuilding project management, monitoring and evaluation.

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## About the authors

**Larissa Sotieva** has over 25 years' experience managing humanitarian, conflict transformation and civic engagement programmes in the former Soviet Union and has a wealth of expertise in political and conflict analysis, facilitation of research and cross-conflict dialogue processes, including high level policy dialogues. Larissa has worked for a number of international organisations in Russia in the North Caucasus and also in the South Caucasus, Central Asia and Ukraine. Between 2006 and 2019, Larissa worked as senior adviser for the Eurasia region with International Alert, after which she founded Independent Peace Associates.

**Juliet Schofield** has over 20 years' experience managing conflict transformation and civic engagement programmes in the former Soviet Union and western Balkans, working with organisations VSO and International Alert, bringing a wealth of expertise in programme management, design, monitoring and evaluation. She has managed research, dialogue, public education and advocacy initiatives, bringing together conflicting sides, fostering youth engagement, critical thinking and promoting social justice. Juliet also has a degree in Psychosocial Studies and recently has been exploring the use of arts and culture-based approaches for social change inspired by her engagement with cultural dialogue between writers, artists, musicians and public figures from across the Caucasus.

### Place names

Place names and spellings are a source of contention in the Georgian-Abkhaz and South Ossetian contexts. In this paper we use neutral spelling where practical, with the exception of direct quotes which use the phrasing of the speaker in question.

# Introduction

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## Background and purpose

**The idea for this review of dialogue and conflict transformation initiatives in the Georgian Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts had been brewing for some time. It arose through a process of regular reflection and the need to understand and acknowledge the current state of peacebuilding in the region today and to explore future possibilities.**

“It is good that there’s no fighting, but it’s not peace.”

The discourse on peacebuilding processes is not unambiguous. One often hears complaints of lack of progress, and there is a sense of exhaustion after years of trying to bring about tangible change in terms of conflict resolution. Peace initiatives appeared to be more defined by their limitations than their vision.

Peace actors from all sides and from within the international community appeared to acknowledge that civil peace processes had become stuck, with earlier achievements feeling increasingly distant. There was a sense that something different was needed, but apart from ‘new ideas’, or ‘more/different people’, these peace actors struggled to articulate what. There was also a distinct feeling that with the passing of time, the first-generation peace actors should give way to the younger generations. However, neither group seem prepared for this at present. At the same time, institutional memory of peacebuilding seemed to be fading, along with an understanding of what peacebuilding involves. It was becoming harder to advocate the need for dialogue and articulate its benefits to an increasingly sceptical public. The narrative is that ‘peace’ had not been built, however that was interpreted.

A reflection on past peacebuilding processes, going back to the early 1990s, felt necessary to enable people to take a step back, assess achievements, reflect on missed opportunities, understand what resources exist today, and better understand the conflict dynamics in order to identify strategic ways forward. It was also felt that such a reflection would help unlock new ideas, and inject energy, values and momentum into cross-divide dialogue. In this respect, both the *process* of reflecting on past dialogue and other peacebuilding initiatives was as important as the findings, which are presented here in analytical form and offer an opportunity for further dialogue and discussion on recommendations.

## Methodology

The review began in the summer of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This had implications for the research methodology. What had originally been conceived as a series of in-depth, face-to-face interviews and focus groups supported by some desk review necessarily shifted online. This had both a potential downside (people would perhaps not be as open as in a face-to-face context – though we felt that we managed to develop a good rapport with interviewees) but also some benefits. For example, had face-to-face



interviews been carried out, they would have been conducted in three blocks, focusing separately on Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians. The online method meant that we were able to shuffle the order of interviews in a way that enabled us to compare and check different interpretations of processes and events as we went along. Doing this helped us understand the depth of disagreements and stereotypes which were revealed. We found many identical trends that unite these three societies, but just as with stereotypes, the respondents from different sides often seemed unaware of their similarities.

The line of questioning itself took a biographic approach – asking people to reflect on their motivations for getting involved in peace initiatives in the first place, and on their personal journeys. This method was designed to be distinct from an accountability-oriented project level evaluation, instead encouraging reflection and steering away from pre-prepared answers. The method encouraged a critical approach and avoided the tendency for respondents to present their work in an exclusively positive light. Interviews explored uncomfortable questions, such as the interpretation of historical facts, the way in which convenient consensus is formed in the respective societies so as to support their interpretation of the conflict, their vision of their own virtue, and the guilt of others. As a result, this analysis is based on multiple subjective perspectives, and forms a complex tapestry of ‘situated knowledges’ in dialogue with each other.<sup>1</sup> It does not therefore pretend to put forward a definitive objective truth; rather, it is an acknowledgement of the prominent role subjectivity plays in shaping the conflict context. The recommendations produced through this analysis consequently raise more questions for discussion, which is part of its purpose. As one interviewee with a long track record of experience in this field fed back after their interview, “I thought I knew the answers to questions of conflict, but after this interview I realised that this is far from the case.”

The bulk of the interviews took place between July and September 2020, and were completed just prior to the outbreak of the Karabakh war between 27 September and 10 November. The war necessitated a further round of consultations in December 2020/January 2021 in order to solicit opinions on how the changed geopolitical dynamic and security balance in the region was likely to impact the Georgian-Abkhaz-South Ossetian contexts. A total of 98 people were either interviewed or participated in focus groups (44 male, 54 female).

Selection criteria for interviewees were based on a desire to solicit experience from civil actors engaged in a wide range of peacebuilding processes, and a limited number of political actors. The aim was to reach different generations and garner the views of leaders and participants of diverse processes. These people included political analysts, academics, women, young people, ex-combatants, journalists, businesspeople, historians, and cultural figures.

To support our analysis, fill in some gaps and questions left by the interviews, and to gain additional perspectives, we also conducted a desk review of publicly available documents which were of relevance.

The initial draft was peer reviewed by a regional expert group, but the final draft is the sole responsibility of Independent Peace Associates.

## Limitations and reflexivity

Given the long timescale under examination, and the enormous number of initiatives implemented during that time, we had to create some criteria to determine what would come under review. For example, the accompanying catalogue of initiatives is only intended to be a summary of the main dialogue processes facilitated by international civil society actors since the early 1990s, and which lasted longer than one year. It does not include the myriad humanitarian initiatives which might have had an indirect peacebuilding value, initiatives conducted without external facilitation, or initiatives facilitated by intergovernmental organisations (such as the Council of Europe or UN). It also does not include academic conferences or roundtables organised by think tanks or academic institutions where experts were invited from the region (except for when a conference was part of a wider dialogue process, such as George Mason University or UCI). While such academic/policy roundtable events might be framed as a 'dialogue', the dialogue in question is usually with international policymakers, rather than between the sides. Their purpose therefore is more about informing international policy than building confidence. The purpose of the catalogue is to support institutional memory, which is fading. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive, detailed description of every peace initiative ever conducted in the context.

Similarly, the review does not evaluate individual processes on their own merits, nor does it attempt to compare them. In any case, in the early years, the main processes evolved through collaboration and ad hoc coordination involving the sharing of information, analysis, and even resources between the international facilitators, who sometimes attended each other's dialogue meetings. This coordination was actively encouraged by local actors who participated in different processes who wanted to maximise complementarity and minimise duplication, and wider society perceived all international activity as the work of the collective 'West'.<sup>2</sup>

Another limitation already referred to was the online nature of the interviews. It could not provide a 'safe space' for all, and precluded an element of informality and relationship building during the course of the interview. This was particularly the case with those with whom we had no prior relationship. To some extent this was mitigated by the sheer number of interviews conducted (we only stopped when we felt we were no longer getting new information) and on our own merits as practitioners with substantial experience and institutional memory (which we must acknowledge hold both advantages and disadvantages as researchers).

The clear advantages in having institutional memory and knowing the context meant interviewees assumed prior knowledge and did not need to expend time explaining some events. It also meant an element of trust was already there, and we found most people to be quite open and tried to be sincere, and to emphasise the difference between personal and public opinions. Several interviews went into some depth into some quite painful issues.<sup>3</sup>

However, we were also mindful that prior knowledge can also be a burden in research. As facilitators of some processes ourselves, we had to be wary of our own experience potentially influencing the research. We challenged our 'knowledge' by deliberately reaching out to interviewees whom we did not know already, including those who we had reason to believe could be quite critical. Taking everything into consideration, the methodology enabled us to assess each respondent's journey and take into consideration a wide variety of different opinions from across the three societies. The resulting analysis provides a great deal of food for thought, both with regards to the past, and to future planning for those working in this sector.

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## Notes

1. See Haraway's 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599. Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledge' acknowledges that while partial perspectives might be limited, they are rich in terms of what they reveal about the context. They steer us away from authoritarian mindsets and binary interpretations, and encourage enquiry, curiosity and dialogue. While it may be a rejection of a positivist worldview and belief that there is an objective truth, it also avoids favouring constructivism or relativism, which Haraway sees as equally problematic.
2. Paula Garb (UCI) and Susan Nan (GMU) have written about this process of collaboration led by UCI, and involving Conciliation Resources, International Alert and later the Heinrich Boell Foundation, among others. They noted that it was not always easy in the beginning to overcome elements of competition between organisations, but clearly all recognised the benefits, and were implored to coordinate through local dialogue coordinators. See 'Negotiating in a Coordination Network of Citizen Peacebuilding Initiatives in the Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process', *International Negotiation* 11: 7-35, 2006.
3. This is relevant in the light of the repeated feedback that we received about other types of research conducted, including questionnaire-style surveys that attempt to quantify qualitative data (and thus produce something close to 'objective'), in that people only share their 'public' opinion with surveyors, even those they trust, answering in a way that they believe is expected of them, rather than their 'private' opinion.

# Conceptual framework for conflict transformation

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**It is useful first to present a conceptual framework for understanding what peacebuilding or conflict transformation is in the Georgian-Abkhaz-South Ossetian contexts. The received idea is that it is all about cross-divide dialogue. And while this study does take dialogue processes facilitated by third parties as its starting point, these processes would be ineffectual without having wider societal influence, including on official peace processes and on the policies of the respective sides in support of peace.**

We are guided by Lederach's definition of transformation, which views peace as dynamic and conflict as something that can be engaged with in order to bring about constructive change, rather than something that can be 'resolved' and eliminated.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly appropriate in the context of protracted conflicts, where the original conditions that gave rise to conflict have themselves evolved so radically that there can be no return to before.

Lederach's framework understands peace as embedded in justice, respect for human rights and nonviolence. It is rooted in relationships, which include both face-to-face interactions and the ways in which social, political, economic, and cultural links are structured. Much of conflict transformation is therefore about 'developing capacities to engage in change processes at the interpersonal, inter-group, and social-structural levels'. Lederach identifies four dimensions of transformation: personal, relational, structural, and cultural, though they are all interrelated and bear similar characteristics:

- **Personal** transformation seeks to minimise the destructive effects of social conflict and maximise the potential for individual growth, drawing upon the whole range of cognitive, emotional, perceptual, and spiritual aspects of human experience.
- The **relational** dimension is about communication, interaction, and issues of power and interdependence between conflicting sides. These relations are often affected by personal or group fears, hopes, emotions and goals.
- The **structural** level focuses on how social, economic, and institutional relationships are organised to meet basic human needs, provide access to resources, and facilitate participation in decision-making processes. It is on the structural level that issues such as exclusion and inequality, versus inclusion and equal opportunities become institutionalised.
- The **cultural** dimension seeks to uncover the cultural patterns that contribute to violence in a given context, and to identify and build on existing cultural resources and mechanisms for handling conflict. This includes aspects such as behavioural and social norms, but also cultural norms such as religion and forms of cultural symbolism, tradition, ritual, etc.

We consider this to be a useful framework through which to analyse working with conflict in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts, given that some terms – including 'confidence building' and 'peacebuilding' – are not perceived as neutral concepts in this context. Similarly, 'civic activism', 'human rights' and 'democracy' are also highly politicised terms, and are viewed as Western concepts. Nevertheless, all of these terms do implicitly fit quite neatly into the conflict transformation framework across different dimensions.

Indeed, when we asked people to describe their **vision of peace** for the future, they used terms consistent with the four dimensions specified above, giving a

range of responses which could be said to exist on a 'peace continuum'. It was also interesting to note the ways in which views across different groups diverged.

- Fundamentally, all three societies see 'peace' as the absence of fear for their lives, the ability to live without coming under fire, and being free from the fear of hostilities resuming. These sentiments were more pronounced from Ossetian interviewees, whose hopes often did not extend much beyond 'being able to continue living here'. Many South Ossetians have permanently migrated to the North. This is especially true of the younger generation, who have few other choices when it comes to seeking work, a career, or simply a decent life. One only needs to look to Akhagori/Leningor for an extreme example of this. There have been recent reports of a further mass exodus of residents from the district, which already had a severely depleted population compared to pre-war figures.<sup>5</sup>
- Next on the continuum were abstract ideas about the 'ability to talk to each other' and of 'civilised relations'. This included concrete mechanisms for interaction, as well as the human and social qualities that facilitate interaction, including political dimensions such as 'mutual respect', 'being allowed to have a different opinion', and 'not imposing opinions on others'. Amongst the Abkhaz in particular, in light of their non recognised status in the world, there was a strong desire to 'no longer have this feeling that we have to fight for every single right'. In relation to their own society, they wanted to be 'unafraid of being criticised, repressed', and more generally, 'to live without ideological or ethnic hostility'.
- Freedom of movement in the broadest sense was next on the continuum – whether this was in relation to movement across conflict divides, or globally. People expressed the need for 'open roads', 'normal relations', and for links in business, trade, education, and leisure. There was also a desire for family reunions, 'so mixed families are able to maintain relationships'.
- Next come observations about how peace feels on a societal level: to live in a society 'in which your rights are respected, regardless of your nationality and sense of belonging'; 'without corruption or nepotism'; 'with more development'; 'with no more need for international organisations'; 'where we can choose our own path, without it being determined on our behalf'. Some also expressed a need for healing and reconciliation on a societal level. It was felt that efforts needed to be made to overcome trauma, and to reduce the propagation of stereotypes, feelings of alienation, and so on. One respondent said that "peacebuilding is when you psychologically accept a neighbour after such a bloody war."

This question was posed specifically to focus on the condition/experience of peace, not the institutional or political arrangements for it. Perhaps this is why only two Abkhaz and South Ossetian interviewees expressed 'recognition' as a solution, and only one Georgian interviewee expressed the desire for a political arrangement akin to 'something like Cyprus' or 'something like the EU'. What was clear from their answers, however, was that institutional structures were not goals in themselves, or at least, the meaning invested in such goals was of more importance.

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## Notes

4. <https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation>

5. Грузинский исход ('Georgian Exodus'), Ekho Kavkaza, 26 November 2020. <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30970969.html>

# The emergence of peacebuilding: motivations and early initiatives<sup>6</sup>

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## Motivations

**The first people to get engaged in various processes in the name of peace were from among the ranks of the so-called Soviet intelligentsia. This was a social class that enjoyed quite a high level of unconditional authority in their societies. People cited a range of motivations as to why they got engaged, from personal reasons to the desire to achieve wider benefits for their societies.**

“During the USSR I considered myself a dissident.  
And now I am a dissident again.”

Georgian respondent

“My motivation hasn’t changed since the days of  
the USSR – I respond to injustice.”

Abkhaz respondent

For some, it was a matter of responding to injustice, preventing a resumption of hostilities and seeking peaceful solutions to the conflicts. For others, it was about standing up for their rights and getting their position across, not only to the other side, but to the wider world. Others still were seeking partnerships and allies, or looking for understanding, sympathy and assistance. And a number of people clearly articulated that they sought to understand the other side and wanted to influence their own societies with the aim of reducing militaristic moods and the desire for revenge.

For many it was not just a calling, but also became a job, in that it was both a source of income and social capital or status within their community. For others it was the only way to travel and see the world, to break out from isolation and broaden their horizons and worldview. This factor was equally relevant for all; however, more recently it has particularly applied to the more isolated societies.

Interviewees from all three sides stated that during the phase of open hostilities, it was quite obvious to them how to act and what needed to be done. Responding to urgent needs tends to be an instinctive process of self-preservation. However, in the post-war phase, the question of how to act became less clear. People were less sure and seemed to be waiting for an indicator of what to do, how to move forward, and in which direction. All three societies were still under the influence of the Soviet style of leadership, with the wars further strengthening that culture of authoritarianism. Accordingly, people favoured the idea of a ‘strong hand’ and resolute decision making.

It was in this context that those who went on to become the leaders of civil society took it into their own hands to influence the conflict context. At that time, the first international facilitators and mediators turned up in the region. Examining their motivations, it transpires that a good proportion of them, in addition to their professional interest, also had a personal connection to the region or type of work. For some, it was an ancestral connection, while others had experiences of migration, dissidence, displacement and family trauma. The combination of motivations held by locals and internationals proved beneficial in the difficult task of bringing a process into being.



“We took on the responsibility for bringing about societal change when others were silent and even asking, “Who gave you the authority?””

Abkhaz respondent

“I had no choice. I could either leave the country, which I didn’t want to do – I love Georgia, my neighbours, friends, family – what, should I take them all with me? Or I could start to try to change things. I chose the latter.”

Georgian respondent

However, the first attempts to resolve or transform the conflicts began even before the arrival of international mediators on the scene, and looked different to processes today. There was no external mediation, and processes relied on bilateral kinship and social ties. These were held together by a reserve of social capital and depended on the will and enthusiasm of those who took on the responsibility of attempting to change the course of events as they escalated. Just like today, no-one delegated this task to them, but neither did anyone question their motives or ask on whose behalf they were working. Society believed in them, in the hope that their efforts could ease the tension and bring the desired results.

## Early initiatives

### South Ossetia

Experts on South Ossetia noted that the late 1980s was a period of active political debate. Ossetian fears of a nationalist, separatist Georgia were compounded by memories of the events of 1920, when the then-independent Democratic Republic of Georgia sent in its national guard to quash an Ossetian uprising which resisted their incorporation into the post Tsarist Georgian Republic. The event resulted in hundreds being killed and thousands more perishing while fleeing across the mountains.<sup>7</sup> As Gamsakhurdia’s nationalist movement gained momentum, inter-ethnic tensions resurfaced within society. During the spring of 1989 the Ossetian national movement ‘Adamon Nykhaz’, which from 1988 was led by Alan Chochiev, made more than one attempt via various Georgian intermediaries to meet with Gamsakhurdia. However, these attempts were rebuked. One of the intermediaries was Zurab Chavchavadze, the head of the Iliia Chavchavadze Society, with whom Chochiev signed a joint statement on 21 July 1989 calling for peace and dialogue.<sup>8</sup> However, Chochiev had previously written a letter of support for Abkhaz independence, which had incensed the Georgians. Other members of the intelligentsia also went to Tbilisi to try to stop an escalation. In one instance, a mixed Ossetian/Georgian delegation of South Ossetians visited Tbilisi in November 1989. The delegation included Lyudvig Chibirov, who was later to become first president of South Ossetia. They met with Gamsakhurdia and asked him directly not to organise the infamous mass march on Tskhinval/i of 23 November 1989 – a request that was refused.<sup>9</sup>

Individuals attempting to smooth relations in this context were powerless against the dynamics which were unfolding. Attempts to influence Gamsakhurdia seemed futile. It was claimed that ‘he wasn’t interested’ and ignored warnings, and that he even dismissed warnings after the November 1989 events that a much greater escalation could arise.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the first initiatives facilitated by international civil sector actors in the post-war period took off around 1995. Two significant initiatives focused on political or Track 1.5 dialogue, the first led by VERTIC between 1995 and 1998, which succeeded in organising a number of high-level meetings in Batumi (July 1995 and 1996) and Vladikavkaz (December 1995).<sup>11</sup>

The second process arose through OSCE contacts which resulted in an invitation to Harvard professor Roger Fisher, founder of Conflict Management Group, to facilitate a series of dialogues framed as facilitated brainstorming and negotiations training. Co-facilitated with Norwegian Refugee Council, four meetings were held between January 1996 and July 1998 (in Oslo, Boston and Barcelona), covering a range of themes of including learning from the Basque and Catalonia context (in Barcelona). At least 3 more meetings were held thereafter until 2000, led by a local steering committee and with lower-key international facilitation.<sup>12</sup>

Both processes are credited with contributing to a 'change in tone' and more constructive discussion during the official talks; and both processes are credited with having developed a number of civil confidence building proposals, or having discussed issues which later became policy – in particular catalysing formal agreements on economic development programmes for South Ossetia.

However, in contrast to the Abkhaz context, the international focus on South Ossetia was more overtly on humanitarian recovery and facilitating repatriation. International humanitarian agencies had such a high level of visibility that 'many perceived them almost as the true government'.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, a comparatively small amount was invested into civil society or into dialogue processes, though some initiatives were later supported through the OSCE mission.<sup>14</sup> Many put this down to a perception at that time that somehow this conflict was easier to resolve, or of a smaller scale to Abkhazia, and possibly even less important somehow.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, this initial period was a time when civil society and the authorities were on the same page. Both were focused on rebuilding and rehabilitating their society destroyed by the war, and to that purpose, they wanted to open up South Ossetia to the international community. Civil initiatives were welcomed. As one respondent said, 'They [the authorities] even helped us get passports so that we could participate in international events.' It is a stark contrast to attitudes towards civil society today.

South Ossetia was ready to look for assistance wherever it was offered, and while it looked to Russia for support, Russia's involvement was initially seen as being via North Ossetia, which had close links to South Ossetia. This North Ossetian factor appears to have been under utilised. It was understood back then that solutions needed to be found in the region. As one former South Ossetian politician said:

**"It was easier for us to work in the direction of Georgia. At least we knew what to expect of them. It was much harder to work with Moscow, as it was so unpredictable."**

Ossetian respondent

After 1999, second-track initiatives ran into difficulties, since on the one hand the Georgian side seemed to be seeking to centralise all peace initiatives concerning South Ossetia, and on the other there was a growing tendency on the Ossetian side to begin to channel communications with Tbilisi through Moscow.<sup>16</sup> The only other serious attempt to establish a Track 1.5 dialogue was by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, which in 2005–2006 organised a series of dialogues and an international conference in Vladikavkaz entitled ‘Compensation, restitution and restoration of rights for the victims of the Georgian–Ossetian conflict’.<sup>17</sup> However, this was not continued due to growing Georgian–Russian tensions and a strengthening of ties between Moscow and Tskhinval/i, which limited opportunities to address challenges at a bilateral level. Moreover, attempts by the Georgian government to develop relations with the South Ossetian population, bypassing the de-facto authorities, made it difficult to stimulate meaningful cooperation from Tskhinval/i on preparing the Restitution Law and other confidence building measures.

Thereafter, the most significant civil initiatives in the South Ossetian context were either through participation in regional formats<sup>18</sup> or those which emerged around 2008 and after. This was after the departure of the OSCE, and after it became much harder to do anything. These initiatives included the George Mason University Point of View<sup>19</sup> process and its later incarnations, the Pax-supported Georgian–Ossetian Civil Forum (which still exists today independently of Pax), and the Pax/Berghof young professionals programme, which also works in the Abkhaz context, and continues today with Berghof’s History Dialogues programme.<sup>20</sup>

## Abkhazia

Even before the outbreak of hostilities, the Abkhaz intelligentsia – many of whom became what we now call civil society leaders – took measures to prevent bloodshed between Georgians and Abkhazians, just as the Ossetians had done. For example, at the height of the Georgian nationalist movement, a group of Abkhazians tried to set up a meeting with Gamsakhurdia through their Georgian friends and colleagues who were equally concerned about the growing dynamic. They arrived in Tbilisi with the expectation of an audience with Gamsakhurdia. However, they only got to meet some members of his circle. The nature of the meeting brought a growing realisation that they were heading for war and that it might be impossible to avoid war. As one respondent said, “The young people we met from Gamsakhurdia’s team talked openly about Georgian superiority, about the exceptional features of Georgian blood and Georgian genes, and how Georgian will be the language in which “all will confess before the apostle”.<sup>21</sup>

During the war itself, the Georgian and Abkhaz intelligentsia tried to find ways to stop the escalation. One initiative was a meeting in Moscow between a group of Abkhazians and the Georgian diaspora, which took place not long after the burning of the Abkhaz Archive in October 1992. This meeting left the Abkhazians with more mixed impressions. On the one hand, they were impressed by the humanism of the well-known poet Bulat Okudzhava. One Abkhaz interviewee recalled that “Okudzhava gave a very deep and profound presentation. It was very much a peacebuilding message, and I remember thinking that if such people had been in power at that time, maybe we could have avoided

the war.” However, another Georgian cultural figure at the same meeting accused the Abkhazians of having burnt down their own archive. This person claimed that this action was done in an attempt to hide the fact that there was indeed no such thing as a distinct Abkhaz nation, and that they are etymologically part of the Georgian nation. The Abkhaz interviewee refuted this, saying “Why would we do that? Why would we destroy such unique items that are impossible to replace? This was a representative of the Georgian intelligentsia in Moscow, and he was infected with the virus of nationalism.”

Such meetings and initiatives were spontaneous in character, and responded to events as they unfolded. After the war, the first dialogues between Georgians and Abkhazians were also not facilitated by third parties. These focused on humanitarian issues and on people missing in action, with key interlocutors first meeting in Yerevan at the end of 1995. These meetings built on work conducted during the war on prisoner exchanges. These efforts enabled the individuals involved to develop a certain level of trust or to gain a reputation as people the other side could work with.

The first international-facilitated conference took place in Moscow in February 1995. Later that year a regional, all-Caucasian conference was held in Pyatigorsk. Both were organised by International Alert. They were not necessarily framed as dialogues, however. There were also various CIS-wide platforms under the aegis of UNHCR/IOM. These included the CIS Conference from 1996, which incorporated the Working Group on Conflict Management and Prevention. This was the first international platform for many Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian civil society representatives, and the first time that many of them met one another. It proved to offer fertile ground for ideas regarding cooperation.<sup>22</sup>

However, the first significant bilateral process to get under way was facilitated by the University of California, Irvine and led by Paula Garb. Garb had a deep knowledge of the region, had studied Abkhaz culture in particular, and knew many Abkhaz civil society actors and officials. Initially the process focused on environmental issues in the Black Sea region, and later morphed into a series of conferences held between 1997 and 2009, with their proceedings published in a 16 volume series entitled ‘Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict’. These conferences were often organised in collaboration with other organisations, including Conciliation Resources, International Alert and the Heinrich Boell Foundation.<sup>23</sup>

UCI played a significant role in facilitating contacts and coordinating with other major international peacebuilding actors that had arrived on the scene around the same time. Each one developed their own programme, which meant they were exploring a particular niche. This was partly prompted by the local civil society actors, who were keen for engagement, but not for duplication. The Schlaining Track 1.5 process initiated by Conciliation Resources and the Berghof Foundation which ran from 2000–2007 evolved from meetings organised in cooperation with UNV and the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly in 1996 (Caucasus wide) and a bilateral, weeklong Georgian-Abkhaz meeting in January 1997.

It was against this background that the Caucasus Forum of NGOs emerged as a strong peacebuilding network with the facilitation of International Alert’s Gevorg Ter Gabrielyan. Between 1998 and 2005, the Caucasus Forum brought together civil society from across the

north and south of the region in a shared mission, which included 'the revival of the tradition of peaceful coexistence and joint cooperation on the conflicts.' The format built upon a traditional Caucasian method of dispute resolution, wherein neutral neighbours are invited to play the role of mediator and facilitator. Over the course of seven years, the Caucasus Forum evolved into a solidaristic network functioning as mediator, dialogue facilitator, civil society capacity builder, early warning mechanism, and conflict prevention mechanism.<sup>24</sup> The process operated on multiple levels, and included bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation. It also involved experts from the whole post-Soviet region, including Moscow.

Most subsequent initiatives evolved from these three main early initiatives (the Caucasus Forum, Schlaining process, and UCI conferences), or were informed by them when engaging civil society actors from the region. These initiatives did not emerge in isolation from each other but were complementary, with discussions from one forum feeding into another. There was a good level of interaction between the different international facilitators, given that all of them were finding their way at the time.

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## Notes

6. It is beyond the scope of this study to give a detailed description and evaluation of all initiatives and processes separately. Nevertheless, this section introduces the reader to those initiatives which interviewees described as most significant, many of which date back to the 1990s and created the conditions for other initiatives to come into being. The main processes from the 1990s to today are also described in the catalogue in the annex to this document. References to pertinent publications which elaborate further on individual initiatives are given in the text where available, the main one of which is the 2012 publication by International Alert, 'Mediation and dialogue in the South Caucasus: A reflection on 15 years of conflict transformation initiatives in the South Caucasus'.
7. Georgian and Ossetian interpretations of this period of history vary greatly, and for a clear articulation of the different perspectives, see 'The Georgian-South Ossetia Conflict', (Chapter 4.2), Nikola Svetkovsky, Danish Association for Research on the Caucasus. Available at <http://www.caucasus.dk/publication5.htm>. In this paper, Svetkovsky cites Ossetian sources which claim that about 5,000 Ossetians were killed, with more than 13,000 subsequently dying from hunger and epidemics, and it is such figures that shape collective Ossetian historical memory. For a Georgian account of this period can see Avtandil Menteshashvili, 'An Assessment of the 1920 Uprising in South Ossetia', in *Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1992, Available at <https://sisauri.tripod.com/politic/ossetia.htm>
8. '25 Years of Georgia's Peace Policy', 2018, Caucasian House (page 58) refers to joint statement on 21 July 1989 calling on peace and dialogue – but also say these were singular case doomed to remain ineffective to change an overall picture of dire confrontations.

9. On that occasion thousands of Georgians were organised in convoys of buses seeking to enter Tskhinvali for a 'peace meeting' but were prevented by a combination of volunteers and militia resisting this 'invasion'. The resulting clashes over two days led to the deaths of six people. Human Rights Watch say there were 12,000–15,000 people on this march, ('Bloodshed in the Caucasus', 1992, Human Rights Watch; p. 5 <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/pdfs/g/georgia/georgia.923/georgia923full.pdf>), while Ossetian accounts put the numbers closer to 40,000–50,000. (See Part 1 of 'Polygon – The Georgian-South Ossetian war 1988–1992 through the prism of the Media', (2015) Chibirov A.L., published on <https://proza.ru/2015/10/29/2461>). This paper also includes an account of Chibirov's meeting with Gamsakhurdia, where Chibirov asked him to cancel the 23 November march and instead to sit down with representatives of Georgian villages in South Ossetia and discuss everything. Gamsakhurdia's response was that he could not cancel it because everyone had been informed already. The paper also said that Gamsakhurdia expected up to 100,000 people to take part.
10. Georgian interviewee.
11. 'Confidence Building Matters: The Georgia-South Ossetia Conflict', Sammut and Svetkovsky, 1996. [https://www.vertic.org/media/Archived\\_Publications/Matters/Confidence\\_Building\\_Matters\\_No6.pdf](https://www.vertic.org/media/Archived_Publications/Matters/Confidence_Building_Matters_No6.pdf)
12. Source material is two articles by Susan Allen, themselves based on interviews with participants in 1998 and 1999. Nan, Susan Allen. "Track One-and-a-Half Diplomacy: Contributions to Georgian-South Ossetian Peacemaking." in Ronald J. Fisher, ed., Paving the Way: Contributions of Interactive Conflict Resolution to Peacemaking. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005. Nan, Susan Allen. "Track One and a Half Diplomacy: Searching for Political Agreement in the Caucasus." In Mari Fitzduff and Cheyanne Church, eds. NGOs at the Table: Strategies for Influencing Policies in Areas of Conflict. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004
13. Ossetian respondent
14. This relative lack of attention to civil society is reflected in the initiative of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs around 2000 entitled 'Forgotten Regions', which sought to build the capacity of civil society in South Ossetia along with Nagorny Karabakh and some North Caucasian regions.
15. The EU started to support infrastructure rehabilitation projects in South Ossetia after 1998. A useful overview of the EU's support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the period 1997–2007 (some of which was provided via the OSCE) is available in 'Europe's Unrecognised Neighbours. The EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia' (2007) CEPS Working Document No. 260.
16. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (Sept 2009), Vol II, p. 102
17. <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/events/?id=483>
18. Such as the Caucasus Forum 1998–2005; Caucasus Business and Development Network 2005–2015; women's networks, including the Caucasus Women's League (a spin off of the Caucasus Forum) 2001–2003; and that of Kvinna till Kvinna since 2002; as well as networks such as IWPR, etc.
19. <http://pointofviewdialogue.com/en/>
20. <https://berghof-foundation.org/work/projects/history-dialogue-in-georgia-and-abkhazia>
21. Though Gamsakhurdia did meet a delegation of the Abkhaz National Movement in March 1990. More details of efforts at public diplomacy in the pre-war period are related by historian Giorgii Anchabadze, including his own personal efforts, in Volume 1 of 'Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict', (1999) University of California Irvine. [https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb\\_cs\\_abkhaz\\_pub.php](https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.php)
22. <https://www.iom.int/cis-conference>
23. [https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb\\_cs\\_abkhaz\\_pub.php](https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.php)
24. Several of the chapters in the aforementioned publication 'Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus' by International Alert are devoted to the Caucasus Forum and initiatives that emerged from it. These include the various professional/thematic networks, such as the Caucasian Women's League; networks of ex combatants, people with disabilities, cultural figures, and young journalists; and the Caucasus Business and Development Network. See also the corresponding chapter in the forthcoming publication 'Peacebuilding, Conflict and Community Development', (2021) Sinéad Gormally, John Eversley and Avila Kilmurray (eds), Policy Press (UK).

# Impact and results of peacebuilding and conflict transformation

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**This report is not attempting to make a quantitative measurement of the accumulated impact of civic peacebuilding over the years, nor is it a comparative study of different processes in terms of their specific effectiveness or approach. It does not aim to provide a 'meta evaluation' of reports, nor is it testing a particular theory of change.**

Given the long timeframe and nature of this review, which partly aimed to provide a space for local peacebuilders to reflect, interviewees were asked what they felt to be the most significant results. They were not given any pre defined criteria or indicators to base their answers upon. Their answers – supplemented with desk research and our own experience/findings – form the basis for the findings in this paper. They have to some extent been generalised.

## Immediate, accumulated and delayed impacts

We shall begin with some observations about the process. When we said to interviewees that we were evaluating the period from the early 1990s to the present day, and asked people to identify the most impactful initiatives (and explain why), most 'first generation' interviewees, (those whose experiences stretched back to the beginning of the conflicts) identified the earliest initiatives as having the most impact. Only later would they consider the value of current-day initiatives. This is unsurprising. In the immediate aftermath of war (and indeed, in the period of escalation prior to the armed phase of the conflicts), everything was new, they were starting from zero, and there was a sense of real urgency and of possibility, too. This is in contrast to the current situation – despite there now being more experience, expertise, and numerous achievements to draw upon, there is less anticipation of making a real breakthrough. This is compounded by a sense of fatigue, tempered with a recognition of the need for a long-term approach and constant hard work. Some of the reflections were somewhat unquantifiable and impossible to prove, i.e., 'things would have been a lot worse if there had not been such initiatives'. Statements such as this one arguably demonstrate the impossibility, even futility of proving a precise correlation between the myriad initiatives over many years and specific results in the present day, especially when there are multiple external factors shaping the context.

Interviewees remembered the earliest initiatives as paving the way for subsequent initiatives, which otherwise might not have come about. Consequently, their impact accumulates year upon year. With each new achievement therefore, the baseline shifts, resulting in pressure to reach a new level of impact. This shift often occurs with little appreciation of just how hard it was to even build a foundation. This has been acutely felt by many civil activists in recent years as the space for civil society has been significantly squeezed. The input required to achieve the kind of results attained previously are often underestimated, while expectations have intensified. This is particularly poignant in the context of South Ossetia, where investment in the development of civil society was always less than in Abkhazia, and which was disproportionately impacted by periodic military escalations since the 1990s and up to 2008. As one Ossetian respondent noted, "There were achievements at every stage, but we kept being set back. How many times can we be expected to start from square one time and time again?"



Others reflected that it is impossible to know when a particular initiative could prove to have an impact, or indeed, to identify a point in an individual's personal development that could be described as an 'impact'. These processes take a long time to evolve, and need people to grow alongside them and take them further. This was a point noted by one respondent, who recalled that her first experience of facilitating a dialogue came seven years after her introduction as a participant to the process. Another interviewee related how, several years after a particular initiative had been implemented, one project participant said, "Now I understand why you did it this way and not that way." This could be both an indicator of a delayed impact, or an accumulated impact (the person in question continued to be actively engaged). However, it does mean that much of this gets lost in short-term project-based evaluation, when it cannot really be known whether a change in opinion will result in some action several years down the road. Similarly, it is hard to trace whether a particular outcome is the result of an earlier phase of an activity, possibly even one facilitated by a different organisation.

Indeed, a frustration that processes are stuck, and a feeling that more should have been achieved are both factors that have given rise to this study. It recognises the need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. It acknowledges that something different is required, but does not accept the false dichotomy between 'tried and tested' methods and 'innovation' that rewards 'quick impact' experimentation over expertise and hard work.

