



Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: rethinking the paradigm

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The paintings that appear on the covers of this series of publications depict Sukhum/i (the spelling of its name is contested), by current and former inhabitants – one Abkhaz, one Georgian. *Memories of the Town Walls* was painted by Adgur Dzidzaria, who now lives in Abkhazia. *Shoreline* was painted by Eldar Kavshbaia, who now lives in Tbilisi. These paintings appeared in a 2008 calendar created by Radio Soma, an independent Abkhaz radio station. Entitled *Twelve Artists, One Town*, it featured paintings of Sukhum/i by artists formerly and still resident in the city.

Cover: Adgur Dzidzaria, detail from *Memories of the Town Walls*. Oil on canvas.

* Holding this publication this way up, the reader will come to the Abkhaz team's research; flipping the publication over will bring the reader to the Georgian team's research.

Foreword

The 2008 war in and beyond South Ossetia inevitably represented a watershed in thinking about Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-South Ossetian and Georgian-Russian relations, and about possible approaches to resolving the outstanding issues confronting these troubled relationships. While the struggle to define the events of 2008 continues, what is less disputed is that the resumption of war demonstrates the failure of previous approaches to resolving the conflicts. Sixteen years of the Georgian-South Ossetian peace process, and one less in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, resulted in neither significant breakthroughs, nor the avoidance of renewed violence. While this outcome can be attributed to various factors, internal and external, possible flaws in the strategic approach of the conflict parties to the negotiations is certainly one of them.

An important question arising in the aftermath of the 2008 war, then, is whether possible flaws in previous approaches to the conflicts have been taken into consideration in the elaboration of post-2008 strategies. This question assumes particular significance for the process to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which has experienced recurring resumptions of violence since the ceasefire in 1993, for example in May 1998, 2001 and 2006.

With the partial exception of the Kodori gorge, where a joint Abkhaz-Russian military operation against Georgian forces took place but no casualties were incurred, Abkhazia escaped large-scale violence in August 2008, an outcome itself open to different explanations. Even without large-scale violence on the ground, however, Abkhazia also confronts a new situation since 2008 in the form of hardened boundaries, increased Russian presence and radicalized relations with Tbilisi. Moreover, rightly or wrongly, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has long been widely assumed to be the more intractable of Georgia's two conflicts. The question therefore emerges: how do emergent post-2008 dynamics impact on prospects for a long-term transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict?

Archil Gegeshidze, from the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), had

devised a concept for research into paradigms of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution already in November 2007. The proposed research agenda assumed a new significance in the aftermath of the August 2008 war, on account of the conflicting reactions to the war, including the recognition of Abkhazia as an independent country by Russia and subsequently a handful of allies (Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru), and the West's continued advocacy of Georgia's territorial integrity. These opposed reactions, and Abkhazia's emergent role as a 'faultline conflict' subsuming a whole range of issues in Western-Russian relations not directly related to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, resulted in a marked deterioration in Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

Gegeshidze's idea was to focus research on the immediate issues driving and aggravating the conflict, and to question the framing of the conflict as broad geopolitics. It was hoped that this could contribute to a transformation in thinking about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and form the basis for constructive cross-conflict dialogue on the resolution of outstanding problems, and on areas where cooperation between the conflict parties might still be both possible and mutually beneficial.

The research was conceived as a parallel project to be realized in partnership with an Abkhaz research team. This role was played by Natella Akaba (from the Abkhazian Women's Association) and Iraklii Khintba (Abkhazian State University). Ivlian Haindrava of the Republican Institute South Caucasus Studies Program, in Tbilisi, joined as the second Georgian researcher. Conciliation Resources facilitated the project, which was then supported through a grant from the European Union Instrument for Stability. The Georgian and Abkhazian research teams met in Yerevan in September 2009 to agree on broad parameters for the research. Research plans were then devised, exchanged and agreed. The research is based primarily on some 21 in-depth qualitative interviews with acknowledged Georgian and Abkhazian experts, both within policy-making circles and outside, in addition to a number of focus groups. New legislation, official statements

and strategy documents were also reviewed, in addition to a wide range of secondary sources.

The resulting research proved to be much wider and deeper in scope than originally envisaged. It reviews both past experience with conflict resolution strategies prior to 2008 and provides a snapshot in time of both societal reactions and policy orientations in the two years following the 2008 crisis. This snapshot is likely to be of lasting value over time, as memories of this period stabilize and official histories retrospectively fix in stone the flux of this traumatic era. Researchers also examined original causes of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, making an analytical distinction between underlying factors driving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and factors explaining the outbreak of hostilities on 7 August 2008 central to this research. It should be emphasized that the views expressed herein are the researchers' own, and cannot be taken to represent the views of the researchers' organizations, Conciliation Resources or the European Union.

This research has been published in English, Russian and Georgian; a summary has been published in Abkhaz.

London, 14 February 2011

1. Introduction: Relevance, theoretical and practical value of the study - *Natella Akaba*

There has been a proliferation of studies of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the past decade. Yet one gets the impression that the majority of authors prefer to describe only the chronology of the events or, in some cases, potential future scenarios. At the same time, root causes and factors which determined the conflict have not yet been properly analysed. This is largely due to a firm belief held by most international mediators that the past should be left to historians while the former should focus on the future. This view has been repeatedly voiced at the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations by official representatives of the UN, the OSCE and the Group of Friends, perplexed by Abkhaz and Georgian researchers' desire to analyse the underlying causes and character of the conflict.

This approach appears deeply misguided and it is likely to be one of the main reasons for the utter failure of the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations and the peace process as a whole. One cannot expect conflict transformation or resolution to take place, nor to find a model acceptable to all stakeholders in a situation without complete clarity over the nature and source of the confrontation and the issues at the heart of the conflict. Each party has its own interpretation of past events and its own vision of the future which, far from converging, are in fact completely at odds with each other. It is difficult, almost impossible, to imagine successful dialogue in a situation where Georgians view the events of 1992-1993 as orchestrated by the 'long arm' of Moscow, provoking the Georgian-Abkhaz war in order to keep Tbilisi in its sphere of influence, while the Abkhaz unanimously view the same tragic events as a culmination of the national liberation struggle of the Abkhaz people and the realisation of their legitimate right to self-determination.

There are plenty of reasons to treat this conflict as intractable. These logically require a move away from traditional methods of conflict resolution. Factors such as the asymmetry between the two sides, the deep historic roots of the conflict, the heavy casualties incurred by both sides during the hostilities, the high proportion of the Abkhaz population involved in the conflict, accompanied by a deep polarisation of the parties' positions and enemy stereotyping of the other side - all spell out the need to turn to the concept of conflict transformation. The objective of the latter is not to promote external factors and mediation efforts, but, primarily, to transform relations, interests and goals of different groups making up the communities on either side of the conflict divide.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the nature and underlying causes of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in its dynamics before and after August 2008, as well as to identify the reasons for the failure of the official negotiation process. It is also useful to identify the role and place of different stakeholders and their interests, which is particularly important in view of the continuing attempts by some circles in Georgia to present the Abkhaz political elite, as well as Abkhaz society as a whole, as Russia's puppets, devoid of any will of their own. Clearly, it is impossible to develop new approaches to the resolution of this conflict without a brutally honest, depoliticised analysis and rethinking of the entire past experience of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, especially in view of the new realities which have emerged since August 2008. These new realities open up new opportunities to establish a long-lasting peace in the region, but also create new security challenges on a regional scale. The current situation requires a thorough analysis and development of adequate responses to the ongoing changes by politicians

and by the expert community. Ideally, this study could stimulate development of a new paradigm of the negotiation process.

1.1 Methodology

One of the objectives of the present study is to conduct a comparative analysis of perceptions of the nature, history and consequences of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, characteristic of the Abkhaz expert community on the one hand, and the ideas, opinions and judgements dominating academic literature on the subject, on the other. In March-February 2010 Arda Inal-Ipa and Liana Kvarchelia conducted a survey among experts on the causes and consequences of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the changes occurring since August 2008. The survey consisted of eleven

in-depth interviews and two focus groups. Respondents included political analysts, Members of Parliament, NGO activists, ex-combatants of the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war, journalists and human rights activists. The interviewees were men and women belonging to different age groups and of different political persuasions. Focus groups included young people, representatives of the expert community and NGOs. Twenty-nine people in total took part in the survey.

The data was later collated and reported in detail as part of the present study, together with the results of the political and scientific analysis of official documents and academic literature on the subject. The authors of the study have also expressed their own personal opinions, observations and judgements.

2. Perceptions of the nature, underlying causes and consequences of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict before August 2008 - *Natella Akaba*

It has become customary to view the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict through the prism of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although there is no doubt that that momentous event served as a powerful catalyst in the escalation of the conflict and its deterioration into a military standoff, one cannot ignore the considerable disagreements and inter-ethnic tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia even at a time when the USSR appeared an indestructible citadel. The Abkhaz, after all, were the only nation in the Soviet Union whose representatives would repeatedly participate in protest rallies against Georgian policies which, they were convinced, were aimed at suppressing Abkhaz national and cultural identity. Although all major decisions were made in Moscow, the Abkhaz elite is convinced, to the present day, that the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (GSSR), which enjoyed a rather privileged position within the USSR, was able

to pursue its own assimilation policy in Abkhazia. Abkhaz protest rallies were held in 1957, 1964, 1967 and 1978, while in 1989 the first armed confrontation between Abkhaz and Georgians resulted in human casualties. If inter-ethnic tensions did exist in other Soviet autonomies, these were not openly expressed until the end of 1980s; Abkhaz protests, however, took the form of open opposition against Tbilisi's policies. Moscow had to consider and address some of the Abkhaz demands, aimed at preserving and developing the Abkhaz language, opening an Abkhaz university, setting up national television and so on, although the central government in Moscow tried to discourage more radical demands which included the secession of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic from the GSSR and restoration of Abkhazia's status to the one it held prior to 1931.

Ethnic nationalism was considered a gross violation of communist norms and was frowned upon in the USSR. This allowed the Georgian leadership to interpret Abkhazia's demands relating to preserving traditional Abkhaz toponyms or developing the Abkhaz language and culture as expressions of nationalism and a deviation from the "CPSU's general political line." This resulted in the persecution and sometimes death of many members of the Abkhaz intelligentsia, even after Stalin's death. With Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and democratisation the previously curbed nationalist sentiment in Georgia proper filled newspaper pages and city squares, while attacks against the Abkhaz autonomous republic and the Abkhaz "separatists" became an integral part of Georgian public life. For the Abkhaz this was a serious cause for concern. Offensive remarks against non-Georgian populations, including demands to impose restrictions on their birth rate, calls to abolish all Georgian autonomous entities only served to increase tensions in Abkhazia.

An open letter published by a group of Georgian literary figures in 1989 became a barometer gauging prevailing attitudes among certain circles in Georgian society in relation to the Abkhaz. Among other things, it contained the following statements: "Benefitting from our thousand-year-old kindness and with our polite accommodation the Adyghe tribes (the Apsils and the Abaza) arrived in our country from the North Caucasus a few centuries ago. We made them welcome on our Georgian soil... Now this newcomer from beyond the mountains, like some moss covering our national flesh, disputes our land."¹ This was far from the only public statement of this kind. It is worth noting that the Abkhaz community took such slogans very seriously and, in wide circulation, they intensified a perceived threat to Abkhaz national and cultural identity and uncertainty about the future.

In our opinion, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is, to a degree, a socio-cultural and psychological (on the level of cognition) conflict, making it particularly acute and emotional. This refers first and foremost, to different understandings by Georgians and Abkhaz of their place in the constantly changing arena of geopolitics. For the Abkhaz it is essential to remain part of the Caucasus, despite the accelerating process of globalisation, to keep open their borders with other republics and regions of the North Caucasus (primarily, their border along

the river Psou), maintaining cross-border cultural, human, economic and other contacts. Georgia's aspiration to distance itself from Russia in every possible way is unacceptable to the Abkhaz not least because it would further separate them from the Adyghe and the other Caucasus nations closest to them linguistically and culturally. For the Abkhaz the notion of a Caucasian identity is not an empty concept, it has real meaning and it allows them to feel stronger and safer. At the same time a considerable part of the Abkhaz elite identify Abkhazia with Europe and highly value European culture.

One could speak here about several levels of identity – the Abkhaz community, inhabitants of the Caucasus, Europeans. For Georgians (at least, according to the Georgian political elite) Georgia's exclusive affiliation to Europe is incontestable so that the Euro-Atlantic vector was and remains, at least for the time being, the main vector of Georgia's development. There is in fact a certain scepticism in Georgia regarding the existence of a Caucasian identity. Both before and during the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-93 and in post-war years many members of the Georgian public reacted with bewilderment to Abkhazian slogans and statements referring to Caucasian brotherhood and brotherly relations between the Abkhaz and the Adyghe. They openly doubted the sincerity of such statements.

The formation of the Confederation of the Caucasus Nations with its capital in Sukhum in 1991 was received in Georgia at best with irony, while Shevardnadze christened the organisation 'a paper tiger.' A number of Georgian cultural figures, a major Georgian writer Chabua Amirejibi among them, went so far as to make offensive remarks about the Adyghe and other Caucasus nations.² One often heard Georgians resident in Abkhazia expressing surprise at the increasing contacts between the Abkhaz and other Caucasus nations at the beginning of the 1990s: "Can you really feel closer to these Muslims than to us, Georgians, with whom you have lived side by side for so many years!" There is still a widespread – and totally inaccurate – opinion among Georgians that volunteers from the North Caucasus in the 1992-1993 war were, in fact, ordinary mercenaries who fought for money. At the same time it is important to mention that occasionally one hears slogans,

1. *Akhalgazrda komunisti* newspaper, 6 May 1989 (translated from Georgian).

2. In one of his interviews Ch. Amirejibi stated that "the Abkhaz are Georgian tribes. Those who came here from the North Caucasus are trash, Adyghe, murderers, semi-barbaric tribes" (*Rossiyskie Vesti* newspaper, 22 October 1992).

coming from Tbilisi, about “Caucasian unity.” As G. Nodia points out “the Georgians claim to have a special role in the Caucasus, so the Ibero-Caucasian idea³, rather popular under Gamsakhurdia, could be considered a form of post-imperialism.”⁴ It is natural that the Abkhaz are not at all happy with such models of a single Caucasus in which Georgia would enjoy a dominant position, when they consider that it is Georgia which in fact constitutes the main threat to their ethnic and cultural identity.

When discussing the underlying causes of the conflict the majority of Abkhaz (and not just Abkhaz) researchers think that the problem of identity lies at its heart. The Abkhaz see Georgian policy on Abkhazia as an attempt to put an end to the very existence of the Abkhaz nation. By denying the existence of the Abkhaz as a separate nation, which is what a number of Georgian ideologues are engaged in at present, and by trying to impress on the Abkhaz the idea that they are, in fact, Georgians, the Georgians infringe upon the identity of the Abkhaz, one of the basic human needs. Even when it is recognised that the Abkhaz have a right to their own identity, they are denied the right to their territory, namely, Abkhazia, which is rather illogical. In the words of Belgian academic M. Theo Yans, territory, in the sense of a place of origin or motherland, “is a cornerstone of identity.” The same author goes on to say that when members of an ethno-political group see a threat to the territory which they consider their own “their reaction could be that of extreme anger” and when a confrontation ensues neither group is prepared to compromise.⁵

It is a fact that during social upheavals such as, for instance, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of communist ideology, national awareness begins to play a pivotal role. According to a wry definition by a Swiss academic, T. Fleiner, nationalism is the highest and the ultimate stage of Communism. The importance of ethnic identity greatly increases in a context when other identities, for example, state, civil and so on, become devalued, as happened

during the precipitous disintegration of the Soviet Union. At such times people tend to turn to their ethnic identity which is closely linked to such basic notions as security and right to participation. Despite assertions by some radical liberals, the majority of people in the contemporary world are not ready to abandon their group identities.

Many historians consider the period following Russia’s war in the Caucasus the starting point of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. At the time, fleeing the tsarist government’s purges, almost three-quarters of the entire Abkhaz population were forced to leave their homeland. Georgian historians and politicians periodically express their surprise at the fact that although it was the Russian government that carried out reprisals and deportations of the Abkhaz, the Abkhaz tend to blame the Georgians – and not the Russians – for their misfortunes. This can be easily explained: it is a well known fact that at certain stages Georgians also participated in the punitive actions of the tsarist administration against the Abkhaz, the Circassians and other Caucasian nations, although today this fact is hotly denied by many in Georgia. It is also well known that although Georgia was a Russian colony at the time the tsarist administration referred to the Georgians as a “loyal population”, unlike the Abkhaz who were christened a “disloyal population.” The Georgian aristocracy were allowed to be part of the Russian court and to do military service there, whereas the Abkhaz gentry, outraged by the loss of their privileges, took part in demonstrations against the autocracy together with representatives of “lower” social strata. Around the same time the Georgian press ran a campaign aimed at resettling Georgians in depopulated Abkhaz lands. Georgian enlightenment figures as well as social commentators campaigned among the Georgian peasants, in particular in the neighbouring region of Mingrelia, urging them to move to Abkhazia while simultaneously doing their best to oppose any Russian settlers, by alleging, for instance, that the Abkhaz climate only suited Georgian populations. “Among those who have managed best to settle down in Abkhazia are settlers from Racha, Imereti and Mingrelia... The rest of the settlers have never adapted to Abkhazia’s climate or got used to this land in the same way as the Rachans, Imeretians and Mingrelians⁶.”⁷ G. Tsereteli

3. The “Ibero-Caucasian idea” was a race-based doctrine identifying a racially defined Ibero-Caucasian civilization that had according to the theory been marginalized historically by Indo-European races. This doctrine was closely associated with Georgia’s first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The Abkhaz, as a Caucasian nation were included in the Ibero-Caucasian community, but Ossetians, as ‘Indo-Europeans’, were not – *Ed.*

4. G. Nodia, “Conflict in Abkhazia: National Projects and Political Circumstances”, in the compilation *The Georgians and the Abkhaz. The road to reconciliation*. (Moscow: 1998) p. 26.

5. M. Theo Yans, “Personal Federalism: Solutions for Ethno-national Conflicts”, *The Practice of Federalism, Looking for Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, pp.366-367.

6. These terms denote Georgians from the regions of Racha, Imereti and Mingrelia, distinguished by specific ethnographic cultures, and in the case of Mingrelians, also vernacular language – *Ed.*

7. *Iveria* newspaper, 1887, no. 14.

wrote at the time that “our people’s [the Georgians – N.A.] resettlement need is ten times greater than that of the Russians... All those who sympathise with our country should do everything they can to channel our poor country folk to the empty areas along the Black Sea coast.”⁸

N. Djanashia was one of those arguing in favour of special rights for Georgians resettling in Abkhazia, saying that “because the Georgians had repeatedly spilled their blood in this land bestowing glory on the banners of Great Russia with their immense courage” the Government (of Russia – N.A.) must offer this land to Georgian settlers, rather than Greeks from beyond the mountains.⁹ This desire by a neighbouring Caucasian nation to use the Abkhaz tragedy for its own national interests was quite understandably seen by the Abkhaz as unacceptable. Thus the Abkhaz and the Georgians found themselves “on different sides of the barricades” and according to Georgian academic T. Gordadze, it was the issue of the *muhajirs*¹⁰ that became a real divider between the Abkhaz and the Georgians. He also points out that classification of different nations in terms of their loyalty to the Russian Empire constantly changed, so that the “loyal” Georgians soon fell out of favour and into a “disloyal” category and by a special decree in 1900, Georgian settlers were banned from buying land in Abkhazia.¹¹

Evaluation of the consequences of the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993 is another bone of contention between the parties to the conflict. Abkhaz academics see the expulsion of the Georgian occupying forces and the ensuing exodus of a significant part of the Georgian population as a just consequence of the national liberation struggle of their people and the realisation of the Abkhaz nation’s inalienable right to self-determination. The attitude towards Abkhazia’s Georgian community became increasingly negative with the beginning of the 1992-1993 war. In the opinion of most Abkhaz, the Georgians should have joined forces with the Abkhaz to oppose those who rode into Abkhazia on top of the tanks, who fired on the beaches of Sukhum from helicopter gunships,

and who murdered and plundered the civilian population. For many Abkhaz the fact that some representatives of the local Georgian community even greeted the Georgian National Guard forces with flowers and champagne was a particularly sore point. Consequently, the Abkhaz feel little love or sympathy towards their former Georgian neighbours and friends.

