



Report

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Youth perspectives on peace and security: the Georgian-Abkhaz context

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The focus group findings in this publication reflect the perspectives of respondents from either side of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict divide. We have reflected the differences in these perspectives in our use of contested terminology, including place names. For ease of reading, we chose not to use attributes such as 'de facto', or 'partially recognised' when referring to institutions and political positions in Abkhazia. We would like to emphasise that by doing so we in no way imply a position on status.

Cover image: *Children at the Black Sea in Abkhazia* © Otto Lakoba

Executive summary

In June and July 2017 Conciliation Resources' local partners carried out two sets of surveys to capture the voices of youth in the context of unresolved conflict in the Georgian-Abkhaz context as a contribution to the 'progress study' on youth called for by the UN in its adoption of Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security. Young people, reflecting some of the diversity of Georgian and Abkhaz societies, took part in focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews. Participants discussed challenges to their peace and security, including but far from limited to the enduring impact of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict on their lives. They also discussed the barriers to engagement in peacebuilding and dialogue that they face and their ideas for overcoming these barriers.

The report opens with background information on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the situation of young people living in the territories affected by it. Young people describe the enduring impact of the unresolved conflict, which leaves young people in Abkhazia, as well as some areas on the Georgian side, isolated and uncertain about their future.

However, with the exception of those living immediately adjacent to dividing lines, respondents rarely raised issues directly related to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (or the Georgian-South Ossetian or Georgian-Russian conflicts) as immediate concerns. Instead they focused on everyday tensions around discrimination at school and the work environment, lack of participation and inclusion, and poor governance and corruption.

In relation to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, most participants mentioned lack of information and opportunities to engage. Young people felt excluded from the peace process but many believed young people could do a better job than current elites at peacebuilding since they are not tainted by the past. For many, the FGD was the very first occasion they had been asked for their opinion on these issues. Practically all thanked the facilitators for the opportunity.

Given violence and tension within their societies was of more concern to many participants than the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, participants noted the lack of an overall culture to deal with conflicts and diversity constructively (both at the level of government and within societies), which is felt in daily life, in school and the family

environment. Abkhaz respondents in particular also expressed concerns regarding pressures and conflicts being battled out in social media in unhelpful ways that politicise issues and make it harder to address them.

However, key opportunities also emerged relating to young peoples' relationship with the past, new technology, and education reform.

Context

Background to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

For over half a century, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has persisted. War in the early 1990s left in its wake trauma, insecurity, displacement and obstacles to development. A peace process, initially mediated by the UN, and since 2008 co-mediated by the EU, UN and OSCE, has not resulted in any serious progress towards a negotiated peace.

Ethno-political conflict

Tensions between different ethnic groups living in Abkhazia, on the Black Sea coast, erupted in violent conflict in 1992-93. These tensions centred around competing historical claims by Georgians and Abkhaz on the territory of Abkhazia, fuelled in part by different interpretations of the Soviet past.

When Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 it saw Abkhazia as an inextricable part of its territory. The Abkhaz held deep-rooted fears that their language, culture and national identity were under threat. Their demands for greater political power and autonomy increased as the Soviet Union unravelled. Nationalism was rife, tensions flared, and a 13-month war broke out in 1992.

By the time a ceasefire was signed, at least 12,000 people had been killed, nearly a quarter of a million ethnic Georgians were forced to leave their homes and Abkhazia had broken away from Georgian control. It declared its independence in 1999, though it remained unrecognised. Georgia claimed that its territorial integrity had been violated and that Abkhazia, though de facto independent, was an integral part of the Georgian state. There was very limited exchange across the conflict divide, and low-level violence was concentrated along the dividing line.

War in 2008

In August 2008, war broke out involving Georgian and Russian forces in South Ossetia, which had also experienced armed conflict in the early and late 1990s. The legacy of this short war has had a profound impact. The Russian Federation, along with a handful of other states, has officially recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and stationed military bases there. For many in Georgia, the conflicts have been viewed since 2008 through the prism of Russian military occupation. The Abkhaz and South Ossetians contest this, viewing increased military, economic and infrastructural support from Russia as a guarantee of their security.

Deadlock in the negotiations

The Geneva International Discussions co-chaired by EU/UN/OSCE, to which Georgian, Abkhaz, South Ossetian, Russian and US representatives are invited on a quarterly basis, are the only official platform to discuss the conflicts. Thus far, progress towards concrete results has been very slow, and ordinary people continue to suffer the consequences of unresolved conflict.

Since 1997, Conciliation Resources has worked with a wide range of local partners to identify and address the root causes and consequences of the 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war. We support

people in a variety of ways to encourage debate and bring about positive change within and between their societies.

With our facilitation, Georgian and Abkhaz civil society, experts and officials are able to meet to exchange information and jointly develop practical solutions to problems which remain stumbling blocks in the peace process.

Conflicts within Georgian and Abkhazian societies

Peace and security in the Georgian-Abkhaz context needs to be seen in the broader context of conflict transformation, which is affected by a wide range of issues around rights and inclusion. The violation of human rights and civil liberties lies at the heart of many violent conflicts as unmet social, political and economic needs may provoke opposition and civil unrest. Although some progress has been made in the Georgian-Abkhaz context in establishing better processes and institutions that promote people's rights and address exclusion, inter-ethnic relations, minority inclusion and participation in political processes remain challenging, not only but especially in rural areas.

The majority of focus group discussions across the board confirmed that the societies continue to struggle with managing diversity in



Georgian-Abkhaz crossing point © Ibragim Chkadua

a constructive way, which is felt more tangibly by some groups than others. On both sides of the divide, respondents named unemployment, lack of prospects for the future, and economic instability as aggravating factors.

Youth in Georgian society

In Georgia, the number of young people aged 15 to 29 comprise approximately 22% of the total population. The majority of young people live in cities, and most of them live in Tbilisi. On April 2 2014, the Government of Georgia approved The Georgian National Youth Policy Document. The aim of this policy is to give young people the opportunity to realize their potential and to be involved in all fields of public life. However, Georgian youth still encounter different challenges in participating in political, social and cultural life.

According to research published by the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs of Georgia, UNICEF and the National Statistics Office of Georgia in 2014, 15-29 year-old people are rather inactive in society. The overwhelming majority (90.4%) believe that they have the right to participate in the resolution of youth-related issues. However, based on 2013 data, only 10.9% actually take part in such processes. Youth participation rates in other spheres are also relatively low. The report notes that young people from vulnerable groups and young people living in rural areas find participation in political and social processes especially challenging.

Nevertheless, young people are one of the more active groups in Georgian society. Youth movements have for some time played a central role in the social and political life of the country. There are many youth NGOs and unions that offer different programmes for young people. And, in recent years, students and young professionals have increasingly taken protest actions to the streets and united around agenda items such as students' rights, women's rights, LGBT rights and ecological issues, but also to reinforce nationalist ideologies. Young people in Georgia also have opportunities to be involved in a range of international programmes, projects and networks.