With these caveats, we structured the different types of impact according to an adaptation of Lederach's dimensions of personal, relational, institutional, and cultural changes. That said, these types of impact are clearly interrelated, and mutually influence one another:

- **Personal level transformation**
  - » Understanding of self
  - » Understanding of the other
  - » Breaking down enemy images/building empathy
  - » Shifting worldview
  - » Critical thinking
  - » Behaviours (personal/professional).
- **Relationships across divides**
  - » Trust and communication, including cooperative relationships (where trust facilitates action).
- **Policy level or practical impacts**
  - » Outcomes specifically related to dialogue processes
  - » Violence prevention/mitigation
  - » Human rights protection.
- **Societal level impacts**
  - » Civil society development
  - » Influencing discourse.

## Personal and individual level transformation

Impact on the personal level is perhaps the most profound type of impact. It is also the easiest to identify, and was conveyed by respondents with the most passion. Moreover, it is essential in order to achieve any wider impact on a structural or societal level. The level of impact on an individual participating in dialogue specifically depends on their personal experience to date. We heard both first- and second-generation dialogue participants talk about how dialogue reduced their level of anger or fear of the other side. However, they also described it as being an often painful, emotional process. Personal transformation was something which required time and could not be achieved in one meeting. In this respect, dialogue has in part played a therapeutic role, removing the emotional barriers for individual participants and paving the way for empathy and mutual understanding.

**“We’ve become less aggressive, more tolerant. Many of us have gone through processes and emerged the other side more respectful towards each other.”**

Georgian respondent

**“I still feel injustice, but I no longer have this anger which I had, because I started to understand the people who live there – their fears of the return of Georgians, and why.”**

Georgian respondent

The extent to which empathy and mutual understanding are extended varies, depending on the nature and content of the dialogue and its target participants. For younger participants who did not directly experience the war, or have no memory of co-existence, it is particularly valuable to break down stereotypes and reduce the enemy image.

**“I wasn’t impacted physically by the conflict, but it impacted me through the history of other people. [Through dialogue] I realised that not all Georgians are bad people.”**

Abkhaz respondent

While more than one Georgian spoke of their shock to find out the ‘reality’ of the other and of their resulting empathy on a cognitive level (‘If I was them, I might think in a similar way’), others spoke of a quite profound empathy on a deeper emotional level:

**“I hadn’t understood her negative experience and hadn’t spoken in empathy with her experience, but now I understand better. In such a process – you’ll never feel what others feel if you haven’t had the same experience.”**

Youth dialogue participant<sup>25</sup>

However, dialogue is not all about understanding the other side, or getting them to understand your position.

**“During dialogue we were all on an equal footing – this was a rare opportunity to study the difficult and complex political situation that we found ourselves in. It was an unusual method to overcome these boundaries – not just conflict boundaries, but in our own thinking as well.”**

Abkhaz respondent

The limitations of dialogue are stark, however. Trust between opposing sides is attained through each individual undertaking a long personal journey, and it does not easily transfer onto the societies they belong to. This is what makes attaining trust such a long, slow, and (in this context) expensive process. Time and again, we hear people say that there really is no substitute for face-to-face dialogue. However, other methods are also needed to tackle the level of distrust that societies have towards each other. The media, public discourse, and examples set by a society’s leadership are all important in this respect. Dialogue and direct communication between a handful of experts can help influence public discourse, and even the leadership under certain conditions, but we must be mindful that there are other forces at play that are more powerful than a small group of experts.

That said, dialogue participants have gone on to influence their own societies in particular ways, whether through their professional activity, civil society, politics, education, etc., thereby provoking others to think differently. Interviewees spoke about dialogue as a process of challenging/changing perceptions, leading to the development of a different worldview – not only in relation to the other side, but more generally in their critical approach towards their own society and global affairs. People spoke in terms of personal growth, and how participation in training sessions, seminars, and conferences had helped them understand themselves better. They also said that participation broadened their horizons and perspectives, and encouraged them to break out of the isolation of their societies. This was particularly true of people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

**“It’s the kind of experience I couldn’t have got any other way. I have a lot of acquaintances from different cultures, different conflict zones – it gives a foundational understanding of how to overcome problems within one’s own society.”**

Abkhaz respondent

International facilitators and organisations have provided opportunities to share experience and knowledge from other conflict contexts. Motivated by the possibility of social change, some of the first-generation peacebuilders from Abkhazia and South Ossetia led the development of civil society within their respective communities. Many of the projects which were initiated by the founders of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP) in Abkhazia have grown to become separate organisations and civic institutions. One Ossetian described their influence in the following terms:

“My life philosophy has changed, and I think I’ve influenced others: if someone who came to us subsequently became a stakeholder and did something different as a result, then yes, we can say we influenced people. Perhaps these people took on certain values and these values are reflected in their work. People took note of us, responded to us, and wrote articles praising and criticising us. That makes it a movement and shows its influence on society.”

Ossetian respondent

We shall explore the phenomenon of civil society further below. Many propose that the effectiveness of civil society organisations is what makes them come under so much pressure – it is simply not in the interests of those who benefit from the status quo to encourage an independent minded, active citizenship. The paradox is that with more success come fewer possibilities. Attaining the right balance between making an impact and doing no harm is a particularly pressing issue in relation to South Ossetia, though the same is becoming increasingly true for the Abkhaz context.

## Relational level transformation

“I don’t agree with these people, but I trust them.”

Abkhaz respondent

“I’m glad that there are some small circles of people who don’t look at everything through the prism of nationalism – this is an important outcome.”

Georgian respondent

The distinction between individual and relational levels of transformation is blurred. It is particularly important to bear in mind that the individual transformations described above are the result of inter-subjective processes, whereby an individual’s views of the other – and vice versa – have an effect on their own image and self-understanding. Developing relationships is a process of mutual recognition between individual subjects – something which is a basic psychological need – and has particular resonance in a context where the sides do not recognise each other politically. Whether these relationships are maintained, however, is a key issue, as is their ability (or otherwise) to act as conduits of information exchange between the societies. Also of importance is the ability of people to collaborate on influencing incremental change on issues that can reduce tensions and create positive dynamics of change.

Interviewees talked about how the opportunity to engage with one another has resulted in the creation of a group of people who today have ‘credit of trust’, i.e., they do not necessarily have to meet in person anymore to understand each other and to exchange information or analysis – it can now be done online. As one Georgian respondent noted, “It’s good that there are people in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i who know each other and know how to talk to each other. They don’t have much influence, but it’s better than nothing. And should there be a new escalation this human capital could be a very important resource.”

Most of the interviewees remain in touch to some degree with people they engaged with via dialogue initiatives. Contact may lapse from time to time, although it can – and does – resume thanks to the pervasiveness of social media. As a result, these relationships can be somewhat dormant, but are capable of being activated when need arises. First-generation civil society activists put particular value on the relationships fostered through the Caucasus Forum of NGOs.<sup>26</sup> The platform, which was facilitated by International Alert and existed between 1998–2005, brought together civil society actors and experts from the South and North Caucasus, Southern Russia, Moscow, and a number of former Soviet Republics. The project ended in part due to funding difficulties, in part due to the difficulty of facilitating such a broad and difficult conflict network after personnel changes at International Alert. Many interviewees expressed their regret over this. Nevertheless, several network relationships remain active, both on an individual level (one interviewee mentioned they had reactivated an old contact from the forum during the COVID-19 pandemic), and occasionally at a collective level. An example of this came in August 2008 when members of a network shared statements calling for an end to hostilities.

## Political and societal level

“It was clear that resolution didn’t depend on us (civil society) – there were more influential circles/groups that decided these issues. The idea of peaceful resolution was weak, and the nationalistic parties and special services were much more influential.”

Georgian respondent

Civil peacebuilding organisations, both local and international, face competing criticisms that they are either too politicised, or that they have insufficient impact on a political level. It is understood that the civic sector is not the one negotiating on any potential peace agreements, nor does it make policy that could bring about changes within their own societies. However, they can be a source of expertise and information for those who do, and in the contexts of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a significant number of prominent individuals have moved between civil society and their respective government authorities or political parties over the years. Influence therefore travels both ways. However, this movement is inhibited by a political culture in which civil society is perceived by a political elite as ‘opposition’ that wants power for itself. Many would criticise this political elite of being more concerned with its own position than with peaceful resolution.

Hindering factors are dealt with in the next chapter. Any achievements were incremental and the result of sustained engagement and perseverance on the part of different actors. We identified five categories in which results were attained:

1. The influence of civil society dialogue processes on policy
2. Preventing more serious violent escalations
3. Human rights and the humanitarian situation
4. Public and political discourse
5. Civil society development.

## 1. The influence of civil society dialogue processes on policy

“Personal interaction between politicians was especially important. These relations enable solutions to be found more quickly when issues arose. For example, a draft of an agreement on non-resumption was developed as a result. While it was never signed, the discourse that was created is very important to this day.”

Abkhaz participant in the Schlaining Process

Two notable dialogue processes that sought to engage officials in dialogue alongside civil society experts were the Schlaining process<sup>27</sup> (in the Georgian-Abkhaz context) and the process started in 2005 by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (in the South Ossetian context). The latter was designed along similar lines to Schlaining, in terms of its engagement of both politicians and civil experts from Georgia, and South and North Ossetia. It was to set the foundations for the later (post-2008) Point of View process developed by George Mason University.<sup>28</sup> These processes were highly appreciated by interviewees. The Schlaining process was described as ‘unique’ in terms of facilitation method and participant engagement, impressions of which remain to this day. Interviewees credited these processes with bringing about significant changes, starting with the fundamental development of ‘some politicians acknowledging that they had changed their minds’. Tangible changes in policy are not necessarily immediately visible, and a level of confidentiality regarding the details of what was discussed at meetings was maintained for reasons of sensitivity. Nevertheless, the ability for politicians to meet their opposing counterparts in a non-politicised context was extremely valued and could have had a significant impact had the political configurations been different.

In their articles about the process, two international facilitators reference the indirect way in which ideas that took shape through participation in the Schlaining process percolated into the official sphere, albeit somewhat altered in the process.<sup>29</sup> One significant example of this is the Georgian concept note on constitutional options penned by a group of Georgian experts on request of the National Security Council prior to the Rose Revolution in 2003. The concept ideas were tested with Abkhaz participants in a dialogue meeting, and with the Georgian public through media articles and interviews.<sup>30</sup> While the concept was not adopted by the Saakashvili Government, elements of it were identifiable in his March 2008 peace plan announced on the eve of the Bucharest NATO summit.

This partial, indirect impact also highlights a dilemma for civil processes when invited into the policy arena – to what extent do they want to have a direct influence (and accept any associated liability), and how willing are they to stand by and observe the distortion of ideas as they evolve through the policy development process? In the case of the Caucasus Business and Development Network, Georgian members were very pleased that economic cooperation became such a prominent part of Saakashvili’s 2010 ‘Engagement Strategy’. For the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, however, the reception was muted. The activities of the Caucasus Business and Development Network had been perceived as an apolitical civil process. Suddenly, it was aligned with the policy of one of the sides.<sup>31</sup>

In the South Ossetian context, by bringing experts together and opening communication channels, the Point of View process is credited with supporting officials and the co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) in their search for solutions on issues such as the release of life prisoners from Georgian prisons, and the repair of the Zonkari Dam.

The involvement of official international mediators in these processes (in an informal capacity) is also central to their success. It facilitates information sharing and engagement in official processes. This cooperation between civil society and official mediators has also been important given that each group has their own perspective and room for manoeuvre. As civil society was not represented at official talks, a number of civil processes took it upon themselves to organise conferences and round tables. These events, which were held in a number of European capitals, as well as in Washington, D.C. and other cities, were attended by international policy makers. The events facilitated the sharing of analysis, and were especially valued by Abkhaz participants, who otherwise have no representation in international institutions.

“They gave opportunities to participate in different international platforms and convey information that I want to communicate, i.e., not the opinion of Georgians or Georgian refugees, but mine. They allowed the whole of Abkhazia to be heard. It was possible to get that perspective on issues and problems across.”

Abkhaz respondent

## 2. Preventing more serious violent escalations

“We managed to stop many negative processes from developing, but we didn’t have the time or feel the need to record them. It was so obvious that we were working for peace. But now we find it’s necessary to prove it.”

Abkhaz respondent

The outbreak of hostilities in August 2008 was a catastrophe for international diplomacy and peacebuilding, and for the many victims of the war. While there is much analysis and investigation into how the events of 2008 came about,<sup>32</sup> prominent in our interviewees’ analysis was the failure of international institutions to prevent Saakashvili from launching an attack on Tskhinval/i on the night of 7 August. Some respondents, including some Georgians, blamed the US for their unconditional support in public for Saakashvili up to that point, arguing that it was an emboldening factor.

South Ossetian society completely revised its attitude towards international organisations in light of the OSCE’s perceived conduct. The organisation was accused of not being impartial and of ignoring the warning signals of an escalation in the conflict. The perceived behaviour of some OSCE staff during the bombardment of Tskhinval/i overnight 7-8 August 2008 also came under criticism. As interviewees pointed out, the 2008 escalation was predicted. Such predictions were also aired at events organised by international peacebuilding

organisations attended by representatives of NATO and other international institutions. One such example was an event co-organised by the University of California, Irvine and the Heinrich Boell Foundation in June 2007 on the prospect of Georgian entry into NATO.<sup>33</sup>

“We warned that it wouldn’t end well, and it transpired that everything said at that conference came to fruition. It was a bitter experience. For a long time, I thought, ‘What’s the point of experts and political scientists if after analysing the past, present and future, no-one uses the information or takes notice of it?’”

Abkhaz participant

However, it has also been noted that intense diplomatic activity during 2008 to reduce tensions in the Abkhaz context, urged on by such analyses and prognoses, was significant in shifting the potential theatre of war away from Abkhazia and onto South Ossetia. Had South Ossetian civil society been as strong as it was in Abkhazia, then perhaps war could have been averted in South Ossetia, too.<sup>34</sup> Abkhaz and Georgian civil society actors developed close ties, which at times of crisis could be leveraged to respond to and de-escalate a situation. Georgian experts pointed out that such ties with Ossetian civil society were weaker, despite there being cooperation on professional and individual levels. According to one Georgian respondent:

“The ability for Ossetians to visit Tbilisi freely prior to 2008, and their willingness to do so, sent the signal that everything was OK and that there was no need for extra efforts to forge communication and dialogue channels. This was in contrast to the Abkhaz context, where the international community did everything they could to encourage such dialogue, which in practice turned out to be a preventive mechanism.”

Georgian respondent

This is hard to prove but is a valid observation. Interviewees also cited other examples of how civil society responded to and found ways to prevent escalations in other contexts.

The Caucasus Forum was one such example. It initiated a number of joint investigation missions, including an Ossetian and an Armenian travelling together to Kodori Gorge in 2001<sup>35</sup> during an increase in tensions there, which according to one Abkhaz respondent did make a difference, saying the situation could have been a lot worse:

“The space for dialogue was there, and there were people on the other side who supported a peaceful resolution of the conflict and stood up for this publicly. This awareness of this position was very important. When the Gelayev events happened, a lot of dialogue participants signed a letter against this ‘adventure’, which was very important.”

Abkhaz respondent



Also, in relation to the Gal/i district during the August 2008 war and the situation on the Georgian–Abkhaz dividing line, civil society leaders claim they managed to influence events in such a way as to reduce the chances of a second front opening up.

### 3. Human rights and the humanitarian situation

Interestingly, one of the most valued confidence-building initiatives is the Georgian government’s health access programme, although the Abkhaz are keen to assert that this has no impact on the political aspirations of those individuals who travel to Georgia for medical treatment. Medical cooperation programmes and programmes to tackle HIV, hepatitis, drug harm, etc. are not only valued for their humanitarian and non-politicised nature, but also for the tangible benefits and professional exchange opportunities they bring. These programmes have, in part, received support (in the form of transport, accommodation arrangements for patients, etc.) from civil society organisations engaged in peace initiatives, and through the personal and professional contacts developed by individuals through such initiatives. Similarly, participation in the Caucasus Business and Development Network<sup>36</sup> (which emerged from the Caucasus Forum) was especially valued in the South Ossetian context. The practical support afforded by the network – including the provision of agricultural machinery – was highlighted in particular.

Working on human rights or addressing human security needs is important for confidence building, given that they are such sensitive topics. This is particularly true for Georgians in relation to the Gal/i and Akhagori/Leningor populations. For Abkhaz civil society, it was important to work across the whole of Abkhazia. Similarly, in order to achieve progress on Gal/i issues, local civil society relied on Sukhum/i organisations to lobby the authorities on their behalf. To some extent, peacebuilding organisations have also helped foster these internal relationships, particularly through building the skills of local civil society, thereby building confidence between Gal/i and Sukhum/i civil society and the local authorities.

“We managed to convince the (Abkhaz) authorities that we’re not the enemy. At first, they were wary that we were under some external control, but over time, and after many meetings, we developed an understanding that we want to resolve specific issues affecting the population, irrespective of nationality. They came to our events, listened to us, and there were good results, including in terms of raising local authorities’ attention to real issues experienced by the population on the ground. But the authorities change – new ones take over, and so on.”

Respondent from Gal/i

One major success that was widely identified was the appointment of a civil society figure to the Abkhaz ombudsperson’s office, along with the inclusion of severe criticism of Abkhaz policy towards the Gal/i district in their first report (which also covered women’s rights, accusations of torture and illegal detentions).<sup>37</sup> Both Sukhum/i-based and Gal/i-based interviewees identified this as the culmination of a years-long journey, and a direct result

of civil society peacebuilding which had been facilitated through international civil society organisations. The ombudsperson in question, Asida Shakryl, previously coordinated projects to support what was initially (in 2006) a network of public advice centres, which in its early stages received support from International Alert. It later continued in the form of the Human Rights Centre at the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes. However, the fact that this appointment as ombudsperson could be seen as marking a 'culmination' or 'result' of sorts should not preclude the many human rights achievements made along the way. Projects such as the public advice and human rights centres exerted a substantial and varied influence on civil, legal, and democratic issues, both at the individual and institutional level.

## 4. Public and political discourse

Civil peacebuilding initiatives did have an impact on public and political discourse, though perhaps not to the degree desired or necessary. The problem of public discourse and inadequacy of the peacebuilding sector to influence it is covered elsewhere in this report.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, some Georgian interviewees credited peace dialogue as facilitating the 'de tabooisation' of the Abkhaz theme within Georgian society. They also acknowledged that people engaged in civil peacebuilding initiatives play a role in shaping public discourse, not only via the media (participation in television interviews, etc.) and the publication of analytical articles, but also in facilitating the discussion on social media and interpreting events using their knowledge of the conflict context. In Abkhazia in particular, many of the veteran peacebuilding actors are also public-opinion shapers (at least, they were more regularly seen on public platforms, television, etc.). In general, journalists have been a key cohort of the dialogue community. They are aware of their wider influence, and of the importance of conflict sensitivity in reporting. They also know to resist bias and refrain from reinforcing negative narratives.

Dialogue participants noted the real value of publications produced through dialogue processes. These include analytical papers (such as International Alert's 'Dialogue through Research'<sup>39</sup> and 'Economy and Conflict', and publications produced as a result of the Point of View process), transcripts of dialogues themselves, such as the UCI process ('Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict'),<sup>40</sup> and thematic policy papers (such as those published by Conciliation Resources). They value the fact that a record has been made for institutional memory. International Alert's 'Dialogue through Research' was frequently referenced as a valuable Georgian-Abkhaz process, because even though the immediate policy impact of its publications might have been limited, these publications remain an important analytical resource and are used by university students and authorities even today. As one Abkhaz interviewee said, "However much they criticised us, the authorities used our analysis. Everyone read the analytical reports in detail, so what we did wasn't in vain."

One younger interviewee started to read the UCI transcripts as a result of our invitation to interview, having not been previously aware of them. They commented on how surprised they were by how the dialogues back in the early 2000s still resonate with the current situation, even with contextual changes.

These publications acted as a tool to stimulate public discussion, and there were numerous roundtables to disseminate and discuss the findings. In addition, though, the experts involved found the very process of analysis to be valuable. It forced them to explore issues in depth, and to carefully study public opinion and different aspects of the conflict. A number of experts interviewed suggested it was worth returning to these publications now, a decade on, to enhance today's analysis by reminding themselves of their perspective then.

Talking about 'Dialogue through Research', one Abkhaz interviewee said, "It was the only systemic analytical resource and attempt to develop themes and understand the positions of the sides. It was a form of public education – we broadened the framework, and the perceptions that young people had. We broadened their minds to make them less ideologised." Many interviewees spoke of the paucity of analysis and discussion today.

## 5. Civil society development

In all these examples, the role of civil society in public education, influencing, capacity building and delivering services has been central. It is fair to say that in Abkhazia in particular, this development of civil society has been largely fostered and supported by peacebuilding INGOs. This is partly because other civil society development programmes were not accessible to Abkhazia, but also in part because working through civil society was the only route open to building peace in a context where any intervention that could be perceived as 'institution strengthening' was resisted by the Georgian authorities and international donors.

In considering what Abkhazia could have been like without such support, one need only look to South Ossetia. Indeed, the difference between the two civil societies in terms of their dynamism is stark. The development of civil society in South Ossetia was initially fostered through Georgian NGOs, and later through regional network initiatives such as the Caucasus Forum.

**"There were a lot of progressive ideas that maybe we wouldn't have taken on if it hadn't been for that communication/interaction."**

Former Forum participant

**"In that context, the fact that this platform lasted several years, and that different layers of society, including journalists, the intelligentsia, politicians, civil society, etc. could speak their minds and exchange analysis and information which was not politicised or propagandised meant that we had a very dynamic tool to attempt to create a societal consciousness."**

Former Forum participant

The Caucasus Forum initiated their 'Forgotten Regions' initiative back in 2000, with the objective of developing civil society in non-recognised entities and conflict regions. Civil society actors from Georgia, Abkhazia and Russia provided training for civil activists

in those regions. It served as an example of the transfer of skills across the region and the creation of new opportunities for those in otherwise deprived regions. It was a time when new initiatives were being born, and founding civil institutions were developing – institutions which would go on to become a huge resource for the whole of society.

**“Most of our (CHP) initiatives became civic institutions. Sukhum Youth House is one such example. If any Sukhum person can articulate themselves well, you can tell that they passed through Sukhum Youth House.”**

Abkhaz respondent

While a number of initiatives were instigated post 2008 (the IKV PAX Christi-supported Georgian Ossetian Civil Forum, Berghof’s youth programme, International Alert’s teacher training, George Mason’s ‘Point of View’ process), and despite the fact that Ossetians participated in other regional programmes such as journalist training, women’s networks and Caucasus Business and Development Network, the increasing pressure on civil society actors and a shrinking space has resulted in most initiatives in South Ossetia being virtually squeezed out. This does not, however, mean they were unsuccessful against their own criteria. Should a time come when it is possible to do something, the human resources will be there.

Civil society initiatives targeting specific groups were also highly appreciated, in particular those helping to organise and represent displaced persons, and those targeting women and youth. While Georgian civil society had many more opportunities to develop compared to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian respondents highly valued the efforts of Conciliation Resources in relation to the development and strengthening of ‘Synergy’ – a network of organisations representing internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>41</sup> Established in 2000, respondents credited the work of the network with making IDPs more visible in public life. They also highlighted its ability to influence policy aiming to facilitate their integration into Georgian society, as well as to influence public discourse and attitudes towards the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

These direct quotes pertaining to the women’s movement and youth initiatives speak for themselves:

## **Women’s movement**

**“After 25 years we have a substantial network, contacts, and very responsible civic-minded people who have grown and understand that peace cannot be built in a day. They have done a huge amount of work, and have experienced numerous tragedies themselves. None of this could have happened as the result of one project. Now there is a solid foundation [of civil society].”**

Female activist

## Youth initiatives

“Many of the young people [who have engaged in projects] over the years have set up their own organisations, got good positions. Some have gone to study, and have received both local and international scholarships. People from Gal/i who were included in youth dialogue processes now form a central core of peacebuilding potential. And they make a contribution even if they are not in the civic sector.”

Gal/i civil society activist

Looking back over the years, it is clear (looking at the involvement of officials in the talks process, or the example of the ombudsman’s office) that official institutions are absolutely central to peace, regardless of whether or not they are recognised. While the approach of not directly supporting institutional development in Abkhazia or South Ossetia may have strengthened civil society in Abkhazia (South Ossetia being a different case), the question remains whether more could have been achieved sooner through institutional development, not only in terms of the authorities, but also education or health institutions.

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## Notes

25. In terms of transformative effects, several participants spoke about the profound impact of the Berghof Foundation’s ‘History Dialogues’ initiative. <https://berghof-foundation.org/work/projects/history-dialogue-in-georgia-and-abkhazia>
26. See Chapters 9–11 in ‘Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus: A Reflection on 15 Years of Conflict Transformation Initiatives’, International Alert, 2012
27. See Chapters 3–5 in ‘Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus: A Reflection on 15 Years of Conflict Transformation Initiatives’, Jonathan Cohen et.al., International Alert, 2012; and ‘A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian–Abkhazian Dialogue Process’, Wolleh, 2006. Available at <https://core.ac.uk/display/71732952>
28. However, direct engagement by representatives of the South Ossetian authorities in Point of View meetings declined after the initial meetings. <http://pointofviewdialogue.com/en/>
29. Jonathan Cohen and Oliver Wolleh in respective chapters listed previously.
30. Now available as an archive: Tsikhistavi-Khutsishvili, N. (ed.), 2014. Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Historical Archive of Georgia, International Center on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN). [http://iccn.ge/files/concept\\_abkhazia\\_in\\_georgia\\_state\\_2004\\_eng.pdf](http://iccn.ge/files/concept_abkhazia_in_georgia_state_2004_eng.pdf)
31. Pentikainen and Klein reflect in their article that ‘while the inclusion of economic approaches in the Georgian government’s strategy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be a positive move, in reality it has posed a serious challenge for our attempts to ‘depoliticise’ economic cooperation, as the Georgian strategy has been perceived by the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians as little more than a public relations exercise.’ Ch. 12, p.263, International Alert 2012 *ibid*.
32. Primarily, we refer to the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, led by Heidi Tagliavini, the report of which was published in September 2009. [https://www.mpil.de/en/pub/publications/archive/independent\\_international\\_fact.cfm](https://www.mpil.de/en/pub/publications/archive/independent_international_fact.cfm)
33. [https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/files/progs/pdfs/nato\\_report.pdf](https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/files/progs/pdfs/nato_report.pdf)
34. See Parastaev in ‘Mediation and dialogue in the South Caucasus’ International Alert, 2012, p. 219

35. [http://www.c4ss.net/website/Web\\_site/RESEARCH/Kodory\\_Gorge\\_Monitoring.pdf](http://www.c4ss.net/website/Web_site/RESEARCH/Kodory_Gorge_Monitoring.pdf)
36. See Chapters 12–13 in 'Mediation and dialogue in the South Caucasus' International Alert, 2012
37. Annual report of the Human Rights Commissioner of the Republic of Abkhazia, 2018–2019 (Ежегодный доклад о деятельности Уполномоченного по правам человека в Республике Абхазия за 2018–2019 гг.) June 2020. Available at <https://ombudsmanra.org/upload/iblock/158/1588f1a7fe9ccbb552c204a002daccb2.pdf>
38. In the section 'Hindering factors (contextual)'.  
Also see <https://www.international-alert.org/projects/dialogue-through-research>
39. The 'Dialogue through Research' process ran between 2008 - 2014, producing several publications which explored issues of security guarantees, international engagement in Abkhazia, the politics of non-recognition, de-isolation and the North Caucasian factor in the conflict dynamics. The last main publication in 2013 was an attempt to look forward to 2020. The process continued in more virtual format thereafter, producing shorter on-line articles presenting different perspectives on topical issues as they arose. See the entry in the accompanying catalogue.  
The 'Economy and Conflict' process brought together Georgian, Abkhaz and international legal, political, economic and business experts and officials to study the issue of regulating trans-Ingur/i economic relations in the absence of a political agreement, producing several publications. They also looked at wider regional transport networks in this regards.  
See <https://www.international-alert.org/where-we-work/caucasus/regional-economy>
40. Volumes 1–15 available at [https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb\\_cs\\_abkhaz\\_pub.php](https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.php)
41. <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/the-synergy-network/?location=georgia&theme>

# Analysis of facilitating and hindering factors

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## Success factors

**An analysis of the interviews reveals that the most successful initiatives identified by the interviewees displayed many or most of the following characteristics:**

### **Cooperation and joint analysis**

They were developed in cooperation between local civil society experts, international mediators and the authorities, and were the result of lengthy discussions, joint analysis and efforts to identify specific actions needed to address a specific problem.

### **Facilitating jointly**

They were facilitated jointly by the parties and international mediators, thereby creating a sense of teamwork and ownership of the process, which in turn gave a sense of responsibility.

### **Social capital**

Those involved from within the societies had initiated their work on conflict prevention and mitigation even before the outbreak of hostilities (as well as during). This meant they could draw upon a reserve of social capital within their societies.

### **International mediator's social capital**

The international mediator also had a reserve of social capital. All interviewees who were engaged in Georgian-Abkhaz processes since the '90s noted that it would be difficult to imagine how a civil dialogue process could have started if it was not for Paula Garb. Her academic background, having already published two ethnographic books on Abkhazia, inspired trust initially on the Abkhaz side. In addition, her personal qualities helped in establishing dialogue with the Georgians. Paula Garb subsequently helped other organisations such as International Alert, Conciliation Resources, etc. to make their first steps in building their dialogue processes.

### **Trust between the mediator and the parties**

Trust between the mediator and the parties, or at least trust from one side or a sincere and observable desire to build trust. In the Caucasus context, politeness, hospitality and traditional tactfulness towards strangers is very often perceived as trust. Mediators should be sensitive to this to avoid making the assumption that trust has been gained. Indeed, constant vigilance towards one's own partiality/impartiality is required. A willingness to acknowledge one's mistakes is also instrumental in this respect. One example given was of International Alert's first report on Georgia in 1992, which was acknowledged to be inaccurate and lacking an Abkhaz perspective. After receiving critical feedback, International Alert issued an apology, which may have resulted in earning some capital. As well as an apology, Alert sent a different staff member to the region – Jonathan Cohen (later one of the founders of Conciliation Resources). Cohen was able to build trust and re-establish the organisation's reputation.

### **Openness and transparency**

Openness and transparency in how the mediators communicated. This helped to avoid different interpretations by the parties. The parties often 'check' the mediator and discuss among themselves what was said to whom. This is a constant process of 'testing'.



Passing this test is necessary to be able to gain the requisite level of trust to be able to pose challenging or sensitive questions, which international civil society organisations often find difficult, either lacking expertise or authority to do so. This can result in tacit agreements between the facilitator and local actors to not step outside each other's comfort zone, which in turn reflects on the quality and effectiveness of their work.

### **Humanising the process**

An ability to humanise the process and minimise bureaucracy. The most highly valued mediators were those who found a way to go around the limitations of their own bureaucracies, putting the needs of the people, the process, and the process' goals first.

### **Respect**

Respect for those with whom one is engaging, which is extended equally to everyone. This sounds quite fundamental, and should be obvious to all, but is worth noting, as interviewees proffered a sufficient number of disappointing examples to the contrary to make it necessary to state.

### **Emotional intelligence**

Emotional intelligence among facilitators and mediators, and the ability to put oneself in the position of others – to relate to the participants/partners as human beings, and not just as sides to a conflict.

### **Education and experience**

Relevant education and experience in the humanitarian and peacebuilding sphere on the part of facilitators and mediators. Some criticised the tendency to hire marketing or technology professionals in facilitator roles. That is not to deny the role that such professions have to play, but rather to recognise that facilitation skills are not generally prioritised in their positions.

Taking all of the above into consideration, it is clear that the role of individuals is of paramount importance, as are their values and qualities. These include trust, mutual respect, interpersonal and professional skills, and experience. Trust takes years to build, especially in contexts where the parties are physically divided, face to face interaction is sporadic, and the situation is unpredictable. Developing trust is already a major achievement in itself. However, this occurs on a personal level, and does not automatically transfer to the societies.

**Dialogue participants who are willing to raise uncomfortable issues and taboos in their own societies are better placed to challenge the other side – and to challenge one another to reflect upon and rethink their own opinions.**

Individuals – both mediators/facilitators and participants – can be pivotal in keeping processes dynamic and moving forward. Interviewees shared stories of breakthrough moments in dialogue meetings which resulted from a combination of personality and emotion from within the dialogue group and sensitive, emotionally intelligent facilitation on the part of the mediator. One breakthrough emerged from a heated argument which could have otherwise resulted in a breakdown of the process. The message was that mediators should not be afraid of heated discussions since, if handled well, they can be the basis on which trust is built within the group. Dialogue participants who are willing to raise

uncomfortable issues and taboos in their own societies are better placed to challenge the other side – and to challenge one another to reflect upon and rethink their own opinions.

This above assessment by local civil peace actors is based on considerable first-hand experience. Unfortunately, it was also noted that ‘Many international organisations did not take root. They came, did a project and disappeared’. Many of the reasons for this failure are the mirror opposite to the aforementioned success criteria. Many failed to build trust, they turned up with their own agenda, and imposed their own point of view in terms of process, project design, participation, etc. Some failed the test of not demonstrating the transparency, values, qualities, commitment or motivation expected by local activists. It is especially difficult for organisations with a high level of rotation, and for new individuals joining an organisation, given that they cannot rely on their predecessors’ social capital, and have to earn it for themselves. This high rotation of international organisations was also a source of deep frustration for local civil actors, and contributed to a feeling that, in the words of one respondent, “We are stuck in the same place and there is no institutional memory. What seems new to a new staff member might be something we did a long time ago, but they report on it as though it’s something new, and we just sigh quietly.”

Other factors contributing to the success of initiatives were more about the format and publicity/confidentiality of processes.

### **Bilateral vs. regional formats**

There has been much discussion on the relative merits of bilateral and multilateral formats. Interviewees who participated in both at different times draw the conclusion that a combination is optimal. Each format has its own strengths and limitations, and in combination can complement each other. Seeking the optimal format is part of the facilitation process, and is key to ensuring that the relevant parties are engaged in the right combination.

The **bilateral format** is considered to be more beneficial for focusing on specific problems concerning the parties. It dispenses with the distraction of involving others who may be less directly involved who have other interests. However, bilateral participants (in particular from Abkhazia and South Ossetia) come under political and societal pressure, as they are more exposed to accusations of ‘negotiating with the enemy’.

**Multilateral processes** enable experience to be shared, and offer the ability to study one’s own situation through examining another. This also helps to break down the sense of uniqueness that is often present in conflict situations, and which can otherwise inhibit the search for solutions. Multilateral processes can facilitate analyses of both internal and external dynamics that impact on the conflict context. They can establish solidaristic networks that are based on identities other than ‘party to conflict’, such as professional identities, regional identities, etc. This is especially relevant for Caucasus regional formats. They can bring conflicting sides together within a shared cultural/regional identity, who can then respond to escalations in each other’s contexts. This can help amplify voices calling for peace which might otherwise get lost. Multilateral formats offer a level of security and freedom to manoeuvre for participants without the risk of them being labelled traitors and accused of undermining national interests.

The top three processes from the 1990/2000s mentioned by most interviewees (by some margin) were the two bilateral Georgian–Abkhaz dialogue processes developed by the University of California, Irvine, the Schlaining Process (Berghof/CR) and the multilateral Caucasus Forum facilitated by International Alert. The Caucasus Forum had inclusivity as a core principle, and brought people together regardless of their status (whether recognised or not), with equal rights to participate. Interviewees from all three communities recognised the importance and value of different forms of cooperation (such as economic and cultural cooperation) without touching on issues of political status, and maintained that this resource should be used. As one Georgian respondent noted, “We ran away from each other, but stayed in the same places – it turned out you can’t get far.”

### Public vs. confidential processes

Public vs. confidential processes also have their relative strengths and weaknesses. Different processes operate according to different levels of transparency and public outreach. Analysing interviews, it appears that while confidential projects may have had a high impact on participants, they had little broader impact on society. A high level of trust that the content of the discussion will not be leaked allows for more open discussion. Conversely, participants of more public oriented initiatives are more concerned with how they might be perceived and interpreted within their own societies, and less sensitive to the other side. On balance, we identify lack of transparency as a key hindering factor to greater societal transformation (see next section).

## Hindering (f)actors (operational)

### Civil peacebuilding – areas for improvement

Below are outlined the hindering factors which are related mainly to the implementation and operational aspects of dialogue and conflict transformation initiatives by local and international civil society actors, donors, and mediators. We deal with contextual factors that hinder such processes in a later section. Naturally, there is some overlap, as implementation and operation are influenced by context, such as the situation an actor is trying to influence and the space the context allows to pursue this.

**Shrinking space for civil peacebuilding.** Civil peace actors had a lot of support from both society and the authorities in the beginning. Indeed, they lead the way in the immediate post-war period. However, a combination of factors has eroded the motivation to engage in this type of activity. This is true among both first-generation peace actors, and also members of the younger generation (who are key to renewing the ranks). The passage of time, along with unmet inflated expectations of what could be achieved and increasing political pressure on civil society (in particular in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) have all played a role in wearing motivation. In Abkhazia, this pressure started when civil society started to be critical in relation to certain policies or actions of the authorities which were unrelated to the conflict. At that point, civil society started to be perceived as ‘opposition’, and their engagement in dialogue initiatives was used against them. Such unfounded accusations of being ‘pro-Georgian’ became a tool to manipulate public perceptions of civil society’s activities, and later became a tool in election campaigning.