The predominant view in Georgian academic writing is that the tragic outcome of the war for Georgia was predetermined by the treacherous policies of the Russian political elite which, as most Georgian researchers firmly believe, was squarely and unashamedly on the side of the Abkhaz and assisted them. However, Abkhaz academics are divided on this point. A number of Abkhaz historians take a slightly differently view of it: that contrary to the popular opinion, officials in Moscow did not hold a pro-Abkhaz position at the beginning of the 1990s.

One must bear in mind what was happening in Russia at the time: the violent standoff between President Boris Yeltsin and his “team” on the one hand, and the Supreme Soviet led by Ruslan Khasbulatov, on the other. Russia was in search of its own new identity and its political elite were deeply preoccupied with their own internal debates about national interests and the way forward. Given that Russia had always considered the South Caucasus a vitally important area, the Kremlin took an active part in the events unfolding in Georgia. It contributed to the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia and return of Shevardnadze to Tbilisi and it got actively involved in terminating the military phase of Georgia’s conflict in South Ossetia. Moreover, there are grounds to believe that in the initial stages of Georgia’s military operation in Abkhazia the Kremlin was assisting Georgia both militarily and politically (suffice it to mention the handover of a large part of the Soviet military arsenal to Georgia in May 1992 under the terms of the Tashkent Agreement, despite the fact that Georgia, not a member of the CIS at the time, was not eligible to receive any weapons). In general, according to Carnegie Moscow Centre expert Dmitry Trenin, the Russian military played a very important role in the South Caucasus at the time, establishing “close links at all levels with their Georgian counterparts.” The “special relationship” between Russian General Pavel Grachev and Georgian warlord Tengiz Kitovani was a well known fact.¹²

8. G. Tsereteli, “The Settlement of Jiketia and Abkhazia”, *Droeba* newspaper, 1879, no. 47.

9. *Iveria* newspaper, 1898, no. 51.

10. The *muhajirs* (originally an Arabic term denoting ‘refugee’) were Muslim Abkhazians exiled to Ottoman Turkey by the conquering Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century – *Ed.*

11. Thornike Gordadze, “Moral and Ideological Obstacles to the Resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict”, in the compilation *Abkhazia-Georgia: Obstacles to Peace* (Sukhum: 2000), p. 42.

12. Dmitri Trenin, “Security Interests and Russia’s Policies in the Caucasus Region”, in *The Caucasus’ Disputed Borders* (Moscow: 1999), p.111.

It is quite possible that Moscow was also vexed by considerable Abkhaz activity in support of the Confederation of Caucasus Nations with its capital in Sukhum and also contacts between the leaders of the Abkhaz National Movement and headstrong Chechen leader General Dudaev. According to noted Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba this was the reason why in the initial stages of the war Moscow was planning to teach the Abkhaz and other “separatists” from the Caucasus a lesson. Lakoba adduces several convincing facts as proof of this assertion. He particularly stresses the fact that when Georgian forces entered Abkhazia on 14 August 1992 Ardzinba tried in vain to get in touch with Yeltsin. The Head of the Presidential Guard A. Korzhakov categorically refused to get Yeltsin on the phone stating that “Boris Nikolaevich was in the sea.” All attempts to reach other members of the Russian government also failed. Lakoba cites the extract from the Russian-Georgian Joint Communiqué, signed during the meeting at Dagomys on 24 June, according to which Georgian and Russian law enforcement agencies undertook to curb activities of any “illegal military, paramilitary and unauthorised armed units and groups operating on the territory under their jurisdictions.”¹³ In addition, the immense pressure put by the Kremlin on Ardzinba during a meeting in Moscow on 3 September 1992, coupled with the unconditional support Yeltsin extended to Shevardnadze by agreeing to every one of his demands, caused outrage in Abkhaz society. With time, however, prompted by internal and external pressures, Moscow did slightly adjust its policy on Abkhazia which is not to say, however, that the Russian leadership had completely accepted Abkhazia’s separation from Georgia.

2.1 Experts’ opinion on the issue

Although the topic of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, its roots and underlying causes have been some of the most hotly debated issues in Abkhaz society, it was clear from our survey that society is divided on this account. These are some of the responses to the question on the nature of the conflict:

- It is an ethno-political conflict, driven by incompatible ‘national projects’ to form nation-states on the same territory;
- It is an ethno-political conflict born out of the contradiction between two principles of

international law: the right of nations to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity;

- The conflict is political in nature, but this political conflict resulted in an inter-ethnic clash at a later stage. The policy of “georgianisation”, the closure of Abkhaz schools and the pressure brought on the language and culture of the Abkhaz affected the way ordinary people thought and related to each other;
- It is a conflict about resources: about land, natural and human resources. Often these “resource interests” are not expressed directly but find an indirect expression through political and ideological aspirations;
- The conflict is multilayered, but the main layer is psychological. At the heart of the conflict lie misperceptions and false beliefs: the Georgians believing Abkhaz land to be their own; the false belief in Georgian society that the Abkhaz are really Georgians and have never had a state of their own; denial of the fact that the Abkhaz and Georgians are two different nations.

But perhaps most frequently mentioned is the ethno-political nature of the conflict, although there are also references to the existence of several other underlying causes. At the same time some express the view that the conflict did not have a complex structure, but was only political, ethnic or economic by nature, while other types of problems appeared later. For example, respondents who thought that the conflict was political in origin quoted the high proportion of mixed Georgian-Abkhaz marriages in pre-war Abkhazia, contradicting the idea of interethnic incompatibility. Many respondents emphasized problems linked to identity and the need to maintain and defend it.

Opinions were also divided as to the moment of the conflict’s inception. There was a range of historical periods suggested: from the Middle Ages to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In reality, however, the range of opinions among the majority of respondents was actually much smaller than it might appear because many respondents were thinking of different stages of the conflict when answering the question. Some spoke of latent stages of the conflict, as opposed to its active manifestation or violent phase. Some respondents consider consequences of the nineteenth century Caucasus war the main source of the conflict while others attribute its origins to Stalin’s purges. Still, respondents seemed to agree that in contrast with other regions of the USSR, the purges in Abkhazia

13. See the detailed account in Stanislav Lakoba *Abkhazia de facto or Georgia de jure?* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Centre, Hokkaido University, 2001), pp. 37, 42-48.

assumed an ethnic, i.e. anti-Abkhaz, as well as political nature. Three respondents insisted that awareness of the existence of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict first came at the time of the Georgian Mensheviks, while events prior to that period had not been marked by interethnic confrontation.

It is important to stress that practically every respondent named 1937 as the time indelibly written into the mind of every Abkhaz as emblematic of policies aimed at the extermination of the Abkhaz nation. It is events beginning in 1937 that respondents consider the main driver of the Abkhaz protest. It is worth noting that apart from the tragedy of the elimination of the Abkhaz intellectual elite as alleged “enemies of the people”, many respondents felt particularly emotional about the persecution of the Abkhaz language. The following excerpts are indicative of this sentiment. “It was the most sinister period when the Abkhaz were very depressed... when in order to speak to each other in Abkhaz they had to hide in school toilets or utility rooms – that was the extent of their fear to express their identity.” In the words of another respondent, “Ukraine also underwent a period of russification but the teachers there would never hit a pupil, whereas when Abkhaz children tried to speak Abkhaz in the breaks between lessons, their Georgian teachers would hit them on the head or their hands with a ruler.”

A number of respondents mentioned the privileged position Georgia enjoyed within the USSR, in particular, the fact that the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic was enlarged by adding parts of the North Caucasus republics during the period of deportations of the Karachai, Balkars and other ethnic groups from the North Caucasus. They stressed that Stalin (an ethnic Georgian) personally played a part in promoting such an attitude towards Georgia; in the words of one respondent, “Many cultural figures who tried to curry favour with Stalin, poured into Georgia to sing the praises of colourful Georgian culture. This made the Georgians giddy and their heads are still spinning. Thus began their arrogance and their feeling of impunity.”

When discussing the main drivers of the conflict many of those surveyed saw the Abkhaz national liberation struggle as a reaction against Georgia’s negative influence. According to one respondent Georgia’s actions forced the Abkhaz nation to organize itself in order to confront the threat more effectively. Other respondents mentioned the special emotional intensity of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict: “There was an all-pervasive oppressive

Soviet machine which had a predilection for a varnished and embellished version of national identity. Yet the Russians never told the Chechens that they did not exist. But the Georgians, with Ingoroqva’s theory¹⁴, tried to deny completely the very existence of the Abkhaz nation. It seems to me that there were no analogues to this in the whole of the Soviet Union. Nobody else was ever told they did not exist. This made the conflict ever more passionate, adding a dimension of personal injury”, said one respondent.

A number of respondents emphasized that the idea of an independent Abkhaz state which today appears so natural and inevitable was only put on the agenda during the war. “Let us cast our minds back to 1989-1991. Abkhazia understood that there were slim chances of gaining independence at that time. So to begin with it was about broadening the scope of its autonomy, about a federal Georgia, which in July 1992 Sukhum was ready to negotiate with Georgia. To a large extent Tbilisi’s own actions prompted Abkhazia to “go all the way”... It would have been possible to strike a deal at some stage in the past but the Georgians, so certain of their position, of Western help and Russia’s loyalty, represented by Yeltsin, were extremely intractable and would not entertain any compromises.”

Almost all respondents were unanimous in naming the war as the main negative consequence of the conflict although, according to one young man, the conflict also had a positive side to it: “Had this conflict not progressed to its ultimate phase, the military confrontation, it could have had graver consequences for our nation.” In discussing the outcome of the conflict some respondents asked themselves the following questions: are we making the best of of the historical opportunity presented to us? Will we succeed in the difficult task of state building? Will we manage to fulfil our mission as a subject of history? One respondent summed up the outcome of the conflict as follows: “As far as I am concerned the conflict is not over yet. It is not clear what is going to happen. We have to think about

14. The author refers here to the theory propagated by literary historian Pavle Ingoroqva, in his 1954 monograph *Giorgi Merchule*. In this book, Ingoroqva claimed that the Abkhaz were in fact seventeenth century arrivals in Abkhazia from the North Caucasus who had usurped and taken on the identity of the original autochthons, a Georgian (Kartvelian) tribe who were the ‘real Abkhaz.’ Ingoroqva’s theory assumed great popularity in Georgia in the 1980s-1990s, and although this popularity lingers in layman’s accounts of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, it has been rejected by serious Georgian scholarship, which now accepts the autochthonous status of the Abkhaz in Abkhazia, alongside an also autochthonous Georgian population – *Ed.*

possible consequences still to come.” The following statement stands out from the rest: “Although many see an independent state as an ultimate and final goal, it is in fact just a tool for the dynamic development of society as a whole. How we use this tool depends on us and no-one else.”

It is worth noting that a consequence of the conflict as significant as the exodus of the Georgian population from Abkhazia was mentioned by two respondents only. “A very important consequence is the change in the demographic situation. It is hard to tell whether it is a positive or a negative change. What is positive is the fact that we are no longer in the minority, yet it would be preferable to see this growth driven either by [the return of – *Ed.*] our own diaspora or as a result of a natural population growth. But it would be very difficult for us to compete with the influx of settlers [from Georgia – N.A.] which happened before the war. The refugee problem will hang over us like a sword of Damocles for a very long time to come. So it would be wrong to declare the problem solved.” Another respondent mentioned the issue in the following manner: “The Georgian refugees

understand that there are no guarantees of their ever being able to return to Abkhazia.”

The silence of most respondents on the topic of refugees can possibly be explained by the fact that while this problem is permanently on the agenda of the official talks, it is practically absent in internal political discourse. The problems of the Gal¹⁵ district also cropped up only once or twice. Although there is no taboo on this topic in internal Abkhaz debates, the fact that these extremely pressing problems were hardly mentioned by respondents in the study requires explanation. The government of Abkhazia is possibly in part responsible for such an indifferent attitude to this sensitive issue, because it has not yet developed any properly articulated policy on the Gal district, which would both be in line with Abkhazia’s national interests and comply with international standards.

15. Known as the Gali district to Georgians, this is Abkhazia’s southernmost district, bordering ‘Georgia proper’, populated almost exclusively by ethnic Georgians of Mingrelian origin, and the only location of significant return by refugees (from an Abkhaz perspective)/internally displaced people (from a Georgian perspective – *Ed.*)

3. An overview of the parties’ positions

– *Natella Akaba*

When we talk about protagonists in this conflict it would be logical to assume that we mean Abkhazia and Georgia as the two adversaries. According to official Georgian position, however, Abkhazia is not considered an independent actor but only an obedient executor of Russia’s will. For decades such an interpretation has been force-fed to Georgian society preventing it from forming a proper understanding of the underlying causes of the conflict. Suffice it to quote a statement by President Shevardnadze during the storming of Sukhum by Abkhaz forces at the end of September 1993: “The conflict in Abkhazia was orchestrated by imperial powers. Sukhumi could have been saved, as recently as yesterday. Russia alone could have done it and we have appealed

to Russia for help!”¹⁶ Georgian governments and presidents may come and go but the fundamentals of Georgia’s political narrative about Abkhazia remain unchanged. Today Georgia continues the same policy of excluding an independent Abkhaz political calculus and will by engaging instead in the usual myths about simple-minded Abkhaz and treacherous Russians. For example, Georgia’s Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to Great Britain G. Badridze is convinced that “Russia has fooled the Abkhaz” and its true aim is none other than to annex their territory.¹⁷

16. Eduard Shevardnadze, interview in the *New York Times*, 27 September 1993.

The *Report by the Georgian Government on the Aggression by the Russian Federation against Georgia*, compiled in January 2010, states that Moscow instigated ethnic confrontation in the “Georgian autonomies created by the Soviet Union, where fertile ground was prepared in advance by fostering and cultivating separatist orientations among local elites. So great was the Abkhaz political elite’s dependence on Russia that it failed to take in and properly appreciate the offer of equality made by the Georgian government based on a reduction of the number of ethnic Georgian representatives in the Supreme Soviet of the Autonomous Republic.”¹⁷

Of course one cannot totally rule out the possibility of the Communist leadership in Moscow exploiting Abkhazian disaffection with the status quo for their own interests. Yet Moscow’s efforts would have failed had Tbilisi demonstrated readiness to understand the real needs and fears of the Abkhaz instead of exhibiting a disrespectful attitude to their aspirations to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity. This only exacerbated prevailing negative stereotypes of the Georgians among the Abkhaz and reinforced their belief that the Georgian strategy was based on the idea of the absolute and total superiority of the Georgian nation and Georgian state over the Abkhaz.

Below is the list of some of the stereotypes relating to the conflict which have been widely and repeatedly used by Georgian officialdom, as well as some representatives of the political opposition:

- The Abkhaz effectively live on Georgian land, because Abkhazia is part and parcel of Georgia, in the same way as (the Georgian provinces of – *Ed.*) Imereti or Kakheti. Since the Abkhaz enjoy Georgian hospitality and kindness they should be grateful to the real masters of this land;
- The Georgians are the most ancient and cultured nation in the world whereas the Abkhaz acquired a written script for their language only very recently. The Georgians’ mission is to bring culture to the Abkhaz, thereby rescuing them from the threat of russification;
- The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is an artificial construct masterminded by a third party, i.e. Russia, which has used the Abkhaz elite, employed by Moscow, to carry out subversive

activities on its behalf. Many rank-and-file Abkhaz actually want to have closer links with the Georgians and have a negative attitude to Russia;

- As a small nation the Abkhaz do not have legal grounds or real possibility of creating their own fully-fledged state. Hence, the best outcome for them would be to remain part of Georgia.

In reality there are other, far more radical, views current in Georgian society but they have been deliberately omitted here because even the approaches listed above cause bitter resentment among the Abkhaz.

These ideas about the Abkhaz, firmly lodged in Georgian popular consciousness, show quite clearly that the unequal status of the two sides was the principal factor contributing to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. When describing the Abkhaz position one should therefore bear in mind that the Abkhaz fought against an institutionalized inequality between Georgians and Abkhaz. According to many representatives of the Abkhaz political elite at the time, it was possible to achieve equality in Abkhaz and Georgians rights within a reformed Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. In fact, for autonomous republics there was no alternative to raising their status in line with that of the union republics.

It would be naive to suggest, however, that the Abkhaz were particularly fond of the Soviet Union. In April 1990 the USSR Congress of Peoples’ Deputies adopted the law *Concerning the procedure of secession of a Soviet Republic from the USSR*, partly as a result of pressure exerted by the deputies representing autonomous republics, including Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba. With the adoption of the law autonomous entities were given the right to hold their own referenda in cases when a union republic, of which they formed part, decided to secede from the USSR.¹⁹ However, the law never became operational. According to an astute observation by historian D.Furman, “the Abkhaz are a small nation. It is not merely independence or aspiration to have equal status with other nations that are at stake here, but their ethnic survival. A small Abkhaz nation could survive in the special “hothouse” climate of the USSR where autonomies’ fixed status was protected by the whole might of the totalitarian state and

17. G. Badridze, “Abkhazia has been fooled by Russia”, *The Guardian*, 3 May 2010; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/03/abkhazia-russia-european-georgia?INTCMP=SRCH>

18. <http://www.report.smr.gov.ge/>

19. USSR law, *Concerning the procedure of secession of a Soviet Republic from the USSR on the Resolution of Issues of Secession of Soviet Union Republics*, *News of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies and the USSR Supreme Soviet*, Vol. 15 (1990), p. 252.

where elections did not count. But in a democratic Georgia operating according to the principle of “one person, one vote” it is very difficult, nigh impossible, to preserve that status”.²⁰ In other words, we are not talking about a special Abkhaz attachment to Communist ideology but about an acute sense of their own cultural and demographic vulnerability given the realities of post-Soviet conditions. Still, to be fair, it is worth mentioning that many problems of the Abkhaz resulted from the “Leninist-Stalinist nationalities’ policy.”

Official and *de facto* inequality were perceived extremely negatively by the Abkhaz because in their own mind they never considered and do not consider themselves in any way inferior to the Georgians (other than in their number). This was the reason why in spring-summer of 1992 the idea of a federation with two equal constituent entities was conceived. Developed and put forward by a group of Abkhaz lawyers, the idea was emphatically rejected by Tbilisi. Following the refusal of the Georgian government to consider the Abkhaz proposal, the latter made the next step. Given that Georgia had unilaterally abolished the 1978 Constitution and reinstated the Constitution of 1921, the Abkhaz faction of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia reinstated, by a simple majority vote, the Abkhaz Constitution of 1925, giving Abkhazia the same status as Georgia. Georgia was, quite literally, “up in arms” at that decision. It is quite symbolic that Georgian troops moved into Abkhazia on 14 August 1992, i.e. on the very day when the Abkhaz faction tabled the above-mentioned motion *On the framework of the relations between Abkhazia and Georgia* for debate in Parliament.