Youth in Abkhazian society

Less social and demographic research is available with regard to the Abkhazian context. 45.9% of the population of Abkhazia is under 34 years old according to the Statistics Department



Students sitting exams © Marina Elbakidze

of Abkhazia. None of the political parties have active youth wings, although at one point the principle youth organisation in Abkhazia, 'Young Abkhazia', was affiliated with the ruling party, 'United Abkhazia'.

There is a State Committee of Youth Policy which is the main official body responsible for youth (see: <http://gkra-mp.ru>). Some in Abkhazia would argue that the Committee does not produce much by way of strategy or policy, but it tends to be publicly visible nevertheless. The Sukhum City Committee for youth and sports is actively operating in Sukhum/i. In addition, there is a dedicated person for youth policy attached to each of the Regional Boards of Education. Within the Parliament there is a Committee on Culture, Youth and Sports. There are also youth committees within some City Councils. Despite numerous committees, however, actual programmes and strategies can be harder to find.

The legacy of the 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war and subsequent international restrictions on trade and travel made significant economic and social development in Abkhazia impossible, despite Russian financial support. An already challenging situation has been exacerbated by Abkhazia's political isolation, which has increased significantly since the 2008 war and has had a particularly serious impact on the territory's young people, whose access to international ideas, education and opportunities is very limited.

When discussing youth in Abkhazia, people typically differentiate between what is known as the 'war generation' and the 'post-war generation'. The 'war generation' refers to people who are old enough to have witnessed or been directly affected by the violence of the Georgian-Abkhaz war and its immediate aftermath. The 'post-war' generation, on the other hand, are those who were born around the time of the war or afterwards and have no personal recollection of the wartime itself,

though they are nevertheless affected by its legacy. The distinct personal memories and experiences of these respective groups often define their stances on various conflict-related issues, both in the domestic context and more globally. In relation to the unresolved conflict with the Georgians, for instance, the post-war generation in Abkhazia tends to hold more radical and hostile views, while representatives of the so-called 'war generation' are sometimes found to be more pragmatic and constructive.

Generally speaking, there is a low level of civic engagement among young people in Abkhazia; activism among youth is usually only seen during election campaigns, when candidates look to galvanize the support of young people. In recent years, younger people have also taken up public office in a variety of institutions.

Young people in Abkhazia are very active and vocal on social media, which now plays a major role in Abkhazian society. Almost everyone has an active Facebook, Instagram or Twitter account, where young people engage in various discussions on political and social dynamics both within and outside of Abkhazia.

The focus group discussions reveal a great potential among the youth of Abkhazia to influence and improve certain aspects of life, however to date young people largely rely on others to provide the leadership and platforms around social campaigns.

Methodology

Conciliation Resources' local partners from either side of the conflict divide led on organising and conducting the focus group discussions within their respective communities, reaching out to new groups of interlocutors not previously engaged in discussions on peace and security, as well as consulting individuals with prior experience in civic engagement and dialogue. On the Georgian side in particular, partners decided to focus primarily on groups that – in one way or another – see themselves and/or are perceived to be outside the mainstream, which naturally affects the overall picture of responses. The fact that it was possible to reach out to individuals with such varied backgrounds is in itself an indication of relative awareness and openness toward diversity within the society. However, findings illicit the outstanding challenges that are yet to be overcome to make particular groups feel less vulnerable and excluded.

In total, 24 Abkhaz (17 female, 7 male) and 75 Georgians (28 female, 47 male), aged between 17 and 33, had the opportunity to share their views in focus group discussions and interviews conducted in June and July 2017 in the following locations:

Georgian side

5 FGD in Tbilisi:

- Representatives of various political party youth wings
- Active young people already engaged in different fields, including peacebuilding
- Persons with disabilities
- Representatives of the LGBT community
- Graduate or post-graduate students from different universities.

4 FGD in different regions of Georgia:

- Probationers and former offenders, currently studying different skills in a special learning centre in Gori (Shida Kartli region)
- Ethnic Azeri women in Marneuli (Kvemo Kartli region)
- Georgians displaced from Abkhazia IDPs and living in Zugdidi (Samegrelo region)
- Residents of Nikozi village, located at the dividing line with South Ossetia, many of whom were displaced in 2008 (Shida Kartli region).

2 interviews in Tbilisi, with a security professional and a disabled community activist respectively.

Abkhazian side

4 FGD in Sukhum/i:

- 2 all-female groups
- Mixed group of people, some with experience of international initiatives related to conflict transformation
- Officials and civil servants at various levels of authority.

1 FGD in Gudauta with young people rarely travelling to Abkhazia's capital.

1 interview in Sukhum/i with an entrepreneur with businesses in Gagra, Gudauta and Sukhum/i and regular opportunities to travel internationally.

Key findings and illustrative quotes

1. Main peace and security challenges faced by youth in the Georgian-Abkhaz context

Although the unresolved conflicts clearly continue to impact on the affected societies, in particular on the residents of Abkhazia, the majority of respondents referred to tensions and uncertainties around educational and economic opportunities as most pressing, without necessarily connecting them to the Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-South Ossetian or Georgian-Russian conflicts:

The main concern of both young and older generations is to ensure daily well-being, that is, to find a job, get an education. Only after these problems are resolved will it be possible to increase the youth's interest in resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict... so that they do not have a nihilistic attitude to this issue. (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)

The main cause of street violence is unemployment among young people. They do not know what else to do. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

[There are] ...not enough young people willing to get involved in these processes. Although we in this room participate and try to make a contribution to peacebuilding, I think that young people are lazy or they have other priorities in life. They look a little superficially at such things. They tend to get a diploma and find a job, and the other issues beyond this do not bother them. People have such serious personal needs that they cannot think of anything else. When a 25-year-old man needs to support a family, he will not think about how to build peace. He is worried about the short-term perspective. We need to understand that the ability to think in the long term will benefit everyone in the future... (Georgian political activist in Tbilisi)

Young people do not know how to fulfil any of their ideas. University graduates are absolutely lost, they don't know what to do, despite the fact that in our society there are lots of problems that need to be tackled. Everyone is afraid to start and this is a type of conflict. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

An exception are young people living close to the dividing lines, where physical isolation limits people's access to homes, family members and other social interaction across the boundaries,

and memories of the violent conflicts remain present:

Many of us have relatives in Tskhinvali region, but it is difficult to maintain contact with them. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

This conflict, which in fact continues until now, has left its mark on the life of each of us. We were forced to leave our homes. We could have had a completely different life than now. It is very difficult, when suddenly you find yourself in a completely unfamiliar situation – it is very difficult to get used to. You have to start life all over again, from scratch. All refugee families went through this experience and this caused huge problems.' (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)

I very much doubt that it will be possible to regain the lost territory. If at least we could open these so-called borders with the occupied territories, this would already be progress. Free movement would make life easier for ordinary people. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

Respondents in Abkhazia also express concerns regarding domestic politics, which can create tensions within society:

There is a political conflict which very strongly occurs within society – within families and in the workplace. It has become something big, it has become part of life and it affects people. For example, colleagues at work or members of the same family often quarrel due to their different political views... Society is very politicised and this conflict is reflected in our lives... (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

1.1 Isolation and lack of communication

"If only Georgians and Abkhaz were to study on equal terms in different world universities, then maybe understanding and trust [...] could develop."

