Civic initiatives

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The conflict over Abkhazia has spawned a range of civic peace initiatives, but after six years of stalemate have these efforts succeeded in changing the way individuals and societies act or offered new prospects for resolving the conflict and attaining a durable peace?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to draw a distinction between first-track diplomacy conducted by officials, leaders and diplomats from Georgia and Abkhazia and international mediators, and second-track initiatives undertaken by individuals or groups who have no official status and represent only themselves and their own principles.

Some peacemaking interventions have been instigated by local academics, teachers or journalists affected by the conflict and searching for ways to address its consequences. In some cases such people in both Georgia and Abkhazia have formed NGOs to pursue their goals.

Other initiatives have come from international NGOs or individuals outside the region. Activities and roles have changed over time, reflecting the dynamics of the political and security situation, the growing sophistication of local NGOs and the learning curve of their international partners. While there has been a randomness about some interventions, others have been motivated by the belief that civic initiatives offer space for dialogue and analysis which official negotiations seldom do, especially when one party (like Abkhazia) is not internationally recognized.

Some conflict resolution initiatives undertaken by Western European, American and Russian organizations began before the 1994 ceasefire, when the introduction of UNOMIG and the CISPRP provided sufficient security for international NGOs to begin exploring their potential contribution. The development of a United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, combined with greater stability on the ground from 1995 encouraged civic initiatives by providing information and analysis and by

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facilitating numerous INGO visits to Abkhazia. Working in a field where the personal meets the political, in which trust and respect are prerequisites to developing and sustaining initiatives, the continuous involvement of several individuals and organizations has been significant. The commitment of local activists has enabled the development of a civic peacebuilding process, but logistical and psychological difficulties in cross-communal dialogue have often required the involvement of external intermediaries.

Multifaceted activities

Civic interventions since the 1993 war have addressed humanitarian and environmental concerns, education, psychological trauma (especially of children), human rights monitoring, conflict analysis, the media, civil society development and democratization, some of which are directly related to the peace process. INGOs like International Alert (IA), Links, the Berghof Centre for Constructive Conflict Management and Conciliation Resources, as well as academics from the University of California, Irvine (UCI) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), have convened many meetings in neutral venues, which have provided opportunities for activists from the conflicting sides to build relationships and foster dialogue on substantive issues. Such meetings have provided valuable opportunities to break down stereotypes ingrained by the post-war separation and introduce new ideas and approaches to conflict resolution.

These initiatives are not about the exercise of power. They focus on relationships, attitudes, ideas and skills, and through the establishment of effective processes have encouraged the parties to address the hard issues dividing them. Training has provided a starting point for many interventions. IA organized three two-week workshops in 1993 and 1994 to promote discussion on conflict resolution and create an environment for people from the North Caucasus and Georgia to jointly analyse their conflicts. Similarly, in 1995 the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland brought together an individual from each of Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Azerbaijan and Armenia for a four-month programme with the objective of training them to establish NGOs that could engage in conflict resolution work back home. The Abkhaz and Georgian participants helped to establish NGOs on their return. The Abkhaz participant subsequently became deputy foreign minister. According to the foreign minister, his appointment was influenced by his participation in Maryland, allowing the insights gained there to be transferred to diplomatic forums. The relatively small politically active communities in Georgia and, especially, Abkhazia create a closely interconnected environment of civil and political actors and give non-official initiatives, potentially, great influence.

Since mid-1996 INGO civic initiatives have tried to move from improving relations to activities promoting dialogue on substantive issues. This is partly in response to the slow progress of the official negotiations and partly due to an enhanced understanding of political constraints. Many meetings have focused on the environment, youth or women's issues as a way of providing less sensitive frameworks for dialogue and considering how common needs could lead to common projects. But most endeavours have found it difficult to move from open dialogue processes to concrete measures that could foster confidence building and reconciliation. Donor policies have often encouraged joint activities, whereas Abkhaz participants have preferred to talk about parallel projects, not wanting to be forced into collaboration according to someone else’s agenda. As a result, fundraising for sustained projects, especially for unilateral work in Abkhazia, has been difficult and has at times compromised the work of organizations or created artificial partnerships.

Unilateral work has become an important part of civic peace initiatives. Georgian has developed a vibrant NGO constituency with the support of international organizations. However, in Abkhazia, because of greater political and material constraints resulting from the societal decay induced by war, NGOs have been more isolated. This has had a negative impact on their preparedness to engage in constructive dialogue with their Georgian counterparts. The imbalance in opportunity has been addressed by the Berghof Foundation which supported a meeting in 1997 to aid local actors in developing their peace strategies, and by Conciliation Resources which, in collaboration with local experts and UNV, ran training workshops on conflict handling, strategic planning and professional skills for journalists and NGOs in 1998 and 1999. UCI has actively combined support for Abkhaz NGO development with dialogue meetings on environmental issues and the role of citizens’ diplomacy.

