

Transforming Conflicts in Georgia: STRIVE FOR LASTING PEACE

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**PERSPECTIVES OF GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN DIRECT DIALOGUE:
A VISION FROM TBILISI
NATIA CHANKVETADZE**

Discussing the Georgian-Abkhazian direct dialogue is a process full of questions. It is unclear what direct dialogue means and how realistic it is that Abkhazians and Georgians will agree on a mutual format of direct dialogue and will not impose conflicting conditions. The issue became especially topical after the current *de facto* president of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, spoke during his election campaign about the need and importance of a direct dialogue with the Georgian side¹. The opinion of Aslan Bzhania, which became a reason for his criticism in the Abkhazian society², was followed by a fragmented response from the Georgian ruling political elite. Interestingly, one of the first response statements from the Georgian side was made by a representative of the State Security Service³, which was followed by the statements of the then Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia⁴ and the then State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality Ketevan Tsikhelashvili⁵.

The aim of the present study is to clarify the expediency and feasibility of Georgian-Abkhazian direct dialogue in the current context – from the perspective of the Georgian side. In particular, the aim is to discuss what form and content, and whose involvement may lead to direct, bilateral dialogue between Sokhumi and Tbilisi, what are the challenges and risks associated with this process, and what concrete steps can be taken or which ongoing projects can and should be developed in order to achieve the initiation of direct dialogue.

The present study relies on review of existing literature and analysis of in-depth interviews. The literature review includes analysis and evaluation of statements, analytical papers, and documents related to the Georgian-Abkhazian direct and/or bilateral dialogue. Six in-depth interviews were conducted with currently active politicians and experts. The analysis of the interviews is based on the views and assessments of the Georgian-Abkhazian direct, bilateral dialogue – by the two representatives of the ruling political elite, two members of opposition parties, and two experts.

It should be noted that the present study is accompanied by two limitations. First, the views, assessments and conclusions given in the document cannot be generalized to the entire current political elite; the study equally fails to generalize and reflect the attitude of the Georgian society at large towards the Georgian-Abkhazian bilateral dialogue. Second, the document does not address the issue of Georgian-Ossetian bilateral, direct dialogue, as the motivation for working on it was the statement by the incumbent political leader of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania. The present paper is divided into two main parts – in the first part I discuss direct, bilateral, informal and formal dialogue formats in protracted conflicts, and the second part will focus exactly on the direct discussion of Georgian-Abkhazian direct, bilateral dialogue.

¹ Aslan Bzhania's explanation about the dialogue with Tbilisi.Sova.News.Available at: <https://bit.ly/37QxL1p>

² "Aruaa" comes up with the idea of a public hearing in the parliament.Available at: <https://bit.ly/3e6XIAh>

³ Deputy Head of State Security Service: The initiatives of Aslan Bzhania are interesting if they are placed in the Geneva format. Interpressnews.Available at: <https://bit.ly/3517WxK>

⁴ The Abkhaz opposition member is in favor of direct dialogue with Tbilisi.What does Tbilisi answer? Jam-News.net. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3kGGIDk>

⁵ Tbilisi is ready to engage in dialogue with the Abkhaz and Ossetian communities.Civil.ge.Available at: <https://bit.ly/31WOxlu>

THE INFORMAL NATURE OF THE DIALOGUE RELATED TO CONFLICT

Dialogue is a process necessary to promote healthy discussion, peaceful negotiations and cooperation between the parties to the conflict. The first-level (Track I) diplomacy is a form of dialogue in which officials and decision-makers from the party/parties in conflict take part⁶. The second level (Track II) diplomacy refers in its turn to the informal nature of interaction / communication when representatives of different sectors of the society (mainly civil society) are involved in the conflict resolution process(es)⁷. In addition to these two levels, there is a one-and-a-half format dialogue (1.5 Track) aimed at facilitating the more efficient functioning of first- and second-level diplomacy. This is possible because the one-and-a-half format enables the informal involvement of decision-makers, or persons close to them, in the dialogue process.⁸

It should be noted that first-level informal diplomacy is considered to be more effective in some cases than official dialogue of the same level, as it allows individuals and groups involved to make better use of the resources at their disposal, and alleviates some of the rigid positioning⁹. It is often noted that the main difference between Tracks II and 1.5 of dialogue is in the participants' profiles, as Format 1.5 implies the informal involvement of decision-makers and political leaders, but also differences in timing and results, as informal formats offer the advantage that frees those involved from bureaucratic obligations.¹⁰

It should be noted that informal diplomacy is associated with the following assumptions.¹¹

1. Informal dialogue focuses on improving relationships, communication and mutual understanding between the involved individuals / groups.
2. The informal nature of the process allows the parties involved to look for alternative solutions to problems, also to think and discuss beyond existing frameworks and rigid positions, as the obligational part is being eased.
3. Informal dialogue should take place in parallel with official diplomacy or be its part.
4. The involvement / role of a third party in the informal dialogue differs from the involvement of the same party in the formal / official format(s).

There are various experiences of Tracks I and 1.5 dialogue in the context of unresolved conflict(s), notably in the cases of Cyprus and Transnistria. Cyprus, which is currently showing a growing degree of co-operation in the situation of the unresolved conflict, experienced stagnation in the peace talks in 2007-2012, but the process was resumed in 2015 with the involvement of the UN Special Adviser¹². One of the initiatives¹³ launched in Cyprus in 2016 is the "six-levels" dialogue. The Level I implies that

⁶ Böhmelt T. (2010). The effectiveness of tracks of diplomacy strategies in third-party interventions. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 47, No. 2. pp. 167-178. Published by: Sage Publications

⁷ *Ibid.* pp.167-168

⁸ Allen, S. (2011). Conflicts in the Caucasus and Their Resolution: A Framing Essay. In *Eurasian Geography and Economics*. 52, No. 5, p. 682.

⁹ Böhmelt T. (2010). The effectiveness of tracks of diplomacy strategies in third-party interventions. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 47, No. 2. pp. 167-178. Published by: Sage Publications

¹⁰ Mirimanova, N. (2012). Mediation and Dialogue: Official and Unofficial Strategies. In *Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus: A reflection on 15 years of conflict transformation process*. International Alert. Available at the link: <https://bit.ly/2GgEczs>

Mapendere, J. (2006). Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks. *Culture of Peace Online Journal* 2(1): 66–81. p. 70

¹¹ Schiff, A. (2010). „Quasi Track-One” Diplomacy: An Analysis of the Geneva Process in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict. *International Studies Perspectives*, 11, pp. 93–111.

¹² Breaking the pattern of deadlock in the Cyprus Peace Process. (2019). *Interpeace Peacebuilding in Practice*, Paper N5. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3e8CzQJ>

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 10

international actors, national government members and decision-makers meet; The Level II involves civil society; while the Level III engages local organizations and lower-level leaders¹⁴. In addition, Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot Chambers of Commerce have been cooperating in Cyprus for years and facilitating the trade process crossing the Green Line¹⁵. There are interesting examples of Tracks I and 1.5 dialogues in the context of unresolved conflict in Transnistria as well. For example, it is worth mentioning the Rome Protocol adopted in May 2018¹⁶. The purpose of this Protocol is to work on the settlement of fundamental and adversarial issues existing between Moldova and Transnistria, including the issue of free movement of people, and the recognition by Moldova of higher education diplomas issued in Transnistria¹⁷.

The focus of the present study, within the Georgian-Abkhazian context, is to understand the expediency and feasibility of the Track I and/or Track 1.5 dialogues, more specifically, whether there is a willingness and opportunity among the Georgian political elite to support dialogue with the Abkhaz side, in bilateral and direct formats, and what actually hinders such process.

PERSPECTIVES OF DIRECT GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN DIALOGUE

Although the focus of the present study is on the context and the assessment of the current possibility for direct, bilateral Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue, it is important to briefly review the pre-2008 and post-2008 formats in which Georgian and Abkhazian political leaders and decision-makers talked to one another.

The Georgian-Abkhazian peace process was launched in 1993, shortly after the end of the war in Abkhazia. In the same year, a memorandum of understanding was signed, which was supposed to become the basis for consequent Georgian-Abkhazian cooperation¹⁸. True, it appeared to be unsuccessful, but in 1995 there was still discussion of the possibility of a federal arrangement, and in 1997 – of the creation of a unified state¹⁹. In 1997, a meeting between the current Presidents of Abkhazia and Georgia Vladislav Ardzinba and Eduard Shevardnadze was held in Tbilisi²⁰. Despite some obstacles, the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process also continued after 2003, under the new Georgian government. For instance, in 2006 in Tbilisi, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia, Sergei Shamba, presented the document titled “The Key to the Future”, and in the same year, Tbilisi responded by publishing “The Road Map”²¹.

It is important to note that until 2008, a number of countries and organizations were involved in the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process as mediators, including the Russian Federation. Representatives of the UN, the OSCE and the member countries of the “Group of Friends”²² of Georgia took part in the facilitation of the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue and the peace process. In addition, there were important 1.5 format meetings prior to 2008, referred to as the University of California and the Schlaining Process meetings. The Schlaining process aimed to engage politicians and decision-makers

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 10

¹⁵ De Waal, T. (2018). *Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe’s De Facto States and Breakaway Territories*. Carnegie Europe. 83. 53

¹⁶ Protocol of the official meeting of the permanent conference for political questions in the framework of the negotiating process on the Transdniesrian settlement. Available at: <https://bit.ly/35IDy6t>

¹⁷ Making progress in the Moldovan-Transnistrian dialogue. *Warsaw Institute*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34D1Pvb>

¹⁸ Abramashvili, I. and Koiava, R. (2018). 25 years of Georgia’s peace policy. *Caucasian House*.

¹⁹ Interview # 02, Expert, former politician

²⁰ Abramashvili, I. and Koiava, R. (2018). 25 years of Georgia’s peace policy. *Caucasian House*. p. 20

²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 30-31

²² These included the United States, Russia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

in dialogue through an unofficial / informal format²³. As it was mentioned in one of the interviews, at the respective meetings and in the documents before 2008, Georgians and Abkhazians referred to each other as representatives of the Georgian and the Abkhaz sides²⁴.

The watershed for the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process was the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 and the recognition by Russia of Abkhazia and South Ossetia / Tskhinvali as independent states, which was denounced by Georgia and the international community as a gross violation of Georgia's territorial integrity, and occupation of the two territories²⁵. The Geneva International Discussion (GID) format and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) were established in the aftermath of 2008. The GID is largely a Georgian-Russian format in which representatives of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian sides, albeit with unofficial status, also participate. As for IPRM, it is of more narrow character and only addresses humanitarian, crisis-related issues.

DIRECT DIALOGUE – A FORM OF ENGAGEMENT OR A MECHANISM OF RECOGNITION?

The current situation is as follows: there exists a format of political dialogue, in the form of the Geneva talks, and informal, Track II diplomacy, also referred to as “public diplomacy”, format. Thus, there is a perception that, given the current reality, the dialogue between Georgians and Abkhazians is ongoing. The aim of the present study is to look beyond the existing formats of dialogue and assess the relevance and possibility of resuming the process of Georgian-Abkhazian direct, bilateral dialogue. Therefore, one of the first questions asked during the interviews was - what would direct dialogue with Abkhazians mean for official Tbilisi?

The debate on the importance of direct dialogue has developed in two directions. First, direct dialogue as a bilateral format for conflict resolution; and, direct dialogue as a parallel, informal process of international political format(s), and the communication channel with Sukhumi. The first version of interpretation of the dialogue was problematic for the representatives of the political elites participating in the study – from both the ruling and opposition parties, although it was acceptable to the experts. And the second version, including Track I bilateral dialogue, but of informal kind, appeared acceptable to both the members of the political elite, and the experts.

Problems linked to the format of direct, bilateral and official dialogue will be discussed in the following subsection. As for the informal, but direct, bilateral and institutionalized format, two views have been expressed regarding this issue. The first implied that representatives of the Georgian political elite are confused, and unable to think thoroughly and strategically about the above topic²⁶. According to the second view, dialogue is seen as a systematic, continuous process and therefore associated with certain difficulties; hence, representatives of the political elite would prefer to talk about an open channel of communication, which they would use as needed, rather than envisaging the dialogue as continuous and institutionalized process²⁷.

The above-cited statement by the current *de facto* Abkhazian leader, Aslan Bzhania, was also assessed differently. So, for example, part of the study participants believe that Bzhania is open to

²³ Interview # 02, Expert, former politician.

²⁴ Interview # 05, Representative of the ruling political party.

²⁵ UN Security Council members condemn Russian occupation of Georgian territories ahead of 12th anniversary of 2008 war. *Agenda.ge*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2HRDysk>

²⁶ Interview # 01, Representative of an opposition political party.

²⁷ Interview # 03, Expert, NGO representative.

dialogue and expresses readiness to engage in any format of direct dialogue²⁸; while for others his statement refers not to any format, but to bilateral and institutionalized dialogue process²⁹.

To sum up, in today's context the acceptable format of Georgian-Abkhazian direct dialogue is associated with an unofficial / informal process in which Georgian and Abkhazian political and civic leaders of different rank can meet and themselves define the agenda for the process, with minimal third-party intervention.

In order to better comprehend the views regarding the format of the Georgian-Abkhazian direct, bilateral dialogue, the following question was also asked in the research framework - who should / could meet (i.e., persons with what formal status) and what issues should/could be on the agenda of direct dialogue?

It is interesting to note that if the dialogue is to be unofficial, the status of the participants in it becomes secondary for the Georgian side. For example, it was noted that the Track I (decision makers) format is acceptable as well if the dialogue is unofficial³⁰. It was also noted that the factor of trust is more important than the status of the participants; in particular, both Abkhazians and Georgians should be able to see that it is trustworthy individuals who are participating in the process³¹.

As for the development of specific dialogue formats, it was noted that it is quite possible to hold meetings at the parliamentary level, and involve MPs in the dialogue process, as these are persons with a mandate but less restricted by their status³². It is important to establish connections at the regional and district levels, e.g. by involving in the dialogue process mayors, governors, chairpersons of city councils from relevant regions or districts³³. It was noted that communication channels can be established between representatives of ministries as well, and a permanent dialogue format can be established with their participation³⁴. It is important that the individuals involved in dialogue are connected with the decision-makers (if these are not participating themselves)³⁵. So, in the course of one of the interviews, an idea was mentioned of appointing special representatives who would be able to discuss various social, economic and humanitarian issues³⁶. The Abashidze-Karasin format was also mentioned during the interviews. This format is focused on ensuring that trade and economic issues remain on the agenda even amid the unresolved Georgian-Russian conflict and the lack of diplomatic relations. However, the transfer of such a format to the Georgian-Abkhazian context should not be of a formal nature, through the involvement of appointed and specially mandated persons³⁷. It should also be noted here that the existing lines of communication must be activated, and that it is possible to extend them, to transform them into an institutionalized dialogue, and, most importantly, to maintain them and constantly adapt to the changing context.

As for the issues that should / could be discussed in the context of direct, bilateral dialogue, the views heard throughout the study largely coincided here. The dialogue format(s) should be political, but free of territorial status issues, as the latter issues would put participants in irreconcilable oppo-

²⁸ Aslan Bzhania's answer is convincing. If we are afraid of a dialogue format, another 28 years will pass. Interpressnews. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ejPWOL>

²⁹ Interview # 02, Expert, Former politician. Interview # 03, Expert, NGO representative.

³⁰ Interview # 06, Representative of an opposition political party.

³¹ Interview # 02, Expert, former politician.

³² Interview # 03, Expert, NGO representative.

³³ Interview # 03, Expert, NGO representative.

³⁴ Interview # 06, Representative of an opposition political party.

³⁵ Interview # 06, Representative of an opposition political party.

³⁶ Interview # 01, Representative of an opposition political party.

³⁷ Interview # 06, Representative of an opposition political party

sition to one another. If the dialogue is multilevel, it will be able to address many social, economic and humanitarian issues. So, for example, Aslan Bzhania himself singled out three issues on which dialogue with the Georgian side is important: the sale of hazelnuts produced in Abkhazia; crime prevention; and, the referral healthcare program³⁸.

During the interviews, the Georgian respondents have noted that it is critically important to improve the legal and humanitarian situation of the Gali population, to discuss the possibility of expanding and effectively actualizing trade relations, to increase access to higher education for Abkhaz students, and to discuss and develop strategies for dealing with emergency crises³⁹. The spread of the coronavirus has shown that access to the resources and communication means needed in similar crises is rather limited in conflict regions, and that dialogue formats and channels of communication are of particular importance in similar situations.

DIRECT DIALOGUE – TAKING RISK OR FEARING TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY?

Decisions regarding the format of direct, bilateral and official dialogue are related to several issues. One of the first problems is the issue of Russia's occupation and the need to keep it isolated from the dialogue process. In particular, in the current status quo, to what extent is it possible at all to have a bilateral dialogue with Abkhazians in a formalized format, so that it is not overshadowed by the reality of occupation?

Based on the interviews, there are two possible answers to this question: first, it is impossible to conduct an official bilateral dialogue if the precondition for this is recognizing the Abkhazians as a party to the conflict and confirming their effective control on the ground, because in this case the dialogue format will resemble one between state representatives⁴⁰; second, it is possible that if the Abkhazians are recognized as one of the (though not the only) parties to the conflict, they will become a legitimate party to the dialogue, but then issues related to the settlement of the conflict and the legal status should remain out of the dialogue agenda⁴¹.

Conducting a bilateral, formalized dialogue in which political and status issues are discussed threatens to replace the Geneva talks and will reduce Russia's responsibility⁴². However, if the bilateral format is informal, talking to the Abkhaz side could also be an opportunity to reduce and counterbalance Russia's influence in the region⁴³.

One may wonder whether bilateral, even informal, dialogue would help alleviate the policy of non-recognition. In response to several interviews, it was stated that recognition and/or annexation of the region by Russia would be further facilitated by the absence of dialogue, as observing international practices reveals that recognition of a conflict region(s) appears on the international agenda when it is clear that compromise cannot be reached.⁴⁴ It should also be noted that the territorial integrity of Georgia is strengthened by internationally signed documents and by the Association Agreement already concluded with the European Union⁴⁵.

³⁸ Aslan Bzhania's explanation about the dialogue with Tbilisi. Sova News. Available at: <https://bit.ly/37QxL1p>

³⁹ Interview # 01. Interview # 02. Interview # 03. Interview # 04.

⁴⁰ Interview # 06. Interview # 05

⁴¹ Interview # 01. Interview # 03

⁴² Interview # 06, Representative of an opposition political party.

⁴³ Interview # 02, Expert, former politician.

⁴⁴ Interview # 01, Representative of an opposition political party.

⁴⁵ Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia: European Implementation Assessment (Update). *European Parliamentary Research Service*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34Gip40>

A particularly important challenge for the Georgian-Abkhazian format(s) of direct, bilateral dialogue would be dealing with Russian propaganda/disinformation in the process. There is no doubt that Russia will definitely try to use the process of direct dialogue to its advantage, and emphasize the superficiality of its role in the conflict. This latter approach will not work if the Georgian side has concrete vision of the scale and purpose of the bilateral format of dialogue, the process will be agreed with the political elite, and there will be a domestic political consensus regarding working in such format.

Interestingly, beyond Russia's role, the conversation focused on the issue of existing confusion among the ruling political elites and the pervading fears of initiating any change in the Georgian-Abkhazian context. Confusion and fears are exacerbated by any increase in the degree of political polarization. Therefore, it is important that the development of a bilateral dialogue format does not become a 'hostage' to internal political dispute, and that the representatives of the political elite seek the ways to look at the issue rationally and free from partisanship. Otherwise, refraining from direct, bilateral Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue will appear to be more closely linked to the fear of taking responsibility by both the ruling and the opposition political elites, rather than to the rational perception of threats associated with direct dialogue.

DIRECT DIALOGUE – AN END IN ITSELF OR A NECESSITY?

The answer to the question whether there is a need for Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue is unequivocally positive. It is interesting to consider, however, whether the importance of direct dialogue is properly understood. For example, it was noted during the interviews that it is the informal or quasi-formal formats of bilateral dialogue that bring about real change in both the reality on the ground and the relationship⁴⁶. It was also noted that politics is a dynamic, ever-changing process and requires continuous reflection and creative thinking beyond the existing frameworks⁴⁷. Therefore, no matter how improbable the process of direct dialogue may seem to us in the current context, it is necessary to look at the issue strategically and on a larger scale, and avoid remaining in the grip of the existing *status quo*.

There are several reasons / motivations mentioned by Georgian experts and representatives of the political elite as justifying the need for a direct, bilateral dialogue.

The first reason is the growing process of mutual alienation between the Georgian and the Abkhazian societies. It has been noted that bilateral dialogue between communities will be a good opportunity to restore social ties and trust⁴⁸. In addition, bilateral dialogue will allow the Georgian side to balance Russian influence in Abkhazia⁴⁹. It is interesting that from the Georgian perspective, the interest on the part of the Abkhazian political elite in the dialogue can be explained by the similar motivation of counterbalancing Russia's influence, especially against the background of declining Russian financial support⁵⁰. At the same time, it should be noted that Bzhanias and his team will not be able to fulfill the promises made to the society only relying on the hope of incoming Russian finances; therefore, their rational interest is having dialogue with the Georgian side and thus finding new ways to supplement the budget of the *de facto* Abkhazian state and support the initiatives needed for the development of the Abkhaz society.

⁴⁶ Interview # 06, Representative of an opposition political party.

⁴⁷ Interview # 02, Expert, former politician.

⁴⁸ Interview # 03, Expert, NGO representative.

⁴⁹ Interview # 02, Expert, former politician.

⁵⁰ Abkhazia 'has not received' Russian funding for 6 months. *OC-Media*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3oH9IYA>

It is important that the Georgian side also has a good understanding of the real need for bilateral, direct dialogue, of its strategic importance, and the challenges it may face while becoming an organic part of the process. It is essential that individuals enjoying trust and influence in the community get involved in the dialogue process, and that the format of dialogue is endorsed by the majority of the political elite.

Several specific steps can be taken to establish bilateral dialogue format(s). The first one is issuing clear and substantive response messages on the need and importance of the Georgian-Abkhazian bilateral dialogue, including the proposing of a specific informal format. The second step can be the use of resources provided by international partners to create a format of bilateral, direct dialogue, within the framework of which Georgians and Abkhazians will have the prerogative to set the agenda. The third step - recognizing the Abkhazians as one of the parties to the conflict and explaining the importance of direct dialogue with them to the Georgian society. Fourth, consolidating the support of a significant portion of the political elite regarding the format of dialogue and its strategic importance.

CONCLUSION

The current conflicts in Georgia possess ethnic, political and geopolitical dimensions. Of course, reasoning about which of these dimensions is the leading and decisive one is not simple. However, it is important to understand that as the context changes, so does the perception of the relative superiority of each of these dimensions. Since 2008, the leading dimension has been the politics of the Georgian-Russian relations, which has overshadowed the Georgian-Abkhazian relations and the actual confrontation between the Georgians and the Abkhazians. Consequently, the opinion has emerged and strengthened that it does not make much sense to speak directly to Abkhazians just because they are being occupied. However, at the same time, another opinion was formed that we should not talk to the Russians either exactly because they are the occupiers. As a result, confusing conceptual chaos has been created for both the political elites and the civil society, as it became unclear with whom we want/or can talk about the conflict(s) in a bilateral format, and why.

No matter how sensitive and controversial the issue of pursuing direct dialogue between Georgians and Abkhazians is, it is necessary to find a compromise version and start working together. Given the current context, it is understandable that the format(s) of dialogue should be realistically feasible, based on shared vision and existing need. It is also important that the format of bilateral dialogue be a result of compromise, based on mutual respect and recognition of each other's needs. It is essential that bilateral and direct dialogue between the Georgian and Abkhazian societies take place at various levels, and that in addition to public diplomacy and civil society representatives, political elites and decision-makers should also talk to each other.

THE ROLE OF THE PARLIAMENT OF GEORGIA IN THE PROCESS OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

GIORGI MODEBADZE

Parliament, as a unique representative body endowed with a mandate of the people, plays a key role in all areas of governance. Parliament is particularly important in a conflict-affected society, as it is directly involved in the peacebuilding process, determines the country's peace policy and oversees the executive branch of power, legislates to ensure human rights and fundamental freedoms, and works on post-conflict security, economic and social issues. Parliament is able to instigate the peacebuilding process by creating respective normative, legislative and institutional frameworks, which in turn help to take active steps in the case of stalemate and avoiding potential conflicts in the future. At the same time, the parliament is a deliberative space where legislation is adopted that creates conducive environment to strong peace initiatives.

Although the parliamentary system of government in Georgia has been established step-by-step since 2012, and the powers of the country's main representative body have been gradually enhanced, the Georgian Parliament has not yet played a decisive role in determining the country's peace policy. To a large extent, it is the result of this, that from the very first years of gaining independence and until today, the Georgian state has not been able to introduce a coherent approach and pursue an effective peace policy.

From the perspective of conflict transformation, to this day there remain a number of serious challenges: inconsistency of peace processes in the country; lack of coordination between relevant state institutions; vicious practice of using conflict-sensitive communities for pursuing narrow political interests; and, in particular, low involvement of the country's highest representative body in determining governmental peace policy.

Contemplating institutional challenges to peacebuilding and addressing existing drawbacks is the starting point for launching the conflict transformation process and the development of successful peace policy. As mentioned above, one of the main challenges facing the Georgian state in this regard is the low involvement of the Parliament in determining the peace policy of the state. The present paper is an attempt to reconsider the role of the Parliament of Georgia in the transformation of conflicts. Its main purpose is to analyze the challenges facing the Parliament of Georgia and to review the means of strengthening the role of the legislature in the abovementioned area. In addition, the paper examines the Ukrainian experience of parliamentary activities in the field of conflict transformation and presents specific recommendations for addressing the main institutional challenges to conflict transformation in Georgia.

Structurally, the paper is divided into four main parts: The first part is devoted to creating a theoretical framework used to explain the paradigm of conflict transformation, and to analyzing the role of parliament in the process of conflict management and peacebuilding; The second part deals with the study of the Ukrainian experience of parliamentary activities in the field of conflict transformation; The third part focuses on analyzing the challenges of Georgian peace policy under different governments, with particular emphasis on the role of the Georgian Parliament, and its engagement in the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts; The fourth part proposes a certain vision, and specific recommendations aiming to enhance the functions of the Georgian Parliament and to turn it into the main institution defining the country's peace policy.

The study employs qualitative research methods, in particular - desk research, including the re-

view of academic publications and official documents of government agencies. The study of secondary sources comprised both the reviewing of scholarly works related to the issue of conflict transformation and scientific literature on the role of parliaments in peacebuilding, as well as analyzing the current Georgian legislation. International studies and normative acts adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament have been reviewed as well, to get familiarized with the post-Soviet practice of conflict transformation. Based on the resulting findings and conclusions of the research, specific recommendations have been developed, and are presented in the last part of the paper.

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT IN THE PEACEBUILDING PROCESS

Conflict transformation implies such a change in the relationship between the individuals and groups involved in this process, which results in a collaborative interaction between the parties. Unlike the complex process of conflict resolution, the goal of conflict transformation is not to stop confrontation through dialogue and find a political solution acceptable to all parties to the conflict, but rather to change the perceptions and attitudes of persons affected by the conflict.¹

According to the common definition, the goal of conflict transformation is twofold: on the one hand, this process should ensure the safety and well-being of the people affected by the conflict; while, on the other hand, it should transform the relationship between the parties to the conflict.²

Working on conflict transformation is an inclusive process. Achieving transformation or tangible change necessarily requires the high involvement in the process both of conflict-affected individuals and of other community groups, but also the active work of the communities' internal vertical structures – i.e., the active participation of decision-makers, middle and lower-level leaders is essential for the process to succeed.³

In addition to achieving changes at the individual and the relationships levels, ensuring structural transformation in society is also an important precondition for conflict transformation, which requires reassessing the flexibility and resilience of specific structures involved in building peace within society.⁴

Due to their being democratically elected representatives of the people, Members of the Parliament possess a unique position in their society to guide the peace process from the bottom up and create necessary preconditions for conflict transformation – as the highest representative body is more open to the general public than the executive or judiciary branches. In general, the legislature institutionalizes conflict, represents different segments of the society, and reflects diverse perspectives. Members of parliament can make the most important contribution to the conflict transformation process by strengthening national consensus around universally recognized values and peace policy objectives through national political dialogue.⁵

¹ Lederach, John Paul. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997, pp. 23-25.

² Chankvetadze, Natia. *Conflict Transformation in Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian Contexts: From Idea to Action*. Levan Mikeladze Foundation, 2020. p. 13

³ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 8-9.

⁵ *Parliaments as Peacebuilders: Parliaments in Conflict-Affected Countries*, Professional Development Programs for Parliamentarians and Staff, pp. 1-2. See: <https://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/agora-documents/WB%20-%20Parliaments%20as%20Peacebuilders%3B%20Parliaments%20in%20Conflict-Affected%20Countries%20-%20Jul%202005%20-EN%20-%20PDP.pdf>

The MP's mandate is unique with regards to conflict prevention and reconciliation, which is an essential component of the consistent transition process from conflict to peace and stability. Given the fact that quite often the main causes of conflict are exacerbated by some specific features of respective constitutional or electoral systems, their ineffective implementation, the misuse or embezzlement of public resources, MPs are equipped with tools to counter the conducive circumstances of the conflict. In cases where the causes of a conflict cannot be dealt with in a timely way, MPs possess additional institutional means to get actively involved in the purposeful process of transition from violent conflict to peace - from selecting a forum for dialogue to using executive oversight over the process of determining the peace policy priorities and the employment of respective resources.⁶

Academic researchers working on the role of parliament in the process of conflict transformation and peacebuilding highlight a variety of mechanisms that the legislature is endowed with for designing governmental conflict prevention and peace policies. There exist three main traditional directions of the activities of parliamentarians, each of which has the capacity to transform certain varieties of conflicts and are related to: the representative function of the legislature; the control of the executive branch through parliamentary oversight; and, legislative activity. In addition, experts in the field point out still another area of possible activity - parliamentary diplomacy, - which allows parliamentarians to work actively in the area of conflict transformation.⁷

In order for parliament to strengthen its representative and legislative function so that it becomes a forum that can transform conflict by creating an environment conducive to its prevention, or by addressing existing challenges, parliament must be reflecting the range of interests of the public at large, and ensure that its work meets the diverse needs of the society. Active cooperation with stakeholders, including civil society organizations and the media, is the main instrument for effectively representing such diversity of interests. However, in order to increase representation, it is also necessary to maximize the involvement of minority groups and women in the process.⁸

Activities of the legislature in the area of conflict transformation include parliamentary oversight. Parliament holds the responsibility to control the executive branch so as to ensure that the relevant institutions are accountable for their policies and actions. The main mechanism for the implementation of this function is the work of the parliamentary committees and commissions, including through convening of the bodies and persons accountable to the parliament. Additional tools include inquiries by a member of parliament, as well as hearings and discussions of the reports by bodies accountable to parliament, interpellation, ministerial hours, thematic investigations, and monitoring the implementation of normative acts adopted by parliament⁹.

Strengthening of the legislative activity of the parliament is particularly important for the successful implementation of a peace policy in the conflict-affected society. The legislative activity of the parliament in the area of conflict transformation is not limited to only the approval of legislative initiatives of the executive power, but also includes the need for the parliament itself to work actively on new legislation. Parliamentarians can exert positive pressure on the executive by trans-

⁶ O'Brien, Mitchell, Stapenhurst, Rick & Johnston, Niall. *Parliaments as Peacebuilders in Conflict-Affected Countries*, WBI learning resources series, World Bank, 2008, p. 2. See: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/6532/450880PUB0Box3101OFFICIAL0USE0ONLY1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁷ *International Parliamentary Conference on Peacebuilding: Tackling State Fragility*, Toolkit for Parliamentarians, pp. 12-15, see: <http://www.cpahq.org/CPAHQ/CMDownload.aspx?ContentKey=4fc00f29-4780-4941-bc92-a3d-96cad2672&ContentItemKey=c477b6dc-1044-4aee-9c2e-fca2052286d8>

⁸ *Parliaments as Peacebuilders: Parliaments in Conflict-Affected Countries*, Professional Development Programs for Parliamentarians and Staff, pp. 11-19.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 32-39.

posing into national legislation of important international treaties and UN resolutions. The basis for strengthening the work of the parliament in the legislative area is the precise reflection of the peace policy priorities at the sittings of the parliamentary bureau, when determining the agenda for legislative activity. Other effective tools for strengthening legislative activity are debates on government initiatives, acts and reports, and the submission of legislative initiatives by members of parliament themselves¹⁰.