Paradoxically, the problem of inequality of status was at least partially resolved only when the Abkhaz became a party to open conflict with Georgia. In the words of Arda Inal-Ipa, “it is quite unfortunate that confrontation, conflict, war became those conditions under which inequality was balanced out, despite the differences in strength... In other words, only in the context of this conflict did Abkhazia find itself on equal footing with its opponent.”²¹

Conflicts do not remain static or unchanged, they are dynamic and multifaceted, and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is no exception. It began officially

as a conflict over status, with political fighting over the question of where decisions affecting Abkhazia’s interests were to be made: in Sukhum or in Tbilisi. The conflict presented a paradox of the government in Tbilisi actively contributing to the disintegration of the Soviet Union at the same time trying to preserve the Soviet hierarchy as far as Abkhazia’s position within Georgia was concerned. As has already been mentioned, during Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s presidency the Abkhaz and the Georgians succeeded in reaching a compromise regarding the distribution of seats in Abkhazia’s Supreme Soviet. According to that compromise the Abkhaz were allocated 28, the Georgians 26 and representatives of other ethnic groups 11 seats. Despite the fact that many Georgian politicians saw it as a considerable concession on the part of Tbilisi, simple calculations show that the compromise had been achieved not so much through the efforts of Georgian deputies but with the help of other elected representatives: Russians, Armenians, Greeks and others.²²

Contrary to the expectations of many Abkhaz, radical nationalism was not extinguished in Georgia after the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia and return of Shevardnadze. In Tbilisi and among the Georgian population of Abkhazia there were repeated calls to put an end to the “privileged” position of the Abkhaz. It was also obvious that even with the majority of seats in the legislative assembly it was impossible to take any major decisions without Tbilisi’s approval. For their part, the leaders of the Abkhaz national movement, in line with other Soviet autonomous republics, had no intention of accepting Tbilisi’s jurisdiction any longer and fought to raise the political status of Abkhazia. This was quite natural if we remember that at the beginning of the 1990s the “parade of sovereignties” engulfed not just the union but also autonomous republics of the Soviet Union: President Yelstin’s famous words addressed to the Soviet autonomies urged them to “take as much sovereignty as you can!” Such a harsh, even terrible, reaction by Tbilisi to their demands struck

20. D. Furman, “Georgia and Abkhazia — the standoff of two truths: a historian’s view of conflict’s peaceful resolution”, *Kavkazskii Uzel*, Analysis, October 2006.

21. A. Inal-Ipa, “Land and other issues of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution”, in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*, Irvine, no. 2 (2000), p.117.

22. The preferential Abkhaz representation in the 64-seat Supreme Soviet was achieved largely at the cost of the so-called Russian-speaking population, who got 11 mandates (17% of seats); moreover, the Armenians, the Russians and other ethnic groups constituted approximately 36% of the entire population of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Twenty-six Georgian mandates (approximately 40% of seats) were obtained by the Georgian community, which constituted approximately 46% of the population. It was, therefore, the interests of the Russian-speaking population which were most affected as a result of the compromise, even though this segment of the population showed real understanding regarding this solution in the hope that it would help preserve peace in Abkhazia.

the Abkhaz as quite disproportionate and out of character with the spirit of the times. After all, the Abkhaz were convinced that, like the Georgians, they had a right to freedom and independence and considered it an outrageous injustice that the Georgians who had realised their own right to self-determination perceived the Abkhaz' natural drive for independence as something unlawful.

The war, and the enormous human, spiritual and material losses associated with it, drastically changed the nature of the parties' relations. Yu. Anchabadze points out that "the antagonism of political elites having transferred to the level of mass consciousness could not but cause a growing feeling of ethnic resentment. That resentment, exacerbated by the losses and casualties of war, led to the deepening of negative emotions and turned them into a mutual phobia when everything to do with the other ethnic group was perceived as hostile, hateful, devoid of any moral or ethical norms and, therefore, subject to destruction and annihilation."²³

But even after the end of hostilities, despite the bitterness and grudges they bore against the Georgians, and subjected to enormous pressure by a Moscow particularly concerned about developments in Chechnya in 1997, the Abkhaz leaders practically agreed to the "soft federation" model of relations (that of a common or union state) despite heavy criticism in Abkhaz society. That alternative, however, was rejected by Tbilisi, convinced that it would manage to squeeze even greater compromises out of the Abkhaz with Moscow's help. Indeed, although the present government in Tbilisi seems to have "forgotten" about this, the Kremlin did, in fact, put an unprecedented amount of pressure on Sukhum after the end of hostilities in September 1993. According to Sergey Markedonov, the Kremlin administration recognised the territorial integrity of the Georgian state up until August 2008. "Throughout the 1994-99 period Moscow continued to maintain a full blockade of Abkhazia. Moreover, in 1996 together with Georgia, Russia got the CIS Council of Heads of States to adopt sanctions against the separatist entities and continued to exert hard pressure on Sukhum until 1998, "trying to 'force' Abkhazia into accepting a common state with Georgia."²⁴ Only when Moscow saw for itself that Georgia had made its choice against Russia

whereas the Abkhaz political elite clearly showed pro-Russian sympathies, did Kremlin policy toward Abkhazia begin to relax.

At the same time room for political compromise with Tbilisi narrowed down to a bare minimum after the adoption of the *Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia* by the Abkhaz Parliament in 1999.

As a small community Abkhazia is understandably unanimous in its aspiration to prevent a return to the pre-war situation, which has formed the basis of every proposal made by Western mediators (such as, for example, the "Boden Plan"). At the same time throughout the negotiation process, i.e. until August 2008, international mediators have failed to understand why the Abkhaz rejected the possibility of remaining part of the Georgian state. The answer is simple: their entire historical experience has convinced them that they face inevitable cultural and linguistic assimilation under Georgian jurisdiction. It is unlikely that the Abkhaz would treat as pure coincidence the fact that every time Georgia has acquired national independence or relative freedom of manoeuvre, its policies towards the Abkhaz (and South Ossetians) has immediately turned to aggression or demographic expansion. This happened in 1918-21, at the end of the 1930s and at the beginning of the 1990s. The collective memory of the Abkhaz nation has registered the gradual downgrading of the national and legal status of Abkhazia (its status as a Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921 was downgraded in 1931 to that of an autonomous Republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic).

Georgia's repressive policies culminated in the mass resettlement of ethnic Georgians in Abkhaz territory, the closure of Abkhaz schools and the extermination of the Abkhaz intellectual elite. Despite occasional Georgian protestations that these were Bolshevik or Stalinist, rather than Georgian, policies, it should be noted that repressions against the Abkhaz were carried out by members of the Georgian Cheka (secret police) or by the Georgian Communist officials and any attempt to resist them were seen as an expression of "Abkhaz nationalism." It would be difficult to disagree with the Georgian ethnologist G. Nizharadze that Stalin's Georgian background played a major role in "aggravating the hyperthrophied sense of honour and domination so

23. Yu. Anchabadze, "Georgia-Abkhazia: a difficult road to accord", in *The Georgians and the Abkhaz. The road to reconciliation* (Moscow: 1998), p.111.

24. Sergey Markedonov, "Lessons of the 'Five Day War'", *Novaya politika*, 30 August 2010: retrieved from <http://www.novopol.ru/text89118.html>

typical of the Georgian national character, at the collective level of 'us' rather than at the individual level."²⁵

3.1 Experts' opinion on the main actors in the conflict

This study's survey of experts contained, among others, the following questions: "Who would you name as the main actors/protagonists who have played or continue to play a decisive or important role in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, in the process of negotiations and in the post-war development of Abkhazia?" The spectrum of responses contained a broad range of opinions, from statements about the important role played by Abkhazia, without which it was impossible to resolve any issues, to the total dismissal of Abkhazia, Georgia and even Russia as mere objects of Western political influence.

- The Abkhaz and the Georgians have been the main actors in the conflict together with the important factor of the [multi-ethnic] Russian-speaking population [of Abkhazia]. The Russian-speaking population's support of the Abkhaz struggle for independence has played an important role;
- The North Caucasus has been an important actor for Abkhazia. Dudaev's radio address to the Abkhaz nation on the third day of the war – "we stand by you, we support you" – was extremely significant;
- Apart from the main actors – Georgia and Abkhazia – other actors got involved in the conflict at different stages, first Russia, then the US. The situation has changed and now Russia has emerged as the main actor;
- The main actors are the Georgians and the Abkhaz, followed by Russia, followed by the US then Europe (which is much more restrained than the US), followed by the North Caucasus and, finally, by such countries as Turkey and other countries of the Middle East which can only have an indirect influence on the conflict;
- Apart from Abkhazia and Georgia, Russia has played an important role. Its role has been quite controversial at different stages of the conflict's emergence and development. Turkey's role is not salient but its interest in resolving the conflict according to the Georgian scenario were tangible

already during the war, and especially after it. Western countries which support Georgia's territorial integrity are also involved in the conflict;

- In the order of importance Georgia comes first, followed by the Western supporting it. One would hope that the two key actors in the conflict are Abkhazia and Georgia but, unfortunately, at present it appears that Russia has a greater involvement in the conflict, while Georgia depends on external actors;
- Georgia is the main actor, provoking a clash between great power interests in the Abkhaz arena;
- The West (US, rather than Europe) and Russia, with their relationships in this region, are the main actors;
- Outside powers concerned to divide the world into respective spheres of influence, and not Georgia and Abkhazia, are the main and most important actors. They launched the (initial) dynamic, with the rest of the actors joining the fray later, Georgia first among them. In the subsequent conflict between the Georgians and the Abkhaz, these nations suffered the greatest casualties but were not the main actors;
- The West is the main actor, or rather, Western policies against the Soviet Union, while the escalation of the conflict and the war were, in fact, the main consequences of those policies;
- The whole international community can be considered an indirect participant of this conflict, in other words all those countries who rushed to recognise Georgia's jurisdiction within the borders of the Georgian Soviet Republic despite ongoing conflicts.

One opinion has a special place among the answers because of its claim that it was global economic processes, and in particular rising oil prices rather than individual countries, that played a significant role in this conflict. Another participant in the survey holds the opposite view: the role of influential external players has been demonised while the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is, in effect, nothing other than an "internal affair." Here is the list of main actors involved in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict:

3.1.1 Abkhazia

In the words of one respondent, there are big players in the geopolitical distribution of power, or "big magnets", and we (the Abkhaz – N.A.) have

25. G. Nizharadze, "We are the Georgians", in collected articles *Defence of the future* (Moscow: 2000), p. 121.

to stick to one of them. It so happened that in this geopolitical space no one cared about us but Russia. Even if we were a mere weapon in Russia's hands, we have always had our own aspirations at heart and we understood quite clearly that we were being used as a weapon, but for the moment our interests coincided. Despite the blockade, Abkhazia did not set itself in opposition to Russia. Even at the darkest hour, when Russia was putting pressure on Abkhazia, there were no apparent anti-Russian sentiments in Abkhazia. There is awareness of the fact that Russia is large, that it can conquer and incorporate you as part of its own territory by force or by your own free will, it can rule you and impose its own decisions. But at least there is no fear that one day it might try to undermine your ethnic identity.

3.1.2 Russia

There was a range of opinions regarding Russia's position. Some of them, for example, described the degree of Abkhaz political independence as follows: "There is no doubt that we are being led in our foreign policy, we rely on Russia's support, but in our domestic policies ... although we might largely depend on Russia for the moment, we shall not depend on it in the future in our internal state building or in the development of our own internal institutions." Other views of Russia's role included the following: "I find it hard to decide if Russia's influence on Abkhazia should be seen as negative or positive. On the one hand, Russia was first to recognise us. On the other, everyone is acutely aware of the fact that there is a real danger of being assimilated by Russia, of our identity being crushed by it."

According to some, as late as 1999 Russia was still hoping to turn Georgia into its ally through the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict within the framework of Georgia's territorial integrity. Its present position is much more realistic, however: Georgia has gone too far in positioning itself in opposition to Russian civilization. It clearly aspires to have a European identity and has developed an anti-Russian stance. With Georgia inexorably slipping through Russia's fingers, Russia had to resort to radical measures. According to another respondent, Russia has been trying to contain the parties to the conflict by "not allowing a complete Abkhaz victory, not allowing them to capture the Kodor Gorge. At the same time, it has been trying to prevent the Georgians from crossing the Gumista [river- *Ed.*] and taking full control of Abkhazia. It has tried to be an arbitrator with influence on both sides".

Many experts link the change in Russia's position vis-à-vis Abkhazia with the fact that Georgia itself had developed a strong leaning towards NATO and the United States. The further Georgia gravitated towards the West, the tougher was Russia's policy on Georgia and the softer its policy on Abkhazia, although Abkhazia's recognition was hardly on the Russian agenda. This agenda included: maintaining control over the region and when the achievement of this goal required recognition of Abkhazia, Russia did just that. Another respondent thought that had Russia sacrificed Abkhazia's interests it might have had a chance to bring Georgia back under its control. This did not happen due to resistance from Abkhazia whose position was consistent and firm, despite the blockade. In the opinion of another expert, Russia's policies on Abkhazia reflect its aspiration to preserve the loyalty of its subjects in the North Caucasus. Russia has effectively allowed the Adyghe peoples and North Ossetians, who could not have independence of their own, to fulfil their political aspirations vicariously through the independence of brother nations – the Abkhaz and South Ossetians.

3.1.3 Georgia

In the words of one respondent, "Georgia is a valuable country from the geopolitical point of view of any player with interests in the Caucasus. It is the geographical centre of the Caucasus. Although poor in mineral resources, Georgia is an ideal springboard for any country that wants to get a foothold in the region. He who controls Georgia and influences its policies, dominates the Caucasus. Georgia is aware of this fact and this is why it naturally wants to use the advantages of this position to take Abkhazia and South Ossetia under its control. In the past, however, Russia had a different strategy of using co-religionist Georgia as a conduit for its interests in the Caucasus.

The legacy of the post-Stalin period was a significant source of strong russophobic sentiments in Georgia. The russification policy pursued in the North Caucasus, did not succeed in the South Caucasus. Even if Abkhazia had become part of Georgia again at the time of (Russian Foreign Minister) Andrey Kozyrev, Georgia would still have drifted away from Russia. Georgian leaders, poorly versed in political correctness, voiced what the politically correct Americans and Europeans could not openly say about Russia. Georgia became a tool completely controlled by the US. Deterioration of relations with Russia serves as an excuse for Georgia to ask the West for money. At present, with some of its territories "occupied", the excuse is there to stay.

3.1.4 Europe

The ideas underlying European approaches to the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict have hardly changed. They are about peacefully forcing Abkhazia to agree to going back into the Georgian fold. Europe does not formulate its own approaches but slavishly follows the US. European countries put all kinds of travel restrictions on Abkhaz citizens thus violating their fundamental human rights. The EU does not have a clear cut and systematic strategy of dealing with the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Some new ideas are beginning to emerge, creating a glimmer of hope, but until very recently the EU was only a minor player in the region.

Different opinions of Europe's role included, for example, the idea that Europe's perception of Abkhazia is not entirely negative. The fact that Europeans have not recognised us for so long and still do not recognise us can have some positive consequences. We face the task of convincing them that they are wrong, of searching for new arguments and new approaches. It makes us think, it creates a space for the formation of a new political intellect of Abkhazia.

3.1.5 United States

Since the time of Truman and Eisenhower containment of Moscow has been one of the US' main objectives in the world arena. In the 1990s an attempt was made to create the GUUAM block of countries. Although the idea proved to non-viable, the Americans still attempted to set up a "*cordon sanitaire*" around Russia. Georgia was to be the main part of that cordon. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict upset US plans to bring Georgia into NATO. One respondent was convinced nobody at the time knew anything about the Abkhaz or their interests.

Americans had to support Georgia and its territorial integrity but this meant that the conflict could not be resolved. The US were not interested in resolving the conflict. Their resistance not just to the recognition of Abkhazia but even to the idea of going beyond the territorial integrity principle in the negotiation process has hardly been conducive to the resolution of the conflict.

* * * * *

To summarize the above, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was a consequence of a number of factors including: historical injustice and inequality, the cultural and demographic vulnerability of the small Abkhaz nation and serious political errors of the Georgian leadership on the eve of and during the

collapse of the Soviet Union. One has to admit that false stereotypes regarding the underlying causes and nature of the conflict still prevail both in public opinion and among the political elite of Georgia. The persisting tendency to shift the blame for unleashing the war to Russia is a serious obstacle to rethinking the past and building a peaceful future.

It has to be said that neither the Abkhaz expert community, nor society as a whole, feel the need to give key problems in Georgian-Abkhaz relations serious consideration. It is hardly a coincidence, therefore, that the issue of Georgian IDPs, together with the situation in the border Gal district which is, to a large extent, Abkhazia's most vulnerable area – are peripheral to public attention. Although many in Abkhazia realise the importance of these issues for the future of the country there is no discussion of any systemic approach to their solution.

In conclusion, one could say that large military losses, mutual grudges and polarized views of past events as well as the two nations' different visions of their preferred future make the search for a mutually acceptable model of conflict resolution particularly difficult.

4. Main stages in the negotiation process (1993-2008): evolution of approaches and analysis of results - *Iraklii Khintba*

The negotiation process which followed the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war is the subject of much academic writing. It nevertheless seemed to us important to go back to these episodes in the political histories of Abkhazia and Georgia in order to consider them through the prism of events post-August 2008 and the “new reality”, the political legality and legitimacy of which are asserted by Sukhum and Moscow. What is the current perception of the evolution of the approaches and views of negotiation participants, transformation of the agenda as well as the role played by external actors in this process?

This short chapter considers the official negotiation process which has been divided into several stages. In order to carry out this analysis we use a historical (i.e. chronological) method with the addition of some elements of political analysis. It is our belief that it is appropriate to distinguish seven stages in the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiation process. This allows us to observe more clearly the nature of changes at the conceptual level. In spite of the official suspension of the negotiation process in 2006-2008 we have included this period in our analysis because of the important latent negotiations taking place at that time.

4.1 Stage one (1992-1993): war and emergence of distinctive features of the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiation process

Existing periodisations tend to ignore wartime negotiations. In our view, the need to introduce this period into the chronology of the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiation process is warranted on two counts.

Firstly, the beginning of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in broad terms is not defined by the 1992-1993 war, which represents merely its “hot phase.” There is, therefore, a consistent connection between wartime and postwar negotiations, confirmed by references to the wartime agreements in the initial documents of the Geneva process. After 30 September 1993 negotiations were already marked by the negative experience of the sides’ political interaction during the war. Secondly, it was, in fact, through these unsuccessful attempts to find a political solution to the complex problems of the conflict that the main positions of the parties took shape, and Russia and the West’s courses of action slowly emerged in subsequent stages of the negotiation process.

The Russian-Georgian negotiations, with participation of Abkhaz representatives, took place on 3 September in Moscow, with the objective of putting an end to the armed conflict in Abkhazia. In the opinion of Abkhaz historians, Eduard Shevardnadze had an interest in holding such a meeting because of the failed Georgian *blitzkrieg* in Abkhazia and the noticeable activation of the Abkhaz troops against a background of a deteriorating socio-economic situation and the intractable activities of Zviadists in Georgia.²⁶ The difficult negotiations which often took the form of open pressure exerted on the Abkhaz side (and in which, apart from President Boris Yeltsin, several invited leaders of the North Caucasian Republics participated) resulted in Vladislav Ardzinba signing the *Concluding Document of the Moscow Meeting*. The document, drafted by the Russian Foreign

26. See, for example, Lakoba, *Abkhazia de facto or Georgia de jure?*, pp. 42-48.

Ministry under Andrey Kozyrev (known for openly anti-Abkhaz views), turned out to be of great disadvantage to the Abkhaz as it legitimated the presence of Georgian troops on Abkhaz soil (Article 1) and did not contain a single reference to the issue of federal arrangements in Georgia. During his shotgun interview to Russian TV channels Ardzinba explained his support for the document by citing the need to stop bloodshed and slaughter of the Abkhaz and other nations in the republic. At the same time he made it clear that the *Concluding Document* contained some “hidden agendas” and went on to say in his statement of 4 September that the “presence of Georgian troops is the main destabilising factor which can eventually upset a fragile peace.”²⁷ That fragile peace only lasted one month.

These Moscow talks in September 1992 laid the foundation for the Abkhaz side’s ambivalent, often suspicious, attitude to Russian mediation and to the agreements themselves which were imposed on it and which often went against its interests. Moreover, the Moscow talks were the first instance of the refusal to recognize Sukhum as an official negotiating party in its own right – the Abkhaz were physically allowed to take part in the negotiations on the issues concerning them directly only after a lot of pressure from Ardzinba.²⁸ All of the above, coupled with objective military and political circumstances, further intensified the Abkhaz side’s feeling of vulnerability, its lack of trust towards its partners in the talks and its unwillingness to make concessions out of fear that they could be used against Abkhazia.