In South Ossetia the situation is somewhat different. Civil society was never particularly critical towards the authorities. Nevertheless, similar rhetoric was used against it, as in Abkhazia, and the authorities were successful in compromising their public image. Internal division within the respective civil societies has also eroded its image. This division has often resulted from competition for resources, rather than genuine ideological differences.

It is important to note that Russia's policy regarding its own civil society reflects directly on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There is an expectation on the Russian part that the Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities will follow their example. In South Ossetia they have done so more resolutely than in Abkhazia.

**Transparency.** All sides expressed the view that both civil and official dialogue processes are too closed and insufficiently transparent to society. If previously, dialogue participants from Abkhazia gave interviews and appeared on television upon returning from dialogue meetings, over time this started to change. Civil society representatives started to come under both direct and indirect pressure, with their meetings with Georgian civil society experts used as a pretext. The aim was to discredit civil society leaders engaged in internal political activity, but it had other effects too. This political pressure, combined with internal competition within civil society, has pushed initiatives underground to such an extent that even within civil society there is little sharing. As a result, mistrust towards such projects only increases, thereby minimising their potential positive impact on wider society.

This lack of transparency leaves the door open to conspiracy and accusation that those who engage in dialogue are potentially 'betraying our interests'.

This lack of transparency leaves the door open to conspiracy and accusation that those who engage in dialogue are potentially 'betraying our interests'. Often no distinction is made in the public imagination between different formats and types of initiatives (dialogue, training, seminars, conferences). The different motivations of participants are also often not fully considered, meaning that there is little appreciation of what these different initiatives can offer the societies more broadly. Interviewees explained that their reticence to publicise their activities was to avoid coming under attack, as space has shrunk for such initiatives. However, they also reflected that they had missed an opportunity earlier on to engage in more proactive public relations or public outreach in order to explain their purpose and achievements to the wider public. This missed opportunity was down to a combination of not having had the time, not thinking it was necessary, or through modesty. They had not anticipated the extent to which their motivations could be called under question. As one respondent noted, "We thought it was obvious that what we were trying to achieve was in the public interest."

**For the younger generation,** peacebuilding is not seen as a viable career, either in terms of earnings or prestige. Civil peacebuilding emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to a complex reality, and the first activists were not taught but learnt by doing. They have passed on their learning and shared a range of knowledge and skills with the younger generation in the hope that they will emulate their example. However, few go on to become active in peacebuilding. Members of the younger generation who do engage tended to be motivated by a combination of personal

and professional interest. A large proportion of young Georgians entering the peacebuilding field have, for example, a refugee/IDP background, and are looking to improve their understanding. Alternatively, their professional or academic background led them in this direction. For young people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, participating in peacebuilding initiatives is often the only way to get an informal education, develop skills and have opportunities to travel and broaden their horizons. This in itself is a source of contention and cynicism towards what some have called 'enforced peacebuilding'. Some respondents questioned the ethics of the Western international community, which have only afforded development and travel opportunities to young people within a peacebuilding framework or which have otherwise made their support conditional. This critique was made less towards international peacebuilding organisations than it was to other organisations who do not specialise in conflict and therefore they do not consider working in those regions (or donors do not support them to do so).

**There is a need to reach beyond the stereotypes** and better articulate (both within the sector and more broadly in the societies) what peacebuilding and conflict transformation mean, and what their goals, methods, and benefits to society are. The current lack of understanding is due to a number of factors. These are compounded by a political prohibition on 'consorting with the enemy' and cynical attitudes towards double standards and doublespeak to make certain objectives fit in with donor language/priorities. But there is also a lack of conceptual clarity among many so-called peacebuilders themselves. Some civil society actors poorly articulate their activities; quite a few revealed somewhat naïve motivations and expectations, while others spoke in stereotypical tropes. Without objectively reflecting upon and analysing the path travelled, it is very difficult to identify constructive ways forward, both for individuals and for society more broadly. The section on contextual limitations highlights some priority areas that have been insufficiently addressed from a peacebuilding perspective. A few reasons for this are also identified in the section on international donors below.

There is an absence of **institutional memory** of the conflicts and efforts to resolve them and build peace. There are traces of efforts fragmented across various publications, but even then they exist only in part, and are held in the minds and memories of just a small number of regional and international experts.

Similarly, there is no institutional record of **peacebuilding impact**. No-one in local or international civil society has properly taken on this task, so societies are unaware. Those who hold this memory tend to be more strategic in their approach, with their activities based on accumulated experience, knowledge and lessons learned, as well as established relationships and trust. Those who have little knowledge of what came before are disadvantaged in this respect, and this applies both to local civil society as well as international organisations. In the process of conducting interviews for this study, we encountered several cases where people could either not recall something, or discovered something they had previously been unaware of (such as the instance of a young respondent discovering the UCI's 'Aspects' series of dialogue transcripts for the first time and deciding to read it). There is a tension between 'innovation' and continuing long-term support for tried and tested methods. New people are good at presenting their work as innovative, because that is how it seems to them. Donors sometimes buy into this because they also lack institutional memory.

**The human dimension.** Words such as suffering, honour, hope, reliability, goodness, love for one's neighbour, etc. have disappeared from the language of conflict and peace. Conflict is treated in business terms, with the language of profit and loss taking precedent over human factors, relationships, emotions, and perceptions. The result is a prevalence of more technical models and approaches towards working with conflict, rather than those that work on human nature on a deep transformational level.

The level of vulnerability in general is very high both in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But the **Akhalgori/Leningor and Gal/i districts** are particularly vulnerable. This is acknowledged, but little is being done to reduce this vulnerability, and often the problems faced by these particular communities are discussed without their participation.

## International mediators/donors

### Mediators and facilitators – official and unofficial

**All sides initially had inflated expectations** of the West and of international NGOs which were not met to different degrees. In South Ossetia, attitudes towards international organisations have been directly shaped by the perceived behaviour of the OSCE in 2008 and the reaction of the global community to that conflict. These were reinforced by propaganda (local and Russian) about the dangers of the West. Attitudes towards the Geneva International Discussions vary and depend on the extent to which a person is actually informed about the process, their attitude towards the conflict, and their expectations of the process – factors which themselves vary across different social and age groups. Most Georgian experts interviewed were unsatisfied with the process, but recognise the need for such a platform. Abkhaz and South Ossetians stated that they have no expectations in terms of political decisions from the process and therefore many have little interest in them.

**All sides accuse each other of double standards** in relation to their treatment of different categories/groups of people as 'more' or 'less deserving' victims. It is worth examining the phenomenon of the 'identified' victim versus the 'statistical' victims, and how both on an individual level and societal level we assign value to and empathise with human beings whom we know or identify with more than those who are a mere 'unknown statistic'. For example, a double standard on the part of Georgia and the West was observed in the failure of both to condemn the murder through torture of an ethnic Ossetian in South Ossetia, while deaths of ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia were met with major public and diplomatic outcries.<sup>42</sup> This has only served to reinforce the feeling in South Ossetia after 2008 that the world is not interested in their suffering and that their lives are not valued in the same way that Georgian lives are.

However, in discussion with Georgian and international interviewees, it became clear that the absence of a reaction does not mean that the tragedy of such a brutal death is being ignored, nor does it signify an absence of sympathy for the family and their search for justice. On the contrary, Georgians are concerned that any expression of

sympathy or condemnation on their part could be politicised in South Ossetia, treated as 'third party influence', and used against the family and their supporters.

The absence of channels of communication gives rise to deep misunderstandings on many levels, resulting in false interpretations based on negative past experience.

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**The element of trust.** As already outlined, it was clear from the interviews that trusting relationships between local actors and international institutions/organisations are built through personal contacts with individual representative of those organisations. The interpersonal qualities of those individuals, their communication skills, empathy, impartiality, knowledge of and interest in the context, etc. define all professional interactions and further cooperation. The element of trust is key. International organisations should take these factors into consideration when hiring staff, as the same holds true even for organisations with a long track record of partnership.

It is clear that sometimes relationships are often less than optimal, and it is easy for misunderstandings to arise through cultural factors. For example, normal, friendly, courteous relations between individuals from across the divide is often understood to be one of the indicators of peace, or the absence of a difference of opinion. However, this is often mere politeness, a façade, or a cultural trait. It can also be rare for local actors to give honest feedback to international facilitators in terms of critical observations about their behaviour, or about which direction a process is going in. This is in part because of the power imbalance (the facilitator is often the donor) but also a cultural reticence. This is especially true if the local actors have good personal relationships with the facilitators, and recognise that there is value to the process (even with unacknowledged shortcomings). In these instances, it can become hard to give constructive feedback. This creates a public image of cooperation that may not match the reality. For example, criticism towards a particular project from within a civil society may be valid, and something which an actor agrees with; however, it can be hard to acknowledge publicly given the web of relationships and also the competition within civil society.

Among Georgian experts, there was a feeling **that the situation in the international field was stagnating**. They believed this was down to the fact that the conflicts were becoming less of a priority in the international community, that funding was limited, and that there are barriers to new organisations (and thus new ideas) entering the field. As one recent study concludes, "Conflict transformation organisations have been locked in a comfort zone of sorts, submitting to a bureaucratic mechanism which, in turn, prevents new ideas from coming to the fore."<sup>43</sup> However, this view was based on an assumption that new ideas are needed, and on an expectation that they would come from outside. Yet ideas from outside are often met with resistance by one or more sides if they do not take into consideration the whole institutional baggage of previous experience, or are not based on an in-depth analysis of the conflict.

## International donors

**There is often a conflict between the expectations of donors, international facilitators, INGOs and local civil society actors,** and each have their own priorities and understanding of the situation. The INGOs often mediate/bridge the gap between local civil society and donors. All NGOs adapt their programmes to donors' priorities, and many feel this can sometimes result in less-than-effective outcomes. For example, some NGOs talk about long and difficult conversations with donors, trying to get them to understand why their approach is important and relevant. While this is happening, they observe other organisations being granted what they perceive to be non-strategic 'projects for projects' sake' – a project designed to win the donor's approval, but which is either unstrategic or poorly implemented. It is possible that some of these attitudes are due to competition in the sector and lack of information sharing within it. Nevertheless, such situations and attitudes are sufficiently widespread to merit highlighting.

It should however be noted that many of the complaints regarding donors are contradictory, but this does not necessarily mean they are unfounded. Some complained that donors had their 'favourites'<sup>44</sup> while others conversely complained that non specialist organisations with no track record in a specific type of work (e.g. gender) were awarded contracts, thus undermining the sustainability of those with intimate knowledge of the field. We heard of donors dismissing disturbing information about the context from those with first hand knowledge because they had not heard it from their regular sources. Organisations also criticised donors for following particular trends, or for being obsessed with 'innovation' at the expense of tried and tested methods developed over a long time. In relation to gender, our own observation is that there is a lack of conceptual clarity between gender as an analytical tool and women and girls as a target group. This encourages a 'tick box' approach in donor application forms and reporting formats.

**Donor-funded projects are becoming increasingly bureaucratic** in terms of financial administration, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting requirements. This has been an unintended consequence of efforts to improve strategy, allocation of funds and value for money (thereby achieving greater impact). However, these efforts have also led to a 'projectisation' of processes or a 'technical' approach to peacebuilding. Such an approach rewards more visible activity. Consequently, human resources are diverted towards administration, and away from less-visible but nevertheless crucial work. This includes the human-resource intensive and highly sensitive relational, empathic and intellectual work required to facilitate long and difficult societal transformational processes. Such expertise has become less valued. Some have put this down to an understanding in peacebuilding circles that while peace is hard to achieve and takes a long time, there is still a desire to build careers quickly and easily.

Some feel that the ability to speak the language of the donor (both in the literal sense and in terms of terminology), produce attractive communication materials, and publish well written reports get rewarded over long-earned expertise.

Apart from being a source of stress, as well as a diversion away from what local organisations (and some INGOs) perceive as 'real work', this tendency has given rise to a cynical assessment



by some that donors and INGOs are creating work for themselves and are content for the conflicts to continue in their current form, as they provide lucrative careers. Many local experts have left NGOs for various reasons, including frustration, unmet inflated expectations and political pressure. Some of aforementioned issues related to donor funding have also been a contributing factor. Some who remain feel a unique sense of responsibility, while others continue through inertia or lack of other opportunities. Despite the numerous difficulties however, the people who do remain are the most valuable actors in this field, and this human resource should be used as purposefully and efficiently as possible.

The work of civil society organisations is stressful, unpredictable and high- pressure, and donors and international partners should together find ways to avoid further contributing towards this. They should also provide protection and support (including mental-health support), and take care of people's wellbeing. This is particularly applicable to those who take risks by raising sensitive issues in public that go against mainstream views when others stay silent. Such care and recognition of their work would prevent people from burning out and dropping out. It would also make their work more effective, and encourage new people to engage in the sector.

## Hindering factors (contextual)

We have structured the contextual limitations in terms of their psychological, societal and political dimensions, which are interrelated and reflect Lederach's four dimensions of personal, relational, structural and cultural transformation. In this respect, we will start with the political sphere, specifically geo-political dynamics, their impact on internal politics, and their subsequent influence on public discourse, which in turn exerts influence on a socio psychological level.

On the socio-psychological level we identify three major themes which have not been dealt with sufficiently by the peacebuilding community – trauma, insecurity and justice. These are not so much missed opportunities as omissions. These issues feed conflict dynamics, and without addressing them, conflicts cannot be transformed and put on a positive trajectory.

Related issues (and often manifestations of trauma themselves) include nationalism, heroisation, the role of education in creating or shifting worldviews, and the Soviet legacy and influence in this respect. Finally, we consider all of these issues (the political, societal, and psychological impact) on an intergenerational level and their implications for moving forward.

- **Part 1:** Geopolitics, internal politics and public discourse
- **Part 2:** Insecurity, trauma, inequality and injustice
- **Part 3:** Nationalism as a source and driver of conflict
- **Part 4:** Education and intergenerational issues.

## Part 1: Geopolitics, internal politics and public discourse

### Geopolitics

Besides the military, economic and legal manifestations of geopolitics, tensions between Russia and the West produce discourses and stereotypes that influence all sides' expectations of each other. This accordingly has an impact on each side's interpretive frameworks and actions.

Abkhaz and Ossetian experts noted that the bias which they always felt to some extent from Western officials and facilitators increased post 2014. This has especially been the case since new rotations of diplomats, some of whom have tended to see the conflicts through the prism of confrontation with Russia. This inhibits trust in the West as intermediaries, and therefore inhibits the prospect of the West being able to build confidence between the Abkhaz, South Ossetians and Georgians, as the Abkhaz and Ossetians are not treated as equal parties.

According to some Georgian experts, the West's support for Georgia may bring benefits, but is also damaging. There were some reflections of how the lack of public criticism by the West towards Saakashvili was an emboldening factor which influenced specific actions and courses of events, particularly in 2008. However, more generally, Western partiality has discouraged Georgians from engaging in self-critical reflection in relation to the conflicts. Reductionism of the conflicts in the Georgian public consciousness obscures objective assessments about their own position. This in turn prevents them from being able to understand the subjective experience of the Abkhaz and Ossetians.

The lack of equality, and the material and psychological effects of everyday acts of non-recognition, such as 'the humiliating refusal of the other side to even call you by your name' all serve to reduce the motivation of the parties to engage.

The Georgian framing of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as occupied territories plays a very negative role. What for Georgians is an occupying force is a matter of basic physical security for the Abkhaz and Ossetians. Georgia's refusal to sign an agreement on the non use of force is perceived by the Abkhaz and South Ossetians as a refusal to recognise their basic needs. In addition, the law on occupied territories is widely perceived as counterproductive by keeping South Ossetia and Abkhazia in isolation, thereby increasing their reliance on Russia. The lack of equality, and the material and psychological effects of everyday acts of non-recognition, such as 'the humiliating refusal of the other side to even call you by your name' all serve to reduce the motivation of the parties to engage.

Some Georgians described such political stances as being Georgia's 'comfort zone', and a way for the side to justify their victim status, absolving themselves of any responsibility for the conflicts in the first place, or of any efforts to resolve them. However, that said, the Russia factor is very real, and untangling the web of culpability and responsibility is a near-impossible conundrum. Others acknowledged that any Georgian politician that was serious about making progress in Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian relations has to

be prepared to lose their seat at the next elections. By this they implied that significant concessions would be needed, which would be fiercely resisted by certain segments of the political class, including those wielding substantial influence over public opinion. The societies are not prepared for concessions, and the conflicts have become a tool in internal political struggles (this is the also the case in Abkhazia, although less so in South Ossetia).

The longer time goes on, the more alienated the societies embroiled in conflict become. What is possible today may no longer be possible in five years' time. And this tendency has been present since the 1990s. Interviewees reflected with regret on missed opportunities before 2008 – in particular how Georgia was always behind the curve with regard to offering the Abkhaz terms which might have been accepted at an earlier stage, or accepting terms from the Abkhaz side which were now no longer on the table. None of the sides (including the international facilitators) reacted in a timely manner to opportunities which were on the agenda and were realistic to implement.

## Internal politics

**“It’s hard to find a bigger enemy for peacebuilding than elections.”**

Abkhaz respondent

**“The political elite benefit from escalation. Without tension they have no tools.”**

Georgian respondent

The political culture in all three elites was identified as an obstacle. Some questioned whether there was any interest to resolve the conflicts at all, given the influence of business and lobby group interests among the political elite's ranks. The motivation of politicians is to retain power, to strengthen their popular base, to be accountable to their backers, and to minimise any major upheavals that might result in their losing power. The temporal horizons for policy making are built around electoral cycles. This leads to short-term planning, and makes any serious attempts to resolve the conflicts impossible. Electoral cycles do not coincide, so the windows of opportunity are very short. For example, the timing of the newly elected Abkhaz administration's outreach to Georgia in March 2020 (which suggested a willingness to engage in bilateral talks) was not optimal, given the forthcoming Georgian elections in October 2020.

Indeed, peacebuilding has become a hostage to elections, with all sides noting that their respective politicians had learned to use the conflicts as a political resource to rally voters by playing on emotional nationalist sentiments. However, messages directed to internal audiences are heard across the divide. With each new electoral cycle, the sides become more and more alienated. At the same time, they are being fed zero-sum options. In the absence of long-termism, deep analysis and honest public debate, missed opportunities are only acknowledged as such when they are no longer an option.

Civil society that works on the conflicts is drawn into this political quagmire. Prior to the 2004 presidential elections in Abkhazia there was a high level of consensus and trust towards civil society actors engaging on the conflicts in international

fora. However, the election in question, which came after the Rose Revolution in Georgia, saw the introduction of more aggressive political technology by one of the candidates, who used Moscow-based political strategists. One such method was the manipulative concept of an 'internal enemy' – a label which could be extended to people who engage with Georgians or who have Georgian relatives, for example.

There is a tendency in Abkhazia and South Ossetia for society to mistrust NGOs for fear of their work potentially leading to a capitulation, or to a forced 'reconciliation with the enemy'. The argument could be made that NGOs are one of the most patriotic groups in society. After all, they work for the benefit of society, rather than for political power or personal gain. Nevertheless, the articulation of such fears and the traction that they gain in society is an indicator that they are real, however suppressed they may be.

## Public discourse

**“Many people in private have more conciliatory or pragmatic attitudes, but public narratives inhibit people from speaking up.”**

Abkhaz respondent

In Georgia, the conflicts do not figure prominently in daily discourse. Abkhaz- or South Ossetian-related issues only tend to receive news coverage around election times, or when an event happens. Examples include 'borderisation'<sup>45</sup> on the South Ossetian/Georgian boundary, or arrests of Georgian villagers by the South Ossetian authorities. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there is practically no coverage at all. According to one Ossetian respondent, "Georgia has disappeared from the media space. We don't know anything about what's going on there." An Abkhaz respondent also noted that, "We rarely get asked for interviews anymore." Nevertheless, the nature of the political discourse, influenced by geopolitics and internal political struggles, is a serious hindrance to meaningful discussion on constructive ways forward. All three societies understand that there is some element of façade in their public rhetoric on the conflicts. And there are many contradictions in relation to the discourse which impact on people's attitudes.

**Audience.** During elections, there is an awareness that polemic aimed at an internal audience is picked up by the other side. Similarly there is a tendency for the sides to address their messages to their respective patrons (Russia or the West) rather than one another directly. In this way they both demonstrate where their loyalties lie, and send messages for both internal and external consumption that they feel comfortable with. The rhetoric that is used has real implications. For example, each time Georgians mention territorial integrity or 'de-occupation', it pushes the prospect of achieving those goals a little further away, as it is interpreted in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the Georgians having no understanding of the needs of the Abkhaz or South Ossetians. Similarly, vocal Abkhaz or South Ossetian support for Russian policies or actions, such as the annexation of Crimea, is interpreted within Georgia as an indicator that the Abkhaz and Ossetians do not have their own independent policy.

**Rhetoric vs actions:** at the same time, there is a contradiction between the sides' declared goals and their actions in pursuing those goals. All three parties appear to be willing to

sacrifice their goals in favour of rhetoric. The Georgian nationalism that underpinned Georgia's pursuit of becoming an independent state as the Soviet Union was disintegrating was hugely detrimental to its statehood and its subsequent inability to reintegrate the territories of the former Georgian Soviet Republic. Meanwhile, Ossetian and Abkhaz assertions of independence from Georgia have resulted in them becoming much more dependent on Russia. The conflicts did not end with the ceasefires of 1992 and 1993. Conflict dynamics continued to develop, and were influenced by isolation from the outside world, geopolitical interests, post-war destruction, and the branding and treatment of people as separatists. Moreover, Georgia was in no hurry to resolve the conflicts on the political level. Several Georgian experts told us how 'Shevardnadze enlisted Russian and Western support and then patiently waited, supposing that the conflict would be resolved to Georgia's benefit.' Such a position was received with alarm in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as they anticipated a resumption of hostilities. This in turn fed a desire to escape such passive-aggressive oppression by declaring independence.<sup>46</sup>

**Conflict as a resource/identity.** Despite the suffering, loss, and limitations resulting from the conflicts, the societies have learnt how to value them and draw on them as a resource. The conflicts satisfy a variety of needs (including psychological), and help build a sense of identity and of uniqueness. This is especially the case for isolated societies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia which have few other external frames of reference. For Georgians, the conflict gives them international status, due to its geopolitical framing and significance. In all three societies, the conflicts are convenient levers of influence. In the presence of an external enemy, internal solidarity is required. This in turn has the effect of limiting genuine public debate about any issue, be it external or internal. That includes debate about the conflict. All three societies have developed a similar mechanism of narrative control, and anyone who goes against the accepted narrative on the conflicts is accused of being pro-Georgian (in Abkhaz or South Ossetia), or pro-Russian (in Georgia).

The cognitive dissonance invoked by competing rhetoric and the mismatch between rhetoric and people's everyday experience of the real world could potentially lead to attitudinal change, if there was a healthy public debate that facilitated critical thinking.

The cognitive dissonance invoked by competing rhetoric and the mismatch between rhetoric and people's everyday experience of the real world could potentially lead to attitudinal change, if there was a healthy public debate that facilitated critical thinking. However, in the absence of that, coping mechanisms include denying or compartmentalising thoughts that risk challenging one's beliefs/worldview, or a complete withdrawal from reality.

For example, in South Ossetia, there are logical discrepancies between competing ideas of an independent state (but remaining fully dependent on Russia), unification with North Ossetia (but retaining sovereignty), or becoming a part of Russia (as Crimea). These difficult scenarios act as a distraction from reality, and there is a rejection of it of sorts. And instead of dealing with issues of the here and now, political polemic drives people into confusion and stupor. People are drawn in to support a particular scenario out of a desire for belonging, and to engage in public life.

A similar phenomenon can be observed with Georgian public rhetoric, which declares a pro-Western position and rejects anything deemed to be 'Russian'. This is all while Georgia remains seriously dependent on Russia, both economically and in other ways.

**Self-censorship.** When speaking on the conflicts, experts (non-politicians) in all three societies exercise self-censorship as they try to navigate political sensitivities. To varying degrees, they avoid criticising their own societies or authorities. This is to avoid such criticism being used against them by the other side, but also to avoid attacks from within their own societies. However, this self-censorship only serves to further limit public discourse, and yet these are the very people who could be pushing it forward. Just as in the Soviet period, it has become normalised to hold one opinion privately and express another publicly. This makes for fertile ground for manipulation and misunderstanding, both internally and across the divide.

As a result, there is limited public debate. Political discourse also tends to be framed in black-and-white terms, and is accompanied by an aggressive social media discourse. This is in part artificially provoked by a relatively small, but highly influential army of anonymous trolls on all sides. These trolls, who according to respondents are most likely paid, would not find such fertile ground to operate if there was sufficient offline public discussion within and across the societies. However, the self-censorship response to political pressure puts local experts in a vulnerable position. Their current positions are to them a justification of the path they have travelled, and a failure to re-examine their past analysis from a critical perspective could leave them unprepared for certain developments in the future.

## Part 2: Insecurity, trauma, inequality and injustice

### Insecurity

Protracted insecurity, living in constant fear of a resumption of hostilities, and living amid the ruins of war are major contributors to societal trauma in the Georgian-Abkhaz-South Ossetian context. And a lack of security guarantees means that human security is prioritised less than political and national security.

In expert circles it is sometimes said that the 2008 war, and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia may have closed the issue of territorial disputes. However, these can still be reopened through war. Despite today's apparent stability and Russia's support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the possibility of a resumption of hostilities in the future is still considered a threat. This has been articulated on all sides, though it is clear that everyone struggles to appreciate that the fears of the other side are real. Some Georgians, for example, feel that an expression of fear from South Ossetians and Abkhazians is disingenuous when Russian military bases are within striking distance of Tbilisi. This is indicative of a lack of nuanced understanding of the nature of their relationship with Russia.

## Trauma

“Why can’t we reflect on the past when we were the winning side? It’s not an admission of defeat to talk about the events of the war. There were cases when we were let down by our own side and people died as a result. History is being rewritten on the go; no-one knows these stories of their fathers/grandfathers, and soon that generation of eyewitnesses will be gone and we’ll have no objective memory or account.”

Abkhaz respondent

**The collective trauma** of the tragic events and losses experienced during the wars has not been worked through on any of the three sides. Indeed, there is little awareness within the societies of how to do this, or even of the need for it. Individual vs. societal trauma is poorly understood. Trauma-related phenomena include commemorating and living in the past, mythologisation, heroisation, and the cult of war/warrior. Trauma is also reflected in public discourse. All sides commemorate the tragedies and victories of the past in a way that either serves to deepen trauma, or doesn’t allow it to heal. This is then passed on to the next generation. All sides suffered, and inflicted suffering. And yet, talking about ‘trauma’ is taboo, or is considered personal weakness or a form of surrender.

**Trauma is a protracted phenomenon.** Trauma is not just related to specific events during military hostilities – the pre- and post-war years can be just as or even more traumatic. Systematic repression, discrimination, feelings of betrayal, and experiences from pre- and post-hostilities all combine with other forms of trauma. These include living without physical security and the security of identity over a long time, the trauma of trying to survive in the aftermath, and the fear of a resumption of hostilities. With each new escalation comes new waves of trauma on top of old. There is also the trauma caused by non-recognition of one’s pain and the lack of justice for past wrongs and crimes (both from a moral and legal perspective). All this needs to be borne in mind when working with trauma and conflict.

**The victor/loser complex** affects behaviour and motives on all sides. In the Georgian/Abkhaz context, the Abkhaz feel as though they are the winners. In contrast, the Georgian narrative is that the Abkhaz were not victorious alone, and that they benefitted from the support of North Caucasian fighters and Russia. This facilitates a certain romanticisation of the conflict in Georgian society which is reflected in discourse, such as when the Abkhaz are referred to as ‘younger brothers’.

In the Georgian/Ossetian context, neither side feels as though they are the winners or losers. Possibly this is an indicator of how integrated the two peoples were, compared to the Abkhaz. In addition, though, the scale of the loss for the Ossetians precludes any sense of being victorious, either in the 1990s or after 2008.

On the Georgian side, a social consensus of silence on the expulsion of so many Ossetians from Georgia possibly stems from suppressed shame. However, while in Ossetian society you

can still hear people say that not all Georgians are bad (just the nationalists and politicians), such views are not reciprocated according to respondents. They see only that Georgians blame Russia, and disregard their own agency. Psychologically, this makes it harder for Ossetians to come to terms with what happened to them, given the cognitive dissonance between what they have experienced at the hands of Georgians and how Georgians reflect their experience back to them. Their suffering is not recognised by the world.

**Ritualisation.** Trauma has yet to be worked through on a personal or family level. Parents have not talked about their experiences of the war to their children, for example. Similarly, society as a whole has yet to talk it through and reflect on what happened. Instead commemoration has been ritualised. This is particularly evident in Abkhazia, with Victory Day celebrations being a key moment in public life and with reminders of tragic events permeating the whole of society.<sup>47</sup> One interviewee from Abkhazia noted that instead of hanging children's paintings on the walls of a newly renovated school in Tkvarcheli/Tkvarchal, a series of portraits of dead children were hung up instead. 'Why maintain memory in this way?' the interviewee asked.

**The cultivation of military heroism** within the societies (particularly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) sends the message to young people that war is a path to social recognition, social status, and self-fulfilment, while the complete opposite is the case for engaging in peacebuilding. This further squeezes the space for peacebuilding and can make the danger of an escalation fuelled by a generation seeking personal and social recognition all the greater.

At the same time, while the societies formally recognise veterans' service during the war, not all veterans enjoy the protections one might expect. Many of these veterans are modest, are not inclined to make a fuss about their social or other needs, and do not live in expectation of any benefits for their contribution in the war. In Abkhazia however, veterans are a political force that is still beyond public criticism. This makes it potentially open to abuse. For example, when one Abkhaz veteran appropriated a public park for commercial development, his justification was, "What did I fight for?" This sense of entitlement sits uncomfortably alongside the effective abandonment of others who also fought but whose values prevent them from reaping the benefits of victory, or who are less politically well-connected. There is insufficient public reflection on these deep philosophical and moral issues, and what it means for society.

Meanwhile, in South Ossetia, the fact of having fought in defence of one's nation gives no social protection from the force of the authorities. Some prominent ex-combatant public figures have been persecuted for their civic position and their engagement with Georgians. The recent death in custody of Inal Dzhabiev<sup>48</sup> is a particularly stark example of how fighting for one's homeland in 2008 did not necessarily provide any protection from the force of the authorities. The expectation of reward for heroism is not a characteristic of the Ossetian context.

**Mythologisation.** Trauma and the absence of an objective public assessment of what took place in each of the societies is a major factor behind the mythologisation of the conflicts over time and of heroisation. It is a consequence of there being no clear evaluations by the



sides of key events (such as who started the war), the burning of the Abkhaz archive, lack of authoritative statistics on how many people perished or were driven from their homes on ethnic grounds, and so on. As each of the sides and different groups within the societies interpret conflict their own way, objective reality, which was already difficult to define in a conflict context, is replaced by many conflicting subjective realities. This then becomes the new conflict. Most experts interviewed observed a radicalisation of societies. The conflicts are so deeply mythologised in the nations' psyche that in the future it will be necessary to address not only the root causes, but also the legacy of the conflicts in different forms.

**Humanitarian responders** who worked both during and in the immediate aftermath of hostilities often did so as a way of working through their own trauma. However, this resulted in them also absorbing other people's trauma. In some cases this led to serious health and mental health problems. "We ourselves needed rehabilitation. Even now we need psychosocial rehabilitation. We work with others, and as we listen and absorb their terrible tales and grief it brings back our own suffering." (Abkhaz respondent).

**Trauma forms the backdrop for Georgian IDP organisations.** It also encompasses the second generation, which has grown up on the stories and unworked trauma of their parents. Until the societal trauma of war is addressed, this cycle will continue, and a new generation will grow up on the narratives and emotions of the conflict. Some respondents noted that IDP parents passed on their pain to the next generation through, for example, teaching their children to read poems about Abkhazia, thereby cultivating a yearning to 'return', even though they have never been there. "Children shouldn't be tied to their parent's past. They should have opportunities in education and so on which focus on their future. They should not be focused on where their ancestors are buried." (Georgian respondent).

**South Ossetian trauma** affects the whole population. It is also more recent, and an ongoing phenomenon. Interviewees acknowledged there isn't even a recognition amongst themselves of what has happened, let alone a re-evaluation. People do not feel secure. "People live with this constant preparedness and expectation that they will again have to defend themselves from aggression," said one respondent. This may appear unbelievable to Georgian society, who themselves fear how a Russian military base so close to their capital might be deployed against them. The Tsnelisi/Chorchana incident<sup>49</sup> in 2019 exacerbated the situation further, prompting South Ossetians to question why the Russians didn't respond sooner to the evidence of Georgians constructing a new checkpoint. It also gave rise to an altogether more painful thought: 'Maybe Russia won't protect us when we need them next time.'

**Intergenerational trauma.** One also has to take into consideration the trauma of growing up amidst the ruins of the conflict. This is particularly the case for those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with respondents from both societies speaking about a 'lost generation', i.e. those who grew up amidst the ruins of war, educated/parented by traumatised adults, with uncertain economic and educational opportunities, and possessing a fear of hostilities resuming. It would be hard to expect this generation to have the skills, motivation or possibilities to resolve the conflicts of their parents.

“This sense of uncertainty – that you could do something today but tomorrow it could just be wiped out because of war – undermined all motivation for many people to try to build something for themselves. A lot of people just took to drink and drugs.”

Ossetian respondent

“Half of my friends didn’t live past 30. Some died from drugs or car accidents. They never saw anything positive. We grew up amidst the ruins, had no opportunities or purpose, and couldn’t get a good education, a job, etc. Their withdrawal into a subculture was a form of protest – they lived the grief of their families.”

Abkhaz respondent

**Societal trauma and forgiveness.** Those who have more direct experience of the war are most likely to be the ones to listen and express willingness to understand and accept the position of the other side. However, society, imbued with attitudes encouraged through public narratives, shouts them down. One Abkhaz interviewee recalled the story of an Abkhazian who said he would forgive his enemy but was shouted down by another Abkhazian. The suggestion was that forgiveness was seen as weakness or something shameful.

**‘Dealing with the past’.** Different interviewees cited various projects which aimed to deal with trauma, events of the past, cultural heritage, etc. However, it appeared as though the public did not always get a clear message about these initiatives. It was acknowledged that there are different motivations behind some of these projects. “Some really want people to understand what happened, while some want to use it as propaganda,” said one respondent. Currently there is no discussion at official levels about investigating the events of the wars of the early 1990s. They take 2008 as the starting point, as if the conflicts only began then. However, as several respondents noted, 2008 was a consequence of the unresolved nature of the conflicts of the 1990s and the mistakes made by Georgia in terms of their resolution. People also put the lack of investigation of the 1990s down to political will. According to one respondent, “War criminals exist in both societies. Neither society is discussing this or investigating. There is no appetite for this.”

## Justice/injustice

Central to peace, as interpreted by all three societies, is the restoration of justice, which amid the pain and loss, also encompasses a striving for respect, recognition and dignity. Having been raised on different historical and family narratives and national propaganda, the different societies’ understanding of justice are in conflict with each other. That means the way in which justice is pursued can either transform conflict or bring about new injustices, which in turn foment new cycles of conflict.

### **A lack of justice in the external conflict can foster a culture of injustice within societies.**

For example, the non-investigation of war crimes, silence over the appropriation of property, and the infringement of rights on ethnic grounds all contribute to the public perception that

such actions are the norm in conflict. This in turn produces a perception that the authorities and judiciary are impotent when it comes to enforcing legal norms. There are many cases of revenge crimes committed as a form of reparation (often framed as 'traditional law') for earlier unprosecuted crimes. The local populations are often aware of these and maintain silence. But people do not believe in the possibility of formal justice. Again, the political will to initiate such investigations is lacking, as this could implicate some powerful individuals.

The absence of justice in the conflict context manifests itself in other forms of violence and aggression within society, in a classic cycle of abuse. When the external enemy is out of reach, there is a tendency to seek out internal enemies.

The absence of justice in the conflict context manifests itself in other forms of violence and aggression within society, in a classic cycle of abuse. When the external enemy is out of reach, there is a tendency to seek out internal enemies. This is observable not only in the repression of civil society figures or journalists who speak out against the public consensus, but also in the brutal treatment of prisoners, as an example of violence that is permissible. All three societies have experienced scandals related to prisoner abuse, brutal treatment, and even death as a result of torture. The legal disenfranchisement of people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, resulting from living in territories which are unrecognised by the wider international system, leaves them with little recourse or redress. In theory, the European Court of Human Rights can deal with a case, but it has no authority over the implementation of their decision by the de facto authorities.<sup>50</sup>

The culture of injustice, combined with a weak civil society to keep institutions in check ultimately undermine the legitimacy of leadership, requiring every more repressive measures and injustices to maintain power. A stark recent example of this is the action of the family of Inal Dzhabiev, who took up a 24-hour vigil in the central square in Tskhinval/i in the middle of winter to demand a fair investigation into the cause of his death, after what they believed to be a falsified investigation by Russian experts. In the absence of justice and of mechanisms through which to gain justice, individuals take up other means available to them, while a political crisis simmers underneath.