Parliamentary diplomacy is an additional area of parliamentary activity that enables MPs to get actively involved in peace processes. By participating in international parliamentary networks, alliances and events focusing on conflict transformation issues, engaging in regional and international inter-parliamentary dialogues, parliamentarians can exchange knowledge, ideas and experiences. Through such forums or bilateral parliamentary contacts, members of parliament are also entitled to develop and sign collective communications or statements calling on governments to take action on key aspects of conflict transformation, both nationally and internationally.¹¹

UKRAINIAN EXPERIENCE OF PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Over the years, the main direction of peace processes in the vast majority of post-Soviet countries has been determined by the executive branch of government, with the parliament relegated to play just a secondary role. With regards to conflict transformation, the situation has not essentially changed to this day either. One exception is Ukraine, where the legislative body plays an active role in the conflict transformation area - both regarding conflict prevention and in the consistent process of transition to peace and stability.¹²

The special role of the Ukrainian Parliament in the area of peacebuilding is a preplanned outcome of many years of successful parliamentary practice. The early years of this period were marked by the dominance of the parliament over the relatively weak presidency, while in later years the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine successfully thwarted several unconstitutional attempts to change the arrangement and did not allow presidency to increase its powers. As a result, the *Verkhovna Rada* continues to play the key role in conflict prevention and management, peace dialogue, restoration of trust and long-term peacebuilding in Ukraine.¹³

The main mechanism for implementing state policy on conflict prevention and peacebuilding is the work in committees and commissions of the Ukrainian legislature. The key committee working in this area is the Committee of the Supreme Rada on Human Rights, De-occupation and Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories in Donetsk, Luhansk Regions and Autonomous Republic of Crimea, National Minorities and Interethnic Relations.¹⁴ In addition, the activities in the same field of the Committee on Foreign Policy and Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation, and the Committee on National Security, Defense and Intelligence should be mentioned too. Also, the mandate of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 22-30

¹¹ *International Parliamentary Conference on Peacebuilding: Tackling State Fragility*, Toolkit for Parliamentarians, p. 15

¹² Smilov, Daniel & Kolarova, Romyana, "Parliaments in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations: Lessons Learned from Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States," *Democratising Security in Transition States*, Findings, Recommendations and Resources from the UNDP/DCAF Roundtable for CIS Parliamentarians, Prague, 2005, pp. 38-57. See: <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/FA70484D-F203-1EE9-B20B2E482E43F39E.pdf>

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Statute of the Committee of the Supreme Rada on Human Rights, De-occupation and Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories in Donetsk, Luhansk Regions and Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, National Minorities and Interethnic Relations. See: <http://itd.rada.gov.ua/radatransl/Home/Committees/en>

Interim Special Commission of the Supreme Rada on the Formation and Implementation of the State Policy for the Restoration of the Territorial Integrity and the Ensuring of the Sovereignty of Ukraine should be noted.

In terms of conflict transformation, parliamentary oversight is a particularly successful component of the work of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. This work is mainly carried out through hearings and reviewing of government reports, interpellation, and inquiries by MPs. The important role of parliamentary diplomacy of the Verkhovna Rada also needs to be added here. Ukrainian lawmakers are actively involved in the work of international parliamentary organizations, standing delegations to the Rada, inter-parliamentary assemblies, bilateral inter-parliamentary commissions, and the groups of MPs involved in inter-parliamentary relations with foreign countries¹⁵.

In the case of conflict transformation work, the main challenge to the peace process in Ukraine is its low level of inclusiveness. The lack of public information and of forums promoting engagement has widened the gap between the country's executive branch and other actors, in the first place between state institutions such as the parliament and the civil society. Along with the low inclusion, another serious challenge is presented by the fact that a large proportion of Ukrainian parliamentarians do not have a clear strategic understanding of the peace process – i.e., essential knowledge about how to transform conflict, conduct fruitful peace talks, carry out national dialogue, or implement reconciliation policy.¹⁶

In order to address these challenges, it is essential to provide elements of multifaceted communication and public involvement in a comprehensive peace process. In this way, it will be possible for the legislature to gain the support of the population and of public institutions - the key stakeholders in ensuring effective implementation and sustainability of the peacebuilding process.¹⁷

PEACE POLICY OF GEORGIA

After the armed conflicts came to an end in Georgia, an important period in its history began. Working to build peace, trust, reconciliation and reunification has been hampered by a number of factors, including the lack of legitimacy of those in power and the struggle for it, the collapse of the socio-economic system, Russia's aggressive foreign policy, and the low interest toward the region on the part of the international community.

Experts working on the issue distinguish three main stages in the peace process involving the Georgian state. The first period is related to the government of President Shevardnadze and it lasted from the end of hostilities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia until 2003. During this period, due to the limited interest of the international community towards the South Caucasus region, the challenges facing the Georgian state were less prominent on the global agenda. As a result, the peace process that began in Georgia in 1993-1994 has been quite localized and passed on to less qualified analysis within the country, or got adapted to the interests of specific groups, instead of attempts to resolve the conflicts in a pluralistic environment with high degree of public involvement¹⁸.

¹⁵ For information placed on the official website of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, see <https://www.rada.gov.ua/en>

¹⁶ Cristescu, Roxana, *The challenge of inclusiveness in the peace processes in Ukraine*, Background Paper, Civil Society Dialogue Network, Vienna, 2017, pp. 3-7, See: <http://eplo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/PUBLIC-VERSION-CSDN-Background-Paper-The-challenge-of-inclusiveness-in-the-peace-process-in-Ukraine.pdf>

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 7-8

¹⁸ Abramashvili Ivane, Koiava Revaz. 25 Years of Georgia's Peace Policy. Caucasian House, Tbilisi, 2018, pp. 15-23

One important detail is noteworthy: Although the peace processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia began almost in parallel, during 1992-2003 some significant progress was made only in the case of South Ossetia. The scholars working on this topic explain the failure of the peace process in Abkhazia mainly by the existence of differences in collective memory, diverging ambitions of political elites, and periodic provocations of various scales.¹⁹

The beginning of the second period of peace processes in Georgia is connected with the change of government as a result of the “Rose Revolution” of 2003. From the very first days of coming to power, President Saakashvili has expressed keen interest in the issue of the country’s territorial integrity. Despite initial optimism backed by a number of serious encouraging factors, it is widely believed that the years 2004-2012 turned out to be quite convoluted in terms of peacebuilding. From today’s retrospective, experts divide the peace policy of Saakashvili’s government into three sub-stages: 2004-2006, when the Georgian state has achieved some progress as a result of bilateral work with the *de facto* authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; 2006-2008, which was marked by extremely tense relations between Russia and Georgia that culminated in a war between the two countries in 2008; and, 2008-2012, when the peace format shifted entirely toward the Georgian-Russian context after Abkhazia and South Ossetia were declared to have become occupied territories²⁰.

Rather superficial sense of simplicity of conflict resolution on part of the Georgian authorities combined with Russia’s aggressive foreign policy, culminating in the latter’s full-scale military intervention in the neighboring state. This had fundamentally changed the configuration of Georgia’s peace policy during the later years of Saakashvili’s rule. The Russia’s perceived image changed from that of a presumed mediator to being a party to the conflict, as it recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As a result, the Georgian government’s room for maneuver got significantly narrowed, as well as its ability to act on own agenda, while the work on the country’s peace policy has shifted to a reactive, crisis mode.²¹

The third stage in Georgian peace policy began in 2012 with the coming to power of the Georgian Dream political coalition. According to researchers, the Georgian Dream was well aware of the complexity of the issue already before it came to power, and this resulted in a less ambitious but more pragmatic approach than reflected in the previous government’s vision for peace.²²

According to common assessment, the peace policy of both the coalition government of the Georgian Dream and the party “Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia” ended its first 8 years in power without any tangible results. The main achievements of Bidzina Ivanishvili’s party were manifested in ‘negative’ peace, de-escalation of tensions and prevention of new conflicts, being for the most part caused by the new circumstances – as Georgia’s peace policy moved further away from Tbilisi and into a wider regional geopolitical context.²³

As a result, it has become quite obvious that the current format of the peace process makes it virtually impossible to resolve Georgia’s territorial problems. It is necessary to look at the issue from a new paradigm, and to develop a new approach in order to better define the main directions of the country’s peace policy. For this, the notion of conflict transformation and the intensification of parliament’s involvement is an ideal means.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 15

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 23-40

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 49

²² *Ibid.* pp. 40-44

²³ *Ibid.*

TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONFLICT IN THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN AND GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN CONTEXT AND THE ROLE OF THE GEORGIAN PARLIAMENT IN THIS PROCESS

Experts on the issue explain the transformation of the conflicts in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian contexts as follows:

In the presence of politically unresolved / unsettled conflict(s), conflict transformation is about changes at the individual, relational, and structural levels to both ensure the safety and well-being of people affected by the conflict and to improve interrelations between the parties to the conflict.²⁴

As can be seen from the definition, work on conflict transformation involves both - activities to be carried out within societies, and changes that can be achieved through interaction between the parties. However, as mentioned above, for the process to be successful, changes are needed at the individual, relational, and structural levels.

Achieving change at the individual level requires working within respective communities as well as critical interpretation of attitudes, discourse, and information received about each other. In order to introduce changes at the level of relations, it is necessary to evaluate all the formats of Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian interactions and to analyze the issues related to the behavior, interests and also other issues raised by the parties at face-to-face meetings. As for achieving changes at the structural level, all structures directly or indirectly related to conflict resolution and peacebuilding should be assessed. As a result, certain principles, values and strategies on which the functioning of these structures is based should be critically reviewed and reshaped.²⁵

According to expert assessments, there is no explicitly formulated (state) vision or strategy for the transformation of conflict and relations in Georgia. Therefore, in the process of restoring trust and building peace, to a large extent it is the Track 2 Diplomacy involving society leaders that is conducted. As a result, the actions of internal hierarchy consisting of the government - political leaderships, the civil society and the lower-level – community leaders - is less coordinated.²⁶ These challenges can be addressed by, in the first place, intensifying parliamentary activities in the area of conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

From the early 1990s, since the end of the military conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the planning and implementation of Georgia's official peace policy was fully led by the country's executive branch of the government. In 1993-2012, the main directions of state-led peace processes were determined by the presidents of the country or their advisers. The situation has not changed radically even after Georgia moved to the new system of governance as stipulated by the 2017 constitutional amendments, and became parliamentary republic by the end of 2018. Although these changes increased the role of the Georgian Parliament in the country's political life, reformed regulations of the legislature further expanded the parliamentary functions and introduced effective mechanisms for implementing legislative, oversight, and representational functions of parliament, such increase in powers did not translate into turning parliament to become the major state institution for peace policy formation.

In addition to the low involvement of parliament in conflict transformation, a number of institutional challenges should be noted that have been revealed through examining the role of state

²⁴ Chankvetadze, Natia. Conflict Transformation in Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian Contexts. p. 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 13

²⁶ *Ibid.*

actors involved in conflict management in Georgia. The problem of overlapping activities of the executive and legislative branches of government rises due to the lack of communication between them. The fact that the Georgian parliament is under-represented in the conflict transformation process has already been noted, while the government institutions – mainly, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Georgian State Security Service, and the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality – are having their separate agendas. Neither the Temporary Commission on Territorial Integrity and De-Occupation of the of Georgian Parliament has any significant political weight or mandate in this regard. The Commission’s activities are limited to its operational functions, and its powers are divided among various parliamentary committees, making it difficult for MPs to formulate a coherent peace policy.

A significant challenge is the lack of interest, knowledge and expertise in the Parliament of Georgia regarding the issue of conflict transformation. This fact negatively affects the possibility of fully-fledged participation of the Parliament in the formation of the official peace policy of the country. There is also an additional challenge stemming from the scarcity of available financial resources that are needed to intensify committees’ activities in the direction of conflict transformation. So, for example, there are frequent cases when parliamentary committees depend on donor financial support to be able to fully implement parliamentary oversight mechanisms. At the same time, it is also a problem that the opposition is less involved in determining the main direction of the country’s peace policy. It should be additionally noted that the legislature is still unable to resist the attempts by various actors to manipulate conflict-sensitive issues and use these issues for narrow political interests.

Against the background of the above-reviewed challenges, it is interesting to see to what extent the Parliament of Georgia manages to participate in the peace building process in the country within the paradigm of conflict transformation. The activities of the deputies in this area are coordinated by the Temporary Commission on Territorial Integrity and De-Occupation of the Parliament of Georgia. As stipulated by its statute, the Commission is also responsible for establishing parliamentary oversight over the implementation of relevant measures, facilitating the peace process and preparing draft decisions and conclusions on relevant issues, as well as developing recommendations. However, in reality the Commission’s activities mainly include holding joint meetings with several parliamentary committees – mainly the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Security; and the Committee on Diaspora and Caucasus Issues, - holding periodic hearings on issues within its competence, and organizing working meetings of the commission chair. There is no other important information related to the conflict transformation paradigm to be found in the Commission’s Statute and Activity Report.²⁷

In its stead, the turning of the current situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia into a solid foundation for the peaceful and full-fledged resolution of conflicts through its transformation is conveyed by the document prepared by the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality,²⁸ the main governmental institution that defines the country’s official peace policy. The Minister’s Vision, which sets out eight key objectives of peace policy, is based on the paradigm of conflict transformation. The document emphasizes the necessity of direct dialogue, trust building and reconciliation with the Abkhaz and Ossetian communities; The need for cooperation based on common interests, status quo neutral problem-solving and humanitarian formats; The need to care for people affected by the conflict; The importance of offering more services and opportunities within the state

²⁷ *Statute of the Temporary Commission on Territorial Integrity and De-Occupation of the Parliament of Georgia.* See: <http://parliament.ge/ge/saparlamento-saqmianoba/komisiebi-da-sabchoebi-9/teritoriuli-mtlianobis-agdge-nis-deokupaciis-droebiti-komisija/komisiis-debuleba>

²⁸ *The vision of State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.* See: <https://smr.gov.ge/ge/page/35/ministris-xe-dva>

space of Georgia to those living in the occupied territories, facilitating access to public services and, thus, sharing public benefits.

For its part, the Georgian parliament has many mechanisms for developing an effective peace policy based on the interpreting of the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia through the paradigm of transformation, which the deputies are unable to fully employ. After the reform of the Statute brought around the widening of the parliament's functionality, it acquired additional arsenal of mechanisms for conflict transformation and strengthening the peacebuilding process. Among these, first of all, are to be singled out the tools related to the control of the executive power through parliamentary oversight: inquiry by a member of parliament, interpellation, Prime Minister's speech and report, appearance of the relevant officials at plenary sessions, minister's hour, hearing of government members and other officials, parliamentary control over the Georgia's defense and security sector, review of thematic reports, establishment of investigative commissions and of other temporary commissions, exercise of parliamentary oversight through the work of committees, and more.²⁹

The functions of the committees, which make the key component of the parliamentary activities in that direction are to be considered separately. The two Committees - on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Security, and on the Diaspora and Caucasus Issues, - which are responsible for determining the main directions of the country's peace policy, have additional mechanisms of parliamentary oversight in this area: control over the execution of normative acts, inspecting the compliance of the by-laws with the legislation of Georgia, obligatory presence of officials at the sitting of respective committees, obligation to submit information to the committees, tasks of thematic rapporteurs.³⁰

In addition to the mechanisms of oversight over the executive branch, the role of parliamentary diplomacy in instigating conflict transformation and peacebuilding should be also highlighted. It should be noted that after the reform of the Parliament's Statute, the Committee on Foreign Affairs is actively trying to employ parliamentary diplomacy to achieve the main goals of its activities, which cannot be said about the Committee on Defense and Security or the Committee on Diaspora and Caucasus Affairs. According to the reports of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament, it actively works with the diplomatic corps accredited in Georgia, pays visits to partner countries, hosts delegations and meets with representatives of international organizations to discuss issues such as the occupied territories of Georgia and the ways for peaceful settlement of the conflicts, strengthening of parliamentary ties, intensification of cooperation with international organizations and In inter-parliamentary formats.³¹

In order to enhance the role of the legislature in the process of conflict transformation and peacebuilding, it is important to fully implement the representative function of the Parliament of Georgia. This includes ensuring greater representation, increasing publicity, ensuring the principle of transparency and access to information, implementing of the open parliament work plan, organizing multi-party deliberations on issues, and, most importantly, intensifying cooperation with voters, stakeholders, including civil society organizations and the media.

Also noted here should be the need to strengthen the legislative activity of the MPs and, first of all, more active presentation by the members of the Parliament of their own legislative initiatives in

²⁹ *Statute of the Georgian Parliament*, XIII, para 148-187. See: <http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/143219/%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94%E1%83%92%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94%E1%83%9C%E1%83%A2%E1%83%98-1-12-2020>

³⁰ *Guidebook of Parliamentary Oversight*, p, 53. See: <http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/118/118595.pdf>

³¹ *Activities Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Georgian Parliament*, p. 13. See: <http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/117/117087.pdf>

the direction of conflict transformation. From the latest annual report on the activities of the Parliament of Georgia, which reflects the activities carried out in 2019, we learn that the Foreign Affairs Committee considered 33 draft laws during the reporting period, one legislative initiative of a citizen of Georgia and only 6 legislative initiatives by MPs.³² The same document shows that during the reporting period, the Defense and Security Committee has been appointed as the leading committee on 20 bills, of which only 4 were initiated by the members of parliament, and 16 bills were initiated by the Government of Georgia.³³ As for the Committee on Diaspora and Caucasus Issues, the report only states that, in order to plan action, the committee held 21 meetings, while next to no information is available on the bills discussed by the committee.³⁴

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Working on conflict transformation is a long and complex process that requires consistent, coordinated, and resource-intensive effort. Significant work needs to be done in this direction in both Georgian, and Abkhazian and South Ossetian societies, to lay a solid foundation for a peaceful and comprehensive settlement of the conflict.

In order for the MPs to fully master their unique mandate for conflict prevention and reconciliation, and for the Georgian Parliament to become the main body determining the country's peace policy, which is a necessary precondition for the targeted transformation of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, the following recommendations are necessary to implement:

- Shift the focus from the concept of conflict resolution to the paradigm of conflict transformation in defining the main direction of the country's peace policy;
- Initiate a political dialogue between the ruling and the opposition parties in order to develop a vision, principles and strategy for the transformation of conflicts;
- Intensify work with various stakeholders, including the non-governmental sector and the media, the expert community, within the process of determining vision, principles and strategy of conflict transformation and establish a consolidated vision of conflict transformation in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts;
- Disseminate messages focused on conflict transformation and reconciliation using various channels at its disposal. In addition, strengthening the work of the LEPL "Parliamentary Research Center of Georgia" in the fields of conflict transformation, and of research on resources and opportunities for building peace in society;
- Clearly define the powers of the Temporary Commission on Territorial Integrity and De-occupation of the Parliament of Georgia, review the Commission's work priorities and implement specific activities for conflict transformation;
- Combine ongoing activities and work with the Abkhaz and Ossetian diasporas by the Georgian Parliament's Committee on Diaspora and Caucasus Affairs. Also, work on developing relations with the Georgian diasporas living in the North Caucasus and Turkey (who have opportunities to communicate with Abkhazians and Ossetians);
- Further increase the use of parliamentary diplomacy resources in developing conflict resolution vision, principles and strategy, strengthen bilateral parliamentary contacts, ensure close cooperation with international organizations working on conflict resolution and confidence-building, intensify work with international donors in order to attract additional financial and human resources;
- Strengthen the legislative activity of MPs, expressed first of all by presenting more legislative initiatives on their part;

³² *Annual Activity Report of the Georgian Parliament and the Action Plan for the Next Year. Tbilisi, 2020. p. 32. See: <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/243899>*

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 23-26.

³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

- Effectively use the parliamentary oversight mechanisms in working towards the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, with particular emphasis on monitoring the implementation of normative acts and thematic research;
- Effectively use the Minister's hour mechanism, which implies not limiting the dialogue to seeking the answers solely to pre-written questions. At the same time, clearly define the procedures for reviewing various reports submitted to the Parliament at the plenary or committee sittings, and in some cases, hold debates after the submission of a report;
- Turn interpellation into an effective control mechanism and establish good practices by accurately outlining in legislation of relevant procedures and response mechanisms;
- Define effective response mechanisms in the cases of nonattendance of government members at committee meetings that leads to hindering of the parliamentary oversight process;
- In order to increase the transparency of parliamentary control and civic engagement in this process, publish more frequently on the Parliament's website relevant information about the implementation of parliamentary oversight and its results.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INDUSTRIAL POLICY
FOR TRANSFORMING CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA**
TORNIKE CHIVADZE

*“I have been observing for a long time that when people work,
national problems are less likely to arise” – Giorgi Danelia*

The idea behind the above quote by Giorgi Danelia is not foreign to the social sciences. Emil Durkheim’s concept of “organic solidarity” considers the deepening of the division of labor as the main factor of social integration in modern times. However, Durkheim’s theory does not allow for the existence of long-term contradictions between the social strata, which in some circumstances may translate into an implicitly social but explicitly ethno-political conflict.

Today there is a widespread speculation that Abkhazians and Ossetians will want to reintegrate with the rest of Georgia – after Georgia leaves these regions far behind economically. The policy of economic isolation actually leads to the development of these regions to be hindered and increasingly dependent on Russia. Such dependence may have a variety of negative political consequences, although economic consequences are no less problematic. Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region are already dependent on Russia for budget revenues and social benefits, investment, trade, capital formation, tourist inflows, and institutional diffusion.¹ In such a situation we have the most extreme form of “dependent development”, which implies the formation of the so-called lumpen bourgeoisie, comprador bourgeoisie and “institutions of underdevelopment”.² This means that the elite, which develops and gains power locally, is in the interest of maintaining the *status quo*, while institutions are formed that pursue the interests of the metropolis. These interests can only occasionally coincide with the interests of local economic development. This does not mean that internal changes will not affect the economy. This rather means that the economy does not have dynamic elements inside it, and that it depends on external factors. It fails to independently produce innovations, means of production, and industrial breakthroughs.

It should be noted that the theory of dependence cannot explain the economy of Abkhazia due to its scarcity and, moreover, the lack of desirable resources and labor force in international markets. Its analysis is still possible based on studying the dependent integration of the region, including Georgia as a whole, into the world economy.

We observe the development in which capitalist enclaves are formed while other territories are untouched. In our case, these enclaves, due to scarcity of resources are not areas where natural resources are exploited, but cities where financial capital flows and developing real estate are the leading sectors of economy. The internal regional economic hierarchy cannot be fully insulated from the global economic geography that has pushed us to the periphery during the post-Soviet period. In a world system in which it is not just Georgia but also Russia that is integrated as a “peripheral empire”³ – a supplier of semi-raw materials and capital channeling.⁴

In such a situation, what can be the Georgia’s national level policy and Tbilisi’s policy towards

¹ Gerrits, A. W. M., & Bader, M. Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Implications for conflict resolution. *East European Politics*, 2016. 32(3), 297–313

² Frank, A. G. *Lumpenbourgeoisie: Lumpendevelopment: dependence, class, and politics in Latin America*. Monthly Review Press. 1972.

³ Kagarlitsky, B. *Empire of the Periphery: Russia and the World System*. Pluto Press. 2015

⁴ Chivadze Tornike, *Transformation of Post-Socialist Russia*. 2016. See: <http://regional-dialogue.com/post-socialist-russia/>

these conflict-affected regions? Should Tbilisi start to merge together the peacebuilding and development policies? Should a pro-active industrial and regional cluster development policy be designed? Or, is existing policy sufficient?

At the social level, the formation of a pro-active industrial policy, and, in general, of a 'developmentalist' state in Georgia is opposed by the dominance here of financial and trade capital, tied accordingly to international capital. All this is revealed by total liberalization at the political level of trade and markets. The passive policy of the state towards the conflict regions is facilitated by the prevailing opinion that the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia is entirely artificial and formed only by an external force, therefore has no real basis. Such a position *a priori* precludes relations with Abkhazia, as it is not seen as a self-sufficient entity with which the dialogue process should take place.

Today Abkhazia is in a subordinate relationship with Russia, but the question is whether Tbilisi's policy indirectly contributes to consolidating it. It is necessary to perceive the Abkhaz people as a party to the multi-layer conflict in order to be able to formulate a pro-active policy of reconciliation. In addition, it is important to scientifically analyze the causes of the conflict of 1990s. Why did the Abkhazian elite of that time not want to lose the privileges gained during the Soviet period within independent Georgia? How did this elite manage to politicize ethnicity and mobilize the people, and what type of class stratification of the society was created? In whose interest is it to maintaining it today? The answers to these questions will be the subject of future debates that will be important for overcoming the ethno-nationalist and primordial models of thought in both the Georgian and the Abkhazian societies. These models of thinking not only cause disintegration, but also enhance the possibility of popular mobilization by elites and create ideological basis for bloody confrontation.

According to the World Bank's 2018 report "Toward a New Social Contract", Georgia, along with Tajikistan, is at the forefront of inequality between within country regions and between urban and rural areas among the countries of Central Asia and Europe.⁵ The situation in the Tskhinvali region and in Abkhazia, against the background of economic disintegration from the rest of Georgia, is much worse in terms of prospects than in other regions of Georgia, aggravated by a lack of a sense of "commonality" by ethnicity. A necessary precondition for civic nationalism is a sense of collective solidarity, the formation of which is conditioned by existence of a certain "commonality". If we see that the problem is such that such solidarity arises only within ethnically united groups, we must strive toward the condition when people of different ethnic backgrounds also possess "commonality."

Existing neoliberal economic policies make the practice of "commonality" more remote, on the one hand by strengthening the non-egalitarian redistribution of wealth distributed by the market, and on the other hand by completely ignoring the need for national and regional industrial and development policies. Under these conditions, there are parallel and unequal social, economic and cultural realities in the single country, and this contributes to social disintegration.

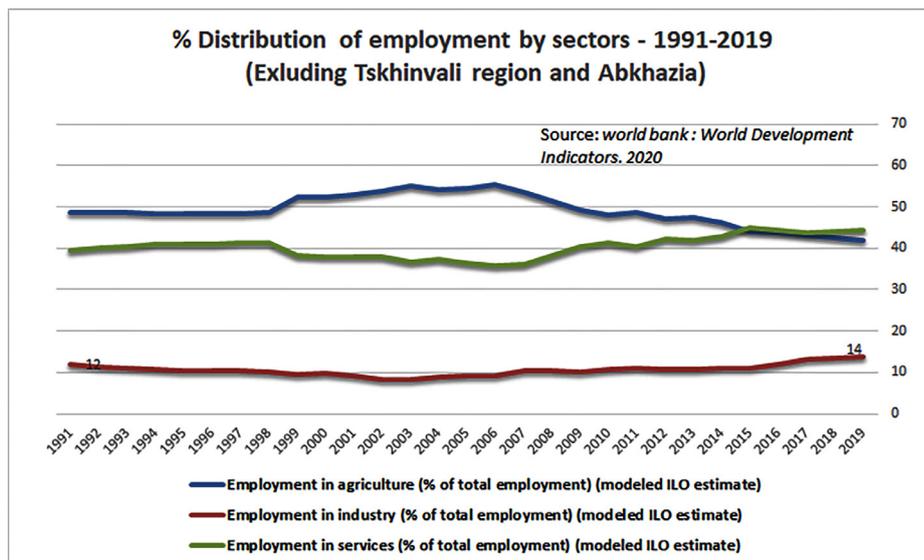
Due to limited scientific work, large shadow economy, disorderly social statistics, lack of field research and other reasons, a thorough analysis of Abkhazia's economic development is currently not possible. Due to the scarcity and physical unavailability of local surveys, a thorough institutional analysis is also impossible. The economy of Abkhazia should be considered at the analytical level as a separate economy, insofar as it has no significant economic relations, influences and feedback with other regions of Georgia. An attempt is made in the paper to highlight the need for a pro-active economic policy aimed at equitable development and peacebuilding.

⁵ Bussolo, M., Davalos, M. E., Peragine, V., & Sundaram, R. Toward a New Social Contract: Taking on Distributional Tensions in Europe and Central Asia. Washington, DC: World Bank. 2018. 83. 68

At the same time, the view that there is the need to ensure common development implies that the process of Abkhazia’s economic backwardness hinders integration, while on the other hand also implies that the Abkhazian society does not have the opportunity for autonomous development without positive steps taken by Tbilisi, and is therefore doomed to permanent backwardness and dependence.

ABKHAZIA AND ECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS OF GEORGIA

The main challenge of the Georgian economy is not just growth but rather economic development, which implies in addition structural transformation of the economy. Economic development differs from growth in that it involves a qualitative change in the economy when, along with revenue growth, a gradual but steep increase takes place in the share of activities characterized by growing returns, demand for skilled labor, high wages, economies of scale, and positive externalities. Structural transformation involves the massive outflow of labor from the low-productivity sector to the medium- and high-productivity sectors. In the case of countries enriched in the course of real historical dynamics, we see that as a rule the labor force flows from the non-industrialized agricultural sector to the manufacturing sector (more specifically to the processing industry) and after reaching the peak⁶ its share decreases in favor of the high-tech service sector.



1. Diagram

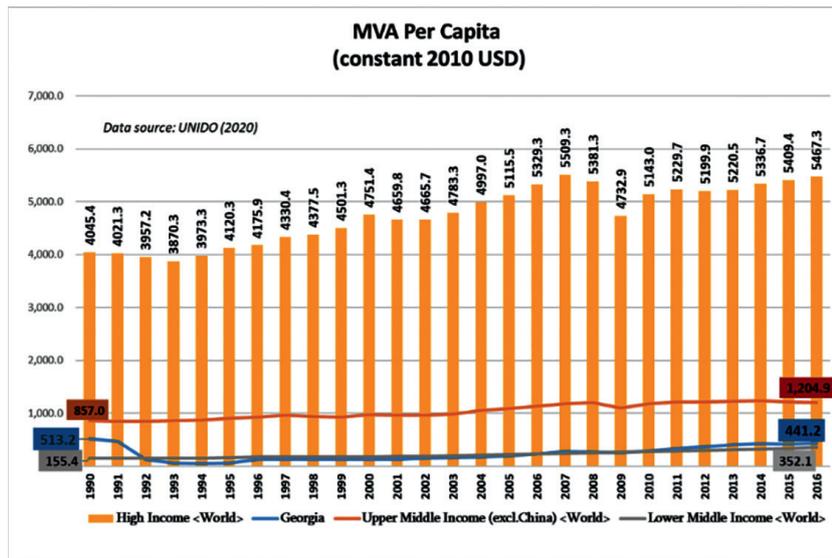
If we look at the Georgian economy from this point of view, we will see that we are facing economic growth, but not development. Along with the growth of GDP in Georgia, the labor force is migrating from agriculture to the service sector, which is nourished by the tourism boom and is a low-tech service sector.⁷

According to economist José Gabriel Palma, one of the major drivers of de-industrialization could be the development of the service export sector and tourism, as has happened in sub-Saharan Africa

⁶ Rodrik Dani, “Industrial Development: Some Stylized Facts and Policy Directions.” Industrial Development for the 21st Century. U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Division for Sustainable Development, 2007.