Young people in Abkhazia feel that their isolation from the outside world and new ideas makes it very hard for them to contribute to the development of their society and to resolving conflicts constructively:

The problems of young people are due to the fact that, during their upbringing, we were in a state of blockade. Young people did not have the resources to receive any information from the outside. [...] There was no way to learn from the experience of other countries. We need to do something to



Participants at a youth summer camp in Abkhazia © Sukhum Youth House

ensure our youth can travel to other countries to gain such learning experiences.

We could invite children from other countries here. Of course, this is difficult to implement due to the political situation... [Our isolation] results from the issue of recognition and the difficulties of movement, but we need to think about how to address this issue. We are very fond of citing the example of Singapore, but people here do not want to follow the path of development of Singapore, only the result. We need to prepare cadres of future leaders who are acquainted with the outside world. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

There are a large number of conflicts within the society: social, economic, conflicts linked to criminality, to external isolation, and to the fact that people cannot see for themselves what is happening in the outside world. People here are stewing in their juice, and their ideas about the world are very narrow, there is no broad view of what is happening. People cannot learn from the experience of other places, since they do not have access to it...

The Abkhaz youth, with rare exceptions, do not have the opportunity to participate in various international programmes... For example, the Georgian youth have a huge number of opportunities for development, for studying abroad; our young people do not have this opportunity. Only one or two people, very few,

can get such an education. If only Georgians and Abkhaz were to study on equal terms in different world universities, then maybe understanding and trust [...] could develop.

Without trust and development, it is impossible for visible results to be achieved. This is noticeable for our young people inside Abkhazia: even those who want to change something do not know how and what to do. They only see one experience around – the Russian experience. I'm not saying that the Russian way is bad, but we need to know what is happening in other places, too, what can be learned elsewhere. Even the most active have to take the example from the older generation. This cannot bring real change. (Young Abkhaz businessman)

Some Georgian participants sensed that the isolation of young people in Abkhazia was an obstacle to dialogue and peacebuilding:

I am often in Abkhazia. There the youth community is very closed. Yes, they can use our free health care system, some Abkhazians study in Tbilisi and their education is fully funded. Yes, they can go to Russia, but with regard to Europe, the road is closed to them. Europe does not accept them with an Abkhaz passport... Their society is very closed. They are afraid to come into contact with us because on their return they may have problems. To overcome this fear, you need a lot of time. (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)

Physical borders are not the only ones that need to be overcome. Different groups within both sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz divide are often isolated from each other and divided by a number of factors, be it location, age, ethnicity, political affiliations, or other identity markers. Tensions arising out of fragmentation and lack of interaction between the different communities within the respective societies were identified by many participants as major obstacles to peace and security:

The most difficult conflict is interethnic strife. Family conflicts and everyday problems are much easier to solve. Ethnic conflict usually takes on a large-scale character and is associated with many victims and tragedies. (Young Azeri Georgian woman)

... The powers of the regions and their ability to manage their resources are limited. This contributes to the growth of separatist sentiments. When an ethnic group has the right and responsibility to make independent decisions, risks and threats are reduced. (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)

Unfortunately, too wide a line divides the [ethnic Georgian] residents of the Gal region [from the rest of Abkhazia]. That issue often leads to controversy and affects both the older generation as well as the youth. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

... This results in many conflicts within our society. The older generation does not accept new global trends. The political struggle in our society between the... government and opposition... involves a very large number of people of different generations. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

1.2 Uncertainty about the future

“When you are taking pocket money from your mother, it is hard to talk about how you can benefit the country.”

Uncertainty discourages young people from investing in their future, and leads to a short-term outlook. This is felt most tangibly by young people from areas closest to the dividing lines, in particular the boundary with South Ossetia, where violence last occurred less than ten years ago:

The war has created the fear factor. We are afraid that we will be expelled. We are afraid we will lose our homes. We do not know what awaits us tomorrow. We can lose everything that we built and created our whole life in a single day. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

In first place is the psychological pressure due to proximity to the administrative border line. Although some time has passed since the war, we still have the memory of everything connected with those events. Young people lost the desire to stay here. They leave and do not return. It's hard to blame them for this – we went through so many troubles and misfortunes and we were tossed back and forth. I cannot raise my child here because the same situation would await him... The state is powerless to protect us. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

Young people in Abkhazia are also affected by the uncertainty and sense of instability that accompanies the unresolved conflict with the Georgians and a volatile domestic political landscape:

... We are not sure about tomorrow... Life for young people today is very difficult to navigate, everything can unexpectedly and quickly change. The stability, which characterised the life of the older generation, collapsed in an instant [i.e. with the onset of war]...

Young people are lost, and their thinking is broken. We do not think of the long term perspective as we are not sure about our own future... (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

Lack of economic stability and unemployment are factors that concern young people across the board:

In our society it is taken for granted that young people always rely on their family. And I am convinced that what also holds us back is the fact that in each family there is a successful relative who supports the whole extended family financially. And while this phenomenon exists in our society, the concept that people need to do things for themselves will not be accepted. People do not rely on themselves, but only on their families and relatives. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)



Boys playing football © Ibragim Chkadua

Financial independence is necessary. When you are taking pocket money from your mother, it is hard to talk about how you can benefit the country.

The economic situation of the country has a very high significance. If in the country there were more resources and more employment, young people could find work and they would be less aggressive. A hungry person is more aggressive. (Georgian LGBT representative)

2. Security challenges faced by various identity groups (gender, disability and ethnic belonging)

“I consider violence in the family to be the most severe form of violence because the victim cannot tell anyone about this.”

Participants from both sides noted that, among young people, certain groups faced insecurity within their own societies. These groups include women, LGBT people, persons with disabilities and ethnic minorities. For many people belonging to these groups, safety and security in their everyday lives is more immediately relevant than the Georgian-Abkhaz or other peace processes. Young people from these communities also face greater challenges in participating in political processes:

Everyone has the right to participate in public life, but opportunities for this that are actually provided are limited. Ethnic minorities are more excluded from these processes.

