

## Georgian-Abkhaz relations: where are we at? Dynamics of memory and conflict

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The Georgian-Abkhaz reconciliation process has witnessed ups and downs in the years following the 2008 Georgian-Russian war and the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia by Russia. Cooperation initiatives from Tbilisi on the level of economy, healthcare, education and mobility of people, mainly envisaged in the “State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation”<sup>1</sup> of January 2010 and the most recent “‘A Step to a Better Future’ Peace Initiative, Facilitation of Trade Across Dividing Lines”<sup>2</sup> from last year, have attempted to bridge the divide between the two societies. While some provisions from 2010 have been implemented and facilitated in the following years, providing still today the opportunity to travel to Georgia for different purposes or to access education, the de facto authorities have rejected the most recent plan and reiterated their refusal to cooperate with Tbilisi in Georgian authorities’ terms. In particular, the absence of recognition and a formal agreement on the non-resumption of violence are two points where Georgia finds Abkhaz authorities irremovable<sup>3</sup>. The hardest reality any initiative must confront is the growing isolation of the Abkhaz de facto state. Many in Abkhazia view the conflict as resolved after Russian recognition, which was accompanied by security guarantees and indispensable economic opportunities. This attitude does not preclude criticism over Russian-Abkhaz

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<sup>1</sup> “State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation,” Government of Georgia, January 2010, [http://gov.ge/files/225\\_31228\\_851158\\_15.07.20-StateStrategyonOccupiedTerritories-EngagementThroughCooperation\(Final\).pdf](http://gov.ge/files/225_31228_851158_15.07.20-StateStrategyonOccupiedTerritories-EngagementThroughCooperation(Final).pdf).

<sup>2</sup> “‘A Step to a Better Future’ Peace Initiative, Facilitation of Trade Across Dividing Lines,” Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 2018, [http://smr.gov.ge/Uploads/Concept\\_EN\\_0eaaac2e.pdf](http://smr.gov.ge/Uploads/Concept_EN_0eaaac2e.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Statement of the de facto Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia, 13/03/2018 and 5/04/2018 [http://mfaapsny.org/en/allnews/news/statements\\_speeches/kommentariy-daura-kove-o-novoy-mirnoy-initiative-pravitelstva-gruzii-shag-k-luchshemu-budushchemu-/?sphrase\\_id=1521](http://mfaapsny.org/en/allnews/news/statements_speeches/kommentariy-daura-kove-o-novoy-mirnoy-initiative-pravitelstva-gruzii-shag-k-luchshemu-budushchemu-/?sphrase_id=1521) ; <http://apsnypress.info/en/opinion/daur-kove-we-are-faced-with-the-categorical-refusal-of-the-georgian-side-to-adopt-a-joint-document-o/>

relations within Abkhaz society and politics, which is generally overlooked by outside observers, but nevertheless shows that Abkhazians are somehow more concerned with internal issues rather than relations with Georgia.

For their part, foreign actors such as the EU and the US who have supported Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty since the beginning of their involvement in the Caucasus region have failed to promote effective instruments for the peace process. The Geneva Discussions are the only international platform in place, which is far from achieving tangible results.<sup>4</sup> In 2009, the European Union's Special Representative for the South Caucasus (EUSRSC) Peter Semneby pushed for a renewed policy towards the conflict-resolution process, which concretized in the Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP). The strategy aimed at transforming the conflict by promoting the de-isolation of breakaway regions from their dependence to Russia, to interact with them and to offer an alternative partner for political and economic support, confidence-building and humanitarian aid, while maintaining the principle of non-recognition and support of Georgian sovereignty. Initiatives promoted by the Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism (COBERM), in partnership with United Nations Development Program in Georgia, are very diverse and are carried out by the European Delegation in Georgia. However, Abkhazia is very skeptical about EU commitment. As Kereselidze writes, "the Abkhaz are confused by mixed signals coming from the EU"<sup>5</sup> and find it difficult to consider the EU as a neutral actor. International engagement still depends on the laissez-passer of the Georgian Government, which means that adding "engagement" to "non-recognition" is not necessarily met by Abkhaz authorities more openly. Therefore, the engagement of foreign actors has had a limited impact and each side's political stance still remains immovable, allowing a very small space for progress in peace talks.

Civil society organisations in Georgia and Abkhazia are nevertheless continuing to concentrate their efforts, despite the unfavourable political situation, on people-to-people relations and cross-border dialogue. Recent activities, mostly funded by the EU delegation, major international funds and NGOs, have concentrated on the need to address past injustices and the memory of conflict on each side. Why memory? As conflict transformation literature suggests, it is important to acknowledge the role of the past in giving meaning and shape to the conflict itself, as well as the need for it to be addressed within reconciliation efforts. Miall sustains that "The attitudes the parties have towards one another are shaped by previous

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<sup>4</sup> 47th Round of Geneva International Discussions, 04/04/2019, civil.ge, <https://civil.ge/archives/301070>

<sup>5</sup> Kereselidze, N. (2015), p. 314.

relationships. The behaviour they adopt is not purely reactive but is based on their memory of what has happened in the past, and expectations of what may happen in the future.”<sup>6</sup>. One of the ways to frame the 1992-1993 conflict sees it as the clash of two different national projects, which resulted in conflicting claims and eventually war. Georgians consider Abkhaz to be Georgians and Abkhazia to be a historical part of the same nation state. Their claims are therefore perceived as legitimate and do not follow any imperial logic. Georgia’s primary objective is the reintegration of breakaway regions in the land where they belong. Abkhazia’s self-determination claims originate instead from a need of self-preservation and survival. Their history of self-government within the Soviet system strengthened a feeling of ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity, for which they refuse to be identified as Georgians. This identity became threatened by the Georgian national project<sup>7</sup>.

