



PEOPLE'S PEACEMAKING PERSPECTIVES

MARCH 2012

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

THIS YEAR MARKS 20 YEARS SINCE THE START of the Georgian–Abkhaz war in 1992. At the heart of the conflict, one of a number that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union, is a contest between territorial integrity and self-determination. The conflict has persisted to this day and brings with it insecurity, deep mistrust, long-term displacement and serious constraints on growth and development.

The findings and recommendations in this brief draw on participatory research from 2010 and 2011 with people directly affected by the conflict. A wide range of people (including marginalised groups) gave their opinion on the conflict and, in group discussions in seven locations spanning the conflict divide, reflected on the European Union's (EU) response.

Since the 2008 war involving Georgian and Russian forces over South Ossetia views have diverged on the very nature of the conflict and who is party to it. Significant numbers of Georgians see it as Russian occupation of Georgian territory. Many Abkhaz perceive it as a Georgian–Abkhaz conflict in which Russia offers security guarantees for an independent state. Others, on both sides, see it as more complex, and multi-layered.

The communities on either side of the divide are physically isolated from one another and are following different trajectories – the Abkhaz toward Russia, and Georgians toward the 'West'. The trend toward increased polarisation, tension and entrenchment of positions creates serious obstacles to working for peace.

The EU is a significant donor and political actor in the region. It has interests in stability and prosperity on its perimeter and was instrumental in brokering a ceasefire after the war in 2008. Since then, it has co-mediated peace talks in Geneva, and has had a Monitoring Mission (EUMM) presence. Its Special Representative (EUSR) is mandated to work specifically on conflict. The EU is therefore well placed to influence dynamics in the region in a more positive direction. By building strong relationships with all stakeholders and looking for the common ground across the divide, it can help create the conditions for lasting peace.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **EU engagement needs to be more tangible to ordinary people and better understood** in order to gain maximum benefit from the policy of engagement without recognition
- **Aligning all areas of policy and programming with peacebuilding goals** will give the EU greater tools to influence positive change in the conflict dynamics
- **Support for effective democratisation and more inclusive politics across the region is key** to creating the conditions for sustainable peace
- **It is vital to listen to local voices** so that policy can be built on strong and nuanced understanding of the situation as perceived by the whole range of stakeholders

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

"In civil society, a lot of expertise has accumulated, knowledge about the conflicts, relationships built with the other side, but this is not being used."

Journalist, Batumi

Findings and Recommendations

1.

EU engagement needs to be more tangible to ordinary people and better understood in order to gain maximum benefit from the policy of engagement without recognition

Since 2009 the EU's stated policy towards Abkhazia has been engagement without recognition of Abkhaz independence. Yet ordinary Abkhaz know very little about this policy or the EU itself. Some groups expressed indifference, or were hesitant to respond to questions for fear of sounding ignorant. Others were more hostile and expressed mistrust towards the EU, who they feel view Abkhazia through a Georgian lens and whose position on non-recognition makes them more dependent on Russia.

"We need a process of confidence building with the EU itself, before we can talk about confidence building with Georgia."

Abkhaz civil society activist

There remain significant numbers in the Abkhaz leadership and civil society who would welcome greater contact and interaction with Europe. Yet there is concern that development support is limited, linked to relations with Georgia, and cannot compete with Russian investments in the region. While the EU clearly and understandably sees support to the Abkhaz through the prism of its partnership with Georgia, presenting its support as something important in its own right would win more Abkhaz hearts and minds. As one participant said, "We too have problems that need addressing, and the EU should stand by its values to promote human rights, irrespective of its stance on the conflict." Abkhaz participants felt EU engagement could only be successful if it was distinct from the Georgian state strategy to reintegrate Abkhazia.

"Engagement with the EU could be a breath of fresh air."

Abkhaz businessman, group discussion

In the conflict context, public statements on non-recognition by EU officials and institutions have disproportionate resonance, and make the work of those

in Abkhaz society who support greater exposure to Europe harder – they struggle to persuade their society that Europe has something to offer. In the words of one Georgian interviewee, reflecting a minority expert view, "Non-recognition is a given – the EU should now refrain from public statements that reinforce this message if it wants engagement to work."

Making what the EU currently does in Abkhazia more visible, and increasing its commitment to practical assistance that addresses ordinary people's needs, would help to build the EU's acceptance as a mediator in Abkhazia.

