

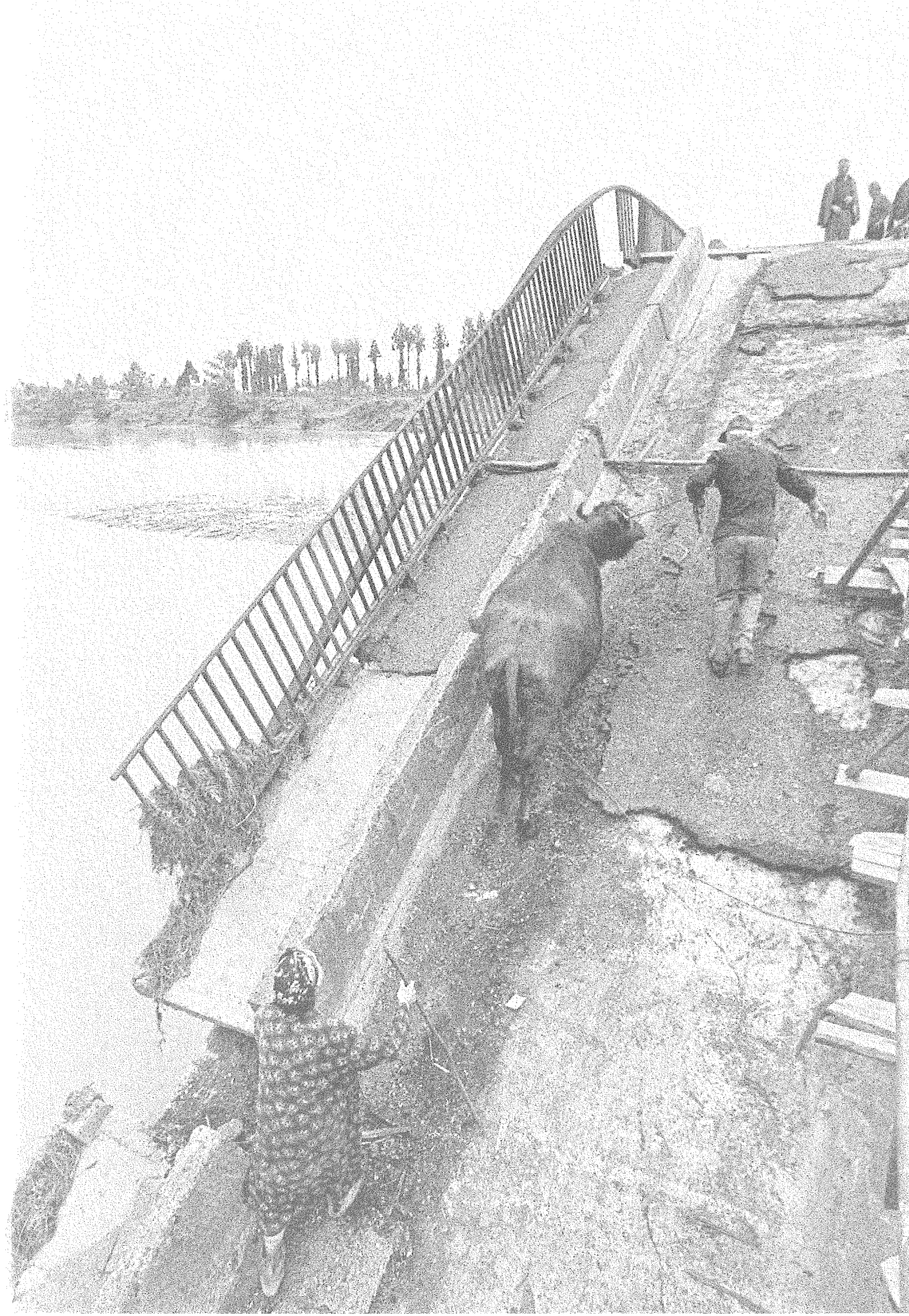
Introduction

Trapped between war and peace

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Jonathan Cohen is a Programme Associate of Conciliation Resources. Previously he was Deputy Director of the Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations in The Hague, working with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. In conjunction with the Berghof Centre and UNV he has facilitated a number of training and dialogue meetings with participants from the Caucasus.