From a legal standpoint, there are equal opportunities for all, but some groups in society are left out of these processes. For example, at this stage, processes do not involve religious groups, non-traditional religions, as well as representatives of sexual minorities. Before the law everyone is equal, but society creates specific barriers... we must admit that when society rejects any certain group, this is not accidental... (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)

2.1 Insecurity and exclusion faced by young women

Many participants referenced gender inequality as a barrier to young people’s involvement in social processes, including peacebuilding:

The need for more active participation of women in the peace process is discussed frequently, but we are excluded. We, the young, are not given the freedom to act. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

We have equal rights but unequal opportunities. Unfortunately, this is reality. You can have the opportunity, but you do not have the will [to participate]. For example, most MPs are men. I think that the domination of men is the result of the passivity of the women themselves. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

The challenge faced by women to participation in political processes is linked to the challenge in addressing domestic and gender-based violence. This was raised especially, but not exclusively, in the all-female groups in Abkhazia:

The gender question has been very current of late in Abkhazia in relation to the growing number of cases of domestic violence, including murders. If we stay silent and do not react, we allow this problem to continue. If you look at our parliament, among the deputies there is only one woman. Many consider a woman’s place to be at the stove in the kitchen – this is a very old-fashioned point of view. Women and men do not have equal access to many resources, especially in politics. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

As a rule, everyone is silent on the issue of domestic violence. I consider violence in the family to be the most severe form of violence because the victim of violence cannot tell anyone about this. The victim endures until everything ends fatally. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

In our culture, we are supposed to be modest, shy, and not to draw attention to ourselves. But from a social point of view, from the point of view of human rights, if you behave in that way when you encounter a violation or injustice, the situation will only become worse. (Abkhaz participant in female-only group in Sukhum/i)

Participants in Abkhazia linked domestic violence – and the socially conservative norms that allow it to continue – with Abkhazia’s isolation:

Young women very often face domestic violence. Isolation has a very strong effect on the situation inside the society, in particular on the situation in families. Many people traditionally refuse to look at family issues such as violence. If people had the opportunity to learn how these issues are addressed in other countries, they would be ready to accept the existence of such problems. (Young Abkhaz businessman)

The lack of engagement from young people in political processes negatively affects the legal protection for women. Abkhaz participants raised the new law on abortion in this context:

Women suffer from these processes. Laws that are adopted infringe the rights of women [such as] the law on abortion. (Abkhaz participant in female-only group in Sukhkum/i)

The gender issue exists and is serious. For example, the law on abortion was adopted by parliamentarians, of whom only one was a woman. And they passed this law despite its shortcomings... How many cases arose where women had to go abroad [for abortions]? And there were deaths. (Abkhaz participant in female-only group in Sukhkum/i)

However, participants from some groups noted that, despite remaining challenges, society was slowly evolving and women were able to participate more than in previous generations:

Several years ago, the children (girls) did not finish school. And now everyone is learning. In past years, early marriages have happened much more often, now they are relatively fewer. And this is very good. I think that a good young generation is growing up, which is capable of doing good deeds for the benefit of society. (Young Azeri Georgian woman)

It is possible for young people to do something positive. It depends on each person and whether they inspire confidence, regardless of whether they are male or female. (Abkhaz participant in female-only group in Sukhkum/i)

The Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted a campaign to prevent violence against women... As a man, I believe that violence against women is contrary to the principles of humanity, not to mention the principle of male honour. I even held a poster in my hands: "No Violence!"

One of the most important results of this is that, while before, victims of violence preferred to remain silent, today they have become bolder to speak about their rights. When a person commits violence and gets punished, it serves as an example to others that we cannot act in that way. (Young Georgian security professional)

2.2 Insecurity and exclusion faced by young LGBT people

"...simply leaving the house constitutes the greatest danger I face in everyday life. It is the fear of mental, physical and sexual violence."

Young LGBT participants detailed the violence and hostility they face in their daily lives:

When we discuss security, it's very important to define whose security we are discussing. For me, as a queer woman, simply leaving the house constitutes the greatest danger I face in everyday life. It is the fear of mental, physical and sexual violence.

Security is the most serious problem faced by transgender people in Georgia. This is the category of people which society forbids from leaving the house during the day. This is a very big problem for these women. They have to hide. We are already accustomed to gathering in secluded places, since it is very difficult to find a public place where you are not exposed to sexual harassment.

I work in an organisation for sexual minorities, and I can say that we represent exactly the group who are most agitated by security problems. It should rather be the state's problem to create a safe environment for all citizens without exception.

Every morning, as I prepare to go to work, I look in the mirror and I think about what kind of problems I will encounter, large or small, if I wear a particular accessory, or short shorts, or dye my hair... when I lived in Berlin, I wore shorts but here I cannot do that.

In addition to clothing, you need to control your tone of voice, gestures, mannerisms, everything, to avoid somebody saying a harsh word, to avoid scoffing, and avoid escalation into physical violence.

Students in Tbilisi confirmed:

Georgian youth often provoke conflict themselves, for example in relation to people of non-traditional sexual orientations... For example, my friend is of a non-traditional sexual orientation and was beaten up on the street in the night because they looked different to other people.

One Georgian student in Tbilisi even admitted to being violent himself:

I have beaten and will continue to beat people of non-traditional orientations and I am not ashamed to admit that. For Georgians, for the people of the Caucasus, gay-parade is a disgrace.

However, another describes how she overcame her stereotypes to an extent:

I also used to have aggression towards sexual minorities but then I realised that as a lawyer, I should protect human rights. I tried to find a neutral position and as a result I came to the conclusion that we should accept their existence. They have always existed and will continue to exist and our violent actions will not change anything.

LGBT participants also discussed the steps needed to make them feel safer:

We do not feel safe in public places. Fortunately, there are already places where you can feel more secure.

We need to feel cared for by the state. We need to feel that the state appreciates us. Currently no one does anything for us. We do not have any protection either at the legal, institutional or any other level.

However, many opinion leaders in society continue to share views that put LGBT people at risk:

A very big problem is discrimination on religious grounds and disinformation coming from religious leaders. A video recently appeared where a priest said nonsense... [about] gender... and that in the UK, sexual relationships between a son and a mother is considered normal, and so on. When people believe the priests, they believe them word for word, and they themselves begin to spread it. As a result people are insulted, beaten ...

Any manifestation of homophobia, xenophobia or any other phobia in the pronouncements of government officials, politicians, TV stars, religious leaders and so on should be punished by law and these people must be dismissed from the civil service. Three years ago a priest chased my sister with a stool in his hands to kill her. He was not even fined because he was a religious figure.

Most participants agreed that teachers are not equipped to help manage conflict and deal with diversity in the classroom. Indeed, they can become part of the problem:

I never felt cold-shouldered by family members. Both mother and father were doctors and I grew up in a safe environment. I experienced sexism for the first time in school when I was 13 years old.

My friends and classmates sometimes speak about how they miss school. I, on the contrary, remember this period of my life with disgust, because it was in school that I had to endure the most abuse and humiliation, not only from students but also from teachers. There were times when the teacher saw other children mock me, but blamed me for it because I brought it on my own head. I complained to the headmaster but he also took no action... I was left with a terrible sense of injustice and insecurity.

As far as the peace process is concerned, some participants felt their participation would not be welcome and that they were deliberately excluded:

They use these astonishing arguments that the Abkhaz and Ossetians won't want to reconcile with

'pederast' Georgia. In other words, our participation would be an impediment [to reconciliation].

2.3 Insecurity and exclusion faced by young people with disabilities

"People with disabilities live in permanent isolation from the rest of society. Their social circle includes only their family, neighbours, relatives and school."

Disabled people can face particular challenges engaging with political processes, including the peace process.