⁷ The Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, Analysis of Labour Market of Georgia, 2018. See. <https://bit.ly/2Pn5tUP>

and the former Soviet Union⁸. Palma distinguishes between different types of de-industrialization. One of the most negative forms of it is “premature de-industrialization”, which is typical for post-Soviet countries. In contrast to Western countries, de-industrialization here is accompanied by a decline in per capita income, which in turn is associated with job losses in the manufacturing industry.⁹ This “premature de-industrialization” poses a threat to both Georgia and the Abkhaz region. The outflow of labor into the service sector may be due to the particularly rapid growth of tourism in the last 15 years. The main reason for Georgia’s de-industrialization is definitely not the development of tourism, as seen from either logical or chronological perspective, but as the pace of development of the processing industry is slow and of the growth of tourism is high, the latter may appear an additional factor adding to the de-industrialization process.



As one can see in the Diagram 2, the annual per capita value added by the processing industry in Georgia in 2016 is lower than the that of the worst – the last - year of the Soviet period. Although according to the World Bank, Georgia belongs to the above-average income group of countries, in terms of per capita value added in the processing industry, it is closer to the average of the lower-middle income countries, which bespeaks the structural backwardness of the economy. The problem is that this situation is continuously maintained over time, in terms of both labor force and added value distribution.

The main driver of the development of science is the demand for it coming from the economic sectors, while among the economic sectors the main consumer of science is the production sector. Social progress is determined by the degree of employment of science in the production process, while the development of science is impossible in turn without a strong production base. This is so even in developed countries, which are currently experiencing a decline in the manufacturing sector. Much of the innovation originates from this sector. For example, 64% of engineering scientists in the U.S. are employed by industrial manufacturing firms, with 70% of surveyed enterprises in the industrial sector belonging to the manufacturing sector.¹⁰ Today, research and development in Georgia accounts for 0.2% of GDP, which is equal to the figures of low-income countries. The same indicator for middle-income countries is on average equal to 1.1%, while for higher-middle-income countries, to which Georgia belongs, it is 1.5%, while for high-income countries – 2.5%.¹¹

⁸ Palma, J.G. 'De-industrialisation, "Premature" De-industrialisation and the Dutch Disease'. Revista NECAT-Revista do Núcleo de Estudos de Economia Catarinense, 3(5): 7–23, 2014

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bonvillian, W. B. Advanced Manufacturing Policies and Paradigms for Innovation. Science, 342(6163), 1173–1175. 2013

¹¹ The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Science, technology and innovation. 2020

For the Georgian economy, foreign direct investment is a source for covering the trade deficit, but its impact on employment growth, technology and know-how has not been studied to date. Based on indirect data, we can draw interesting conclusions if we conditionally divide the criteria of the Global Competitiveness Index¹² into two groups: 1 - those more related to production capacity, and 2- those that measure liberalism of legislation and institutional arrangement, which according to the theory should strengthen the production capacity of the economy. It is obvious that out of 137 countries included in the index, Georgia occupies a deplorable position in the first group, and advanced positions in the second group.

Industrial capacity	Rank (out of 137 countries)	Investment environment	Rank (out of 137 countries)
FDI & Technology transfers	94	Property rights	46
Accessibility of newest technologies	111	Irregular taxes and bribes	30
Accessibility of financial services	81	profit taxes %	8
Technologies at company level	108	Trade tariffs %	4
Number of local providers	129	Burden of trade-related procedures	14
Quality of local providers	115	Influence of business legislation on FDI	29
Complexity of the industrial process	88	Simplicity of employment and dismissal	28
Company expenditures on research and development	122	Strength of investment protection	7
Innovation strength	99	Burden of state regulations	9
Number of research institutions	127	Influence of taxation on investment behavior	14
Availability of scientists and engineers	125	Non-tariff barriers	25

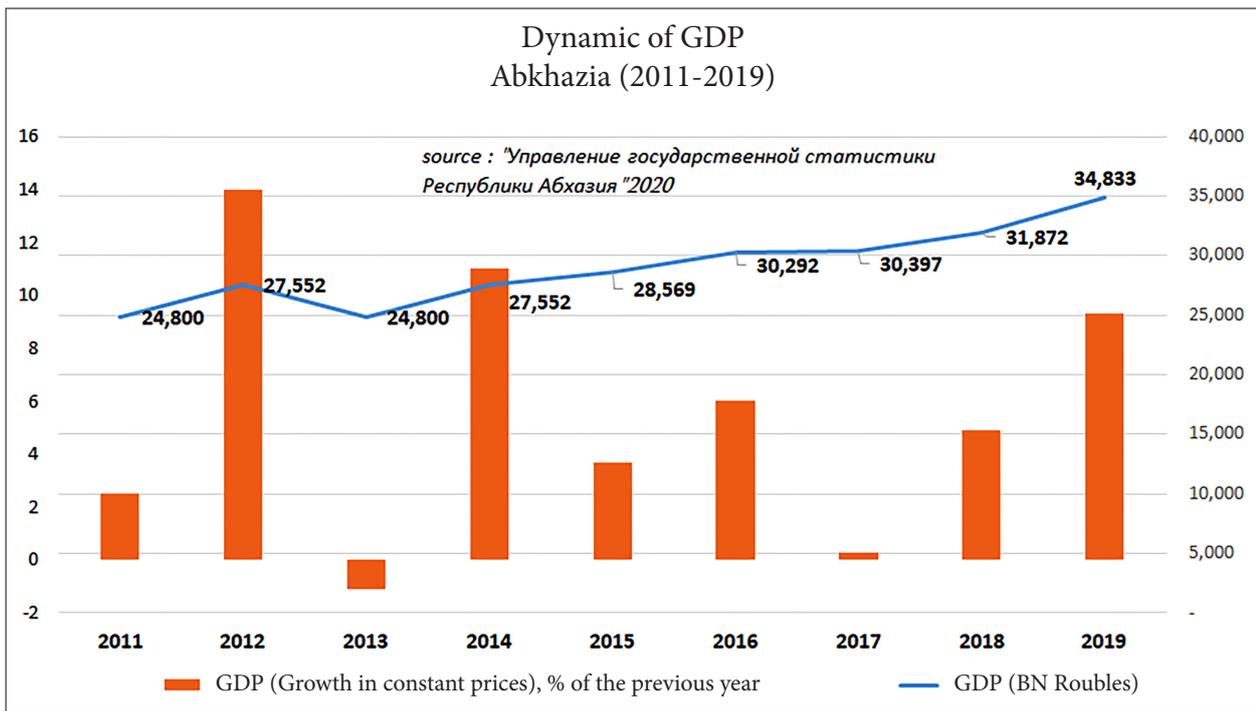
Although foreign direct investment in Georgia over the past two decades is higher than the world average and other regional and similar income countries, its technological backwardness and significantly limited production capacity are evident.

¹² http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GCR2017-2018/03CountryProfiles/Standalone2-pagerprofiles/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Profile_Georgia.pdf

ECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS OF THE ABKHAZ REGION

During the Soviet period, Abkhazia developed into an agrarian-industrial republic in accordance with the Soviet system of territorial division of labor. The peak of socio-economic development/growth plummeted in the 90s of the twentieth century. Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war, Abkhazia, like many post-Soviet entities, became a pre-industrial, backward region.

Like other regions of Georgia, Abkhazia is characterized by rather uneven development, translated into inequality in living standards in rural and urban areas. For example, according to Abkhaz researchers, the eastern part of Abkhazia, which occupy 72% of its territory and where 41.5% of the population live, accounts for only 16% of industrial and other product turnover, functioning enterprises, and fixed capital investments.¹³ As we have described in the introduction, the Abkhazian economy depends in many ways on the Russian economy and donations.



Unpredictable GDP growth rates indicate the instability of the economy, and the fact that its growth depends on sporadic actions.

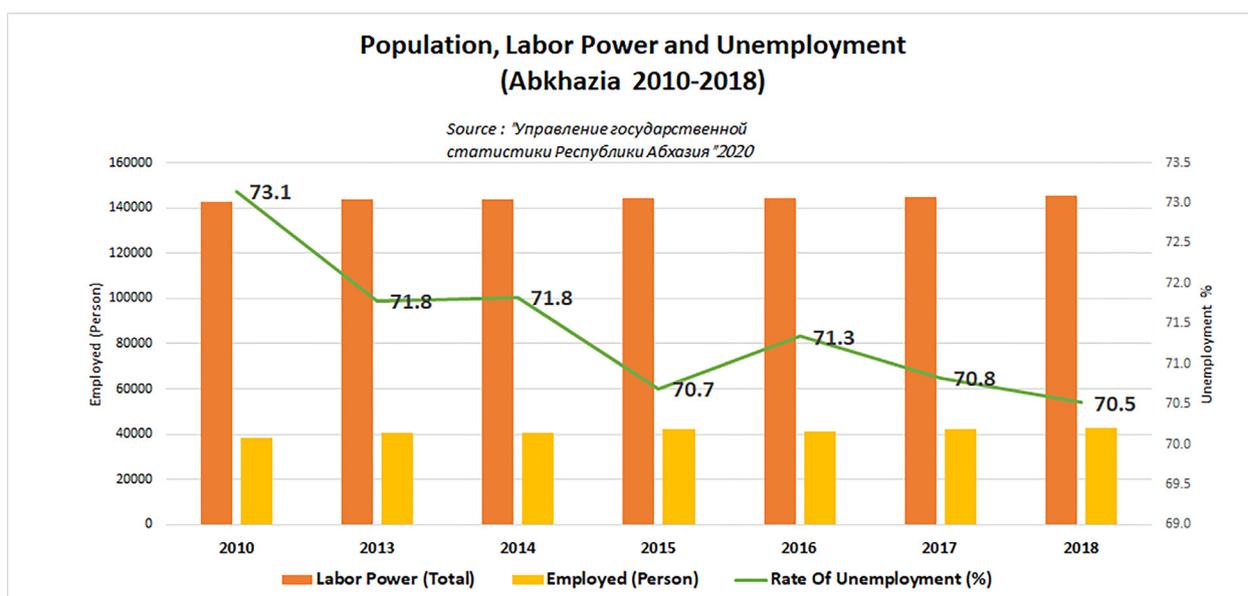
Statistical analysis of poverty, inequality, social protection and other social characteristics is not published in Abkhazia, although according to a survey conducted by the so called “Presidential Center for Strategic Studies”, 33.6% of respondents state that they do not have sufficient money to buy all the food they need.¹⁴

The population of Abkhazia for 2016 is about 243 000 people.¹⁵ Even with such a modest population size, the economy is unable to employ such a small labor force. Unemployment has not gone below 30% of the working age population in recent decades, and is hovering around 70%.

¹³ НИР. О состоянии национальной экономики Абхазии за 2014-2018 гг. 2019.

¹⁴ Шатица Х. К. & Мирцхулава И. В. Особенности и проблемы планирования в экономике Абхазии. «Теоретическая экономика» №1, 2019

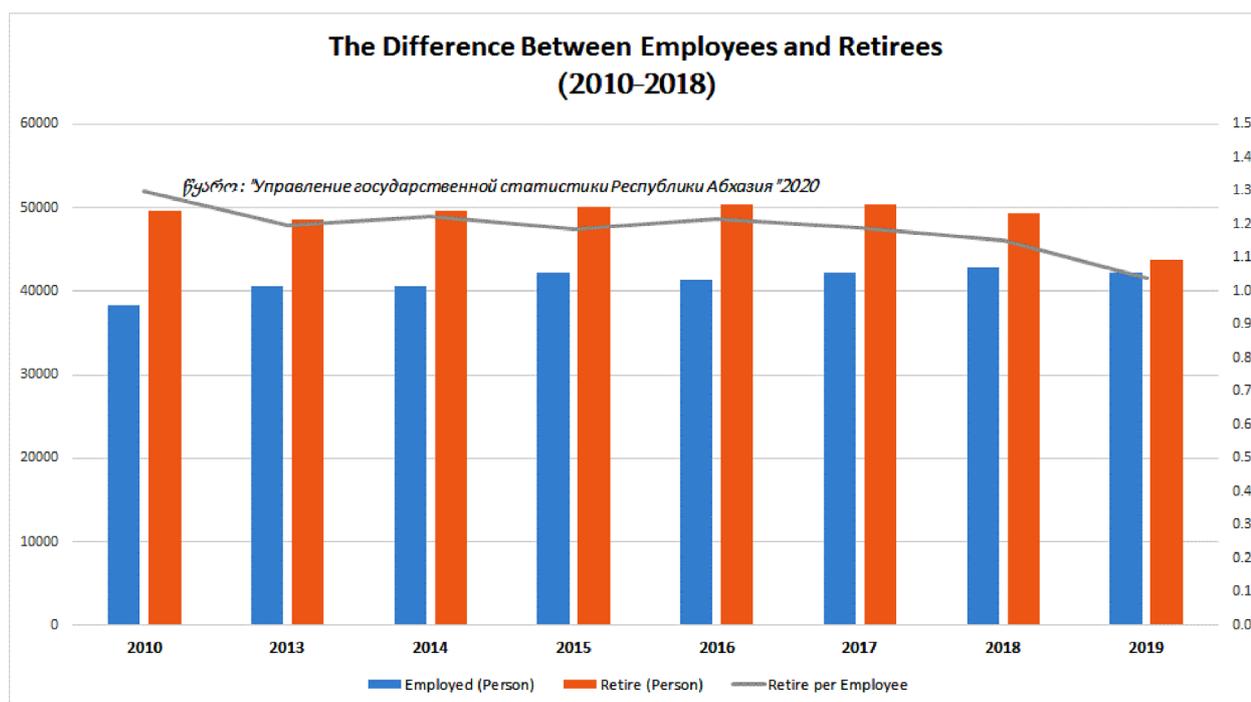
¹⁵ This data excludes internally displaced persons.



Of course, this data cannot offer a complete picture of the situation, as 50-53% of Abkhazia's economy in terms of GDP falls on the shadow economy.¹⁶ One of the biggest challenges in the labor market is that the current number of registered employees is already lower than the number of pensioners. Unofficial employment will certainly reduce the unemployment rate, but not radically. Moreover, informally employed people do not pay taxes to the *de facto* budget, which will further worsen the situation with the dependency index in the future, i.e., the ratio of the pensioners' number to be "supported" per one taxable employee. For example, by 2016, the number of pensioners in the region exceeded that of officially employed persons by 9,000. By 2018, the Russian Federation has paid pensions to 32 thousand people in Abkhazia, which sums up to about 4 billion rubles a year. In 2021, it is estimated that the internal income of the local pension fund will reach as much as just 1.2 billion, which is not even half of the total retirement benefits to be paid to the ever-growing number of pensioners.¹⁷

¹⁶ Гогорян Анаид. У нас теневой бизнес – порядка 70%. Эхо Кавказа. 14.02.2020. нб. <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30434964.html>

¹⁷ Sputnik Абхазия, Итоги года и планы: как фонды Абхазии распорядятся новыми бюджетами, 16.12.2020. See. <https://bit.ly/3cNuwZi>



The share of salaries in the monetary income structure of the population makes just one-fifth; The estimated volume of the shadow economy is 16-17 billion rubles.¹⁸ The average per capita budget revenue in Abkhazia is only 1600 rubles. During the last 3 years, the total monetary expenditures of the population exceeded the monetary income by 30 billion rubles.¹⁹ As for the structure of the economy, it also looks rather unfavorable, as there is no significant dynamics in the industrial sector that is corroborated by the de facto export data presented below.

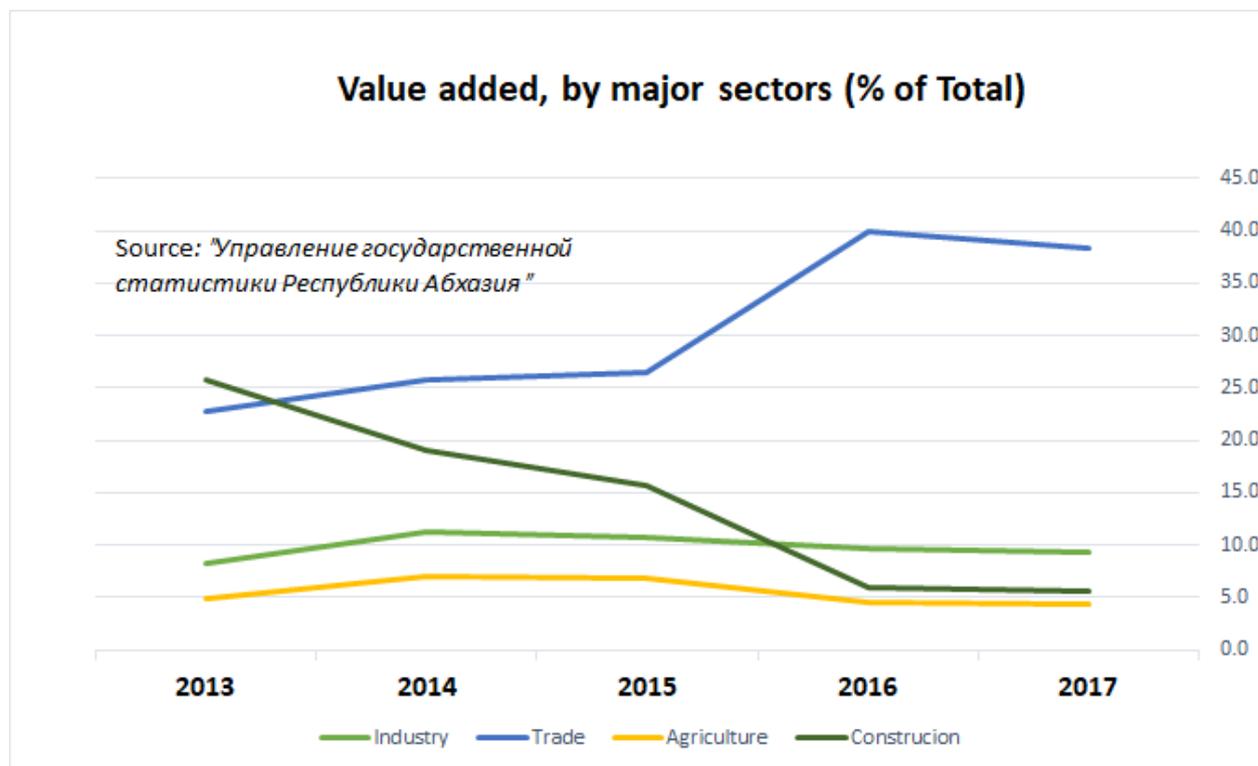
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Industry (number of individuals)	1826	2370	1827	1956	2006
Industry (% of total employees)	4.5	5.6	4.4	4.6	4.7
Construction (number of individuals)	2620	1800	1658	1898	1716
Construction (% of total employees)	6.5	4.3	4.0	4.5	4.0
Agriculture	397	443	322	259	347
Agriculture (% of total employees)	1.0	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.8
Trade (individuals)	2745	2513	2518	2477	2494
Trade (% of total employees)	6.8	5.9	6.1	5.9	5.8

Source. Абхазия в цифрах 2018: Управление государственной статистики Республики Абхазия. Сухум: ИП «Лавгилава А.», 2019.

¹⁸ НИР. О состоянии национальной экономики Абхазии за 2014-2018 гг. 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

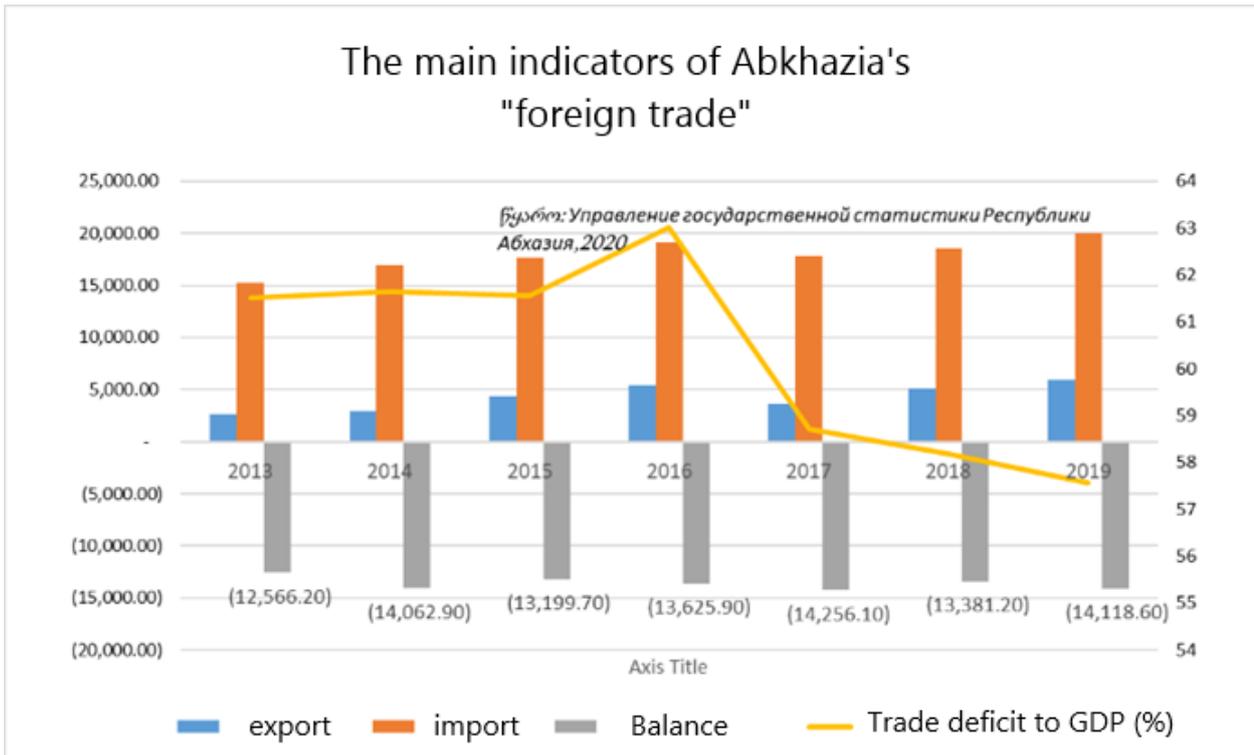
As of 2018 there were 2 006 people officially registered as employed in the industrial sector throughout the region. Unfortunately, due to lack of information, it is impossible to see the share of the processing industry as a share of the total industrial sector. The only thing we know is that the number of processing enterprises has decreased from 213 to 139 between 2015 and 2019 (it is difficult to say how many of them actually work).²⁰



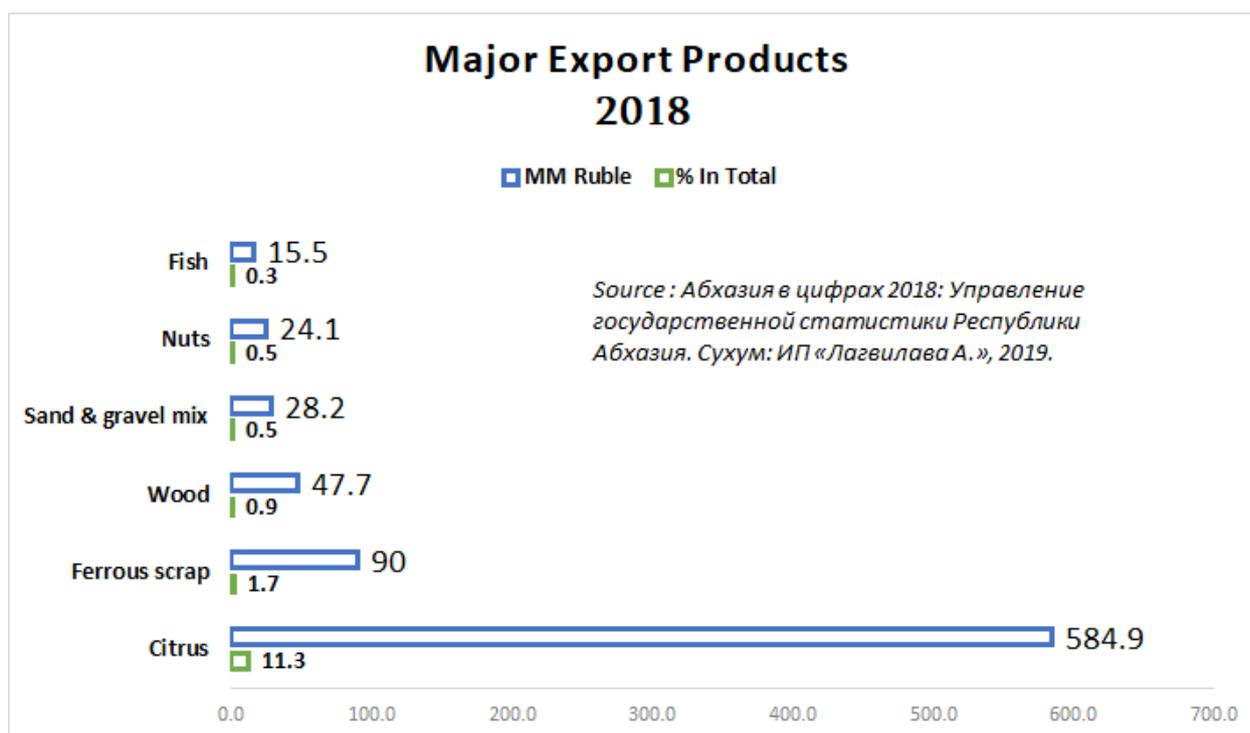
Across sectors almost 40% of value added comes from trade, while the share of the real sector is 14-15%. The monetary volume of industrial production in 2018 amounted to 4 680.3 million rubles.²¹ Most of the industrial enterprises in Abkhazia are concentrated in the city of Sokhumi. The field of industrial production is represented by such industries as the production of wood materials and furniture; the production of fish flour and fish oil; the processing of ferrous and non-ferrous metal scrap, the production of paving slabs, blocks, concrete. In the field of mining, it is extraction of inert materials, limestone and coal. Due to limited size of domestic markets, it is impossible to develop the economy of not only Abkhazia, but also of Georgia as a whole, without growth focusing on export of goods.

²⁰ Абхазия в цифрах 2018: Управление государственной статистики Республики Абхазия ИП «Лагвилава А.», 2019.

²¹ Справка о социально-экономическом состоянии Республики Абхазия. 2020.



In terms of trade balance, the Abkhaz region is close to the indicators of countries such as Liberia, Nauru, Lesotho and Tonga. As for the structure of exports, it is completely dominated by low-tech and primary processed products, which kills long-term development.



The weakness of the real sector of the Abkhazian economy is well reflected by the composition of its de facto export basket, which consists mainly of primary processed, scrap and mining sector goods. With the opening of the Russian market, there is an opportunity to increase the specialization in the production of citrus, although it should be noted that economic specialization is also dangerous for long-term development.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A NEW UNIVERSAL PARADIGM OF DEVELOPMENT

It should be noted that the presentation of the document “A Step to a Better Future” adopted by the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality in 2018 was an unequivocally welcome act. This document was the first sign of the Georgian state moving toward creating a positive agenda for the Abkhaz people. However, it should be also noted that it is somewhat incongruous with the general direction of the state policy in this area. The Georgian side does not consider the issue of legitimation of the Abkhazian elites, which at the local level is seen as a matter of unconditional recognition by Georgia of Abkhazia’s independence. According to the Abkhaz perspective, any change should start with discussing the issue of political status – if the real goal is to create a common, shared wellbeing.

In order to achieve the real development of the Abkhazian region and its integration with the Georgian economy, first of all, the “Law on the Occupied Territories” should be revised, as it directly implies putting the economic restrictions of Abkhazia. At the same time, we should start talking about the establishment of a moratorium on the question of political status, which will make it possible to pursue a real economic policy and to form the concept of common development.

“A Step to a Better Future” is an attempt to bring existing economic ties into a legal framework, which is certainly welcome, but that does not mean reaching a breakthrough. For achieving real

progress and restoration of connections, it is necessary to develop an industrial development and production-oriented policy that will vary from region to region. It is necessary to develop within this latter framework a specially tailored industrial policy for Abkhazia – through dialogue with the Abkhazia's *de facto* authorities and the society.

Clearly, today, a state that does not have a developmentalist vision of economic development at all, and bases its policies on the principles of neoliberalism, i.e., of free market, will not be able to pursue significant economic policies in conflict regions, as there do not exist any development-supporting institutions and tools even at the most elementary level. Therefore, in order to launch the process of confidence-building and development from the of frozen point, it is necessary to start a dialogue with the Abkhaz side on economic issues. At the same time, it is important to approve, institutionalize and implement central and regional industrial policies.

Finally, if we evaluate the last 30 years, we can conclude that the formation of a progressive political class in Georgia, which will break free from the 30 years of neoliberal hegemony, is the only precondition for starting these processes. Such a process will turn the conflict regions into productive ones, and the elites will bet not only on small trade across the *de facto* borders, but also stake on the development of common financial, industrial and trade networks, which in turn would play a pivotal role in conflict transformation.

ASPECTS OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN GEORGIA ELIKO BENDELIANI

As a result of unresolved conflicts, Georgia faces many challenges, and the cost of these conflicts is quite high. However, it affects in different ways different groups of citizens of the country, and in particular affects strongly those who have been forcibly displaced, had to change their place of residence and environment, and continue their lives in the new reality.

Over the years, the IDP community has had to overcome many difficulties and obstacles, and had to struggle for self-preservation. Today, IDPs are better integrated and more self-sufficient, however, they still encounter specific needs that require different approaches. Studies show that IDPs are still perceived by many in the society as a group of people constantly expecting to receive aid, rather than true socio-political actors¹.

It is noteworthy that intellectual and civic resources of the IDPs as a community group remain largely unused, which is clearly demonstrated by the fact that they are practically unrepresented in political life; moreover, they do not participate in policy-making even in the area of peaceful settlement of conflicts, and this certainly strengthens among them the feelings of exclusion and marginalization.

The present text aims to analyze the life conditions of IDPs, identify the main challenges facing them, discuss their socio-political activity and their participation in the peacebuilding process.

CURRENT REALITY

Forced displacement is becoming an increasingly worrying global challenge. According to 2018 data, the number of IDPs displaced by armed conflicts, violence, human rights violations and natural disasters has exceeded a record 41.3 million.² Unlike refugees, there is no international humanitarian institution for IDPs. Therefore, the protection and care of IDPs is mainly the responsibility of the governments of their countries of residence.

According to the data of 2020, a total of 90,614 IDP families are registered in Georgia, and 286 811 IDPs in total³. Most of them (90%) were forcibly displaced from Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region as a result of the armed conflicts of the 1990s, while some (10%) were displaced as a consequence of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. IDPs today make up more than 7% of the population of Georgia, which is an unprecedentedly high per capita rate at global scale⁴.

The Georgian state asserts that internal displacement will be considered ended only when the voluntary return of IDPs takes place, or if they are given an opportunity to do so. Until then, all people who have been forced to leave their homes as well as their descendants have the right to receive refugee status and to participate in state-run IDP programs.

Statistical data reveals that the number of IDPs in Georgia is growing from year to year. This

¹ Women During and After the War. From Survival to Self-establishment: IDP Women in Georgia. Heinrich Boell Foundation, South Caucasus Regional Office, 2020.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2019, V.

³ LEPL Internally Displaced Persons, Ecomigrants and Livelihood Agency. See <https://idp.gov.ge/idps>

⁴ Transitioning from Status to Needs Based Assistance for Georgia IDPs: A Poverty and Social Impact Analysis. The World Bank, 2016

happens due to the fact that according to the Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories of Georgia, IDP status is granted to children of IDP parents, including those who have only one IDP parent. For comparison, if we look at the data from the last 5 years, at the end of 2015 there were about 268 000 registered IDPs in the country⁵, while according to 2020 data, the number of registered IDPs is now 286 811⁶, i.e., in five years the number of IDPs has increased by about 18 811 persons.