An improvement in the Abkhaz army’s positions as it advanced directly towards Sukhum, coupled with Russia’s ambiguous plans regarding the outcome of the conflict, resulted in the Abkhaz and the Georgian parties signing the *Agreement on a Ceasefire in Abkhazia and the Mechanism to Ensure Its Observance* on 27 July 1993 (the 1993 *Sochi Agreement*), brokered by Moscow. At the meeting in Sochi the Abkhaz side already had the status of an equal participant in the talks. The signed agreement suited the interests of the Abkhaz side much better than the *Concluding Document* of 3 September 1992. It envisaged a step-by-step demilitarisation of the conflict area which meant the withdrawal of the Georgian armed units from the territory of Abkhazia (Paragraph 6), the neutrality of

Russian troops (Paragraph 7) and a considerable internationalisation of the ceasefire monitoring process. The agreement contained a provision on measures for the return of refugees (Paragraph 6) as well as a provision for the “resumption of the normal functioning of the legitimate authorities in Abkhazia” (Article 8), which allowed for loose interpretations by the conflicting parties.²⁹

However, neither side was happy with the Agreement despite its somewhat compromising nature. In Georgia “a large proportion of the population was shocked and demoralised... a third of the Georgian forces which were to withdraw from Abkhazia had joined the Zviadists.”³⁰ As for the Abkhaz side, it did not think that the document had clearly provided for an acceptable future political arrangement which, when viewed against the background of the relative superiority of Abkhaz troops in military terms, could be seen as an extremely disadvantageous concession. Secondly, the Abkhaz side was used to relying on its own power, rather than pinning hopes on the ephemeral guarantees of mediators whom it did not trust. The truth of this observation can be illustrated by A. Zverev’s remark, that throughout 1992 and 1993 it was not clear which situation suited Russia’s interests more: a united and strong Georgia or a Georgia weak and divided.³¹ The ambivalence of Russia’s policy in the South Caucasus can be explained by the existence at the time of several centres of power, each pursuing its own aims: the President, the Supreme Soviet, regional elites, the military, etc.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that none of the monitoring mechanisms were able to ensure the parties’ compliance with the agreements they had reached.

This explains the abortive nature of the tri-partite Commission on control and inspection set up in accordance with the *Concluding Document* of 3 September 1992. In the same way, the 88 person-strong UN Observer Mission in Georgia, created on the basis of Resolution 858 (1993), adopted by the UN Security Council on 24 August 1993 in order to

27. A. F. Avidzba, “Civil war (1992-1993)”. In *Issues in the military-political history of Abkhazia* (Sukhum: 2008), pp. 185-187.

28. *Ibid.* p. 177.

29. Incidentally, another argument in favour of analysing wartime diplomatic events as part of the general Georgian-Abkhaz negotiation process is the parties’ intention documented in the Agreement, to continue without delay and with the assistance of Russia, ‘negotiations on the Agreement on Comprehensive Conflict Resolution in Abkhazia’, under the aegis of the UN, (para. 9).

30. A. Zverev, “Ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus, 1988-1994”. In *Contested borders in the Caucasus* edited by B. Coppieters (Moscow: Ves mir, 1996), p. 61.

31. *Ibid.* p. 58.

supervise the observance of the *Sochi Agreement* of 27 July 1993, abruptly terminated its monitoring activities after the resumption of hostilities in September 1993.

4.2 Stage two (1993-1994): controversial Moscow agreements

The second period was marked by Abkhaz attempts to formalise their military victory, which in practice resulted in Abkhazia's *de facto* independence from Georgia, and by Sukhum's intention not to allow a full-scale return of Georgian refugees due to the absence of adequate security guarantees and fears of the potentially explosive nature of such a step. At the same time the Georgian side tried to mitigate negative political and social consequences of their military defeat, to ensure the return of refugees and to use political, legal and diplomatic means to prevent Abkhazian self-determination. Russia's goal was to consolidate its role as a peace broker and, more broadly, its influence in the region. For its part, the UN was trying to get more actively involved in the negotiation process which could be interpreted by some Western actors as an attempt to find a counterbalance to Russia's growing role.

Despite the establishment of the Abkhaz army's control over the territory of Abkhazia and the dire domestic political and economic situation in Georgia, Tbilisi would not abandon its hopes of a military revanche. According to Zverev, a number of high-ranking Georgian officials emphasized the need for a new invasion of Abkhazia in November 1993.³² This took place against a sharp increase of Russia's influence in Georgia and a reluctant political rapprochement between the two countries. Eduard Shervarnadze had to resort to Moscow's help to suppress the internal civil rift and to preserve his own hold on power. This was bought at the price of signing the *Agreement on the Status of Russian troops in Georgia* (9 October 1993) and Georgia's subsequent accession to the CIS in 1994. The Abkhaz' mistrust of Russia's mediation grew even stronger with the signing of the *Georgian-Russian Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations* on 3 February 1993, which seemed to confirm Russia's strategic support for Georgia.

This was the background for the start of the Geneva negotiation process under the auspices of the UN at the end of 1993. Within the framework of

that process attempts were made with the help of mediators to prevent the resumption of hostilities through the development of adequate guarantees and deployment of peacekeeping forces in the conflict area. The Abkhaz side consolidated its status as an equal participant in the negotiations as well as scoring some diplomatic victories.

The *Memorandum of Understanding* of 1 December 1993 where the parties promised "to refrain from using force or the threat of force against each other for the duration of the ongoing talks to achieve a full scale resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia"³³, was a prelude to the truly important agreements. Those were reached within the framework of the Geneva Process by April 1994, brokered by Russia and with the participation of the OSCE. The most significant document among them was the *Statement on the Measures for the Political Resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict* which, according to the Abkhaz, stated *de facto* the absence of any legal state relations between Abkhazia and Georgia (the document discusses developing proposals on *restoring* the legal state relations). According to the areas of joint competence of the parties determined by the document, one can speak effectively of the factual declaration of confederative relations between Georgia and Abkhazia. At the same time, it is clear that neither the UN, nor Georgia have ever recognised the "Abkhaz interpretation" of this document.

The *Quadripartite Agreement on the Voluntary Return of Refugees and IDPs* was adopted at the same time as the "April Declaration". The above-mentioned *Moscow Agreement on the Ceasefire and Military Disengagement/Separation of Forces* was signed a little later on 14 May 1994. To achieve a separation of the two sides and to prevent a further escalation of the conflict the Collective Peacekeeping Forces (CPKF), made up of Russian soldiers, were introduced into Abkhazia, despite the fact that the whole of the previous year had been spent studying the possibility of deploying international or UN peacekeeping forces in the security zone. Initially, the Abkhaz side was inclined to agree to the deployment of the UN peacekeeping forces in the conflict zone.³⁴ The

32. *Ibid.* p. 63.

33. Memorandum of understanding between Georgia and Abkhazia signed in Geneva. In *Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: documents 1989-2006*, (with Comparison and comments by M.A. Vokhonskiy, V.A. Zakharov, Yu.N.Silayev) (Moscow: Russkaya Panorama Publishing House, 2008), p. 319.

34. *Report of the UN Secretary General on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia*. 3 March 1994, S/1994/253. p. 5.

international mediators made it conditional on recognition of the territorial integrity of Georgia and the return of refugees, introduction of civil police into the Gal district and deployment of international peacekeeping forces on the whole territory of Abkhazia.³⁵ Such conditions could not satisfy the Abkhaz side which preferred more abstract, but politically acceptable, provisions of the peacekeeping mechanism suggested by Russia.

This stage of the negotiation process yielded positive results, according to Sergey Shamba: "The documents adopted at the time...form the basis, the legal foundation of the resolution of this conflict and their practical implementation could considerably advance the negotiation process".³⁶

4.3 Stage three (1995-1997): the failure of federalisation projects

The third stage was marked by a change in the negotiations agenda: there was an indication that the discussion of steps and mechanisms for the prevention of hostilities had progressed to the exploration of different models of state-legal relations between Abkhazia and Georgia. Against the background of the collapse of the Geneva Process, there was a sharp stepping up of Russia's independent role as a broker in the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations.

There was discussion of the institutional formalisation of Abkhazia's and Georgia's co-existence in a single state even before the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993. This was the project proposed by lawyer Taras Shamba, but the project proved unacceptable to Georgia. When the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia convened to discuss this document on 14 August 1992, Georgia invaded Abkhazia.

According to an accurate observation by Vyacheslav Chirikba, "the Abkhaz side's consideration of a possible reintegration into Georgia was forced and could only be explained by strong Russian pressure."³⁷ In fact, by establishing a regime of Abkhazia's political and economic blockade shortly after the end of the war Russia was seeking to create a "soft federation" within Georgia's Soviet borders.

A draft Protocol on Georgian-Abkhaz settlement was drawn up during an intensive round of Georgian-Russian-Abkhaz consultations, running right through 1995, with the participation of the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy E. Brunner. When discussing the document Ardzinba stated that he was not against the federation model but insisted that it should be a "union of two equal state entities."³⁸ In the end the Protocol, which stipulated that Abkhazia should be given the status of a constituent entity within a Georgian federation, was initialled by the Abkhaz side. This met with sharp criticism from the Abkhaz Parliament, which demanded that the Abkhaz delegation act in accordance with the Constitution of Abkhazia of 26 November 1994, in which Abkhazia was declared "a sovereign democratic state", and that they should remove their initials from the Protocol.

Discussion of different models of federal relations between Abkhazia and Georgia continued notwithstanding. The next draft of the Protocol (the Moscow Protocol) was drawn up in 1997. It proposed creation of a federal union where both joint and special competences of its subjects would be clearly defined. Acting on the initiative of Russia's new Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov the Abkhaz delegation led by Ardzinba made an unprecedented visit to Tbilisi on 14 August 1997, where both sides signed a Joint Declaration stating the parties' "resolution to put an end to the conflict which has driven them apart and to restore peaceful relations and mutual respect." At the same time the document did not contain any reference to their aspiration to find a federal solution to the status problem.

Ultimately, the *Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz settlement* was never signed. It is important to note that it was the Georgian side which refused to sign it on 17 June 1997, due to its "concern that the draft agreement did not refer to Georgia's territorial integrity and left the question of the right to secede open."³⁹ The Protocol was not desirable for Sukhum, either. The Abkhaz side had agreed to consider the possibility of a federal solution mainly due to increasing political pressure from Russia and the Group of Friends, coupled with socio-economic difficulties facing the country. The latter resulted from the tightening of Abkhazia's blockade in accordance with the decision by the CIS Heads of States summit in 1996. Ardzinba managed to parlay public disaffection with the

35. *Ibid.* p. 4.

36. S.M. Shamba, "Negotiation process: hopes and disillusionments", available at: http://www.mfaabkhazia.org/documents/stati_i_analiz/peregovornyj_process_nadezhdy_i_razocharovaniya

37. Vyacheslav A. Chirikba, *Georgian-Abkhaz War* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Abkhazia: ways forward*, International Crisis Group, Europe report No. 179, 18 January 2007, p. 10.

negotiations around the federal model in order to show both Russia and the West the illegal nature of such a solution. Besides, according to Bruno Coppieters' sound assessment "the fact that the Georgian military intervention of August 1992 has never been condemned by the international community and that the federal proposals of Georgia do not provide solid guarantees to Abkhazia should any future Georgian government be tempted to repeat such an attempt explain to a large extent the refusal on the Abkhaz side to discuss federal options."⁴⁰

According to Sergey Shamba, signing such a protocol could have been a breakthrough in Georgian-Abkhaz relations but it never happened, partly because of "the complete absence of trust between the parties which prevented any progress in their relations."⁴¹ Confidence -building measures as the most important component of conflict transformation first appeared on the agenda at the following, fourth stage of the talks.

4.4 Stage four (1997-1999): discussions of confidence-building measures against a background of deteriorating negotiations

The ensuing period was marked by attempts to reanimate the UN's role in the conflict resolution process, as well as exploration of different approaches to the resolution of the conflict using the concept of conflict transformation. The background of the conflict became considerably less favourable after the events of May 1998.

In 1997 the Geneva Process was officially resumed. Following the Georgian-Abkhaz Geneva Agreements of 17-19 November the role of the international political bloc set up back in 1993 – the Group of Friends of Georgia – which included the US, Germany, the UK, France and Russia, was formalised. It was decided that representatives of the Group could participate in meetings and discussions and make statements and proposals on various aspects of the peace process, including the political settlement. At the same time, it was emphasised that they were not parties to the talks

and were not invited to sign any documents which would be agreed by the parties during the talks.

Such formal confirmation of the Group of Friends's status was necessary in order to ensure their permanent status as participants in the work of the Coordinating Council chaired by the UN Special Envoy, which had been set up pursuant to the Geneva Agreements of 17-19 November. The three working groups of the Council (sustainable non-resumption of hostilities and security problems; refugees and internally displaced persons; economic and social problems) were to develop a joint programme of action on the full-scale settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as well as deal with some current practical issues. Consolidation of the UN's leading role was seen as evidence of its increased importance in the conflict resolution process.

The Gal events of May 1998 threatened to wreck the effectiveness of that UN initiative and the overall negotiation climate. Increased activities by Georgian paramilitary groups ("partisans") and the police who were clearly preparing ground for Tbilisi's military comeback led to clashes with Abkhaz military units. This resulted in a sharp deterioration of the security and political situation and a mass exodus back to Georgia of those recently returned residents of the Gal region. That situation once again demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the UN Observer Mission (UNOMIG) mechanism. Following the May events, UNOMIG was criticized both from the Abkhaz side and from representatives of the Georgian refugees for its inability to prevent outbreaks of violence. Apart from the damage to its reputation the UN suffered serious economic losses as over 90% of all the houses restored with through UNHCR efforts at the cost of US \$2 million were destroyed in the fighting.⁴² Almost ten years later the situation was characterised by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as a "gap between the Mission's mandate and its capabilities."⁴³

The stepping up of activities by the UN was also linked to a new impetus in the process of establishing unofficial Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue and the implementation of confidence-building measures – two objectives stated at the Geneva meeting in November 1997. The May events of 1998 did not disrupt the meeting on confidence-

40. Bruno Coppieters, "Western Security Policy and the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict". In *The practice of federalism. Looking for Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, edited by Bruno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, Natella Akaba (Moscow: Ves mir, 1999), p. 66.

41. S.M. Shamba, "Negotiation process: hopes and disillusionments: available at: http://www.mfaabkhazia.org/documents/stati_i_analiz/peregovornyj_process_nadezhdy_i_razocharovaniya/

42. S. Stewart, "The Role of the United Nations in the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict", *Journal of Ethno-politics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 2 (2003): 17.

43. *Report of the Secretary General on the situation in Abkhazia*, 23 January 2008 S/2008/38. p. 17.

building measures between the two sides which took place in Athens on 16-18 October 1998, with enhanced personal involvement of the Secretary General's Special Envoy Liviu Bota. Russia and the OSCE acted as the enabling parties. Representatives of the Group of Friends were also present at the meeting. The subsequent meeting in Istanbul in June 1999 also discussed concrete confidence-building measures between the parties. In particular, it suggested to develop cooperation at the local level, especially economic cooperation, organise meetings of political and public figures, and to develop and set up mechanisms for regular exchanges of information. The meeting also considered possible cooperation between law enforcement agencies on both sides who would exchange available intelligence on planned illegal actions on either side and hold consultations on taking the necessary joint steps for their prevention.⁴⁴

4.5 Stage five (1999-2002): the shrinking of negotiation space and the changing role of Russia

This stage is marked by substantive changes in the context of negotiations brought about by the approval of the Constitution of Abkhazia in the national referendum of October 1999 and the adoption of the *Act of State Independence* by the People's Assembly – the Parliament of the Abkhaz Republic. From that moment onwards, the Abkhaz side refused to discuss the issue of Abkhazia's political status, thus reducing considerably any space for negotiations. This provoked an emotional declaration from a number of Georgian experts that "the Act of Independence signifies the end of any settlement."⁴⁵

These events were taking place against the background of a changeover in Russia's political elite. The rise to power of Vladimir Putin who swapped his post as Head of the FSB (Russian security service) for that of Russia's Prime Minister in August 1999 coincided with the start of a large-scale operation by Russian forces in Dagestan, which in practice marked the beginning of the second Chechen campaign. This immediately led to a deterioration in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi brought about by the situation in the Pankisi

gorge in Georgia where Chechens (including Chechen rebels), who were fleeing the conflict and whom the Georgian leadership had provided with refugee status, began to settle in the first weeks after the military campaign had started. The Kremlin accused Shervardnadze of conniving with "Chechen terrorism" and unwillingness to establish order in Pankisi.

At the same time if the government in Sukhum had tried to support the Chechens in 1994 (they even had President Ardzinba issue a decree on mobilisation in Abkhazia, which became one of the reasons for the introduction of Russian sanctions against Abkhazia) the Abkhaz not only refrained from any such actions in 1999, but were much more careful in their assessment of the situation.

The Chechen war was only an excuse for the cooling in relations between Russia and Georgia. The real reason lay in Tbilisi's growing "western" orientation. Negotiations were already in full swing in 1999 on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan gas pipeline, as well as other forms of economic cooperation. The Georgian Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security made a formal request to NATO in February 1999 to "protect Georgia's sovereignty and independence", whereas in April of the same year Shervardnadze announced Georgia's intention to become part of the North Atlantic Alliance.⁴⁶ There was a growing feeling of Georgia's irrevocable gravitation towards the West.

Although Moscow's "swing towards Abkhazia" was not reflected in any way in its official rhetoric, it found practical expression in the easing of the checkpoint and customs' regimes on the Russian-Abkhaz border, the beginning of applications processing for Russian citizenship, preparations to launch a railway link, as well as Abkhazia's exclusion from the recently introduced visa regime for Georgia. This tangible change in Russia's position and practical policies from unequivocal, at times even ruthless, decisions in favour of the restoration of Georgian territorial integrity, met with growing expectations in Abkhazia.

This was the backdrop of the third meeting on confidence-building measures in Yalta on 15-16 March 2001 where the parties adopted a detailed and very ambitious programme of joint actions. Their plans were undermined, however, by another military-political crisis. A border raid in the Upper

44. Istanbul Statement by the Georgian and Abkhaz Sides on Confidence-Building Measures. In Vokhonskiy, Zakharov and Silaev (eds.) *Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: documents 1989-2006*, pp. 429-430.

45. See discussion in *Materials of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*, Vol. 4, (2000). p. 121.

46. Edward Mihalkanin, "The Abkhaz: A National Minority in Their Own Homeland", in *De Facto States: The Quest for Sovereignty*, edited by Tozun Bahcheli, Barry Bartmann and Henry Srebrnik (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 152.

Kodor in October 2001 when a detachment led by Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelaev, joined by Georgian paramilitary units, tried to break through to the Russian-Abkhaz border was condemned by leading figures in Georgian civil society as well as some opposition parties⁴⁷, but did not produce a negative reaction from the majority of Georgian society. The action became a clear example of the Georgian government's weakness as it allowed itself to be drawn into this provocation, partly under pressure from the Abkhaz government-in-exile. This also brought to the fore the legitimacy of military solutions to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the eyes of the Georgian public. The confidence-building process was rendered abortive, with doubt cast on the very reason and need for such negotiations.

Against this background the Special Envoy to the Secretary-General Dieter Boden proposed a document *Basic principles for the division of competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi* (known as the "Boden Plan"), which he had been working on from the very first days of his appointment to this important position and which failed dramatically. The document contained a reference to the "special" sovereign status of Abkhazia within the Georgian state and a provision which read that "the division of competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi will be determined on the basis, among others, of the Declaration of measures for the political settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict of 4 April 1994."⁴⁸ Yet the document's main premise, formulated by Boden himself, was quite unambiguous: "The future status of Abkhazia, as stated in the document, should be such as to be part of the Georgian state... the point is that this concept has to be explained to them [the Abkhaz side – I.Kh.] so that they understand that all their legitimate demands can only be met within the framework of such a solution."⁴⁹ The failure of the Boden plan was caused by its incompatibility with changed realities after 1999. In addition, it did not take account of the nature of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (discussed below), which required a different approach to its resolution. The fiasco of this initiative proved the hopelessness of proposing universal formulae of conflict resolution

in the absence of trust between the parties and the Abkhaz side's sense of vulnerability, exacerbated by the West's stubborn reluctance to take into account its interests.

