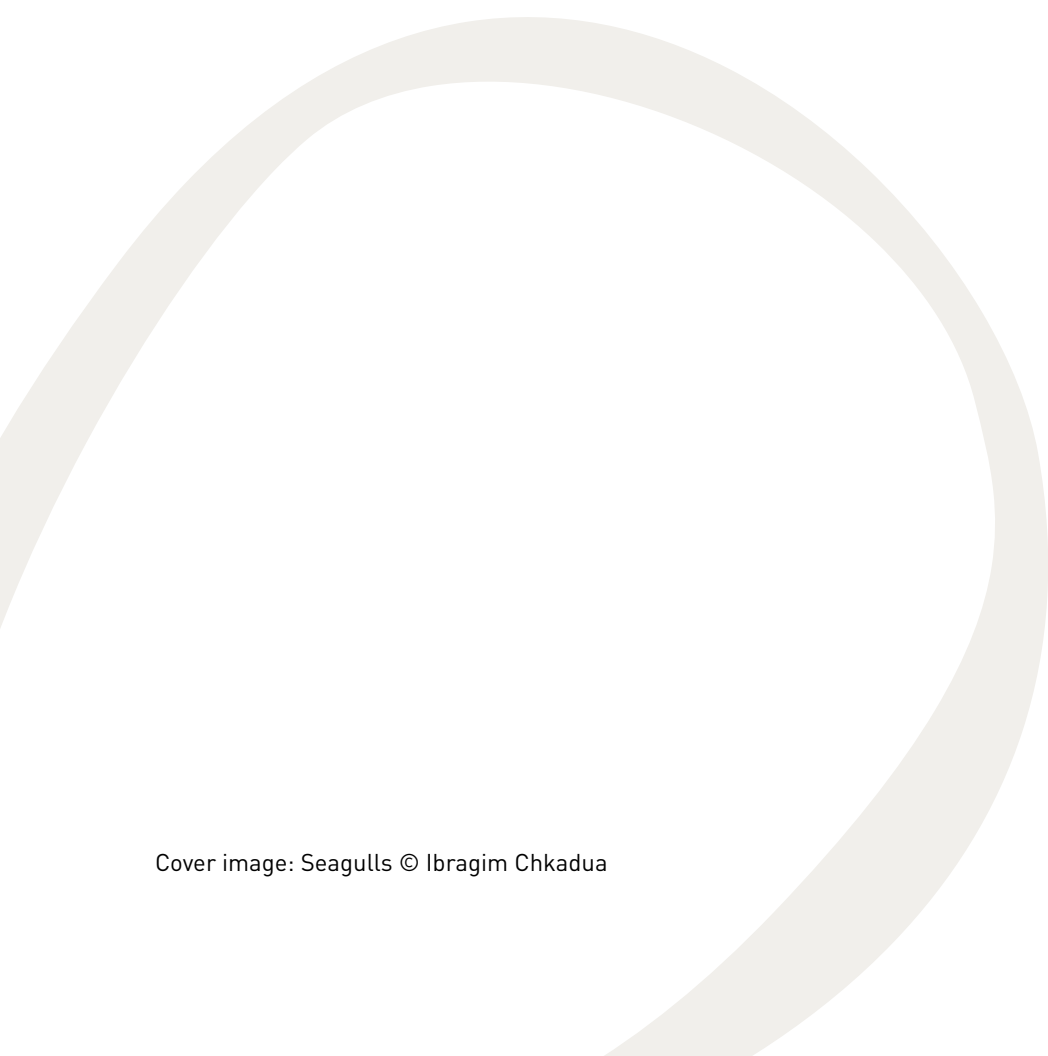




Georgian findings

Paths to Peace?

A survey of public attitudes towards potential transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict



Cover image: Seagulls © Ibragim Chkadua

Preface

In summer 2013, research was conducted on both sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict into public attitudes towards a range of potential steps that could contribute to transforming the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

The idea to conduct this research arose out of a process of cross-conflict exchange and dialogue, facilitated by Conciliation Resources and its partners. One of the key topics that emerged in the dialogue was the overall lack of progress in the peace process. It was seen as a challenge to introduce even small changes in policy or behaviour, which was clearly hampering prospects for development and for building more constructive relationships in future. Some participants in the dialogue often referenced public opinion in trying to explain the lack of progress – attitudes held by the general public were an obstacle, holding back attempts by officials and decision-makers to make bolder moves.

Having identified this tendency in the dialogue process, we decided to test our assumptions, and to enquire through a process of focus group discussions and interviews about the opinions of a range of people on both sides of the conflict. What do people really think, what hopes and fears do they have, and to what extent are predominant attitudes in the societies presenting an obstacle to moving forward? How broad is the range of opinions that exist in society, and how have they changed in relation to a dynamic and changing political context? Can we be sure that we are not basing the discussions in our dialogue processes on attitudes that are already out of date, that we are not missing the nuance in the debate within the societies?

Conciliation Resources' local partners decided to conduct the research in parallel so that we could compare the results together, and explore to what extent opinions on either side of the conflict converge or diverge. The research teams agreed focal areas for the research, though questions were formulated separately, as appropriate to the distinct contexts. We focused on themes that arose frequently over the course of the dialogue. What are the obstacles cited as standing in the way of change? What are the possible steps that people see as desirable or feasible? We wanted the results of the research to help us to understand which areas may be the most appropriate for taking first steps and to



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understand better the areas that are better left for a later stage in the process. We wanted to see whether there was common interest in making changes in some specific areas: which are the issues where interests overlap? On which issues are sides too far apart for the dialogue to lead to tangible result at this point?