When discussing the issue, one should keep in mind that on the one hand, it is important that the descendants of IDPs are the legal heirs of their parents and have the right to return to their homes; On the other hand, an increase in the number of IDPs implies also an increase in the number of beneficiaries of IDP benefits, long-term accommodation, and other program expenditures. Whether the new generation of IDPs and their families should receive a monthly IDP allowance and housing from the state, and what specific mechanisms should the state develop to regulate this process, is often the subject of debate. However, there are no answers to these questions as yet.

Until now, the issue of registration of the real estate, located in the conflict regions, in the public registry remains a problem, due to which the IDPs are unable to confirm the ownership of the real estate and transfer it by inheritance.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF IDPS

The IDP population in Georgia still faces many social and economic problems and challenges, while the authorities do not have a comprehensive policy tailored to the needs of IDPs. Most of the IDPs are socially vulnerable and live in extreme poverty. As various studies have demonstrated, despite many efforts to change that, IDPs are still the most vulnerable category of the Georgian population⁷. The average monthly income of IDP families is twice as low as that of the host population, with the unemployment rate among IDPs about three times higher than among non-IDPs⁸. In addition, a large proportion of IDPs do not have access to any land and financial resources, resulting in fewer opportunities for self-employment or entrepreneurial activities. In its turn, the lack of property ownership restricts access to banking and other financial resources as well.

The society perceives the IDPs as a group permanently expecting to be provided by humanitarian aid⁹, which further contributes to their marginalization. This is aggravated by the fact that to date, various agencies distribute basic food items to IDPs in the run-up to the elections or before holidays, which is often found by IDPs to be somewhat offensive. An example of this happened in April 2020, just before Easter, in the town of Zugdidi where an IDP woman demonstratively threw food products to the ground in front of media cameras¹⁰. Although this fact has caused mixed reactions within the

⁵ The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia, 2015. See: <http://mra.gov.ge/geo/static/>

⁶ LEPL Internally Displaced Persons, Ecomigrants and Livelihood Agency. See: <https://idp.gov.ge/idps>

⁷ Intentions Survey of IDPs in Georgia" (UNHCR, 2015); Study of IDPs' attitudes towards long-term solutions. UNDP Survey (2013)

⁸ Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Internally Displaced Persons of Georgia, Preparatory Document for the Reform of the Refugee Allowance. 2017.

⁹ From Exclusion to Involvement: Ensuring IDP Participation - Georgia Lessons. EU Delegation to Georgia and Conciliation Resources. 2009. Nino Kalandarishvili. How do IDPs see ways to solve their problems? Recommendations for political entities. Heinrich Boell Foundation. 2012.

¹⁰ Some IDPs in Zugdidi expressed dissatisfaction with distribution of gift before the Easter. See: <https://www.radio-atinati.ge/koronavirusi/article/>; Who is this woman who threw Easter cake and eggs into the sewers. See: <https://www.infopostioni.com/2020/04/18/>

community, still the main thing has remained unnoticed - IDPs do not want to be constantly on the lookout for humanitarian aid; they need tailored assistance that will create new opportunities and help them finally escape extreme hardship.

IDP ASSISTANCE TAILORED FOR NEEDS

One of the issues that has become the subject of active discussion in recent years is the transition from status-based to needs-based assistance. According to the Law on Internally Displaced Persons, all internally displaced persons – i.e., all persons with the official IDP status - are entitled to a social allowance, the so-called IDP Allowance. According to the amendments to the law in 2014, all IDPs whose monthly income does not exceed 1 250 GEL receive these benefits.¹¹ In the first years the allowance was equal to 7 GEL and it was the same size as the old-age pension at that time; in the following years the amount of the allowance has increased several times, and since 2013 the IDP allowance is 45 GEL. The IDP allowance remains the only source of livelihood for some IDPs. In addition, the existence of a monthly allowance for IDPs brings a sense of stability, which, both materially and psychologically, carries certain significance. However, the value of the allowance does not meet the needs of some IDPs, which is why it is considered important to switch to need-tailored assistance.

The state spends about 121 000 000 GEL per year on IDP allowances¹². Added to this is the amount that socially vulnerable IDPs receive every month. In total, the amount spent on the allowance is much higher than the amount allocated for IDPs to solve their housing and other problems.

In 2017, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and IDPs of Georgia published a “Preparatory Document for the Reform of the IDP Allowance”¹³. The document outlined five possible options for IDP allowance reform. All five alternatives proposed by the Ministry implied the termination of allowances for certain categories of IDPs, which, in the current social conditions, would be unfortunate for many of them. There emerged a risk that the reform would aggravate the social situation of the IDPs living in already quite dire social conditions. This was especially so against the background that studies have shown that the only family income for some of the IDPs is this 45 GEL allowance, which is mainly to be used for the purchase of medicines and paying utility bills.

Thanks to NGOs and civil society activists, the implementation of the reform has been delayed for a while, although it is still on the agenda. According to the 2019-2020 Action Plan¹⁴, a needs-tailored assistance model for IDPs should have been developed by the end of 2020. However, it is still unknown at this stage what strategy the state will choose, therefore IDPs have fears that the reform will further aggravate their already difficult social condition.

¹¹ The Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories of Georgia

¹² Tengiz Sultanishvili. Study of *IDP Population Attitudes Towards Possible Alternatives to the IDP Assistance Reform*. Charity Humanitarian Centre Abkhazeti, 2017

¹³ Draft version of the preparatory document for the reform of the allowances and IDP protests.

See: <https://netgazeti.ge/life/170867/>

¹⁴ Action Plan of the State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons for 2019-2020.

See: http://gov.ge/files/495_69712_967817_2566.pdf

LONG-TERM ACCOMMODATION OF IDPS

Lack of adequate housing remains a major problem for the majority of IDPs. Consequently, one of the main challenges for the state is to provide them with long-term accommodation.

The old and new waves of IDPs have had different provisions in terms of accommodation. With the support of the international community the resettlement of most of the new wave IDPs was rapidly organized through by building settlements with cottage-type housing. In contrast, back in the 1990s the resettlement of IDPs was disorganized and largely self-directed. The IDPs took refuge by occupying empty buildings, hotels, sanatoria, schools and other public and private property, while some settled in the private sector with their relatives, or rented space. Thus, the current shares of IDPs provided with long-term accommodation is indeed different for old and new waves of IDPs.

In the early years of the displacement, the government considered the return of IDPs to be the only way for them to settle long-term. Only in 2007 did the government, with the support of international organizations and the broad involvement of the IDP community, adopt a state strategy on IDPs¹⁵.

The strategy has two stated goals: 1. To create conditions for the dignified and safe return of IDPs; 2. To support the creation of dignified living conditions of the IDP population and to promote their inclusion / integration in the society.

Adoption of the strategy was an important step forward. However, in practice, the main focus and effort was on accommodation, while in other areas – there was less action by far. Consequently, no tangible results could be achieved.

Significant steps have been taken since 2014 to provide IDPs with long-term housing. The amount of funds allocated by the government for long-term resettlement of IDP families is increasing from year to year. In the 2020 budget, 67 million GEL has been allocated for this purpose¹⁶. Large-scale constructions were carried out by the state in Tbilisi and in the provinces, while dozens of buildings in the condition of dangerous disrepair have been closed down. With financial support from the German government, the Danish Refugee Council has launched a program of building houses for IDPs who own land plots. However, despite the seemingly large-scale resettlement process, still a rather large proportion of IDPs (53%) are waiting for resettlement, having to live in harsh conditions, in some cases in a life-threatening environment. At this rate, when the state only manages to accommodate ca. 2 000 families a year, it will take more than 20 years to complete the long-term resettlement of IDPs, especially as the number of IDP families increase through natural processes, as was noted above.

Inadequate living conditions have become particularly dangerous in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as IDP households in many facilities have shared bathrooms that do not meet basic hygiene standards. At the same time, as the living quarters are often not well furnished or are in poor state, many IDPs do not have appropriate environment to exercise their right to health and decent education.

It should also be noted that, despite the resettlement criteria developed by the Inter-agency Commission in 2013, which regulate the long-term resettlement, IDPs consider the resettlement process to be insufficiently transparent and experience a constant feeling of injustice¹⁷.

¹⁵ *State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons – Persecuted*. Tbilisi, 2007

¹⁶ Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia.
See: <https://www.moh.gov.ge/ka/news/4712/>

¹⁷ Nino Bidzinashvili. “How long should we be lied to?” The 29th day of IDP protest in front of the Ministry.
See <https://netgazeti.ge/news/398165/>

However, at the same time the existing resettlement system does not give IDPs any incentive to improve their socio-economic and living conditions. IDPs who are awaiting resettlement fear that if they improve their social condition, they may lose their entitlement to some social benefits or fail to fit into the resettlement program criteria. Hence, they try not to lose their socially vulnerable status and thus to not extend their waiting time.

Government initiatives aimed at resettlement of IDPs are often planned without proper consideration of accompanying economic and integration opportunities. As a result, IDPs remain dependent on social assistance even after resettlement, and the new IDP settlements tend to turn into new ghettos.

SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITY OF IDPS

Although certain progress has been made in addressing IDP resettlement needs, IDPs as a community group are still not fully integrated into the social and political life of the country. Achieving full integration of IDPs in the society remains a serious challenge.

Unfortunately, there do not exist individualized approaches based on the need for promoting IDP integration. It is difficult to obtain information on the state of inclusion of IDPs, as there are no statistical data available on the number of IDPs enrolled in higher education, including the share of IDPs in educational exchange programs, or the numbers of IDPs involved in various social and economic projects. The needs of IDPs are not reflected in the local self-government budgets either.

Even although IDPs still face a number of challenges, both in terms of integration and as related to socio-economic issues, the question of IDPs has lost its public relevance over the years, IDPs' needs and their participation in public life are not a significant priority in the current political discourse. Issues related to IDPs are still kept somewhat relevant only by the efforts of non-governmental organizations.

One of the indicators of the lack of urgency of the IDP question became the abolition of the ministry focusing on their issues that happened despite the persistence of many problems related to internally displaced persons. When the "Small Government Concept" was initiated in 2018,¹⁸ the Ministry of IDPs was included in the list of ministries to be abolished and thus merged with the already functionally most overloaded Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Affairs. The regional representations of the Ministry of IDPs were also mixed. Shortly after the implementation of the reform was completed, it became clear that in the current reality the existence of a separate structural unit was important, which is why in 2019, on the basis of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia, the LEPL Agency for Refugees, Eco-Migrants and Livelihoods was created¹⁹, and the refurbished regional offices have also resumed work. The abolition of the ministry took place without any consultation with the IDPs and provoked a range of different reactions among the IDP community. With the abolition of the ministry, the IDPs lost their representation within the government, which would voice the needs of the IDPs and bring their concerns to the decision-makers. This was well illustrated at the presentation of the pandemic anti-crisis plan where IDPs were not represented and any mention of their needs was totally absent. Although information was later spread about the allocation of relevant funds to IDPs, this initiative never got implemented. IDPs have a feeling that the question of IDPs has been

¹⁸ The new government structure will comprise 10 ministries and 1 state minister's office. See: <https://bit.ly/3JJuRiN>

¹⁹ Decree №01-109/n of the Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia "On the establishment of a legal entity under public law - the Agency for IDPs, Eco-migrants and Livelihoods".

forgotten, the main focus remains focused on accommodation, while on the other hand IDPs, their needs, or any required resources are not any more visible.

IDPs are socially quite an active group. IDP CSOs are actively working on mobilizing the community, and as well coordinating their work with government agencies. Over the years, these organizations and IDP activists have gained unique experience and continue to make significant contribution to the development of the IDP community. However, this activity has not been expanded to cover the realm of politics. IDPs are not properly represented in any elected bodies of local self-governments, or legislatures.

When talking about the IDP participation, it is important to take into account the following circumstances: the first refers to the participation of IDPs in the political process through special structures associated with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are considered to be entities that serve the interests of IDPs. The attitude of IDPs towards these structures is quite uneven. On the one hand, these structures carry for the IDPs some symbolic significance, and on the other hand, the existence of these governmental structures in current form is unacceptable to some IDPs that want to have it reorganized.²⁰

As the degree of integration of IDPs gradually increases, the possibility of representation in central and local government bodies becomes more realistic. Significant steps have been taken in recent years towards IDP involvement and cooperation at the local level. Nevertheless, to date, IDPs remain under-represented in elected bodies. According to the IDPs, this is due to the fact that when electing representatives for local self-government or in the first-past-the-post mode of voting, the local population would not vote to support IDPs but will give preference to locals²¹.

At the same time, being an IDP is associated with certain stigma, which is why relatively successful IDPs do not want to associate themselves with the IDP community, and therefore do not see themselves as pursuing the interests of IDPs in the political arena.

PARTICIPATION OF IDPS IN THE PEACE PROCESS

The importance of IDPs' participation in conflict resolution is, on the one hand, seen as an axiom as everyone would agree that a peaceful solution to conflicts is impossible without their participation; however, on the other hand, IDPs' involvement in these processes is rather limited and they do not influence the discourse on peaceful conflict resolution.

The right of return of IDPs is a permanent part of Georgia's official rhetoric and foreign policy. This issue comes to the fore especially when the recurrent UN Resolutions on the "Status of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Georgia" are once again adopted, and when we celebrate still another symbolic victory due to the simple fact that more countries supported UN General Assembly resolution this time than the last year, this interpreted as strengthening of the Georgia's position. The resolution affirms the right of IDPs, regardless of their ethnicity, to return to their homes with dignity and safety; It also highlights the need to respect and protect their property rights. The UN General Assembly has been adopting this resolution regularly since 2008. In the first years, this resolution created a spark of hope for the IDPs, however, over the year, this hope has faded and become just a purely symbolic token.

²⁰ Nino Kakhishvili. IDPs from Abkhazia are preparing for rallies. Netgazeti. 2020.

²¹ In search of a solution: from opportunity to necessity – political and social participation of IDPs in Georgia. Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflict (ISNC), 2015.

IDPs were often portrayed as an uncooperative group that rejected all solutions other than return²². They are not perceived as a valuable peace resource, even though IDPs have a direct interest and need for a peaceful resolution of conflicts. In addition, the IDPs have experience of coexistence with Abkhazians and Ossetians, they still maintain social ties with people living on the other side of dividing lines, and the IDP community keep the living memory of Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians both living together peacefully and being in conflict with one another. They understand well the sensitivity of the issue. Observations have showed that in places where IDPs live, the awareness among the local population about the conflicts is much higher, and this is especially well seen when working with young people.

Although some members of the IDP community participate systematically in various peace formats, the broad involvement of IDPs in the conflict resolution process is not ensured. The fact that IDPs are not sufficiently involved in the peace process is due to several factors: on the one hand, the involvement of IDPs in dialogue formats creates some discomfort among the other side participants; on the other hand, there is also a fear that including IDPs may endanger the process.

Fully-fledged participation of IDPs in the reconciliation policy development process is not ensured either. IDPs claim that, unlike the work on the IDP strategy, which was developed with their broad involvement, the participation of IDPs in planning peace policies was not made certain. IDPs' awareness and involvement regarding the current formats is also low, including participation in the work within two official formats, the Geneva International Discussions (GID) and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM). However, it should be noted that the Head of the Government of Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the head of the interim administration of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region participate in both of these formats as representatives of IDPs. Still, they do not consult with the IDP community, which makes IDPs feel that their interests and opinions are not adequately represented in these formats.

It is important to note that within the framework of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and with the support of the UN Women, meetings are held periodically between participants in the Geneva talks, women affected by the conflict, and representatives of the civil society, which to some extent fills the existing vacuum.

CONCLUSION

The protracted conflicts in Georgia are affecting the IDPs the hardest, in the form of various social and economic problems and challenges. That is why IDPs are most interested in resolving conflicts. In addition, IDPs are an important peace resource that is not properly used.

Over the years, the IDP community has become a diverse group with a range of specific opportunities and needs. IDPs are today one of the most mobilized social cluster of the Georgian society.

Although today IDPs are a population group fairly well integrated in the local community, they have little opportunity to influence politics. Including the challenges facing the IDPs themselves, as well as to influence the conflict resolution process.

²² From Exclusion to Involvement: Ensuring IDP Participation – Georgia Lessons. EU Delegation to Georgia and Conciliation Resources. 2009.

In order for IDPs to get stronger as a community and a civic network, while their resources and participation in the social and political process of the country may be brought to better use, especially with regards to the peace-building process, the paper outlines below the following recommendations:

- It is important that there exists a comprehensive and coherent policy towards IDPs;
- The government should ensure that detailed regular study is conducted of the needs and capabilities of the IDP population that will make it possible to effectively switch to IDP assistance tailored to needs;
- For the long-term resettlement of IDPs to be effective, the resettlement program must be supported and accompanied by social protection mechanisms - access to livelihoods, quality health care and education;
- It is important to speed up the resettlement process and, at the same time, to develop a clear time plan so that each IDP is able to know when his or her accommodation will
- It is important to increase the role of local self-governments in relation to the IDPs, as well as active participation of IDPs in the process of solving the challenges facing them;
- It is important to ensure the adequate participation of IDPs in peace and confidence-building processes, both in informal and official formats. In order to use the IDP resources effectively, it is necessary to intensify the work towards their wider involvement. Systematic consultations with the IDP community should be held to ensure that IDP issues are the essential part of the dialogue and of negotiations agenda.

**GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA STATE STRATEGY ON OCCUPIED TERRITORIES:
ENGAGEMENT THROUGH COOPERATION** (Evaluation report)
K E T E V A N M U R U S I D Z E

“Georgia’s State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation” is the main governmental policy document that defines Georgia’s state policy towards Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia. The Strategy and its Action Plan include several key areas for encouraging relations between populations on both sides of the dividing lines and engaging populations in the occupied territories.

The purpose of the present evaluation is to examine what has been implemented in the frames of the Strategy and what its direct outcomes are. The evaluation approach is based on the criteria set out in the UN Development Programme (UNDP) Evaluation Guidelines. The report is organized in accordance to the main objectives as defined in the Strategy: economic relations; infrastructure and transport; education; health care; people-to-people interaction; preservation of cultural heritage and identity; free flow of information; legal and administrative measures; human rights; and, prevention of natural disasters. The report also includes consideration of the Instruments for Engagement presented in the Action Plan.

The present report and recommendations are aimed at reviewing and analyzing the achievements and challenges encountered since the adoption of the State Strategy, which will help the government agencies, local and international organizations, as well as other stakeholders to better plan and implement their future programs and activities.¹

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEXT

“Georgia’s State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation” was developed in 2010. The development of the Strategy was preceded by the August 2008 war, which significantly changed both the dimensions of the conflicts, and the dynamics of relations between the communities living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, and the rest of the Georgia’s population.

In response to the changed circumstances, the Government of Georgia adopted the Law on Occupied Territories (October 23, 2008) and passed relevant legislative amendments. The Law defines the status of the occupied territories and the special legal regime that covers the movement within these territories, property rights, economic activities, institutions (illegal agencies) operating within the occupied territories, and other issues.

The above-mentioned strategy and the “Action Plan for Engagement “ (July 3, 2010) were developed to restore the dialogue that broke down after the 2008 War and to re-establish relations with the communities living in the occupied territories. It should be noted that the implementation of the strategy required the revision and simplification of the Law on Occupied Territories and a number of related administrative norms. Accordingly, changes were made to the Law and related regulations both in 2010 and in subsequent years. The debate regarding the increasing of the flexibility of the existing legislative and administrative norms continues to this day.

¹ Note: The research and report preparation process for this assessment was completed in September 2020.

The implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan began during the rule of the United National Movement. The government was changed in 2012 and since then the implementation of the state's course of action in this direction was led by the ruling "Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia" coalition. At the same time, during the Strategy implementation period, the leadership of the governmental agency working in this field – i.e., the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality² – changed three times, in 2012, 2016 and 2020. It should be noted that the main functions of the Ministry are defined as: development of policy proposals and respective institutional mechanisms; initiating and participating in the peace process; conducting negotiations and consultations with various local and international agencies; coordinating and dealing with relevant administrative issues.

Along with the implementation of the state strategy, in 2018 the Georgian government has developed a new peace initiative "A Step to a Better Future". The initiative includes two main areas, such as increasing education opportunities for the population of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, and facilitating trade across dividing lines. The initiative is in line with the goals set out in the Strategy, but offers a more detailed vision and mechanisms for effective work in these two areas.

It should be noted that the governmental, local non-governmental and international organizations are obliged to implement the peace programs and initiatives under the conditions of the Russian occupation. The peace process is hindered by the illegal process of the so-called "borderization" carried out along the administrative dividing lines. which is also accompanied by illegal arrests, and often inflicting wounds and loss of life to local people living on both sides of the dividing line. Temporary and sometimes long-term closures of checkpoints located on dividing lines further hinder the movement of people and the relationship between them.

The movement of representatives of international organizations and missions in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia is also restricted. In this regard, the situation is particularly difficult in the case of the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, where only the representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are allowed to enter. At present, relations between Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians are possible mainly with the support and mediation of international organizations. These relations are particularly sensitive with regard to local or regional political processes.

EVALUATION METHOD

The evaluation of the activities conducted within the framework of the State Strategy "Engagement Through Cooperation" was carried out according to the effectiveness criteria defined in the UNDP Evaluation Guidelines³. Several methods of qualitative research were employed during the evaluation.

For the purpose of analyzing secondary sources, annual reports prepared by the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality (2013-2019), as well as reports and studies prepared by the Public Defender's Office, local and international organizations, were considered and analyzed as part of desktop research process. Statistical information retrieved from the Office of the

² In 2010-2014, the agency bore the name: The Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration.

³ UNDP (2019) *UNDP Evaluation Guidelines*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

State Minister was also analyzed. Documents such as relevant legislative and administrative acts, the State Strategy and its Action Plan, have also been studied.

In order to obtain additional information related to the ten-year period that the evaluation was focused on, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with current and former officials of the Office of the State Minister. Also, interviews were conducted with representatives of major international donor organizations and local NGOs.

A questionnaire was developed to serve as an evaluation tool, in which the questions were organized according to the four main directions of the Strategy's Action Plan. Special questionnaires were prepared for each target group, adapted to their specific profiles.

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

Several limitations that accompanied the evaluation process should be taken into account. Based on the stated purposes of the assessment, the report provides the findings focusing on the Strategy implementation outcomes but not the assessment of general impact that its implementation may have had on Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations. Also, in essence, the Strategy defines the vision of the Georgian state in relation to the occupied territories, and therefore is a guideline for action for both government agencies and local or international organizations working in the field. However, in this case the focus of the evaluation is on the activities carried out by the Georgian authorities, though it also considers the involvement of other actors. Consequently, there has been no attempt to involve in the evaluation process any representatives of the Abkhaz and Ossetian communities, despite the fact that these communities are among the main target groups of the strategy. Also, the assessment does not include activities carried out on the Tbilisi-controlled territory as the Strategy specifically aims to encourage communication between the communities across the division lines and enhance the engagement of the populations living in the occupied territories.

The Strategy evaluation covers mainly the period 2010-2019, as due to the lack of access to the annual reports of the Office of the Ministry of Reintegration for 2011 and 2012, this period is less represented in the evaluation. Still, statistical data for this earlier period are available and analyzed along with data from other years.

FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Regarding economic relations, the Strategy implies promoting development of trade, agriculture and agribusiness. It also envisages forming financial environment that would incentivize development, the creation of targeted funds, and respective harmonization of the legislative environment.

From the adoption of the strategy until 2018, the Georgian government has not established any specific mechanisms, initiatives or financial support schemes that would encourage Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian trade and business relations. Nevertheless, informal economic relations existed in both directions, and these have become even more active in recent years. E.g. In 2010-2015, according to surveys, the daily cargo turnover between the Georgian and the Abkhazian sides

in both directions was 150 tons, the annual cost of which ranged from 7 to 15 million US dollars⁴. In addition, there existed quite positive experience of implementing small business projects through the cooperation of Georgian and Abkhazian organizations. Georgian organizations also assisted Abkhaz partners and project participants in developing their project and business management skills.

The development of trade relations was also hindered by the Georgian Law on Occupied Territories, which significantly restricted the conduct of economic activities in the occupied territories without receiving special permission from the Georgian Government. However, the number of applications and issuance of such permits was quite small (a total of 21 such permits were issued in 2008-2013, and 7 in 2014-2016). Restrictions were imposed also by both the Abkhaz and South Ossetian sides, with one exception made with the consent of the Abkhaz side of the export of hazelnuts from the Abkhazia to the rest of Georgia and further abroad through it. So, in 2014, 2,185 tons of nuts with the market value of USD 9,204,000 were transported via the Enguri Bridge.⁵

Over the years, part of the restrictions stipulated by Law have been reduced based on the recommendations of the international community, local organizations and the Public Defender. In addition, in 2018, the Government of Georgia has prepared a package of changes and initiatives – “A Step to a Better Future” – to encourage trade across the dividing lines.

This peace initiative comprised legislative changes, tax breaks, and access to financial assistance, but its implementation was initially hampered by a number of factors. So, there appeared to be a lack of agreement and coordination on legislative and administrative issues between various departments of the Georgian government, especially concerning financial and taxation agencies. The offers lacked analysis of existing or expected risks and ways to deal with them, which, among other factors, made it difficult attracting financial support from donor organizations. Also, the initiative focused on its status-neutral proposals, although without clearly explaining what mechanisms would provide this effect. It was also unclear how the products produced in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia would be labeled in the Georgian and international markets (meaning status-neutral labeling).⁶ In addition, the lack of accurate and comprehensive information about the initiative reaching the Abkhazian and South Ossetian societies remained quite a challenge too.

In 2018, on the initiative of the Government of Georgia, a grant program “Enterprise for a Better Future” was added to the state program “Produce in Georgia” in order to encourage Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian joint production. Submission of applications for participation in the program started in March 2019, and 368 applications have been received, of which a large part – 274 applications – were from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia (from almost all districts of these regions). The sheer number of applications indicates the interest in the program and its successful start. The project budget was GEL 500,000, with GEL 7,000 to GEL 35,000 allocated for individual or joint projects. As a result of the competition, 20 projects were chosen for funding.

In general, in order to successfully develop economic and business relations with Abkhazians and South Ossetians it is important to simplify existing legislative and administrative regulations. According to a number of studies, possible instability and perception of high risks are among the main obstacles for entrepreneurs and businessmen on different sides of the dividing line. In these circumstances, it is especially important to reach political agreements and make clearer statements

⁴ Mirimanova, N. (2015) Abkhazia: Regulations for Trade with Disputed Statehood. In Druey, C. C. and Fitzé, E. (editors) *The Caucasus Conflicts: Frozen and Shelved?* Politorbis. Bern: FDFA and swisspeace. 9-17.

⁵ Mirimanova, N. (2015b) *Trans-Ingur/I Economic Relations: A Case for Regulation*. London: International Alert.

⁶ Chankvetadze, N. (2019) Assessment of the Trade Facilitation Component of Georgia’s Peace Initiative – A Step to a Better Future. [Policy paper]. Tbilisi: PMC Research Center.

intended to facilitate the process. Dissemination and access to accurate and comprehensive information on such initiatives is one of the important prerequisites of success. However, the number of applications received within the framework of the initiative “Produce for a Better Future” is a rather positive indicator in this regard. It is also important to explore the needs of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities, and to strengthen their resources on the ground, so that they would be able to better prepare and then manage joint projects and business ideas. In commercial and business projects it is important to follow the principle Do No Harm, especially in the context where corruption risks are quite high.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORT

Difficulties with access to the territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia are the major obstacle for the Georgian government in restoration and rehabilitation of infrastructure there. Nevertheless, several projects have been implemented in both the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In the case of the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, the opening of the Tiriponi irrigation canal for the population living on both sides of the dividing line, and the provision of natural gas to the Akhagori district are particularly noteworthy in this regard. In the case of Abkhazia these are: rehabilitation of the Enguri Bridge and restoration of free passenger bus traffic; establishment of a 220-bed multi-profile, university clinic equipped with a dormitory, and construction of a shopping complex to promote trade relations in the village of Rukhi.

As for the construction and rehabilitation of local infrastructure in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, the Georgian government is unable to implement projects due to lack of access to the areas. In this regard, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is working on various small scale infrastructure projects (such as rehabilitation of social and educational infrastructure) in Abkhazia. The infrastructure-related work of the Georgia’s central government was mainly aimed at resolving the issues of repair-rehabilitation, gasification and water supply in the conflict-affected villages located in the territories under its own control.

These goals of the State Strategy also include environmental issues. In this regard, the cooperation of Georgian and Abkhazian specialists for the survival of the Colchic box tree and the joint fight against the Asian brown marmorated stink bug (*Halyomorpha halys*) form rather positive experience. It is noteworthy that in the process of working on both issues several meetings of specialists were held with the support of the Council of Europe Confidence Building Programme, as well as through direct, regular communication between Georgian and Abkhazian specialists. Also, through the Coordination Mechanism, the Abkhazian side was provided with veterinary vaccines, pesticide application equipment and necessary pesticides. The European Neighborhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD) projects in Abkhazia are also being implemented in the field of protection of forests and environment in general. However, neither the Georgian government nor international organizations are able to cooperate with the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia on environmental issues.

EDUCATION

There are several main areas of work in the field of education in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia: promoting and funding education in Georgia and abroad for young people living in the occupied territories; working on joint curricula and meetings of the representatives of educational field; and, dealing with relevant legislative and administrative issues.

In 2011-2019, a positive trend had been observed of increased enrollment of students from Abkhazia in Georgian higher education institutions. A total of 1,111 students were enrolled during that period and 1,052 of these were funded by the state (see Table 1).

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Enrolled	126	71	60	86	90	84	120	138	336
Funded	77	71	58	82	87	84	119	138	336

Table 1. Number of students from Abkhazia enrolled in 2011-2019 in Georgian higher education institutions and funded by the Georgian state⁷

According to the available data, the highest number of students from Abkhazia – 336 – was enrolled in 2019, which is two and a half times more than in the previous year. Such a positive change can be explained by several steps taken by the Georgian authorities, such as the simplification of legislative and administrative regulations, and the adoption of a new initiative in the field of education “A Step to a Better Future”, which facilitated the dissemination of information on educational opportunities and offered more concrete mechanisms of support. It should also be noted, however, that the above data mostly include enrolled students coming from Gali district and Kodori Gorge. According to available information, the share of ethnically Abkhazian students among the enrollees is quite modest.

Unlike the case of Abkhazia, there is no positive trend in the number of students enrolled in Georgian higher education institutions coming from the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia. A total of 41 students were enrolled during the same period, and all of them received state funding (see Table 2).

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Enrolled	3	6	3	4	3	7	6	7	2
Funded	3	6	3	4	3	7	6	7	2

Table 2. Number of students from the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia enrolled in 2011-2019 in Georgian higher education institutions and funded by the state:⁸

There exist several state programs for supporting study in Georgian higher education institutions. From 2010, the “1 + 4” program began to apply to young people from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, although their participation in this program is small. The more complex initiative in the field of education is “A Step to a Better Future”, which was adopted by the Government of Georgia in 2018 in addition to the existing programs, also implies the simplification of legislative and administrative regulations. In 2019, an after-school training program was launched, in which 142 entrants from the occupied territories participated during the pilot three-month period.

Benefiting from Georgian educational programs by young people living in the Occupied Territories is accompanied by a number of limitations, including the lack of full information on available opportunities and benefits, procedural hurdles to recognition of educational documents, the problem of providing accommodation for already enrolled students, and the lack of living allowances.

⁷ Information obtained from the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. Data received on July 22, 2020.

⁸ Information obtained from the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. Data received on July 22, 2020.