4.6 Stage six (2003-2006): moving backwards instead of forwards

By 2003 crisis in the negotiation and peace processes had become apparent. In the circumstances Russia tried to recapture the initiative from the UN and use its last chance to keep Georgia within its sphere of influence. A meeting of the Presidents of Russia and Georgia was convened in Sochi on 6-7 March 2003. The Abkhaz Prime Minister G. Gogulia was invited for the sole purpose of being told the results of the meeting. The sides agreed to implement large economic projects, solve various issues linked to the opening up of the railway, in parallel with the return of refugees. To achieve these objectives relevant working groups were to be set up that clearly duplicated the structure and, to some extent, the functions of the Coordinating Council. It is important to note that the issue of political status which would have made reaching any future agreement quite problematic was not mentioned in the Sochi meeting's *Concluding Document*.

Some Georgian experts welcomed the Sochi agreements, seeing them as a chance to reach rapprochement with Russia and a hope to advance the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.⁵⁰ Yet the Sochi agreement of 2003 was never implemented. To begin with, it was a bilateral Russian-Georgian agreement which assumed discussion of various issues to do with Abkhazia without Abkhaz participation. Secondly, time has shown that neither Russia nor Georgia had any interest in its implementation. Thirdly, the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003 and the internal political crisis in Abkhazia in 2004 following presidential elections and the end of the Ardzinba era had pushed these issues to the bottom of the political agenda.

While Russia was trying to establish itself in the role of "main peacemaker" in the South Caucasus, a new actor appeared on the stage – the European Union. Traditionally, Europe had played an insignificant role in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, with Russia, the US and the UN acting as the main players. Having got stronger both organisationally

47. See, for example, *Events in the Kodori Gorge. October 2001* (Vladikavkaz: Independent research by a group of NGOs from the Caucasus, 2001) p. 66-73.

48. *Main principles of the division of powers between Tbilisi and Sukhumi* (the 'Boden plan'); available at: <http://abkhazia.narod.ru/boden.htm>

49. Interview with Dieter Boden, *Ekho Moskvy*, 17 May 2002; available at: <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/18478.phtml>

50. See, for example, round table at *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 4 July 2003; available at: http://www.ng.ru/courier/2003-04-07/9_georgia.html

and politically, however, the EU started to make bolder claims to become one of the key powers in the region. A breakthrough in the EU's political presence in the South Caucasus happened in 2004 with the enlargement of the European Union. Ten states of Central and Eastern Europe acceded to the organization, and it gained access to the Black Sea region after the entry of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007.

Europe's "novelty" as a player in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was its main advantage. If the US, and the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary General in Georgia which they controlled, had exhausted the limits of Abkhaz trust, Europe with its less tendentious and aggressive stance was regarded sympathetically by the Abkhaz side. This was partly reflected in President Sergey Bagapsh's plan on the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, entitled *Key to the Future*.

Key to the Future, which contained practically no references to Russia but which mentioned the Abkhazian interest in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), can be seen as the most important signal so far sent to the West – although it hardly presents an effective recipe for the settlement of the conflict. Confused and inconsistent, the plan demands that Georgia recognise Abkhazia's independence without offering anything in exchange (even on such a key issue as the return of refugees). The reaction to the plan of the Georgian President's advisor on conflict resolution Irakli Alasania was only to be expected. He stated that "this 'key' cannot open any doors." In the meantime, the main points of the Georgian roadmap for conflict resolution⁵¹ voiced by Alasania were rejected by the Abkhaz side which, quite reasonably, saw a contradiction between the federal solution to the status problem and the Constitution of Abkhazia.

The irreconcilable nature of the parties' positions⁵², absence of any progress on the confidence-building front, the slowing down of the dynamics in the peace process and the intensity of UN's activities

51. "Tbilisi announces main principles of a peace plan on Abkhazia" *Civil Georgia*, available at <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=11076>

52. D. Darchiashvili's opinion is indicative here; he said in 2006: 'I do not see, in the foreseeable future, any part of the Georgian political society which would consent to Abkhazia's independence, neither do I see any political group on the Abkhaz side which would give up the idea of independence'. Cited in proceedings from 'Prospects for Georgia and Abkhazia in the context of Black Sea integration', Istanbul, 24-27 July 2006. Published in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*, Irvine, Vol. 13 (2007), p. 20.

in the conflict zone formed the background for the Kodori events of 2006, which put an end to the official negotiation process. The events cancelled the tentative positive dynamics which had emerged during the preparation of the Agreement on the non-resumption of hostilities.⁵³

4.7 Stage seven (2006-2008): "phantom negotiations" and the recognition of Abkhazia

The introduction of Georgian armed units into Abkhazia's Kodori gorge on 25 July 2006 was seen by Sukhum as a gross violation of all key agreements⁵⁴ and a direct security threat. Despite Tbilisi's assurances that these were police operations whose aim was to restore constitutional order in the Upper Kodori area, the Abkhaz were certain that Tbilisi was preparing a launchpad for further attacks against Abkhazia. Another important task for Tbilisi was to re-format the conflict, i.e. create a "legitimate" centre of power on Abkhaz territory and thus present the conflict as an internal Abkhaz conflict, an intra-community conflict. However, as Abkhaz expert Liana Kvarchelia pointed out at the time, "the relocation of the 'autonomists' [the Abkhaz government-in-exile - I.Kh.] to the Kodori gorge after which it was

53. A meeting between President Saakashvili and President Bagapsh was expected to take place at the end of 2005 to conclude an agreement on the non-use of force and IDPs at the beginning of 2006. On 6 December 2005 in Sukhum in the presence of the UN Secretary General Special Representative H. Tagliavini Georgian State Minister for Conflict Resolution G. Haindrava and Abkhaz Foreign Minister S. Shamba signed a protocol stating their readiness to 'present [the agreement] to their governments for final approval and signature'. See Crisis Group, *Abkhazia: ways forward*, p. 19.

54. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted in his reports (especially, of 23 July 2007) the activation of Georgia's land and air [troop] transfers to the upper part of the Kodori gorge, together with other facts which could be interpreted as evidence of multiple breaches by Georgia of the *Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces* signed in Moscow in 1994. Immediately after the offensive in the Kodori gorge the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1716 in which it expressed 'its concern with regard to the actions of the Georgian side in the Kodori valley in July 2006 and to all violations of the Moscow Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces of 14 May 1994 and other Georgian-Abkhaz agreements concerning the Kodori valley' and urged the Georgian side to ensure that the situation in the upper Kodori gorge was brought in line with the Moscow Agreement and that no troops unauthorized by this agreement were present. Georgia, whose actions were formally supported by the US and EU, denied any breaches of the 1994 Moscow Agreement. This demonstrates the ambiguous position of the UN. Tbilisi's right to an idiosyncratic interpretation of events in the Kodori gorge was indirectly confirmed by the UN Secretary-General in his 23 July 2007 report to the General Assembly. Therefore the appeal of the UN SC Resolution 1716 of 13 October 2006 to bring the situation in Kodori in line with the 1994 Moscow Agreement fell on deaf ears in Georgia.

declared the 'legitimate government' of Abkhazia made a nonsense of holding talks with the [actual] government of Abkhazia."⁵⁵

The Kodor events served as an unequivocal reminder to Abkhaz society that Tbilisi was ready to use force in order to regain Abkhazia. The process of negotiations was officially terminated by Sukhum, while the relations between Russia and Georgia hit new lows. After the "spy scandal" in September 2006 Russia imposed an economic embargo on Georgia, stopped granting visas to Georgian citizens and suspended air communications between Georgia and Russia. It began the deportation of Georgian citizens with uncertain legal rights, although quite often legal migrants were also deported. Relations between the two countries soured to such an extent that, according to the VTSIOM, by October 2006 61% of Russian respondents called Georgia a "rogue state"⁵⁶ and only 5% of respondents interviewed in November 2006 supported the idea of Abkhazia being incorporated back into Georgia.⁵⁷

These events took place on the eve of the forthcoming decision on Kosovo and many saw the Kodor operation as a means for Georgia to stop the realisation of the expected "Kosovo scenario" in Abkhazia. In fact, Russia was sending quite unambiguous signals to that effect. In June 2007 President Vladimir Putin made a shocking statement about the similarities of the Kosovo problem with those of Abkhazia, South Osetia and Transnistria.⁵⁸ The declaration of Kosovo's independence on 17 February 2008 and the juridical recognition of the new state by leading Western countries were seen as a precedent by Abkhazia, whereas Georgia, the US and the EU hammered on about the uniqueness of "the Kosovo case".

By March 2008 Russia had dropped the sanctions' regime, introduced by the CIS Council of Heads of States in 1996 and brought its railway troops into Abkhazia to restore and guard the railway in June 2008. All this was happening against a

serious deterioration in the security regime in the conflict zone.

In the emerging situation Abkhazia was trying to prevent further Georgian aggression, on the one hand, and, on the other, to show greater independence in the context of Russia's growing influence. Hardly anyone truly believed until August 2008 in the real likelihood of Russia's recognition of Abkhazia. Moreover, this was the time of active discussions of a Taiwanese scenario for Abkhazia, at odds with the course of building an internationally recognised state. The refusal to participate any further in the negotiation process was, thus, a mere formality.

The term "multivector orientation" became an important innovation in the Abkhaz political vocabulary at the time. Despite declarations of the Russian vector's "priority status" in foreign policy it was clear what the term meant in the context of post-Soviet realities: a gradual move away from a Russian monopoly and a diversification of foreign relations. In fact, the period from the beginning of 2008 until 8 August 2008 was a period of lost opportunities for Western countries, which could have acquired a much more significant role in the Georgian-Abkhaz context and even tried to wrestle the initiative on building relations with Abkhazia away from Russia.

It is no accident that during that same period there was a sharp rise in the number of visits by Western emissaries to Abkhazia. Ambassadors of 15 EU countries visited Sukhum in May 2008 while EU Special Representative Javier Solana visited Abkhazia in June of the same year. The words of the Secretary of the Abkhaz Security Council Stanislav Lakoba bear testimony to the positive impressions left by these visits on the Abkhaz side: "One can see signs of potential changes in the EU's approach to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Judging by the questions asked and assessment given one can conclude that there have been certain changes in the EU's approach to conflict resolution. It is possible that there could be a shift in emphasis in their attitude to Georgia as well."⁵⁹ Yet EU representatives never went beyond statements of their readiness to assist with the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiation process.

Signs of Abkhazia's readiness for significant compromises were the closed negotiations between Sergey Shamba and Irakli Alasania over

55. <http://www.apsny.ru/apsnynews/apsnynews.php?mode=more&more=6883>

56. "Russia and Georgia: tensions do not cease", 11 October 2006; available at: http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/3365.html?no_cache=1&cHash=b3850b5203

57. "Russia and Abkhazia: from recognition of independence to incorporation into the federation?" 9 November 2006; available at: http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/3558.html?no_cache=1&cHash=64b729998a

58. "Putin notes equal rights of Kosovo and post-Soviet regions" available at: <http://www.pravda.ru/news/world/08-06-2007/227621-putin-0/>

59. <http://www.abkhaziagov.org/ru/president/press/news/detail.php?ID=10336>

the document on the non-use of force, which took place in May 2008 in Sukhum, as well as the statements by the Abkhaz Foreign Minister about the possibility of replacing Georgian armed units in the Kodor Gorge with an international police force under the auspices of the UN. These two facts could, of course, be interpreted in a different light, especially if we remember the secret talks on Karabakh which led to the resignation of the Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 1998. It is no wonder that at the time Shamba attracted criticism from patriotically-minded opposition circles, which suspected him of weakening Abkhazia by negotiating unfavourable terms. To this day the Abkhaz opposition uses these claims against the ruling elite; in fact, they resented the very fact of negotiations after the demonstrative exit of Abkhazia from the negotiation process in 2008. After the recognition of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation, Shamba tried to counter the opposition's accusations by presenting the negotiations as an attempt to develop security guarantees amid a deteriorating situation. He declared: "While we knew full well that the Georgians would never agree to remove their troops from the gorge voluntarily, we demonstrated readiness to discuss different scenarios of a peaceful resolution to the problem, while at the same time preparing for a military operation. Nobody was going to surrender the Kodor gorge".⁶⁰

It stands to reason that when analysing the negotiation process it is important to take into account the internal political climate and the struggle between the main political forces. In Abkhazia any foreign policy initiative is subject to close scrutiny on the part of competing political groups, which hinders considerably the implementation of tactical steps, particularly in such a difficult area as the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. However, on the eve of the August 2008 war it was the West which displayed a total lack of flexibility when it failed to hear, or did not wish to hear, clear signals coming from the Abkhaz administration regarding a "multi-vector orientation." This is why the "Steinmeyer plan" for the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict published in July 2008 was ill-timed and out of touch with reality.

The "five-day war" in August 2008, and the recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence which followed, marked a thorough transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In a situation where the Abkhaz administration refused to continue negotiations with the Georgians (qualified by the possibility of resumed contacts subject to President Mikheil Saakashvili's resignation), the sole platform where Georgian and Abkhaz representatives still meet today are the Geneva discussions established according to the Medvedev-Sarkozy Plan. However, ambiguity surrounding the status of the participants, caused by Tbilisi's refusal to recognise the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians as official parties to the negotiations, does not permit this format to produce any legally binding documents. The parties' positions are not simply different – they are drifting away from each other, in the same way as Georgia and Abkhazia are moving in opposite directions.

4.8 The Georgian-Abkhaz negotiation process: towards an evaluation of its effectiveness

American researcher J. Dines distinguishes three types of negotiations depending on the parties' interests. The first type is a situation where participants have little interest in a positive outcome of the negotiations or are indifferent to it. The second type of negotiations are negotiations in which the parties display an interest in achieving results, but their interest is moderate and, moreover, relates to overall goals. The third type of negotiations are negotiations where participants have a real interest in joint problem-solving. There is no doubt that only the third type can be truly successful.

Although participants of the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations were aiming for a result, it was a "zero sum game" with the positions of the parties diverging to such an extent that one side's gain could only be achieved through the other's loss. At least, this was what the parties assumed in their interpretation of their objectives and interests. On the one hand, this has something to do with the very logic of official negotiations, particularly when they are concerned with the resolution of painful conflict issues. As Natella Akaba rightly points out, "the ability of officials to manoeuvre and to display flexibility is substantially limited since they are under heavy pressure from internal and external circumstances. They cannot, for example, "lower the tone of their earlier demands without damaging

60. "Sergey Shamba: Our state has never known independence such as we have today», *Apsnypress*, 23 November 2009; available at <http://www.apsnypress.info/news2009/November/23.htm>

their reputation.”⁶¹ On the other hand, regulations set for the negotiations, initially by Russian and later by Western mediators which assumed predetermined results (restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity) by definition moved the Abkhaz side beyond the threshold of constructiveness and compromise. Every issue, even humanitarian questions, were inevitably politicised and the inability to go beyond the “status teleology” blocked any agreements.

In spite of the fact that the focus on achieving tangible results constitutes the main function of negotiations, modern literature distinguishes other functions as well: information and communication, normative functions, implementing internal political and foreign-policy objectives, and propaganda functions.⁶² The parties did make use of these incidental, at first glance, functions of negotiations (particularly, the propaganda function), often to the detriment of the conflict transformation process.

There is a widespread belief that the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiation process failed. However, in order to evaluate its effectiveness, one needs to have an idea of what constitutes a successful result of negotiations. On the one hand, there are the statutory goals of the two sides which are practically incompatible in the case of an ethno-political standoff: territorial integrity versus the right to self-determination in the form of secession. Negotiations are transformed into a zero sum game which, by definition, assumes an unconventional approach to the notion of “result”. What constitutes a gain for one party, appears as a loss and injustice to the other. This is why the notion of full-scale conflict resolution could not become an effective alternative because the parties lacked conventional understanding of its meaning. On the other hand, however, the value of negotiations often consists not in the achievement of comprehensive agreements and the ironing out of all contradictions, but in the very fact of diplomatic interaction reducing the likelihood of new attempts to solve problems by force. Besides, negotiations as a contest of ideas, arguments and intellectual constructs afford a different take on familiar items from an established ideological arsenal, in order to test out new approaches and identify the most important political issues.

The qualitative sociological research summarizing expert opinions gathered for this study generally confirms our conclusions regarding the importance and necessity of the negotiation process. However, in spite of the fact that a few experts see the recognition of Abkhazia’s independence and the liberation of the Kodor gorge as a result of the successful work of Abkhaz negotiators and diplomats, most of the respondents admit that negotiations were not effective enough. In their opinion, the negotiations’ ineffectiveness can be explained by several reasons:

1. *Asymmetric nature of the negotiations format*, where the Abkhaz felt vulnerable and did not feel they had equal status as a negotiating party: “When one party receives considerable help from outside and feels its military and political superiority, the negotiation process cannot be effective.”
2. *Negative role of mediators* who displayed an interest in a particular outcome and did not encourage the parties to explore more flexible approaches and to soften their positions.
3. *Absence of trust between the parties* that resulted in the violation of agreements, as each party had no confidence in the other’s compliance with them. One could also add the fact of *periodic escalations of violence* on the part of Georgia (1998, 2001, 2006) which undermined positive trends in the parties’ attitudes and the implementation of concluded agreements.
4. *The incorrect interpretation of the nature of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict by the main stakeholders*. This conceptual distortion is expressed in the tendency to see the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as a political conflict motivated by narrow elite interests, “ethnic entrepreneurs”, who mobilise ethnicity for the achievement of their goals: distribution of power, economic benefits and other goals.⁶³ According to the classic scholar of constructivism Frederik Bart, these elites “do not represent the cultural ideology of the group or the ‘will

61. N.N. Akaba, “Contemporary conflicts: The role of unofficial diplomacy in the peace process.” In *Materials of the Georgian-Abkhaz conference (March 1999, Sochi)*, (Irvine: 1999), p. 11.

62. See M.M. Lebedeva *Political resolution of conflicts* (Moscow: Aspekt-press, 1999), pp. 188-194.

63. Talking of the causes of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia Georgia’s President Saakashvili said in his state of the nation address on 16 July 2006: ‘*These are not ethnic conflicts. These are political conflicts imposed on us* [emphasis added – I.Kh.]. They are linked to the attempts of the post-Soviet forces, anachronisms of the old Soviet imperial thinking, to gain control over at least some neighbouring territories. Georgia is the most delicious piece of the pie they want to swallow, or at least, to create problems for Georgia’. Cited in International Crisis Group, *Abkhazia today*, Europe report, No.176, 15 September 2006, p. 9.

of the people'.⁶⁴ It is thereby assumed that it is possible and desirable to solve such conflicts through a federal model, as it is not irreconcilable interests of the parties that are at stake but a narrow elite calculus. To achieve an agreement one needs to affect the level of elites – mostly, through the use of an external factor.

It is clear that it is also wrong to perceive the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as a purely ethnic conflict. Secessionist conflicts by definition possess a political quality as they are aimed at achieving political ends (for example, creation of an independent state). Therefore the description of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as ethnic might create the impression that it is a question of intercommunal discord inside Abkhazia⁶⁵, instead of the struggle between Abkhazia and the Georgian state. It is important that the Abkhaz, striving more for political than cultural self-determination should assume inclusiveness in this project for other ethnic groups living on Abkhazia's territory. This way the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which arose at the intersection of ethnicity and politics, and implies the importance of the ethnic factor in reaching political goals, should be seen as an *ethno-political conflict*.

The existence of competing concepts of ethnicity – primordial, instrumental and constructivist – each of which interpret the character, form and political expression of this phenomenon in a different way, does not disallow the importance of the ethnicity function accounting for the strong emotional attachment to a certain community, which characterises the self image of each person. The power of ethnicity is particularly great in the Caucasus where historically there has been a real demand for mobilisation strategies. Ethnic values and group interests of the Abkhaz have been so significant that neither the harsh economic conditions of the post-war blockade, nor the prospects of economic benefits offered by the West, nor any talk of democratic happiness and prosperity within a reformed Georgia, could serve as an impetus for them to abandon the goals they have been fighting for. This is why it is impossible to deny the importance of ethnic identity and ethnic mobilisation factor in the analysis of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, despite criticisms of the primordial or socio-biological concepts of ethnicity.