The collapse of the Soviet Union generated instability throughout the Caucasus and rapidly undermined established political structures and economic practices. Long suppressed aspirations were unleashed and, more than any other of the newly independent states that arose from the debris of the Soviet Union, Georgia became the location of a series of violent conflicts. The conflict over Abkhazia has proved the most intractable of these. An unstable stalemate has marked relations between Abkhazia and Georgia since a ceasefire in May 1994 formally brought an end to the thirteen-month war of 1992–93. Negotiations have oscillated between dialogue and deadlock, punctuated by periods of heightened tension, which in May 1998 almost resulted in full-scale military conflagration. A framework agreement was signed early in the peace process, but it has been subject to conflicting interpretations. Subsequent exchanges of draft proposals and counter-proposals have rarely been able to address the fundamental issues separating the sides. While Georgia and Abkhazia are not inclined towards a renewal of war the efforts of international organizations, individual states and non-governmental organizations have failed to shift the process towards resolution. There is little common ground for a resolution of the underlying conflict on the political status of Abkhazia. The Abkhaz demand sovereignty; Georgia is prepared to grant autonomy within an asymmetric federation. Georgia requires the safe return of people displaced by the conflict before the issue of Abkhazia's status can be resolved; the Abkhaz authorities demand the determination of the political and legal status of Abkhazia before the issue of the displaced can be resolved, fearing that large-scale repatriation would leave the Abkhaz in a minority within Abkhazia.



This issue of *Accord* explores the context in which negotiations have taken place, the needs and fears of Georgians and Abkhaz and the way in which different actors have intervened. The key texts, reproduced here, reveal a negotiation process that has grappled with the conflicting interests and visions of Georgians and Abkhaz. The texts also display the complexity of negotiations conducted under the auspices of the UN but with the very active involvement of a regional power, the Russian Federation, which has had an ambiguous involvement in the generation of the conflict and as a mediator. The setbacks encountered suggest that sustainable peace requires far more than a political settlement. Economic reconstruction, social and political justice, demilitarization and the realization of security, reconciliation and the healing of traumatized societies are also vital. These issues are difficult to pin down, especially when the mistrust the parties have for the long-term intentions of the other undermines the search for political accommodation.

Challenges ahead

The psychological and political inheritance of the Soviet period as well as the war exert a powerful grip on the peace process. If sustainable peace is to emerge from the cycle of violence a number of contentious issues will have to be tackled. Whether Georgians and Abkhaz can be convinced that they have not lost what they fought for or that security priorities are not compromised is questionable. But this will be critical to the achievement of a settlement that is not short-lived.

Conflicting perceptions of territorial integrity and self-determination bedevil the negotiations process. Confederal, federal and autonomy-based solutions have been proposed, but the long-term implications for political and financial accountability, social policy, policing and foreign policy have been left unclear. If popular respect for politicians and thus confidence in an official peace process is to be strengthened governance at central and local levels will have to be rethought.

The peace process has by and large been the preserve of the political elite, yet marginalizing the public from the process is dangerous. Communities have been in turn mobilized by war and rendered passive by the socio-economic burdens of transition. As a result they may not be ready to compromise or abandon animosities cultivated by the media and nationalistic political leaders. However, engaging the public in the peace process is difficult when government structures and civil society remain weak. Abkhaz fear of cultural extinction and Georgian concerns about political disintegration and Russian interference make leaders cautious about compromise. As long as vocal groups on both sides harbour aspirations of victory compromise will be difficult

to achieve. Nevertheless, policies based on ethnic inclusiveness and political openness would help to foster long-term stability by channelling conflict into politics and away from violence.

Justice and reconciliation

Conflicting perceptions of justice in terms of history, atrocities committed during the war and the needs of marginalized and displaced people make compromise difficult. Finding ways to process the past that will lead to mutual understanding rather than recrimination will not be easy. To date political leaders have not been inclined to promote reconciliation. Whether this is a question of conviction or an attempt to balance competing internal constituencies is difficult to discern. The association of justice with vengeance does not help. Neither does the fact that holding the perpetrators of wartime atrocities to account will be costly in political and financial terms.

Expectations are influenced by hopes that peace and development can be delivered by external actors – by the UN, Russia, the United States or even NATO. Yet intervention to date has stabilized the conflict but not moved it towards resolution. At best intervention will create conditions that are conducive to the parties themselves reaching an accord. The transportation of oil from the Caspian basin is another external factor that will lubricate change. This will inevitably bring more benefits to some than to others and the possibility of further conflict as well as development. The scope for political manoeuvre is limited by the fact that there is no decisive peace dividend. Demands on international aid to promote reconstruction will be considerable and will have to be met in a complex and unstable regional context.

Politicians and their constituencies on both sides need to engage more thoroughly with the challenge of democratization, economic co-operation and new political relationships as a real incentive for different communities to live together. However, the existence of vested interests that might not benefit from peace, the psychological heritage of separation that is accumulating and the lack of sufficiently strong peace constituencies make it difficult to turn war fatigue into peace hunger.

Note on spelling

Abkhaz and Georgians spell a number of place names differently. For example, where the Abkhaz use Sukhum, Gal and Ingur, the Georgians use Sukhumi, Gali and Inguri. In the article by Liana Kvarchelia Abkhaz spelling is used, otherwise spellings that are normally employed in international discourse on Georgia are used. This is done without taking a position on the underlying political debates concerning language usage.