In terms of study abroad, young people living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia can apply for it at the Georgian International Education Center, although no relevant statistical data have been available so far⁹. In addition, through cooperation of the Governments of Georgia and the United Kingdom, starting from the 2014-2015 academic year, young people from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia will be able to receive a Chevening Scholarship under its South Caucasus Programme. To date a total of 13 students, mostly Abkhazians, have taken advantage of this opportunity.¹⁰

Regarding the area of joint research, the collaboration between Abkhaz, South Ossetian and Georgian researchers and specialists mainly focused on archival issues. There is less experience in developing collaborative research or educational programs in other areas. Since 2013, within the framework of the Council of Europe Confidence Building Project, Georgian and Abkhazian education specialists and teachers have regularly met to participate in workshops with focus on foreign language (English) teaching, modern teaching methods, and bilingual education. A total of 6 meetings have been held during these years, of which Ossetian teachers have attended only one.

Over the last ten years, legislative and administrative regulations and practices in the field of education have changed and got simplified. Restrictions on free movement of people remain still one of the main challenges in this respect. Over the years, the requirement to present an ID card of a Georgian citizen, or a 'neutral document', remained one of the barriers hindering the use of educational opportunities. This changed in 2017-2018 as such requirement was abolished. As a result, young people living in the occupied territories can use their so called "individual number" to join existing programs. In addition, it is possible to pass the Abkhazian and Ossetian language and literature exams – instead of the general skills test – to be admitted to Georgian higher education institutions. Also, the procedures for recognizing education received within the occupied territories have been simplified. From 2017, respective applications can be submitted online, by applying through international organizations or Georgian higher education institutions, including those submitted in Abkhazian language. Young people living in the occupied territories are thus able to use recognized documents to study abroad. However, with the changes adopted, it is important to further simplify and refine procedural and bureaucratic issues.

HEALTH CARE

Health care programs for people living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia appeared to have worked most effectively compared to all those defined by the Strategy priorities. There are several key areas in the field of healthcare, such as the State Referral Services Program (hereinafter referred to as the Referral Program), the provision of medical assistance, and meetings of representatives for sharing knowledge and experience.

The Referral Program is the Georgian government's most successful initiative, having benefited a total of 9,973 patients from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia in 2011-2019 (6,398 Abkhazians and 3,027 Ossetians; see Figure 1)¹¹. During the same years, a total of GEL 28,064,633 was allocated for patient funding (for detailed statistics, see Annex 1).

⁹ During the evaluation process, we contacted the International Education Center by e-mail with request for information but were told that no such statistical data exist.

¹⁰ Statistical data includes the number of graduates of the Chevening Scholarship from 2014-2015 to present, and does not cover students of the current academic year.

¹¹ The bar chart is based on the information obtained from the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. Data received on July 22, 2020. Note: In the statistics provided, the data for 2011 and 2012 are not broken down by regions.

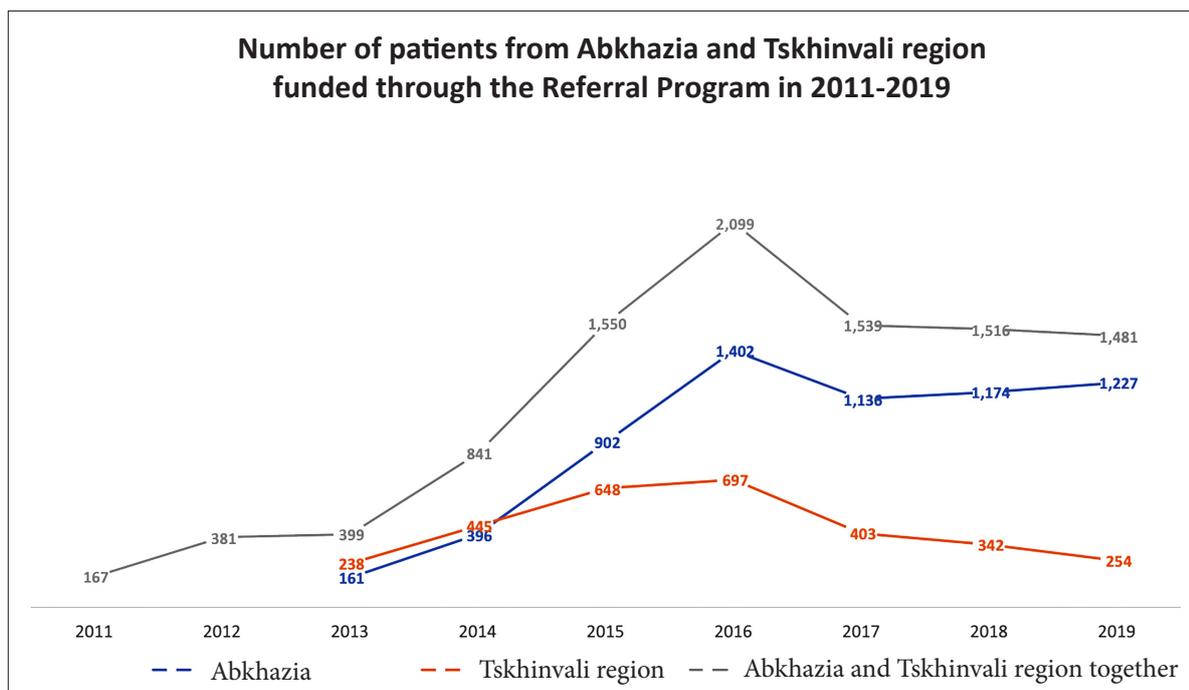


Figure 1. Number of patients from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region funded through the Referral Program in 2011-2019

According to the statistics presented here, the number of participants in the program has been steadily increasing from 2011 to 2016; so, in 2016 five times more people received health services than in 2013. After 2016, the trend started to decrease, which is particularly visible regarding the number of patients coming from the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia. The earlier positive trend can be explained by the wide dissemination of information about the program, the positive evaluation of the program by patients that helped to attract other patients, and the wide range of funded medical services. At the same time, the decreasing trend observed in 2017 coincides with such developments as the suspension that same year of funding for diagnostics under the “Referral Program”.¹²

It should be noted that, according to the data of 2014-2017, patients most often applied under this program to Georgian medical institutions for treatment related to oncology / onco-hematology, general surgery, and gynecological problems.¹³ People arriving from the occupied territories received medical services mainly at medical centers of Zugdidi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Gori and Tbilisi. At the same time, a 220-bed multi-profile clinic with an attached dormitory has been established in the village of Rukhi. This will make it easier for patients from Abkhazia to receive medical services. Also, the Hepatitis C Management Center in Zugdidi will make the participation in the Hepatitis C Elimination Program accessible to residents of Abkhazia, although, due to some administrative issues, the process has been delayed.

Providing medical services is an important component of healthcare aspect of the Strategy. In this regard, through Coordination Mechanism which operates under the umbrella of UNDP, various medicines and vaccines (drugs for treating tuberculosis, AIDS, and diabetes, various immunization vaccines including the hepatitis B vaccines, hepatitis C tests, etc.), medical materials and equipment were regularly supplied to Abkhazia. However, it was not possible to provide medical assistance to the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia.

In 2011-2019, a total of GEL 43,500,000 was allocated from the Georgian budget to fund the

healthcare component, of which GEL 28,064,633 was spent on financing medical treatment and GEL 15,435,367 on other forms of medical assistance (see Annex 1).

Regular meetings of Georgian and Abkhaz doctors were held within the framework of the Council of Europe Confidence Building Program with the aim to exchange their knowledge and experience. The main topic of the meetings was the prevention and treatment of drug addiction (5 meetings). It should be noted that Georgian and Abkhazian doctors continued their cooperation on this topic also beyond the meetings, with an online communication platform created for this purpose, still functioning to-day. Also, trainings were conducted on tuberculosis and other infectious diseases (1 meeting), and on treatment of hepatitis C (1 meeting). One more meeting was held between phthisiologists. In addition, Abkhazian doctors were regularly undergoing training in Batumi and Sachkhere. However, there have been no similar collaborations or meetings with physicians from the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

One positive example of successful interaction between the Georgian and Abkhazian healthcare representatives is the cooperation in the fight against coronavirus disease (COVID 19). Several meetings were held between specialists in the field, including direct online communications and consultations of Abkhaz specialists with the Georgian National Center for Disease Control. The Abkhaz side received assistance provided through existing “Coordination Mechanism” by the Georgian government, international organizations and foreign countries to fight the virus (tests, disinfectants, equipment, etc.). Representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO) also held several meetings on the territory of Abkhazia with specialists working on the ground, having shared the best experience and effective protocols for the fight against the virus. Cooperation with the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in combating the virus pandemic failed to materialize.

Despite certain achievements in the area of healthcare, there are several barriers to more effective cooperation in this field. Temporary, sometimes quite prolonged, closures of checkpoints on the dividing line and obstacles to movement remain one of the most significant hurdles. Restrictions on freedom of movement are closely linked to the dynamics of Tbilisi’s relations with the occupied territories and to the state of current political processes. For example, due to the incident at Chorchana-Tsnelisi in 2019, checkpoints connecting with the Tskhinvali region were closed and access to medical services for the population living on the other side of the dividing line was dramatically restricted.

At the first stage of functioning of the “Referral Program” submission of neutral documents was a prerequisite for inclusion in the program, thus creating political and administrative barriers. Later, when this restriction was removed, this was reflected in the sharp increase in the number of the program users. Also, due to certain legislative and administrative hurdles, the ethnic Georgian population of the Gali district got able to enjoy the benefits of health care only since 2017.

Lately, one of the main obstacles to the effective operation of the program was claimed to have been the termination of funding for primary diagnostics. In addition, as the commission meeting and decision-making are procedurally and bureaucratically protracted processes, this creates additional difficulties for patients arriving from the occupied territories, given the existing restrictions on movement. Also, there is the need to cope with problems related to providing patients with accommodation in the process of post-operative rehabilitation, and to dealing with administrative issues. Due to the fact that several different agencies are involved in the implementation of the “Referral Program”, the lack of their systematic and coordinated cooperation hinders the effectiveness of the program.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

One of the main goals of the state strategy is to develop and promote relations between societies divided by conflict. In this regard, the role of the relevant agencies of the Government of Georgia is limited to participation in the meetings and, when necessary, to provide assistance with the organization and coordination process.

Meetings focusing on dialogue and confidence building are mainly arranged by international, local and foreign country-based organizations (e.g., those from Germany and UK). Meetings initiated by international organizations are mainly organized through the “Coordination Mechanism” operating under the umbrella of UNDP. Local organizations, for the most part, conduct projects or organize meetings with the help of personal contacts they have in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, and with financial support from donor organizations.

In order to promote relations between the societies, a total of 145 meetings were organized through the Confidence Building Mechanism of the Council of Europe in 2010-2020, with 131 meetings between Georgians and participants from Abkhazia, and 14 meetings involving those from the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia (see Figure 2)¹⁴. Under the program, regular meetings were held between representatives of specific fields, for example, in areas such as cultural heritage and museum management, archival research, education, health care, conflict resolution, human rights, and the fight against violence toward women and children. Meetings on these specific issues were held mainly between Georgian and Abkhaz representatives. Also, Georgian, Abkhazian and Ossetian youth participated in several peace camps.

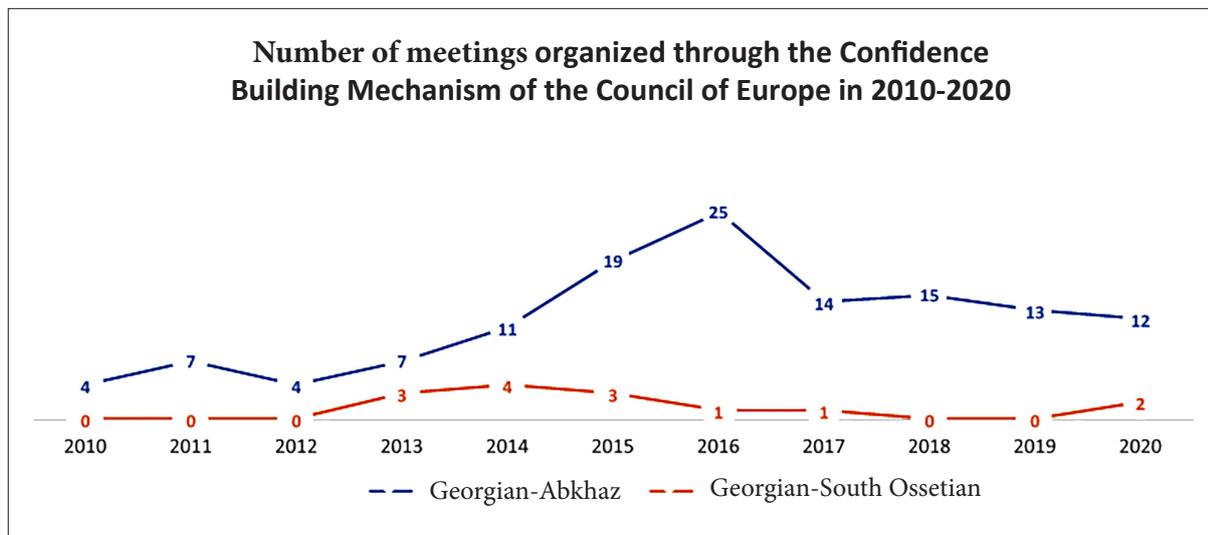


Figure 2. Number of meetings organised through the Confidence Building Mechanism of the Council of Europe in 2010-2020

Since 2015, regular meetings with representatives of the Georgian and Abkhazian societies, including decision-makers and experts, along with representatives of international organizations, have been held in London (UK), Bern (Switzerland) and Berlin (Germany)¹⁵. The meetings have mainly served for creating a space for discussing current events and initiatives. On the one hand, these meetings were less systematic and not related to any specific topic, making their results less tan-

¹⁴ Information provided by the Confidence Building Mechanism Division of the Council of Europe. Data received on July 30, 2020. Therefore, information covering the 2020 meetings is not full.

¹⁵ It should be noted that this format of meetings was created in analogy to the format of the previous meetings, in particular the one used in the Schleining process.

gible. On the other hand, the meetings laid the grounds for joint work in areas such as fighting the Asian stink bug, ecology, and archives. Also, issues initially discussed in such format were later addressed in subsequent state programs and initiatives, such as “A Step to a Better Future” focusing on the field of education.

It should be noted that, over time, regular meetings have yielded positive results in terms of developing relationships and building confidence, which has led in turn to increased proactive initiatives and involvement on the part of Abkhazians. Tangible results in this regard are, for example, establishing cooperation in the field of healthcare, or joint publications by archival specialists. Indirect positive effects can be seen in other areas as well, such as in the case of Georgian and Abkhaz social workers cooperating on issues of violence against women and children, who continued to communicate beyond the meetings and have set up a hotline to protect victims of domestic violence in Abkhazia.

Willingness to cooperate is highest among civil society representatives. Also, despite the politicization of human rights issues, regular meetings of representatives of this field and of the Public Defender’s office have had a rather positive impact. So, for example, the current Abkhazian *de facto* Public Defender, who has been participating in Georgian-Abkhazian trainings for a number of years, speaks most actively in public arena about the need for protection of the rights of the ethnic Georgian population residing in the Gali district¹⁶. Similarly, Abkhazian specialists of cultural heritage and monument protection have become more active in protecting extant artifacts, including the Georgian ones.

One of the biggest challenges in the field of inter-communal relationships remains the lack of cooperation with the South Ossetian side. There are several reasons to be blamed for this: 1. A weak civil society in the Tskhinvali region, which is slowly disintegrating and remains under constant pressure; 2. Restriction of access to international organizations in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia; and, 3. Lack of interest from international organizations, which is partly due to the negative experience of previous attempts to involve South Ossetian participants in the dialogue. On the other hand, this is closely connected with the restriction of freedom of movement and ongoing occupation. Despite the difficulties, since 2008 there has been a greater need and opportunity for dialogue with the South Ossetian side. In this regard, the format of the civic dialogue organized by George Mason University “Point of View” creates the sole space for long-term and regular meetings. Also, local Georgian organizations work on joint publications with South Ossetians through existing personal contacts.

In terms of relations with Abkhazians, direct meetings without facilitation by a third party are hindered by several factors: 1. Abkhazians are opposed to meeting Georgians without the involvement of a third party because this creates local tensions and political problems for them at home; 2. Abkhazians are more interested in participating in international projects and through this process gaining knowledge and expertise, than in just cooperating with Georgians. An example of the second factor is the meetings of Georgian and Abkhazian teachers. Abkhazians are not too eager to openly cooperate with their Georgian counterparts, but they actively use in their practice the knowledge and skills gained during the training sessions, as confirmed by the questionnaires they have filled after the meetings, and outlined in respective reports.

The State Strategy also envisages dialogue with the diaspora representatives, especially with the descendants of populations displaced from the Russian Empire (e.g., ethnic Abkhazians residing in Turkey), although work in this direction has not continued since the change of the govern-

¹⁶ Civil.ge (2020) Abkhaz Ombudsperson Speaks of Rights Abuses of Gali Georgians. Civil.ge, <https://civil.ge/archives/357910> Accessed on 27 August 2020

ment in Georgia in 2012. This direction is within the competence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, and there is no coordinated work with the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality on these issues.

PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

Work on the protection and preservation of cultural heritage and identity includes cooperation on archival materials and preparation of joint publications on related issues, protection of Abkhazian and Ossetian languages, and protection of cultural monuments.

In order to restore the Sokhumi archives destroyed during the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, copies of Soviet-era materials preserved in the Tbilisi archives were periodically transferred to the Abkhaz side at meetings in international formats, e.g., during the Geneva International Discussion and the Council of Europe Confidence Building meetings. Also, with the assistance from the British government, the ethnographic archives were handed over to the South Ossetian side. The Virtual Archive of Abkhazia (AVA) was prepared through cooperation of several agencies, with the materials uploaded there available in Georgian, Abkhazian and English languages.¹⁷ The interest toward exchanging archives is great and the process is assessed positively by all parties.

With the aim of preserving cultural heritage and identity, regular meetings were held between Georgian and Abkhazian, as well as South Ossetian specialists within the framework of the Council of Europe's Confidence Building Project. The topics to which the meetings and trainings were dedicated included cultural heritage and museum management, conservation of architectural structures, and simultaneous translation from/to the Abkhazian language (with the participation of Georgian and Abkhazian specialists in the Abkhazian language). In the same format, the Georgian and Abkhazian archival specialists cooperated intensively to prepare joint publications. As a result, one such publication has already been published, one is ready for publication, and work is underway on three additional topics.

A special state program was created to protect and preserve the Abkhazian language and culture. Also, a Scientific Research Center of Georgian-Abkhazian Relations has been established at the Tbilisi State University that implements various research projects with the support of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. An Abkhazian corner was organized at the National Library of the Parliament of Georgia. Also, in the framework of cooperative project, the Georgian National Center of Manuscripts published the Mokvi Gospel in high polygraph quality with parallel texts in Georgian, Abkhazian and English languages that was distributed in Abkhazia as well. In addition, the teaching of the Abkhazian language in several schools within the Georgian-controlled territory has been strengthened, and a number of textbooks in the Abkhazian and Ossetian languages have been prepared.

Regarding the protection of monuments, the main work of the Government of Georgia was focused on compiling a list of monuments in Abkhazia, informing the international community, in particular UNESCO, about illegal digging of archaeological sites in Abkhazia by so called '*nighthawks*' (also known as "black archeologists"), and arranging expert visits to monitor the condition of cultural monuments in Abkhazia. Within the framework of the Council of Europe Confidence Building Project, Georgian and Abkhazian, as well as Georgian and South Ossetian specialists met regularly to study and describe the condition of cultural heritage sites. Georgian-Abkhazian cooperation

¹⁷ Abkhazian Virtual Archive (AVA)website: <http://ava.ge>

appeared to be more effective in this direction. The collaborators jointly developed a monument registration form to allow Abkhaz specialists to register the existing monuments themselves. Due to the politicization of the issue in both regions, no concrete steps have been taken on that matter, but deepening of the professional knowledge of Abkhaz and South Ossetian specialists has had a positive impact leading to protests against misguided local policies and to advocacy campaigns for monument protection.

The State Strategy goal of the protection and preservation of cultural heritage and identity also includes the promotion of religious freedom and of relations with the peoples of the Caucasus. Unlike the situation in the previous period, since 2012 the reconciliation policy has not been working any more on strengthening relations with the Caucasian peoples, while in the reporting period no information is available on activities carried out in relation to religion issues, including ensuring the possibility for conducting ecclesiastical activities in native languages.¹⁸

UNHINDERED DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

The goal of the State Strategy in terms of unhindered dissemination of information includes the development of platforms and mechanisms conducive to communication, the promotion of cooperation between journalists, and the use of new technologies in this process.

In terms of creating communication platforms, an online platform has been set up within the framework of the Council of Europe project to strengthen the cooperation between Georgian and Abkhazian physicians working on prevention of drug addiction. According to the available information, virtual groups and informal communication spaces were created on social networks for the participants of various projects. No other specific platform or mechanism has been developed in this direction.

Video clips and information booklets in Abkhazian and Ossetian languages were prepared to disseminate information on the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union, on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), and the introduction of visa-free travel to EU / Schengen countries. One of the ways to distribute these booklets among the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities was distributing them at checkpoints and passing them on to patients involved in the “Referral program”. The videos were posted on the Georgian information space as well as on the YouTube channel EUNATO GovGe. At the time of writing, the number of views of the videos translated into Abkhazian is 89, and the number for Ossetian is – 21.¹⁹ Also, information on coronavirus spread prevention and existing recommendations in Abkhazian and Ossetian languages is available on the StopCov.ge platform.

The website of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality has the options of choosing Georgian, English and Russian languages. Some of the strategic documents are translated into Abkhazian, Ossetian and Russian, though not all documents are available in Abkhazian and Ossetian. Also, there are more documents available in Georgian than the number of materials translated into any of these other languages. The translated documents are placed together with Georgian sources, which makes it difficult to find and access them.

¹⁸ According to the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, this issue falls within the competence of the State Agency for Religious Affairs.

¹⁹ Link to the video materials in Abkhazian language on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFjdBOCLlzQ>
Link to the Ossetian language video materials on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PZjzle4JBQ>

In terms of relations between journalists, within the framework of the Council of Europe project Georgian and Abkhazian journalists were trained on dealing with violence against women. Media representatives were offered the opportunity to attend these meetings organized by the George Mason University and the Reconciliation Resources (London Meetings). In addition, within the framework of the Coordination Mechanism, Georgian journalists were trained on covering conflict related issues. Throughout 2012-2020, the Office of the State Minister and ministers held annual meetings with Georgian journalists behind closed doors aimed at exchanging relevant information, but COVID-19 pandemic has halted this process.

It should be noted that breaching through the barriers between the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian sides that are dividing respective information environments remains a challenge. In Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, the Russian information media are fully dominant, which prevents the provision of complete and accurate information about current developments in the Georgian-controlled territory, or about the proposals put out by the Georgian side. Lack of accurate and comprehensive information influences the levels of participation of Abkhazians and South Ossetians in existing joint projects in the areas of education, health care and economy. Therefore, the main source of information for them is often just personal acquaintances or on-site organizations, which makes the provision of information dependent on individuals.

Some of the factors hindering the smooth dissemination of information are: lack of interest from the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides; dominance of the Russian information media; suppression of Georgian signals on the spot; filtering of information by the Georgian side due to conflict sensitivity and the security risks of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian partners; internal polarization within the Georgian society and politicization of relevant issues; lack of a definitive vision or mechanism for working on these issues on the part of the Georgian side.

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES

At various times during the last years, the Venice Commission, the Public Defender, and several international organizations have made recommendations to the Government of Georgia advising it to implement legislative changes in accordance with the goals set out in the State Strategy. These recommendations were mainly aimed at liberalizing the restrictions imposed by the Law of Georgia on the Occupied Territories, in particular those impeding the freedom of movement and economic activity in the occupied territories. Currently, the law restricts virtually all types of economic activities in the occupied territories, both for foreign citizens and foreign investments, and for Georgian companies and Georgian citizens, if this is done by bypassing the Georgian government. Any activity within, and visiting of, the occupied territories is legally possible only on the basis of a special permit issued by the Government of Georgia.²⁰

As a result of the amendments to the Law introduced in 2013, the procedures for issuing permits for economic activities in the occupied territories were simplified. Also, a rule was introduced for issuing a special permit allowing to enter the occupied territories from other directions in exceptional cases. Such permits can be issued both before and after the actual entry upon submission of relevant information. Also, in the first case of violation of the rules established by the law regarding entering these territories, an administrative penalty is imposed instead of previously stipulated imprisonment, though in case of recurrence – it is still to be considered a criminal offense. Under the

²⁰ Public Defender (2017) The Law of Georgia on the Occupied Territories: Analysis and Recommendations. Tbilisi: Public Defender. <http://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2019041113004967514.pdf> Accessed on July 14, 2020

2016 amendments, entry of foreign nationals across dividing lines from the occupied territories were allowed for the purpose of seeking asylum.

In 2018, the Georgian government's new peace initiative "A Step to a Better Future" simplified the procedures for young people living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia seeking opportunities to receive higher education in Georgia, and for the recognition of their general education documents. Also, based on the objectives of strengthening trade incentives and facilitating access to education across the dividing lines, the initiative envisages a number of changes in the laws of Georgia, in particular in: "Law on the Procedure for Registering Citizens of Georgia and Aliens Residing in Georgia, for Issuing Identity (Residence) Cards and Passports of a Citizen of Georgia", "Law on Occupied Territories", "Law on Civil Status Acts", "Tax Code of Georgia", "Law on Entrepreneurs", "Law on Grants", "Law on Higher Education", and "Law on General Education".

It should be noted that the permits system related to movement and activities in the occupied territories has not been mentioned as an obstacle to the implementation of joint projects with Abkhazians and South Ossetians. If the project complies with the legislation of Georgia and the goals set by the government, obtaining the permit is not associated with much difficulties. Also, representatives of local and international organizations have positive experience in communicating or consulting with the Office of the State Minister. However, in the case of local organizations, a higher degree of involvement and cooperation would be desirable.

Despite the changes introduced, complicated administrative procedures and lack of coordination between relevant departments of the Government of Georgia are being cited as a hindering factor, in particular when receiving neutral documents, participating in the "Referral Program in educational programs, or obtaining official recognition of documents issued in the occupied territories. Restrictions on the bank transfers stipulated by the Law on Occupied Territories also create some hurdles for the implementation of joint Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian projects as involved international organizations can as a rule only manage monetary transactions via bank transfers. Also, the Resolution #320 of the Government of Georgia "On Approval of the Rules of Conduct for Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia" imposes restrictions on travel abroad for residents of the occupied territories of Georgia, including for the purpose of participation in joint projects.

HUMAN RIGHTS

In terms of human rights protection, the State Strategy envisages the support of safety and rights protection in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, including in particular the protection of the rights of ethnic Georgians, the involvement in respective processes of international organizations, and the establishment of special international monitoring missions.

In this regard, the work of various Georgian government agencies was mainly focused at providing information to international organizations on the facts of human rights violations in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia. These issues would become the subject of active debates in the format of the Geneva International Discussion and at the meetings organized within the framework of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).²¹ In particular, mainly discussed issues included: restrictions on freedom of movement, arrests and killings of ethnic Georgians close to the division lines, and legal status of ethnic Georgians living in Gali and Akhgori (e.g. restrictions on

²¹ IPRM meetings in Gali have been suspended since June 2018.

receiving education in their mother tongue, attempts to change their (registered) ethnic origin and identity, problems with obtaining the “residence permit”, etc.)

In terms of human rights, one positive experience of cooperation and of direct negotiations with the Abkhaz or Ossetian sides was the exchange of prisoners on the Enguri Bridge in 2016. A number of different government agencies were involved in this process, coordinated by the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.

It should be noted that the possibility for monitoring human right abuses in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia by international organizations and missions (such as the Council of Europe, or EUMM) is restricted. However, in 2015-2016, with the support of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Georgian side, international experts Thomas Hammarberg and Magdalena Grono were given the opportunity to conduct human rights monitoring in Abkhazia. Eventually, due to the politicization of the issue, the prepared report was not officially published, and became available only through independent sources²².

As a part of the Council of Europe Confidence Building Project, annual meetings were held between Georgian and Abkhaz ombudsmen and civil society representatives. The main topics considered at the meetings were the issues of domestic violence, including violence against women and children, and the empowerment of women. Also, Georgian and Abkhazian psychologists and psychiatrists received several trainings on methods of assisting women and children – victims of violence. The resulting cooperation of social workers established during such meetings led to the creation of a hotline for victims of domestic violence in Abkhazia. Despite the politicization of human rights issues in Abkhazia, in particular those related to the protection of ethnic Georgians living in Gali, the positive impact of the Georgian-Abkhazian meetings can be seen in the advocacy by the Abkhaz Public Defender, appointed in 2018, of the rights of the Gali population. In this format, cooperation on human rights issues with the Ossetian side has not been established.

NATURAL DISASTER PREVENTION

The Georgian authorities are ready to assist Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in the case of emergencies related to natural disasters.

During the reporting period, no significant cases of natural disasters were reported in these regions. The only development of that scale is the spread of Asian stink bug that has detrimentally affected the agricultural sector in Abkhazia and other regions of western Georgia. Several direct meetings and regular consultations were held between specialists in the field in order to establish effective joint mechanisms to combat the stink bug. In addition, the Georgian side provided the Abkhazian side with special insecticide application tools, pheromones, equipment, and necessary pesticides. Georgian-Abkhazian cooperation in the fight against the Asian stink bugs is considered to be one of the most successful and positive cooperative experiences.

²² Hammarberg, T. and Grono, M. (2017) *Human Rights in Abkhazia Today*. [report]. Stockholm and Brussels: <https://www.palmecenter.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Human-Rights-in-Abkhazia-Today-report-by-Thomas-Hammarberg-and-Magdalena-Grono.pdf> Accessed on 15 April 2020.

INSTRUMENTS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Seven instruments of engagement were identified to achieve the goals set by the Action Plan for implementation of the State Strategy:

1. Liaison mechanism with neutral status
2. Neutral ID card and travel document
3. Trust Fund
4. Joint Investment Fund
5. Cooperation Agency
6. Financial Institute
7. Integrated socio-economic zone

Of these instruments, only the first and the second one have worked.

The status-neutral “Liaison Mechanism” was established under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program to facilitate communication and cooperation between the various parties to the conflict. It was based on the experience of the previous Georgian-Abkhazian bilateral coordination commission. The coordination mechanism has a coordinator only from the Abkhaz side, while on the Ossetian side this mechanism has not worked.

The work of the Coordination Mechanism is positively assessed by all parties. International organizations (e.g., the Council of Europe and the United Nations Development Program) have been able to plan and implement Georgian-Abkhazian meetings and joint projects with the involvement and support of the Liaison Mechanism. Medical and humanitarian aid provided by the Georgian government, by international organizations, or by individual countries would be provided to the Abkhaz side through this mechanism. Also, the needs and initiatives appearing in Abkhazia were communicated to the Georgian side and international organizations through the mechanism coordinator. In addition, the Liaison Mechanism was involved in the process of determining the whereabouts of persons missing as a result of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and its aftermath, and the transfer of their remains in case of death.

It should be noted that the Liaison Mechanism has also often served as a ‘humanitarian corridor’. However, its more effective functioning has been hampered at various times by objective or political factors, such as the closure of checkpoints, declaration of a state of emergency during pandemics, and the restriction of movement (e.g., during the coronavirus and H1N1 outbreaks). The work of the mechanism is closely related to the political processes and the dynamics of relations between the Georgian-Abkhazian parties. In crisis situations, the quality of the mechanism is reduced and, consequently, the process of organizing projects or providing assistance is hindered. Nevertheless, the Liaison Mechanism has not stopped operating at any stage of its existence. However, the effective functioning of the mechanism depends to great extent on personal relationships and the coordinator’s personal qualities.

Having recognized the role and function of the Liaison Mechanism in Georgian-Abkhazian relations, the lack of such a mechanism with the South Ossetian side has significantly hampered work on rebuilding trust in the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia as well as on providing humanitarian assistance.