As with other young people, limited access to information was highlighted as a major barrier to participation for people with disabilities, which respondents linked to the limited spaces available to them:

The deficit of information is explained by the fact that information about such projects [on peacebuilding or conflict resolution] does not reach the places where young people with disabilities spend their time. Another obstacle lies in the fact that people with disabilities may know that such opportunities exist, or may have heard or seen something on television, but barriers remain in their mentality. If a person with disabilities begins to actively engage in something, it is considered something incredible and, in general, this activity concerns the protection of the rights of the disabled people. In other areas, people with disabilities have no chance of success.

Naturally, there are physical barriers. These include an environment that has not been adapted for disabled people and the fact that the state has no appropriate services such as guides and interpreters. The family cannot always provide support for a person with disabilities.

People with disabilities live in permanent isolation from the rest of society. Their social circle includes only their family, neighbours, relatives and school. Affected by a lack of abilities and skills, people with disabilities do not have the capacity necessary to participate in such processes.

A sense of exclusion leads to a lack of confidence and prevents young people with disabilities from taking an active part in political processes, although they would have a lot to offer in terms of peacebuilding:

In general, diplomacy is a matter for elites. This is a closed sphere, especially for needy and socially unprotected people. And people with disabilities

understand this well. Accordingly, they do not believe that they can somehow have influence in this sphere, and therefore avoid it entirely.

I do not feel that I'm taking any noticeable part. You are the first person who asked me this question and asked about my opinion. I myself had to look for information. [It is] necessary to take some more positive measures, at least in terms of access to information... so that people with disabilities can participate in these processes.

For example, the position of a representative of Georgian youth to the UN exists. I heard that the first three years the representatives were men, and there was a lot of talk about why there were no women or ethnic minorities. No one ever asked why none of the representatives were disabled. I believe that the participation of people with disabilities in such processes, especially in the peace process, would be a very serious sign for Abkhazians and Ossetians. Seeing a person with disabilities as part of the Georgian delegation would indicate the degree of democratisation and development of Georgia to them. Unfortunately, however, we are not involved in this process. The problem remains invisible because no one talks about it, including among the disabled community. No one has aroused such interest in us. Accordingly, people with disabilities remain outside the framework of this process.

2.4 Insecurity and exclusion faced by young people from ethnic minorities

“The only thing that can ensure us a better future is education.”

Young Azeri women living in Georgia who took part in the discussions struggle to participate in mainstream society. Language barriers are an obstacle to their engagement on issues of security and justice. As with most other respondents, notions of conflict and security are most acute and relevant when applied to these participants' immediate lives. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and peace process were not raised at any point in this FGD:

We really want to participate, but we have one big problem – we do not speak the state language. Here, many don't even speak Russian and so cannot express their opinion [at all].

When someone notices any conflict or violation of human rights and tries to explain something to the perpetrator, the language problem again arises. A person who has witnessed a conflict can misunderstand what is happening because he does not understand the language... Therefore,

the probability is high that the conflict will remain unresolved.

Every day we see how women's rights are violated. Our mentality... is to blame.

There are problems with regard to violations of children's rights. One case received wide publicity: a father chained up his own child, asserting that this is how one should bring up children. We must do everything to ensure that such instances do not recur.

However, positive developments in recent years were also acknowledged:

In recent years, we have become more sensitive to conflict. That is, we are no longer afraid to talk about conflicts openly, be it a conflict in the family, ethnic conflict, or child cruelty. Today, we have become bolder in saying that we have witnessed some such conflict and that we do not want these to occur. Before, when witnessing violence, people preferred to close their eyes to it. Now the situation has changed. This is a sign of progress.

In order to make further improvements, participants stressed the need for quality education and civic awareness:

The only thing that can ensure us a better future is education... Without education, the country will not have a future.

We do not yet know how the state should solve these problems and how to protect victims. Our problem is that we do not know the law. As a result, very bad things happen around us. It is necessary to work on correcting these shortcomings – then such bad things will be reduced.

Participants also believe that young people from ethnic minorities can play a positive role in community-level peacebuilding:

In neighbouring villages, there are volunteer youth groups. With the help of these volunteers one can work with various government structures and interact with human rights protection centres. [The volunteers] ...are much more active than the staff of these centres themselves. Therefore, the main emphasis should be placed on local resources and on young people.

To attract young people to participate in this process, it is necessary to explain the importance of the creation of such... groups for both local residents and for the young people themselves... For example, if they can campaign and thereby prove that they can achieve something, then they will be able to win people's trust.

...We have youth projects, such as 'The Camp' and 'Peace in the Caucasus'. Young people from three different nationalities take part in them. There, they learn through practical exercise how to stop conflict, how to manage conflict once it has started, and what needs to be done to prevent conflict and not let it develop at all.

In terms of overall trends many participants in this FGD felt society was increasingly inclusive:

Thanks to the programme of preparatory courses, young people have the opportunity to enter the university and get higher education. Accordingly, the opportunities for young people have equalised to some extent.

The society is gradually breaking down barriers for ethnic minorities, for sexual minorities and so on...

Georgians and Abkhaz taking part in the FGDs on either side acknowledged that ethnic minorities faced discrimination in their respective society and that this posed certain risks to peace and security:

Stereotypes are a big obstacle. Very many people worry about what others will say if they see them with a person of another skin colour or from a different religion. In the first instance, we ourselves need to break all these stereotypes. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

There was a girl who created a project, she was a Mingrelian from the Gal region and in her team she had two boys who were ethnic Abkhaz from Sukhum. She was supposed to present the team members with whom she was doing the project. As a result, the Abkhaz members came to her and asked her if she could please not say that they were involved in a joint project because they were ashamed to be doing a joint project with a Mingrelian... We are afraid that society will somehow react badly if we do something together [with Gal people]. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

I would say that a hidden national conflict exists. It is not clearly visible at the state level, but not entirely positive reactions exist towards other ethnicities in a wider sense – in terms of [access to] passports, citizenship, education. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

Georgian society is not tolerant – there are a lot of racists who offend – sometimes verbally, and sometimes physically – people of different religions or ethnicities. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

State policy on ethnic conflict from the very beginning should be focused on peace.

It is necessary to take measures against disintegration. We have areas where ethnic minorities live in compact spaces and this can carry certain latent threats. ... We use the term ethnic groups all the time – this is wrong. It is better to call ethnic minorities citizens of our country. (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)

[Ethnic Georgian] youth from Gal don't feel themselves to be part of the Abkhaz state. They have limited access to education and even if they get to study at the Abkhaz state university through the consent of the rector, a lot of problems occur (will they get a diploma, in which way will it be issued, etc.). The state does not consider them to be its citizens but still demands from them that they fulfil obligations such as military service. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

The future conflict that is brewing is Armenian-Abkhaz. It is ethnic. This is a time bomb. Our people are rude [to them]... Armenians will sooner or later get tired of this and there can be a conflict... They live in their enclave; we live in ours. We do not have any communication with each other at the social level. We need to somehow reconcile... (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

A participant in Sukhum/i, herself with non-Abkhaz roots, confirms:

I feel that I cannot express openly everything that I would like to say precisely because I do not have Abkhaz relatives whose influence would help me avoid conflict in this regard.