"We don't see engagement being filled with real content – we just hear rhetoric."

Abkhaz official, group discussion

Georgian participants were more positive about the EU's intentions and its support, and many perceive the EU as a resource for resolving the conflict. However, some criticised the EU for ambiguity in its policy statements while others felt the EU was not sufficiently robust in drawing attention to human rights deficits in Georgia.

"Georgia strives for European values, and we want to build the kind of society that is as close as possible to those values."

Member of a Georgian NGO

Significant numbers of Georgian participants favoured direct EU engagement with Abkhazia, refuting the notion that the Abkhaz should link with Europe only via Tbilisi for fear of 'creeping recognition'. The majority of these saw a parallel process of building closer Georgian and Abkhaz links with Europe as the way to counterbalance Russian influence in Abkhazia, and to keep a vital door open for constructive Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Make explicit what the EU understands by engagement, to what end it pursues this policy and how it is distinct from the Georgian strategy.**
- **Create increased opportunities for people to gain an understanding of what the EU can bring through:**
 - An EU information centre in Sukhum/i that enables the wider population to access books, films, language teaching;
 - A Centre for European Studies at the university in Sukhum/i.
- **Ensure funds are made available to address local needs and enhance the EU's profile:**
 - The EU should initiate a thorough and consultative process to establish what local people on both sides want from engagement, and factor this in to its planning;
 - More EU development and democratisation support needs to reach the population in Abkhazia, and more use should be made of bilateral instruments to further conflict transformation goals;
 - Funding mechanisms such as the Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism (COBERM) should continue to support civil society work to address root causes of conflict, with a particular focus on work within the separate communities, including in the boundary regions and among displaced communities.
- **Care should be taken with terminology in EU policy communications:**
 - Terms such as 'engagement' have negative political connotations in Abkhazia;
 - It is important to be conscious of the impact the term 'occupation', used in the context of Georgian-Russian relations, has on Georgian-Abkhaz relations.



2.

Aligning all areas of policy and programming with peacebuilding goals will give the EU greater tools to influence positive change in the conflict dynamics

A range of instruments exist for closer EU-Georgian economic and social integration which, while not directly related to addressing the conflict, could be used to demonstrate the EU's commitment to engagement and increase its acceptance as a mediator.

The EU is Georgia's main trading partner. The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership form part of the approximation process. As such, the EU invests significant amounts of time, money and expertise to support democratic development, the rule of law, governance, economic development and social reform in Georgia, in addition to its work on conflict.

Constructive action could be taken so the Abkhaz population could benefit more from EU programmes. This would help meet some of the internal needs identified by Abkhaz participants as priority areas for EU engagement, increase prospects for stability and prosperity and encourage a convergence of standards in areas of common interest across the divide. In line with the accepted principle of 'do no harm', at the very least the impact of EU programmes and trading relationships on current conflict dynamics should regularly be reviewed, in order that they do not serve to entrench or exacerbate divisions or tensions.

"Russia is able to draw on European experience, but we only have access to it in a reworked form, via Russia."

Abkhaz journalist, group discussion

Needs identified by Abkhaz participants included investment into public health, agriculture, medium and small business and banking system support, education reform and professional training (including in Gal'i region), infrastructure (e.g. transport routes within Abkhazia and across the divide), information technology, governance, waste disposal and environmental protection.

"It's important to open up the boundaries, establish not only inter-personal relations but economic and cultural relations – and whatever the status will be, it won't matter."

Georgian youth group discussion

A survey of Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) identified quality of housing and unemployment as key problems, in addition to political marginalisation. EU support to vulnerable groups in Georgia should continue to focus on IDP welfare and integration, in tandem with efforts to address the issue of return. The displaced are among those most affected by conflict, and yet are marginalised, struggling to move from being passive objects of other people's agendas.

"We should talk about the rights of Georgians and the rights of the Abkhaz people. We should make it clear how we are going to live there, [otherwise] we can't build a relationship with the Abkhaz people."