**The search for justice is a very subjective process**, and is focused on one's own grievance without empathy for the suffering of the other side. Everyone wants justice for themselves, but prefers to turn a blind eye to injustices that they may have been party to themselves. While the sides seek acknowledgement and admissions of guilt from the other side, they do not wish to reflect on their own culpability. The tendency is towards a competitive victimhood and struggle to occupy a higher moral ground, thereby revealing the interdependency of the parties' subjectivities. Repeated cycles of abuse perpetuate mutual recriminations. An understanding that justice is not a zero-sum game and that it is possible to be both victim and perpetrator, along with a focus on one's *responsibility* as well as *rights* could help break down this competitiveness and encourage deeper self-reflection.

**Restoring justice is a long and difficult process** and requires a respect for equal rights of all sides of the conflict, a balanced approach to all aspects of the conflicts, and equal engagement in the process by all sides. Those affected by these protracted unresolved conflicts and associated long years of uncertainty and unpredictability are critical of international organisations and institutions selectively investigating a single aspect or episode of the conflict, or one particularly timeframe. They perceive it as evidence of a partial and one-sided approach and a way of avoiding studying the roots and the cause-and-effect relationship between different events. International structures engaged in fact finding and the search for justice should take this into consideration. For example, experts who were interviewed expressed the view that an investigation of the war of 2008 and its consequences should go back to the period in Georgia when Gamsakhurdia came to power. Such an investigation should, they said, examine crimes against Ossetians living in Georgia, and raise the question of compensation, (including for property that was appropriated).

Without a political settlement it is difficult to imagine a formal ‘truth and reconciliation’ process from which reparations and restitution might follow. Unofficial or non governmental processes of truth-seeking and documentation met with resistance from the Saakashvili government.<sup>51</sup> There was even open criticism in the case of the 2006 ‘Sorry’ campaign led by a group of Georgian civil society actors, which only serves to reinforce the stereotype of Georgian denialism. On the other hand, some interviewees spoke of the reluctance from within South Ossetia and Abkhazia to investigate crimes which, even though committed against them, could have uncomfortable consequences. An example of this would be potential reparations for the appropriation of property of displaced persons.

### Part 3: Nationalism as a source and driver of conflicts

“I used to be quite nationalistic, but when I was a student at a multinational college, I realised that nationalism is stupid. Georgians are no worse than others, but neither are they better. And when you realise this, it’s easier to work with the conflicts.”

Georgian respondent

The disintegration of the USSR set in motion enormous changes in Georgia and across the region. It was a time of great volatility, instability and unpredictability. But one thing was understood – the breakup of the USSR gave the Georgians the chance to finally fulfil their dream of having their own state. This dream moved Georgians en masse, and became a national movement. It took on radical forms, both in the way it captured people in its euphoria and in the way it was pursued. Georgian ethnic nationalism lay at the very foundation of a new Georgian state, and there was little consideration of the fact that other nationalities living in Georgia might have needs and feelings of nationalism of their own. According to one Georgian interviewee, in being driven by the implementation of their cherished goal, “Georgians were deafened to the needs of other nationalities who lived there. Moreover, Georgians didn’t see them as equal members with equal rights in the state of their dreams.”

Many across the former Soviet region could not accept the shock of the new reality, and as a coping mechanism held on to the expectation that the USSR would return. This, they believed, would make everything 'go back to normal', and national movements would quieten down again under Soviet state ideology and propaganda of 'equal rights and justice for all'. This was particularly the case in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where people believed in the Soviet project more than the Georgians. Meanwhile, Georgian history was being revised and new narratives quickly started to emerge. Some of these were completely new, while others had been forgotten or distorted during the Soviet period. This new history shaped the Georgian image of themselves in the present, and also in terms of the future which they were starting to build.

However, ideas of sovereignty were also alive in Abkhaz society, with Abkhaz national narratives echoing Georgian narratives in terms of their desire for sovereignty and self-determination as a nation. Yet despite the alarming growing ethnic nationalism of the Georgians, the goals articulated within Abkhaz public discourse revolved around becoming a more independent and equal subject within Georgia.

Ossetian support for the Soviet project was linked to the desire to keep their nation united within the borders of one country. Nationalism in Ossetia was more civic (as opposed to ethnic) in nature. To some degree that remains the case, judging by the way in which Ossetian society forcefully rejected any attempt to discredit the protest of the Dzhabiev family on the grounds that his mother is ethnic Georgian.

As the USSR disintegrated, South Ossetian society demanded protection from the threat of Georgian ethnic nationalism by seeking recognition of equal rights. One of their proposals for a post-Soviet Georgian constitution was to include Ossetian as a state language. In the Ossetians' assessment this would both protect South Ossetian autonomy as well as the rights of the many Ossetians living in the Georgian regions. Still fresh in the memory of Ossetians was the trauma of the cruel repression of Ossetian youth and intelligentsia, who had tried to preserve their language and protect it from changes in writing systems that occurred in the Soviet period (first from Latin script to Cyrillic, and later to the Georgian alphabet). This demand for language equality was primarily a trauma response triggered by post-Soviet unpredictability, and had the aim of ensuring that such a traumatic history in relation to their language could not be repeated.

Mainstream public opinion in Georgia was that such proposals and declarations from Abkhazians and South Ossetians sounded like a threat to their national project, and their reaction was extremely negative and aggressive.

Thus, from the nature of nationalism as described by those interviewed and which we were able to study, the context can be described as a conflict between Georgian radical ethnic nationalism and a more moderate Abkhaz nationalism and Ossetian civil nationalism.

Here we see a phenomenon whereby radical and nationalistic-oriented societies view the creation of a new society as involving the destruction of the old, as perpetuating the idea of national exceptionalism, and as radically changing the existing social order through violating the rights of others, and even attempting to destroy them.

An example of such a moment in history was the very creation of the USSR, with which parallels can be drawn. The same methods were evident in the foundation of an independent Georgia as were used in the foundation of the USSR.

Georgia's example was not only dangerous but contagious, and stimulated the development of national movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Just like the Georgians, these societies were already seeking to establish their position in the new context. The separatist movement began as a reaction to structural discrimination and the denial of equal rights on the part of Tbilisi, which fuelled fears of losing national identity as a consequence. Most importantly at the time, however, it was driven by the lack of physical security guarantees. It became patriotic to be a separatist and nationalism became an appealing concept. And it remains so to this day, judging by mainstream public polemic and action.

## Understanding nationalism

There is no real understanding in all three societies as to what nationalism is, what its origins are, and how it manifests itself. No distinction is made in public discourse between terms such as nationalism and patriotism – there is no clear understanding of the significance of the meaning that these terms carry. The propaganda machines ensure that the conceptual lines between them are blurred in public discourse and, for example, radical nationalism is often considered to be something admirable.

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This in turn opens a dangerous window of permissiveness. It freely enables all types of behaviours through which an individual and society can demonstrate their love of their homeland, their country, and ways in which they strive to improve and strengthen it. However, these actions, however well-intentioned, often carry the potential for conflict. Mainstream opinion may not always perceive them this way, but they can be painful for national minorities if the polemic and reforms are insensitive to them.

The relationship of all three societies towards their national minorities is problematic, though this is not necessarily widely acknowledged within the societies themselves. Furthermore, issues experienced by a national minority are often dismissed along the lines of, 'Things are hard enough for us. Why should we concern ourselves with them?' This is another example of the propensity towards 'competitive victimhood' referred to in the previous section, wherein an individual or society seeks recognition of particular injustices committed in relation to themselves. In this case, competitive victimhood helps to stoke nationalist tendencies.

Almost everyone we interviewed from all sides noted the exceptional pain of their own society, stating that it was they who have suffered the most in this series of endless conflicts, isolation and suffering since the time of the USSR until today.

This hyperfixation on oneself is a clear sign of societal trauma, and makes it harder to comprehend someone else's injustice. It therefore becomes more difficult for the societies to recognise and acknowledge the wrongs which they may have committed in relation to others. Recognition of offenses which potentially you or your society are culpable of would diminish one's ability to occupy the moral high ground as being the most transgressed against – something which affords 'victim status' and all the behavioural norms that stem from that.

However, the societies are not completely homogenous, and there are always people in all societies with different perspectives and positions. The question is how visible they are, and whether their voice is heard, especially at times when nationalistic sentiment is rising. Abkhazians and Ossetians say that back when tensions first arose, alternative Georgian voices and opinions were hardly ever heard in public discourse.

During interviews, several Georgians expressed shame, guilt, and also incredulity that such a phenomenon was unleashed in their country, in particular in relation to the organised campaign of the early 1990s that led to over 100,000 Ossetians living in Georgian regions outside South Ossetia<sup>52</sup> being driven out of their jobs and homes, and in some cases, even murdered.

“Georgian irregulars came at night, took everything, beat people, and took members of the family away, after which they were never seen again. We even buried people at night, in fear of doing so during the daytime.”<sup>53</sup>

Ossetian refugee from Georgia

Georgian interviewees who brought this up struggled to explain it. One called it “unprofessional, incompetent Georgian nationalism,” and another, “despotism.”

“I feel guilt towards the Ossetians for what Georgians did to them under Gamsakhurdia, because they were quite integrated into Georgian society. If I were to live over again, I would go out onto Freedom Square and protest against it.”

Georgian respondent

“I can't understand how the Georgians managed to construct a conflict with the Ossetians. How did they descend to such idiocy, such abnormal violence? It came from above – such despotism doesn't happen by itself. To enable the expulsion of people from their homes, to empty their villages! Their villages were raided, their homes occupied.”

Georgian respondent

These events, the destructive force of nationalism, and the way in which nationalism undermined Georgian statehood have not been adequately worked through in Georgian society. One Georgian participant in early dialogues observed how much of the Ossetians' experience was

a 'discovery' for the Georgians – they were simply unaware. This has implications for the current day as, in the words of another Georgian interviewee, "The lessons are not learned. For example, no-one opposes nationalist responses to Muslim minorities." The respondent in question added that "Sooner or later Georgians must understand their real past and learn lessons."

As one Ossetian pointed out, "There has been no assessment of what happened. Each time power changed hands, not one of the new leaders ventured to reassess what had happened to Ossetians in Georgia and in South Ossetia. I understand why, because Georgian society is not ready for it. But if some sensible Georgian authority acknowledged that they did wrong, then the Ossetians might start to change their attitude. In South Ossetia they still don't understand how Georgians can continue to relate to what happened as something 'normal'."

This is undoubtedly a painful part of recent Georgian history, and should be acknowledged that Georgians also complained of discrimination at the hands of the Ossetians and Abkhazians. Once Georgian noted that, "The core of injustice in relation to the Georgian population of Gali lies in the relationship of the Abkhaz towards us Georgians who don't live in Gali."

This mismatch between Georgians' self-image and how they are perceived by the Abkhaz and South Ossetians is not only a major obstacle to reconciliation, but also to mutual understanding. The Georgians are saddled with the image of a chauvinistic, fascistic aggressor among the Abkhaz and Ossetians, but their own national self-image is of being 'tolerant' or 'magnanimous' towards their non-ethnic Georgian 'guests', in what one scholar described as 'self-exculpatory denial'.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, we found the Georgian experts who were interviewed to be much more self-critical than the Abkhazians and South Ossetians, who found it difficult to acknowledge current day Georgian vulnerabilities in relation to Russia, and were more concentrated on their own vulnerability. Georgians have legitimate grievances against Russia, and almost all those interviewed expressed legitimate concerns for the treatment of ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Although Georgian society is improving, changes have not yet reached a critical mass. For now, this process of rethinking the past and present is only on the level of civil society. Even politicians who understand the flawed nature of nationalist thinking constantly give in to positions of the conservative church and the persistent ethnic nationalism of the middle class. Despite the circulation of progressive ideas within civil society, these ideas still do not form a value base for political decision making.

Public rhetoric around nationalism and patriotism continues to be an emotive and manipulative tool which is used to maintain conflict discourses and militaristic attitudes.

Public rhetoric around nationalism and patriotism continues to be an emotive and manipulative tool which is used to maintain conflict discourses and militaristic attitudes. Furthermore, these discourses have been mobilised on a new front, one that straddles the ethnic divide. It



revolves around the culture war that pits 'traditional', hierarchical societies against 'Western, democratic, pluralistic' values, which are portrayed as morally corrupt (due to their advocacy of equal rights for all, and concepts such as gender equality, which is interpreted by the church as 'destroying families' and national/ethnic culture). To be clear, these 'culture wars' are political in nature, and aim to harness emotions, fears and identities in support of their objectives. These objectives include undermining the efforts of progressive civil society, independent journalists, human rights activists, feminists, etc. who seek democratic change and social justice, and who are perceived as a risk to the power bases of those who benefit from the status quo.

However, this is a phenomenon that Western societies are also struggling with. Perhaps a public discussion on the allure of nationalism and authoritarianism in the context of the rise of the far right in Europe and the US, Trumpism, and so on, could take some of the sting out of the tail for Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians, and enable them to critically examine their own context.

A discussion of the psycho-sociological aspects of concepts such as 'identity' and 'nation' as 'imagined community',<sup>55</sup> could serve several purposes. As well as helping with acknowledging the nationalism of the past, it could foster understanding of the shared trauma of the Soviet period from which it emerged, the trauma of the conflicts, and the way in which discourses and identities are constructed in the present. This would serve to transform people's perceptions of themselves and in relation to the 'other', regardless of who that other is.

## Part 4: Education and intergenerational issues

"Only those who lived through the worst years could be a restraining factor on the resumption of hostilities. The younger generation who have only seen it in images have a romanticised view of war."

First-generation Ossetian respondent

"The younger generation cannot be the carriers of values that we are trying to defend. This generation are more dependent, which means more open to manipulation."

First-generation Abkhaz respondent

"Things will only change when the next generation takes over. It's hard because in the Caucasus the older generation has to be respected. They are deemed to be wiser, and even if they are wrong, you should show them respect."

Young Abkhaz respondent

Many issues already covered under 'trauma' particularly impact young people in specific ways. This section consolidates a few of the thoughts already broached. It has been 30 years since the conflicts broke out, and a whole generation has grown up in the current context, without having ever experienced co-existence in a common state or interaction

through normal, daily life. While the older generation has both personal and collective memory of the pre-war days, the younger generation has only the collective memory (narratives which have been handed down to them by their families and societies). Young people have grown up within a political culture characterised by an ideologised public discourse and education, and the cult of war heroism. They have grown up amid the ruins of conflict and family narratives, carrying the trauma of their parents, or the trauma of bereavement, displacement and loss. And they have suffered limitations imposed on them by a conflict-affected society, complete with winner/loser complexes which shape one's worldview.

However, the younger generation is not a homogenous group. Some are more affected by the conflict legacy than others. For example, those living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and people in IDP families have experiences which are quite distinct from the majority of Georgian society. Given that a period of 30 years has passed, it is fair to talk about two generations growing up – both the children and grandchildren of the conflicts. Furthermore, there are those who have spent the formative periods of their lives (in education or work) abroad, either in Russia or Europe. These people have quite different perspectives to their compatriots back home, and one finds quite different attitudes and disagreements between the diaspora and those who stayed behind in all contexts.

### **Prospects of the younger generation to find mutual agreement**

Interviews explored people's assessments and expectations of the younger generation in terms of their ability to find mutual agreement in the future. The contradictions in responses across the generations were striking. One Abkhaz respondent said, "After the war, having laid down our arms, we thought about how we could wash the blood away, how we could resolve this conflict. And we realised that we won't be able to forgive. Only the next generation who hasn't seen the horrors of war can do this."

While at some point in the relatively recent past, the older generation had thought they could bequeath the concept of resolution to the younger generation, and wanted to prepare them for this, they gradually started to feel a sense of disillusionment, complaining that most of the younger generation are either more radically nationalistic or not interested.

Several respondents opined that the hard line positions held by young people were a result of having not experienced the full horrors of the war, and not knowing the 'other side' (meaning they had fewer emotional ties). Others suggested it was due to resentment (at least in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) that they do not completely feel part of the world and live under some limitations, which they blame Georgia and the collective West for.

Others reflect that it will be harder for the younger generation to negotiate and come to agreements because, in the words of one Abkhaz respondent, "It will be like negotiating with someone from another planet." While young people today are more informed through the internet, and have been less subjected to the pain of loss, their lack of personal contacts, shared experience, and detailed personal knowledge of how events unfolded before, during and immediately after the war will make it harder for them to develop a new vision. Others reflected on an already apparent tendency whereby young Abkhaz (and South Ossetian)

diplomats feel disadvantaged in relation to their Georgian counterparts. A sense of inferiority prevails, both in terms of the education and the skills needed to engage on an equal level.

The older generation still has resources in this respect (though there is a sense that these resources are not being adequately utilised). However, time is not on their side. All parties with an interest in peace should feel a sense of urgency given that this window is gradually closing.

## Generational renewal and change

Most first-generation interviewees were seriously concerned about the fact there did not seem to be a generational change taking place within local civil society working for peace. There was a feeling that youth peacebuilding had not come of age. Though youth peacebuilding work began back in the 2000s, some regretted that they had not started to invest more in youth sooner.

The older generation complained that younger people do not take on responsibility.

However, we heard paradoxical statements from older and younger civil peacebuilders. The older generation complained that younger people do not take on responsibility and that they are scared to take any steps in peacebuilding on their own initiative for fear of coming under the same kind of attacks on social media as their elders.

Meanwhile, the younger generation complained that older people do not give them the space.

Meanwhile, the younger generation complained that older people do not give them the space. There is a sense that the intelligentsia of the older generation have been trying to mould the younger generation in their own image, which has influenced their selection of 'loyal' young people for projects. However, young people want more freedom to do it their way.

**Political class.** This complaint that young people have regarding their elders is more directed to the political class than civil society, and explains why so few intelligent, well educated people choose to go into the quagmire of politics. One Abkhaz respondent said, "They think they are right, that they have experience, and that younger people should inherit their knowledge. It's a matter of culture. Very few would risk giving power/authority to a younger person. It doesn't matter how intelligent you are, if you threaten the way things are done, then you won't be given space."

**Traditional societies.** All this is indicative of the strong culture of deference to age, particularly in Abkhazia. The process of coming of age is quite a long one in this respect, and one which some find stifling. As one Abkhaz respondent said, "Young people need a place to develop and feel free – free from their parents. Young people are under too much societal control. They need more freedom, new impressions and experiences, and to not be judged for who they are. They should be allowed to be passive or active, as they wish."

**Youth peacebuilding** projects tend to be focused on the ‘young elite’ – predominantly university students or recent graduates. This is based on a theory of change that with limited resources, this is where the greatest impact can happen. After all, this is the layer of society which will be responsible for negotiations in the future, and for shaping local institutions (both civic and political). That is a fair assessment, but in the Abkhaz context, we now see a considerable number of these people working for international organisations that have offices in Abkhazia. These organisations pay good salaries which civil society organisations cannot match. There is also a reluctance to go into politics because of a distaste for the political culture and the limitations on young people reaching positions of responsibility.

We should question whether it is fair to expect the ‘young elite’ to bring about change within the unreformed institutions, just as we have learnt that empowering women to participate in a man’s world does not automatically bring about gender equality. More transformative change is needed, including institutional reform, and this of course has been outside the scope of civil peacebuilding in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

## Education

Education affects the younger generation’s capacities in two ways. It impacts their knowledge of the conflicts themselves (both in terms of basic information, and the narratives within which they are framed), and access to further high-quality education at home and abroad. All parties talked about a well-educated populace being essential for a strong society that can build peace. They also said that this cannot be left solely to NGOs to deliver, but should be achieved through reforming schools and universities. Observations on education ranged from the quality and methods of teaching, to the availability of modern subjects on the curriculum fit for a modern society. Respondents also touched upon addressing the narratives in history textbooks, and making conflict studies more available at universities as an inter-disciplinary subject. Access to international education was also a key point raised by Abkhaz and South Ossetians (whose diplomas are not recognised by international universities). And while initiatives such as the UK government’s Chevening Scholarships and other Swiss initiatives were welcomed, they are still very limited in terms of the numbers who can benefit.

**Skills in critical, independent thinking** are important, as are being exposed to and encouraged to consider different perspectives. No less crucial is the ability to reflect, think globally, avoid stereotypes, and to articulate opinions. This is so that societies are able to resist manipulative propaganda and engage in rational discussion. These abilities are also key to becoming media literate. As noted previously, one Abkhaz interviewee mentioned that it is easy to identify young people who have been through Sukhum Youth House’s programme over the years, such is the difference between levels of articulacy.

**History education and conflict studies** are two particularly important areas to focus on in schools and universities. History textbooks on all sides have been rewritten in an ideological paradigm that supports the nationalist narratives of the respective sides, effectively inverting the Soviet ideology of ‘Friendship of the Peoples’ into ‘enemies of the people’.<sup>56</sup> As one Georgian said, “Students are still being taught narratives whereby the ‘Abkhaz came down from the mountains’” (a nationalist narrative dating from the time of Gamsakhurdia),

yet there is very little in Georgian textbooks about the conflicts themselves, or the Soviet period in relation to Abkhazia or South Ossetia. This lack of knowledge of their own recent history will inhibit any reflection on the origins of the conflict and prospects for resolution.

It is important to address the limited availability of **conflict or peace studies** as a topic on university curricula. In addition, it should be taught as an inter-disciplinary subject, not just from the perspective of international relations, but including elements of social and political psychology as well. “It’s not enough to be told about Lederach and Galtung, you have to read them yourselves” (Georgian respondent). All sides commented on the absence of good contemporary analyses and literature on the conflicts in local languages (in particular Georgian). Material produced by international scholars or NGOs has a very limited audience made up of scholars who are already motivated and who have knowledge of English or Russian. It should be noted that in the absence of modern texts on the conflicts produced in local languages, university students have been using publications produced by peacebuilding NGOs as part of their studies.<sup>57</sup>

**Education access and options.** While there are shortcomings in education on all sides, the growing disparity between options that Georgian students have compared to Abkhaz and South Ossetian students was remarked upon by everyone. This is already becoming a serious problem, with the older generation in Abkhazia expressing concern that young people who grew up in the post-conflict context amid serious economic and social problems will not be equipped to deal with such a wide range of new challenges. Much emphasis has been put on tackling discrimination concerning access to education. Regardless of this, however, one Abkhaz youth pointed out that, “Many don’t even think about it because they don’t even allow themselves to dream that they could get an education abroad. It’s even worse that they don’t even have this dream.”

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## Notes

42. The contrast is drawn between the death of Archil Tatunashvili in February 2018, and the death of Inal Dzhabiev in August 2020 in similar circumstances, both at the hands of the South Ossetian security services and both showing signs of torture.
43. ‘Perception of the Impact of International Support on Peaceful Transformation of Conflicts in the South Caucasus: View from Tbilisi’ (Caucasian House, 2017)
44. Five of those interviewed (from all sides) said they felt that some international donors with offices in Tbilisi have their favourite NGOs with whom they share common ground, and have provided support for a long time without proper monitoring and control.
45. i.e. the process of installing fences and barbed wires on the boundary between Georgian-controlled territory and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus enforcing a ‘border’.
46. Elaborated further in the section on Nationalism.
47. Similarly, several years ago a study of Georgian TV on the anniversary of what they refer to as the ‘fall of Sukhumi’ revealed similar level of commemoration of this event, but from the mirror opposite perspective to the Abkhaz ‘victory’ commemorations. See Ketil Khapava et al. ‘Myths and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Instrumentalisation of conflict in political discourse’ *International Alert*, 2012.

48. Dzhabiev was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder of the interior minister. He is widely understood to have nothing to do with the crime. His death caused a popular outpouring of grief and anger as photos of his beaten and tortured body circulated in social media.
49. Wherein rival checkpoints were established by the Georgian and South Ossetian authorities as part of an ongoing process of 'borderisation' along the administrative boundary.  
[https://eumm.eu/en/press\\_and\\_public\\_information/press\\_releases/36637/?year=2019&month=9](https://eumm.eu/en/press_and_public_information/press_releases/36637/?year=2019&month=9)
50. 'The ECtHR has generated some interesting case law to the effect that – depending on the circumstances – both the legal authorities and the authority exercising effective control can have responsibility for human rights in a disputed entity. However, the ECtHR cannot directly address the de facto authorities of a disputed entity not recognised by the majority of the international community, and implementation of ECtHR decisions are beyond its control.' (Report Assessing the Human Rights Protection in Eastern European Conflict and Disputed Entities, FIDH, 2014). South Ossetia has unilaterally recognised the ICCPR, the ICESCR, the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and certain protocols to these conventions (information according to the above report).
51. See 'Transitional Justice and Georgia's Conflicts: Breaking the Silence', 2009, International Centre for Transitional Justice, available: <https://ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Georgia-Breaking-Silence-2009-English.pdf>
52. Figures may be disputed, with most analysts relying on the last Soviet census data of 1989 which showed that 164,000 Ossetians lived in Georgia, of which only 65,000 lived in South Ossetia (or 2/3 of the population of South Ossetia). However, during Soviet times, many Ossetians living in Georgia changed their names to sound more Georgian in an attempt to escape structural discrimination. Many people were therefore integrated as Georgians with Georgian surnames, and were not registered as Ossetian in the census. Nevertheless, this did not always afford them immunity from Georgian nationalism, and many of them were forced to flee to Russia and North Ossetia to seek asylum, citing the Ossetian etymology of their surnames.
53. Many more testimonies outlining police impunity and collaboration between official and unofficial armed units are documented in a report by Human Rights Watch/Helsinki entitled 'Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Violations of Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in the Georgia-South Ossetia Conflict', March 1992, available: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/pdfs/g/georgia/georgia.923/georgia923full.pdf>
54. Kaufman 2001, 'Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War'. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press. p. 106
55. 'Imagined Communities', 1983, Benedict Anderson
56. See research facilitated by International Alert on this subject in 'Myths and Conflict in the South Caucasus – instrumentalisation of historical narratives', International Alert, 2013. Available at <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/myths-and-conflict-south-caucasus-1> Also, 'History Education in the South Caucasus', 2014, Philip Gamaghelyan and Sergey Rumyansev, Turkish Policy Quarterly, Spring edition.
57. Including International Alert's series of 'Dialogue through Research' publications and Conciliation Resources.

# The impact of the 2020 Karabakh war on the Georgian- Abkhaz-South Ossetian conflict contexts

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**The outbreak of hostilities in the Nagorny Karabakh context on the morning of 27 September 2020, despite being long predicted, nevertheless came as a shock. It is still too early at the time of writing (January 2021) to make a definitive assessment and understand the full impact of the war on the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts, but it is clear that the context has completely changed from the time when the first round of interviews for this study were conducted between July and September 2020.**

This war shook the region so fundamentally that if we were to conduct this research today, its primary objective would be to focus on the war's impact. This analysis is based on a study of news reports and analysis published both during and after the 6 weeks of hostilities, and a further round of interviews and focus groups with regional and international experts, conducted in December 2020 and January 2021.

The focus of our study was not to analyse the Karabakh conflict and consequences in that context, nor how the Armenian or Azerbaijani sides interpreted the conduct and outcome of the war (though the war rhetoric of the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, their interpretation and public articulation of events is an important information resource, and one which influences perceptions of those observing this conflict). Our focus was solely on its impact on the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflict contexts, how people in those societies interpreted the events and their possible repercussions, and to make recommendations accordingly.

## **The consistency and uniformity of the post-soviet conflicts**

The war in Karabakh highlighted the close ties between the former-Soviet regions, and the commonalities and interconnectedness of these conflicts.

These commonalities are perhaps not quite as obvious in peacetime. On the whole, the societies live separate lives, though they are informed about each other, primarily through television and radio (for the middle-aged and elder populations), and social media and the internet (for the younger populations). Personal contacts are only a secondary source of information after the media. These are often online maintained online, and are usually between people who have already established close relations in real life. Nevertheless, most people understand that there is an element of disinformation, bias, and one-sidedness in their respective media, in line with their own society's objectives. However, often the news is not purposefully propagandistic as such, as it is delivered through stale frames, in an uncritical manner, and with little in-depth analysis or exploration of sensitivities.



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**In the North Caucasus**, where religion is quite prominent in socio-political discourse, the war in Karabakh and its outcome is interpreted as an increase in the Muslim world's influence at the expense of Christian influence in the region. That is despite the fact that Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus practice different denominations of Islam. In this respect, the societies demonstrate a clear level of solidarity with Azerbaijan and Turkey. People recognise the key role played by Turkey, without whom Azerbaijan could not have achieved what it did. They interpret the outcome of the military action as a strengthening of Turkey, not Azerbaijan. There is an expectation now that Turkish influence will be on the rise in Chechnya, Dagestan and other areas of the North Caucasus where Islam is practiced.

**For North Ossetia**, where there is a sizeable diaspora of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the main concern during the outbreak of hostilities was to avoid any local clashes and escalations of conflict between these communities. However, North Ossetians also have questions and concerns in terms of what the outcome of the Karabakh war might mean for South Ossetia, with whom North Ossetia has had a close relationship, particularly since 2008.

People from the North and South Caucasus alike are concerned about the potential for instability and different scenarios that could upset the conflict status quo in the region, even if the current status quo is not to their liking. However, given that fears of possible military escalation in other contexts are widespread, these could in themselves serve as a sustainable deterrent to any resumption of hostilities. This deterrent could be further strengthened through appropriate work.

Some alarm bells were raised in expert circles in relation to the possible reactivation of military action in Eastern Ukraine, where Caucasian volunteer fighters have played a significant role in the past, and are likely to do so again in the event of a resumption of full-scale military action.

## Responses to the Karabakh war as a mirror of positions in the Georgian-Abkhaz-South Ossetian contexts

The initial reactions to the outbreak of hostilities served as a litmus test to gauge the views of individuals and the societies. They revealed clear support for one side or the other. This loyalty and sympathy towards one side mirrored their own conflict context. Societies reflected on the Karabakh situation through the prism of their own societal and personal experiences of conflict and their vision for the future.

The Karabakh war drew the attention of the sides to each other. This resulted in a kind of dialogue of opinions and positions between Georgians, Abkhazians, Ossetians and other communities in the region where there is a high conflict potential. They have been checking each other's reactions and interpretations of events. Knowing how others were reading events during the escalation meant they could assess the situation from different perspectives, and look for arguments to strengthen their own positions. This tendency was particularly apparent in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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For Abkhazia, balancing opinions on the Karabakh conflict has always been and remains a sensitive issue, given the large Armenian community in Abkhazia and the Abkhaz diaspora living in Turkey. The need to constantly strike a balance with Russian interests makes it all the harder. Nevertheless, it is still achievable.

Georgian society was focused on its own interests, both in terms of its own vision of conflict resolution, and in terms of preventing any rise in tensions between its own Armenian and Azerbaijani communities. Georgia carefully monitored the reactions of major regional actors, analysing events in an effort to defend its interests as they pertained to Armenian-Azerbaijani-Turkish-Russian relations.

The Georgians did also show an interest in Abkhaz and Ossetian interpretations of events in Karabakh, but of more concern was Russia's role in the conflict, even when it appeared that Russia was not so actively engaged, and was merely calling for the sides to stop the bloodshed.

It is clear that the military escalation in Karabakh was a trigger for Georgian society. It brought back memories of the August 2008 war, tapped into societal trauma and fears of Russia's disproportionate influence in the region, and fears of the negative consequences such influence could hold for Georgia.

## A changed geopolitical map

The Karabakh conflict has radically changed the geopolitical map, the contours of which are still being redrawn, and could continue to be for some time. However, what is clear is that there has been a reshuffle of stakeholders and new ones have appeared.

Even prior to the Karabakh escalation, interviewees for this study had commented that apart from the main geo-political influencers of the past few decades – Russia, Europe and the USA – Turkey has in recent years become much more active in the region. It has been promoting its economic interests, establishing different kinds of partnerships, and even implementing humanitarian programmes. Now Turkey's leap into the Caucasus has become a new reality.

Attitudes towards Turkey's new status in the Caucasus are not unequivocal, in the same way they are not unequivocal with regard to the events in and around Karabakh itself. There is a fear of the new situation, of where it might lead, and how it all might end. Historical memory plays a role in this respect. Narratives are passed down the generations and are amplified by the media. Many of these narratives are about Turkey, its people, its treatment of its Armenian population, its role in the Caucasus, and its past relations with the Georgians. Today, Turkey is seen as an extension of the Caucasus in terms of proximity, economic connections, religion, ease of access and strong ties with Turkey's large Caucasian diaspora.

## **A revision of roles and a revision of established partnerships and the status quo**

The reverberations of the war in Karabakh have shocked the Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian societies. Concerns about the implications for their own conflicts has stimulated a public reflection regarding their respective strategic partnerships. As is often the case during times of such upheaval, many different ideas and often quite contradictory interpretations are circulating.

Some experts noted that Georgians perceive the strengthened role of Turkey in the region as a possible welcome counterbalance to excessive Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Somewhat paradoxically, this idea sits alongside the potent historical narrative that it was precisely due to Ottoman Turkish persecution that Georgia was forced to turn to Christian Russia for protection in the first place.

Nevertheless, Turkey as an economic actor is received positively in Georgian society in terms of the economic opportunities that might be afforded. Furthermore, Georgian society welcomes Turkey's presence in the region as a NATO member, which Georgians hope might accelerate their own entry into the bloc.

Other Georgian experts commented that Russia was the only side to win from this conflict. In their opinion, Turkey's image in the eyes of the international community had been damaged. The country had lost its reputation as a neutral neighbour and actor, even if it had expanded its influence. Russia, on the other hand, having not even fired a shot, was victorious overall.

However, Abkhaz and South Ossetian societies are demonstrably concerned that Russia has been weakened, and express worry for the implications this might have for their future fate and security.

Abkhazians and Ossetians consider that Georgia did not remain neutral in this conflict, contrary to its official declarations. Some said that Georgia was selective in terms of providing transit through its territory and in so doing supported Azerbaijan, supposing that an Azerbaijani victory could be a good thing for Georgia.

All respondents agreed that the West had suffered a major blow. Many said the West has practically disappeared altogether, or become invisible, unheeded and insignificant compared to Russia and Turkey, who are actively

restructuring their regional influence, and forging new partnerships. Such contradictions in public opinion are frequently observed during periods of great change, unpredictability, and a loss of stability and a sense of security. All of these features are quite characteristic for the region at present.

## The role of Russia according to Abkhazians and Ossetians since the Karabakh war

Apart from widespread opinion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that the war has led to a weakening of Russia's role and changed power dynamics, there are other interesting outcomes which could impact on future developments in relation to the conflicts in the region. More than once, Abkhazians and Ossetians expressed the view that Russia sacrificed the interests of its strategic partner, Armenia, for the sake of maintaining good relations with Turkey and with Azerbaijan, and to improve its international image which had significantly suffered since Crimea.

Some said that Russia had learned the lesson of 2008 and was now being much more circumspect. Instead of recognising Karabakh, Russia had, in the words of one person, "let Azerbaijan and Turkey destroy Karabakh, while it took control of the territory itself."

Anxiety over what happened to Karabakh and Armenia with the tacit connivance of Russia is quite high in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This anxiety carries across to internal discussions on the potential negative scenarios in their own situation. The message people took from the events around Karabakh was that there are no permanent political partnerships. Parties pursue options which are most favourable to them at a particular moment in time, and often, immediate interests can override strategic and long-term interests. As one Abkhaz analyst commented, "Politicians come to power for a limited term, and mostly concentrate on those interests that best serve their tenure and their time."

## The breakdown of a sense of security

The question of Russian security guarantees has resurfaced again in public discourse in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with many now calling into doubt the sustainability of such guarantees since the Karabakh events. Opinions are divided. Some are certain that Russia will maintain its obligations and will intervene in the event of an attack by Georgia. Others dispute this, saying everything could change, that Georgia could come to an agreement with Russia. Others point out that much could change once Putin leaves power.

The question of Russian security guarantees has resurfaced again in public discourse in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with many now calling into doubt the sustainability of such guarantees since the Karabakh events. Opinions are divided.

**In Abkhazia**, experts seemed to try to reassure people that Georgia would not follow Azerbaijan's example and launch an attack as long as Russian troops remain in Abkhazia. They stated this view with such certainty that one might question why they have been demanding Georgia sign an agreement on the non-use of force for so long. On the one hand, this idea of an agreement on the non-use of force appears to have lost relevance in public discourse, given that trust in the very essence of such political treaties and partnerships has been undermined. On the other hand, the need for such an agreement is being articulated in slightly different terms than before. Such an agreement could enable Abkhazia to benefit from new transport projects being initiated in the region. In this respect, internal debates on the merits of a multi-vector foreign policy have re-emerged. At the same time, since the Karabakh war and the deterioration of the security situation in the region, Russia has deemed it necessary to speed up integration processes with Abkhazia. In the absence of a non-use of force treaty with Georgia (and all that may ensue from that), Russian authority over Abkhazia will become even more absolute and uncontested.