Since ethnicity is often a constructed reality, when we talk about a clash of ethnic identities between Georgians and the Abkhaz we imply a particular historical period: the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Historical memory, cultural and linguistic differences, infringement of the ethno-cultural rights of the Abkhaz throughout the 20th century, the construction of an ethnic mythology and symbols by intellectuals and by political leaderships have all influenced the formation of a modern Abkhaz ethnic identity as an identity which opposed Georgian attempts to extinguish it. Yet this does not preclude transformational shifts in the motivation and the value structures of Abkhaz identity over the historical long-term. At the same time, notwithstanding the way ethnic identity has been formed, the strength of identity markers, mythology, cultural symbols and value systems in ethnic self-awareness is such (the same is true of the Georgian matrix) that it is not just unscientific but completely wrong to ignore this factor in the analysis of the causes of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Because ethno-political and ethno-territorial conflicts, to which the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict undoubtedly belongs, do not concern so much interests as the values⁶⁶ and characteristics of identity, there is always a large degree of scepticism in assessing prospects for their resolution. As a result, they require different approaches to resolution and settlement. Typically, there is a range of options for resolving such conflicts from “deferred status” to the recognition of independence of one of the conflicting parties, which is exactly what the West did in relation to Kosovo.

64. F. Barth, *The Analysis of Culture in Complex Societies* Vol. 54, (Stockholm: Ethnos, 1989), pp.120-142.

65. To put it simply an ethnic conflict is a fist-fight in a market between vendors of different ethnic backgrounds and not an organised political achievement of goals.

66. According to the theory of ethno-political conflicts, “a value is a narrowly understood object of principal importance for a certain subject and the life of this subject, that is not a means and nor a condition but a goal in itself. It is an expression of the subject's identity, with the loss of which the subject would disappear as an independent, self-determining entity, enjoying recognition and respect of other subjects. Conflicts, engendered by values, occur, as a rule, when one social subject imposes these values on another social subject or when these values are held in contempt by another subject. A value can be a territory, limited resources (including government authority), status or spiritual values (and philosophy of life, connected with them”. See A.R. Aklaev, *Ethno-political conflictology: Analysis and management* (Moscow: Delo, 2008), p. 464.

5. The change in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict after August 2008 – *Iraklii Khintba*

The August 2008 Georgian-Russian war can be considered a fairly logical outcome of events in the context of consistently deteriorating relations between the two countries in preceding years. According to the official Georgian position the root causes of the conflict date back to the end of 1980s when the Georgian aspiration to democratic development clashed with Russia's political and geostrategic goals. According to the Georgian government report on the war of August 2008 "this resulted in Russia consistently trying to undermine Georgian sovereignty from the very beginning of the post-Soviet era."⁶⁷ Based on this logic, the August war was only one of many open expressions of "Russia's longstanding conspiracy" against Georgia, along with the "Abkhaz episode" of 1992-1993. The Abkhaz point of view considers the events of August 2008 and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence a logical outcome of the incompatibility between the Georgian national project and the ethno-political aspirations of the Abkhaz and the Ossetians.

Simplified interpretation of this controversial issue distorts the real picture of the underlying causes and, more importantly, of the impact of the August events. The open standoff between Georgia and Russia which resulted in the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, as well as the deployment of Russia's military contingents in these republics has had a *significant effect on the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and Georgian-Abkhaz relations* as a whole. It is, therefore, essential to carry out an analysis of the contextual changes after August 2008 in order to develop a new paradigm for the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

It appears methodologically warranted to consider several levels of "post-August realities": *geopolitical, that of its subjects, that of Western involvement and the level of Russian-Abkhaz relations.*

5.1 The geopolitical level

The geopolitical situation could be defined as the existing power balance in a particular geographical arena vis-à-vis international political actors. According to this definition, the "August events" have become a kind of tectonic shift, with local, regional and even global consequences. This refers, primarily, to the emergence of "new realities" in the South Caucasus that have largely redefined the geopolitical situation in the region and that are linked to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and their subsequent recognition by a number of other countries.

This has led to a change in Russia's role in the current geopolitical landscape. Abkhaz experts interviewed as part of the study agree with the dominant Russian official discourse that August 2008 symbolised "Russia's renaissance", affirming Russia's capacity to take crucial decisions unilaterally, without the approval of other states. Russia demonstrated its willingness and its ability to defend its own interests, if need be, by force. One could debate "what constitutes a weak/strong state" in the modern world (a country which uses primarily political methods and resorts to international law instead of military means could be considered strong), but there is no doubt that Russia's actions have reaffirmed its great power ambitions by indicating that the South Caucasus remains its zone of special interest and dominant influence. Moscow's presence in the region has greatly increased, it has acquired the necessary

67. *Report by the Government of Georgia on the Aggression by the Russian Federation against Georgia*, (Tbilisi: August 2009), p.114.

institutionalisation which was lost, to some extent, as a result of the decisions taken at the OSCE Istanbul Summit of 1999.

The war of August 2008 started a new cycle of confrontation between Russia and the West, having, in fact, revived certain aspects of the Cold War. Some Abkhaz experts compare this situation with the Cuban missile crisis of 1962: during the Georgian-Russian war there was a risk of a potential clash between the Russian troops and NATO forces (when the US navy entered the Black Sea waters), which could have started conflict on a global scale. Similarly, the war has led to the strengthening of regional players, not only Russia but also Turkey and Iran. Russia and Turkey's positions appear to be converging, with the latter preventing American ships from using Turkish waters during the active phase of the Georgian-Russian confrontation by invoking the Montre Convention. Turkey is trying to position itself as an independent actor capable of influencing stability and security in the region. Iran also has the potential to pursue its interests: Tehran is coming out of self-isolation and trying to regain its place as a regional player. Its resources are in demand, allowing it to count on potential partnership with Russia and Turkey. Besides, a number of experts have drawn attention to an important regional aspect of the post-August situation: improvement in Armenian-Turkish relations which could impact on Armenia's position in the region and transform the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There are growing fears in the West regarding a potential outbreak of violence in that part of the South Caucasus and an increase of Russia's influence there.

In spite of the fact that the war has made political and ideological as well as geopolitical borders in the South Caucasus even more pronounced (for instance, Georgia is "escaping" ever further from the South Caucasus), and it perhaps laid the foundation for a future escalation of tensions between Russia and the West, there are signs of increasing pragmatism in the relations between Moscow, Washington and Brussels. With Barack Obama's arrival in the White House there have been noticeable changes in Washington's foreign policy strategy (the "reset" of its relations with Russia), expressed in the commitment to Kissinger-style realism. In spite of EU criticism of Russia's unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its criticism was largely rhetorical given the increasing volume of economic cooperation between Europe and Russia.

Consequently, one feels that because of the importance of its relations with Russia the West is not ready to sacrifice them in order to protect Georgia's interests.⁶⁸

5.2 The level of the conflict parties

By virtue of Georgia's active efforts to find international legal mechanisms to respond to the events of August 2008, the larger part of the international community have come to see these events as outgrowing the boundaries of the Georgian-Abkhaz standoff. The Georgian *Law on Occupied Territories* came into force on 23 October 2008. It was Tbilisi's answer to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the deployment of Russian military contingents. The main purpose of the law is to register the fact of "Abkhazia's occupation by the Russian Federation" as well as Moscow's "effective control" of that territory. It is important to stress that "effective control" assumes responsibility of the controlling state for all human rights violations which take place in the "occupied territories of Georgia". It is quite possible that Tbilisi will thus attempt to use the tools of international law to bring Russia to justice, including by suing it for material damage (for example, filing a suit in the European Court of Human Rights on the alleged violations of personal and property rights). In terms of changing the conflict context, the Law as well as the associated Strategy and the tactics of the Georgian government are aimed at shaping perceptions of the conflict towards a confrontation between Russia and Georgia.⁶⁹ Abkhazia is not considered a party to this confrontation, as has been continuously portrayed throughout the post-war decade. This is supported by Georgia's unwillingness to recognise the official status of the Abkhaz delegation in the Geneva talks; and secondly, by its refusal to sign

68. Georgian political analyst Paata Zakareishvili makes an interesting comment to this effect about the official visit by President Saakashvili to France on 8 July 2010: 'They are wary of his [Saakashvili's] antics; the only thing the West wants is for Georgia not to become a problem in the context of relations between Russia and the West. Maybe that was the reason why Sarkozy wanted to meet with Saakashvili'. A similar opinion is expressed by Dominic Fean from the Russia and New Independent States Research Centre of the Paris Institute for International Relations: 'For France the issue of preserving and developing relations with Russia is a greater priority than relations with Georgia ... In these circumstances the important thing for the Georgian President is to have an opportunity to make a point and, from time to time, remind the world about himself and his problems'. See "Mikhail Saakashvili's baptism by isolation", *Kommersant*, no. 102 (4402), 9 June 2010.

a non-use of force agreement with Sukhum which, according to Tbilisi, should be concluded instead with the Russian Federation as the “real” party to the conflict. Moreover, by using the notion of “occupied territories” Georgia is trying to “veto” the process of further recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. One remark in Saakashvili’s interview with the Russian magazine *Power* is particularly telling: “Even if there had been a chance of international legalisation of the creation of a new state there [in Abkhazia – I. Kh.] the Russian occupation has put an end to it.”⁷⁰ The logic of this statement is clear: if the territory is occupied, its government does not represent the will of

the people but that of the “occupying force”; this makes it impossible to draw any conclusions about real public support for the idea of independence from Georgia.

The *Law on Occupied Territories* puts the cause of the failure of the Georgian-Abkhaz talks back on the agenda: it results from putting economic and humanitarian issues within a political framework. By defining the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as “occupied”, the law forbids any economic activity there unless it is authorized within the Georgian legal system. This rule can also have an effect on the work of international NGOs which have been warned by the Georgian Ministry for Integration against any attempts at direct engagement with Abkhaz counterparts. Despite the caveat in Paragraph 2, Article 6 of the Law which deals with business activity allowed in exceptional circumstances (in order to contribute to the peaceful resolution of the conflict, among other things), its very wording, which states that the Georgian government declares its agreement with such activity in order to “protect Georgia’s national interests” cannot but provoke a negative response from the Abkhaz. Besides, by limiting entry to Abkhaz territory from the Zugdidi district (Article 4, Paragraph 1) the law, in fact, calls for Abkhazia’s isolation, reduces the chances of economic, and therefore political, modernisation and stymies any efforts to transform the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

Realising the negative consequences of implementing such a law and in reaction to the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission’s criticisms, the Georgian government proposed a new approach centering on the *de-isolation* of Abkhazia. This refers to the *State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation* adopted by the Georgian Cabinet of Ministers on 27 January 2009. The document contains a series of ostensibly sensible ideas: de-isolation of Abkhaz citizens, their involvement in economic cooperation programmes, opening up of education opportunities, and commitment to the peaceful resolution of the conflicts. At the same time when reading the document one becomes aware that the proposed de-isolation is to take place through by-passing the official Abkhaz authorities, which, in effect, places the population of Abkhazia outside its constitutional framework. This is aimed at supporting the principles which “underlie this strategy, namely, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and the tasks of ensuring non-recognition and

69. This interpretation has been around since the beginning of the 1990s, when S. Chervonnaya explained the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as an attempt by Russia to delay the process of Georgia’s westernisation. In 1998 Georgian State Minister Vazha Lordkipanidze said: ‘The Abkhaz conflict is a military and political conflict, created in order to preserve the Soviet Union, and it is the Russian government who is responsible for it.’ (E. Fuller, ‘Quotations of the Week’, *RFE/RL Caucasus Report* 1, 44 (1998)). Yet the national character of the ‘Abkhaz project’ was, by definition, incompatible with the Soviet internationalism and the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Even such a thoughtful commentator as Julie George makes a typical mistake when writing that ‘Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatist movements strove to separate from Georgia but to remain within the USSR’ (Julie A. George, *The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p.25.). The national leaders of Abkhazia needed the USSR in the instrumental sense in order to break away from Georgia, but not as a value system. This was evidenced in the post-1993 Abkhazian policy of de-communisation. This is the main difference between Abkhazia and the ‘Soviet paradise’ in Transnistria and South Ossetia (there is still a Stalin Avenue in Tskhinval –inconceivable in Abkhazia where practically all Soviet place names were expunged in the first post-war years and where the Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia contains the initial lines of the American Constitution). Despite the above pronouncement of V. Lordkipanidze that position did not become the banner of the official policy of Georgia. An indication of the popularity of this idea in Georgian society after August 2008 is an about-turn in the views of the Georgian researcher Thornike Gordadze. In 1999 he wrote: ‘We think that the widely held opinion that Russia is responsible for the Abkhaz crisis, is erroneous. Without the internal tensions between our two societies all Russia’s attempts to this effect would have failed.’ (Thornike Gordadze, “Moral and ideological obstacles to Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution”, *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*, Vol. 2 (1999): 55). In the same article he writes about the destructive role of Georgian nationalism in aggravating relations with ethnic minorities (pp. 58-64). The very same Gordadze 10 years on exaggerates the role of Russia to such an extent that his article about the Russian-Georgian relations in the 1990s totally ignores the ethnic factor in the conflicts and Georgia’s role in their escalation. He denies the Abkhaz even a modicum of free will and national interests, when he says that the unresolved situation in Abkhazia was the result of Russian unwillingness to concede anything [in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – I.Kh.]. See Thornike Gordadze, “Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s” in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*, edited by Svante E. Cornell & S. Frederick Starr (New York & London: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), p. 43.

70. Personally I am for a strong Russia’, interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, *Vlast’*, no. 8 (861), 1 March 2010.

final de-occupation.”⁷¹ The section on economic development speaks directly about its importance in strengthening integrational links between “parts of divided society” in order to guarantee the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity. This, in fact, supports Abkhaz fears that the strengthening of economic ties between the populations of Gal and Zugdidi might increase their Georgian orientation and result in an effective separation of the Gal district from Abkhazia. In addition, the assertion contained in the *Strategy* regarding the “external nature” of the conflict has had a negative effect on its transformation: for it should be the job of Abkhaz and Georgian societies, as well as their elites, to look for ways out of this confrontation and to build mutual confidence.

The excessive politicisation of the *Strategy* and the ambiguous nature of the *Action Plan* makes the two documents unacceptable to the Abkhaz side. This was confirmed by the negative reaction to the documents by Sukhum officialdom and Abkhaz society as a whole. This is taking place against the background of the continuously falling interest towards Georgia in Abkhaz society.⁷² This trend arises from a *sense of the completion of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict* in the popular psyche after Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and the replacement of the CIS Collective Peacekeeping Forces in Gal and Ochamchire districts with Russian troops. This is characteristic of a stereotype born out of August 2008 asserting that there is no connection *between the future of Abkhazia as an internationally recognised state and the resolution of the conflict with Georgia*, which also implies the resolution of a number of key issues, namely, refugees, restitution, property rights, etc. There is clear evidence of the reduced importance of the conflict in Abkhaz society’s list of priorities as it is preoccupied with the problems of organising its own space. In this new situation the topic of Russian-Abkhaz relations is growing in importance but also in ambiguity of perception.

It is important to point out the objective nature of the growing alienation between Abkhaz and Georgians. This is particularly noticeable among the young Abkhaz generation. There is a whole new generation of young people who have grown up in the twenty years since the war and who have no

experience of co-existence with Georgians. On the one hand, this could serve as a natural means of getting rid of multiple layers of historical memory and negative myths, yet on the other hand, it could separate the two nations to such an extent that it would be very problematic to establish good neighbourly relations between them.

If we consider the opinion of experts in the survey, the majority point to the unresolved status of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict continuing after August 2008. The following arguments could be adduced in support of this point of view. Firstly, a conflict can be considered resolved when the claims of the conflicting parties have been satisfied, i.e. when the issue at the heart of the conflict has been dealt with. Yet the ideas of the Georgians and the Abkhaz regarding the main points of confrontation (preserving ethnic identity, political sovereignty, refugees and IDPs) are intrinsically incompatible. Secondly, the absence of a peace treaty between Georgia and Abkhazia makes the military and political situation dependent on arbitrary factors and contributes to its instability. Despite the security guarantees provided by Russia many Abkhaz experts think that this situation could change with a potential rapprochement between Moscow and Tbilisi, or with large-scale shifts in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus. These guarantees are, therefore, viewed by many experts as not entirely reliable.

There is also an idiosyncratic point of view held by many experts about the advantages of the unresolved state of the conflict, both for Georgia which is trying to draw the attention of the international community and which is used to relying on the corresponding financial support, and for the West which uses the unresolved state of the conflict to step up its active involvement and increase its influence in the region. This is the expression of yet another dominant stereotype in Abkhaz society, the stereotype resulting from deep mistrust of the intentions and actions of Georgian and, to some extent, Western political elites.

If we consider internal political trends, we can see that after the recognition of Abkhazia’s independence there has been an expectation that Georgia would lose its importance as a topic of internal discourse. To be sure, during the presidential elections of 2009 the Abkhaz effectively managed to avoid being accused of having any pro-Georgian candidates or candidates secretly recruited by certain “Tbilisi agencies.” Yet the events of August 2009 prior to the elections made the Georgian issue more poignant in light

71. Government of Georgia. *State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation*, p.3; available at: www.civil.ge/files/files/SMR-Strategy-en.pdf

72. At the same time the ‘Georgian card’ continues to be used in internal political struggles.

of the painful problem of citizenship. The Abkhaz Parliament introduced amendments for all of the three readings of the *Citizenship Law of the Republic of Abkhazia* which were seen by the opposition as automatically conferring Abkhaz citizenship on the entire population of the Gal district. This was heavily criticised by patriotically-minded circles in the opposition who dragged the topic of the “betrayal of national interests” back onto the agenda. This resulted in statements referring to the Gal residents as a “fifth column”, a “potentially dangerous element”, and “still murdering our people.” In such circumstances the Abkhaz government could find it very hard to make any concessions on the issue of relations with Georgia and to look for potential compromise methods of conflict resolution.

5.3 The level of Western (external) involvement

There has been a noticeable reduction in the degree of internationalisation of external players’ presence in the zone of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict since August 2008. Collapse of the peacekeeping format caused by Georgia’s unilateral denunciation of the Moscow ceasefire agreement of 14 May 1994 on 30 August 2008 cast doubt over the legality of UNOMIG’s presence in the conflict area. Termination of UNOMIG’s mandate in July 2009 and its withdrawal from Abkhaz territory had both social and economic implications (the loss of well-paid jobs for the Abkhaz staff of the Mission, reduction in the number of humanitarian programmes, a smaller microeconomic impact) as well as consequences of a political nature (a sharp decline in the international presence in Abkhazia, disappearance of an important information channel and opening for Abkhazia, growing isolation and increasing difficulties with regulating the legal status of international NGOs as well as UN agencies operating in Abkhazia such as the UNDP, UNHCR and UNICEF). In addition, the parties’ inability to come to an agreement on the new format of the UN Mission demonstrated the persisting incompatibility of their positions and rejection of concession strategies not only by the parties to the conflict (Abkhazia and Georgia) but also by the external actors involved in the South Caucasus.

The European Union which had been more active in the conflict zone since 2004⁷³, became the main mediator in the Georgian-Russian standoff in August 2008. But Europe failed to win Sukhum’s

trust as the principal peace broker. What the Abkhaz viewed as an unfair reaction to the unauthorised deployment of Georgian troops in the Upper Kodori (2006), Brussels’ tough stance in relation to Abkhazia’s independence, pressure put on some countries to prevent their recognition of Abkhazia and other steps to that effect contributed to Sukhum’s mistrust of the EU. The Abkhaz side is adamant in trying to prevent the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) from entering its territory. It justifies its decision by citing two factors: provisions of the Medvedev-Sarkozy Plan of 12 September 2008⁷⁴ and the EU’s biased attitude to Abkhazia’s sovereignty. There is a clear unwillingness in Brussels to maintain neutrality in its approach to the status issue.