Georgian IDP survey respondent

Grievances over limited freedom of movement surfaced in Abkhaz group discussions. Abkhaz holders of Russian passports have sometimes not been issued visas for travel to Schengen countries, a decision seen by many as symbolic of EU indifference to Abkhaz rights, particularly when this has concerned sick people seeking medical treatment abroad. The status-neutral travel documents currently under discussion are not perceived as neutral by the Abkhaz as they are issued in Tbilisi, and some Georgian participants felt it important to seek international travel documents that are acceptable to both sides. Greater flexibility in the EU's visa rules would increase Abkhaz exposure to different perspectives and help address current feelings of isolation and exclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- More use could be made of EU trade and investment to promote peace and justice:
 - European investment funds and trade agreements should be conflict sensitive and include support for human rights;
 - The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement negotiations with Georgia bring opportunities for enabling trade across the dividing line.
- A constructive approach to peacebuilding by the Georgian government should be rewarded in the 'more for more' approach:
 - Changes to the 'Law on Occupied Territories' to create maximum opportunities for de-isolation, and a flexible approach to external parties' direct engagement with the Abkhaz;
 - Willingness to explore demilitarisation and the benefits of a potential non-resumption of hostilities agreement (something all parties should be encouraged to do);
 - Efforts to deliver justice for victims of conflict – work on reparation and restitution, and improving IDP wellbeing in their current location, in addition to facilitating a pragmatic and realistic debate about return, based on the opinions and needs of displaced people.
- The EU should facilitate freedom of movement, including for conflict-affected communities:
 - Work should continue on the process of visa liberalisation with Georgia;
 - Options should be explored for documents to be issued to conflict-affected communities under the aegis of an international body acceptable to all stakeholders;
 - Opportunities must remain for people living in Abkhazia who hold Russian passports to get visas for travel in Europe.
- Ways should be found for Abkhaz civil society to feed into the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform, and for exchange programmes such as Erasmus, or Youth in Action, to include the Abkhaz population.

3.

Support for effective democratisation and more inclusive politics across the region is key to creating the conditions for sustainable peace

"We should create the kind of state where Abkhaz, South Ossetians and Russians want to live."

Georgian journalist, group discussion

In Georgian discussions, many felt that Georgia needs to be more attractive to the Abkhaz and that it was important to make democratic as well as economic progress. Others were more sceptical and felt that this was not sufficient in itself to win the Abkhaz back. Some pointed to militarisation, a perceived worsening of democratic practice in Georgia, and a deterioration of relations between the government and political opposition as making it unfeasible. Abkhaz group participants cautioned against placing too many hopes in this argument:

"There's no point in hoping that we will come running if Georgia becomes more attractive."

Abkhaz opposition politician

There is a strong case to be made for improving governance across the region in its own right. Only in this way can some of the root causes of conflict be addressed – problems of minority rights, political representation and participation. Ultimately, if a political settlement of the conflict is to be reached and to last, ordinary people will have to feel they have some say over issues that directly affect their lives. Without a political culture of pluralism and debate in which people's rights are respected and voices heard, individuals and groups like the Gal/i population, displaced communities, Armenian and other minorities on both sides of the divide are left vulnerable and with few choices about their future.

"If we can learn to treat our minorities better, we will be better-placed to talk about peace."

Georgian joint analysis workshop participant

It is important that even in conflict areas where status and population composition are contested, the values of participation, diversity and human rights are respected. The EU can play a vital role in helping to hold leaderships to account, and promoting adherence to international standards.

There is of course a dilemma in supporting work on good governance in areas with contested status, and where there are different perceptions of the legitimacy and representativeness of the leaderships. Yet there is also a risk of entrenching conflict by engaging on governance and human rights work only with the populations in widely recognised states. Imbalance in opportunities for development needs to be corrected and core values on which the EU was built extended to the populations, irrespective of intractable status questions.

"The experience which Europe has accumulated over centuries, in governance, local government and culture is important for us."