In this context, religion is seen as a potentially divisive force and religious leaders or educators are not always seen to be helpful actors:

I've read both the Bible and the Quran and nowhere does it say that people should persecute members of different religions. This is most of all a societal problem – we have raised religion to the level of fanaticism. Among Georgians there is a category of people for whom religion has become fashionable. ... They don't see anything beyond their religion and disdain people of others faiths. Muslims are also fully entitled citizens of Georgia and they have the right to follow their beliefs. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

I remember the homophobic and racist remarks made by my teachers. The Religious Education teacher said bluntly that all blacks are sinners. Any schoolteacher who admits even the slightest manifestation of homophobia or xenophobia must be removed from access to children. (Georgian LGBT representative)



Students in Tbilisi © David Pipia

3. Barriers to engagement in peacebuilding and dialogue

3.1 Exclusion from politics and political processes

Many of the respondents from both sides of the dividing line feel excluded from political processes. Both Georgian and Abkhaz societies are, to varying degrees, largely patriarchal and this seems to limit participation of young people. Young people from different parts of the societies feel their opinions are not taken seriously:

The level of trust [in young people] is generally quite low. This prevents us... from realizing our abilities. 'You're younger than me, what can you teach me?' is a common attitude... in such cases, you lose both your motivation and your confidence... our opinion often causes mirth among our elders. Our opinion is rarely taken into account. I'm very upset about this. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

The people who are in power and who make decisions are mostly adherent to Soviet thinking. Their attitudes were formed in the Soviet system and they continue to think according to the Soviet pattern. If you look at all the power structures, it becomes obvious that the succession of generations is poorly implemented in our country. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

On both sides, young people perceive that corruption and nepotism among political elites can be aggravating factors of exclusion:

The country has a low political culture and strong horizontal ties. There is always yours versus someone else's. These problems are the ballast that pulls our society down, not allowing us to follow the path of development. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

[One of the most important sources of conflict] ... concerns our mutually dependant relationships with relatives and neighbours which influence our lives. For example, work is obtained through contacts, and if a person is fired due to the poor quality of their work, they are indignant and take it as a personal offence, and the personal relationship [with their colleagues] is broken. In this way, it's very hard to build a society with a professional workforce. Professionalism is in second place. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

If you have power, you do what is comfortable and look after your own needs regardless of whether your decisions harm others. (Abkhaz participant in female-only group in Sukhkum/i)

Nepotism is to blame for why we are rejected. Unfortunately, nepotism is flourishing in today's Georgia. Those who have access to state programmes are mainly those who have close ties with government officials, political organisations and so on. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

Having desire to work is not sufficient. In real life, getting a job is really very difficult. If you have no contacts and connections, no one will accept you for a decent job. So many little kids are begging. It hurts me to see this. (Georgian former offender)

3.2 Lack of engagement/interest from young people in the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process and in broader political processes

“We cannot say that we are excluded from the peace process, because there is no process as such.”

Perhaps resulting from this sense of exclusion and lack of information, many young people demonstrate apathy towards political processes in general and the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process in particular. A sense that many young people have no connection with their counterparts on the other side of dividing lines, and that young people have little understanding of or interest in the peace processes, emerges from the FGDs.

Georgian participants expressed concern about political apathy in general, and unwillingness to engage on Georgian-Abkhaz or Georgian-South Ossetian issues in particular:

In the face of many problems, this generation shows apathy and indifference. Even the 2008 war does not really bother them – it is as if they have forgotten all those sorrows and misfortunes. Fortunately, there are exceptions. But I believe that most young people are not able to create anything worthwhile. Therefore, society does not trust them much. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

According to my personal observations, young people have become more infantile. They do not

believe in anything because they do not have enough self-belief. I see a deficit of purposeful, motivated young people, although it must be acknowledged that in other regions the situation is even worse. In general, I believe that people no longer believe in anything. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

For many, passivity among young people and the reluctance of state structures to listen to them seem interlinked. And they felt young people themselves could do more to make themselves heard:

The passivity of youth is associated with their level of engagement with society. During the elections, for example, young people constituted only 12% of voters. If we become more active, the government will begin to pay more attention to us. (Georgian political activist in Tbilisi)

Young people themselves are not active enough. Some think that their opinion does not interest anyone, some [think] they do not have enough competence.

Representatives of the state take things into consideration when they are forced to. The opinion of small numbers of people does not excite them. If there are only two or three voices of youth, no one will listen to them. Therefore, young people should actively demand from the authorities to listen to their opinion and take it into account. (Georgian participant from Zugdidi)

Immediate economic concerns often take priority over political engagement:



University students in Abkhazia © Ibragim Chkadua

Another obstacle is the difficult social-economic situation and the information vacuum as well as the indifference of the youth themselves. Many simply do not want to leave their comfort zone, they are not interested in what is going on around them, for them the main thing is that they themselves are alright.

Today's youth are first and foremost concerned with ensuring their own material wellbeing and only after that can they start thinking about others, about human rights, about good relations. It's hard to talk to a hungry person about the rights of others and to get him to think about that. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

Young people are sometimes more focused on emigration (both away from rural areas, and from the country) than resolving domestic political and social problems:

Today's youth should have a healthy environment and also hope for a future where they can manage to achieve something in life. Today everyone is orientated on emigrating after they finish university as they don't see any perspective in staying here. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

It is necessary to stop the migration of young people away from the area. Life in the region should be interesting for them and they should feel themselves in demand here. After graduation, local youth should have the motivation and attitude to return to their native region. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

Youth in Abkhazia also shared concerns about the passivity of young people and their unwillingness to engage in political processes, which they linked to lack of civic awareness and confidence in the authorities:

Young people are settled in their places and do not want to move...

Probably one of the most important [factors] is the lack of faith in the fact that there is any prospect... For example, in my circle of friends, we do not try to hold any public rallies, and everyone tries to provide for themselves and do what they think is right, but only for themselves and a small circle of close people, families, parents, friends, etc. (Young Abkhaz businessman)

Abkhaz participants rarely brought up cross-Ingur/i issues. Where the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was raised, participants demonstrated concern about a lack of interest and engagement:

...it's very important to show interest. One of the obstacles can be considered lack of interest. The

aggression and unwillingness to engage with reconciliation is a barrier. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

Finally, a sense that the peace process is moribund further disincentivises young people from engaging with it:

We cannot say that we are excluded from the peace process, because there is no process as such. The peace process does not really move. From the point of view of peacebuilding, only meetings, events, trainings and actions are held. There is no strategy. Nothing concrete is happening either at the local or central level, so what are we excluded from?! (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)

In order to move forward, some felt clearer direction from decision-makers was required, whereas others thought the international community could support the peace process more effectively:

We need to know the specifics of the work, how to behave at the negotiating table and how to communicate with the representatives of the other side. The position of the state should be expressed very clearly. It would not be appropriate for the state to have one set of priorities and for us to have another. When we know what principles and tasks the state is guided by, we will also follow this line. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

The majority of MPs do not think about peace and security, nor about the people. Their main concern is the purchase of new homes and cars. International organisations... must act independently of our government and not allow politicians to pry into their affairs, otherwise nothing happens. International organisations should be interested in the opinion of ordinary people and their problems, which do not bother the government at all. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

On a positive note, a number of respondents felt that society as a whole was showing growing faith in youth and their capabilities:

I think that people are gradually starting to trust young people to deal with their needs and solve their pressing problems. This is a great incentive for young people to develop their abilities and to improve their education and experience.