Neutral Identity Card (NID) and Neutral Travel Document (NTD) can be obtained by people living in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia upon presentation of residence and identity

documents. In the conditions of occupation and isolation, Abkhazians and South Ossetians can participate in the programs offered by the Georgian government using the neutral ID card, and travel to a number of different countries of the world with the neutral travel document. As of 2018, the neutral travel document is recognized by 12 countries, including 9 EU member states.²³

For years already, since 2010, the presentation of the neutral ID card was a prerequisite for enjoying educational, healthcare, economic and other benefits offered by the Georgian government. Until recently, this has significantly hindered the use of respective opportunities by Abkhazians and South Ossetians, due to both political and administrative impediments. No consultations were held with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian sides regarding the planned neutral documents. Therefore, their position and needs were not adequately taken into account. Neutral documents were perceived by Abkhazians and South Ossetians as a Georgian propaganda move, a kind of trap. Therefore, if necessary, they would choose obtaining a regular Georgian passport, as it implied a simpler process, while at the same time the passport made it possible to travel to more countries. Obtaining neutral documents was a more bureaucratically complicated process, as Georgian state agencies involved often lacked information and coordination.

After the change of government in 2012, the obligation to submit a neutral document to participate in state programs was removed, although the possibility of obtaining the document remained. Those wishing to participate in the programs were now able to receive services also using so-called an identity card issued in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. From 2018, the new peace initiative of the Government of Georgia “A Step to a Better Future” proposes a new, status-neutral mechanism by assigning a so-called “individual number”.

The Trust Fund and the Joint Investment Fund as proposed in the Action Plan have not been established, but in 2019 the Peace Investment Fund for a Better Future was launched with the participation of the State Investment Partnership Fund and the Georgian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Fund is a financial instrument for the promotion of joint trade and business ideas envisaged by the new government initiative “A Step to a Better Future”. USAID-Georgia was involved in the technical attuning of the Fund and it is expected to start to operate by the fall of 2020.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Assessing the direct results of ten years of existence of the State Strategy for Occupied Territories – Engagement Through Cooperation, it is possible to state that the Strategy worked more effectively in the case of Abkhazia than in that of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. The most successful direction of the Strategy implementation is health care, with the “Referral Program” having attracted the participation of most people from the occupied territories, while the experience of general cooperation is positive too. Also, the “Liaison Mechanism” operating under the auspices of the UN Development Programme appeared to work most effectively among the Strategy’s engagement tools, although there has been no cooperation with the Tskhinvali region in this format. The development of economic relations remains one of the most important challenges, as the Strategy and the previously existing initiatives have not worked so far in this direction. Only the recently launched government program “Enterprise for a Better Future” has aroused interest among the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities, although the assessment of its outcomes is premature at this stage. Despite the lack of formal business projects, informal economic relations have intensified

²³ The Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, as well as Japan, Israel and the United States.

in recent years. One of the major difficulties, which affects all areas of the Strategy implementation, is related to the inadequate ability to provide accurate and comprehensive information to the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities. International and local organizations play a leading role in promoting inter-communal relations. Notably, the work on building trust and relationships through regular meetings has had a positive effect on cooperation in other areas as well. However, the implementation of state programs and joint projects still largely depends on the work of individuals, while it is its institutionalization and systematization that is important for the sustainability of the confidence-building process. Also, better coordination and agreed approach between the governmental structures of Georgia would improve the implementation process of the Strategy. One of the significant shortcomings of the Strategy and the programs offered within it is its unilateralism, in particular, the lack of involvement of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian communities in the process of their development.

The following recommendations were developed during the strategy evaluation process:

In order to promote the involvement and cooperation in the part of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, the Government of Georgia should:

1. With the assistance of international organizations and the use of existing dialogue formats, work to increase the involvement of the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, including through the establishment of a Liaison Mechanism and funding for projects planned with the participation of Ossetians;
2. With the assistance of international organizations and mechanisms (Geneva format, IPRM), through dialogue with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian sides, work actively to ensure freedom of movement across the dividing lines;
3. Ensure the depoliticization of peace-related, humanitarian and human rights issues, and in this regard cooperate with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian sides;
4. Develop a vision and specific mechanisms for disseminating information in Abkhazian and Ossetian societies;
5. In the process of developing peace programs and initiatives, hold consultations with representatives of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities in order to take into account their interests, needs and circumstances;
6. With the assistance of international organizations and Georgian NGOs, support the strengthening of local resources in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, including human resources, civil society, and infrastructure;
7. Take into account the experience of local and international organizations related to the process of developing peace initiatives, especially in the fields of economy and inter-communal relations;
8. Promote the development of inter-communal relations and develop a systemic vision of the role of public diplomacy in the implementation of various directions of the strategy;
9. Work for the development of relations with the peoples of the Caucasus and the relevant diasporas (e.g., with the Abkhazian Diaspora in Turkey);
10. In the direction of economic relations, work to reach a political agreement with the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides in order to increase the security of the business environment and motivate the business sector;
11. Ensure the provision of accommodation and living expenses for students from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region / South Ossetia, and support vocational education programs;
12. In the direction of healthcare, provide funding for primary diagnostics within the framework of the “Referral Program”, taking into account the currently existing risks and shortcomings.

In administrative and legislative areas:

13. Relevant agencies of the Government of Georgia shall work in mutual agreement and coordination on the process of improving the legislative and administrative space, and the implementation of the state peace and humanitarian programs:

14. The Government of Georgia should take care of the institutionalization and systematization of effective programs and approaches, so that the peace process does not depend on the change of any specific government and officials, or upon individual persons;

15. The mandate of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality should be broadened to include the coordination, consultation and administrative matters, as well as the implementation of program activities defined by the set of goals of the Strategy;

16. Relevant agencies of the Government of Georgia should develop mechanisms for analyzing, monitoring and evaluating the risks of the peace programs, duly taking into account conflict sensitivity and the “Do No Harm” principle;

17. The Government of Georgia should strive to attract local financial resources in parallel with increasing the support from international partners and donor organizations.

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Annex 1. Number of Patients from the Occupied Territories Funded under the State Referral Program in 2011-2019

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Abkhazia			161	396	902	1,402	1,136	1,174	1,227
South Ossetia	167	381	238	445	648	697	403	342	254
Financing	594,419 ₾	1,261,662 ₾	728,975 ₾	3,166,603 ₾	4,267,512 ₾	5,182,504 ₾	4,214,654 ₾	4,528,766 ₾	4,119,538 ₾
Healthcare Component	2 mil. ₾	3 mil. ₾	2 mil. ₾	4,5 mil. ₾	6 mil. ₾	6 mil. ₾	6 mil. ₾	7 mil. ₾	7 mil. ₾

Annex 2. Information about the respondents.

1. Interview N1, Former official at the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 25.05.2020
2. Interview N2, Employee of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 09.06.2020
3. Interview N3, Representative of the United Nations Development Program in Georgia, 03.07.2020
4. Interview N4, Representative of the Council of Europe's Confidence Building Mechanism Division, 21.07.2020
5. Interview N5, Expert, Local NGO, 07.08.2020
6. Interview N6, Expert, Local NGO, 09.08.2020
7. Interview N7, Expert, Local NGO, 13.08.2020

Note: Due to limitations caused by the coronavirus, interviews were conducted via telephone and online communication.

DEALING WITH THE PAST FOR TRANSFORMING CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA

I V A N E A B R A M A S H V I L I

After significant political changes, wars or mass atrocities, societies are left with many questions around the past, identity, victimization and justice. Understanding a difficult past can be a challenging long-term process, especially for post-conflict nations with a record of gross human rights violations. Dealing with the Past (DwP), with its comprehensive approach, can be a useful method for overcoming a painful political heritage and focusing on building sustainable peace.

DwP is a relatively new concept, but its evolution can be traced back to post-war Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (overcoming the past), when the country tried to come to terms with the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust. This process lasted for decades and involved investigations, court trials and critical self-reflection across academic and political circles. It is important to note that this struggle of understanding the past also involved thinking about the future and what this memory meant for next generations.¹

Today, DwP is generally associated with the set of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms needed for dealing with the legacies of human rights violations during transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy and during conflicts.² It stands on four major victim-oriented rights and principles against impunity³:

1. The right to know (right of individual victims and their families to learn the truth about what happened to them or their relatives; securing archives, preserving collective memory, providing access to information related to serious human rights violations);
2. The right to justice (right of victims to a fair remedy; duty of the state to investigate, prosecute, and duly punish);
3. The right to reparation (e.g. restitution; compensation for physical or mental injury, for lost opportunities with respect to employment, education, and social benefits; rehabilitation through medical care and physiotherapy; symbolic acts such as an annual homage to the victims, the establishment of monuments and museums, or the recognition by the state of its responsibility in the form of a public apology);
4. The guarantee of non-recurrence of crimes (e.g. protection of victims and society from further violations; ensuring good governance and the rule of law).

Besides this legal dimension, DwP also involves deconstruction of nationalism and partisan collective memories. Politicizing the past and promoting collective remembering of victimization and “memory wars” remain immediate problems after conflicts as parties strategically construct collective memory and seek to institutionalize it so that it is shared across space and time.⁴ In this process, partisan memories successfully mobilize state resources and public emotions.⁵

Overall, in societies which are seeking to move beyond violent conflicts, DwP aims at creating institutions and mechanisms necessary for establishing democratic norms of tolerance and power-sharing and transforming victim-perpetrator identities.⁶ This focus on building a democratic, just and peaceful society is a crucial component of a conflict transformation process as large-scale human rights violations always impact individual, collective and structural relationships that prevent societ-

¹ *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: Definition by Deutsche Welle

² Sisson, Jonathan (2010) *A Conceptual Framework for Dealing with the Past*, In: *Politorbis* Nr. 50, p. 11.

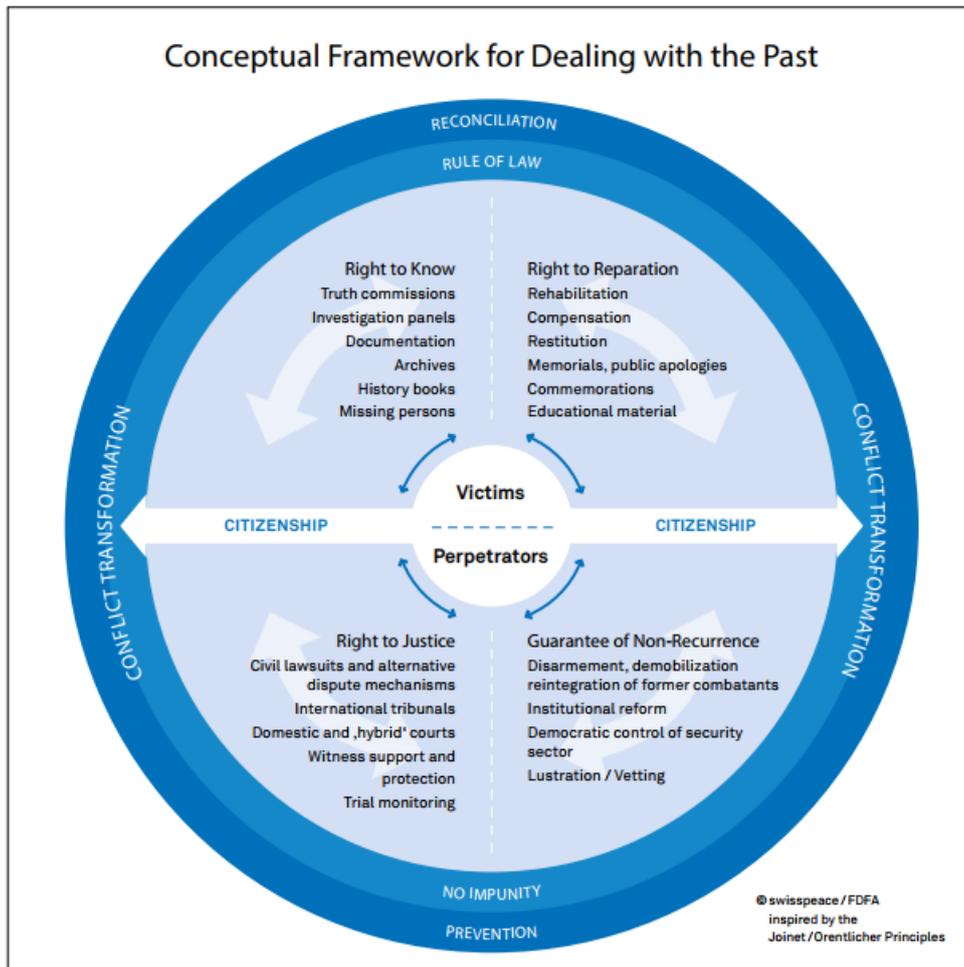
³ *Ibid*, pp. 12-13

⁴ McGrattan, Cillian (2014) *Policing politics: framing the past in post-conflict divided societies*, *Democratization*, 21:3, pp. 390-394

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 394

⁶ Baumgartner Elisabeth, Gabriel Sidonia & Jones Briony (2015) *A Transformative Approach to Dealing with the Past*, *Swisspeace*, p. 9

ies from reconciliation.⁷ Understanding this close interaction between democracy, DwP and conflict transformation can be a useful tool for explaining why DwP can be successful in some post-conflict settings and not in others.



CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA AND DEALING WITH THE PAST: ABSENCE OF COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK

During all of its milestones in recent history, Georgia has needed to deal with its difficult political legacies and address human rights violations. The need emerged after significant political transitions (e.g. dissolution of the Soviet Union, regaining of independence, 1992 coup d'état, 2003 Rose Revolution and government change in 2012) and as a result of the ethno-political conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As these conflicts have become more and more intractable over the past 27 years, they require particular attention from all sides, but primarily from the Georgian political elite as time essentially works against Tbilisi. Even though there have been numerous attempts and isolated initiatives from Georgian civil society to start a DwP process around conflict-related topics, they were never applied systematically. The reasons for this are manifold.

Firstly, historical experience has shown that DwP mostly functions in liberal democracies with strong institutions and public trust. Georgia since its independence from the Soviet Union has struggled to build a genuine democratic system, and the process is still on-going. In the absence of well-established justice mechanisms, transparent decision-making and a political culture based on consensus, the political process mostly gravitates around a fistful of people, some of which are per-

sonally connected with the events of the 1990s or 2008. As a result, opportunities for DwP around conflict-related topics are limited as they elicit little political will from the Georgian political elite.

Secondly, since the start of negotiations Tbilisi lacks coherency in its peace policy vis-à-vis Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. In the 1990s, due to the weakness of control mechanisms and underdeveloped state institutions, the achievements of the government in the peace process often fell victim to the aggressive actions of armed groups.⁸ Even though after the Rose Revolution the new government disbanded those paramilitary units, it continued the policy of what Georgian statesman and then member of parliament Ivlian Khaindrava called “negotiations during the day and war at night.”⁹ Continuing with a changed strategy of cooperation during 2005-2006 and then switching back to aggressive policies proved that Mikheil Saakashvili’s government also lacked a clear strategy how the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia could be addressed. The change of the power in 2012 has also failed to yield the desired transformation of the peace policy, which remains a captive of the legacies of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. The official “single conflict discourse” which emerged since 2008 suggests that there is no ethno-political conflict between Georgians and the Abkhazians, and Georgians and Ossetians, while Russia is the only party to the conflict. This denial has considerably hampered an objective perception of the existing situation and prevented the state from implementing an adequate peace policy.¹⁰ In the end, this political inconsistency shows that the Georgian political elite lacks a long-term vision about the transformation of the country’s conflicts.

Lastly, in the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts, there are no clear lines between victim and perpetrator identities, which makes it difficult to develop an adequate DwP approach. The 2008 war and Russian aggression has made the situation even more complex. Regardless of Abkhaz and Ossetians declaring *de facto* independence, their identities are still constructed around collective victimization meaning that instead of suggesting entry points, the current representation of the past in all three societies promotes “intergroup competitive victimhood” i.e. process when conflict-affected societies try to prove that their group has suffered more than their adversaries.¹¹

CONNECTING DWP AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN GEORGIA

DwP, with its belief that it is central to address past human rights violations to achieve a just and peaceful society,¹² is an inevitable component of transforming conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and this has long been recognized among Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian civil societies. Throughout the years there has been significant progress made in areas like searching for missing persons, facilitating a dialogue based on biographical interviews or systematizing fragmented archives, however it still needs to penetrate the mainstream public discourse. In order to de-isolate this progress, Georgia needs a holistic DwP approach, but due to the reasons explained above, it will be an extremely difficult process and mostly civil society’s burden to bear.

In 2019, under the aegis of the UN in Georgia, a series of conferences and discussions involving local and international stakeholders were organized to map the work of Georgian civil society in regards to DwP and to find potential areas for further stimulating this process. As a result, a number of relevant fields were identified which could have important long-term effect on promoting reconcilia-

⁸ Abramashvili Ivane and Koiava Revaz (2018) *25 Years of Georgia’s Peace Policy*. Caucasian House, p. 63

⁹ Speech of Ivlian Khaindrava on Tskhinvali events, (2004), Republican Party of Georgia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3bllcZO>

¹⁰ Abramashvili & Koiava, p. 82

¹¹ Psaltis Charis, Carretero Mario, Čehajić-Clancy Sabina (Eds.) (2017) *History Education and Conflict Transformation: Social Psychological Theories, History Teaching and Reconciliation*, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 13

¹² Baumgartner, Gabriel & Jones, p. 7

tion between Georgian-Abkhaz, and Georgian-South Ossetian societies. These fields can be grouped into judicial and non-judicial categories and cover the following areas which will be analyzed individually: restoring archives; promoting discussions and dialogue based on biographical interviews; fostering conflict-sensitivity in the education system and promoting transitional justice.

RESTORING ARCHIVES

Archives play a critical role in preserving a nation's history and the rights of its citizens. In post-conflict settings, national archives, with their scientific and political value, are important institutions for exploring and shaping collective memories about past events.

The process of restoring the files of the national archive of Abkhazia, which was allegedly burned down by the Georgian military during the conflict, has turned into one of the key areas where Georgian, Abkhaz and international researchers and scientist cooperate. The archive, which contained more than 176,000 artifacts with thousands of books, folklore records and photographs, was unique not only for the Abkhaz and Georgian people, but for the whole of the Caucasus.¹³ In addition to its historical and cultural significance, these archives also had a very practical use, as personal documents (birth, death, marriage, pension certificates, etc.) were also preserved there.

Modern Georgian historian Gia Anchabadze was one of the first who began to help with the restoration of the burned Abkhaz archive and the transfer from the Georgian archives of copies of documents from the 19th and 20th Centuries.¹⁴ Today, a number of local and international organizations work in this direction. Recently, significant efforts were made by the British organization Conciliation Resources and Swisspeace to systematize the archives on both sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The archives, consisting of official documents, personal photographs, materials from private archives, eyewitness accounts from ordinary people and public figures, newspaper reports, film clips and other media materials, try to restore as full as possible a picture of Georgian-Abkhaz relations from 1989 to 1996.¹⁵

In the case of South Ossetia, important steps were made by the local Georgian organization, Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts in 2019 when the timeline of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, based on archival documentation, was launched online and became available to the public. The timeline consists of scanned documents, newspaper articles, texts of decrees and agreements which are systematized and arranged in chronological order, providing a full picture of relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali between 1988-2008.¹⁶

Besides civil society efforts, Georgian state agencies also cooperate with Abkhaz partners in exchanging the archives; however, cherry-picking of the materials from both sides still remains a big challenge.¹⁷ Besides, access to the state archives for Georgian researchers remains limited as copying documents requires significant financial resources and some parts of the archives are totally beyond reach.¹⁸ This shows that political sensitivity about the archives is still strong across the conflict divide, emphasizing the need to further strengthen work in this direction.

¹³ How Abkhazia is trying to restore its historic archive which burned down 27 years ago during the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict Jamnews, 27.01.2020 Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fA8B8H>

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ The Memory Project, Conciliation Resources. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cgM4vs>

¹⁶ ISNC, Timeline of Georgian-Ossetian Conflict (1989-2008). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dyBH7S>

¹⁷ Gvinjia Roman - Project of archives with the Georgian side works better than others, interview with Netgazeti. 03.05.2019 Available in Georgian at: <https://bit.ly/2SSaC6x>

¹⁸ Increasing Transparency of Archival Documents in Georgia, Legislative Proposal of IDFI, 23.04.2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cjhTE4>

PROMOTING DISCUSSIONS AND DIALOGUE BASED ON BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEWS

Dialogue based on constructive storytelling is an essential part of peacebuilding. It has the potential to heal, to foster empathy and forgiveness, to challenge master narratives and to help in better understanding the past. Oral stories and biographical interviews serve as powerful tools for preserving national memory and enriching archives. When projected into public space, they can stir up important discussions (often self-critical and intergenerational) about the past and its connections to existing reality.

In the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts, as well as within these individual societies, the Berghof Foundation has been leading a continuous dialogue system, which is based on recording, analyzing and discussing the biographical interviews. In this process, which started in 2012, Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian participants exchange stories about their own history in a biographical mode, listening to different voices and sharing various experiences. The aim is to encourage and support civil society actors in sharing stories that enhance peaceful and tolerant interactions with former enemies. These stories are not one-sided, either portraying only positive experiences or recounting violent experiences of living together. They are usually discussed in special Biographical Salons in Sukhumi and Tbilisi which provide a space for regular meetings and storytelling by war witnesses such as veterans, relatives of missing persons, IDPs, etc.¹⁹

Despite the fact that during the last eight years about 450 biographical interviews and 700 personal stories were recorded by the Berghof Foundation which are discussed annually at hundreds of workshops and engage thousands of people,²⁰ this process has the potential to grow even more and attract more resources and larger engagement to challenge the prevailing narratives and mistrust across the conflict divide.

FOSTERING CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education is one of the most important human rights and its accessibility is significantly affected during and after military conflict. In post-conflict contexts, education can play a major role in transforming or, conversely, deepening social division.

Over the years, education has contributed to the reproduction of Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts among new generations as different governments saw and framed the recent past differently. Georgian researcher of memory politics, Guranda Bursulaia, categorized this inconsistency of recent history teaching in Georgian schools into three different phases: traumatic silence (1993-2003), personalized silence (2004-2007) and victimized silence (since 2008). According to her, the first phase was a type of silence that followed immediately after the conflicts and was emotionally overloaded. Thus, before 2003 Georgian history teaching completely left out the wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, the official discourse started to look for scapegoats and instead of holding responsibility for the past as a State, a limited number of people were accused of all wrongdoings. As for the last stage, which began as a result of August 2008 and still continues today, there is a selective voicing of the victimization narrative, shouting one-sided pain and suffering and emphasizing a single existing conflict (Georgian - Russian) narrative.²¹

Besides schools, problems also prevail in higher education. The main challenge here is a lack

¹⁹ Berghof Foundation, History, Memory and Identity. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2SRWKJk>

²⁰ According to the Berghof Foundation, in 2019 alone, 155 Discussion Workshops were facilitated in Abkhazia, while in Georgia proper this number reached 250 engaging 1800 and 3000 participants respectively.

²¹ Bursulaia Guranda, (2020): *The voices of silence: The case of Georgian history textbooks*, Caucasus Survey. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2019.1709784>

of financial support for scientific research, which is necessary for introducing progressive and new visions in understanding the history around Georgia's conflicts. In addition, lacking peace studies as a separate discipline in Georgian universities is another part of the problem as in local academia conflicts are mostly seen through the paradigm of geopolitics and security while individual, collective or other micro and macro dimensions of conflict are neglected.²²

In order to manage this complex relationship between conflict and education, different countries around the world have adopted a conflict-sensitive approach. This method was developed by the inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and it aims to deliver education programs and policies in a way that considers the conflict context and aims to minimize negative (i.e. contribution to conflict) and maximize positive impact.²³ Recently, a number of Georgian CSOs started working with the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia to adopt conflict-sensitivity in history teaching processes in Georgian schools. This is, however, going to be a long process which will ultimately depend on the political will of the government.

PROMOTING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Transitional justice in the context of conflict transformation is quite broad and involves anything that a society devises to deal with a legacy of conflict and/or widespread human rights violations, from changes in criminal codes to those in high school textbooks, from creation of memorials, museums and days of mourning, to police and court reform, to tackling the distributional inequities that underlie the conflict.²⁴ In the case of Georgia, despite massive violations of the laws of war and also human rights, and several thousand deaths and hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, wrongdoings during conflicts have never been addressed from the perspective of transitional justice. Impunity and the shortfall of truth-seeking efforts still remain as some of the most challenging issues for the conflict transformation process. Meanwhile, it is becoming increasingly urgent as many key individuals to the events of the early 1990s have already passed away.

Even though Georgian peacebuilders and human rights defenders do not argue about the need and importance of transitional justice for confidence building between Georgian and Abkhaz and Georgian and South Ossetian societies, there is no consensus as to whether it should wait for favorable political preconditions to arise or not. Some arguing in favor, mention the adoption of the Georgian law on property restitution to victims of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in 2006, which was major progress but in the absence of a genuine peace process did not lead to any practical implications. Nevertheless, some argue that application of transitional justice mechanisms is already a strong message and can create the space for cooperation across the conflict divide itself.²⁵

As there is no readiness from the Georgian government to apply transitional justice mechanisms to its peace policies, this process could be led by civil society, which would need to adapt its own transitional justice mechanisms as there is no universal model. Initial steps could be establishing a temporary and apolitical truth-seeking commission and documentation of the human rights violations which are accessible to the Georgian side. Part of this work has already been done in the 1990s and 2000s but it requires further systematization and verification.²⁶

²² Abramashvili Ivane and Kalandarishvili Nino (2020) *Conflict Transformation and Conflict-sensitive Teaching: Challenges for Georgian Education System*, Center for Peace and Civic Development.

²³ INEE Guidance Note on Conflict Sensitive Education, New York, 2013. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fFsLy1>

²⁴ Undine Kayser-Whande and Stephanie Schell-Faucon (2010). *Transitional Justice and Conflict Transformation in Conversation* in *Politorbis* Nr. 50-3, p. 98

²⁵ Studio Re, Discussion on the Transitional Justice in Georgia, 2014. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtVf69cc5_0

²⁶ Ibid

Naturally, it would be a significant step towards restoring justice if the Georgian government worked with truth-seeking commissions to prosecute human rights abusers of the conflicts of the 1990s based on documented materials. However, it is highly unlikely as prosecutions have rarely been used as an instrument for dealing with legacies of past abuses in Georgia, as well as in the post-Soviet space more generally. Here, bypassing judicial accountability is typically done in the name of stability, or kinship ties and loyalties.²⁷ In addition, releasing from criminal liability due to the expiration of the limitation period also poses a big challenge in prosecuting some crimes.

Against the backdrop of limited opportunities, a promising mechanism for Georgian civil society is to pursue symbolic reparations. Abkhaz, Ossetian and Georgian memorials of the conflicts so far have been used to promote nationalism and victimization, while they have the potential to serve ideas of justice, reconciliation and peace.²⁸

Unlike other mechanisms of transitional justice in Georgia, the search for missing persons is an area where significant progress was made. Since 2004 the ICRC has been working hard in this direction and in 2010 it succeeded in setting up two separate coordination mechanisms (bilateral Georgian-Abkhazian and trilateral Georgian-Russian-South Ossetian) for clarifying the fate of persons missing in relation to the armed conflicts of the 1990s and August 2008, and their aftermaths. Through the humanitarian platforms, the remains of up to 500 persons have been recovered, out of which close to 200 have been identified and handed over to their families. As about 2,300 people are still unaccounted for in connection with the armed conflicts, the search process requires further work and more coordination between the conflict parties.²⁹

APPROACHING DEALING WITH THE PAST HOLISTICALLY: POTENTIAL STEPS FOR GEORGIA

DwP is a nationally-owned process with an endemic model. Based on the analysis provided above, it is clear that in the case of Georgia, the government is not ready for initiating a systematic DwP process around conflict-related issues. It is also clear that the Abkhaz and South Ossetian political elites have no intention of getting involved in this process as there have been massive breaches of human rights from their sides as well. Hence, the only way forward in this situation is for Georgian civil society to lead by example and in upcoming years adopt as holistic an approach as possible within the limited opportunities to deal with the legacy of the conflicts.

First of all, Georgian civil society groups, peacebuilders, human rights defenders, academics and international partners in their personal capacity expressing willingness to get involved in this extremely complex work would need to establish a formal coalition or network. Without the institutionalization of this process it would be extremely hard to coordinate the work. It would also be necessary to engage the Public Defender's Office as well as watchdog organizations and CSOs working on transparency as effectively addressing past mistakes is directly linked to government accountability. As Magdalena Grono put it in her 2009 report about the transitional justice prospects in Georgia, "if accountability is not pursued, the risk that abuses and infringements may recur—in the conflict resolution or democratization arenas alike—is high. Decades of official impunity have bred an environment of societal mistrust of government structures and public institutions, and cynicism toward the professed Western value- and rights-based discourses. The cumulative impact of ignored legacies of abuse has had a devastating impact on Georgian society."³⁰

²⁷ Grono Magdalena Frichova (2009). *Transitional Justice and Georgia's Conflicts: Breaking the Silence*, ICTJ, p. 27

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 29

²⁹ ICRC. Missing in connection with 1990s, 2008 conflicts remains of 23 more people identified, 12.03.2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dGZNw6>

³⁰ Grono, p.23

As a next step, the coalition should pursue detailed thematic inquiries and needs assessments in each of the areas identified above (restoring archives, promoting discussions and dialogue based on biographical interviews, fostering conflict-sensitivity in the education system and promoting transitional justice) in order to form a realistic holistic strategy. This latter would also require formation of a media strategy since the Georgian mainstream media is still fragmented and biased regarding covering the news or providing analysis related to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is crucial to increase awareness on the importance of DwP among journalists in order to bring the information clearly to the public.

After the formation of a holistic strategy, the Georgian coalition should work closely with their partners and donor community to support formation of such civil society working groups in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well. This would be a crucial step for establishing a comprehensive and multi-lateral dialogue process around DwP issues which will be a significant step towards addressing past injustices and will ultimately lead to confidence building.

IMMEDIATE STEPS

RESTORING ARCHIVES

- Georgian CSOs should create a permanent working group to engage the government and parliament of Georgia in order to make state archives more accessible (e.g. decreasing fees, opening up archives about concrete historic events or individuals, etc.)
- Georgian researchers should strengthen work in private archives. This area is not examined sufficiently as there is no exact data on the scope. Based on observation, most of these archives are family ones, which are not systematized and digitalized, hence the risk of losing important materials is especially high;
- More human resources should be invested in digitalization and categorization of the already acquired archival materials. Unfortunately, there is no database or means of coordination between CSOs; without a systemized working process, exchange of archives will be protracted and sporadic;
- Existing materials and databases should be popularized for research purposes:
 - CSOs should ensure public access to the materials at their hands. The best way to do this is to digitalize and publish them on websites;
 - Young researchers should be engaged and incentivized to work on Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian archives. CSOs could cooperate with local universities, possibly with the faculties of history, to give course credits for students who get involved in studying and systematizing these archives;
 - Periodic exhibitions and media discussions would be necessary to reach out to a larger audience. Besides, media products such as documentary movies based on the archive materials could be beneficial to stir up public interest on specific conflict-related topics.

PROMOTING DISCUSSIONS AND DIALOGUE BASED ON BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEWS

- It is important to analyze and categorize already recorded biographical interviews and life stories about the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is necessary to understand where the process stands and what imbalances (e.g. gender, age, geographic) need to be addressed.
- CSOs should work with mainstream media (national TV channels in the Georgian context) to organize public discussions based on collected stories and interviews. This is a necessary step to give them practical use in confidence building. During 2016-2017 the Berghof Foundation tried to take practical steps in this direction by conducting 49 radio programs in Georgia on Radio Lib-

erty, but television still remains as a primary source of information for the majority (69%) of the Georgian population.³¹

- To enlarge the process of collecting life stories, a partnership with the newly established Youth Agency could be a useful start. As taking part in various peacebuilding initiatives is part of the organization's mandate, partnership can help CSOs to reach remote regions of Georgia as well as to engage new participants in dialogue and discussion platforms.