Abkhaz businessman, group discussion

The democratisation agenda is a policy domain where cooperation across the divide is possible, and arguably where common interests can be found. Local people involved in peacebuilding see issues such as minority rights or nationalism as a common problem. Working practically on both sides of the divide to hold leaderships to account and to achieve convergence in standards of political practice would be consistent with EU goals, and is an area of clear European expertise. It would also meet an appetite and readiness for this among local people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Commission independent research assessing current practice in democratisation on both sides of the conflict divide, exploring where progress has been made and where there is room for improvement.
- The EU Delegation should encourage relevant policymakers (national and international) to link with displaced communities, so that IDP representatives have a say in decision-making processes that affect them. It should also encourage registration of Gal/i returnees and support work in Abkhazia that improves their livelihoods and rights.
- Ways should be found to implement work in line with Eastern Partnership objectives and standards to support the development of democratic practice in Abkhazia:
 - Longer-term funding should be made available from the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) to support Abkhaz civil society to promote good governance, democratic standards and human rights;
 - Provide technical support and agree benchmarks on progress towards European standards in Abkhazia on key areas including anti-corruption, independent media, good governance, justice sector and law enforcement reform, managing diversity and minority rights, teaching history and language in contested contexts, civic participation, and improving the capacities of local public authorities;
 - Elections held in Abkhazia should be judged on how far they meet democratic standards, even if they are viewed as illegitimate.
- Facilitate internal Georgian dialogue by including in EU support to the Georgian government accountability and monitoring mechanisms (on progress in democratisation and peacebuilding) that involve genuine partnership with civil society, and consultations across the political spectrum.

4.

It is vital to listen to local voices so that policy can be built on strong and nuanced understanding of the situation as perceived by the whole range of stakeholders

Perspectives held by people affected by the conflict need to be heard in order for policymakers to respond adequately to the challenges inherent in such a complex context, and for progress to be made in the peace process.

IDP research findings challenge assumptions about what the displaced want and how they see their future. Almost 60 percent of IDPs believe the conflict cannot be resolved by force. For 75–85 percent of respondents, even if return were to become possible, they would not have homes to go to. Having evidence of the realities that conflict-affected communities have to deal with, and an understanding of their opinions, helps link policy decisions to the needs of ordinary people.

Abkhaz group participants expressed feelings of discrimination and frustration because the Abkhaz were rarely given access to international platforms, and sometimes found their position being represented by Russia. They were highly sensitive to not being considered a party to the conflict, or to Russian interests being perceived as synonymous with Abkhaz ones.

"If Russia were to leave tomorrow, we would still have a conflict."

Abkhaz participant, joint analysis workshop

Although survey and group discussion findings confirmed that the majority of Georgians view the conflict as primarily between Georgia and Russia, there was a sense that it is at the Georgian–Abkhaz level that most progress can be made. A majority of IDPs said they support negotiations between Tbilisi and Sukhum/i, as did roughly two thirds of Georgian group participants. Some of the latter supported bilateral negotiations in conjunction with talks at other levels.

The question of dealing with past legacies surfaced in group discussions on both sides, and 59 percent of IDP respondents agreed that to resolve the conflict, injustices that happened in the past need to be addressed. Georgian group participants stressed the importance of addressing grievances stemming from the early 1990s in order to start a process of reconciliation, and prevent future conflict. People talked about the obstacles that nationalism and negative attitudes toward minority groups create.

"We need to acknowledge our mistakes [...], apologise, repent, if we really want reconciliation and to build a normal, just society and state."

Georgian civil society activist, interview

The Geneva talks are seen as the one platform for keeping communication open at the political level at present. At the same time, expectations of progress are limited. Some, mostly Georgians involved in civil society dialogue, expressed regret that they did not have more direct exchange with the Geneva process participants and mediators. A number were critical of the Georgian government approach, and felt their views, based on years of cross-conflict dialogue, were not being heard.

Younger participants from either side of the conflict, particularly those who had been involved in civil society activities, tended to be more progressive, open and less prone to using stereotypes. As potential future decision makers, their opinions and approach will be key to eventual conflict resolution.

Alternative views can open up possibilities for action or progress. A commitment to capturing different perspectives may entail creative thinking and a departure in approach – but it could add a valuable missing link to current understanding.