**In South Ossetia**, the Karabakh war coincided with an internal political crisis which had been simmering for a long time but reached new proportions after the death of Inal Dzhabiev while in detention. This led to a protracted protest after the Russian defence ministry published the results of their forensic examination which showed the cause of death to be not torture but drug withdrawal. In such a close society, where everyone knows everything about each other and is internally focused and cut off from the world, such a result is not believed by anybody.

The death was of course a human tragedy, and society is still in shock. However, it is also highly symbolic, and has undermined South Ossetian's sense of security in no less a way than Russia's behaviour in relation to Karabakh did. The fact is that for the average South Ossetian, security is the most important thing on earth. Having lived through war, loss, and long years alternating between war and peace, life after 2008 was perceived as being relatively stable and secure. That was in spite of people living among the ruins, and seeing expectations of Russian recognition go unfulfilled.

Of course, the guarantee of security is nurtured by the presence of Russian troops in South Ossetia. There are many issues that people are not completely happy with, such as the environmental impact. However, these concerns are kept under wraps, if only because people value the guarantee of physical security that the troops provide in relation to Georgia. The moment that the medical opinion of the Russian ministry of defence was made known, people felt betrayed in the same way they believe the Armenians were betrayed. People started to believe that a similar fate to the Karabakh scenario might await them too. Such reflections are reinforced by steps taken by the Georgian security services to strengthen their positions around South Ossetia.

## Changing perceptions of models of war, peace and peacebuilding

As perceptions of war change, so do perceptions of peace. And while we know that the idea of war has changed, we know very little of how ideas of peace have changed or could yet change.

As we engaged in this reflective, retrospective process in the summer of 2020, interviewing experts from all three societies, we heard a wide variety of analyses and opinions on a range of topics. These included the causes of the conflicts, what experts felt had been missing from peacebuilding, what was needed to build a peace process, how to build trust between war divided societies, how to reactivate talks on different levels, and how to find ways to achieve justice for all sides. However, the Karabakh war has changed to the core how people reflect on all these issues.

Instead, an understanding is emerging that everything can be resolved quickly through a new kind of war, as long as it is well-prepared and every move is anticipated.

When Georgian plans to develop the same type of military drone technology used by Azerbaijan in Karabakh became known, the Abkhazians and Ossetians interpreted it to mean that Georgia intended to follow Azerbaijan's example. The fact that some Georgians welcome the new Turkish influence in the South Caucasus is also interpreted by Abkhazians and Ossetians as being because Georgians see partnership with Turkey as a potential means to regain control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

An interesting phenomenon is the diminution of the significance of human valour in military action. People realised that battle qualities of heroism, courage, dedication and self-sacrifice are no longer so critical in modern warfare. More significant to victory today is a good propaganda machine, economic power, and military technology such as drones controlled from afar by people who are perhaps devoid of such qualities and values which were previously so important in battle.

However, as perceptions of war change, so do perceptions of peace. And while we know that the idea of war has changed, we know very little of how ideas of peace have changed or could yet change. This is an area which requires careful study.

Interestingly, the war of 2008 and subsequent events did not have such a major impact on the Karabakh context in the way the Karabakh war is now influencing the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts. The war in 2008 did not serve as a model for resolving the Karabakh conflict, partly because of how the sides (Georgia, Ossetia, and Russia) were regarded both during and after. In contrast, the Karabakh war has provoked belligerent moods in the region, and has strengthened the cult of force, through which one can be victorious both on and off the battlefield.

One factor is that the status of ex-combatants after the 2008 war was no advert for war. For various reasons, both in Georgian and South Ossetian societies, ex-combatants did not achieve cult social status after 2008. They were certainly not afforded the same kind of honour that Azerbaijani soldiers are today.

Excessive heroisation, and the rapid social uplift that Azerbaijani fighters have been given serves to heighten the cult of war, force and aggression. That is not only true for Azerbaijan – these effects have spilled over to the surrounding regions. Social media is full of socially seductive photos of previously quite ordinary Azerbaijani boys who now enjoy popularity among their peers. The glorified image of war and the permissibility of violence is transformed into something romantic and sexual.

The full cost of 'victory' cannot be perceived objectively against such a vivid and alluring picture of triumph. The image of victory bought by the lives of so many victims on all sides serves to minimise the value put on human life in the popular imagination. This is not only true for the Karabakh context, but surrounding regions, too.

## **A new world – the rise of the cult of war as a social mechanism for change**

The military rhetoric did not stop with the end of hostilities. On the contrary, it remains prominent in the socio-political debates in the region, including in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian contexts. And paradoxical as it may seem, war has become associated with the changes that people want to see in the region.

Apart from this, the Karabakh war demonstrated to the three societies that coming to some form of agreement before someone else decides to you is not only beneficial, it is arguably essential. However, it also showed that it was necessary to be prepared for war, given that it had recently been shown to be an effective, tried-and-tested method.

Azerbaijani rhetoric was built on the premise that all paths towards a resolution by peaceful means had collapsed, leaving no option but to resort to military force. Such rhetoric has propagated the idea of war as an effective method to achieve one's aims while boosting popularity. This was a concept that had previously been lost in the aftermath of the August 2008 war.

The Karabakh war has become an example to the societies of how 'victor' and 'vanquished' status can become switched through military action. It appears to show how easy and profitably one can switch one's identity, and gain respect. However, this misses the point that without a peaceful resolution to the conflicts, the societies could remain in a perpetual cycle of such an 'exchange'. 'Ready to conquer' has become a new characteristic of 'peace', but only one side can win by military means, or there are no winners at all.

## Conclusion

The conflict has not ended with the signing of an agreement, and its consequences will continue to reverberate around the region for some time. The region will continue to experience flux and change as the different contexts influence each other.

The diverse interpretations of the Karabakh war create parallel realities in terms of perceptions across the region. In talking to experts from different sides, it became clear that events were interpreted differently depending on the prism through which they viewed them. Sources of their information also played a role, as did their objectives as a society. All sides are inclined to see what they want to see instead of the reality, seek advantages for their side, and find ways to justify their own political positions. The different views on the Karabakh war in the South and North Caucasus and across the post Soviet region are in themselves a clear reflection of the state of those conflicts.

For peace practitioners, military action in Karabakh showed that the cost of a quick solution to the conflict is too high for all sides. And today's conflict dynamic shows that the sides are still far from a real solution to the conflict. The war in Karabakh forced a reflection on the value of compromise as opposed to rigidly sticking to maximalist positions, even if the compromise on offer seems impossible or unacceptable. The societies are reflecting on the fact that Armenia lost far more through war than they would have lost through the compromise solution that was on the table.

However, the current moods of favouring a military solution to the conflicts demonstrate the potential for further destabilisation across the region. A new appreciation of war as a potentially effective means to achieve one's goals has emerged. That is true of political goals (such as the control of territory) or goals more related to social status and self-actualisation. Such sentiments, which are further boosted through viral social media, will continue to act as a slow-burning time bomb for as long as its seductive parallel reality proves stronger than the desire for a broad public critical reflection on the real state of affairs.

## Recommendations

The Karabakh war demonstrated to the conflicting parties that they should diversify their partnerships and be more pragmatic in this regard. It showed that it was important to not be too reliant on one partner alone. The fragile status quo should now be treated as an opportunity rather than a dead end that only someone else can resolve.

Long-term mechanisms for civil observation of the situation are needed in order to monitor attitudes towards the conflicts, conflict dynamics, and influence. These are also needed to provide a critical analysis of the conflict context to the wider public, to mitigate disinformation, and reduce the risk of escalations.

Cooperation across the Caucasus and the entire post-Soviet region on matters to do with civil peacebuilding is needed in order to build partnerships which can develop preventive mechanisms, build confidence, and identify other ways to work for peace between the societies divided by conflict.



# Conclusions and recommendations

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**This study has been an attempt to examine the journey that civil peacebuilders have taken over the past 30 years, since the conflicts started to emerge. The aim has been to draw lessons, assess the current state of the sector and make recommendations about where to go next.**

We heard of local civil society's efforts to prevent violent conflict amid the chaos of the disintegration of the USSR, their humanitarian efforts during and immediately after the wars, and their often difficult and painful encounters through dialogue. Central to all these efforts was the search for mutual understanding that could facilitate peaceful resolution, and also the search for ways to rehabilitate their societies and build a better future. Through the years there were moments when it felt like progress was being made on a political level, and many talked about the transformational impacts experienced by those engaged in peace processes. The report examines factors which contributed to success along with hindering factors, both in terms of the peacebuilding sector itself, and the wider political, societal, and psychological dimensions of the conflict context. Over time, peace initiatives have become more defined by their limitations than by their success as they have come up against political and societal resistance and overt obstruction. At times, maintaining the closing space for dialogue became an achievement, as peace initiatives have also had to navigate periodic shifts in the political environment, and significantly, the August war of 2008, which was a complete game changer on many levels.

Bringing together the main findings, we present a holistic picture of the current state of peacebuilding in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts. Accordingly, we make some recommendations on ways forward.

The recommendations are informed by the regional and international experts who were interviewed. Their views were further enhanced by our own analysis and vision of what might have the most optimal impact on conflict dynamics. The recommendations are designed to stimulate discussion of how to address topical and taboo themes in what we propose should be an ongoing process of regular analysis underpinning and driving practical action. In this respect, we expect that new recommendations may arise, or that these recommendations may need to be modified due to the rapidly changing social and political dynamics in the region. Even during the period in which this study was conducted we have seen major contextual upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Karabakh, the increasing influence of Turkey in the region, and now the evolving internal political dynamic in Russia. The long term consequences of all these events on the conflict contexts still remain to be seen.

The war in Karabakh had an impact far beyond the region. While attitudes towards independence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have not changed, the war has shifted the parameters of public debate, and a new dynamic in Russian-Abkhaz and Russian-Ossetian relations has emerged. And while some peace practitioners may conclude that the war forced a reflection on the value of timely compromise, elsewhere in the wider region, a new appreciation of war as a potentially effective means to achieve one's goals has emerged, bringing the potential for further destabilisation across the region.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed vulnerabilities worldwide, but some societies are more affected than others. While one positive side effect has been the greater use of modern

technologies to break down borders, such technologies are inadequate to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and are limited in the way they can facilitate peacebuilding processes. Most of the respondents noted that online peacebuilding initiatives are rather superficial, and do not actually work if the people involved do not already have a trusting relationship offline. The recent enthusiasm for facilitating online peacebuilding should be treated with some caution.

Below we present our observations on the current state of the peacebuilding sector, and thereafter present recommendations in terms of approaches which are relevant to the peacebuilding sector, and specific themes that require particular attention. Some of these recommendations represent a mind shift in how we understand conflict, peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Others are more project-oriented, with some references made to past projects which brought results, but were not continued for various reasons. Many recommendations cut across multiple themes. For example, the themes of trauma, injustice and insecurity are interrelated, and in turn influence political discourse and internal politics. As such, the recommendations should be taken as a whole.

## The current state of the peacebuilding sector

The idea for this study originally emanated from a sense that civil peace processes had become stuck, with earlier achievements feeling increasingly distant. Apart from exploring contextual limitations, interviewees reflected a great deal on the state of the peacebuilding sector itself. Accordingly, this study identified a trend indicating a **decline in the quality of civil peacebuilding**. When asked to recall the most significant or impactful peacebuilding initiatives, people would mainly talk about initiatives which ended some time ago. When pressed to reflect on the current day, respondents started to think up recommendations for initiatives they would like to see in the future. Experts and NGO leaders in interviews spoke more of lost opportunities, or of how more could have been done or could have been done differently. The only current-day initiatives that were highlighted as strategic and change-oriented were those which built on long-term institutional experience. However, the number of these could be counted on one hand.

These and other indicators show that even people engaged in peacebuilding initiatives do not necessarily perceive them as peacebuilding in substance. There are many explanations for the aforementioned decline in quality, and these are explored in the main text. However, personal values, competence, expertise, institutional memory, and accumulated experience were outlined as fundamental for leaders and facilitators of such work. These skills and qualities are essential in order to steer a process in a strategic direction, and to set an example that can inspire the next generation to engage in such processes.

Another trend identified was that of **the pursuit of new ideas or 'innovative' approaches at the expense of 'old'**, tried-and-tested approaches which many respondents valued much more and felt were more effective. However, resurrecting some of these old ideas may be problematic, as the human resources with the special set of skills to facilitate such processes effectively are in short supply. There is a clear generational aspect to this, and there was concern that there did not seem to be a generational change taking place within local civil society working for peace.

The older generation complained that younger people do not take on responsibility, or that their involvement was limited to 'innovative' but ultimately non strategic initiatives. Meanwhile, the younger generation complained that older people do not give them the space they need. This inter-generational tension deserves special attention, taking into consideration that the younger generation have grown up in a different context, and with different aspirations to their elders.

The search for 'new' ideas need not mean abandoning tried-and-tested approaches and expertise that has been accumulated through decades of experience. On the contrary, there should be a stronger focus on developing the skills and qualities of the next generation along these lines. It is vital to foster the human resources needed to facilitate such complex and sensitive processes, while creating the space needed for the next generation to explore different leadership styles.

It is necessary to reintroduce a culture of more **reflective practice in the peacebuilding field**. This used to be acknowledged, but the practice has since been neglected. By this, we mean a return to a long-term approach, the careful nurturing of institutional memory, and being open to learn lessons (not only from one's own work, but also from others). Within the sector there are competing demands to appear professional and knowledgeable while at the same time remaining curious and constantly learning. As individuals, organisations and the sector as a whole, we should be able to acknowledge what we do not know, and doing so should be a mark of professionalism. This would broaden the space for more effective strategic planning and ultimately avoid complicating matters.

Accordingly, approaches to **monitoring and evaluation** need to change. Evaluation should focus on measuring human change on the individual and societal levels, and become part of a cycle of regular analysis and strategic planning. In recent years, resources and effort put into evaluating peacebuilding appear to dwarf the act of peacebuilding itself. The pressure to measure often drives the way projects are programmed and designed, which in turn distorts the process. Monitoring and evaluation have become quite technical and 'professionalised'. Consequently, there is often a risk of prioritising form over content, and of missing the important nuances of peacebuilding that are harder to evidence. The paradox is that the essence of evaluation can get lost in such a technical approach, and a space is created in which everything can be interpreted as peacebuilding. This results in growing bureaucracy taking precedence over focusing on the needs of the region, the societies, and the people affected by conflict.

Another interesting observation is the tendency for the conflicts to rub off on the peacebuilding sector itself. **Competition and discord** between different peacebuilding actors often reflect the rivalry and division between the conflict parties. Perhaps this is because we put the division and rivalry of the parties at the heart of peacebuilding work in the first place. However, it could also be down to a combination of the need for political sensitivity (and with it, an element of secrecy) and competition for resources (which in turn breeds jealousy and mistrust). Whatever the reason though, this discord is not conducive to effective strategic peacebuilding and puts a significant additional burden on local partners on top of all the other bureaucratic and political stresses.

There is no blueprint for peace in the region, no single approach, and it cannot be delivered by just one organisation or even a consortium. The recommendations below will only be effective

if there is **communication, cooperation and synergy** between the different areas of work and between those engaged in it. For example, dialogue alone cannot bring peace without also addressing societal trauma, or addressing human rights. There needs to be better synergy between different spheres of work, and between humanitarian, human rights and peacebuilding organisations. Such synergy and cooperation within the sector could then become a model for communication and cooperation between the divided societies across the region. It could positively impact on regional partnerships and facilitate a better understanding of the overall context, which in turn could improve strategic planning and response.

**Expectation management** is vital for all those engaged in peacebuilding, whether they may be local civil society actors, or their international partners and donors. Expectations should be continuously reviewed in terms of how realistic they are. Neglecting this can lead to frustration, burnout, loss of trust in the process, and loss of belief in oneself. Working on conflict is stressful and unpredictable, and civil society actors are put under a great deal of professional, political and personal pressure. They put themselves at risk for the greater good, raising socially sensitive issues, asking politicians uncomfortable questions, and speaking up when others are silent. They need to be able to put mechanisms in place to prevent burnout (both on a professional and personal level) and support their mental and physical wellbeing. Without such mechanisms, people leave the sector and are not replaced due to a general reluctance to take on such a thankless task. There is then the risk that 'GoNGOs' will take the place of real civil society.

## A holistic approach to conflict transformation – broadening the parameters

It is worth returning to the Lederach Conflict Transformation Framework, as this articulates the types of change processes required, and the desired outcomes or dynamics with which we need to work.

- **Personal level transformation:**
  - » Understanding of self and of the other (breaking down enemy images/building empathy)
  - » Shifting worldview
  - » Critical thinking
  - » Behaviours (personal/professional).
- **Relationships across divides:**
  - » Trust and communication
  - » Cooperative relationships (where the trust facilitates action).
- **Policy level or practical impacts:**
  - » Outcomes specifically related to dialogue processes
  - » Violence prevention
  - » Human rights protection.
- **Societal level impacts:**
  - » The development of civil society
  - » Influencing the discourse.

Work on the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts should approach these **conflicts as a dynamic system**, and take into consideration the interconnected causal relationships in all their complexity. It should not be limited to a particular timeframe or specific events. The societies do not distinguish between different stages of the conflicts, and those working for their transformation should also avoid such compartmentalisation.

The starting point for working on the conflicts should be a recognition of fundamental human rights and dignity of all affected persons, regardless of their ethnicity or status, eschewing double standards in this respect. While acknowledging that there are unique and specific obstacles to engaging with the authorities in the two societies (in particular in South Ossetia), it should be stressed that withholding certain types of support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia for fears of 'creeping recognition' amounts to structural discrimination. Even if in the immediate post-war years there were grounds for such a policy, over time the policy has contributed to the deepening divisions and alienation of the societies. The EU's policy of 'engagement without recognition' was ground breaking in its time, but is widely felt to have fallen short of its potential.

We must take into account the fact that **physical isolation creates mental isolation**. And it is vital to remember that the longer the societies remain in such a state, the more difficult it will be to engage them, even on issues which they agree might be useful. If a society becomes isolated, one cannot expect it to remain unchanged when the political situation allows you to return to it. And in the meantime, neither the political situation nor the societies will get any less problematic.

People highlighted the increasing divergence in the social and economic opportunities for the local populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, compared to Georgia. The decline in education, healthcare, and institutional protections such as rule of law have contributed to an outflow of young people, a brain drain, and the degradation of society and public institutions. The EU and other international donors should further develop ways of engaging in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They should also consider different types of intervention, including internal and institutional development in areas such as education, health, social services, policing, and the judiciary (training and reform). The respective authorities in Tbilisi, Sukhum/i and Tskhinval/i should refrain from politicising such initiatives. This list is not exhaustive, and each area requires a whole separate set of more detailed recommendations. There also needs to be further exploration of what is possible in the political context. However, the main point is that a shift in policy is needed. There will also have to be an element of 'catch up' with the levels of technical assistance provided to Georgia over the years.

**Equal parties and bilateral dialogue.** Along the same lines of shaking up formats, the EU and other international stakeholders should invest in whatever is needed to enable Abkhazians and Ossetians to engage with the Georgians as equal parties to the conflicts, and to engage in dialogue on specific issues of mutual interest (such as in Gal/i and Leningor/Akhalgori). This includes facilitating bilateral dialogue between the Georgian and Abkhaz and South Ossetian sides. Regardless of how one views the legitimacy of the de facto authorities, refusing to recognise them as a side to the conflict also denies people living in those societies the ability to demand accountability of their authorities

in terms of conflict-related policies. No-one in Abkhazia or South Ossetia is untouched by the conflicts, and many are still impacted on a day to-day basis. Denying them any agency in terms of resolution is a factor further alienating the sides. At the very least, having a right to be emotionally involved in the process is an important part of healing.

It is important for Georgians and international community to understand the underlying needs driving the Abkhaz and South Ossetian demand that Georgia sign an agreement on the non-use of force. Security, or the absence of security, is the main trump card in political debates, and the main reason to turn to Russia protection. Since the Karabakh war and the deterioration of the security situation in the region, Russia has accelerated legal integration processes with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the absence of a non-use of force treaty with Georgia, Russian authority over Abkhazia and South Ossetia will become even more absolute and uncontested.

**Create parallel dialogue process(es).** There is a need for new dialogue processes or platforms which could complement the Geneva International Discussions. Such a platform or process would have to be one that allowed the participation of civil society and some mid-level officials (Track 1.5) alongside international negotiators, advisers, and co-chairs. It could experiment with different themes (e.g., women, Gal/i, trade, human rights, education, etc.) and formats (bi/trilateral, regional), with the objective of sharing analysis and ideas, and drafting proposals for conflict-transformation initiatives. This would not duplicate GID themes or replace other ongoing civil processes, but rather supplement them. Each session would incorporate pre- and post-sessions featuring internal civil society dialogue. There would need to be some carefully managed media coverage, which would require close cooperation between civil peace actors and journalists. The timing is ripe for this, as the Karabakh war of 2020 has changed the context in the region in ways that are still unfolding. All this warrants additional efforts and new formats of dialogue.

In this respect, **working in a multi-lateral, Caucasus-wide format** would appear to be prudent. Internal and external conflicts have many points of confluence and mutually impact each other. Dialogue in a regional, multilateral format can therefore enhance the analysis conducted in bilateral and internal dialogues. This could in turn serve to highlight the similarities of the parties, common problems, concerns, interests, culture, and the value of multiculturalism. Themes revolving around shared history, cultural traits and common interests across the Caucasus region offer many opportunities for less politicised dialogue and exchange. These initiatives could, for example, focus on cultural, ecological or economic issues.

Such processes could support the **engagement of Russian experts** in civil society dialogue initiatives. Russia's role in the conflicts is acknowledged, yet Russian civil society is under represented in civil society initiatives on the conflicts. There should be more efforts to engage with Russian academics, think tanks, journalists, bloggers, and civil society representatives in order to facilitate joint analysis on Russia's role, aims, and interests through multilateral dialogue. This could help to reduce the image of (and actual) anti-Russian bias in Western (and Georgian) approaches to the conflicts – and to South Ossetia and Abkhazia in particular – and create a more balanced engagement. It could also help facilitate dialogue between Abkhazians and Russians, and Ossetians and Russians, rather than assuming they are one and the same.

**Conflict analysis should be a mutual, ongoing process, conducted together with local and international actors.** It should create a space to build mutual understanding and the development of a joint conflict transformation strategy – one which supports and empowers civil society in all three societies. A hindering factor in conflict transformation is the mismatch between the expectations of donors, international facilitators/peacebuilding NGOs and local communities in terms of the goals each wants to achieve, and the ways in which they think they should pursue them. An ongoing process of collaborative analysis would be useful to discuss the goals, objectives and motivations of the actors engaged both on a personal level and as organisations.

**Transparency.** Civil society should be more vocal about their aims, approaches, values and impact. They should also ensure that their declared aims correlate to their actions. The lack of transparency (due to political sensitivities) and frequent discrepancy between declared and undeclared goals act as the main destroyer of trust, both within the societies and across the divide. Greater transparency should help the societies understand the link between such initiatives and reduce the likelihood of a resumption of hostilities further down the line. This could also help improve the image of peacebuilding within the societies, and thus attract talented young minds into such processes and renew expertise. The importance of transparency is the same for both local and international actors. To some extent, international donors and facilitators have become hostage to the politicisation of their efforts to facilitate and establish conditions for peace in the societies. This is because in their search for confidence building measures and out of conflict sensitivity, they are also forced to contort their messages which increases the potential for manipulation.

Similarly, **conflict analysis should be produced in a way that is accessible to a public audience and used as a basis for public debate within the societies.** Doing so will increase the level of critical thinking and make it possible to highlight aspects of the conflict, such as who benefits from the current state of affairs, conflict dynamics, and whether a resumption of hostilities is likely. This should in turn stimulate the desire to work on prevention and develop a vision of what needs to be done. In order to achieve this, there needs to be a willingness to think and act outside existing frameworks, and to identify new approaches and internal reforms in all three societies.

**Conflict and conflict transformation should not be viewed solely in terms of interethnic relations.** It is important to develop a culture of working on conflict through non-violent means on all levels. For example, working on interpersonal, intra-societal conflicts can also help change attitudes towards working on the political and external conflicts, and all are interrelated. When the external enemy is out of reach, there is a tendency to search for an enemy within, as the unresolved conflicts simmer and manifest themselves in other forms of aggression (including towards themselves and members of their own societies).

**Conceptualising peace.** Broadening the concept of conflict should be accompanied with a public discussion on the concept of peace. Since ‘peacebuilding’ has become synonymous with ‘capitulation’ in the public consciousness, there is a need to reconceptualise what ‘peace’ means. Following the Karabakh war, we see how attitudes towards war have changed – war has been



rehabilitated as a potential solution to conflicts. However, we do not know how perceptions of peace may have changed as a result. What is 'peace', and what should be done to build it? Such discussions are needed both within the peacebuilding community and within broader society.

Peacebuilding should be seen to have **some practical value**. The study showed that people do not make a connection between the unresolved conflicts and their quality of life. The societies must understand the correlation between peacebuilding processes and the decreased probability of military action. Projects with specific, tangible benefits should be supported alongside analytical studies and public discussion on themes such as the cost of conflict and the benefits of peace.

**Youth work.** Young people who grew up amid the ruins of conflict are in need of a particular kind of rehabilitation in order to come to terms with today's reality. There needs to be an honest assessment of the opportunities and limitations they face in order to encourage them to move forward, rather than retreat into what is already an isolated community.

It is essential to bring the younger generations into the peacebuilding field to ensure some continuity. Currently this is insufficiently addressed. It is necessary to understand why young people are not taking on the mantle of their elders, and address those barriers. Young people from all three societies noted that not only do they have no particular desire to talk to the other side, but that soon they will have no common language. Georgians are forgetting Russian and giving preference to English language learning, while in Abkhazia and South Ossetia the influence of Russian remains, and the majority do not have knowledge of English. It is necessary to maintain and develop the ability of the parties to communicate in a common language, whether that is through expanding English language training in Abkhazia/South Ossetia or Russian language training in Georgia. Both are important to ensure the parties can continue to engage in direct dialogue in the future.

It is important to cultivate a **culture of conflict prevention and non-violent communication** in schoolchildren and young people in particular. Being able to work on one's own complexes, having the ability to understand and deal with one's own problems, and being able to recognise and empathise with other people's needs are important skills. These should be promoted as such, and should form an essential component of a child's personal development and wellbeing. This would prepare them for negotiating difficult conflict-related situations in the future, whether that is within their families, communities or across divides.

**Donors should broaden their support to civil society** in this respect. In addition, funding for Abkhaz and South Ossetian civil society initiatives should not be solely or explicitly linked to peacebuilding or confidence building with the Georgian side. There is already acknowledgement of the value of 'parallel' projects (rather than 'joint' projects), and of the peacebuilding potential of work within the societies. However, the framing of such initiatives leads to discrepancies between declared and actual aims, as well as perverse incentives for participation. Ultimately, this framing destroys trust internally and makes for poor PR for the international community within these societies. It is important to support democratic processes, facilitate de-isolation, and link the transformation of the conflict with a transformation of the internal context.

**Core funding.** Given that one of the major stresses is the high level of bureaucracy, short funding cycles, competition between NGOs, etc., donors should consider making multi-year core grants available to NGOs and streamlining their financial and administrative requirements. This would enable local organisations to focus on their core work as well as invisible non-projectised work, while enabling them to seek funding for additional projects.

Donors could consider including trusted local experts on grant competition evaluation panels, combining the best of local and international expertise. Mechanisms could be put in place to ensure conflict of interests are minimised, such as when an expert is also an applicant. This would also give greater recognition to experts with a deep knowledge of the context and the conflicts, and who have demonstrated an ability to remain objectively neutral. Core support could also be provided to such civil society actors (i.e. those who are prepared to react publicly to the situation, and who are willing to maintain regular contacts with the sides, with the aim of de-escalation).

One form of conflict prevention could be the implementation of a more flexible funding mechanism to support **rapid reaction** to changes in the context before they spiral out of control. Such a rapid reaction mechanism would also prove to be essential to facilitate a timely response when events do spiral out of control. This would be a matter of credibility for the peacebuilding community. People need to see that their work is relevant even in the midst of war, and not only when the fighting has stopped. Otherwise, cynical attitudes towards peacebuilding are reinforced. This funding mechanism could be managed by local and international experts from the region alongside the donor. This would increase the effectiveness and mobility of response to situations as they arise, as well as strengthen the profiles of people working on the conflicts.

## Thematic recommendations

### Trauma, justice, and human security

One of the key aspects driving these conflicts relates to the basic human need for the **preservation of dignity**. Human dignity lies at the heart of human rights and justice, and an individual's perception of self and self-worth. The denial of dignity, whether on the individual or societal level, can be a key factor in fomenting conflict. Conversely, its restoration can facilitate resolution. The denial of dignity is traumatising, and the reparation of dignity is central to overcoming trauma. But people have different ideas as to what dignity is, and it is important to understand what meaning it holds for people. Developing an understanding across the three societies of how each side interprets dignity can build mutual understanding based on the commonality of human and social needs. Accordingly, it can help ensure that these needs are met.

**Trauma sensitivity.** Working on trauma, both on an individual and societal level, is very difficult and sensitive, and there are no readymade solutions. This recommendation should be taken as highlighting the importance of the issue, given that it has been underestimated and neglected in the past. Understanding and acknowledging the problem is the first step to healing, yet it is

currently poorly understood or a taboo subject. The psychological trauma of violent conflicts still manifests itself in many areas of people's lives, and in the societies as a whole. It is necessary to work with both individual and societal trauma, which will not die with the generation that fought on the front lines, but will instead mutate and return in unexpected ways. It is important to understand how trauma manifests itself and therefore how to deal with certain behaviours, including decision making. Working with trauma can also be a unifying factor across the divide.

We propose that trauma-analysis should be integrated as a tool in conflict and context analysis. Trauma can be seen as part of the context and a factor that influences human behaviour, rather than something that should or can be 'healed'. Conceptualising trauma as 'in the room' alongside different actors could help in understanding how it influences human behaviour, on an individual and societal level.

**Preparing the societies for transitional justice.** In the absence of a settlement, it is difficult to imagine any formal transitional justice process through which reparations and restitution might be worked through. In the meantime, it is necessary to review what steps are possible to take in the current context which could help prepare the societies for such a process. In doing so, it will be important to anticipate risks and sensitivities, including politicised resistance. Tellingly, all the recommendations set out in a paper devoted to this issue dating from 2009<sup>58</sup> are still pertinent today (though some initiatives which could be situated within the transitional justice framework have been started in the meantime).<sup>59</sup> Some of these recommendations covered issues within the remit of civil society organisations. These included raising awareness of transitional justice themes and approaches; building civil society capacity on all sides to promote a transitional justice agenda; promoting documentation and truth-seeking in these contexts; and supporting a second-track dialogue process focusing on transitional justice and encouraging local actors to explore policy options in this area. However, issues of justice necessarily require engagement with the authorities on all sides. That is particularly the case when such issues involve displaced persons, and reparations and compensation, including for property loss on all sides.

**Acknowledging wrongs.** In the Georgian context, the national conversation about the conflicts needs to incorporate the phenomenon of Zviadism and the aggressive nationalism associated with that period. There needs to be an acknowledgement of the mistakes and wrongs done in its name. Georgian society needs to change its nationalistic image within Abkhaz and South Ossetia society. Its silence on this issue (which some suggest stems from guilt) breeds ignorance and thus denial. In turn, it reduces any motivation of Abkhazians or South Ossetians to engage. 'National identity' is not an intrinsic quality, it is a construct, and the roots of nationalism were laid in history. If a conversation can eschew identity politics and instead build understanding of identity and the nature of nationalism, this could potentially pave the way for an apology. This in itself would be a fundamental step within a wider conflict transformation strategy. An apology should be perceived as strength, and if prepared and framed in the right way, it could serve as a 'reset' and a factor in building trust and restoring the possibility of a conversation. The first step lies with the stronger party. A unilateral apology could stimulate internal reflection in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on how they should respond. This reflection could mark the start of a healing process.

**Protecting human rights and day-to-day justice.** Until progress can be made on the big conflict-related issues (reparation, restitution), there is a need to work on the level of day to day justice. This is particularly true of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where there has been little investment into the functioning of the judicial and criminal justice system, and where many legal and administrative irregularities are a legacy of the conflict. For example, an expansion of core support could be offered to civil human rights centres, and also the ombudsman's offices. This recommendation pertains to the protection of human rights on all sides in terms of basic dignity. Such protection should be afforded irrespective of ethnicity, and 'human rights' as a term should not be used as a stick to beat one's opponent with. There is a role for civil society organisations in monitoring and providing public education in terms of human rights, but often human rights organisations come across as adversarial and in opposition to the authorities. But human rights support can also involve the provision of practical support to the population and the facilitation of constructive collaboration with the relevant bodies on correcting discriminatory practices and regulations.<sup>60</sup>

**Human Security.** The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many areas of vulnerability of the populations in terms of day to day human security, non-the-least in the sphere of healthcare. Cooperation on healthcare is one practical area in which dialogue and sharing expertise has been valued and could be expanded, in particular as the pandemic situation is likely to continue for some time. This is an area that should be depoliticised, and also less shrouded in secrecy and taboo. It is an area both of mutual interest and humanitarian concern.

The populations of Gal/i and Akhagori/Leningor have been particularly disadvantaged in this respect. In addition to addressing specific problem of healthcare access, it would be beneficial in both contexts to establish **civilian monitoring** of the human security situation to support local civic actors to monitor, identify and analyse local problems and devise solutions at the level where intervention is required.<sup>61</sup> The pandemic has highlighted the need for systematic monitoring even further, not just in terms of monitoring physical security, but in terms of a whole range of human security needs and problems faced by the population. Such monitoring, if conducted regularly and consistently, could serve as an early-warning system, and identify issues and solutions before they reach crisis point. A system could be run alongside or in coordination with local public advice centres, human rights centres, or crisis centres run by CSOs and in communication with the local authorities.

## Public discourse

There are common traits to be found in the nature of public discourse across the three societies which were explored at length in the main text. In brief, however, all three societies understand that there is some element of **superficiality in their public rhetoric** on the conflicts. Each side feels the need to make periodic public statements to the effect that 'all is well', and there is a tendency for the sides to address their messages to their respective patrons (Russia or the West) rather than to one another directly. Ultimately, this means that the message and meaning gets lost.

Furthermore, over time society begins to believe their rhetoric. At the very least, it has become normalised to hold one opinion privately and express another publicly. People exercise **self-censorship**, and are keen to maintain their self-image (the way people and society want to be seen) and resist the image of them that forms externally (the way others see them).

All three societies have developed a similar mechanism of **narrative control**, and anyone who goes against the accepted narrative on the conflicts is accused of being pro-Georgian (in Abkhazia or South Ossetia), or pro-Russian (in Georgia). This gives rise to numerous internal conflicts and discourages healthy debate which could otherwise explore solutions to many issues.

In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the public are confident that they know everything there is to know about their conflicts, that they have their finger on the pulse, and can monitor dynamics, trends and make prognoses. However, such certainty can make societies vulnerable as they stop asking critical questions and challenging their opinions. In doing so, they can potentially miss new insights into today's state of affairs as they view them through yesterday's eyes. Their current positions are to them a justification of the path they have travelled, and a failure to re-examine their past analysis from a critical perspective could leave them unprepared for certain developments in the future.

All three societies have a **fear of change**, in case change is for the worse. This could be a legacy of the trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is a steadfast inertia, with people rapidly becoming accustomed to a particular situation as it currently is, accepting it as the new normal. At the same time, there is a widespread dissatisfaction with regard to quality of life, human rights, freedom of speech, economic opportunities, corruption, the general direction in which the society is heading, the political situation, the development of strategic partnerships, etc. This inertia puts a damper on public discussions. To make things worse, **propaganda sends messages conflating demands for a better life with danger**.

All of the above issues (the addressing of messages to external audiences instead of direct dialogue, the desire to present a certain image of oneself that requires turning a blind eye to certain realities, self-censorship, the fear of change, the fear of challenging one's own fragile position, not to mention the distorting effect of propaganda and political spin) serve to reduce the effectiveness of public debate. They result in misunderstandings, internal conflicts, and the persistent ignoring of important issues. What's more, they give rise to illusory images and unrealistic assessments of the current situation.

There is a need to stimulate **healthy public debate, build critical thinking**, and tackle the paradoxes and contradictions that emerge between the desired (and illusory) images that circulate and the real state of affairs. For healthy public debate, it is necessary to continue investing in developing local analytical potential and provide opportunities for local analysis to reach international circles.

**The role of journalists** is crucial in this respect, as is cooperation between journalists and civil society peacebuilders, in order for messages to be adequately communicated and understood

among the wider public. This is not a recommendation concerning 'peace journalism', but rather relates to the earlier point about the transparency of the civil peacebuilding sector.