Take a school... young teachers [are recruited by their elder peers because they]... can bring new ideas to school and introduce new approaches.

Young people predominate among those who deal with conflict resolution. They are very active and

this manifests itself in everything: in politics, in the economy, in the social sphere. (Young Azeri Georgian women)

In general, the level of trust in and expectations of young people is very high. I have heard from ordinary people that only you – young people – can fix our future. I have often met quite young people in positions of responsibility that do a great job. Therefore, I think that the level of public confidence in young people is as a whole quite high. There are simply internal obstacles in the form of social challenges and limited opportunities. Even so, the youth is quite active... young people are less corrupt. (Young Georgian with disability)

3.3 Lack of access to trusted information

Young people from both sides of the dividing line report that they feel they do not have access to trustworthy information regarding the conflict. Participants felt they lacked fair information about the conflict as well as information about how they personally could engage in the peace process and associated projects. Lack of information appears to constitute a major barrier to their participation in the peace process. This lack of information results both from the relative isolation of young people, especially in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and adjacent areas on the Georgian side, but also from one-sided media coverage or 'propaganda':

The first issue is the limited access to education and information. This, in turn, leads to the fact that people easily fall under the influence of various ideologies. (Georgian political activist in Tbilisi)

First of all, you need an information campaign about at what stage is the process of peace talks at the moment, about where we are now and where we begin, and about which processes we need to be included in. We must very clearly record our desire to resolve the conflict exclusively by peaceful means, through dialogue, and not by swinging our fists. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

There must be freedom of speech. People need to get unbiased information... when a person is well aware of this or that problem, his actions will be more productive. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

I think we need better access to public opinion data. We do not have information about what we really want. You need to start with this [information] in order to analyse the situation adequately. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

Young people on the Georgian side expressed concern that their counterparts in Abkhazia and

South Ossetia were subject to propaganda that turned them away from the peace processes:

There are also many problems with regard to the reconciliation process. We can and would like to get closer and establish dialogue with the youth on the other side, but they are brought up with the image that we are the enemy. Therefore, it's very difficult to sit with them at the negotiating table... the Tskhinvali youth is told that the Georgians are enemies, and they believe this propaganda. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

Some Abkhaz respondents feel this in some ways also applies to young Georgians:

On the television and from the internet it's also obvious that the Georgian youth have a distorted understanding of the situation in Abkhazia. (Young Abkhaz businessman)

3.4 Lack of common language, networks and experience of co-existence

"They do not teach English over there, and we don't teach Russian. So as a result communication and dialogue become more difficult."

Twenty-five years of separation means young people face different, sometimes greater, barriers to dialogue with their counterparts across dividing lines, than their parents. Young Georgians, Abkhaz and South Ossetians have no or little experience of living together to draw upon, and are in the process of losing a 'common language':

There is another serious problem. For example, in Nikozi, Russian is no longer taught in school. If we want to establish relations with them [young people in South Ossetia], we must have a language in which we can talk with them. They do not teach English over there, and we don't teach Russian. So as a result communication and dialogue become more difficult. There is then the need for an interpreter, but an interpreter cannot create the atmosphere necessary for dialogue. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

The older generation has a more subjective approach to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict because, firstly, they were personally involved in every stage of the conflict, and, secondly, before the war they all had relationships [with Georgians], positive or negative. So they relate [to the conflict with Georgia] more emotionally... their pre-war relations strongly shape their attitudes. The youth have no such connections, they do not know anything about

the Georgian youth, just as the Georgian youth does not know anything about the Abkhaz youth... Very often, [young people's] opinions are more negative than those of the older generation. I know that direct personal experience helps communicate and explain a position. Therefore, I think that much will change if young people develop and work more actively towards this goal. (Young Abkhaz businessman)

However, the fact that young people did not experience war first-hand does not necessarily mean they are more open to dialogue than their parents' generation:

I do not think that a person who lost his father or mother during the war will want to sit down at the negotiating table... Mothers who lost their children find it hardest of all to forget the past, but they are the very people who say that war is not a solution and call for everything to be resolved by peaceful means. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

4. Opportunities for young people to participate in peacebuilding

"...diplomacy does not love the proud. A position needs to be supported by arguments rather than pride... This work should be done by young people."

As examined above, young people often have no direct experience of 'living with the other'. This makes it harder for them to hear and understand

perspectives from people on the other side of conflict lines. Unlike their parents they usually have no option to draw on personal experience or contact across the divide. The fact that they have no personal experience of the conflict means they are less able to understand the complexity of that period and are more vulnerable to simplistic, popular narratives about the past that constitute further barriers to peace. The peace process is perceived as moribund and offers few chances to engage young people – this partially explains why most young people are more concerned about issues of conflict and security in their immediate surroundings than in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Set against these challenges, young people can contribute to the peace process. Participants identified a number of opportunities that – perhaps with outside support – would equip them with tools to build a peaceful future.

4.1 Young people can relate differently to the past

Several focus group participants agreed that young people carried fewer bitter memories from the conflict than their parents' generation. And many believed themselves to be more willing to free themselves from the past, in spite of narratives and trauma passed from their elders:

The youth are the part of our society which are open-minded and capable. When they dedicate themselves to solving problems, they have ideas



Young journalists at a training course © GoGroup Media



Young Georgians engaging in discussions about conflict
© Lika Lejava

that would not occur to the older generation. The youth have potential. It is necessary to ensure that the initiative shown by youth has a response. Young people should be given the opportunity to interact with all the government authorities. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

Older people often remember the old days, and young people would prefer to think more about the present and look to the future. For the older generation it is hard to forget old wounds and grievances, but young people can start from a clean sheet. It's easier for young people to find a common language and common interests with the other side. (Georgian participant in Nikozi village)

When young people engage in peace and security, carry out peacebuilding actions, their work is more effective than those activities carried out by the older generation. The older generation has a political or criminal past, which they constantly repeat. Young people do not have a dark past and this is a favourable factor for them. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

It is the previous generation that refused to negotiate. Instead, the youth should be involved in the negotiation process. For certain reasons, the older generation does not take this step, so we must do it. [The older generation] should forget about their pride, because diplomacy does not love the proud. A position needs to be supported by arguments rather than pride... This work should be done by young people. (Young Georgian security professional)

If we look at actions which youth organisations and initiative groups have undertaken in an attempt to address disagreements or conflicts, then a good example is the most recent conflict with the opposition whereby young representatives actively argued in favour of negotiations and called upon the older generation to have dialogue... There was an evident desire on the part of young people

to participate in resolving the conflict. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

4.2 Social media poses both opportunities and threats to peacebuilding

"...there is only one form of social activism – hashtags on social media. Few are willing to be active outside their homes."