FOSTERING CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

- As mentioned above, the working format between the Ministry of Education of Georgia, peacebuilders, education experts, teachers, authors of history textbooks and new generation of historians on adopting conflict-sensitivity in Georgian education system is already in place, however it should be further enlarged to ensure effective communication as well as access to local educational resources and analysis of best international practices;
- Supporting materials for history teachers about the recent past and conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be prepared and integrated into the school curriculum. In February 2020 a group of Georgian historians and peace researchers have already started working on the supporting material for history teachers which will cover the history of Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian relations from the middle ages to the modern period, with a special focus on the 20th century and conflicts in the 1990s;
- With the cooperation of the National Center for Teacher Professional Development, a special training module on conflict-sensitive teaching should be elaborated which will guarantee engagement of a large group of teachers across Georgia and providing trainings for them;
- With the engagement of the General Education Management and Development Department of the Ministry of Education, conflict-sensitivity should be introduced as a cross-cutting methodology and, along with history, it should be integrated into subjects like Georgian literature, Civic education and Arts;
- CSOs working on confidence-building should work with the Ministry of Education to introduce conflict analysis and peacebuilding as a separate elective subject in Georgian schools. This will provide students with theoretical and practical skills in conflict management and it will be a big step towards breaking the cycle of the conflict and preventing the reproduction of ethnic stereotypes among new generations.

PROMOTING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

- A civil commission should be established in Georgia which will document and examine the major human rights violations and important tragic events (e.g. The Dzar Tragedy) of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and develop recommendations for the government of Georgia on administration of justice through traditional and ad hoc mechanisms. It is reasonable to establish this commission under the Public Defender's Office. Even though criminal prosecution will be impossible in the majority of cases from 1990s conflicts due to the statutory time limitation, it is still important to document the human rights violations and abuses, define the level of crimes and develop recommendations for reparation of victims, as well as seek truth and accountability;
- CSOs should pressure Government and Parliament to sign and ratify long-awaited International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which Georgian Public Defender's Office has been recommending since 2013. During the last round of UPR review, Georgia committed to ratify the Convention. The Convention defines the crime of enforced disappearance and obliges Member States to take appropriate measures to ensure that enforced

³¹ NDI, Public Attitudes in Georgia, Results of December 2019 survey. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2MLHp9E>

disappearance at the national level is a criminal offense. The Convention also obliges the State to conduct a thorough and objective investigation as soon as it receives relevant information. The Convention also establishes right of any victim to know the truth about the circumstances of an enforced disappearance and the fate of the disappeared person, and the right to freedom to seek, receive and impart information to this end.

CONCLUSION

DwP is a painful, tedious and sensitive journey for all societies who try to do it. The key to DwP lies in the fact that it is a process oriented on the future. It is a cornerstone of reconciliation which does not demand forgetting. On the contrary, it requires an understanding and evaluation of the past so it will be possible to build a peaceful, secure and democratic future.

The protracted conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian occupation and internal political reluctance makes it an almost impossible task to deal with the past abuses in Georgia. On the other hand, providing comfort and answers to the ones who have lost their loved ones or chances to live normal lives as a result of the bloodshed and discriminatory policies, would be an inevitable pursuit for conflict transformation. There are enough indications from the recent past that without addressing past traumas and impunities, neither Georgian, nor Abkhaz and Ossetian societies have a guarantee that force will not prevail over peace once again.

CHANGED REALITY IN THE CAUCASUS – ECHOES OF THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR IN GEORGIA

ZURAB MENAGARISHVILI

On September 26, 2020, I received a bottle of Armenian cognac as a birthday present from a friend living in the town of Abovyan. This date was also congratulated by another friend in Baku, who made me promise to visit him after the end of the pandemic. None of us could imagine that evening that war would start the very next morning which would drastically change the geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus.

In September 2020, hostilities between the Azerbaijani and Armenian sides resumed once again in Nagorno Karabakh. In this case, the military action happened at the largest scale since the 1990s, claiming the lives of thousands of people¹. The war, which lasted 44 days, ended with apparent military and political advantage of Azerbaijan. Russia has also strengthened its position in the region. It is also noteworthy that for the first time in a long stretch, Turkey, as a state with aspirations for regional hegemony, has returned to the South Caucasus region. Given the actual consequences of the second Karabakh war and its geopolitical context, studying it, including from a Georgian perspective, is crucial for understanding what changes have taken place in the region and what it should mean for a country like Georgia, in particular with regards to its internal conflicts, national security, and the economy.

In addition, studying this conflict is relevant and important for Georgia in the sense that 6.3% of the country's population are ethnically Azerbaijani and 4.5% are ethnically Armenian² who still have strong emotional ties with the Republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Georgian state is trying to integrate citizens representing ethnic minorities into the common Georgian civil space, while the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh poses certain challenge for Georgia on the path of socialization of compactly settled ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in single social space.

The reality that has emerged in the region in the aftermath of the second Karabakh war deserves a special mention. Official Baku was able to achieve a political victory by use of force that, according to Ilham Aliyev's statement, had hitherto been impossible throughout all the years of diplomacy and negotiation, which "eventually became even more impossible due to the Armenian side losing its motivation to negotiate."³ All this may, on the one hand, give the Georgian society a militaristic perception that peacebuilding and the process of restoring trust with Abkhazians and Ossetians are futile and ineffective; while on the other hand, may give Abkhazian and Ossetian societies certain impression and create possibility for being manipulated by some internal political groups or even another state willing to instill the idea that the Georgians will try to resolve the conflict by military force as soon as such possibility may emerge. This will create a permanent set-up for confrontation, which naturally complicates the process of restoring trust between Georgians, on one hand, and Ossetians and Abkhazians, on the other.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the contemporary South Caucasus, viewed as a unified regional complex, has not been properly studied by the Georgian academic community. Therefore, analyzing the impact on Georgia of the second Karabakh war and its outcomes, as well as the results

¹ According to official Baku, Azerbaijan lost 2,783 soldiers. The Armenian side still counts the number of casualties. Search operations are also underway in the Hadrut / Khojevand, Fuzuli, Zangelan, Kubadli districts.

² GeoStat. Main Results of the 2014 General Population Census

³ President Aliyev: Armenian regime did everything to undermine negotiations. 08. 10. 2020. <https://www.azernews.az/nation/170203.html>

of geopolitical rearrangement in the region, becomes increasingly important, especially since the events happening in the neighboring countries have a direct and immediate impact on Georgia.

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the consequences of the second Karabakh war and to study its possible effects on Georgia.

CONFLICT CHRONOLOGY

The armed conflict in Nagorno Karabakh between the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations began before the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues to this day in various forms. Naturally, the confrontation between the two peoples has an older origin than the Soviet Union itself, but one thing is clear: the conflict, which took place in the late 1980s and led to a full-scale war, developed the way it did just when the central power institutions of the Soviet Union had weakened and virtually disappeared, while local forces began to struggle in pursuance of their own interests. The Soviet system, while it still existed, was able to temporarily stop the historical conflict between the two peoples, but was powerless to completely eliminate it⁴. On the contrary, the federal ethno-territorial arrangement aimed at creation of “Soviet statehood / identity”, has also somehow enabled peoples to have their own autonomous republics in relatively larger Soviet republics that were accompanied by borders and governance related disagreements. These have further aggravated pre-existing tensions not just in Karabakh and the South Caucasus, but also in other parts of the Soviet Union⁵.

The history of hostilities in Karabakh following the collapse of the Soviet Union brings together several separate incidents of military confrontation:

- The first confrontation between the newly created Azerbaijani and Armenian states ended in a full-scale war, in which the Armenian side was able to gain an advantage. As a result, the Armenians gained control not only of most of the territory of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region, but also of the surrounding Azerbaijani districts, where the majority of the population was Azerbaijani.
- The second incident occurred in 2016 and is referred to as the April War, or the Four Day War. During this confrontation, Azerbaijan managed to occupy some strategic heights, while according to official Yerevan’s position, Armenian forces were able to repel the enemy attack. This modest military success instilled a sense of self-confidence in the Azerbaijani society⁶.
- The third and final case is the 44-day war, which began on September 27 and is also referred to as the Second Karabakh War. As a result of the action, Azerbaijan managed to gain control of all areas beyond the borders of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region, to which Baku’s jurisdiction had no longer extended after the First Karabakh War. The Azerbaijani army also took control of the town of Shusha / Shushi, as well as the southern part of Nagorno-Karabakh [Hadrut /Khojevand district], which had previously been populated predominantly by Armenians. The outcome of the second Karabakh war is considered within their respective societies an obvious success for Azerbaijan, and a defeat for Armenia.

It was this last war that took place almost 30 years after the first one that has once again changed the balance of power in the South Caucasus region.

⁴ Cheterian, V. (2001). *Little Wars and a Great Game: Local Conflicts and International Competition in the Caucasus*. Basel: Swisspeace.

⁵ Geukjian, O. (2012). *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited

⁶ International Crisis Group. (2017). *Nagorno-Karabakh’s Gathering War Clouds*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

WHO (RATHER) WON?

The second Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan ended on the basis of the Russian-brokered agreement signed by the parties on the night of November 10. According to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, signing of the text of the agreement was “incredibly painful” for Armenia⁷.

The agreement comprises 9 clauses, including: the transfer of [occupied] territories by Armenia to Azerbaijan; the return of internally displaced persons to Nagorno-Karabakh; the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone; the launching of a Russian-Turkish joint ‘peacekeeping center’; the establishment of a corridor connecting the rest of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic; and the terms of functioning of the Lachin corridor. In a televised address after the agreement signing, which was broadcast on all TV channels in the country, Ilham Aliyev stressed that the document has no mention of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, and that the war ended with a *de facto* territorial and political success on the part of Azerbaijan.

By the time of the agreement signing, Baku already fully or partially controlled the Fuzuli, Jebrail, Khojevand, Zangilan, Kubadli districts, as well as the city of Shusha and the settlements in Lachin and Khojaly [Askeran] districts. On December 1, the Azerbaijani army, by gaining control of the Lachin district, completed the takeover of the territories provided for in the agreement.

The success of the Azerbaijani side is also related to the fact that the Republic of Turkey, which is considered to be the main political and military ally of Azerbaijan, has been involved in the process of mediation of the conflict, more precisely of the peace agreement and controlling the ceasefire implementation. Bringing around the engagement of Turkey in the region should be, naturally, perceived by the Azerbaijani side as a successful attempt to counter-balance Russian influence. From now on, it will not be the Russian Federation alone to be represented in the region, although there will be a relatively smaller presence of Turkey.

The issue of Nakhichevan corridor is also important. It has always been in Azerbaijan’s interest to have the shortest direct land connection with the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic⁸, which would geographically pass through Armenia, or more specifically through the Syunik province of Armenia. Until now, there has not been any legal basis for the existence of such a connection, and everything would depend on the existence of a bilateral agreement between the states of Azerbaijan and Armenia, while, for well-known reasons, such an agreement was previously unthinkable. After the second Karabakh war, under the new international agreement, Azerbaijan has already acquired the legal right to request the opening of such corridor.

As noted, there is an additional clause in the agreement that obliges the parties to return internally displaced persons to the conflict zone. This seems unrealistic in the short term, as given the post-war polarization between respective communities, peaceful coexistence is still unlikely at this stage. However, it does allow official Baku to constantly raise the issue of the return of Azerbaijani refugees to Mountainous Karabakh, hereby stressing the fact of non-implementation of undertaken obligations by Armenia; and also, due to high sensitivity of the topic, to exercise political influence on ongoing internal developments in Armenia.

⁷ Nikol Pashinyan made this statement the same night of the signing through his personal Facebook account. The statement was met with mixed reactions in the Armenian society. See the text of the statement here: <https://www.facebook.com/nikol.pashinyan/posts/2807204759599901>

⁸ Azerbaijan is currently connected to the Republic of Nakhichevan by two land routes. The first runs through Georgia and the Republic of Turkey and is relatively long, while the second is going to the Autonomous Republic via the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Ultimately, the success achieved in the war obviously evokes a sense of self-confidence and pride in Azerbaijani society, which is further reflected in the degree of legitimacy of the ruling elite, which has hitherto suffered a kind of crisis.

On the other hand, the agreement was followed by protests in Armenia. Protesters occupied the government and the parliament buildings, physically assaulted members of the parliament, and demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and early elections. Pashinyan finally agreed to the latter demand amid mass rallies and resignations by members of the government and MPs, therefore now new elections are to be held in Armenia.⁹

After the war, Armenia had to cede the territories it had gained as a result of the First Karabakh War. According to the conceptual vision formed through the OSCE format of negotiations, known as the “Madrid Principles”, which was last renewed in 2009, - if an agreement was reached, Armenia should cede most of the Azerbaijani territories around Karabakh, but by keeping Lachin and Kelbajar would also have land connections with de facto Karabakh. Also, the legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh would be determined¹⁰, which should have been a significant diplomatic victory for Armenia. Despite the general agreement on the basic principles, no specific agreement was reached on the central issues of the Madrid Principles. By comparison, as a result of the war, Armenia relinquished all the “assets” that it could have “traded” over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh¹¹, which is logically a serious political loss for Yerevan.

A separate topic of discussion is the military and manpower losses that are currently being established, as well as the influx of refugees who arrived from the conflict zone mainly to the Republic of Armenia.

In addition to Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is important to consider also the issues related to Turkey and the Russian Federation, both of which have also received certain political and geostrategic benefits from the current developments.

The Russian Federation, which allowed Azerbaijan to enjoy freedom of action during the conflict, has become the main guarantor of peace since the end of the war.

According to the tripartite agreement:

- 1960 lightly armed Russian peacekeepers have been deployed on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh;
- Russian observation posts and checkpoints will be opened along the so-called line of contact;
- The movement of passengers and cargo via the Lachin corridor will be controlled by Russian forces;
- Representatives of the Russian Federation, together with their Turkish counterparts, will establish the Peace Center, which is expected to be located in the Agdam district;

⁹ On February 7, 2021, the ruling political party of Armenia – “My Step” published statement regarding the early elections which had been promised before. According it, there was not such demand from people to hold new elections in the coming period of time. thus, holding an early election in Armenia is very questionable.

¹⁰ OSCE. (2009, July 9). Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries. Retrieved from osce.org: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152>

¹¹ Currently, Nagorno-Karabakh has no political-administrative status that would be recognized by both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Actually, the *de facto* government continues to work on the ground calling itself the government of an independent republic of Artsakh. The independence of the Artsakh has not been recognized by any sovereign state, although it has been recognized by the governments of some provinces or cities in Europe, Australia and the United States that do not enjoy any influence over foreign policy, and as well by self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In addition, since the end of the war, representatives of the Russian Federation have been actively involved in the demarcation process of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, including in the Syunik region.

The question arises as to how Russia's geopolitical leverage has changed in the South Caucasus region, including Armenia, since the Karabakh war.

Prior to the war, the Russian Federation was represented by military force in only two South Caucasus states, including in Georgia - with illegal military bases in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, and with legal base in Gyumri - in the Republic of Armenia. In the post-war reality, Russia is now present in Azerbaijan as well, which gives it a special opportunity to influence not only foreign policy of Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also domestic developments there.

The fact that, despite Armenia's insistent requests aimed to get Russia intervened in the conflict¹², while Russia continued to maintain a basically neutral position, suggests that such a development was in the interests of the Russian Federation. Several possible explanations can be found for this, including the desire to punish Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power through a velvet revolution, and who more or less repeated the Georgian and Ukrainian experience of rapprochement with the West through democratic reforms and the fight against corruption, which naturally was rather painfully perceived in Moscow. Also, in the current reality, as it was already mentioned, Russia is able to influence the policies of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and although Turkey's presence also made an appearance in the region while the Western influence had dramatically diminished during the war, there emerged a feeling in Russian ruling circles that now they are able to fully control the South Caucasus.

For its part, Turkey also received certain geostrategic benefits, having returned to the South Caucasus for the first time after a long historical pause. This is considered one of the triumphs of the current Turkish government's pan-Turkic and neo-Ottoman policies. With Turkey now re-entering the Caucasus, Ankara is given the opportunity to trade with Russia compromises on the Caucasus for other strategic issues in Libya and Syria; or, conversely, to compromise on Libya and Syria in order to consolidate its position in the Caucasus.

Eventually, as a result of the new geostrategic setup, the Russian Federation strengthened its positions in the region, while also a new player appeared in the form of Turkey, which will now try to balance Russia's influence. For its part, Azerbaijan's position was significantly strengthened too, after being able to significant extent to achieve its own strategic goals.

In this new reality, a legitimate question arises, what is the role of Georgia and where is now its place in all this.

REGIONAL IMPACT ON GEORGIA

Georgia has good neighborly relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. It is through Georgia that Azerbaijan supplies its energy resources to Turkey and further on to EU countries. Numerous docu-

¹² Throughout the duration of the war Nikol Pashinyan repeatedly, directly or indirectly called on Russia to intervene more actively in the conflict. On October 31, 10 days before the end of the war, he even wrote a letter to the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin; However, Putin stated that as the fighting was not taking place in the territory of Armenia, he could not intervene. See the text of the letter in English here: <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2020/10/31/let/10617>

ments of partnership and mutual support have been signed between the three countries, and they are engaged with one another not only on the basis of bilateral relations, but also through joint, tripartite format.

Although Georgia cooperates with Azerbaijan and Turkey, especially in the areas of energy, transport, trade, and in the case of Turkey – also defense, this does not make Georgia a party to the conflict and an ally of Turkey and Azerbaijan in it, as Georgia also has good neighborly relations with Armenia. This is quite well understood both in Baku and in Ankara.

At the time when the influence in the region of the Russian Federation, a direct adversary of Georgia, has grown even more, naturally arises the question of protecting Georgia's interests and national security. However, despite Turkey's expected attempts to counterbalance Russia in the region, Georgia cannot fully rely on Turkey in this matter, because in spite of good mutual relations, it is theoretically possible that the interests of Georgia and Turkey do not fully coincide, while, as it was already mentioned, closer partnership and alliance with Turkey may jeopardize good neighborly relations with Armenia. Instead, Georgia should try to bring the West back to the region, as it appears to have virtually disengaged from the process during the last war¹³.

Finally, given the current reality, it has become even clearer now that while the South Caucasus is gradually emerging as a geopolitical confrontation area between the two states competing for regional hegemony - Russia and Turkey - Georgia is more or less alone in this setting. Hence, it is essential to engage the West in playing more active role in the South Caucasus region, and specifically in Georgia, including in supporting the Georgian state and resolving its conflicts peacefully.

WHAT DOES THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR MEAN FOR GEORGIANS, ABKHAZIANS AND OSSETIANS?

The Second Karabakh War has made it clear once again that the negotiations that have been led for many years have remained largely formal, and that the parties involved have not had any real willingness to resolve the issue peacefully. The reason for this, presumably, was the intensified rancor between the two societies and therefore the inability to compromise against the backdrop of the emerged reality.

The military success of Azerbaijan, from a *realpolitik* perspective, has shown that what could not be resolved through diplomacy for so long has been relatively quickly resolved through the use of military force. All this, through the eyes of an outside observer, gives the impression that a conflict can only be resolved by military force.

Although the modern Georgian state has never stated that it will resolve its confrontation with Russia and internal ethno-political conflicts by military means, it is possible that Azerbaijan's military success may strengthen in some parts of the Georgian society the belief that the peacebuilding and negotiation formats that exist so far are useless, and that like our neighbor, Georgia needs to think about militarization. This, of course, poses a problem of legitimacy for the state's "reconciliation policy" that was being implemented to date. On the other hand, the feeling of the part of the popu-

¹³ Although France and the United States co-chair the OSCE Minsk Group along with Russia, their role was modest compared to that of the latter. As French President Emmanuel Macron has been criticized by Ilham Aliyev for his "pro-Armenian stance", while the US-proposed peace deal was more of a part of the Trump election campaign than a real peace plan, it was the Russian Federation has played the role of the key mediator.

lation that it is impossible to resolve conflicts without militarization is substantiated by the fact that, like the Azerbaijan-Armenia talks, the existing conflict resolution formats in the Georgian reality are largely formal, and are mostly limited to responding to quotidian incidents.

On the other hand, there may be a perception in the Abkhaz and Ossetian societies that the Georgian state will try to resolve the conflict by using military force. During the war, on September 30, the Abkhazian media outlet Abkhazia Today published a letter from Akhra Smir¹⁴, an Abkhazian blogger and journalist and a representative of the *de facto* president's administration, comparing the events in Karabakh to the war in Abkhazia:

"After the war and the blockade, after the events of 1998, 2001 and 2008, having taken into account the political crisis, the coups and the pandemic, we need to know and remember that Georgia can attack us any day of the year, and with the help of powerful countries. Citizens of Abkhazia and Abkhazians all over the world, look at Karabakh and remember that the enemy has not gone anywhere. It is lying in wait," wrote Smir in his letter.

Similar sentiments can be seen in the texts of the Abkhazian *de facto* Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The agency issued a statement on December 25 in which the Abkhaz side responded to the text of a parliamentary hearing by then-Defense Minister-designate Irakli Gharibashvili, in which Gharibashvili announced that Tbilisi planned to purchase reconnaissance and combat drones. Sokhumi accuses Tbilisi of militarizing and planning to resolve the conflict by military means:

"Judging by the ongoing processes in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijani side was able to carry out offensive operations using combat drones. Obviously, this kind of modern weapon can be used by [the Georgian side] to settle the unresolved conflict by military means," is said in the statement of the *de facto* ministry.¹⁵

Practically similar attitudes are observed in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia where, according to *de facto* President Anatoly Bibilov, they should learn from the lessons from Karabakh. Summarizing his report on defense situation, Bibilov stated, "South Ossetia needs to analyze and understand what is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria and other 'hot spots' of the world, and what is needed for our Defense Ministry to develop in various high-tech areas."¹⁶

Although the Abkhaz and **Ossetian** *de facto* governments have expressed fears that Georgia might launch a military confrontation, all of this should in fact be seen as statements targeting the local societies and / or a means of diplomatic warfare, not as a real threat perception, because:

A. Unlike Azerbaijan, Georgian military capabilities are quite limited

Over the past five years, Georgia's defense budget, while nominally growing in Georgian Lari, has remained substantially the same or are not growing significantly due to the depreciation of the national currency at a time when major purchases by the ministry of defense and the costs of services are paid in foreign currency, mainly in US dollars. Over the past five years, Georgia's annual defense budget has been about \$300 million. By comparison, according to the World

¹⁴ The letter was published in the self-proclaimed republic on September 30, the day of its declaration of independence. Text of the letter in Russian:

<https://www.facebook.com/apsny.today/photos/a.547762342256624/1202620516770800/>

¹⁵ Комментарий МИД Абхазии – The complete text in Russian:

http://mfaapsny.org/ru/allnews/news/statements_speeches/kommentariy-mid-abkhazii-87/

¹⁶ Президент Южной Осетии призвал извлечь уроки событий в Нагорном Карабахе, Сирии и других «горячих точках» <http://cominf.org/node/1166533982>

Bank, Azerbaijan spent almost 4 percent of its gross domestic product (\$ 48.048 billion / in current value) on defense, while in the same year Georgia spent only 2 percent on its defense of its \$ 17.477 billion worth GDP.

B. Georgia's declared reconciliation policy

The declared strategy of the Georgian state is a policy of reconciliation along with the policies of non-recognition and de-occupation. Official Tbilisi has repeatedly stated that it supports only a peaceful way of resolving the conflict.¹⁷

C. The Russian factor

The military balance in the Caucasus is to the Russian advantage. The Russian Federation has military bases in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. In addition, under bilateral agreements, Russia will ensure the protection and security of the 'borders' of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. This circumstance, given the limited military capabilities of Tbilisi, practically excludes any chance for Tbilisi to resolve the conflict by military means.

Whether Georgia really started militarizing after the Karabakh war and/or whether local *de facto* leaderships really fear that a new war will break out, one thing is clear - a precedent was set by the second Karabakh war in which one side was able to successfully pursue its own interests by force. In the case of propaganda and manipulation applied by third forces, this may further deepen the feeling of mistrust between the Georgian society, on one hand, and **Ossetian** and Abkhazian societies, on the other, which is detrimental to the 'reconciliation' process.

THE ISSUE OF INTEGRATION

Quite a significant part of the population of Georgia is made by representatives of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnic groups. Due to widespread lack of knowledge of the state language, labor or study migrations, kinship ties, main sources of information media, or other reasons, these groups of citizens essentially solidarize with their ethnic homelands of Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively.

According to the stated policy, the Georgia state is trying to integrate these citizens into its common social and political space. However, against the background of deepening confrontation and hostility between the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, current developments have rather negative impact on the relations between ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia.

During the conflict, although Georgia had publicly stated that it did not allow transit of military equipment of either side over its territory, and maintained full neutrality, false information was spread among Armenian citizens living compactly in Georgia that its government was allowing the transportation of Turkish military assistance to Azerbaijan and obstructing humanitarian aid to Armenia. This has caused certain turmoil among Georgia's Armenians. This fact has demonstrated that part of the compactly settled ethnic Armenians do not trust the country of which they are citizens, explained by the lack of political integration into the Georgian society. In the end, the Armenian embassy in Georgia had to state that the spread information was not true.¹⁸

¹⁷ "Non-recognition, de-occupation, reconciliation" - Minister on Tbilisi peace policy, Netgazeti, 30.12.2020 <https://netgazeti.ge/news/509781>

¹⁸ Embassy of Armenia: "It is not true that Georgia prevents us from receiving humanitarian aid". Radio Liberty. 06. 10. 2020 <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30878364.html>

It is worth mentioning separately that during the second Karabakh war, the issue of Armenophobia became more visible within the Georgian society. On November 6, four days before the end of the war, Akhra Avidzba, an aide to the *de facto* president of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, posted on social media photos of Abkhaz Armenians on their way to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Avidzba, “all ethnic Armenian citizens possess the right to defend their homeland.”¹⁹ It was later reported that Armenian volunteers had indeed arrived in Armenia and met with representatives of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh government.

During the war in Abkhazia in early 1990s a detachment of local Armenians, the so-called “Bagramian Battalion”, was actively fighting against Georgian forces. Consequently, the spread of information about the participation of Abkhazian Armenians in this war has evoked emotional reaction in some parts of the society and in some cases, a wave of Armenophobia and hate speech.

To summarize what was said above, it is clear that in the aftermath of the 44-day war the process of integration of citizens belonging to ethnic minorities becomes more difficult, as the states to which respective population groups have certain affiliations are fighting against each other. The issue is especially aggravated when former or current citizens of Georgia of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnicity are involved in the war, including those involved in direct hostilities^{20;21}, or alternatively in the so-called information warfare, and emotionally support one of the parties to the conflict. The war made it even more clear that the Georgian state should make additional efforts to integrate its minority citizens into a single common space.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the Karabakh war, the Russian Federation further strengthened its position in the region. It is currently the main mediator between the opposing parties, allowing it to influence the politics and policies of Baku and Yerevan. Turkey has also benefited, as it has gained the opportunity to counterbalance Russia’s influence also in other regions elsewhere - by creating a new confrontational space. For its part, Azerbaijan has also achieved military and political success, gaining control of most of the territories it has been unable to govern for most of the last three decades.

From Georgia’s perspective, at a time when geostrategic confrontations between two major powers, Turkey and Russia, are emerging in the region, it is important to encourage the West to take a more active role as a partner and supporter of Georgia, so that to some extent Georgia’s interests in the region are protected.

Although the Georgian state has no such intentions, for an ordinary observer achieving the country’s national goals through militarization may seem attractive, therefore some parts of the Georgian society may support the idea to resolve the conflicts militarily. However, it is important to understand that such attitudes create fertile ground for the third party to be able to incite ha-

¹⁹ Up to 20 volunteers have flown into the conflict zone to take part in fighting, though it is unknown whether they actually took part in the hostilities. See photos shared by Akhra Avidzba:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=794358321415573&id=100025242379704

²⁰ Vahagn Chakhalyan arrested in Yerevan | Armenian media. 11.11.2020. Netgazeti

<https://netgazeti.ge/news/497886/>

²¹ Vahagn Chakhalyan’s participation in the Nagorno-Karabakh war was reported in the local media, which also has Azerbaijani-speaking readers, with the headline: “Javakheti separatist Vahagn Chakhalyan fights in the ranks of terrorists in Karabakh and vows to ‘return to Georgia with weapons and the members of brotherhood’, i.e., terrorists.” Radio Marneuli. 05.10.2020. <https://www.marneulifm.ge/ka/siakhleebi/article/34630>

tred between Georgians, and Abkhazians and Ossetians. Ultimately, Georgia needs to step up its efforts to implement confidence-building and reconciliation policies – so that at the very least other forces interested in kindling the conflict are not allowed to contribute to its deepening through targeted propaganda.

The war also showed that it is critically important for Georgia to maximize the socialization of ethnic minorities in the Georgian society in order to avoid any kind of tensions between ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia. This requires improving access to education and daily information for ethnic minorities, their economic empowerment, creating favorable conditions in Georgia for young people to work and live there, and more.

Finally, the question arises, whether the consequences of the war will bring the beginning of peace between the Azerbaijani and Armenian peoples?! The answer is probably certain to be negative. In this case, the post-war situation, the border demarcation process, the war-caused traumas experienced by the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, and the presence of Russian peacekeepers on the ground, are the basis for new conflicts. Although Azerbaijan received virtually everything that realistically could be achieved in the given circumstances, the conflict has not been resolved. Instead, Armenian and Azerbaijani societies became even more antagonized. A possible compromise solution to the conflict is perceived in both countries as a betrayal of the homeland, which forebodes constant confrontation between the states. The lesson for Georgians, Ossetians and Abkhazians should be clear - if the parties to the conflict really want to make peace and are free from the influence from other external forces, then there is no alternative to rebuilding trust and reconciliation.

TURKEY'S INTERESTS IN ABKHAZIA: PAST AND PRESENT

SANDRO BAKURADZE

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND THE ABKHAZ WAR

Turkish interests in Abkhazia have a long history and their origins go as far back as the times of the Ottoman Empire. Abkhazia was an important springboard for the Empire to control the Black Sea basin. Already as early as in the 15th century, the Ottomans tried several times to establish themselves on the territory of present-day Abkhazia, and have actually gained certain foothold on the Abkhazian coast. As Russia's influence in the Black Sea basin increased, so did the strategic importance of Abkhazia to the Ottoman Empire, and from the 18th century onwards, Ottoman rulers began to undertake significant costs directed at the fortification of the Abkhaz coast. Even during the Middle Ages, when building a new fortress on the site of the old Genoese one known as Sukhum-Kale, the Ottoman government, in addition to significant financial costs applied significant efforts to bring in skilled construction workers from Istanbul, Trabzon and Erzurum.¹

With the growing influence of the Russian Empire in the Black Sea basin, while the importance of Abkhazia to the Ottomans increased, especially with the loss of Crimea, the Abkhazian aristocracy began to pursue a more independent policy using Russia as an alternative patron. During the Caucasus wars Abkhazia became a battleground between the Ottoman and Russian empires, and in 1864, after the final victory of the Russian Empire, many Abkhazians, as was the case of a number of other Caucasian peoples, were forced into exile to the Ottoman Empire as a part of the *muhajir* migration wave.