There needs to be an ongoing **public discussion on the conflicts** and a constant reflection on the path that has been travelled. It is essential to work on the level of public education, so that all sides understand the others' interpretation of events in the lead-up to and during the active phase of hostilities. In Georgia in particular, there is much ignorance about some of the details of the conflicts, in part due to Georgia's own silence over certain events leading up to the outbreak of hostilities in the early 1990s. Only through public discussion of this kind will it be possible to think about bringing the sides closer, understand each other's positions, and help the societies understand in which direction they are currently heading.

**Breaking down stereotypes and working with nationalism** can be approached through education and different methods of fostering critical thinking in relation to ourselves as individuals, our relationship to the world, and how our ideas about ourselves and others are formed. At the same time, personal transformation and critical thinking can be brought about through rethinking history, national narratives, and family narratives. This can be achieved through public discussions on the origins and manifestations of nationalism, the nature of conflict, and relations towards national minorities. Attempts to learn about others will similarly help broaden horizons.

**Sensitive conversations.** Civil society should begin to grapple with some of the starker realities related to the conflicts, based on in-depth analysis that does not shy away from the unpalatable issues, or focus only on what is desired. Ignoring or putting off the difficult realities and scenarios potentially stores up problems for the future. These may include lack of preparedness to anticipate new conflict tendencies, a failure to prepare the population for difficult decisions, etc. Such a refocus on difficult issues could help generate new ideas that could promote peaceful conflict transformation. It could also facilitate strategic planning based on qualitative analysis and the ability to predict possible future trends.

**New challenges.** Such an analysis could take into account the impact of new developments in the context, such as the impact of COVID-19 and the Karabakh war, the rise of Turkish influence in the region, and the changes taking place in Russia today and across the world. This could in turn foster an awareness of the commonality of problems and threats, and the need to cooperate in response to them.

**Regional dynamics.** Similarly, an examination of the similarities and relationships that still exist between the former Soviet republics, as well as the drivers and consequences of conflicts in the region can build a fuller picture of the interrelatedness of different processes and thus help identify the best ways of addressing them.

**Terminology and meaning.** It is important to have a public discussion within the societies so that people know how different parties understand terms and signifiers such as 'status', 'independence', 'territorial integrity', 'occupation', 'national dignity', and 'recognition'. Similarly, it is important to know what 'return' means for the younger generation of IDPs

who were brought up on the idea of returning to a place they have never been. The meaning invested in terms such as these changes over time, depending on the context or political trends. They can also hold contradictions within them that need unpacking. For example, the way in which Abkhazians and South Ossetians view the terms 'recognition' and 'status' has evolved over time. While they initially signified the basic need for physical security and identity, they now imply esteem and development. The word 'recognition' also carries emotional weight in referring (consciously or otherwise) to recognition of injustice, of the adversity they have faced, and of their tragedies and pain. Political recognition is assumed to be a means to these ends, yet there is an ambivalence towards political recognition by Georgia, as this would mean the return of Georgians to their former residence – something that provokes serious concerns in the absence of other forms of recognition.

At the same time, it is important to conduct dialogue and agree on terminology such as place names, and come to mutually agreeable formulations. Details such as these are a source of great irritation and a psychological barrier for honest engagement. Indeed, they are 'micro-aggressions' – everyday acts of non-recognition of the other's reality. Although this would ultimately be a major political undertaking, it's necessary to attempt to do this outside a political framework too.

**Education.** All parties talked about the need for a well-educated populace as fundamental to a strong society that can build peace. Correspondingly, they spoke of the need to reform schools and universities, both in terms of quality and methods of teaching, and of diversifying and updating the range of subjects on the curriculum. This is more pertinent in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian contexts, where there has been less investment.<sup>62</sup>

There is also some good practice to draw on, as well as initiatives which have already been piloted and which could be replicated or scaled up. For example, teacher training for English-language teachers; work on history textbooks, in particular in Georgia, where a variety of textbooks are in use.<sup>63</sup>

It was proposed in future to have more investment in distance education. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for more investment in distance and online education, and for further expanding the opportunities they can offer in relation to international higher education. Many respondents praised efforts to facilitate access to scholarships for international universities. However, they also expressed regret at the limited number of students who could benefit. Again, there is good practice in distance education in the field of peace and conflict studies, delivered through the University of California, Irvine.<sup>64</sup> In addition to supporting the introduction of courses designed for students from the region, support could also be offered to students looking to study remotely at universities around the world. This support could be technical in nature (providing computers and internet access), or cover aspects such as tuition fees, language tutoring, etc.

All of the above can help the societies see themselves and their opponents through different lenses, not only through the lens of conflict. This would consequently help people to understand how hidden drivers of conflict often stem from their individual

and societal needs, and thus make them better placed to address them. It would also help society to realise the price paid for their political declarations. This is crucial – ultimately, conflict transformation is linked to a transformation in thinking.

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## Notes

58. 'Transitional Justice and Georgia's Conflicts: Breaking the Silence', 2009, International Centre for Transitional Justice, Available at <https://ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Georgia-Breaking-Silence-2009-English.pdf>
59. E.g. work on missing persons conducted within the Geneva International Discussions or through INGOs (in particular one could situate Berghof's History Dialogue as part of such a process, and Conciliation Resources' Memory and Archive Project, both of which are beginning to resonate more publicly.
60. A 2014 meeting of human rights activists from the region organised by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) call for the de facto and de jure authorities to commit to international human rights standards and to 'refrain from conditioning this collaboration on "higher politics" challenges discussed in peace negotiations'. At the same time, they implore the international community not to 'hide behind the absence of political will among the parties to act'. 'Assessing Human Rights Protection in Eastern European Disputed and Conflict Entities', FIDH, 2014, p. 55 [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport\\_disputed\\_entities\\_uk-ld3.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_disputed_entities_uk-ld3.pdf)
61. This could build on work carried out by Saferworld between 2008 and 2014, but would need to be reviewed to take into account contextual changes. See the most recent report dating back to 2014 which analyses the results of the fourth annual survey (conducted since 2011) in the eastern districts of Abkhazia by the Institute for Democracy. Available here: Security for local communities: Can the achievements of the past few years be preserved? <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/809-security-for-local-communities-can-the-achievements-of-the-past-few-years-be-preserved>
62. Conciliation Resources produced a series of recommendations on the development of education in Abkhazia in their 2016 publication 'The Realm of the Possible: Education'. All of these are still relevant, and could also be adapted for South Ossetia. They focus on initiatives that could broaden the horizons of young people living in Abkhazia, and create opportunities for students living in Abkhazia to study abroad. They also outline the need to reform and modernise the education system in terms of curricula, teaching methods, materials, aids and provisions with the aim of achieving inclusivity, including through mother-tongue-based multilingual teaching. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/realm-possible-education>
63. Other efforts to tackle this issue have focused on teaching methods, and specifically on encouraging an interpretive approach to learning (as opposed to rote fact memorisation), active multiple perspective seeking, and making alternative teaching resources available. Nevertheless, there is criticism that while the textbooks changed, 'the teaching system and its teachers stayed the same' See 'History Education in the South Caucasus', Philip Gamaghelyan and Sergey Rumyansev. Turkish Policy Quarterly, Spring 2014, <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/680/history-education-in-the-south-caucasus-spring-2014>; see also <https://caucasusedition.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/History-Textbooks-and-History-Education-in-the-South-Caucasus.pdf>
64. The distance learning and dialogue project of the University of California, Irvine, was very well received. It was regarded as an innovative method of providing access to modern education in peace and conflict studies, as well as a form of dialogue through learning. More about this can be found in the catalogue accompanying this report.



## Afterword

We hope that this analysis of 30 years of peacebuilding provides much food for thought, and an opportunity to look at the conflicts through the prism of lessons learned. Our aim was to present a holistic picture of the conflicts as a complex system of interrelated events, with numerous elements and multiple cause-and-effect relationships. The findings not only highlight the need for constant reflection and regular analysis of the context and emerging trends, but also the need to reflect on our own roles as actors in the context, and to ensure that our actions match our declared goals. It is important for all of us working on conflict to understand our influence on regional dynamics and how, in turn, the region impacts on us as we become part of that context and possibly even a part of the conflict. We hope that this research will be useful for all players in seeking more effective approaches to working with the conflicts in the region.

We sincerely thank everyone who so openly shared their thoughts with us, reflected on their personal and professional experience, and expressed their desires for a future without war. We can safely state that this paper is a product of joint reflection. We believe that with such powerful human potential, this region will find its path to a dignified and peaceful future.

# Annex:

## Catalogue of initiatives facilitated by international civil society organisations

### Catalogue<sup>1</sup>

#### South Ossetian context

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#### Abkhazian context

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1. The catalogue is organised per lead facilitating organisation, though there has been considerable collaboration between organisations over the years. The division between those focussing on either the Abkhaz or South Ossetian context refers to the organisation's *main* focus, but does not mean that this was their sole focus. Organisations listed under 'Regional context' consistently worked on both contexts or across the South Caucasus region.

**This catalogue is an accompanying annex to the report by Independent Peace Associates, presenting analysis of 30+ years of working with conflict in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts.**

Given the long timescale under examination, and the enormous number of initiatives implemented during that time, we had to create some criteria to determine which initiatives and how much detail could realistically be included in such a catalogue. Therefore, this document is only intended to be a summary of the main dialogue processes facilitated by international civil society actors since the early 1990s, and which lasted longer than one year. It does not include the myriad humanitarian initiatives which might have had an indirect peacebuilding value, initiatives conducted without external facilitation, or initiatives facilitated by intergovernmental organisations (such as the Council of Europe or UN). It also does not include academic conferences or roundtables organised by think tanks or academic institutions where experts were invited from the region (except for when a conference was part of a wider dialogue process, such as George Mason University or UCI). While such academic/policy roundtable events might be framed as a 'dialogue', the dialogue in question is usually with international policymakers, rather than between the sides. Their purpose therefore is more about informing international policy than building confidence.

The purpose of the catalogue is to support institutional memory. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive, detailed description of every peace initiative ever conducted in the context. The authors are aware of some shorter-term initiatives which did not make it into the catalogue due to the difficulty of sourcing archive data from organisations, years after the staff who implemented the projects had moved on. We accept that there may be other initiatives that have been omitted due to this loss of institutional memory.

We thank everyone who collaborated in compiling the data for this catalogue, including the current and former staff of the organisations represented.

## International facilitator VERTIC and later LINKS-London

### Process

**'Confidence Building Matters': South Ossetian – Georgia political dialogue (1994-1998)**

### Donor(s)

EU

### Partner(s)

Various interlocuters in the Georgian Parliament and the South Ossetian authorities

### Main objectives / purpose

To facilitate organized contacts and dialogue between political actors on the Georgian and South Ossetian sides, in a process parallel to the formal talks.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

A number of high-profile meetings were held at which politicians from the two sides met, often for the first time, outside the framework of the Joint Control Commission (JCC). These in themselves were the result of intense series of contacts, visits and frank discussions, and lower level, informal meetings which took place in between the four main highlighted 'events'. Furthermore, a number of study visits took place including to Ireland and the UK, Scotland, to study the process of devolution there.

**July 1995:** A South Ossetian delegation, including Dmitri Medoev, then foreign minister, participated in a youth conference in Batumi. Medoev had a private meeting with Zurab Zhvania, then General Secretary of the governing Citizens Union Party and soon to be Chair of the Georgian parliament. At the time this was the highest level political meeting between the sides since the ceasefire, and set the scene for future meetings. Also present was Irakli Menagarishvili, Deputy PM of Georgia (later FM).

**December 1995:** the two sides met again in Vladikavkaz and resulted in the formulation of proposals for number of civilian confidence building measures aimed at facilitating contacts and the flow of information between the two sides.

**July 1996:** South Ossetian Parliamentary delegation led by Kosta Dzugaev (then Chair of the Legal Affairs Committee) attended Caucasus Youth Conference in Batumi.

**January 1997:** Kosta Dzugaev, now speaker of the South Ossetian Parliament, visited Tbilisi, meeting President Shevardnadze and Speaker of Parliament Zurab Zhvania, and had separate meetings with all the political factions in the Georgian Parliament. This was the highest level visit by a South Ossetian leader to Tbilisi since hostilities and there was considerable TV coverage, including on Russian media.

## Main outcomes and outputs

Opening up a dialogue channel contributed to easing of tensions. The fact that the sides were seen publicly to be talking to each other was important as well as the content of ideas and discussions.

Apart from their merit in building trust between the sides, these initiatives helped to increase the capacity of the South Ossetian side in managing their negotiations with the Georgian side and to improve their understanding of the international experience of conflict resolution. South Ossetian officials were hosted in London and were introduced to conflict resolution processes under way in Northern Ireland, and constitutional processes and devolution of power in Scotland.

Six civilian confidence-building measures were proposed after the Vladikavkaz meeting, including:

- a. A committee of Parliamentarians from the two sides that would meet regularly
- b. A civilian telephone hotline based at the parliaments of the two sides to facilitate communication and contacts between officials and NGOs
- c. An expert committee to study other models and situations that may help to bring about a comprehensive political solution to the Georgian-South Ossetian problem
- d. Journalists to produce a joint television documentary on the 1989-92 conflict
- e. Measures to facilitate the flow of information, including exchange of television programmes
- f. A joint committee to organise the Caucasus Youth Conference in the summer of 1996.

### More information available from:

Background to the Georgia-Ossetia Conflict and future prospects for Georgian-Russian relations (2008) Sammut, LINKS.

The Georgia-South Ossetia Conflict (1996). Sammut and Cvetkovski, VERTIC Confidence Building Matters 6. [https://www.vertic.org/media/Archived\\_Publications/Matters/Confidence\\_Building\\_Matters\\_No6.pdf](https://www.vertic.org/media/Archived_Publications/Matters/Confidence_Building_Matters_No6.pdf)

## Main challenges and lessons learned

After 1999, second-track initiatives ran into difficulties, since on the one hand the Georgian side seemed to be seeking to centralise all peace initiatives concerning South Ossetia, and on the other Tskhinval/i came under a lot of pressure from Moscow to channel all communications with Tbilisi through the JCC.

## International facilitator

### Conflict Management Group with Norwegian Refugee Council

Conflict Management Group (CMG), founded in 1984 by Roger Fisher, Professor of Law at Harvard Law School and director of the Harvard Negotiation Project, merged with Mercy Corps in 2004

#### Process

CMG-NRC Workshop Series (Georgian-South Ossetian Track 1.5 Dialogue Process) (1995-2003<sup>2</sup>)

#### Donor(s)

Norwegian MFA; United States Institute of Peace (USIP); Carnegie Corporation of New York

#### Partner(s)

Georgian, South Ossetian and North Ossetian senior officials, policy makers, influential individuals

#### Main objectives / purpose

To encourage productive peacebuilding policies and augment the official mediated peace talks, through facilitated joint problem-solving workshops and trainings in constructive negotiation.

#### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Three one-week workshops framed as facilitated joint brainstorming and negotiations training were conducted with groups of approx. 12 influential Georgians and South Ossetians in January and May 1996 (Oslo); and June 1997 (Boston). Themes of joint interest discussed included cultural, economic ties and refugee return. Status issues were initially off the agenda but discussed at the second meeting.
- A fourth workshop in July 1998 in Barcelona shifted to substantive issues – focused on joint learning from the Basque and Catalonia context.
- Thereafter, a local Steering Committee was established to take on more local responsibility for the process, and further meetings were held with less intensive international facilitation in Bulgaria, Armenia and in Georgia/South Ossetia. A Steering Committee visit in 2000 to Barcelona, Andorra, San Sebastian, and Bilbao took place, during which in addition to the in-depth study of cases, participants also discussed the interim status agreement.
- The project continued beyond 2000 in the form of consultations with the sides about a variety of process related issues but plans for further dialogues were not possible to organize after changes in the leadership – first in South Ossetia at the end of 2001 and later after the Rose Revolution in Georgia and subsequent change of policy/approach towards the conflict regions. Later efforts later in 2007-8 to revive the Steering Committee were eventually scuppered by the August war.

2. Source material is two articles by Susan Allen, themselves based on interviews with participants in 1998 and 1999. Nan, Susan Allen. 'Track One-and-a-Half Diplomacy: Contributions to Georgian-South Ossetian Peacemaking.' in Ronald J. Fisher, ed., *Paving the Way: Contributions of Interactive Conflict Resolution to Peacemaking*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005. Nan, Susan Allen. 'Track One and a Half Diplomacy: Searching for Political Agreement in the Caucasus.' In Mari Fitzduff and Cheyanne Church, eds. *NGOs at the Table: Strategies for Influencing Policies in Areas of Conflict*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004. Also input by Lara Olson, former NRC project coordinator, and Arthur Martirosyan, former CMG senior consultant.

## Main outcomes and outputs

- Official mediators and participants credit the process for improving the official negotiation processes (JCC meetings). The local brainstorming sessions were held typically several weeks in advance of the JCC meetings mediated by the OSCE and mirrored the issues from the agenda of the formal negotiations. Personal relationships and mutual understanding built helped change the tone of the official meetings, with parties becoming more focused on interests, making for more constructive discussions. Furthermore, an increase in direct communication between the sides in between official meetings meant that some issues could be addressed in a timelier way.
- Concrete ideas for effective peacebuilding policies being negotiated at the official level were explored at the informal meetings. For example, the 16 May 1996 Memorandum on Security and Confidence-Building, and March 1997 document on economic development in South Ossetia were both discussed at earlier Oslo meetings. The modalities of the 1997 Agreement on Refugee Return was discussed at the June 1997 Boston meeting. The UNDP \$2 million economic development project with a joint Ossetian-Georgian decision-making model and a 3.5 million Euro EU project agreed through the JCC in 1999 had also been explored in the CMG-NRC dialogues.<sup>3</sup> Fisher's last visit and meetings with Shevardnadze and Chibirov was in 1998 when the parties were discussing the draft interim status agreement.
- Mutual understanding impacted on discourse and preventive diplomacy. E.g. a jointly drafted statement produced as an exercise at one of the meetings later formed the basis of a conflict-sensitive public policy statement made by a Georgian official at another forum (the UNHCR-CIS conference), which helped avert a new increase of tension at the time in relation to internationally-assisted refugee return.

## Main challenges and lessons learned

- The CMG facilitators invested time in building relationships with key interlocutors, meeting the leaders at the time (Chibirov and Shevardnadze) to talk through their approach and making public presentations in Tbilisi and Tskhinval/i, increasing their legitimacy in the eyes of the public on both sides. Their approach to participant selection for each meeting was rigorous, based on clearly identified criteria (professional profile, expertise, personal and interpersonal qualities, as well as a mix of political affiliations) and interviewing them in person. Facilitators ensured each successive meeting incorporated new participants but built on a core group that had set a productive tone at the previous meeting. The inclusion of North Ossetians as a 'stabilising voice' is also notable, as was the transparent communication with the Russian side about the intentions of the effort. The facilitators also maintained regular communication with the official mediators and sought not to duplicate other initiatives.
- Key to success was the collaboration between two NGOs, each bringing complementary knowledge and skills: NRC with a presence on the ground and a practical, humanitarian mandate; and CMG with conflict resolution and negotiation expertise. NRC were further able to support the informal understandings reached through dialogue with concrete and visible assistance at the local level, as well as keeping local channels of communication with officials on both sides so the concrete projects could succeed and show the tangible benefits from 'talking' (i.e. the track 1.5 process).
- Policy development is a long-term processes. The CMG-NRC workshop series took place over several years and built relationships, insights and process skills slowly over a period of time.

3. Lara Olson, 'The South Ossetia Case'. ed. Jonathan Cohen, Vol. 7, Accord: A Question of Sovereignty – the Georgia-Abkhazia Peace Process (London, U.K.: Conciliation Resources 1999).  
<https://www.c-r.org/accord/georgia%E2%80%93abkhazia/south-ossetia-case>

## International facilitator International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

### Process

**Georgian-South Ossetian Dialogue (2005-2007)**

### Donor(s)

EU

### Partner(s)

Senior Georgian and South Ossetian officials and opinion leaders

### Main objectives / purpose

To develop a basis for transforming the (then) crisis into a political dialogue leading to political agreement between the two sides; To establish direct dialogue between Georgian and South Ossetian stakeholders.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

Two dialogue meetings in March and July 2005, followed by international conference in Vladikavkaz in 2006 on 'Compensation, restitution and restoration of rights for the victims of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict'.

The first meeting (Brussels) meeting took place after significant deterioration in relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinval/i following 2004 clashes and the closure of Ergneti market. The meeting discussed European case studies for safeguarding political and economic rights of minority communities and was addressed by representative of the German community in Belgium. It was an opportunity to discuss long-term scenarios, expectations, and red lines for relations between Georgians and South Ossetians. Around 20 people attended, representing senior officials, opinion leaders and experts from Tbilisi and Tskhinval/i. It was the first bilateral meeting held outside of the then existing quadripartite Joint Control Commission.

The second meeting coincided with Slovenia's Presidency in OSCE and focused on humanitarian issues, including restitution of property for Ossetians refugees and other confidence building measures proposed by the Georgian authorities. The meeting was addressed by Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs and included observers from the EU and OSCE. The meeting generated several proposals for rebuilding communications and other bilateral links between Tbilisi and Tskhinval/i. It discussed the key requirements for building confidence among Ossetian refugees and IDPs for their future return to their pre-1990s residencies in other parts of Georgia. Meeting also focused on issues related to opportunities for residents of South Ossetia to participate with their Georgian peers in programmes for educational and other humanitarian exchanges, including in Europe.



The Vladikavkaz conference was attended by representatives of authorities from Georgia, North Ossetia and Russia well as NGOs from North and South Ossetia, Georgia and individual refugees. Also attending was the OSCE Mission in Georgia, UNHCR and the Secretariat of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, in the framework of the preparation of the Venice Commission's follow up opinion on the Georgian draft law on the rehabilitation and restitution of property of the victims of the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict (Restitution Law). Ahead of the conference, Georgian officials from the Georgian Ministry of Justice, who were working on the Restitution Law visited Ossetian refugee settlements in North Ossetia for the first time to better understand the status of refugees and their attitudes towards restitution initiatives.

### **Main outcomes and outputs**

This was the only serious, albeit informal, attempt to set up truly bilateral Track 1.5 talks to discuss the whole range of issues from policies to security and reconciliation. Meetings generated several proposals for economic, humanitarian and people-to-people contacts, which were not discussed within the official JCC format. It played an important role as a dialogue platform for the preparation of the Restitution Law, which was later adopted by the Georgian government, but not implemented due to 2008 conflict and its consequences. However, the South Ossetian Authorities remained mistrustful towards Georgian intentions regarding the Restitution Law and refused to engage in its formal preparation. However, the atmosphere and substance of discussions was constructive and sufficient trust was developed that participants started to look forward, instead of focusing on mutual grievances.

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

This process was important because it included participation of influential decision-makers on both sides and provided a platform to openly discuss problems and solution without participation of third parties. It also coincided with a period of increased activism from the Georgian side to advance a conflict resolution agenda, including through the Restitution Law. However, broader geopolitical realities were not conducive to translating dialogue into meaningful cooperation, as growing Georgian-Russian tensions and strengthening ties between Moscow and Tskhinval/i limited opportunities for addressing challenges at bilateral level. Moreover, Georgian government attempts to develop relations with South Ossetian population bypassing de-facto authorities, made it difficult to stimulate meaningful cooperation from Tskhinval/i on the preparation of the Restitution Law and other CBMs.

## International facilitator George Mason University

### Process

#### Point of View (POV) Dialogue process (2008-2015)

### Donor(s)

UK Foreign Office, UNDP, USAID, USIP, One Foundation, Planethood Foundation, Alliance for Conflict Transformation, George Mason University Foundation, Department of State

### Partner(s)

Various civil society actors and organisations representing Georgian and South Ossetian civil society sector (over 200 activists over the 7 years of the POV).

### Main objectives / purpose

The dialogue process created space and discussions that have enriched participants' understandings of the possibilities for confidence building in the aftermath of the August 2008 war. The dialogue was envisioned as a space to allow for joint updated conflict analysis and discussion of possible confidence building measures. It also catalysed confidence building measures that bridge the Georgian-South Ossetian divide.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- 2-3 annual dialogue meetings with the participation of civil society representatives, community members, experts and professionals in different areas to discuss and plan possible confidence building measures
- Joint updated conflict analysis and analysis of current political situation on both sides of the conflict
- Creating access for South Ossetian civil society to directly interact with the representatives of international organisations
- Implementation of small grants for projects that support confidence building and conflict resolution
- Expert analytical work to develop resources and create analytical foundation for future work.

### Main outcomes and outputs

- Over two dozen stand-alone confidence building projects that were planned and later implemented separately by the participants attending POV dialogue meetings (including archive work, cultural preservation, journalist exchanges, education, and others)
- Large collection of thematic analytical reports authored and presented by South Ossetian and Georgian experts, as well as international experts on the relevant issues of Georgian-South Ossetian conflict (available at [www.pointofviewdialogue.com](http://www.pointofviewdialogue.com))

- Facilitation of conversations and subsequent repair of the Zonkari dam located under the control of South Ossetian de facto authorities (with financial support of OSCE)
- Facilitation of conversations around water sharing and water management
- Contribution to the cleaning and partial restoration of Tiriphoni channel
- Contribution to the discussion and civil society support to the decision of prisoner release in 2017.

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

Political situation in South Ossetia is very volatile. With the change in the administration in Georgia in 2012 South Ossetian de facto authorities were unwilling to develop a new engagement strategy with more moderate Georgian government. Georgian–South Ossetian conflict context as well as peacebuilding work is highly influenced by the Russia–West relational dynamic and with deterioration of this set of relationships had its negative impact on the process of confidence building and conflict resolution. Since 2012 the environment for civil society and peacebuilding work became extremely restricted, which creates additional challenges for safe and meaningful participation of South Ossetian colleagues in peacebuilding work. The main lesson learned from the years of POV project is the ability of the local civil society actors to be resilient and find creative ways to continue their engagement even under extreme pressure. Previous networks, personal reputation and academic standing are valuable assets that support peacebuilding and confidence building work in restrictive environments.

## International facilitator George Mason University

### Process

#### Cost of Conflict (CoC) (2016-2018)

### Donor(s)

UK Foreign Office, USAID, Swiss MFA, Austrian MFA, Conciliation Resources

### Partner(s)

International Peace Institute, Kelman Institute, Institute for Study of Nationalism and Conflict (Tbilisi), Caucasus House (Tbilisi), individual experts and peacebuilders from Tbilisi and Tskhinval/i.

### Main objectives / purpose

**Overall purpose:** Stimulate Georgian-South Ossetian analytical exchange and increased understanding amongst experts by collaboratively creating an analysis of the different costs incurred by both societies due to the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. The project aimed at collecting a broad range of approaches to considering the cost of conflict, as well as presenting a broad range of perspectives on Georgian-South Ossetian relations.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Joint analytical work assessing the cost of the conflict in different dimensions in Georgian-South Ossetian context
- Facilitation of the development of humanizing narratives within the conflict communities
- Large academic conference presenting the analytical work conducted by Georgian, South Ossetian, Russian and international experts
- Public discussions of the cost of conflict incurred by both sides within Georgian and South Ossetian societies.

### Main outcomes and outputs

- Two separate publications on cost of conflict:
  - a. **Cost of conflict: Core dimensions of the Georgian-South Ossetian context.**  
This is a collection of analytical articles authored by Georgian, South Ossetian and selected invited Russian and International experts that present analysis of institutional, human and economic cost of conflict for both societies. Available at <https://carterschool.gmu.edu/research-and-impact/programs-and-projects/cost-conflict>

b. **Cost of conflict: Untold Stories – Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict in People’s Lives.**

This is a collection of personal stories and narratives of local community members on both sides of the conflict about their personal traumas and cost that continue to incur as the conflict continues to linger. This collection of stories aims to increase understanding within both societies that there are no winners in this conflict and both sides continue to suffer from the unresolved state of the conflict.

- Active roundtable discussions within each community presenting both publications and facilitating conversations about various costs of the ongoing conflict
- Access for the international community to these various narratives and increased understanding within the international community of how various costs of conflict are assessed and experienced by these local communities.

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

The political environment in South Ossetia continued to remain tense and challenging. Dialogue space was narrow and always under a high level of scrutiny. Within this environment academic engagement and engagement on the level of expert discussions with the analytical presentations and publication provided an important, meaningful and safe space to work across Georgian-South Ossetian conflict divide. Local partners on both sides continually emphasized shortage of quality analytical work produced locally that covers Georgian-South Ossetian conflict dimension. This creates space and opportunity for anchoring other engagement approaches around the development of analytical platforms in lieu of more open opportunities for dialogue work.

## International facilitator

**George Mason University, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation (for Human stories)**

### Process

**Value of Dialogue (2019-2021)**

### Donor(s)

UNDP, BST

### Partner(s)

Institute for Study of Nationalism and Conflict (Tbilisi), Caucasus House (Tbilisi), individual peacemakers and civil society activists from Tskhinval/i.

### Main objectives / purpose

**Overall purpose:** The purpose of the project is to support the development of analytical collaboration between Georgian and South Ossetian experts through joint and parallel assessment of the value of different dialogue processes within this conflict context.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Joint analytical work assessing the value of dialogue in Georgian-South Ossetian context.
- Facilitation of the development of humanizing narrative within the conflict communities through presentation of personal experiences with dialogue processes of Georgian and South Ossetian community members
- Academic conference presenting the analytical work conducted by Georgian, South Ossetian, Russian and international experts (planned for Autumn 2021)
- Joint online roundtable discussion on personal perspectives of Georgian and South Ossetian community members (December 2020)
- Public discussions of value of dialogue in Georgian and South Ossetian societies.

### Main outcomes and outputs

- Two separate publications on value of dialogue.
  - a. **Value of Dialogue: Analytical publication.** This collection of expert analysis presents the discussion of different dimensions of the value of dialogue within the Georgian-South Ossetian context. The publication focuses on tangible outcomes that different dialogue processes were able to deliver throughout all these years, as well as what impact these processes have on the strengthening of social, civic and political institutions within each of these societies.

b. **Value of Dialogue: Human Stories – Georgian-South Ossetian Context.** This is a collection of personal stories and narratives of local community members on both sides of the conflict about their personal transformative experiences of participation in the dialogue processes. This collection of stories aims not only to contribute to the development of more harmonizing narratives but also boost public support towards different dialogue processes and engagements. Will be available at <https://www.imaginedialogue.com>

- Active roundtable discussions within each community presenting both publications and facilitates conversations about the importance of dialogue
- Access for international community to these various narratives and increased understanding within the international community of what value local communities see in dialogue processes despite their current limited nature.

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

The political environment in South Ossetia continued to remain tense and challenging. Dialogue space was narrow and always under a high level of scrutiny. Within this environment academic engagement and engagement on the level of expert discussions with the analytical presentations and publication provided an important, meaningful and safe space to work across Georgian-South Ossetian conflict divide. Local partners on both sides continually emphasized the shortage of quality analytical work produced locally that covers Georgian-South Ossetian conflict dimension. This creates space and opportunity for anchoring other engagement approaches around the development of analytical platforms in lieu of more open opportunities for dialogue work.

## International facilitator PAX (at the time known as IKV Pax Christi)

### Process

**Value of Dialogue (2019-present)**

### Donor(s)

Dutch MFA (core grants to PAX); small projects supported by COBERM and various others

### Partner(s)

Georgian-Ossetian Civil Forum, consisting of civic activists, journalists, and representatives of different Georgian – South Ossetian CSOs (on the Georgian side, mainly IDP-based / focused).

### Main objectives / purpose

To foster peaceful settlement of the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict and support those directly affected by the conflict, through direct contact and interaction; information and exchange of stories; and social and economic perspectives ('peace dividend': the direct benefits of cooperation).

Also see: [www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/civil-forum-peace](http://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/civil-forum-peace)

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

The Civil Forum was a locally driven initiative with PAX as an invited facilitator. The underpinning assumption of the process was that people on both sides were perfectly capable of finding common ground if not hindered by nationalistic narratives and restrictive measures on the respective sides.

- **The Civil Forum itself:** Regular (bi-annual) meetings of the core group in third countries; Joint strategizing and decision-making on small projects; Formulation and agreement of statutes and internal regulations, manifests, declarations, public statements, and external communications
- **Informational sphere:** Support of local newspapers and editions ('XXI Seclare' in South Ossetia and 'Kartlosi' newspaper by NGO Kartlosi in Gori); book 'The other face of war', etc.
- **Socio-economic perspective / finding the 'peace dividend':** Stimulation of small-scale economic activities on both sides; Support for local activities to improve living circumstances
- **Dialogue meetings** in third countries for specific target groups, e.g. journalists, writers, inter-generational groups, ex-combatants, relatives of those who lost their lives in the conflict.

### Main outcomes and outputs

**Qualitative outcomes:** The main result has been the formation of the group, the professional growth of the individuals involved, and its continuity against all the odds of 2008 and beyond. Significantly, individuals and organisations involved have proven capable to continue their activities and cooperation after the international partner had to withdraw in 2013.



The Civil Forum, officially registered in 2011 as an NGO under Georgian legislation, continues to this day (in modified form), engaging conflict-affected youth, international volunteers, and other organisations. Founding partners 'Momavlis Tskhinvali' and 'Coalition for IDPS' Rights' continue to implement projects bringing together different social, professional groups from both the IDP population and those currently living in South Ossetia, with and without international facilitators. In South Ossetia, institutionalisation of the Forum was challenging due to the restricted space for civil society generally, in particular those engaging with Georgians. Nevertheless, cooperation continues, and the network provides enough safety for South Ossetians to visit Tbilisi or organise transportation of those who need urgent healthcare.

Concrete outputs:

- Newspapers XXI Seculare (several years of editions) and Kartlosi
- Book 'The Other Face of War' (stories of war-affected individuals from both sides, in English, Georgian and Russian)
- Joint Leiden Declaration.

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

- Too bold statements can seriously impact safety of participants. The Leiden Memorandum, though formulated carefully, was so ground-breaking its signatories were publicly called 'traitors' by the president on South Ossetian TV. Subsequently, one of them was beaten up and threatened by several members of parliament and another received threats. International action in coordination with human rights organisations helped stabilise the situation.
- Local ownership and initiative were central to the long-term viability of the process. Attempts to institutionalise the Civil Forum did not lead to one overall juridical structure (which would have to be registered in a third country), but the process of discussing exact modalities of cooperation and decision-making was valuable as it helped strengthen trust between those involved. Strong interpersonal contacts could make working together and being inclusive difficult at times (though the core group managed to involve new people along the way), but was a strong asset in securing the continuation of bilateral dialogue and exchange activities even without third-party support.

## International facilitator PAX (then known as IKV Pax Christi), Berghof Foundation

### Process

**Engagement through Dialogue: 2009-2010 and follow-up projects (2010-2011 and beyond)**

### Donor(s)

EU (main donor), COBERM, German MFA, UK Conflict Prevention Pool

### Partner(s)

International Centre on Conflict and Negotiation, Cultural-Charitable Centre 'World without Violence' named after Zurab Achba, Agency for Social, Economic and Cultural Development.

### Main objectives / purpose

- To contribute to de-escalation and transformation of the conflicts in relation to Georgia, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia
- To establish dynamics in Georgia, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia in which civil society actors can publicly and politically address the complexity of political processes in relation to good governance and break-away regions.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

#### Main process:

- Selection and preparation of young professionals and young potential leaders of different professions, young people in and around official structures on each side
- Dialogue and study visits to Moldova/Transnistria (and to Kosovo incl. the North)
- Follow-up with local partner organisations, former and future participants
- Publications in (local, national) media on all sides about joint activities and ambitions.

#### Follow-up phase:

- (Local) training for former participants to become facilitators of inclusive dialogue themselves
- Joint training and dialogue-and-study activities conducted by Young Facilitators.

### Main outcomes and outputs

The joint study visits (Georgian-Abkhaz or Georgian-South Ossetian; 12 in total with 120 participants) generated new insights into conflict dynamics and the different possibilities existing in similar contexts. Participants identified common interests, built trusted contacts with whom to cooperate resulting in the development of common strategies.

The contacts established proved durable and valuable: many participants pursued their career in key positions in state structures, NGOs and universities on all sides, conserving up to this day some form of contact, sense of common interest, and experience of trust with their peers on the other side(s).

Apart from quite a lot of media output, a joint Georgian-Abkhaz-South Ossetian 'Declaration of principles for engagement' was issued (partly in reaction to the Georgian 'Law on Occupied Territories' and subsequent legal acts).

Most materials produced are no longer online, (with exception of some materials in Georgian):

- Interview with PAX facilitator Cinta Depondt: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/2252082.html>
- Interview with Abkhaz coordinator Dalila Pilia: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/2071616.html>

'Coloured pencil reports' created by Oliver Wolleh from Berghof Foundation:

- Describing a dialogue/study visit: [www.paxforpeace.nl/media/files/sccolouredpencilreportno2-wolleh1.pdf](http://www.paxforpeace.nl/media/files/sccolouredpencilreportno2-wolleh1.pdf)
- Overview of process and follow-up: [www.paxforpeace.nl/media/files/sccolouredpencilreportno5-wolleh1.pdf](http://www.paxforpeace.nl/media/files/sccolouredpencilreportno5-wolleh1.pdf)

## Main challenges and lessons learned

- Careful selection with clear criteria by local partners has allowed to reach precisely those young leaders who went on to take up leading positions wherein their joint experience had extra value
- Regular work with participants in between meetings allowed to create a process instead of simply a series of encounters, with each subsequent group building on previous ones, building an increasing dynamic of trust even though participants only took part in one dialogue and study visit each
- Investing time, capacity and resources in a stable team structure with local organisations from different conflict areas gave the process the stability allowed to navigate complex political developments and circumstances and still deliver good quality results.