A VUB exercise that was part academic and part political illustrates attempts to promote joint reflection and inject new ideas into the process. Georgian and Abkhaz scholars attended two seminars on the role of the international community in regulating the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict and on models of sovereignty. Subsequently scholars and officials made joint study visits to Switzerland and Belgium, and were exposed to comparative federal experiences. The academic co-operation aimed to stimulate much needed discussion among opinion formers as well as to encourage intellectuals from both sides to participate in an analysis of the roots of the conflict and the prospects for future settlement. The proceedings were published in Russian and distributed in the region. A copy of the book was lying on the desk of Vladislav Ardzinba when a Georgian television journalist interviewed him in 1999, indicating that the material reached the highest level.
Such initiatives can have a profound impact on the attitudes of individuals. In January 1997, UNV and the Berghof Centre brought twenty-two mainly non-governmental people from Georgia and Abkhazia to Stadtschaining in Austria for a workshop on democratization in transitional societies. After one exercise a number of participants were shocked to see the extent to which opponents understood their needs and fears and yet remained steadfast in support of their own positions. While most civic peace initiatives have involved ‘civil society actors’, some, like the meetings organized by the Conflict Management Group in The Hague in 1994 and 1995, have brought officials and political leaders together unofficially.

A lesson that can be drawn from the myriad of meetings that have taken place is that political change does not come from creating trusting relations alone but from trading benefits and concessions, and from creating legal frameworks that accommodate conflicting relationships and broader attitudinal changes in society. While negotiations are the domain of official diplomacy, generating ideas is often easier in an informal civic environment. Transmitting these ideas upwards to the negotiating process and sideways to society at large, however, is no easy task.

**Obstacles and constraints**

Civic initiatives have encountered a range of political and logistical obstacles. Telecommunications with Abkhazia, from Georgia as well as from further afield, have been intermittent at best. Foreigners travelling to Abkhazia have often had to rely on UNOMIG helicopters, planes or armoured vehicles and the four-wheel drives of aid agencies for transport, or have simply had to walk across the Inguri Bridge.

Arranging travel abroad for Abkhaz has at times required liaison with the Georgian and Russian Foreign Ministries, as well as the acquisition of laissez-passer documents, since Abkhaz passports are not recognized. Some Abkhaz choose to take Russian or Armenian passports for convenience, but this allows opponents to question their commitment to Abkhazia. Sochi, across the Abkhaz border in Russia, has been the most common location for meetings, since only on very rare occasions since the war have Abkhaz civic actors travelled to Georgia or Georgians to Abkhazia. The complexity of Abkhaz travel illustrates the asymmetric relationship: Georgia and Russia have some influence over which Abkhaz can travel and thus over which meetings can take place. Georgia is reluctant to relinquish this leverage, even though it imposes a political and psychological constraint on all aspects of the negotiation process.

The composition of delegations at meetings is also problematic. In 1997 a meeting of Abkhaz and Georgian parliamentarians in the USA was undermined when a leader in the ‘government-in-exile’, with which Abkhaz are reluctant to engage, joined the Georgian delegation. However, inviting to meetings those who are more willing to talk does not necessarily bring together people who are influential or those between whom confidence will be most difficult to build – the Abkhaz and IDP representatives. This points to the fact that NGOs often deal with the people who they can access, not necessarily those who have most leverage over the peace process. Conflict resolution and confidence-building processes have often been seen as elitist since the same people tend to be invited time and again. This is especially the case with Abkhazia where the circle of people involved has been much narrower than in Georgia. This has resulted in conflict resolution fatigue, particularly in Abkhazia, as innumerable fact-finding missions and invitations to meetings have exhausted key local partners. The small size of the groups involved in these activities has sometimes left them politically vulnerable and prone to accusations that they are detached from society at large, pawns of their governments or subject to government pressure.

The structure of meetings has been another sensitive issue. At times Abkhaz have refused to participate in bilateral meetings, as if these symbolize acceptance of status within Georgia, and have been keen to add a regional, Caucasian dimension. This has pros and cons. It has meant that contact has been sustained in broader forums when it might otherwise have dwindled and has provided solidarity for the Abkhaz. While regional integration and comparison with other Caucasian conflicts undoubtedly has a bearing on how a final resolution might be achieved, there is, nevertheless, a concern that regional meetings dilute discussion of the hard issues of political status and IDP return.

Confidentiality is also sensitive. Participants might be inclined to explore more radical ideas in confidential meetings, but there is less scope for discussions to filter back into the public domain. Unlike politicians, those who participate in meetings on their own account are often cautious because, although they have no mandate, they are often considered to be representing the wider community.
Co-ordinating efforts

The number of overlapping civic peace initiatives calls for co-ordination or information sharing between the actors involved. However, such efforts face challenges of competition for funding, prestige and contacts; concerns about confidentiality; differences (to the point of contradictions) in approach, politics, analysis, and underlying theories; poor personal relations; and lack of resources to undertake explicit co-ordination.

Nevertheless, there is surprisingly effective ad hoc co-ordination of international efforts. UNV has informally kept other actors abreast of initiatives and jointly thought through intervention strategies with INGOs. There have been several meetings and increasingly frequent communication between those INGOs engaged in long-term Georgian–Abkhaz conflict resolution processes. In addition, Georgians and Abkhaz inform internationals about ongoing initiatives as they participate in multiple processes.