After the *muhajir* wave subsided, some of the exiled Abkhazians did return to their homeland, but by that time the demographics of the region had changed forever. If before that time the region was populated mostly by ethnic Abkhazians and to less extent by Georgians, it has gradually become a multinational and multicultural environment. If by 1886 Abkhazians have already made up only 41% of Abkhazia's population, by 1926 that number had fallen further to just 26%.² And since the 1950s, with the development of tourist infrastructure and industrial enterprises, thousands have migrated to the region from the entire territory of the Soviet Union. As a result, according to data from 1979 and 1989, the share of Abkhazians in Abkhazia was 17% and 19%, respectively. The region did not have an absolute majority of any single ethnicity, although the largest part of the population was made up by ethnic Georgians.³

¹ Fedakar, Cengiz. Kafkasya'da Osmanlı Tahkîmatı: Sohüm Kalesi (1723-1729), VAKANÜVİS-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi, Vol. 2, Kafkasya Özel Sayısı ISSN: 2149-9535, 2017, pp. 167-168

² Here we must bear in mind that pro-Abkhazian sources refer to the Georgians living in the territory of present-day Gali as a separate ethnic group – the Samurzakhanis. It should be noted that the perception of the Samurzakhanis' identity by imperial Russia was rather ambiguous. On the one hand, statistical data compiled by N.K. Seidlitz, as well as the ethnographic map of the Caucasus of 1880, do not mention the Samurzakhanis as a separate group in the category of nations. However, according to the demographic report based on the census of 1886, although the Samurzakhanis are not listed as a separate people in the list given in the preface, they are still listed separately in the part dedicated to the Sukhumi Okrug. This has given both pro-Georgian and pro-Abkhazian sources room for varying interpretations. See: Hewitt, George (ed.) *The Abkhazians*, Routledge, 2013, p. 289; Свод Статистических Данных О Населении Закавказского Края, Извлеченных изъ Посемейныхъ Списковъ 1886 Г., Тифлисъ, 1893, сс. XIV, 162

³ For the data based on the Soviet demographic statistics see: <http://www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rnabkhazia.html>

Along with the exile of *muhajirs* the influence of Islam in Abkhazia has weakened, and later, as a result of a missionary campaign actively promoted by Russian authorities, a significant portion of ethnic Abkhazians got baptized, whether nominally or sincerely, as Orthodox Christians. With the outflow of *muhajirs* and the weakening of the influence of Islam, the leverage of the Ottomans and, consequently, of Turkey in Abkhazia gradually weakened. This process intensified further during the Soviet era, especially with the closure of state borders that almost completely restricted contacts between Abkhazian exiles in Turkey and their local compatriots. The Soviet government, which was quite wary regarding the contacts of peoples living in the Soviet territory with their diasporas residing in capitalist countries, would apply the same approach regarding the Abkhazians, and thus for many decades the Abkhaz diaspora living in Turkey were deprived of access to their historical homeland.

After Stalin's death, along with some measures of political liberalization, certain members of the Abkhazian intelligentsia were allowed to visit Turkey on official visits or business trips, and thus re-establish contacts with representatives of the Abkhazian diaspora living there. For example, at the Izmir International Festival in 1968, the Soviet delegation included representatives of the Abkhazian society such as historians Giorgi Dzidzaria and Shalva Inal-IPA, writers Vianor Panchulia and Vladimir Aiudzba.⁴

The first visit of the representatives of the Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora to Soviet Abkhazia took place in 1969, when Mehdi and Hakki Ozdemir (Azhiba) visited Abkhazia, while the first full-scale visit, that has turned into a demonstration of the hospitality by local Abkhazians and occupied a significant place in the memory of both local and Turkish Abkhazians, happened in 1973. It was when Salih and Meliha Amichba, along with the lawyer and later influential activist within the Abkhazian diaspora – Rahmi Tuna and his wife, publicist and researcher Mahinur Tuna (Papba), visited Abkhazia.⁵ During "perestroika", with the rise of nationalist feelings among many peoples of the Soviet Union, similar process took place in Abkhazia. Political liberalization allowed the Abkhaz diaspora to return to their historic homeland, and as a result, a number of ethnic Abkhazians arrived from Turkey and Syria for receiving education or for permanent repatriation.⁶

Since 1989, after the escalation of the ethno-political conflict between Abkhazians and Georgians, members of the Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora have become much more active in Abkhazia, closely cooperating with the local administration. So, in October 1989 and shortly afterwards, Sezai Babaküş (Papba), editor-in-chief of the economic section of *Hürriyet*, one of the highest-circulation Turkish newspapers, began working in the Information and Foreign Relations Department in Abkhazia on request from the Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba. In 1990, a delegation led by Mayor Unal Ozan from the Adapazari Municipality, the center of the Abkhazian Diaspora in Turkey, visited Abkhazia, and a friendship and cooperation agreement was signed between the municipalities of Sokhumi and Adapazari.⁷ During this period, as the legal status of Abkhazia has not yet become the subject of active controversy, the Turkish government maintained official neutrality, which was reflecting the existing ideological *mise-en-scène* in Turkey, where there was rather mixed attitude towards the expression of non-Turkish identities by Turkey's citizens.

⁴ Abhazou, Vahdang – *Seferberlik Zamani*, Sohum, 2013, s.18

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 23

⁶ According to Abhazou, by 1991 the number of Abkhaz, Adyghe and Ubykh students in Abkhazia had reached 41, including 23 of them from Turkey. See: Abhazou, 2013, p. 27

⁷ Sol (Simsim), Selçuk – [Savaş öncesi Abhazya-Diaspora ilişkileri \(1989-1992\) I.Bölüm](#), Jineps, 01/02/2020

With the outbreak of the Abkhaz war in 1992, the Turkish government, which had already recognized Georgia's independence within its Soviet-era borders, found itself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, due to its own problems with separatism, as well as to undertaken commitments, it was forced to formally support Georgia, and on the other hand, due to the influential Abkhazian and North Caucasian diaspora and strategic factors related to the Black Sea basin, it was unable to take any radical step in any direction.⁸ Thus, the representatives of the Abkhazian or North Caucasian diaspora who wanted to go to fight in Abkhazia were not hindered to do this, but all their attempts to gain legal support from the Turkish government led to a quite harsh reaction. Vladislav Ardzinba's visit to Turkey in July 1992, when he tried to meet with Turkish officials, ended in vain in this regard.

At the same time then Prime Minister of Turkey Suleyman Demirel, in addition to refusing to meet with Vladislav Ardzinba and not allowing him to appear in the Turkish media, paid an official visit to Georgia a week after Ardzinba's visit and signed on July 30, 1992 an agreement that among other details related to Turkish-Georgian cooperation, included the recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity as both sides undertook obligation to support protecting each other country's territorial integrity.⁹ Despite the lack of success in their attempt to meet with the Turkish government members, the Abkhaz delegation managed to meet with leaders of an opposition party – Bulent Ecevit, Oğuzhan Asiltürk and Mesut Yilmaz. Still, the results of the visit were largely unsatisfactory for the Abkhaz side. Nevertheless, the issue of Abkhazia was raised in the Turkish parliament, and speeches by then rather influential politicians – Istemihan Talay and Oğuzhan Asiltürk, who expressed support for the Abkhaz side – caused great excitement among the Turkish North Caucasian diaspora.¹⁰

Dozens of members of the Turkey's Abkhaz and North Caucasian diaspora took part in the war in Abkhazia, and five of them were killed¹¹. These victims of the war became important symbolic figures for the Turkish North Caucasus diaspora, and have occupied a revered place in their history and iconography. *Şendoğan* Kaiti (Azhund) from the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey became a general in the Abkhazian army. The war in Abkhazia is still considered an important event for the Turkey's North Caucasus diaspora, and has played an important role in its consolidation.

GENERAL ATTITUDES RELATED TO ABKHAZIA IN TURKEY

Even after the war in Abkhazia, Turkey's attitude toward the Abkhaz issue was defined by ambiguity caused by a combination of pragmatic and emotional factors. Due to its own internal political problems, as the issue of Kurdish separatism continued to play a major role, Turkey formally supported Georgia's territorial integrity and avoided providing logistical or political support to the Abkhaz. However, due to the sentiments on part of the influential Abkhazian and North Caucasian diasporas, and the Turkish society's historical past, the Turkish government refrained from taking any active steps against Abkhazia and also held back from taking any radical measures against organizations or volunteers striving to get engaged in Abkhazia.

⁸ Oran, Baskın (Ed.) – Türk Dış Politikası, Cilt II., İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2002, p. 417

⁹ Taştekin, Fehmi – [Küllerinden Doğan 'Canlar Ülkesi' Abhazya](#), Karadeniz Araştırmaları Dergisi, N 24, Kış 2010, 83-157; TC Resmi Gazete, Sayı: 21360, 29.09.1992, pp. 2; 5.

¹⁰ Marje, [N 8, 12/1992](#), pp. 21-23

¹¹ These were ethnic Abkhazians Erkan Çağlı (Tsiba), Zafer Aliş (Argun), Vedat Akari (Kvatsba), Bahadır Ozbaği (Abağba) and Adyge Hanefi Arslan (Yegozh). For their place in the iconography of the civil society organizations of the Caucasian diaspora, see: <http://demokratikcerkeshareketi.org/node/708>; <http://www.kafkasevi.com/uploads/diasporaaniyor.jpg>

From the legal perspective, Turkey has been officially supporting Georgia's territorial integrity since 1992, and the agreement of July 30, 1992 is the starting point in this regard, emphasizing that "both countries recognize each other's borders in the same way as had been stipulated by the Kars Treaty." Turkey formally joined the embargo imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States, and suspended the official transport links that already existed between Turkey and Abkhazia. Among these were the Sokhumi-Trabzon naval connection, which started operating regularly in 1994, after the end of the war in Abkhazia.¹²

Turkey has been observing this embargo for a long time, and would also approach with understanding the detentions and sanctioning by the Georgian Coast Guard of Turkish ships violating the embargo. However, after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS, and official lifting by Russia of the embargo on Abkhazia, Turkey's position has also changed. In 2009, after Georgia seized a Panamanian-flagged Turkish cargo ship *Buket* and its crew, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu paid a special visit to Georgia and as a result, the Georgian side was forced to release the ship's crew and captain, the latter having already been sentenced to a prison term.¹³ In the following period, the Georgian government was also forced to return to the Turkish owners, who have not paid the fines imposed for the violation of the border, their vessels that were temporarily confiscated by the Georgian authorities.¹⁴ In contradiction to international law, which in some cases allows coastal countries to seize ships that violate their legislation in international waters, while allocates the responsibility to deal with the settlement of legal issues related to such event to the country under whose flags they were sailing – Turkish sources tried to justify the move taken by Ahmet Davutoğlu by the argument that the ship was detained in the "Russian-Turkish economic zone" of the Black Sea, and thus, this being an exceptional case, Turkey was entitled to make certain claims.¹⁵ Following the second visit of Ahmet Davutoglu in 2013, the number of Turkish ships seized by the Georgian authorities decreased sharply.¹⁶

Despite such ambiguous developments, Turkey continues to observe the policy of non-recognition of Abkhazia and, consequently, observes most of the restrictions imposed by the Georgian government on the *de facto* government of Abkhazia. For example, in 2011, Abkhaz leader Sergei Bagapsh failed to give any official format to his visit to Turkey, and despite efforts by the Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora, according to Turkish media the visit remained personal and unofficial, mainly linked to Bagapsh's health status. An official statement issued by the Turkish Foreign Ministry also confirmed that the visit was of no official nature.¹⁷ About a month after the visit, Sergei Bagapsh died during an operation in Moscow, which largely confirmed the credibility of the Turkey's statement.

In 2014, Turkish police thwarted an attempt by the Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora to open a polling station in Istanbul where *de facto* citizens of Abkhazia would be able to vote in the Abkhaz *de facto* presidential election. Despite all the efforts by representatives of the Abkhazian diaspora, including the member of the Turkish parliament Engin Ozkoç, Turkish police closed down the polling station.¹⁸

¹² Gültekin Punsmann, Burcu; Tarba, Kemal; Başkan, Argun – [Karadeniz'in Bütünleşmesi İçin Abhazya](#), TEPAV, ORSAM, 2009, p. 10

¹³ [Buket'in Türk kaptanı yarın serbest kalacak](#), Sabah, 06/09/2009

¹⁴ [Gürcistan elindeki Türk gemileri bırakıyor](#), Denizhaber, 20/12/2010

¹⁵ E.g.: Ece, Nur Jale, Erbaş Açikel, Aslıhan – [Uluslararası Deniz Hukuku'nda Kıyı Devletinin Gemilere El Koyma Yetkisinin Sınırları: Gürcistan'ın Karadeniz'de Seyreden Gemilere El Koyması](#), Uluslararası Deniz Hukuku'nda Kıyı Devletinin Gemilere El Koyma Yetkisinin Sınırları Sempozyumu, Orsam, Ankara, 2011, pp. 136-138

¹⁶ Eissler, Eric R. – [Can Turkey De-Isolate Abkhazia?](#), Turkish Policy Quarterly, Fall 2013, p. 132

¹⁷ Чарквиани, Нестан. [Лидер Абхазии посетил Турцию с «бизнес-визитом»](#), Голос Америки, 13/04/2011

¹⁸ [Abhazya seçiminde sandık tartışması](#), Habertürk, 24/08/2024

Despite the policy of non-recognition, the Turkish side continues to maintain contacts with the *de facto* government of Abkhazia and, in this context, deputy advisor to the Turkish Foreign Ministry Unal Çevikoz paid a sanctioned visit to Abkhazia in 2009; while the Turkish Ambassador to Georgia Levent Murat Burhan visited Abkhazia in 2010.¹⁹

PUBLIC AND INFORMAL RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND ABKHAZIA

Notwithstanding Turkey's official stance on the Abkhaz issue, which supports Georgia's territorial integrity, linked to certain reasons for this that can be traced back to Turkey's own internal problems, Turkish society and part of its political community view Abkhazia quite emotionally, due to certain historical and religious factors. Abkhazia has had for a long period of time belonged to the Ottoman Empire's sphere of influence, while the vast majority of Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora is Muslim. This, in the eyes of a large number of Turks, enfolded the Abkhaz war against the Georgians under a religious guise²⁰. Due to the political and economic influence of the Abkhazian and, more generally, North Caucasian diaspora in Turkey, the Turkish authorities were also to some extent forced to take their views into account. Consequently, whatever was the official position of the Turkish government, relations at the social and economic levels continued.

Cooperation between Turkey and Abkhazia at the political, cultural and educational levels continued to be important, while Abkhazians repatriated from Turkey, as well as ethnic Abkhaz or non-Abkhazian Turkish citizens, also played an important role in public life of Abkhazia. In this regard the Division of Muslim Affairs of Abkhazia and the Turkish College of Basharan stand out by their role in the Abkhazia's public life, marked by the strong involvement by the members of the Turkey's Abkhazian diaspora in launching both of these entities.

While in Abkhazia local beliefs have always been more important than any formal confession,²¹ the Division of Muslim Affairs was created with the aim to somehow counterbalance the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which became significantly more active there in the aftermath of the war. At the same time, the Division's existence was conditioned by the factor of largely Muslim creed of repatriate Abkhazians, who after the war began to return in significant numbers to their historic homeland, or would purchase property and spend their free time there. The founder of the Abkhazian Division of Muslim Affairs was Adil Gablia (Tokjan), an Abkhazian repatriated from Turkey, who led it from its inception until his death in 2010. Under the leadership of Adil Gablia a mosque was built in the city of Sokhumi, religious literature was published, and the unification of the Muslims of Abkhazia around a single religious organization was largely achieved. Gablia, who had received religious education in Turkey, maintained active contacts with Turkey's religious and political groups, and thus his sudden death under suspicious circumstances became the subject of serious specula-

¹⁹ [No: 86, 20 Nisan 2010, Tiflis Büyükelçimizin Abhazya Bölgesini Ziyareti Hk.](#), Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mfa.gov.tr

²⁰ An interesting example of this can be seen in the parliamentary speech by veteran Islamist politician Oguzhan Asiltürk who in his statement presented to the parliamentary committee on October 13, 1992, accused the Turkey's government of inaction, and ignoring the oppression of Muslims and the closure of the access to Central Asia. See: [TÜRKİYE BÜYÜK MİLLET MECLİSİ, 19. Dönem 17. Cilt 3. Birleşim, S. 112-114](#); TURKEY IS A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, 19. Dönem 18. Volume 12. Birleşim – S.376; Marje, N 8, 12/1992, pp. 21-23

²¹ Krylov, Aleksandr – [The religious situation in Abkhazia](#), 25 February 1998 – Keston News Service, Abkhazworld.com; Кулова М. Л. – [К вопросу о традиционной языческой религии абхазов в современной Абхазии](#), Известия Российского государственного педагогического университета им. А.И. Герцена. №29 (65) Аспирантские тетради: Научный журнал – СПб., 2008. С. 177-180

tions,²²fueled by previous attacks on other leaders of the Abkhazia's Islamic community. The Muslim community of Abkhazia, in which the share of repatriates is significant, attracts significant interest in Turkey, and there is a representative in Abkhazia of the Turkish Religious Affairs Department, – currently this is Ayhan Tsikhichba, an ethnic Abkhaz. Religious ties between Abkhazia and Turkey are clearly driven primarily by the repatriation factor, but given the general framework of the Turkey's regional policy and ambitions, it is important for Turkey to have active contacts with Sunni-Islamic communities in its neighborhood.

As for the field of education, special mention should be made here of Basharan College linked to the Fethullah Gulen Movement, which operated in Gagra from 1993 to 2010 and was one of the most significant and prestigious educational institutions in Abkhazia. Basharan College was also an important mediator in helping Abkhaz students to get admitted to study at Turkish universities²³. Basharan College was finally closed in 2010 due to financial problems²⁴. Today, there is a public boarding school at its premises, with no longer any official ties with Turkey.

Abkhazian and North Caucasian community organizations also play an important role in public relations between Abkhazia and Turkey. Among them, the most important is the Federation of Caucasian Associations (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu – KAFFED*), which unites cultural and societal organizations of the North Caucasians living in different regions of Turkey, and is engaged in a variety of cultural and publishing activities. The Federation of Caucasian Unions became later the basis for launching a significant part of Abkhazian community organizations that emerged during the war in Abkhazia and in its aftermath. In 1992, during the war, the Caucasian-Abkhazian Solidarity Committee (KADK) was established by individuals with the background largely left-wing as seen in the Turkish context.²⁵ KADK actively worked to attract humanitarian and political support for the Abkhaz case and has been actively advocating it among non-Abkhazian residents of Turkey. The left-wing background of some members of the organization had caused certain apprehensiveness, especially in certain circles within the Turkish government, and eventually led to some tensions and divisions among the North Caucasus and Abkhazian groups²⁶. Nevertheless, during the war the organization managed to gain considerable influence and largely replace previously active Abkhazian organizations, such as the Association of Caucasian Culture in Istanbul. Eventually, after the war, through the direct support of Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba, KADK became the *de facto* official representative entity of Abkhazia in Turkey²⁷. Later, the Abkhazian associations operating in Turkey not only strengthened their position within the ranks of the Federation of Caucasian Unions, but also successfully achieved the goal of uniting most Abkhazian civic organizations from different regions of the country, and in 2010 established the Federation of Abkhaz Unions (*Abhaz Dernekler Federasyonu – AbhazFed*), which unites 17 Abkhaz organizations.²⁸

Political and cultural figures from Abkhazia regularly visit Turkey, often with the support of the Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora. Historian İlber Ortayılı²⁹, close ally of the Turkish government, Homeland

²² According to widely distributed information, Adil Gablia and his wife reportedly died as a result of poisoning by an unknown chemical. See: Цвижба, Заира – [Мусульмане живут одной жизнью с народом](#) Газета Республика Абхазии, 04.07.2011; [Мусульманская община Абхазии в ожидании нового муфтия](#), Islamnews.ru, 25.07.2011

²³ [Gülen okulunda Lenin heykeli](#), Internet Haber, 07.04.2007

²⁴ [Abhazya'daki Türk okulu kapanıyor](#), Ajanskafkas, 06.08.2010

²⁵ Atan, Fatih – Kafkas – Abhazya Dayanışma Komitesi: Bir Dönemin Anatomisi 1992-1993, Dönence, İstanbul, 2010, p. 34

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp.. 64-66

²⁷ Gültekin Punsman; Tarba; Başkan; 2009, p 13

²⁸ [Federasyonumuzun 17. Derneği Sinop Abhaz Kültür Derneği](#), abhazfederasyonu.org, 10.03. 2020

²⁹ Ortayılı, İlber – [Abhazya: Güzel coğrafya, güzel insanlar](#), Hürriyet, 22.10.2016

Party leader Doğu Perinçek,³⁰ members of the Turkish Federation of Journalists and its head until 2015, Attila Sertel³¹, a delegation of Turkish parliamentarians, the rector of the Sakarya University³², and many others have visited Abkhazia at various times.

The reason for the active social and cultural inter-relations, apart from the presence of the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, is apparently the historical past that connects Turkey with Abkhazia since the Ottoman period. At the same time, as a result of the massive *muhajir* movement, many traditional characteristics of the Caucasus are also familiar to the Turkish society. Such attitude presents Abkhazia to the non-Abkhazian citizens of Turkey as a culturally and politically close political entity. As for the activities of the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs in Abkhazia and the role of repatriates in the re-formation of Islamic organizations in Abkhazia, we must not forget that along with satisfying the religious needs of repatriates, Turkish historical memory views Abkhazia as a Muslim-populated area, in spite of its currently rather diverse confessional composition, and the legacy of the Christianization campaign conducted by the Russian Orthodox Church in the aftermath of the *muhajirs'* exile. Thus, even regardless of the diaspora factor, Abkhazia's place occupied in the memory and popular culture of Turkish society and ruling classes ensures that informal relations between Abkhazia and Turkey will always be active, whatever the official policies of the Turkish authorities.

ABKHAZIAN-TURKISH ECONOMIC AND TRADE RELATIONS

Turkey is Abkhazia's second largest trade and economic partner after Russia. While the 18% share that Turkey had in Abkhazia's foreign trade in 2012³³ got reduced to just 8% by 2019³⁴, Turkey still maintains the position of Abkhazia's number two economic partner nation. The reduction of Turkey's share in the Abkhazian economy can be primarily related to the impact on Abkhazia of unstable bilateral political relations between Russia and Turkey. Almost entirely politically dependent on outside powers, the *de facto* government of Abkhazia in situations, where it has to choose between Russia and Turkey, is usually forced to go for Russia. This became obvious once again in 2016 when the Russian government, due to the incident on the Syrian border where Turkish air forces shot down a Russian military plane, imposed economic sanctions on Turkey – joined by Abkhazia³⁵. The sanctions largely abolished the ability of almost all Turkish citizens, except for the diaspora members with Abkhazian *de facto* citizenship, to conduct economic activities. This has drastically reduced Turkey's economic influence in Abkhazia, and although Russia later eased the sanctions, Turkish economic influence no longer matches previous levels. Another noteworthy factor is the ongoing economic crisis in Turkey itself, which has severely limited the opportunities for both the Abkhaz diaspora members and the Turkish businessmen in general to invest in risky environments.

Despite declined economic ties, Turkey continues to support Abkhazia to increase the latter's level of economic openness, as evidenced in December 2020 by two of Turkey's largest state-owned banks, Ziraat Bankası and İşbank (the latter being created through direct initiative of Atatürk, with one-third of its shares still belonging to the opposition Republican People's Party³⁶) to

³⁰ [Perinçek: Türkiye, yakın zamanda Abhazya'yı tanıyacak](#), Sputnik Türkiye, 19.12.2019

³¹ [Tgf Başkanlar Konseyi Toplantısı Abhazya'da Yapıldı](#), Haberler.com, 14.05.2014

³² [Türkiye'den gelen heyet ile görüşme](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia, mfaapsny.org, 08.06.2014

³³ [Russia and Turkey Remain Abkhazia's Main Trade Partners](#), Abkhazworld, 29.08.2012

³⁴ [Плюс на минус: внешняя торговля Абхазии в 2019 году](#), SputnikAbkhazia, 10.03.2020

³⁵ [Breakaway Abkhazia joins Russia's anti-Turkish sanctions](#), Agenda.ge, 12.01.2016

³⁶ Butler, Daren – [Turkey's Erdogan to move CHP's Isbank stake to Treasury](#), Reuters, 05.02.2019

making the decision to service the Abkhazian international bank cards in Turkey³⁷. This decision was met with a sharply negative reaction from official Tbilisi, and Turkish Ambassador to Georgia Ms. Fatma Jeren Yazgan was summoned to the Georgian Foreign Ministry for an explanation. The ambassador denied the information and linked the issue to the bank cards issued by the Russian banks operating in Turkey³⁸.

Any kind of sea traffic around the territory of Abkhazia, and thus largely sea-based commercial relations between Turkey and the *de facto* government of Abkhazia, openly violates the 2004 decree of the President of Georgia³⁹, while economic ties between Turkey and Abkhazia also have a political dimension. This is related to two factors – the first is the influential Abkhazian and North Caucasian diaspora, for whom the war in Abkhazia became a turning point that had the same impact on their nationalist awakening as the April 9 tragedy had on Georgians. The North Caucasian diaspora, which has traditionally close ties to the Turkish military and civilian elites, is still quite influential today, and in the face of the fragile political balance and functionalist approach to politics, the Turkish authorities do not find it worth confronting it. The second factor is Turkey's desire to maintain active contacts with the lands, which in Turkish terminology are inhabited by "kin communities"⁴⁰, and thus to maximize its economic and political influence in an area that has long been under the sway of the Ottoman Empire.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Turkey's interests in Abkhazia are largely linked to historical and sentimental reasons, but they also possess a strategic aspect, although its being rooted in realism looks somewhat questionable in the context of rather volatile Russian-Turkish relations. Under the existing *status quo* in the South Caucasus, Russia is apparently the dominant power, while Turkey, despite its close alliance with Azerbaijan, is largely just an important economic player in the region, while its military function is essentially limited to logistical and organizational issues. It is worth noting that notwithstanding all the expenses incurred by Turkey during the second Karabakh war, it received in return solely the right to deploy a small contingent at the Aghdam ceasefire monitoring point, while only Russian military detachments were deployed as the peacekeeping forces⁴¹. The actual inability of the Turkish government to significantly increase the Turkey's role in the South Caucasus after the Karabakh war demonstrated that the Turkish government has no effective leverage against Russia. This is primarily due to Russia's strong positions in Libya and Syria, where Russia's ability to radically change the *status quo* has the potential to quickly and severely hurt Turkey's interests⁴². At the same time, Turkey

³⁷ [Крупнейшие банки Турции начали обслуживать национальные карты АПРА «World»](#), Национальный Банк Республики Абхазия, 21.12.2020

³⁸ [Gürcistanda neler oluyor Elçi dışişlerine çağrıldı](#), Kafkassam, 23.12.2020

³⁹ [საქართველოს პრეზიდენტის ბრძანებულება № 313 2004 წლის 3 აგვისტო](#)

⁴⁰ In the official Turkish narrative since 2002, the term denotes the predominantly Muslim peoples living in the territory of the former Ottoman Empire.

⁴¹ [Алиев: российско-турецкий мониторинговый центр по Карабаху создадут в Агдамском районе](#), Tass, 12.12.2020, [Российско-турецкий центр мониторинга по Карабаху: где его разместят, стало камнем преткновения](#), BBC Russia, 04.12.2020

⁴² In Syria, for example, a launch of joint military operations by the Russian and Syrian authorities in Idlib province against the Islamist groups that are fortified there would mean a new wave of refugees in the direction of Turkey. This new wave would also be quite different in composition from the previous refugee flows – as due to the policy of the Syrian government to squeeze mainly Islamist-leaning militias and the families of their members toward Idlib, the province has become a haven for radical Islamist groups. Such a new wave of refugees in the midst of economic and political crisis would be a serious blow to Turkey.

does not have the kind of economic leverage that could force Azerbaijan to mediate with Russia in defense of Turkey's interests – in fact, in terms of economic investment, Azerbaijan's investment in Turkey is greater than that of Turkey in Azerbaijan⁴³.

Thus, Turkey's interests in relation to Abkhazia are largely focused on maintaining Turkish contacts in the region and on the activities of the Abkhaz and North Caucasian diasporas living in Turkey, as well as on limited economic cooperation with Abkhazia. Therefore, no dramatic changes should be expected in this area for the following reasons:

- 1) The attitude of the Turkish government and elites towards Abkhazia is largely sentimental in nature, and is essentially based on a certain synthesis of historical memory and the result of lobbying by the North Caucasian diaspora. Thus, turning a blind eye to the economic activity of Turkish companies in Abkhazia, due to quite modest economic benefits, is by and large perceived as just helping "brothers". Equally, the intervention of the Turkish side in order to free the Turkish ships seized by Georgia should be seen not as a pro-Abkhazian action, but as domestic policy-oriented nationalist and populist action aimed to show the Turkish public that Georgia cannot detain Turkish ships without a cost.
- 2) Turkey continued to this day to deal with serious separatist problem within its own borders that has caused the Turkish government to cope with serious domestic and foreign policy crises. Due to the fact that the war in Abkhazia appeared to be a crucial turning point for the representatives of the North Caucasus diaspora that has strengthened their national self-consciousness and nationalist values, the Turkish government is wary that, in addition to the Kurdish issue has already divided the Turkish society, this process may lead to further weakening of the 'official' version of the Turkish identity of "national unity and unanimity", already diminished and in crisis. Such fears are aggravated by the fact that some influential members of the Turkey's Abkhaz diaspora, including Cumhuriyetçi Bal, Sezai Babakush, Handan Demiroz, and some others, publicly supported in 2015 the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), widely considered to be associated with the Kurdish nationalist movement⁴⁴.
- 3) Georgia serves as an important strategic and economic corridor for Turkey, which connects it with Azerbaijan and, in part, with Russia and Central Asia. Turkey does not want to lose this advantage, in particular due to the important oil and gas pipelines passing through the Georgia's territory.
- 4) Russia, which possesses important military bases and interests in the Caucasus, including Abkhazia, enjoys a clear military advantage *vis-à-vis* Turkey. There are only two conditions for changing this *status quo* – a serious political crisis inside Russia, the signs of which are currently not visible, or a military confrontation, which is excluded due to the mismatch in military capabilities of the two countries, and their respective engagements within the system of international alliances.

Thus, notwithstanding the high probability that the uneasy relations between Russia and Turkey in the international arena may turn into a serious confrontation, the chances of such development influencing the situation in Abkhazia are minimal. Turkey, despite the changed foreign policy orientation and historical sentiments, will continue to prefer taking action regarding Abkhazia through its diaspora and the civil society, while prioritizing economic area. At the same time, Turkey will not try to legalize economic relations by reaching an agreement with the Georgian side, mainly due to the existing predominant reality in Georgian society. Turkey does not have the geopolitical luxury of los-

⁴³ [Türkiye-Azerbaycan ilişkilerinde yatırımlar daha stratejik hale geliyor](#), Milliyet, 08.06.2020

⁴⁴ [Demokrat Çerkeslerden HDP'ye Destek](#), Bianet, 27.05.2015

ing its friendly relationship with Georgia, therefore, it cannot use any kind of coercion with regards to the Abkhazian context, while there does not exist any significant political force in the Georgian political reality with enough political capital to make any concessions to Abkhazia regarding Georgia's territorial integrity. On the other hand, neither has the Georgian side sufficient power to prevent the Turkish side from carrying out economic and cultural activities in Abkhazia. At the same time, the legalization of Turkish-Abkhazian economic and cultural cooperation with the consent of the Georgian side would carry the risk of the domino effect, i.e., may lead to the establishment of similar relations with Abkhazia by many countries around the world, and the growth of Abkhazia's international legitimacy. This would also be a rather undesirable development for the Georgian political spectrum⁴⁵.

Relations between Abkhazia and Turkey are likely to continue at the diaspora-based, economic and cultural levels without their formal legalization, while the Turkey's long-term intentions, to great extent based on historical sentiments but also directly dependent on developments within Russia, are likely to remain just what they now are – merely intentions.

⁴⁵ The issue of the domino effect is quite an old problem discussed in Georgian academic circles. See, e.g.: Kapanadze, Sergi. [Turkish Trade with Abkhazia: An Apple of Discord for Georgia](#), Turkish Policy Quarterly, Fall 2014, p.68

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