## International facilitator Imagine Center for conflict Transformation

### Process

**History Education in the Context of Georgian-South Ossetian Relations (2013-14)**

### Donor(s)

COBERM

### Partner(s)

N/A

### Main objectives / purpose

The main objective of the Project was to challenge the ideological and exclusivist approaches to history education and encourage the adoption of conflict sensitive and inclusive approaches among historians and history educators in Georgia and South Ossetia.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- A series of Methodological Workshops for Georgian and South Ossetian historians, history educators, and methodologists
- Development of a Methodological Manual on Principles of Historiography and History Education
- Development of Supplemental History Lesson separately in Georgia and separately in South Ossetia based on the recommendations from the Manual
- Piloting of the Supplemental History Lesson in 1 Georgian and 1 Ossetian secondary school or educational NGO's.

### Main outcomes and outputs

- Publication of a Co-Authored Methodological Manual on Principles of Historiography and History Education (published in 2014) in Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian
- Publication of the Supplemental History Lesson separately in Georgia and separately in South Ossetia based on the recommendations from the Manual
- Piloting of the Supplemental History Lesson in 1 Georgian and 1 Ossetian secondary school or educational NGO's.

## **Main challenges and lessons learned**

In less than a year, the project achieved all its immediate goals. Our main lesson was that both societies have many professionals ready to collaborate.

Reforming history education, however, requires a sustained and methodical effort. Our second lesson, unfortunately, was that many donors who support peacebuilding tend to prefer quick results and not many were willing to invest in a long-term project. Despite our initial success and praise we received both from COBERM and its funder, the EU, the project funding was not renewed for the second year as we were not able to promise that the alternative textbooks, we were planning to produce would be included in the official school curriculum. Unfortunately, we were not able to find alternative donors or continue the project and lost the momentum.

## International facilitator

### Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California, Irvine (UCI)

#### Process

**Black Sea Project (1994-1998)**

#### Donor(s)

The Winston Foundation for World Peace, Open Society Institute, Hewlett Foundation, UC Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, UCI Center for Citizen Peacebuilding

#### Local partner(s)

12-16 civil society actors, sociologists, Black Sea environmentalists and scientists

#### Main objectives / purpose

The purpose was to bring together Abkhaz and Georgians who shared similar concerns about the degradation of the Black Sea and surrounding environment. The topic was considered a good place to begin facilitating dialogues to help the sides in the conflict reach a mutually satisfactory peaceful resolution.

#### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Conducted 6 focus groups, over a hundred in-depth interviews, and collected newspaper and other media reports of peace activities
- Facilitated 8 forums of local environmental activists, scientists, members of other NGOs interested in working on joint projects to promote confidence-building and the peace process
- The above activities led to plans for additional forum activity
- One of the forums was held at UCI in February 1998. It was a meeting of scientists from Georgia/Abkhazia, from the UC system, including UCI and UCSD's Scripps's Institution of Oceanography, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the Marine Board of the US National Academy of Sciences
- The focus of the 1998 forum was to identify and begin working on issues of common interest that threaten the Black Sea ecosystem
- Consistent communication with local partners by email/phone in between visits to the region.

#### Main outcomes and outputs

- Participants were interviewed about the project for local publications, TV and radio programs
- UCI produced a video showing the highlights of the forum discussions and interviews with the participants
- Plans to organize the next forum in 1999 which became the first in the series 'Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict'.

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

The biggest challenge was our discovery after the 1998 conference that this topic for joint projects was related to major security concerns at the political level. Both sides at the NGO level shared similar concerns about the well-being of the Black Sea and the surrounding environment, but the political leaders would not allow the participants to do research together, or share sensitive information obtained by one side or the other about conditions on their side of the ceasefire line. That is why the next forum/conference that we organized became the first one in the series 'Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict'. We never returned to the topic of Black Sea environmental issues.

## International facilitator

### Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California, Irvine (UCI)

Since 2004 the process expanded to involve as co-leaders, participants and donors, the Heinrich Boll Foundation, Conciliation Resources, and International Alert

#### Process

**Conference and Publication Series 'Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict' 1997-2009**

#### Donor(s)

Hewlett Foundation, US Institute of Peace, UC Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, Open Society Foundation, UCI Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, USAID, COBERM/UNDP, Heinrich Boell Foundation, Conciliation Resources, International Alert

#### Local partner(s)

Several hundred civil society actors, journalists, academics, high level politicians and diplomats participating in unofficial capacities from Georgia/Abkhazia, and dozens of international counterparts and donors.

#### Main objectives / purpose

The multi-year series was organized to facilitate dialogues to help the sides in the conflict reach a mutually satisfactory peaceful resolution. The conferences helped keep open channels of communication between civil society activists, academics, journalists and policy makers from the two communities, and gave them access to their counterparts in Russia and various international organizations. Because of the project's dedication to full transparency, the conferences also involved many more people in the dialogues through these publications and post conference meetings in each community.

#### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Organization of 16 conferences over a 2-3 day period, the specific topics, participants and locations of which were identified by international and local partners.
- Transcription, publication and dissemination of the conference proceedings in separate books and online at [https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb\\_cs\\_abkhaz\\_pub.php](https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.php)
- Dozens of academic and policy papers, presentations and publications that analysed results of conferences and conference publications.
- Meetings of UCI and other international partners in each community before and after each conference to ensure that final decisions come from local partners, to engage with local political leaders, journalists, civil society leaders, international diplomats and organizations. The goal was to better understand current developments, ensure that local leaders were aware of our work and could provide their insights and concerns.
- Participants were interviewed about the project for local publications, TV and radio programs to ensure transparency of the project.
- Consistent communication with local partners by email/phone in between visits to the region.



## Main outcomes and outputs

- Publication and dissemination of 16 conference proceedings in separate books and online at [https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb\\_cs\\_abkhaz\\_pub.php](https://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.php)
- Dozens of interviews with international and local participants on local tv, radio and print media.

### List of Publications: Volumes 1-16 of the series *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*

Vol 1. Testing Assumptions about Unofficial Diplomacy:

Perspectives of Citizen Participants, March 1999.

Vol 2. Proceedings from a Georgian-Abkhaz Conference, August 1999.

Vol 3. Transcripts of Georgian-Abkhaz Meetings and Georgian TV Programmes on the Abkhaz Issue, December 1999-January 2000.

Vol 4. Civil Society, Refugees and State Structure, 25-26 March 2000.

Vol 5. Cultural Continuity in the Context of Statebuilding, 26-28 August 2000.

Vol 6. Tbilisi Meetings, October-December 2000.

Vol 7. The Caucasus Stability Pact and Peacebuilding Strategies, 19-23 March 2001.

Vol 8. The Caucasus Stability Pact and Peacebuilding Strategies, 20-25 August 2001.

Vol 9. Initial Summaries, 4-8 July 2002.

Vol 10. A Time of Change, 2003-2004.

Vol 11. The Russian Factor, 21-22 June 2004.

Vol 12. Russia's Role: Realities and Myths, 28-29 June 2005.

Vol 13. Prospects for Georgia and Abkhazia in the Context of Black Sea Integration, 24-27 June 2006.

Vol 14. Georgian NATO accession and potential impacts on the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process, 12-15 June 2007.

Vol 15. The Georgian-Abkhaz Case in a European Context, 18-19 June 2008.

Vol 16. Civil Society and the Peace Process, 4-6 June 2009.

### Detailed accounts of the history of these dialogues and their impact were published in these articles:

Garb, P. (2012). Building and Sustaining a Permanent Conference. In *Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus: A Reflection on Fifteen Years of Conflict Transformation Initiatives*. International Alert.

Garb, P. (2012). Civil Society and Conflict Transformation in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Accomplishments and Challenges. *European Security*, Volume 21, Issue 1, March, pp 20-101.

Garb, P. (2010). The View from Abkhazia of South Ossetia Ablaze. In Stephen F. Jones (eds.) *War and Revolution in the Caucasus: Georgia Ablaze* London and New York: Routledge. Reprinted from *Central Asian Survey*, Volume 28, Number 1, June.

Garb, P. (2009). The View from Abkhazia on South Ossetia Ablaze. *Central Asian Survey*, Volume 28, Number 1, June, pp 235-246.

Garb P. and Nan S.A. (2009). The Dynamism of Shared Success in Abkhaz-Georgian Peacebuilding. In Zelizer C. and Rubinstein R.A. (eds.) *Building Peace: Practical Reflections from the Field*. Kumarian Press.

Garb P. and Nan S.A. (2006). Negotiating in a Coordination Network of Citizen Peacebuilding Initiatives in the Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process. *International Negotiation*, Volume 11, Number 1.

Hemmer B., Garb P. Phillips M. Graham J (2006). Putting the 'Up' in Bottom-up Peacebuilding: Broadening the Concept of International Negotiations. *International Negotiation Journal*, Volume 11, Number 1.

Garb, P. and Whiteley, J. M. (2001). A Hydroelectric Power Complex on Both Sides of a War: Potential Weapon or Peace Incentive. In Ingram, Helen, Blatter, Joachim (eds.) *Reflections on Water: New Approaches to Transboundary Conflicts and Cooperation*. The MIT Press.

Garb, P. (2000). Shaping a State and Law in a 'Mousetrap'. *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, (Spring).

Garb, P. (2000). Small Steps toward Peace in Abkhazia. *Give and Take*. (Publication of the Initiative for Social Action and Renewal in Eurasia), Vol. 7, Spring.

Garb, P. (1999). The Inguri Power Complex. *Accord. A Question of Sovereignty: The Georgia-Abkhazia Peace Process*. Issue 7.

**Detailed accounts of these dialogues and their impact were presented at policy and academic centres:**

Garb, P. (April 8-10, 1999). *The Role of Unofficial Diplomacy in the Abkhaz-Georgian Case*. The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Peace Studies Association Conference 'Case Studies in Peace Making: Interpersonal to International'. @ Siena College, Loudonville, NY.

Bobrovnikov, V.; Garb, P. (January 1998). *Post-Soviet Reinvention of Indigenous Law in the Caucasus*. Paper presented at the UCI Conference on A New World Orders: Shifting Terrains of Local Strife in an Era of Globalization.

Garb, P. (December 1997). *Views from the Field: Perspectives on Georgian and Abkhazian War Victims Traumatized Societies: Ethnic Conflict in the Republic of Georgia*, The International Research and Exchanges Board and the United States Department of State, Washington, D.C.

Garb, P. (October 1997). *Cross-Conflict Management of the Inguri Hydroelectric Power Plant (Abkhazia/Georgia)*, Paper presented at the UCI Conference of the UC IGCC/MacArthur Scholars on International Environmental Policy.

Garb, P. (May 1997). *Ethnicity, Alliance Building, and the Limited Spread of Ethnic Conflict in the Caucasus*. Institutions, Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: International Experience and Its Implications for the Caucasus, Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies and the Institute for International Studies, UC Berkeley.

Garb, P. (February 1997). *Lessons Learned in Second Track Diplomacy: The Case of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict*. Presented at UCI Conference on Internal Wars and Peacekeeping/Peacemaking Operations.

## Main challenges and lessons learned

The biggest challenge was obtaining ample funding that could have provided opportunities for:

- More dialogue conferences, thus engaging more people
- Wider dissemination of the conference proceedings
- Development of shorter, more compelling summaries or highlights of discussions that could have reached more people
- Bringing more people from the region to visit other countries that are models of peaceful problem solving and that are the worst models for how not to engage in conflict.

Due to the lack of ample funding (we operated annually on \$20,000-80,000), we spent too much time writing grant proposals, and planning our work frugally in order to stretch the resources we had. We were forced to focus our work on the utmost important and urgent needs to have maximum dialogue with minimal funding. This short-changed the follow up and wider dissemination work.

An important lesson we learned early in our work was to collaborate well with all outside intervenors, to consult with each other often, plan our work collaboratively, and share rather than compete with each other for funding and local participants.

Another important lesson learned, but much later was that we should have included younger people, college age students in our dialogue process much earlier than we did, which was around 2007. This was a decade after we had begun working mainly with mid-career professionals who at the outset were in their late thirties and forties. They were opinion shapers who had the ear of politicians as well as people in the grassroots. Had we also included younger people early on we would have had developed many more strong opinion shapers. This is why we developed in 2010 another initiative focused on university students.

We also learned that we had underestimated the depth of trauma and the resulting resistance to and even fear of dialogue by the majority of people, especially on the Abkhaz side. Throughout the project, local project leaders of both societies faced negative public commentary and even threats that also hampered widespread dissemination of conference results. This taught us all how war not only does not solve the original problems, but adds many new problems that take decades, more than one generation to resolve.

## International facilitator

### Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California, Irvine (UCI)

From 2014 to 2016, co-led with George Mason University's Center for Peacemaking Practice

#### Process

**UCI Distance Learning and Dialogue Project (2011-2016)**

#### Donor(s)

**USAID, UCI Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, UCI Distance Learning Center**

#### Partner(s)

6 local university faculty, 95 university students and young professionals in Georgia/Abkhazia/South Ossetia.

#### Main objectives / purpose

The purpose was to build people-to-people relationships between 95 Abkhaz, Georgian, and South Ossetian youth through online courses and in-person conferences together with around 225 UCI students in 6 distance learning courses (2011-2015) and 2 in-person conferences at UCI (2014 and 2015). The courses were designed to provide all students with knowledge, skills, and abilities to analyse causes and consequences of conflict over territory and sovereignty; generate a problem and solution analysis of case studies; write a policy paper convincingly arguing a policy position based on data analysis, write and present a briefing memo, and mediate between different parties of a conflict. The goal was to build a foundation of trust among the South Caucasus and US students so that they could learn from each other about their societies and conflicts and connect with each other in positive ways that would lead to long-term relationships. This is what we had accomplished in the series "Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict. Another goal was to give South Caucasus students practice in discussing their conflicts with an international audience unfamiliar with their communities and the conflicts.

#### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- 6 distance learning courses
- 2 in-person conferences at UCI (2014 and 2015)
- Meetings in the region with project leaders, local university students and faculty, local NGOs, political leaders, diplomats, international representatives in the region
- Although the courses were developed primarily by UCI faculty, the project was designed in consultation with local participants taking the lead on what type of courses and related activities were most beneficial locally and for the sake of building people-to-people relationships
- Wide dissemination of the project results in each community
- Certificates of completion of courses were awarded to all the South Caucasus students.

## Main outcomes and outputs

The framework of education as a context for fostering constructive dialogue has produced many positive outcomes, and lessons learned to enhance future people-to-people reconciliation among youth. Through the online courses and in-person meetings, students were able to:

- Examine their own conflict from the perspective of others (the UCI students, faculty, and other students from the conflict zone). They were able to see their conflict in a more global context and understand better how global and regional agendas affect the dynamics of the conflict.
- Explore new platforms for dialogue - online learning platforms, Skype, and Zoom.
- Develop independent views on their own conflicts and on other conflicts.
- Discuss issues more freely than in traditional bilateral discussions because of interactions with US students. The presence of American students and faculty greatly helped to establish a trusting environment. The questions that the American students asked also opened up topics that might otherwise be avoided. Students were able to address these topics in constructive ways.
- Establish connections that would extend outside the program. Most of the participants, including the coordinators, are communicating outside the project, mainly through Facebook and Skype.
- Local participants reported that the project format allowed for more relaxed and authentically personal group dynamics than other dialogue platforms. This may have been because the core of the project was learning, not dialogue. As a result, participants may have felt less stressed interacting online and in person at the conferences. Furthermore, it takes considerable time for people to open up to each other across a conflict divide. According to the participants, the courses gave them the time needed for this delicate process of building trust and easing of communication. This, in turn, created more room for understanding and acceptance of other positions. Another factor that the Abkhaz said predisposed them to open up authentically to all the participants was that youth in Abkhazia who aspire to better education, but feel blocked by political circumstances, felt this project gave them equal access to education.
- The project was also positively received by parents and other family and friends of Abkhaz participants because the students were able to participate in a US educational environment. Many Abkhaz believe that Georgia and the West want to prevent Abkhaz from having equal access to Western education and travel. Thus, they were sceptical of the possibilities to participate in an educational program in the US. They were pleasantly surprised to be wrong. Students and their circle of friends contacted the Abkhaz coordinator to find out how they or their relatives and friends could participate in this type of educational project in the future. Parents, teachers and students spreading the word about this positive project. This kind of enthusiasm for the program opens the potential for Abkhaz parents and others to support and lobby for more such programs. This, in turn, can have a positive impact on perceptions of the West, of Georgian policies, and of access to education in the West. This is a very important transformation occurring; Abkhaz students are eager to meet with Georgians.

The participants in the courses and conference now have a face to the other side. They have expressed that they can feel what the others might be feeling, what they care about, and the complexities. The interaction has given them understanding of all the layers and players that are influencing the dynamics of the whole process. They recognize that there are not quick answers easily available, that much time will be needed to find resolution to the conflict. But all feel that what they did was a step forward, even if a small step.

In February 2020, the Georgian and Abkhaz coordinators of this project presented their experiences and analysis of this project at a 2-day conference marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UCI's Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, thus renewing their friendship in person, and sharing their views about the program's value and lessons learned.

## **Main challenges and lessons learned**

The challenges were:

- Technical issues associated with Wi-Fi in individual homes and workplaces that sometimes hindered direct communication in real time with the US instructor and students. These problems were the greatest in South Ossetia.
- The time difference of 11-12 hours between the region and California necessitated early morning classes in California for all students to interact in real time. The earliest times for the California class was in the evening for all students in the region who were home at that time, not at their university where they could be together and where Wi-Fi might be stronger.
- Course schedulers were not always able to accommodate faculty request for morning time slots.
- In the future it would be preferable to offer such courses from US universities on the East Coast, and better yet, in European universities, thus closing the large gap in time difference.
- Even the students with the best English language knowledge found the course material challenging and needed additional time to complete written assignments, and more help from faculty.
- Students met with some scepticism from their communities about their participation in the dialogue aspects of the courses, but all agreed that those challenges outweighed the benefits everyone saw in participating in US university courses and engaging with US students.
- Students who participated in the conferences noted that if they had been able to meet with their Georgian/Abkhaz/South Ossetian counterparts in person before the online course, they might have felt more comfortable interacting with them online. This would require more funding for an additional meeting but would be worthwhile for the sake of dialogue.
- Unfortunately, no further funding was possible to continue the project after 2016.

## International facilitator Conciliation Resources

### Process

Supporting conflict transformation in the Georgian-Abkhaz context (since 1997)

### Donor(s)

Various, including UK government, Swiss FDFA, European Union, with smaller contributions from Dutch MFA, Sigrid Rausing Trust, USAID, Swedish SIDA

### Partner(s)

Civil society organisations on either side of the conflict divide, civic actors, education, media, environmental and other professionals, youth, displaced communities, officials and political interlocutors, parliamentarians, international diplomats, mediators, INGOs and experts.

### Main objectives / purpose

The main objective of our work over more than two decades has been to create an enabling environment for conflict transformation.

Our work has aimed to support local actors to find ways to address the needs of their societies, and to bring people together for joint analysis, and to share information, perspectives and visions for the future, within the two societies and also across the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict divide.

Together with our partners, we have aimed to help local and international actors adopt more constructive approaches to addressing the legacy of past violence, root causes and consequences of conflict, and create space for progress to be made. There are serious divergences in the needs and interests of key stakeholders, and in relation to perceptions of the conflict and possibilities or opportunities for change in future. There are a number of key issues at the heart of the conflict that are currently irresolvable. Yet there are also benefits to be gained from an active focus on dialogue and engagement. Supporting work on this over the long term can help to create an environment more conducive to conflict transformation and prevention, and ultimately to longer-term political settlement and sustainable peace.

Conciliation Resources does not take a position on the conflict or its resolution but aims to provide an impartial and non-threatening space where participants can engage in constructive dialogue and work (separately or together) on issues of common interest despite opposing political positions.

We have engaged in a wide range of diverse initiatives, engaging diverse actors working at and between different levels of society, and adapting our approach as the politics and dynamics of the conflict have changed. We recognise the asymmetries in the conflict and that the needs on both sides of the divide, and of different stakeholders on either side, may require different types and degrees of support. Above all, our work is rooted in our relationships with local partners and interlocutors who are best placed to determine the change their societies and region needs.

## **Main activities / strands of work / methodology**

### **Facilitate multi-track dialogue between a range of Georgian and Abkhaz participants, including civil society, officials, experts, youth, displaced, media professionals, environmental practitioners**

For over twenty years we have convened regular Georgian–Abkhaz dialogue (totalling over 50 meetings). The dialogue has at times been a Track 1.5 process (for example, the ‘Schlaining process’ that brought together officials and civil society actors 2000–2007, and was co-facilitated with the Berghof Foundation until 2005). At other times it has focused on civil society dialogue (including in partnership with the University of California Irvine, and Heinrich Böll Stiftung), or specific groups such as journalists or environmentalists. To enable greater participation by young people, we facilitated an exclusively youth dialogue process (2007–2012) alongside our other dialogue. Most recently (2012 to date) we have facilitated dialogue within the framework of the Limehouse Discussion Platform. This is an informal dialogue that brings together civic actors, experts, officials and MPs from the region, sometimes together with international participants for part of the dialogue. This dialogue is focused on keeping channels for information exchange open, bringing people together for joint analysis, to generate ideas and create opportunities for progress on specific areas of common interest, and enable more constructive narratives to be built. A number of practical initiatives have been generated by the dialogue, including on access to higher education for students living in Abkhazia, and environmental resource management and ecology.

### **Resources**

Improving prospects for peace through Georgian–Abkhaz dialogue. <https://www.c-r.org/our-work-in-action/improving-prospects-peace-through-georgian-abkhaz-dialogue>

From youth dialogue to youth action: It’s not an event, it’s a process (Comment piece), August 2012. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-views/comment/youth-dialogue-youth-action-its-not-event-its-process>

Georgian/Abkhaz youth dialogue and study trip: A roller coaster ride through Brussels (Report), April 2010. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/georgianabkhaz-youth-dialogue-and-study-trip-roller-coaster-ride-through-brussels>

Georgian/Abkhaz youth dialogue programme study trip to Northern Ireland (Report), October 2009. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/georgianabkhaz-youth-dialogue-programme-study-trip-northern-ireland>

Jonathan Cohen, The Schlaining Process; Manana Gurgulia, The Schlaining Process: An Abkhaz Perspective; Paata Zakareishvili, The Schlaining Process: A Georgian Perspective. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/politics-and-mediation-schlaining-process>



### **Facilitate collaboration on memory work to address the legacies of the violent past and contested narratives**

Since 2010, we have pursued a thematic focus on 'dealing with the past' with local partners from both sides. This has involved a series of regular workshops and dialogue meetings, the transfer of archival materials and discussion of cultural heritage and contested narratives. Feasibility studies and reflection on activities appropriate to the current phase of the conflict evolved into what is now called the 'Memory Project'. Partners are working on both sides to build archives of existing material and new oral history recordings, documenting lived experience of the violent past and securing it for future generations. We have worked in close partnership with swisspeace, with input from the Center for Nonviolent Action in Belgrade and Sarajevo, and a range of other expert resource people with experience of archiving and documentation work, of dialogue on dealing with the past, and of creative outreach, curation and memorialisation. Following an exhibition in Tbilisi in 2019, work is ongoing to create diverse opportunities for outreach on either side, and to provoke discussion in the societies about the root causes of conflict and reflection on what the contested past means for shaping the future.

#### **Resources**

The Memory Project. <https://www.c-r.org/our-work-in-action/memory-project>

Rachel Clogg, Looking back to look forwards: the power of archives to transform conflict, October 2020. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/looking-back-look-forwards-power-archives-transform-conflict>

Reflections on memory and dealing with the past, October 2020. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/reflections-memory-and-dealing-past>

An exhibition - Corridors of Conflict: Abkhazia 1989-1995, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvp32H\\_dcFE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvp32H_dcFE)

Rachel Clogg, Marina Elbakidze and Arda Inal-Ipa, The art of the possible: dealing with past violence in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In: Transforming broken relationships Making peace with the past, Accord Insight 3, eds. Mark Salter and Zahbia Yousuf, September 2016. pp.16-21. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/reconciliation-and-peace-processes>

### **Strengthen capacity and conflict literacy among diverse groups and facilitate internal dialogue on both sides of the conflict divide**

We have worked to support local initiatives, by individuals, groups or civil society organisations on either side of the conflict divide. This has included conflict transformation training, including training for trainers, work on governance, human rights and civic education, small grants programmes and/or development of community-led initiatives in all regions of Abkhazia. We have worked to support internal dialogue across the regions of Abkhazia, exploring issues of diversity, supporting women-led initiatives, and eliciting the perspectives and needs of different communities. This included interaction between organisations based in Gal/i region and elsewhere in eastern Abkhazia with civil society organisations in Sukhum/i, for example through a regular forum for civil society exchange.

For a number of years we have worked with English-language teachers from all regions, to improve teaching methodology and share their experience of working in different parts of Abkhazia. We have supported fledgling organisations such as Association for People with Spinal Disabilities, Asarkia and Respublika Idei, as well as core support to now established NGOs and opinion leaders such as the Center for Humanitarian Programmes. In 2000 we started working with diverse individuals and fledgling organisations representing Georgians displaced from Abkhazia. We brought them together from different parts of Georgia, including Samegrelo, Imereti and Tbilisi, for training in conflict transformation and civic participation, to help them articulate their needs, create a support network and plan strategies for getting IDP voices heard at national and local levels. This evolved into almost a decade of support to what became the Synergy IDP network, a locally driven initiative supporting IDP communities to participate in decision-making processes that affect them. We produced the translation into Russian of the Working with Conflict resource, and together with the Berghof Foundation we supported Georgian and Abkhaz partners to produce a 'Discussion pack' of materials on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict context, for use in education and dialogue.

### Resources

Civil society emergency response: addressing Covid-19 and its impact in Abkhazia, August 2020. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/civil-society-emergency-response-addressing-covid-19-and-its-impact-abkhazia>

Local First: Synergy network, Georgia, July 2014. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/local-first-synergy-network-georgia>

Marina Elbakidze, Breaking stereotypes: Georgia's internally displaced. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-views/stories/breaking-stereotypes-georgias-internally-displaced>

Sharing responsibility: governance in the midst of conflict (Report), November 2013. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/sharing-responsibility-governance-midst-conflict>

Georgian-Abkhaz conflict discussion pack, April 2002 (Russian). <https://www.c-r.org/resource/georgian-abkhaz-conflict-discussion-pack>

Working with Conflict, 2000 (Russian). [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/WorkingWithConflict\\_01rus.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/WorkingWithConflict_01rus.pdf)

### Enable learning and exchange with academics, analysts, peers and practitioners from other contexts, including study visits and summer universities

We have arranged multiple 'study visits' for groups from the Georgian-Abkhaz context. Some have been on specific topics of interest (such as economic issues in the context of conflict, security, language and cultural identity, dealing with the past, the role of women), others have provided comparative experience from other conflict contexts (such as Northern Ireland and the Balkans). We have taken visiting lecturers and experts in international relations, documentary film making, memory work, human rights and civic education, education exchange programmes, and social cohesion to work alongside partners in the Caucasus. We hosted an International Summer University in Abkhazia over five years (2002-2006) bringing students from across the Caucasus together with peers from outside the region, taught by Russian and western academics working together. We provided publications and organised a lecture series at the Georgian national library. We have facilitated internships and participation in training courses for young people from both sides, including over a number of years in Stadtschlaining (Austria), Birmingham (UK) and Warsaw (Poland). We have also worked with others to create more opportunities for students resident in Abkhazia to access education abroad, including through the Chevening scholarship programme.

## Resources

Clem McCartney, Jonathan Cohen and Rachel Clogg, *The Georgian–Abkhaz conflict: Reflections on four study visits to the United Kingdom and Ireland (Report)*, February 2003. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/georgian%E2%80%93abkhaz-conflict-reflections-four-study-visits-united-kingdom-and-ireland>

Case study on introducing a regional application option for the Chevening scholarship programme in *Learning from Partnership: Effective donor support to civil society-led peacebuilding*, Feb 2018. <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/learning-partnership>

## Strengthen independent media and conflict-sensitive reporting

For over a decade, we had a particular focus on media work in the Georgian–Abkhaz context. Starting in 1999, with exchanges and cross-conflict dialogue, training between Georgian and Abkhaz journalists, both independent and state media professionals, continued alongside support for a range of specific initiatives. Work on print media included support to the *Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* and *Kolokol* journals and *Nuzhnaya Gazeta* newspaper in Abkhazia; the *Postfactum* magazine run by Georgian IDPs; inserts in mainstream newspapers such as an information bulletin about Gal/i region that was published in Abkhaz newspapers, a ‘Your Abkhazia’ page printed in the Georgian press (24 hours), a ‘Synergy’ page about Abkhazia and views of IDPs in *Rezonansi*; and a South Caucasus wide newspaper called *Panorama* that enabled information exchange across the region. Radio work included joint radio initiatives such as ‘Neither war nor peace’ (a Georgian and Abkhaz journalist travelling together and interviewing people on both sides), and one focused on the Moscow Georgian and Abkhaz diaspora. A *Radio Diaries* series produced over 1,300 short self-recorded stories that were broadcast on over 20 radio stations, in which ordinary people from all parts of the South Caucasus reflected on different aspects of their lives. Over many years we worked with *Radio Soma* in Sukhum/i and *Radio Atinati* in Zugdidi, also enabling some exchange between the two radio stations. We supported an IDP radio project based in IDP collective centres, a *Media Club* based in Abkhazia, and helped to establish an independent production studio *Asarkia*. We also contributed to *Go Group’s Eyewitness Studio* (including hosting meetings of young journalists from across the South Caucasus in London). We have supported a number of Abkhaz journalists to produce films and worked closely with the Georgian production company *Studio Re*, to host discussion programmes and produce a series of films about the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, sometimes working together with Abkhaz counterparts.

## Resources

*Absence of Will* (English subtitles), 2008 [Studio Re]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAYAK-ALjGw>

*Abkhazia: One Side of a Conflict* (Russian with English subtitles), 2004 [Studio Re]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLRLHFbzQTU>

*Ten years and still waiting* (Russian with English subtitles), 2004 [Studio Re]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfvfnHbpJbA> [Not available via CR YouTube – available on Studio Re YouTube]

*Hoping for Peace* (Russian with English subtitles), 2002 [Studio Re]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwYZyYrBNBO>

Rachel Clogg and Jenny Norton, *Communicating across borders. Peacebuilding and the media in the South Caucasus*. In: *Paix sans frontières. Building peace across borders. Accord Issue 22*, eds. Alexander Ramsbotham and William Zartman, January 2011. pp.71-75. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/cross-border-peacebuilding/communicating-across-borders-peacebuilding-and-media-south>

### Promote constructive changes in policy and practice through events and publications

Over decades of active peacebuilding work, we have produced resource materials that aim to aid better understanding of the different perspectives on the conflict and on prospects for change, and sometimes suggest possible ways for constructive steps to be taken. Some of these resource materials are informal and disseminated to specific target audiences. Others are publicly accessible. Some publications are the direct product of dialogue, and summarise views expressed by a range of participants. Others are related to specific projects, in support of developing strategy, or involving former diplomats and politicians who travelled to the region to provide a sounding board for testing ideas. We have supported a range of individual or group initiatives designed to provoke discussion and reflection, such as a group of Georgian political and civic actors in 2003/2004 who drafted their vision of potential Georgian-Abkhaz constitutional relations, an Abkhaz women's organisation that formulated priorities for integrating the needs of diverse ethnic and religious groups in Abkhazia, or a group of civic actors from both sides who worked on recommendations for changes in EU policy in the region. Sometimes we have worked directly with officials and decision makers, offering training or creating platforms for internal or cross-conflict discussion of possible steps. We have provided opportunities for Abkhaz and Georgians to participate directly in international conferences and other platforms with a focus on conflict and/or the South Caucasus, so that their voices and perspectives are heard. Sometimes we have enabled civic actors and/or officials to meet with international interlocutors, for example in Brussels, Moscow, London, Berlin, Vienna and Washington. At other times we have worked with professionals to produce quantitative opinion surveys or conducted qualitative research into people's perspectives on a range of issues related to peace and conflict transformation.

#### Resources

Majority of Georgians see prospects for change to improve relations with Abkhaz, October 2020. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/majority-georgians-see-prospects-change-improve-relations-abkhaz>

Youth perspectives on peace and security: the Georgian-Abkhaz context, April 2018. <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/youth-perspectives-peace-and-security-georgian-abkhaz-context>

Paths to Peace? A survey of public attitudes towards potential transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Abkhaz findings, 2017. [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/CR\\_Paths-to-peace\\_Ab\\_EN\\_0.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/CR_Paths-to-peace_Ab_EN_0.pdf)

Paths to Peace: A survey of public attitudes towards potential transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Georgian findings, 2017. [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/CR\\_Paths-to-peace\\_GEO\\_EN.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/CR_Paths-to-peace_GEO_EN.pdf)

The Realm of the Possible Finding ways forward in the Georgian-Abkhaz context: Challenges in education, July 2016. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/realm-possible-education>

The Realm of the Possible Finding ways forward in the Georgian-Abkhaz context: People in the Gal/i region, July 2015. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/realm-possible-gali>

Dialogue and Diversity in Abkhazia: Public opinion survey, March 2015. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/dialogue-and-diversity-abkhazia>

People's Peacemaking Perspectives: Georgian–Abkhaz conflict – Policy brief, March 2012. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/peoples-peacemaking-perspectives-georgian%E2%80%93abkhaz-conflict-%E2%80%93-policy-brief>

EU's role in conflict resolution: Georgian and Abkhaz perspectives, March 2012. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/eus-role-conflict-resolution-georgian-and-abkhaz-perspectives>

Survey launched in Georgia highlights opinions of internally displaced people, July 2011. <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/survey-launched-georgia-highlights-opinions-internally-displaced-people>

Displacement in Georgia: IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice: Policy brief, April 2011. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/displacement-georgia-idp-attitudes-conflict-return-and-justice-policy-brief>

Displacement in Georgia: IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice: An analysis of survey findings, April 2011. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/displacement-georgia-idp-attitudes-conflict-return-and-justice-analysis-survey-findings>

Archil Gegeshidze and Ivlian Haindrava, Transformation of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict: Rethinking the paradigm (Georgian perspective) (Report), February 2011. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/transformation-georgian%E2%80%93abkhaz-conflict-rethinking-paradigm-georgian-perspective>

Natella Akaba and Iraklii Khintba, Transformation of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict: Rethinking the paradigm (Abkhaz perspective) (Report), February 2011. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/transformation-georgian%E2%80%93abkhaz-conflict-rethinking-paradigm-abkhaz-perspective>

Laurence Broers, Out of the margins: Securing a voice for internally displaced people: Lessons from Georgia (December 2009). <https://www.c-r.org/resource/out-margins-securing-voice-internally-displaced-people-lessons-georgia>

Conflict sensitive approaches to donor engagement in Georgia, October 2008. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/conflict-sensitive-approaches-donor-engagement-georgia>

Crisis in Georgia: Recommendations and principles, August 2008. <https://www.c-r.org/resource/crisis-georgia-recommendations-and-principles>

Jonathan Cohen, Archil Gegeshidze and Liana Kvarchelia. Georgia–Abkhazia. In: Powers of Persuasion, Incentives, sanctions and conditionality in peacemaking, eds. Aaron Griffiths and Catherine Barnes. Accord Issue 19, 2008. pp.66–73. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/incentives-sanctions-and-conditionality>

A question of sovereignty. The Georgia–Abkhazia peace process, Accord Issue 7, October 1999. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/georgia%E2%80%93abkhazia>

## Main outcomes and outputs

It is challenging to summarise outcomes and outputs for a wide range of work that spans more than two decades and multiple different partners and kinds of initiative.

The most recent evaluation of our work in the Georgian–Abkhaz context was completed in 2020, focusing on achievements since 2016, many of which were cumulative. A summary of some of the key outcomes, based on this evaluation, follows. Other outputs – resources, publications and initiatives that have emerged as a result of our work – are mostly covered in the section above.

Key outcomes include:

- We have kept open channels for informal dialogue over the long term, engaging a wide and expanding range of participants, adapting to suit the changing dynamics of the conflict context and to push the boundaries of what is possible amid a deteriorating regional and global context.
- Our work has enabled improved understanding by a number of different target audiences of different perspectives and built stronger relationships and improved cooperation within societies (vertical relationships between civil society and political elites and officials) and across the Georgian-Abkhaz divide, including horizontal relationships among civic actors in Georgian and Abkhaz societies promoting constructive interaction and dialogue.
- We have seen the policies and practices of local and international actors change, partly as a result of our work, and greater openness of multilateral institutions and bilateral donors to supporting programmes and new issue areas that address practical needs in Abkhazia.
- Civil society capacity has increased, promoting broad participation and community activism, progress on governance, human rights and inclusion, creating opportunities for education and campaigning for environmental protection and increased awareness raising about conflict issues.
- Our work has contributed to increasing acceptance of critical reflection on the past; in particular, parts of Georgian society have become more open to examining the origins and root causes of violence in the 1990s.