Evaluating civic peace initiatives

Civic peace initiatives should be evaluated through an examination of their relationship to and impact on first-track processes and society at large. While on a political level the UN has at times shown a benign wariness of INGO attempts to facilitate meetings, it has provided logistical support and frequent briefings. UNOCHA and UNV have gone further. The former provides a mail service between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. The latter, prompted by its field co-ordinator from 1996 to 1999, Martin Schürer, has funded and participated in an array of confidence and capacity-building activities involving local and international INGOs. Almost assuming a second-track character itself, UNV has created links between INGOs and other UN agencies. While INGOs benefit from these links they have rarely engaged the UN in structured discussions about the effectiveness of peacemaking strategies.

INGOs have made considerable efforts to establish relations with government representatives and politicians on both sides. Individual meetings outside the framework of dialogue or confidence-building initiatives also have an impact. This is particularly so in Abkhazia where opportunities to discuss issues are rarer due to travel constraints.

Attempts by INGOs to address the role of Russia in the peace process, however, have been rarer. This reflects the fact that Russia is generally seen as a grey figure lurking in the background. Russian NGOs have not found a role for themselves, stifled by perceptions of partiality, especially from the Georgian side.
It is more difficult to ascertain the extent to which ideas feed into official negotiations. Two examples indicate ways in which there might be cross-fertilization. Confidence building, previously promoted only by civic initiatives, assumed a more important role in the official negotiation process as a result of meetings organized "to strengthen mutual trust." Under the auspices of the UN and with assistance from the Greek and Turkish governments, delegations of businessmen, journalists, politicians and members of the cultural elite met in Athens in October 1998 and in Istanbul in June 1999. On the one hand, these confidence-building meetings aimed at rebuilding relationships, as many NGO initiatives have tried to do. On the other hand, the presence of high-level officials created opportunities for informal negotiations, covering both political and socio-economic problems as well as issues such as the exchange of newspapers and television news bulletins.

As early as 1996 civic initiatives openly dealt with economic co-operation, development and the impact of the blockade on the Abkhaz preparedness to negotiate constructively. While these issues were not on the official negotiating table, there was minimal public discussion of them at that time. After a joint meeting in early 1997 Georgian participants called for economic incentives as a way forward, but they were heavily criticized. Yet by the end of the year, one of the three working groups of the newly established Co-ordinating Council was on socio-economic development. Subsequently, a UNDP Needs Assessment Mission promoted this as possibly the most promising area for progress. It is difficult to establish a causal relationship, but it was not insignificant that civic constituencies were prepared to raise the issues publicly, especially in Georgia.

The influence of civic peace initiatives on society at large is more difficult to ascertain. By their very nature civic initiatives imply an autonomy of action that was absent under Soviet authoritarianism. Western governments and NGOs have emphasized the development of civil society, however ill defined, as an antidote to ethnic nationalism and an aid to democratization. Civic peace initiatives bolster this process. Nascent NGOs have increasingly addressed conflict-related issues, attempting to widen discussions on matters of resolution and develop civic bodies as a means to create a social readiness for settlement. This does not necessarily mean that non-political actors are more open to compromise than political leaders, but it recognizes that settlements not acceptable to the public will be hard to sustain and that peacebuilding has to occur both at the high political level and at the level of society at large, at the same time. The lack of public debate about progress in or constraints on the negotiation process suggests that politicians and civil society are divorced from one another. Leaders have been

An Abkhaz view

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The motive behind NGO meetings is the promotion of dialogue as an alternative to violence though many in Abkhaz society believe that the Georgian hidden agenda behind such initiatives is an attempt to reconstruct a common state through efforts at a different level. As Abkhazia has not been recognized as a state this is perceived as particularly dangerous for Abkhaz aspirations. This explains the greater enthusiasm among Georgians for bilateral co-operation and why Abkhaz NGOs have tried to change the format of meetings to include wider Caucasian representation. Bilateral contacts have tended to focus on specific issues such as Black Sea pollution, the search for missing people or the role of civic initiatives. Practical results have been modest but relationships have been built. The greatest achievement to date has been the realization on both sides that there is an opportunity to develop a more realistic idea of each other’s concerns and that dialogue, with social groups as well as elites, is the best way of achieving peace and stability in the region.
reluctant to mobilize support for compromise, fearing that people would not be receptive. Therefore, NGOs and social movements play a crucial role trying to bridge this gap and stimulate dialogue within as well as between communities shaken and fragmented by violence.

It is quite likely that despite all their efforts local and international civic groups are not directly influencing prospective peace accords that are being negotiated by political leaders and diplomats. After all, settlement seems a long way off and in neither Georgia nor Abkhazia are there strong peace constituencies. This makes it difficult to turn war fatigue into a desire for peace and reconciliation, but the work of local and international NGOs is both empowering and challenging people to become more engaged in processes of social change. If civic actors can promote a long-term programme of ongoing analysis of the fundamental issues and root causes of the conflict, this could help to bring about necessary political change and influence the choices societies make.

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