The majority of the surveyed Abkhaz experts think that August events and the resulting situation did not have any impact on Western approaches and perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The West continues to ignore the new situation which has emerged since the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s independence and sticks to familiar patterns. In addition, right from the start the international community showed no interest in resolving the conflict according to the Abkhaz scenario since it was trying to project its relations with Russia onto Abkhazia. Western miscalculations were caused by an absence of any real interest in Abkhazia and a lack of objective information about it, preventing the development of a constructive policy in relation to the conflict. A growing number of Western countries have been declaring their commitment to the Georgian solution of the political status of Abkhazia – the “policy of non-recognition.”

Saakashvili’s actions during the war as well as growth of personalistic authoritarian tendencies in Georgia in the period after August 2008 have affected the attitude of many countries to Georgia’s political elite. What had been, until a short time ago, Georgia’s winning image as a country which could be relied on in matters of energy transit, military presence, creating the right publicity for economic reforms, was dealt a serious blow. This

73. That was the beginning of the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in the South Caucasus, as part of the General European Security Strategy, approved in 2003. The concept document of this strategy says, in particular: ‘We should now take a stronger and more active interest in the problems of the South Caucasus, which will in due course also become a neighbouring region (“A Secure Europe in a Better World”, European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003, p.8 available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>).

explained the West's, and in particular, the US' diminished interest in Georgia as these countries got increasingly embroiled in their own domestic problems and military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the same time one can suggest that there have been certain changes in the West's attitude to the Georgian-Abkhaz context and a rethinking of the toolkit with which to influence the situation. This has not yet, however, translated into a clearly defined strategy. Some positive changes in the West's treatment of Abkhazia can be explained by such factors as: notable achievements in the democratic development of Abkhazia linked to the existence of political pluralism and independent media, a democratic changeover of regimes, a thriving civil society and Abkhazia's eagerness to prove that it is not entirely controlled by Russia and does not (unlike South Ossetia) entertain the possibility of integration into Russia. There is every likelihood of a growing realisation among the expert community of the fallacy of Western policy of Abkhazia's isolation, which has only deprived the latter of any alternatives to allying itself with Russia.⁷⁵ This could be caused by the realisation by a number of Western politicians that Georgia has lost Abkhazia for good, so it is important that the West do everything it can not to lose it either. This means creating the best possible conditions to allow Sukhum to diversify its foreign policy.

At the end of 2009 Eurocrats in charge of the South Caucasus began to formulate new approaches to the resolution of ethno-political conflicts in the region. It is clear that Europeans realise that preserving the status quo and a "strategic sitting-on-the-fence" policy in relation to Abkhazia are not effective from the point of view of conflict transformation and are not in the West's long-term interests. The EU Special Representative in the South Caucasus Peter Semneby, about whom the Abkhaz political establishment have mixed feelings, has been promoting the new EU policy based on two main principles: "engagement and

non-recognition." According to Semneby, "the EU has a strategic interest in engagement within the framework of its non-recognition policy. Despite the imperative of its unconditional commitment... to the territorial integrity of Georgia it is equally important to demonstrate practical flexibility and pragmatism by, for example, developing contacts with the communities of the breakaway regions. Only through engagement... can it offer alternative prospects to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and ensure the efficacy of its 'soft power'."⁷⁶

In order for these ideas to take shape as a clearly defined action plan it is essential to overcome not only conceptual or moral obstacles but complex political and procedural barriers linked to agreeing relevant measures with all EU members. Besides, it is quite likely that these European plans might not be acceptable to Georgia which is clearly trying to "monopolise" the process of de-isolating Abkhazia. This might be the reason behind the "anticipation game", i.e. Tbilisi's obvious ambition to make public and formally entrench its own strategy of de-isolation at the earliest opportunity. Given the politicised nature of the *Strategy on Occupied Territories* its founders must have known from the very start that it would be rejected by the Abkhaz. This would allow them to kill several birds with one stone: firstly, the very fact of the public disclosure of these relatively new ideas on conflict transformation would get a positive approval of the West and would reaffirm its perception of Tbilisi as a pro-active and constructive actor. This is the reason for both Abkhazia and Georgian opposition circles pointing out the "PR exercise" nature of this document. In addition, Tbilisi would have grounds for requesting substantial financial resources to implement projects which form part of the strategy. Secondly, the Abkhaz side's refusal to consider the strategy could be seen as a rejection of the de-isolation idea *per se*, which would send a negative signal to the West. In reality, Georgia might be quite happy with the continued isolation of Abkhazia because it makes it much easier to persuade the world that Abkhazia is "an occupied territory" which does not possess any sovereignty attributes of its own. If Abkhazia is open to the outside world it could dispell these myths. Finally, by acting in this fashion Georgia prevents any direct contacts between Abkhazia and Europe, thus "monopolising" through its own mediation.

74. The French version of the Medvedev-Sarkozy Plan was worded differently from the Russian version: the Russian text refers to security for 'South Ossetia and Abkhazia' and the French and English texts refer to security 'in' these republics. On the one hand, this gave grounds for the EU and Georgia to insist that the EU Monitoring Mission's mandate should apply to the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, on the other hand, created an opportunity for Abkhazia and Russia to prove that that request was not legitimate.

75. This position is expressed in the clearest and most convincing fashion by Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell, "How to Save Abkhazia from Being Permanently Absorbed into Russia", in *American Interest*, Vol.5, 5, Summer May/June (2010): 69-72.

76. Testimony by the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus Peter Semneby. U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing on "Mitigating Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in the OSCE Region" Washington, D.C., 4 May 2010, p. 5.

By trying to get Abkhazia recognised as an “occupied territory” Georgia is striving to prevent its true de-isolation. The *Modalities for the conduct of activities in the occupied territories of Georgia* adopted towards the end of 2010 as an addendum to the *Law on Occupied Territories* demonstrated once again Tbilisi’s determination to isolate Abkhazia completely.

5.4 The level of the Russian-Abkhaz relations

Abkhazia’s isolation determines its political and economic orientation towards Russia. Having recognised Abkhazia and provided it with security guarantees Moscow has real grounds to strengthen its presence in Abkhazia. The signing of the *Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Treaty between Russia and Abkhazia* on 17 September 2008 laid the foundations for adopting and implementing a series of agreements on a wide range of areas for cooperation. To date over 20 such agreements have been signed, covering a variety of areas of public life. The most important of them, from the point of view of this discussion, are the *Agreement on Joint Measures to Strengthen the Security of the National Borders of the Abkhaz Republic*, the *Agreement on a Combined Military Base* (both from 18 February 2010) and the pending *Agreement on Joint Customs Space*. Given that the Russian Federation represents Abkhazia’s interests in third countries and acts as the main promoter of its recognition, Abkhazia’s success in the international arena largely depends on Russia’s foreign policy and its reputation in the world.

Consolidation of Russia’s presence and the impact of this factor on the prospects of the Georgian-Abkhaz settlement in general, as well as Abkhazia’s political fortunes in particular, are the key topics in political discourse post-August 2008. The euphoria caused by Russia’s decision to recognise Abkhazia’s independence on 26 August 2008 is slowly giving way to reflection and a more profound analysis of Russia’s role and long-term strategy in the Georgian-Abkhaz context.

Analysing the *Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Treaty* of 17 September 2008 from a political point of view we can conclude that Moscow and Sukhum have established confederation-style relations which do not require any institutions of joint government and which can therefore be classified as “associate relations”.⁷⁷ At the same time, we are dealing here with closer ties

than those of a “free association”, with a type of integration which provides for joint economic, currency, customs and defence space as well as synchronisation of legislation which do not form part of associate relations between the US and the Marshall Islands, the Federative States of Micronesia or Palau.

The key issue here is the degree of independence of the Abkhaz authorities in the decision-making process. Given Georgia’s efforts to prove that Russia exercises “effective control” over the Abkhaz territory and that official Sukhum is not a sovereign centre of power in Abkhazia, the question acquires additional importance. Moreover, Moscow’s agenda for broader international recognition of Abkhazia appears quite ambivalent. There is a view that such recognition does not suit Russia’s interests as it could lead to a gradual withdrawal of Abkhazia from the Russian sphere of influence.

After 26 August there have been an increasing number of official statements (President Bagapsh’s many public appearances, for example) on the need for Abkhazia to take part in integration processes ongoing in the former Soviet Union. This mainly referred to the need to join the CIS, the CSTO and the Russia-Belarus Union State. Of course, neither joining the CIS nor membership in the CSTO are legally possible at present because they require Abkhazia to be recognised as an independent

77. Associated relations or ‘free association’ is a type of confederation or union of sovereign states. Associated states are confederations according to the famous Russian political scientist A.I. Soloviev (A.I. Soloviev, *Political science: Political theory, political strategies* (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2003), p.199). This form of inter-state relations is based on agreement, concluded between a larger and a smaller state and it stipulates the main principles of their relations. Therefore, associated relations are determined by: 1) the presence of a bilateral agreement; 2) preservation of the sovereignty and international legal personality of both states; 3) precedence of the larger state in the area of defence and to some extent – in the area of foreign policy; 4) financial union and unified currency; 5) preferential terms for acquiring citizenship; 5) customs union. In practice the concept of associated relations implies an existing practice of political and economic interaction between the countries, whilst preserving sovereignty of union members. In international practice there are three examples of ‘associated relations’: the US – the Marshall Islands, the US – the Federated States of Micronesia, the US – Palau. At the same time associated states should be distinguished from dependent territories (Puerto Rico, Guma, Gibraltar, New Caledonia, etc.). Considerable financial assistance, provided by the US to these three union states on a non-repayable basis, can be compared with the Russian financial injections into the Abkhaz budget (See more detail on ‘associated relations’ in: *Compact of Free Association* at <http://www.fm/jcn/compact/actindex.html>; I.R. Khintba “Associated relations – a model of integration for Russia and Abkhazia”, *Dialogue of civilizations: East-West. Materials of the VI University scientific conference*, edited by Yu. M. Pochta (Moscow: RUDN, 2006).

state by all members of these organisations. The positions of the majority of post-Soviet states on the issue of the legal recognition of Abkhazia have not undergone positive changes over recent months. At the same time it is also clear that integration into an entity which only exists on paper (the Russia-Belarus Union State) would not bring any tangible economic benefits to Abkhazia. In fact, it would have damaging political consequences because Abkhazia would be seen as part of a state entity and not as an independent entity as it only refers to “becoming part of a Union State” as opposed to “joining a Union”. Abkhazia’s entry would not bring the Soviet Union back to life but might serve as a serious counter-argument in the discussion on how real Abkhazia’s independence is and what chances it has to be recognised internationally.

Abkhaz experts who took part in the survey think that an inevitable increase in economic dependence has a tendency to turn into a political dependence. At the same time the majority are confident that it is not in Russia’s interests to create an impression of a dependent Abkhazia. Firstly, such an impression would contradict Russia’s own geopolitical interests because Moscow would benefit from having a border with a recognised state, a subject of international law, an independent player, a UN member linked to Russia as an ally and contributing to promoting Russia’s interests in the region. Secondly, this would legitimise Russia’s decision to recognise Abkhazia by confirming its validity as well as Abkhazia’s right to be independent as a successful modern state. Russia needs to demonstrate the “Abkhaz project”’s viability as a counterbalance to the West’s “brainchild”, Kosovo. Thirdly, treating Abkhazia’s independence with respect could be a positive signal for Russia’s allies which could help Moscow to consolidate its leadership of collective forums in the post-Soviet space. Fourthly, the broadening of the circle of countries with diplomatic relations with Abkhazia and thereby supporting Moscow’s decision against a background of increasing tension with the West would signify an improvement in Russia’s prestige in the international arena.

At the same time, the same experts are increasingly convinced of the existence of a certain “red line” in Abkhazia’s international political ambitions. Russia would put up with the diversification of Abkhaz foreign policy, with the country’s opening up for economic and political cooperation

with other countries (for example, Turkey) only if its interests in the region are not threatened. Figuratively speaking, Russia needs to be confident that whatever happens it still has the “controlling stake.”

While agreeing with the experts on some aspects of this issue, we must note the importance of signals sent by the Abkhaz political elite to Moscow and to the rest of the world. These signals indicate Abkhazian desires for:

- Internal independence and the decision-making practice based on the declared national aspirations of Abkhazia;
- Maximum transparency in the use of funds allocated by Russia;
- Correct prioritisation of these spendings in order to create the foundation for future financial independence;
- Flexibility and ability to manoeuvre in difficult conditions.

All of these can both provide the necessary reserve of freedom of manoeuvre in its relations with Russia and show the West its openness for cooperation.

As far as local contexts of the conflict are concerned, the presence of Russian border guards on the Ingur river can have two different interpretations. On the one hand, it could be a limitation on cross-border economic engagement due to lack of trust local residents have towards Russian border troops, as well as Russia’s direct interference in local processes. According to some subjective assessments, there has been an increase in crossings of what is formally a closed border. As we discovered in interviews with some Gal residents they were driven by the desire, fuelled by rumours, to “do as much as possible before the Russians shut the border down completely”. Yet there is also a different view, that Russian border troops’ presence will improve law and order in the Gal district; there is hope that the border regime will be better regulated and contribute to a safer environment for business activity. Russia is not likely to stand in the way of trade as there is little chance that this would threaten its economic interests in Abkhazia.

5.5 Some conclusions

Summing up the main trends in the situation after August 2008 one can draw the following conclusions:

1. Georgia's policy towards the new post-August situation has been framed in terms of the concept of "de-occupation." The strategy of non-recognition is based on the internationalisation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and attempts to "punish" Russia with the help of international legal and political instruments.
2. Refusal to take into account the ethno-political dimension of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, expressed in the refusal to consider Sukhum a subject of the conflict and a party to negotiations, creates obstacles to the transformation of the conflict.⁷⁸
3. Against a background of general commitment by external actors to "old" unproductive approaches there are signs of some positive changes in the EU policies. If this trend is not supported a geopolitical situation could crystallise in the South Caucasus leading to deep divisions and international confrontation.
4. The Abkhaz side has practically stopped sending any signals on the settlement of its conflict with Georgia. Georgia has been relegated to the sidelines and there is a conscious disregard of the importance of dialogue and of the need to resolve this persistent conflict.⁷⁹ Interviewed

Abkhaz experts did not volunteer any fresh ideas about conflict transformation in the new situation.

5. The current situation is driving Abkhazia even further away from Georgia and the West. Although this trend is positively perceived by some groups in Abkhaz society, in reality it threatens Abkhazia's political goals – independence and international recognition of Abkhazia.

78. A quotation from the same speech by the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus in the US Helsinki commission on 4 May 2010 is another example of the realisation of the fallacy in this approach: 'The Russian-Georgian war was undoubtedly a war between states, but its foundations lay in the fraught inter-ethnic relations between the Georgians, on the one hand, and the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, on the other, resulting from the wars of the early 1990s. These inter-ethnic conflicts gradually became hijacked as part of the larger inter-state conflict and geo-strategic shifts. The multi-dimensionality of this conflict has required our response at many levels to seek its resolution'. (Testimony by the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby. U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing on "Mitigating Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in the OSCE Region" Washington, D.C., 4 May 2010, p.1).

79. See Sergey Bagapsh's statement: 'The situation which arose in the country and around it in connection with the recognition of its independence demanded that we should make relevant changes in our internal and foreign policies. A more active foreign policy is more relevant for us today, a policy directed not *at the resolution of the conflict with Georgia* [author's italics- I.Kh.] *but at obtaining Abkhazia's recognition* by other countries in the near and far abroad"; available at: <http://abkhaziagov.org>

6. After August: conflict resolution or conflict transformation? – *Natella Akaba and Iraklii Khintba*

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is an asymmetric ethno-political conflict, driven by values and aspects of identity, and, as such, is hard to resolve. Conflict management in the Caucasus is further complicated by the fact that today the region is highly militarised. In addition to the unresolved conflicts, it faces other challenges, including the growth of radical religious movements in a number of North Caucasian republics, acute social problems and instability. As Zbignev Brzezinski repeatedly stressed, in the second decade after the end of the Cold war the Caucasus runs the risk of becoming what the Balkans were in the first decade. However, this 'Eurasian balkanization' is going to be worse – due to the high stakes in the game associated with the production, transit and supply of energy.⁸⁰

At the same time, having concluded the agreements *On Joint Efforts to Protect the State Border* and *On a Combined Military Base* with Sukhum, Russia has created a reliable protective barrier ensuring Abkhazia's military security. In the absence of multilateral collective security mechanisms, however, the situation still appears quite challenging, especially, as after the events of August 2008 and Georgia's exit from the CIS, all mechanisms which had been developed during the 15 years of the Georgian-Abkhaz peace negotiations, were destroyed and all previously signed documents denounced on Tbilisi's initiative. Equally important is the seriously undermined mutual confidence of the protagonists, which was already in short supply before August 2008. This and many other factors are convincing arguments in favour of the need to pay attention to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, as to other unresolved conflicts in the region, and not to be limited by the format of the sluggish and generally unsatisfactory Geneva talks.

After Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia, Georgia, as a topic, is being ever further sidelined in the Abkhaz collective consciousness. Since the threat of renewed Georgian aggression, tangible throughout the whole post-war period, is now largely diminished, and Tbilisi is diligently propagating the notion that Abkhazia is merely a "Kremlin puppet", the majority of Abkhaz citizens see no point in establishing any relations with Georgia.

As far as the Georgian position is concerned, then as far as we can judge, the August crisis of 2008 has not persuaded the political elite in Georgia to re-think its policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to seek mutual understanding with the populations of their former autonomies. Instead, by manipulating more or less successfully its image as a "victim of Russian aggression", Tbilisi has directed all its efforts to demonising Russia in the eyes of the international community while waiting for the West to assist it in finally resolving its 'territorial issues'. At the same time in reality Tbilisi has also distanced itself (in the eyes of an outside observer, at least) from the Georgian-South Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhaz conflicts proper. However, in our opinion, this "strategy of ignoring" [the conflicts] manifested itself most clearly and gained strength at the time of the Saakashvili administration's accession to power in Georgia, the fact that took a large part of Abkhaz society by surprise. Many in Abkhazia had thought that Saakashvili's rise to power on a tide of popular protest against the Shevardnadze regime and majority support provided him with a historic chance to form a more or less objective assessment of Georgia's role in initiating the 1992-93 war, especially, since the new Georgian leader and his team did not bear any responsibility for those events and could reap serious moral dividends with the Abkhaz and the Ossetians. But it did

80. Antonio Missiroli, "Georgia on the EU's mind", European Policy Center, 14 October 2008, www.epc.eu

not happen and after August 2008 the 'ignoring strategy' became particularly explicit.

Obviously, this attitude of the Georgian leadership to Sukhum and Tskhinval is designed to demonstrate that both former autonomies are obedient instruments of Moscow, devoid of sovereignty of their own. Curiously enough, at the same time some in the Georgian establishment nurse the idea that very soon the Abkhaz will become disillusioned with Russia, understand the harmfulness of their pro-Russian orientation, and akin to a ripe fruit, readily fall into Georgia's lap, which will have become a democratic and economically successful country. What remains unclear is that if the Abkhaz do not decide anything themselves and totally lack any freedom of action how can they 'return to the Georgian fold' while being under Russia's control?