Social media is extensively used by young people on both sides of the conflict line. It often gives young people a sense of 'connectedness' that some relate to a sense of security:

Frequently you can observe the dependence that young people have on gadgets – often young people only feel comfortable and safe when they have a telephone in their hands. They want to always be connected and to know what is going on. We understand that security is often interpreted differently, but in the wider sense of that word it seems to me that the attachment to telephones and other gadgets provides a sense of security for young people, as well as other simple benefits. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

Social media is also seen as an opportunity for raising and addressing important social issues:

Nowadays social media networks, particularly Facebook, have become the most active mechanism [for solving problems]. If we outline the problem, our indignation, how we were treated, the reaction will be swift and the problem will be solved because people do not want publicity. Of course, this is the most straightforward way, and it is effective. But to apply to the appropriate authorities is difficult and takes a lot of time. (Abkhaz participant in Gudauta)

Social media offers unprecedented opportunities for young people to communicate across conflict lines, both within the societies, and across the Ingur/i:

When some of the guys I worked with began to communicate with each other [online], they said that they had had such and such a stereotype about those who lived in Gal and in Tkuarchal. They said that now they no longer had them, since they realised that... it was just because they had not communicated much before. (Abkhaz participant in all-female group in Sukhum/i)

The internet and globalisation have blurred borders. For example, I have several foreign friends with whom I communicate over the internet. And

with Abkhazians, who live in the occupied territory, I also correspond with the help of the internet. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

However, some participants felt that addressing important issues on social media resulted in shallow discussion and that online discourse should not replace social participation offline, and that in some cases it can be damaging:

Another serious obstacle is the fact that young people lock themselves in the virtual sphere. They are very active and communicative in social media networks but when they meet each other they do not try to look deeply at problems. (Abkhaz participant in all-female group in Sukhum/i)

In Georgia, there is only one form of social activism – hashtags on social media. Few are willing to be active outside their homes. (Georgian LGBT representative)

For me it seems that nothing can be worse than what goes on on Facebook... all these negative judgements and opinions do not solve any problems. (Abkhaz participant in all-female group in Sukhum/i)

4.3 Physical spaces for young people are still important

Despite the options for online discussion, young people therefore raised the value of meeting and collaborating face to face:

There are few sites where young people from different parts of the country can communicate and share their impressions. When there is more mutual understanding among our youth, it will be easier for them to communicate outside. I do not see options for such get-togethers. Young people would like to be given the chance to participate in serious youth projects. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

Young people should be interested in participating in various projects. It is necessary to organize a place where young people can meet regularly and discuss interesting topics. (Georgian former offender in Gori)

4.4 Formal and informal education is needed to address conflicts constructively

Participants from both sides stressed the need for education reform in two main areas: improved civic education that encourages diversity and allows young people to think freely; greater access to outside ideas and knowledge (mainly Abkhazia):

[There are] three main steps for strengthening the role of youth in solving conflict. Firstly:

raise the standard of education (all spheres, all schools, within the country and outside it). Secondly: teach people to respect the law – start with small steps and develop this habit. Thirdly: start to work on fighting corruption. (Young Abkhaz businessman)

Firstly, increase the standard of education; civic consciousness should be at a high level. A person should be able to adequately analyse events. Secondly, healthy mutual relations which allow one to apply that education. Thirdly, respect in relation to others. (Georgian student in Tbilisi)

I think that among the youth there is a low level of tolerance. This may be related to the low standard of education and it is necessary to work towards [improving] education. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

Reforming the education system is vital. I believe that most of the problems among youth are connected to a lack of education. (Abkhaz participant in Sukhum/i)

When I disagreed with the teachers, I was immediately criticized as being badly bred. I did not understand why expressing opinions is a sign of bad manners... The school should pay more attention not only to academic performance, but ensure that children learn to think freely, because to learn this in adulthood is extremely difficult. (Georgian political activist in Tbilisi)

I want to mention that an incorrect interpretation of terminology is taking place in schools. For example, in school when they are explaining the concept of tolerance, religious figures say that it means the legalisation of sodomy and so on. They incorrectly explain the meaning of tolerance, liberalism etc... The most important thing is that any change requires political will. It requires a society which is able to elect politicians free from various phobias. But such a society needs education. We are trapped in a vicious circle. (Georgian LGBT representative)

Education should seek to instil an overall culture that is more conducive to peacebuilding. Until societies are capable of serious self-critical reflection, moving forwards will be difficult. This links to dealing with the past: We really like to blame others – Shevardnadze, Russia, an evil uncle. We don't like to admit that in many respects, we are the ones to blame for what happened – that the conflict also started because of our xenophobia and the fact that our President was a fascist. Until we ask for forgiveness for what we ourselves have done, we will not be able to reconcile with anyone. (Georgian LGBT representative)



School class in Abkhazia © Ibragim Chkadua

4.5 Young people see international support and experience as central

Local non-governmental organisations working in this area should develop a common action plan and strategy and propose them to the government, since it alone cannot do much. International organisations should support both government and local non-governmental organisations in the implementation of these projects. Without collaboration and networking, we will not be able to achieve tangible results. (Georgian participant in Zugdidi)


Young people are audible and visible, but because of isolation and out-dated methods, youth cannot offer any new approaches because they do not see anything else – this leads to greater isolation. Even the most active young people today do not offer any new, excellent approaches compared with those of the older generation (if not worse, then definitely not better) and this applies to every kind of issue, including conflict. To change this situation, it is necessary that a young person is prepared and confident, has received a high-quality education and has become a professional in a particular area. There are no resources for this inside Abkhazia – some external support will be needed. But you can start small – let school graduates take part in different educational projects, schools, etc., so that they can see how things work elsewhere, so that they begin to analyse and understand what is needed. Inside Abkhazia there are spaces for youth, but young people do not make use of them effectively – they act like the elders, they do nothing new. (Young Abkhaz businessman)

“Education should seek to instil an overall culture that is more conducive to peacebuilding. Until societies are capable of serious self-critical reflection, moving forwards will be difficult.”

Conclusions

The challenges and opportunities set out by Georgian and Abkhaz youth respondents suggest a number of areas around development and peacebuilding where action can be taken and where support from international organisations might be appreciated:

- **Help local actors build more inclusive and shared societies** by supporting internal dialogue, communication and interaction across geographical, ethnic, generational and other divides, and encourage civic education and critical thinking from an early stage and at various levels;
- **Create more physical spaces for young people** to get together and have constructive engagement with one another, as well as external perspectives and experiences. This should include young people in rural and more isolated areas and include opportunities for youth in Abkhazia to access a variety of education and exchange opportunities locally and abroad;
- **Explore options to encourage more constructive use of online fora and debate.** This could involve innovative collaborations with technology professionals. Work in this area could address issues regarding lack of trusted information, and the failure to motivate participation;
- **Better utilise the potential of young people,** especially groups that are often excluded from consultations or peacebuilding activities. This piece of research has shown that there are young people out there, eager to engage, but lacking information and opportunities;
- **Support more stable and secure livelihoods,** especially among vulnerable groups, and in rural areas, to discourage migration and give young people the confidence and space to engage more actively in shaping their society and building peace.



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