Men on the seafront in Sukhum/i.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage multiple informal dialogue processes, bilateral and regional, and find ways for Geneva participants to draw on them:
 - In addition to ongoing Georgian-Russian bilateral dialogue, the EU should encourage dialogue between the Georgian and Abkhaz leaderships, making funds available to support third party facilitation where necessary;
 - The EU should prioritise educational opportunities for young people in the region and outside, including resourcing opportunities for young people from across the divide to meet and study in a common environment and take part in projects together;
 - The EU could draw more on existing networks, informal civil society processes and publications to inform its role as mediator, including participating in meetings initiated by local civil society;
 - Internal dialogue processes reflecting on minority rights and nationalism should be encouraged.
- The EU Delegation and visiting EU representatives including the EUSR, could create mechanisms for regular exchange with civil society actors, the displaced, and other conflict-affected communities on both sides. The Geneva Co-Chairs could create opportunities for dialogue between Georgian civil society and experts and their politicians taking part in the Geneva meetings.
- The EU should consider working with other institutions to create opportunities for Abkhaz representatives to participate in international debates on issues that relate directly to them (such as the European Parliament, Council of Europe or UN).
- An inclusive process of learning from past experience is needed across the region. Lessons need to be learnt from the breakdown of relations in 2008, and conflict analysis should take into account the war in the early 1990s.

Acknowledging injustices

In a recent blog, where readers were asked to summarise in one word what Georgia was most lacking, 'justice' was the highest occurring word. A sense of injustice and grievance also surfaced in group discussions on either side of the conflict divide, although perceptions of injustice varied. An Abkhaz teacher spoke of a sense of 'blockade' by the West. "I am working in order to educate my children. But with our passports, school leavers cannot continue their education anywhere other than Russia [...] Why does Europe discriminate against our children?"

A woman from Gagra expressed fears of getting seriously ill. "We don't have the right facilities here, and it's too expensive to go to Moscow. Some people go to Tbilisi,

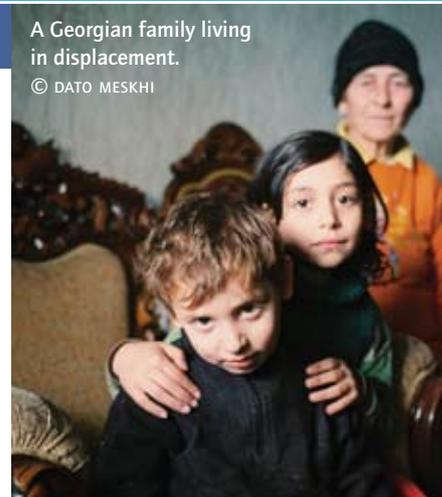
and they are forced to take Georgian passports in order to receive life-saving treatment. Those who don't are left with no options."

For many Georgian participants justice implied moral and financial compensation and the right to return for those displaced by the war. In the words of a Tbilisi civil society actor, "To restore justice is to return what people lost, or to compensate for it. In what way and to what extent, that is another question. This needs to be negotiated."

Many expressed the need for their opinions, and grievances, to be heard and acknowledged. As one Georgian journalist put it, "without recognising our mistakes

A Georgian family living in displacement.

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and acknowledging injustices, we can't move forward, either in building a democratic country, or in resolving our conflicts."



This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Conciliation Resources and Saferworld take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.

References and Acknowledgements

The findings in this policy brief were drawn from research conducted by Conciliation Resources and partners under the People's Peacemaking Perspectives project, and other programme work in the region. For full details of the project, including research reports and additional source materials, please visit: www.c-r.org/PPP

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Methodology

The findings and recommendations included here reflect the opinions of people in the region based on wide consultation and on a joint analysis workshop conducted with Georgian and Abkhaz partners to reflect on key messages. Group discussions and interviews were carried out in Batumi, Gurdjaani and Tbilisi, and in Gagra, Gal/i, Ochamchira/e and Sukhum/i, and included journalists, teachers, representatives of local non-governmental organisations, young people, business people, officials, members of parliament and opposition politicians. Separate analyses of the Georgian and Abkhaz focus group results were written by Conciliation Resources' partners Marina Elbakidze and Liana Kvarchelia: *Perceptions of the EU's role in conflict transformation in Georgia*, and *Perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and prospects for cooperation*.

The content in this brief also draws on the long-standing work of Conciliation Resources and its partners in the region. Additional materials that informed its findings include: *Displacement in Georgia: IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice*, the results of a public opinion survey conducted in 2010 among Georgian displaced; and *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: rethinking the paradigm*, reflections by Georgian and Abkhaz experts involved in cross-conflict dialogue on the challenges and opportunities in the context post-2008.

This policy brief reflects the perspectives of local people from either side of the divide. We have reflected the differences in these perspectives in our use of place names.

Cover photo shows a woman looking across the Ingur/i bridge. © IBRAGIM CHKADUA