In reality, the situation in Abkhazia is quite different from that painted by Tbilisi. Russia is viewed in Sukhum as a strategic ally with a greater interest in preserving Abkhazia's independence than in swallowing the territory. Alternatives to Abkhazia's independence are not even considered either at the political level or at the level of society as a whole. However, it should be noted that this aspiration clearly irritates some Russian political analysts and journalists. A vivid example of that exasperation is the indignation of one of the solid critics of Sukhum policies, M. Kolerov: "A 190% protectorate, Abkhazia still does not aim to be incorporated into the Russian Federation. The maximum [it would consider] is to establish associated relations [with Russia]. Abkhazia will always be a separate state with its own and very ambitious bureaucracy, created in the successful struggle for national liberation ..."⁸¹

Taking into consideration how complex and multidimensional the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is, as well as the increased frequency with which interests of major players in the region clash with one another, it appears futile to continue putting all efforts into conflict *resolution*, while the goals of the parties remain irreconcilable and mutually exclusive. To transform the conflict or, to be more precise, to transform the conflict system seems more optimal – in other words, there need to be changes in the situation that could affect the perception of the conflict by the parties. As scholar Hugh Miall has noted, "transformation is a process of transforming relationships, interests, discourses' of the parties to the conflict, it is a 'progressive process, requiring

the realisation of a number of small or large steps, as well as concrete measures, in the implementation of which very important roles may be played by completely different actors."⁸² According to another big name in the theory of conflict transformation, John Paul Lederach, "the long-term goal of transformation consists in proclaiming, in word and in deed, the precedence of local people and resources."⁸³ From these positions peace building is seen as a long-term process, with the final goal of transforming the system of war into the system of peace, i.e. the transformation of the context, structures, actors, as well as of the problems themselves (by means of re-formulating them).

Unfortunately it is necessary to state that today the factors at work in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict are those contributing to the deepening of the conflict, and not its transformation. These factors, formulated by Clem McCartney⁸⁴, are listed below:

- The parties rely on position-of-strength policies;
- There is a high level of hatred and hostility, further amplified by the conflict;
- Mistrust, fear and the feeling of danger, felt by the parties;
- Inconsolable pain and grief, physical losses as a result of the conflict. Problems of lack of understanding and poor communication between the parties;
- Lack of structures and mechanisms for managed engagement;
- Different views on the disputed issues and approaches to their resolution.

It is obvious that official negotiations or efforts of international mediators are unable to influence these factors; moreover, transformation of the conflict explicitly demands special attention paid to the internal development aspect although the role of external actors with their interests must be taken into consideration as well. Such an approach suggests, among other things, a deep and impartial analysis of the past, repudiation of violence, overcoming inequality in relations, widening of the dialogue space by including new actors, etc.

81. Abkhazia yesterday, today and tomorrow— Expert Online 2.0 30 August 2010; www.expert.ru

82. Hugh Miall, "Conflict Transformation: a multi-dimensional task/ethno-political conflict: ways of transformation", in the *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), p.78.

83. J.P. Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse Studies on Peace and Conflict Resolution) (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

84. Clem McCartney, *Reframing: a strategy for conflict transformation*, (London: Conciliation Resources, 2007), p.3; available at http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/comparative-learning/documents/CR_Reframing2007.pdf

Considering the increased role of the EU in Georgia after the August 2008 war, it is logical to suppose that Brussels' role in the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict could be significant. At the same time according to Antonio Missiroli, the policy of the European Union towards Georgia became even more muddled and fragmented after the conflict and can hardly be called a balanced policy (or a package of measures). According to this expert, "this policy is to do with the bureaucratic practice, special national interests and old procedures and formats, which failed to change to adapt to the Georgian case."⁸⁵

On the other hand, as the Belgian political analyst Bruno Coppieters quite justifiably stresses, the EU's desire to bring together the interests of the opposing sides is subject to certain limitations, as external actors must secure the agreement of both parties to the conflict. At the same time, as Coppieters notes, the government of internationally recognised Georgia has more opportunities to influence the EU decision-making than the '*de facto*' (from the point of view of the EU countries – N.A., I.Kh.) governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In reality this gives Georgian leaders an opportunity to establish control over EU's conflict transformation activities vis-à-vis Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which naturally does not promote positive dynamics. Fearing that during the process of engagement with the European institutions the authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia could gradually gain greater legitimacy in the eyes of the EU, Tbilisi is trying to limit EU activities to supporting NGOs in the 'breakaway regions' and obstructs projects aimed at reforming government institutions, supporting minority rights and other activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. 'This attitude of Georgia makes it impossible for the EU to strengthen legitimacy of political resources of some internal actors in these communities or to restrict others', concludes Coppieters.⁸⁶ Yet this [ability to influence] is considered to be one of the most important components of conflict transformation. However, according to another expert, Magdalena Frichova-Grono, Georgia is currently very dependent on the help and political support of the European Union, which gives the latter real leverage over Tbilisi. Although this did not deter rash actions on Saakashvili's part in August 2008, today, according to Frichova-Grono,

the Georgian leadership realises that similar actions would lead to the drying up of any aid.⁸⁷

In reality, however, it needs to be stated that so far the Georgian political elite has not displayed any signs of readiness to review its attitude towards the various aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The notorious Georgian 'strategy' does not answer any of the critically important questions in Georgian-Abkhaz relations, and the focus on 'soft power' after all that happened between the two nations seems to be, as does the strategy on the whole, an attempt to impress Western powers now weary of the Georgian leadership. For its part Abkhazia relies on the military and economic presence of Russia, which is becoming more active in the South Caucasus and considers the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict settled. Among the political elites of both Georgia and Abkhazia there is a deficit of new ideas and approaches to conflict resolution, of ideas based not only on the search for external allies and guarantors but on identifying internal resources for peace and on changing the attitudes of both societies to their respective past and present.

Nevertheless, paradoxically, after the recognition of Abkhazia's independence by Russia, new opportunities arose to transform the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, or at least, to reduce its destructive potential. These new options are considered below.

6.1 Public opinion on the subject of bilateral contacts

If earlier, immediately after Russia recognised Abkhazia's independence, many representatives of the Abkhaz expert community considered the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict exhausted, currently only one of the 29 respondents holds this opinion. According to some experts, the conflict has entered its post-war phase, the parties have not signed a peace treaty while a third party provides security guarantees. Furthermore, opinions regarding the sustainability of these guarantees are divided as follows: A) these guarantees are long-term and reliable; B) the situation could change, should there be a rapprochement between Moscow and Tbilisi; C) even with the existing guarantees military provocations, leading to human casualties, can continue; D) security, guaranteed by Russia alone and not by the resolution of the conflict itself, will create a loss-of-sovereignty risk for Abkhazia. A

85. Missiroli, "Georgia on the EU's Mind".

86. Bruno Coppieters, *The EU and Georgia: Time Lines in Conflict Resolution*, EU Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper #70, December 2007; pp. 17-18.

87. Magdalena Frichova-Grono, *Georgia's Conflicts: What Role for the EU as mediator?* (London: Initiative for Peacebuilding/International Alert, 2010), p. 27.

number of experts noted that the conflict is not resolved because the Abkhaz and the Georgians have different notions of what the relations between Abkhazia and Georgia should be. There is no formula, accepted by both sides, of Abkhazia and Georgia's co-existence in the given geographic space.

Considering the above opinions it seems logical that practically all respondents should think that it is necessary to hold negotiations, even if with certain provisos. Some assert that it makes no sense to hold serious negotiations with the current Georgian leadership, yet it is necessary to continue the process since it will grant the Abkhaz a certain international platform. These respondents are hoping that more substantive negotiations would be possible if the Georgian leadership were to change.

Other respondents think that it is necessary to hold negotiations but the format of the Geneva discussions must be changed because Abkhazia is not represented there as an official party. A third opinion was voiced as well: it is important to preserve the format of the Geneva discussions because it transfers the discussions from the plane of bilateral relations to the sphere of collective security in the South Caucasus. This benefits Abkhazia because it becomes established as a regional player, and should it not use this platform, Georgia would use it alone. On the whole, the respondents noted the following on the subject of negotiation process:

1. Negotiations are a direct contact, therefore, they make it possible to discuss any area of concern at first hand;
2. Negotiations are always preferable because while they continue there is less of a chance for 'guns to talk' (*inter arma enim silent leges*).
3. Georgian strategies are often based on myths, one of which is the idea of the absence of the Georgian-Abkhaz antagonism *per se*, with Russia being the whole problem. Another myth is related to the hope that when Abkhazia realises that Russia will swallow it up it will, allegedly, want to return to the Georgian fold. The West, for its part, also bases its strategy on these false premises. It is, therefore, important for Abkhazia's voice to be heard internationally.
4. Negotiations are needed to stop the situation from deteriorating. In any case, no matter how futile the negotiations might seem today, there is an exchange of information and different ideas are being discussed. The situation may

change and favourable conditions might occur at some point to implement these discussed ideas.

5. Cutting short of the Geneva process will not lead to our isolation because both the West and Georgia have a greater interest in negotiations than Abkhazia and may therefore agree to other formats. The respondents supporting this point of view agree that the loss of links with the outside world will bind Abkhazia to Russia even tighter, however, they do not agree that a time-out in the negotiation process would lead to the loss of connections with the international community.

This final point is a vivid illustration of the popular myth that all world actors are very keen on engaging with Abkhazia, while Abkhazia finds itself in a rather privileged position.

There are a wide variety of opinions regarding the issues to be included in the agenda for the negotiations. According to all respondents the status of Abkhazia is non-negotiable. 'Progress in relation to other issues is not likely; however, it is always important to know your opponent's position', according to one respondent. Others were rather sceptical about the prospects of being able to discuss a number of issues:

- Any topics, suggested by Abkhazia, will be 'torpedoed' by the Georgians. However, when the process of Abkhazia's de-isolation gains momentum, when air and sea communications are restored once again and Abkhazia starts establishing contacts with Turkey and possibly Ukraine and Belarus, the Georgians will have to reckon with Abkhazia.
- One respondent thinks that Georgia, with Western donor help diminishing, will drift towards Russia. For the time being, though, Georgia will gamble on bad relations with Russia, trying to prove that Russia is an aggressor and an invader and that it exercises a complete control over Abkhazia. It is not to the Georgian leadership's advantage that the world should note positive processes in the internal development of Abkhazia.
- Some respondents do not see any possibilities of concluding bilateral agreements in the absence of external stimuli: 'for the Abkhaz it is not a vital necessity today because Russia's military presence is going to increase and security guarantees for Abkhazia are ensured'.

Speaking of the issues on the Abkhaz agenda the experts named: a) guarantees of non-resumption of violence through a treaty between Abkhazia

and Georgia; b) border issues and regulation of procedures at check points; c) joint use of a number of economic or other facilities (for example, the Ingur hydroelectric plant); d) regulation of cross-border trade.

A number of respondents think that any engagement with Georgia is only possible after the signing of the non-use of force treaty with international guarantees after which it would be possible to discuss a wide range of issues, including economic relations. At the same time, even with the current border officially closed, over 18,000 people crossed it this year, mostly residents of border districts. If the non-use of force treaty were signed the number of people crossing the border would increase, while legalising the existing cross-border trade would bring significant revenues into Abkhazia's budget. An opinion was voiced that the railroad could be another area of mutual interest, as, for example, the proposed Black Sea orbital road. If Georgia does not politicise the issue and demand that all Abkhaz contacts with the outside world be conducted through Georgia, then according to one respondent, Abkhazia and Georgia could cooperate economically in the same way as Taiwan and China. At the same time other respondents think that there should be no economic relations with Georgia. 'We should trade with friends, not with enemies. We should build economic cooperation with Russia and Turkey.'

6.2 Conclusion

To sum up the above, we come to the following conclusions:

1. A new reality was established in the South Caucasus as a result of August 2008; part of this reality was a radical change in the contexts of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the Russian-Georgian relations. Contrary to some illusions, the recognition of Abkhazia's independence by Russia did not lead to the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The official Georgian line which consists of denial of genuine Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, is even more persistently skewed towards the 'external element' alone – the conflict between Russia and Georgia, where the Abkhaz are allocated the role of a managed extra. In both cases there is an absence of vision regarding ways to resolve the conflict (or to transform it) and, consequently, regarding ways to create foundations for future security.
2. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is impossible to resolve as long as conflicting and unequal relations remain at the heart of the conflict. Hence, any model of conflict resolution must be based on parity principles. Possibly, the most effective way to resolve ethnic and political contradictions can be the concept of conflict transformation which does not assume a predetermined status solution but which, at the same time, requires that people's real needs be addressed and their rights respected. This concept also implies the need to 'restore the balance in the asymmetric relations through the process of realisation, correlation, negotiation and development' which is impossible to achieve in conditions of inequality in negotiations, isolation and stigmatisation of one of the parties to the conflict.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, the Abkhaz side experienced and continues to experience these negative practices. On the other hand, Sukhum too should become more proactive vis-à-vis the Georgian – "conflict" – vector of its foreign policy, instead of simply ignoring it.
3. Both the Abkhaz and the Georgian sides, dissatisfied with the results of the negotiation process, blamed the failures on each other's uncompromising attitudes and the ineffectiveness of mediators (Abkhazia was dissatisfied with the West and Georgia was dissatisfied with Russia). In reality, the main problem, in our opinion, was a complete lack of trust between the parties as well as inability of both societies and political elites to overcome obsolete concepts and myths. This fact determines the need to re-think conceptually the strategy of conflict resolution with the aim of moving on to the strategy of transformation. It is important to find ways of addressing these myths and negative constructs of the past in order to transform their negative energy into positive impacts of conflict transformation. This can be done within the framework of "dealing with the past".
4. After Russia recognised Abkhazia's independence a number of new options and conditions to transform the conflict emerged. If previously Abkhazia felt vulnerable in the extreme, without any reliable allies, then presently with the changed balance of forces in the region Abkhazia's confidence in guarantees of her stability and at least the physical security of the Abkhaz population by the military might of Russia has also grown. This allows

88. More in A. Curle, *Making Peace*, (London: Tavistock, 1971).

Abkhazia to feel more assured. At the same time this situation leads to the conflict *per se* being ignored and its relevance for internal debates becoming greatly diminished. This is one of the reasons why Abkhaz political circles do not display any readiness to develop a new, pragmatic foreign policy strategy, able take on board the new geopolitical reality and opportunities it brings. Such a strategy should contribute to Abkhazia's greater openness to the wider world, while preserving its strategic partnership with Russia.

5. The Kodor gorge factor which triggered the escalation in 2006 and which hindered the continuation of useful, if ineffective, peace negotiations, ceased to exist after the events of August 2008, when Georgian units were squeezed out of the Upper Kodor. The restoration of Abkhaz jurisdiction over this territory removed any obstacles to reviving direct Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations.
6. Despite Russia being viewed as a strategic ally and the only security guarantor for Abkhazia, the Abkhaz retain their interest in Europe, due to the historic and cultural appeal of the latter but also because the "European" (or rather, universal human) values have a lot in common with Abkhaz (Caucasian) ethical norms. At the same time, Abkhazia needs to demonstrate its soundness as a state and its commitment to democratic standards and to ensure more effective guarantees of human rights and the rights of all minorities which make up the poly-ethnic community – the people of Abkhazia. Government policy on the Gal district must also be considered in this context; it remains the weakest link in both domestic and foreign policies. It is ten years since tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians were allowed to come back to their homes in the Gal district. Yet the issue of the returnees' official status still has not acquired any clarity or consistency. The Abkhaz government and civil society together with various international agencies such as the UNHCR should make every effort to ensure respect for the rights of Gal residents in line with international human rights legislation and Abkhaz national laws. Attention should be paid to different mechanisms and ways of tackling one of the key issues in transforming the conflict context – the problem of refugees.
7. The European Union has not abandoned the ineffective approaches it applied to Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution and

transformation prior to August 2008. Making new announcements about the inviolability of Georgia's territorial integrity European institutions not only fail to help but at the same time deprive themselves of an opportunity to act as an impartial mediator. As Coppieters rightly notices, "from the Abkhaz point of view the idea of Europeanisation has long been present in Abkhazia but the international community – mistakenly – is committed to the integration of Abkhazia into Georgia and not into Europe."⁸⁹ Apart from the task of encouraging the West to show greater political sensitivity it is also important to ensure that Abkhaz society does not become hostage to geopolitical stereotypes. Abkhazia's openness towards the West does not automatically mean prejudicing Russian interests, especially, in view of the new emerging architecture of relations between Moscow, Brussels and Washington.

8. The signals coming from the regional EU office in the South Caucasus in the last few months, regarding the formulation of a new strategy in relation to Abkhazia ('Engagement without Recognition') were on the whole positively received in Abkhazia; however, the implementation of this plan is hindered by the low adaptability of European decision-making mechanisms and insufficient political will of key actors. At the same time proposals to abolish the EU Office for the South Caucasus as well as Head of EU Foreign Policy Catherine Ashton's welcoming of the Georgian *Strategy on Occupied Territories* do not instil optimism because Abkhazia is convinced that this will all lead to a complete cessation of cooperation with the EU since contacts with the EU through its Tbilisi mission are unacceptable for Sukhum. Meanwhile the positive reaction by EU senior officials of Tbilisi's strategy undermines Abkhazia's confidence in European plans for the de-isolation of Abkhazia. In this case the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict will find itself outside the EU orbit. Should the strategy of 'Engagement without Recognition' be successful though, the EU could have two important roles to play: as a political actor engaged in the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and as an important instrument and resource in the political and economic modernisation of Abkhazia. In order to perform these constructive roles, Europe should declare its neutrality on the status.

89. Bruno Coppieters, "The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict", in *Europeanisation and conflict resolution: case studies of the European periphery*, (Moscow, 2005), p.217.

9. Since effective implementation of European plans to de-isolate Abkhazia is impossible without the reciprocal movement of the Abkhaz, clearer signals from Sukhum are needed. However, there is decreasing discussion in Abkhazia of multiple political vectors because, among other things, Sukhum did not receive an adequate response from the West regarding its initiatives in 2006-2008. At the same time it is necessary to have a clear understanding that the strengthening of democratic institutions in Abkhazia is in the interests of all stakeholders and a key condition for the transformation of the conflict.
10. An important EU contribution to regional stabilisation could be support for the drafting and signing of a “non-use of force” agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia. Such an agreement could, among other things, aid the institutionalisation of international presence in Abkhazia, which ended when the UN mission’s mandate was terminated in June 2009. The EU could put its efforts into influencing Tbilisi to realise the necessity of signing such a document, which would open new prospects for direct Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue.
11. It is clear that the strengthening of the EU’s role cannot be achieved at the expense of infringing Russia’s interests. Considering the increasing level of EU-Russia cooperation as well as calls for the creation of a common security system in the European region, including the South Caucasus, it can be hoped that effective mechanisms for coordinating the EU’s and Russia’s actions to strengthen peace in the region will be developed. Improvement in the engagement between Russia and the EU is in Abkhazia’s interest since without mechanisms to coordinate EU and Russian interests and concrete actions, implementation of any European initiative will be hindered. The role of Russia in the region is geographically and geopolitically invariant.
12. It seems vitally important for Georgia’s further development that Georgian society find the strength to acknowledge that return to past models of Abkhaz-Georgian relations is impossible under any circumstances. Having destroyed the USSR, it is impossible to preserve one of its elements – the Georgian SSR. Only having learnt to treat the Abkhaz as equals and recognised their right to independent development, can Georgian society concentrate on the creation of a better future for its own country and for the whole region of the South Caucasus.

Biographies

After graduating in history and an early career in journalism in Abkhazia, in 1976 **Natella Akaba** completed doctoral studies in history at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Moscow; her topic was British colonial policy in Qatar. Between 1978 and 1989 she lectured at Yerevan State University and later the Abkhaz State University. After joining the Abkhaz National Movement (People's Forum) in 1990, she became a member of parliament in Abkhazia and later was appointed deputy, then head of the parliament's Human Rights Committee. During the Georgian-Abkhaz war Akaba was a member of the Abkhaz delegation at official Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations; she has participated widely in advocacy and peacebuilding initiatives relating to the conflict, as well documenting human rights violations perpetrated during the war. In 1994 – 1995 Akaba served as the Abkhaz Minister for the Press and Information. Since 1999 she has been director of the board of the Association of the Women of Abkhazia.

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Iraklii Khintba graduated in political science at the People's Friendship University of Russia in 2006, and completed doctoral research there in 2009. His topic was factors and models for the consolidation of democracy. He began to lecture at various universities in Moscow and later took a position as an associate professor at the Abkhaz State University. He is also a research fellow at the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes and at the Abkhazian Institute for Humanitarian Studies, Sukhum.

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