The August war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 added more nuances to the already intricated knot of claims and accusations between both sides. For the Abkhaz, it resulted in the recognition of their de facto statehood, in security guarantees and in the entity’s gradual increase of dependency on Russian support. For the Georgian side, it marked defeat and reinforced an already consolidated narrative where Russia is and has been the main problem in Georgia’s recent history. Russia not only occupies Georgian territory, but also threatens Georgian democracy through political, economic and other types of influence. This position has concretized in the support for a specific perspective on history, which views Georgian past as a constant struggle to defend its integrity and independence, namely by Soviet Russia. The detachment from and condemnation of the Soviet period has become imperative and has resulted in new memorial sites, commemorations and street names dedicated to victims and heroes who defended the Georgian state from Russian occupation.<sup>8</sup> Despite the positive aspects of a process of recovery from a dictatorial past that had its dark sides, this attitude has the effect of corroborating the idea that Abkhazia is now more than ever, as it was during the 1992-1993 war, a pawn serving the geopolitical interests of Russia. Harzl (2017) describes the phenomenon produced by this situation as a “reputational dilemma” that affects many de facto states. In general, secessionist states are “treated with ignorance, caution, rejection or sometimes even pariah”<sup>9</sup> and they are usually identified with

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<sup>6</sup> Miall (2004), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Nodia (1997), pp. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Toria (2014), p. 322-327.

<sup>9</sup> Harzl (2017), p. 122.

their patron state. They have no international legitimacy, and therefore treating them as authorities is not possible because it could mean legitimization. This type of situation further alienates Abkhaz society, which holds a significant degree of criticism towards the “patron” state<sup>10</sup>, while Russia’s position strengthens and Abkhazia’s isolation from the outside world grows.

While Georgians insist on the idea of victimhood towards Russia, Abkhaz support a narrative of victimhood towards Georgia. They recall their lost status of Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Georgian SSR’s discriminatory policies towards Abkhaz people, the nationalist discourse of Georgian leaders, the struggle for political representation and for the survival of Abkhaz language, culture and identity. The 27<sup>th</sup> of September, the day Abkhaz forces raised the flag of the Republic of Abkhazia over the building of former Council of Ministers, is celebrated as a liberation from Georgian rule. Celebrations taking place on that occasion in Sukhum/i go beyond the simple one-day commemoration<sup>11</sup>. The main side effect of this narrative has been the consolidation of a regime that is close to an ethnocracy<sup>12</sup>, where human rights of non-ethnic Abkhaz have considerable limitations. Georgians living in the Gali districts are the main victims of such situation<sup>13</sup>.

If looking through the lenses of how societies remember and interpret their past, especially a violent one, is hardly a tool for the resolution of complex conflicts, it nevertheless offers new cues of analysis. First and foremost, we can observe how memory works in a selective way. When something is remembered and commemorated, something else is forgotten<sup>14</sup>. This can result in the formation of master narratives that convey and perpetuate a specific interpretation of the past in which a collective identifies itself. In a conflict situation, narratives can be extremized or can simply focus on certain aspects of the

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<sup>10</sup> O’Loughlin et al. (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Last September, that day started with a flower-laying ceremony for the fallen soldiers in the Park of Glory. Following, a drawing competition for children on the street in front of the Dramatic Theater. A musical performance and a concert took place at the secondary school. Another concert starring famous singers and artists was hosted by the National Philharmonic Society of Abkhazia. Later in the afternoon, at Bagrat Shkub, the head of the Culture and Administration Department of Sukhum(i) opened the “Island of Poetry” project, where poems by Abkhaz writers on the war were displayed on a screen or played as a music. A concert in Bagapsh Square, starring war veterans, closed the day. Celebrations continued for the whole week including military parades and celebrations at memorial sites.

<sup>12</sup> Popescu (2006), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Hammerberg

<sup>14</sup> A. Assman in Olick *et al.* (2011).

story while neglecting others, making it harder and even socially unacceptable to consider the other side's story. However, what is not debatable is that the current standstill in Georgian-Abkhaz relations still affects the lives of thousands and thousands of people on both sides. It is therefore imperative to keep these considerations in mind when analyzing political transitions and reconciliation processes in post-conflict societies, which are often heavily influenced by how the collective experiences its past, by the narratives that dominate public discourse and the way they are reproduced. Now more than ever, as Thomas De Waal suggested, "More creativity is certainly required to overcome this unsatisfactory situation"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> De Waal, 03/12/2018.

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