## Main challenges and lessons learned

- There are no 'quick wins' in peacebuilding. In order to make progress there is a need for long-term, patient work, rooted in what people living in the context need and are able to bring. When engaging in dialogue local actors are often viewed with suspicion by their own communities. Local peacebuilders therefore need to be given the space and support to work within their own society in order to stay sufficiently rooted and credible, and able to respond to and represent local needs and fears.
- The challenge is to secure flexible and consistent funding to support this essential patient work on the ground and allow local actors to work at their own pace with a longer-term strategy in mind. While it is important to convene dialogue meetings and opportunities for exchange across the divide, these will ultimately not lead to progress without the preparatory work within the societies before and between meetings.
- With positions so polarised in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, and isolation increasing, there has at times been pressure on Conciliation Resources to take sides or make statements in favour of one side or another. However, in order to maintain our role as convenor of dialogue in which all participants can feel respected and able to participate meaningfully, it has been crucial to stay principled, taking an impartial stance with regard to political settlement.

- Peacebuilding initiatives need to be based on thorough, and regularly updated, conflict and context analysis and to adapt to respond to opportunities as they arise. Given the different levels of development, interest in and energy for different aspects of work within the Georgian and Abkhaz societies, needs and space for specific initiatives tend to be very different on either side, or from one stakeholder group to another. An asymmetric and adaptive approach has therefore been required, often focusing on different priorities in the two societies and among a wide range of stakeholders.
- There are often tensions between visibility and the need for there to be broad buy-in, and the need for safe spaces to explore ideas that do not always benefit from wide visibility.
- The more flexibility there is to adapt plans, and not to force the pace of change or expect immediate results that follow a linear logic, the more opportunity there is to build credible relationships, embed peacebuilding work in the needs of key stakeholders, and lay the foundations for seizing opportunities when the time is right.

## International facilitator Heinrich Böll Foundation

### Process

**Conference and Publication Series 'Aspects of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict' (2004-2009 with University of California, Irvine) and Berlin Extension to the Limehouse Process (2008-2009 with Conciliation Resources)**

### Donor(s)

HBF

### Partner(s)

University of California, Irvine, Conciliation Resources (2008, 2009).

### Main objectives / purpose

The main goal of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in the South Caucasus Region is to contribute to the forming of free, fair and tolerant societies in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. One element of HBF's work is to facilitate civil society dialogue for the peaceful transformation of conflicts, often working in partnership with other organisations.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

HBF has implemented numerous projects in the region focusing on the conflicts, including a public discussion series; media projects; and region-wide projects, including the South Caucasus Documentary Film Festival on conflicts and human rights.

More information about these projects past and present is available here: <https://ge.boell.org/conflict-transformation>

The main dialogue processes that HBF have been involved in include the following.

Conference and publication series 'Aspects of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict', 2004-2009 (in partnership with University of California, Irvine 2004-2009 and also with Conciliation Resources, 2008-2009)

- Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict 11: The Russian Factor (2004)
- Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict 12: Russia's Role: Realities and Myths (2005)
- Prospects for Georgia and Abkhazia in the context of Black Sea Integration (2006)
- Georgian NATO Accession and Potential Impacts on the Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process (2007)
- Conflict and Migration: The Georgian-Abkhazian Case in a European Context (2008)
- Civil Society and the Peace Process, 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

'Berlin extension' of the Limehouse Process (Conciliation Resources) (2008-2009) – Georgian-Abkhaz annual informal dialogue with civil and political actors in personal capacity; closed round tables with representatives of ministries and parliament, both on national and on EU levels.

Public discussions organised by HBF often focused on issues discussed in dialogue meetings with invited Georgian participants.



## Main outcomes and outputs

- Elaboration of proposals for de-isolation and de-escalation measures
- Successful lobbying for the integration of Abkhaz students into German scholarship programs (German Academic Exchange Service)
- Establishment of direct communication channels between German MFA and Abkhaz civil society actors
- Publication of UCI/HBF Conference proceedings: <https://ge.boell.org/taxonomy/term/2723>  
Available for download at [www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb\\_cs\\_abkhaz\\_pub.php](http://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.php)

## Main challenges and lessons learned

- At certain periods civil dialogue processes came under obstruction by then Georgian government
- It was a continuous challenge to balance maintaining the level of trust achieved within the group while not becoming too closed a circle
- Organising follow up public discussion on both sides as important (and often more challenging) than the meetings themselves.

## International facilitator

### Toledo International Center for Peace (CITpax)

Also with the Viadrina Centre for Peace Mediation and swisspeace

#### Process

**Georgian and Abkhaz Perspectives on Human Security and Development in Conflict-Affected Areas: A Policy Research Initiative (2008-9)**

#### Donor(s)

EU, Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

#### Partner(s)

Georgian and Abkhaz civil society experts and analysts

#### Main objectives / purpose

This project was a cycle of research and dialogue aimed at building a common understanding of the consequences that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict on the populations living on both sides of the conflict divide. The research focused on transversal technical issues grouped into four fields: human security, energy, regional economic development and the protection of the displaced persons and returnees.

#### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

**Dialogue meetings** with researchers from both sides were held in March, June, October, December 2008 and a March 2009 conference in Brussels, where research findings were presented.

**A workshop on mediation and dialogue practice** was held in Berlin for mid-ranking Abkhaz and Georgian officials in co-operation with the Viadrina Centre for Peace Mediation and swisspeace. The purpose of this training was to portray different ways of negotiation, mediation and dialogue and also to promote understanding of the importance of a needs-based approach in conducting negotiations whilst at the same time showing the value added of mediation.

#### Main outcomes and outputs

**A collection of policy papers** with parallel Georgian and Abkhaz perspectives on 4 themes important for improvement local living conditions: 1) human security; 2) human rights; 3) economic development and 4) energy policy.

Paper is available in English for download: <http://www.toledopax.org/en/content/georgian-and-abkhaz-perspectives-conflict-resolution-and-human-security-joint-research>

## International facilitator International Alert

### Process

**Caucasus Forum of NGOs (1998-2005)**

### Donor(s)

EU, UK Lottery Fund, UK Foreign Office

### Partner(s)

Various civil society actors and organisations from across all regions of the North and South Caucasus (approx. 600 activists over the 7 years of the Forum).

### Main objectives / purpose

**Overall purpose:** Strengthening trust and cooperation between the peoples of the Caucasus, building tolerance, development of political culture, assertion of civic consciousness, the revival of traditions of peaceful coexistence, and overcoming ethnic hostility and prejudice.

The regional process emerged initially to support a Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, at a time when other bi-lateral dialogues were evolving (mainly the University of California, Irvine process).

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

Network meetings in locations in the Caucasus: trainings, discussions, creative games.

Professional/thematic network meetings: (e.g. on Traditional forms of conflict resolution; between young journalists, **ex-combatants**; people with disabilities; historians; and the Caucasus Women's League, including Georgian-Abkhaz track 1.5 meeting in UK 2003.

Cultural Dialogue – publication of book of war stories 'Time to Live'.

The "Forgotten Regions" project supporting civil society in Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, and some regions of the North Caucasus.

Joint civil diplomacy missions: to Karachay-Cherkessia in 1999; to **Kodor/i** in 2001; monitoring of the presidential elections in Kabardino-Balkaria in 2002 (and others).

Internal dialogue between communities in Abkhazia; small grants for communities in the conflict zone (e.g. kindergarten in Gal/i lower zone; children's playground Ochamchire/a), etc.

### Main outcomes and outputs

A 2004 evaluation (published in Russian in Volume 10 of UCI's 'Aspects' series) identified the main result as the formation of a 'central pool' of civil society peacebuilders working in cooperation and that were better prepared in 3 ways:

- Psychologically: (breaking down enemy images; overcoming emotional/cognitive barriers to cooperation)
- Intellectually: (understanding each other's perspectives, deeper informed on the situation)
- Practically: (developed skills and resources to transform their societies, to resist militaristic moods).

Practical cooperation had already resulted in: broadening the space for interaction between professional and sectoral networks across the Caucasus; on-going dialogue, facilitating new understanding of the conflict, its causes and dynamics and also methods of transformation. Several 'products' had been created – books and films – reaching a wider audience; and the network was a catalyst for development of civil society in the different societies (including the main driver of civil society development in the 'forgotten regions') and a number of spin-offs (including the Caucasus Business and Development Network; and young journalists some of whom went on to work with IWPR).

The process is credited (by respondents in this study) with "changing the atmosphere" of conflict in that more and more people recognise the need to normalise relations – essential for stable political settlement. Contacts, relationships forged during the Forum days are still in place today – through the network no longer formally exists. Bi-lateral processes emerged from the multi-lateral format.

More detail about the history of the Forum and some of the work it inspires is available in these articles:

Chapters 9-11 and 17-21 in 'Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus'.

<https://www.international-alert.org/publications/mediation-and-dialogue-south-caucasus>

Transcending Borders – Article in Caucasus Edition, November 2016. <https://caucasusedition.net/transcending-borders-transnational-approaches-to-conflict-resolution/>

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

The very high level of local ownership was a key positive feature of this initiative, but it was a challenge to maintain financially a network that stretched across the whole North and South Caucasus (and also had participation from Central Asia at key moments), which fell under different budget lines/departments of international donors. Attempts to institutionalise the network coincided with changing staff and donor priorities, as well as some changing priorities of the founding local partners, who continued working in other formats.

## International facilitator International Alert

### Process

**Dialogue on Human Security (2005-2008); Dialogue through Research (2008-2014); Caucasus Dialogues (2011-2014); Cultural Dialogue (2012)**

### Donor(s)

UK/EU

### Partner(s)

Academics and Civil society actors.

### Main objectives / purpose

**Georgian-Abkhaz Human Security Dialogue** (2005-2008) the foundation of this dialogue was a mutual recognition of the interdependence of each other's security. Focused on research, outreach and advocacy, public education and training skills development for a range of local partners and their respective target groups. Partners of this phase emerged from the Caucasus Forum of NGOs and included cultural figures, historians, psychologists, IDPs, ex-combatants, women and analysts. In Abkhazia Alert also supported research into the effectiveness of the judicial system in safeguarding human rights; and three citizens' advice bureaus.

'**Dialogue through Research**' was originally conceived prior to August 2008 in an attempt to de-escalate the conflict. It reconvened afterwards, initially studying 'Security Guarantees' in its aftermath. The topics for this and subsequent research were agreed through a process in which partners commissioned each other to undertake research on a given topic. The findings were then debated and disseminated publicly, with the perspectives published side by side, to encourage a new way of thinking about the conflicts.

**Caucasus Dialogues** was initiated in 2011 to complement the main dialogue process, but to deliver a regular series of short analytical pieces which offered Georgian and Abkhaz perspectives on events in the region as they unfolded.

Regional Dialogue International Alert also conducted dialogue through research and **Cultural Dialogue** in the broader South Caucasus context, through its South Caucasus **Mediation and Dialogue initiative**, with partners from the Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-South Ossetian, and Nagorny Karabakh conflict contexts.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Dialogue and joint analysis meetings
- Training courses (various) including civic education and conflict analysis/studies for students
- Research, publications, presentations and discussions.

## Main outcomes and outputs

Dialogue through research:

- (Mis)calculations in the Caucasus? Roundtable 28 July 2014
- Myths and conflict in the South Caucasus, Vol 2: Instrumentalisation of conflict in political discourse (2013)
- Myths and conflict in the South Caucasus, Vol 1: Instrumentalisation of historical narratives (2013)
- Myths and conflict in the South Caucasus: A training manual in critical thinking (2013)
- Georgia-Abkhazia on the road to 2020 (2013)
- The North Caucasus Factor in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict Context (2012)
- The de-isolation of Abkhazia (2011)
- The politics of non-recognition in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (2011)
- EU - Caucasus Dialogue on Georgian-Abkhaz Relations – Roundtable November 2010 (2011)
- International engagement in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution process (2010)
- Dialogue on security guarantees in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (2009).

Other:

- Caucasus Dialogues (from 2011): including a series on Tolerance and Conflict
- Cultural Dialogue (2012)
- Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus (2012).

## Main challenges and lessons learned

Participants value the process as a regular and structured channel through which Georgians and Abkhaz could access critical analysis from across the conflict divide, informed by dialogue, presented side-by-side. It subsequently became an important resource for those studying conflict studies in the region and internationally.

## International facilitator International Alert

### Process

**Regional Economic Research; Trans Ingur/i trade dialogue (2004-2018)**

### Donor(s)

European Union, the UK and Swiss governments

### Partner(s)

Local experts, analysts, small business

### Main objectives / purpose

Despite the restrictions on crossing the Georgian–Abkhaz divide, economic activity across the Ingur/i river persists. Although this trade is unpredictable and risky, people continue to trade in this way on a daily basis, because for many of them it is fundamental to their economic survival.

The regulation of economic activities across the Ingur/i is therefore a key way of building and sustaining confidence and peace across the conflict divide, making this an important area of study. The focus of our research has been to assess the potential of mutual economic interests as a basis for conflict transformation.

International Alert brought together Georgian, Abkhaz and international legal, political, economic and business experts and officials to study and discuss the issue of regulating trans-Ingur/i economic relations in the absence of a political agreement.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Study trips
- Research and analysis (see publications below), including comparative analysis with other regions
- Dialogue process between Georgian and Abkhaz experts.

### Main outcomes and outputs

- Opening the 'Ingur/i gate' for legal business: What conditions are needed for political acquiescence? (October 2018)
- Opening the 'Ingur/i gate' for legal business: Views from Georgian and Abkhaz private companies (March 2018)
- Trade between Serbia and Kosovo: Evolution of the regulatory framework (October 2017)
- Regulation of trade across contested borders: The cases of China/Taiwan, Serbia/Kosovo and Cyprus (April 2015)
- Trans-Ingur/i economic relations: A case for regulation (Volume 2) (April 2015)

- Rehabilitation of the railways in the South Caucasus, Vol. 2 (August 2014)
- Rehabilitation of the railways in the South Caucasus, Vol. 1 (October 2013)
- Trans-Ingur/i economic relations: A case for regulation (May 2013)
- Prospects for the regulation of trans-Ingur/i economic relations: a stakeholder analysis (2012)
- Regulating Trans-Ingur/i economic relations: views from two banks (July 2011)
- Corruption and Conflict in the South Caucasus (2006)
- From War Economies to Peace Economies (2004).

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

The project reached a natural end – after presenting the research on businesses and the political climate, there was no further natural place for International Alert in the process. Analysis, expertise, knowledge is in place for when the political conditions may be conducive to implement these recommendations.



## International facilitator International Alert

### Process

**Caucasus Business Development Network (CBDN) (2005-2015)**

### Donor(s)

UK/EU

### Partner(s)

SMEs across South Caucasus and Turkey

### Main objectives / purpose

In 2005, International Alert set up the Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN) with colleagues from the region with the aim of engaging business communities from across the region in peacebuilding.

Local organisations in the CBDN saw their role very much in pioneering new models for economic cooperation, as politics did not seem likely to offer such avenues in the foreseeable future. The guiding vision, developed jointly during dialogue meetings, was to promote an environment where people could cooperate and trade free of fear.

Businesspeople would soon have tired of dialogue alone. So our dialogue work started shifting from theory to practical initiatives such as tea-marketing festivals, joint production initiatives, training workshops for beekeepers and informational meetings for tourism operators. In some cases, they developed commonly produced Caucasus food brands (cheese, wine, tea, honey, juice). These new models for regional cooperation signalled a new way of seeing things.

The geographical scope of the project included Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh, spanning four conflict divides.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Network meetings
- Joint study trips and attendance at trade fairs, festivals, business and economic forums, including South Caucasus Business Women's Forum held in Pitsunda
- Joint production initiatives (cheese, wine, tea, honey, juice) and facilitation of small business initiatives.

### Main outcomes and outputs

The Caucasus Business and Development Network website is no-longer active.

A detailed reflection of the whole CBDN process in Part 5, Chapters 12 and 13 of the book 'Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus'.

<https://www.international-alert.org/publications/mediation-and-dialogue-south-caucasus>

## **Main challenges and lessons learned**

The purpose of demonstrating that traders and businesspeople can work together was achieved alongside some practical results. The 'Caucasus brands' had important symbolic value but due to regional economic obstacles, including closed borders, conflicts, etc. were never commercially viable thus not sustainable in their own right. CBDN was valued by partners as a safe platform for SMEs to engage with each other, enhance their professional capacities, share knowledge and information, learn about contemporary business practices and technologies, exchange contacts and network, thus enhancing the basis for regional cooperation and development. It's survival for 10 years was a testament to the commitment of its members, who continue their business activities in different ways.

A number of lessons learnt are articulated in the Chapter 12 in the Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus' publication, including the value of having a diverse partner/membership base, flexibility in programme design, in particular the regional format, and mobility within the region, within the political constraints. The practical business focus enabled de-politicisation of the process, and political discussion of the conflicts was rarely on the agenda.

## International facilitator International Alert

### Process

**Psychosocial rehabilitation for teachers, South Ossetia (2009-2012)**

### Donor(s)

EU/UNDP/Swiss government

### Partner(s)

Teachers in South Ossetia; Students.

### Main objectives / purpose

In 2009 Alert started working with teachers to develop their skills for working with traumatised children, while at the same time enabling them to influence change in their communities.

The trainings covered practical techniques for working with traumatised children, combined with group analysis of societal problems affecting performance and behaviour in the classroom. Teachers designed and implemented a number of small projects including: extra-curricular educational and cultural activities for school-children (music, dance, art, school journalism); environmental campaigns; education for children with special needs; reviewing University-entry tutoring programmes; and vocational training for agricultural machinery operators and electricians. Teachers also participated in a [study visit to Abkhazia](#), to learn about the experiences of cooperation between the education sector and civil society.

This initiative was followed up with a youth programme, seminars for Ossetian students to assist them to better understand themselves and human behaviour - how and why people respond to conflict situations and problems in a certain way - and what they can do on a societal level to address day-to-day problems.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- Psychosocial training seminars (a series of 4 in European capitals with 47 teachers in total)
- Micro projects (outlined above)
- Study visits.

### Main outcomes and outputs

Over this period, Alert observed a transformation in the outlook of the teachers, who were initially suspicious of working with a western organisation, as well as of each other, and believed that they were powerless to effect any positive change in their situation. By the end, the teachers were motivated and inspired by their own experience, gaining confidence in their own abilities and resources and committed to playing an active role in rebuilding the social fabric of South Ossetian society.

Teachers also observed a change in children in terms of motivation and increase of interest and level of engagement, as a result of their extra-curricular activities. Many of the projects implemented had quite a strong social resonance and drew interest from outside the school and from the wider community. Others were successful in developing social partnerships with the Ministry of Education and other institutions, important for transparency and sustainability of initiatives.

A number of articles about the initiative are available here:

- Teachers: <https://www.international-alert.org/projects/psychosocial-rehabilitation-teachers>
- Youth: <https://www.international-alert.org/news/building-peace-ground>

### **Main challenges and lessons learned**

This initiative demonstrated the central importance of psychosocial support in peacebuilding, to help people regain some control over their own lives; the importance of internal work, empowerment of civil society actors.

The main challenge was the increased difficulty in working on South Ossetia and resistance to civil society initiatives.

## International facilitator International Alert

### Process

**Initiative for Youth-led Civic Dialogue and Action (September 2015 - December 2018) / Youth Dialogue for Civic Action (September 2019 - September 2023)**

### Donor(s)

USAID

### Partner(s)

Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP), Caucasian House (CH),  
Fund for Social and Cultural Initiatives of Abkhazia (FSCI).

### Target group

Young people (aged 19–30)

### Main objectives / purpose

Alert brings Georgian and Abkhaz youth together using a people-to-people approach to learn and work together on civic activism and engage in conflict analysis. The aims are:

- a. To boost youth-led civic activism
- b. Diversify and strengthen civil society
- c. Begin to normalise relationships between participants from the different areas through increased, safe, spaces for contact.

The new phase of the project expands with a stronger element of conflict analysis through the organisation of simulation games; including more young people from rural locations and different generations of activists; greater emphasis on media narratives and gender mainstreaming.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

In the first project of this programming (2015–2018) the following activities took place:

- Civic education courses – 4 cohorts per location, with each course consisting of 3 sessions on various aspects of civic engagement. 259 participants (Georgia: 34 men and 84 women; Abkhazia: 54 men and 87 women)
- Conflict analysis workshops (2–3 days, 3 in each location), 4 cohorts. 112 participants (Georgia: 23 men and 34 women; Abkhazia: 19 men and 36 women)
- Discussion clubs: 29 in total: 14 in Georgia (involving 520 individuals) and 15 in Abkhazia (involving 162 individuals)
- Four Regional Institutes (in the Hague, Barcelona, Bratislava and Cyprus) bringing together youth from across the South Caucasus to discuss problems facing youth and possible solutions with their peers and to learn from activists in other regional contexts
- Small-grant initiatives: 7 in Abkhazia and 6 in Georgia (see outputs below).

First year of follow up phase: September 19 – August 20:

- Two civic education courses (one in Abkhazia, one in Georgia) for a total of 61 participants.
- Conflict analysis workshop, Tbilisi (22 participants). Abkhaz workshop delayed due to COVID.
- 30 discussion clubs, 11 online, attracting 561 participants. Some discussions publicly available on Caucasian House's [YouTube](#) channel, and on FSCI's [podcast](#).

## Main outcomes and outputs

- A total of 13 small-grant initiatives, 7 in Abkhazia and 6 in Georgia. Including:
  - » A [Youth Art Festival](#)
  - » A campaign on [animal rights](#)
  - » A campaign to support [older people who face social exclusion](#)
  - » Three cultural heritage projects – including on the '[Great Abkhaz Wall](#)'
  - » Social cinema on topics of inclusion and diversity
  - » [Articles](#) and an [exhibition](#) on the theme of civil society for a sustainable city
  - » Street art in Kutaisi
  - » A camp on civic activism for ethnic minority youth
  - » A [documentary on ethnic minorities in Georgia](#)
  - » A [documentary on youth unemployment and exclusion](#).
- Berlin event for street artists from across the Caucasus on the theme of social impact through art in (August 2018) with participation of South Ossetians, [highlighted here](#).

## Main challenges and lessons learned

Difficulty in engaging South Ossetia in a meaningful and sustained manner.

Tensions between donor and partner preferences of format (bilateral vs regional format).

Loss of a lingua franca – Russian is not as widely spoken in Georgia as it was, and English has not replaced it (especially in Abkhazia) as a means of communication between the two sides.

## International facilitator Saferworld

### Process

**Community-Based Approaches to Security – Understanding and responding to local needs (2009-2015)**

### Donor(s)

UK, EU

### Partner(s)

Institute for Democracy, Abkhazia; Association of South Ossetian Women; Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD); the Gori Information Centre; Georgian Young Lawyers Association; Caucasus Research Resource Center.

### Main objectives / purpose

The overall purpose was to support local responsible authorities to better understand local needs; and to find appropriate ways of responding to locally identified priorities.

The objectives whereby to achieve this were to:

- Gather local perceptions of security and analyse how these perceptions are influenced by security incidents and other dynamics
- Increase the capacity of communities to better articulate their concerns, to have more confidence in requesting responses to what makes them feel insecure, and to play a role in developing solutions
- Support relevant stakeholders, including security actors to develop internal systems / tools
- Preventive action to address threats to vulnerable communities.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

**Increased understanding of community security concerns, through:**

- Regular **community security studies** in Eastern Abkhazia and Shida Kartli measuring
  - a. Community perceptions of local priorities
  - b. The levels and nature of security incidents
  - c. Potential triggers of future tensions and violence
  - d. Levels of contact, trust and confidence between ethnic groups.
- Establishment and running of an **Early Warning Network** along the ABL in Shida Kartli. This Network connected community representatives through a mobile-phone system (the **Elva platform**), allowing them to flag emergency incidents as they are happening and to provide weekly feedback on security incidents in their community.

**Increased community-level capacity on safety and security, through:**

- Establishment and support to **Community Reference Groups (CRG)** in Eastern Abkhazia and Shida Kartli. The CRGs allowed for sharing of resources, for communities to exchange experiences, and for identifying and planning for shared threats.
- Information exchange **between communities living across the ABL** in Shida Kartli and South Ossetia on security threats.

**Community-led responses to security threats, through:**

- Implementation of 15+ **Community security initiatives** in Eastern Abkhazia and Shida Kartli aimed to increase local security. These initiatives were identified and developed by the CRGs on the basis of community-by-community 'mapping' exercises.
- Facilitating **discussions between communities and security actors**, drawing on expertise from former Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) officers who spoke and offered background training at workshops with civil society members in Abkhazia. While the initiatives are developed by communities, they have been tested by, and implemented in partnership with, relevant security actors.

**Reviewed policies for policing conflict-affected communities, through:**

- Advisory support to the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM): assessment of EUMM operations and development of a training pack in 'More effective monitoring' specific for the Mission
- Facilitating a review of internal procedures by the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) an experience exchange between the MIA and Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on policing conflict-affected communities.

In addition, **study visits** were organised, involving representatives from Abkhazia: to Scotland (2013 and 2016) and Northern Ireland (2014) to study community policing and road safety issues.

## Main outcomes and outputs

Main outcomes were improved relations between local community representatives and the relevant authorities, through facilitated dialogue and discussion of problems. Likewise, through the process there was improved levels of trust between Sukhum/i and Gal/i CSOs. Furthermore, concrete initiatives to address local problems were identified and recommendations made to the respective authorities.

The cross divide nature was a significant element of the approach and occasioned (albeit low profile) space for perspectives/conversations with Georgian and Abkhazia officials that differed from the official lines, challenging hardened political stances at the time.

As a partner in the **Point of View** process between 2011-2015, Saferworld was able to ensure the participation of members of conflict-affected communities in a number of dialogue meetings (held and organised by George Mason University [GMU] in Istanbul, Yerevan and other venues) and to ensure local voices and perspectives in Shida Kartli and in South Ossetia were heard in a wider format and providing connectivity between the local community security work and the dialogue track.



Saferworld also focused in 2014–16 on early stages of a similar community-level intervention in vulnerable areas in Tavush Marz Armenia and (on the Azerbaijani side) Tovuz and Gazakh districts on the Azerbaijan–Armenia international border.

**Publications available on Saferworld website:**

**On Eastern Abkhazia**

Isolation and opportunity in Eastern Abkhazia: A survey of community security (March 2011)

Potential for change: A survey of community security in Eastern Abkhazia (July 2012)

Security for all: community perceptions of safety and security (May 2013)

Security for local communities: Can achievements of the past few years be preserved? (May 2014)

**On Shida Kartli**

Understanding and responding to security needs: Lessons from working with communities in Shida Kartli (February 2011)

Moving beyond insecurity: A survey of community security in Shida Kartli (March 2011)

Challenges of the everyday Evolving community security trends in Shida Kartli (March 2012)

Peace, security and stability in Shida Kartli. A community-informed strategy (June 2012)

Empowering conflict-affected communities to respond to security problems in South Ossetia (February 2013)

**Publications on North Caucasus and Nagorny Karabakh** produced as part of the *People's Peacemaking Perspectives (PPP)* project in 2010–2012, (a collaboration with Conciliation Resources).

## Main challenges and lessons learned

The main challenges were systemic, including an undeveloped culture of participation as a result of Soviet legacy, lack of coordination between authorities and other security providers. Indeed, this was behind the approach to foster a people-centred approach to security and peace which was previously lacking in the overall security architecture, contributing to instability and conflict dynamics.

One characteristic identified early on was the reticence of communities to answer the survey questions. This improved over time, as they became used to the project and understand its aims, but it meant that some data was not entirely trustworthy early on or was difficult to analyse comparisons in data between surveys, as often the 'change in perception' could be a 'change in response' related to increased trust in the process. Nevertheless, the analysis took this into consideration.

Issues identified as 'what more could be done' in 2011, two years into the process:

- Establishing systematic processes for community-consultation before and after Incident Prevention and Response (IPRM) meetings
- Agreeing standard principles and practises for understanding and responding to local needs in vulnerable communities.

## International facilitator Berghof Foundation

### Process

**History dialogue as basis for normalisation in Georgia and Abkhazia (2012-ongoing)**

### Donor(s)

German Foreign Office (and others)

### Partner(s)

World Without Violence NGO, Sukhum/i; Movement of Abkhaz Mothers for Peace and Development; Abaza TV; Ilia State University, Tbilisi; Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University/Sabauni, Tbilisi; Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi; Free University, Tbilisi; Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University.

### Main objectives / purpose

From website: <https://berghof-foundation.org/work/projects/history-dialogue-in-georgia-and-abkhazia>

In our work on history dialogue in the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, participants from different age groups in both societies engage in a dialogue on history. We strive to support our partners in overcoming the ‘silence on history’ that characterises many interactions across conflict lines and acknowledge the grievances caused by violence and injustice on all sides. Thus, we contribute to the goal of building sustainable, trustful relationships between civil society actors on all sides, while bolstering sustainability in the entire peacebuilding system.

In these dialogue processes, participants exchange stories about their own history in a strictly biographical mode, listening to different voices and sharing various experiences. Voicing grievances and appreciating the other sides’ losses can initiate a step towards forgiveness.

### Main activities / strands of work / methodology

#### Earlier phases:

- Joint workshops on biographical interview methods; Recording of interviews
- Inter-generational ‘Listening workshops’ to reflect on interviews and on both on one’s own and the other sides’ experiences and conflict narratives
- Triologue meetings in Yerevan, to discuss memories from all (three) conflict sides
- Since 2015, television shows and radio programmes where people could share and discuss their memories publicly.

#### Current phase:

Together with partner organisations in Georgia and Abkhazia we conduct regular discussion rounds and workshops on war memory. In this work we deliberately focus on rural and border regions as well as IDP settlements. It is our goal to make people and stories from all regions heard, who are rarely heard in official discourses. In Intergenerational Dialogue, older and younger people interact.

Older participants add their experiences, younger participants challenge dominant narratives and share their views. To deepen and broaden the discussions, the Berghof team regularly conducts intergenerational one-day workshops, opening spaces for deeper discussion. In 2019 and 2020 our local team conducted 1300 parallel local discussion workshops (800 by the Georgian team and 500 by the Abkhaz team).

An important feature of our work is the joint Abkhaz-Georgian digital/Zoom workshops. During these meetings, active participants take part to discuss memories of the wars from both societies. The individual approach encourages mutual openness as well as a sensitive and trustful relationship between the participants. In spite of the difficult topics, all participants relate to each other in a very thoughtful and sensitive way. The discussions showed that on both sides there is readiness to listen, to understand and to acknowledge painful issues. In 2020, our Georgian-Abkhaz facilitators team conducted 70 joint discussion workshops.

## Main outcomes and outputs

Additional video and written resources via: <https://www.facebook.com/BerghofFoundationCaucasus>

- Berghof Dialogue Diary 1:
  1. <https://vimeo.com/120038568>
  2. <https://vimeo.com/189613120>
- Berghof Spotlight 1:
  1. <https://vimeo.com/176284062>
  2. <https://vimeo.com/204176523>
- Andrea Zemskov-Züge and Oliver Wolleh (eds.) 2018. "Changing the past in our heads." A facilitator's guide to listening workshops. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/changing-the-past-in-our-heads-a-facilitators-guide-to-listening-workshops>

## Process / International facilitator

### The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, South Caucasus Office

Kvinna till Kvinna as a donor and partner organisation has supported women's rights in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (SO until 2017) since 2002. Our partners – local NGOs – promote peacebuilding efforts and support internally displaced persons. They counter stereotypes and abuse by providing courses on women's rights and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) linking this to a broader understanding of transformative feminist peace and conflict transformation.

The main process for Kvinna till Kvinna for many years was to provide financial support to NGO partners, and facilitate networking and capacity development of Women-to-Women Diplomacy in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (currently pending).

One of the main approaches of Kvinna till Kvinna partners has been the operationalisation, and localisation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, especially in Georgia.

Kvinna till Kvinna also supports projects and long-term processes of partner organisations which are tackling obstacles for women's participation in peace processes on various levels

#### Donor(s)

Swedish SIDA through embassy in Georgia – the main institutional donor for entire period of Kvinna till Kvinna's presence in Georgia (2002-2020). Also, Norwegian MFA (2010-2015); Dutch MFA (2010-2017); Swedish FBA (2017-2019)

#### Partner(s)

##### **Current partners (2021) pertinent to peacebuilding and rights of conflict affected population:**

Association 'Imedi' IDP women's movement for peace (Georgia)

Association of Women of Abkhazia (Abkhazia)

Cultural-Humanitarian Fund 'Sukhumi' (Georgia)

Democratic Women's Organization of Samtskhe-Javakheti (Georgia)

Union of Wives of Invalids and Lost Warriors (Georgia)

Women's Fund for Development (former Avangard) (Gal/i, Abkhazia)

Kvinna till Kvinna also previously worked with Women's Information Center (until 2015) and with individual peace activists in the South Ossetian context (until 2017).

## Main objectives / purpose

When war ends officially, it is not at all certain that peace (as in the absence of violence) takes its place. Often violence against civilians continues sporadically, and it is estimated that nearly half of all conflicts relapse into violence again. Peace is also patchy: some disputed territories may form pockets of violence, which means that peacebuilding may take place amidst ongoing violence. The space has shifted as global and local dynamics interact while war feeds on globalised networks of weapons and other assets, its violence is often acted out in streets, village squares, private homes and other microlocal settings.

Kvinna till Kvinna promotes and supports work on the concept of Feminist Peace, which is related to three perspectives:

- Peace as the absence of all types of structural violence
- Peace and security for all
- Peace premised on the universal integration of a gender perspective as well as the equal participation of women at all levels and in all peace building processes.

## Main activities / strands of work / methodology

Kvinna till Kvinna supports women in Georgia, Abkhazia, (currently not operational in South Ossetia) in the following ways:

- Facilitating dialogue and building trust between opposing sides of ethnic, territorial boundaries and intercommunity conflicts.
- Promoting dialogue and local ownership, needs based analysis and evidence-based reporting.
- Advocating for the meaningful participation of women in policy development, response mechanisms to conflict transformation and recommendations for decision makers.
- Promoting peacebuilding and the concept of Feminist Peace, with a focus on women's leadership.
- IDP psychosocial and legal support.
- Raising awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) among law enforcement actors also support our local partner organizations in their GBV prevention and response work. Partners are producing analysis on the connection between GBV and armed conflicts, also putting a focus on gendered effects of the protracted conflicts.
- Supporting survivors of gender-based violence.
- Holding gender equality courses for teachers and university students.
- Advising the governments and writing shadow reports.
- Educating women on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and provide free gynaecological care, preventing child marriages and sex selective abortions.

## Main outcomes and outputs (highlights)

Kvinna till Kvinna has contributed to change in a number of ways over the years. A recent evaluation highlighted the following areas of accumulated impact:

### **Increased organisational and programmatic capacity of women's organisations,**

including those working with conflict affected populations and across the divides.

### **Greater awareness within society of domestic violence and gender equality**

in Georgia in particular. Education and awareness raising programmes of Kvinna till Kvinna's partners have been described as 'transformational'; and some refer to the organisations as 'incubators for change' over a generation. There has been increasing media attention, especially around legislation and women's rights.

**On an institutional level,** persistent efforts by Kvinna till Kvinna's partners to get legislation passed on issues such as domestic violence and gender equality, UNSCR 1325 National Action Plans, and anti-discrimination, etc. have had results in Georgia.

**On the conflict context:** Kvinna till Kvinna partners have made a practical impact on the needs of IDP and border communities, and in bringing the needs of those groups to the policy level. Work across the divides has also contributed building trust, understanding and good relationships between groups of women. Support to partners in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has helped to overcome asymmetries between civil society actors across the divides.

Below a sample of concrete outputs over the 18 years of Kvinna till Kvinna's programme:

- Parallel research on Human security indexes in Abkhazia and Georgia
- Parallel work on Gender Responsive Early Warning Systems in Abkhazia and Georgia
- Self-mobilization and self-support groups, local and national networks, and associations
- Advocacy campaigns for Women, Peace and Security and National Action Plans for UNSCR 1325
- Critical Shadow Reports on first Georgian National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325
- Advocacy for IDP rights
- Promotion of women political participation.

## Main activities / strands of work / methodology

- UNSCR 1325 on Women Peace and Security has been an important tool for women's organisations, but in the absence of any meaningful peace processes, there is little opportunity for women to get onto the 'peace negotiations', and where this has been used effectively has been on encouraging IDP participation in public life and local political participation
- Kvinna till Kvinna partners have been reporting better mutual understanding and reduced aggression on an interpersonal level, and understanding peacebuilding as 'building good relations', but as the years go on, local partners struggle to articulate beyond that how they could impact on the conflict dynamics
- Women peace activists anticipate having a greater role only after a peace agreement would be in place, yet there are no meaningful peace processes in place
- Periodic reflection and analysis of the effectiveness of cross-divide work is important.

*Indie  
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