Participation in the research provided an opportunity for people to structure their thoughts on the conflict. The topic is rarely discussed on either side of the conflict with a view to finding practical and constructive ways forward. Discussions in the focus groups provoked serious thought on the issue, and encouraged people to think creatively about what might be possible and whether change could indeed be achieved. For many, the assumption is that nothing can be done. Daily life has adopted a pattern that is now habitual and that makes it hard for people even to imagine that it could look very different if the conflict were resolved. Taking part in the research began to open up possibilities, giving people a sense that in fact some steps can be taken at this point in time, and that these might

shift the dynamic in a more constructive direction. On the Georgian side, at the time the research was conducted in 2012, this was aided by the relatively recent change in government, which gave some people in society a sense that a new approach to the conflicts may be possible. Looking back at this period now that parliamentary elections have again taken place in Georgia in October 2016, some today speak of yet another political cycle of missed opportunities; others recognise the small but sometimes significant steps that were made, despite an unstable political context, that proved more problematic to navigate than many had perhaps expected.

The broader context for the research was predominantly an overwhelming feeling on both sides of the conflict that so much time has passed, and so many opportunities have been missed, that it is hard to envisage what change is possible. The outcomes of the research, in light of this, were surprising and participants in the dialogue had mixed responses to the results. Some questioned the findings, and different participants drew different conclusions as to which issues emerged as priorities.

In one dialogue session in 2014, Georgian and Abkhaz participants were asked to place issues that had been explored in the research on a grid. They placed the issues according to their potential to build confidence across the conflict divide on the one hand, and the degree to which they might be contested or controversial, on the other. Although this exercise proved extremely challenging and frustrating for some, eventually the groups managed to identify a clearer picture of issues that had the potential to build trust and lead to long-term peace, and that could be prioritised in terms of practical action and advocacy.

The research challenged the apparent reluctance at the political level to pursue changes, and take creative steps. Some dialogue participants had held the view that resistance among the wider populations was holding back initiatives and action at the political level. Others were of the view that the governments were lagging behind their populations in terms of readiness for bold steps. The research provoked intense debate, and challenged some of our assumptions. Overall, it demonstrated a degree of readiness among some groups in the societies to resolve certain issues and to settle practical, concrete questions, even in the absence of any progress toward political settlement.

Most participants identified three areas with fairly high potential for confidence building and transforming the conflict in a positive way where progress would be achievable in the short term:

- Access for Abkhaz (students) to education abroad;
- Facilitate international engagement to support development in Abkhazia.
- (Re-)establish bilateral formats for discussion and/or contacts among Georgian and Abkhaz officials.

Additional issues were also categorized as 'less contested', but opinions differed with regard to the potential impact on trust and overall conflict dynamics. A number of them require further clarification:

- Restoration of the Abkhaz archive was perhaps seen as the least contested action point of all. However, while the Abkhaz felt it would have significant impact in terms of peacebuilding, some within the Georgian group were more sceptical;
- Both groups thought it would be possible to come to some agreement over co-operation on issues of security in the Gal/i region. But the Georgians tended to give this higher priority in terms of confidence building than the Abkhaz;
- The Abkhaz group pointed out the significance of granting UNESCO access to Abkhazia in the broader context of preservation of cultural heritage and building trust. Some Georgian participants felt they needed more clarification what this type of work may look like in concrete terms;
- Similarly, both groups could imagine that symbolic steps could be taken to address or acknowledge grievances of the war. However, this area requires further elaboration and needs to be fleshed out with more concrete ideas.

Three issues were discussed as potentially having a fairly high impact on confidence between Georgians and Abkhaz and creating long-term stability, but participants acknowledged it would be difficult to move forward on them in the current political climate:

- Official recognition of Abkhazia as a party to the conflict;
- Drafting and signing an agreement on non-use of force;

- Finding an agreed definition of the status of Gal/i residents and officially recognizing the fact of return.

Although the field research was conducted in 2013 and the joint conclusions were drawn in 2014, we feel that the findings remain relevant, and have decided to bring them to the attention of a wider circle of people. The protracted nature of the conflict, and the apparent lack of progress can result in pessimism regarding prospects for change. Indeed, even the positive steps that are being taken are not always given the credit they deserve. The Georgian government's cessation of subversive activity in the Gal/i region in recent years, for example, or the demonstration of

good will on the part of the Abkhaz, when they agreed to release Georgian prisoners in 2016 as a result of negotiations, were largely overlooked by both societies. We hope that research such as this can help to overcome the sense of inertia surrounding the conflict, and contribute to a more objective assessment of what is being done and can be done.

The main conclusion we draw is that there is an agenda for an on-going cross-conflict dialogue, and there are things that can be discussed, and bolder steps that could be taken, in order to make real progress.

The full reports are available on our website: www.c-r.org/resources/paths-to-peace

Research methodology

We conducted qualitative research with a relatively small sample audience. We wanted to explore the main tendencies in the initial responses that people had to particular suggestions. We wanted to get a feel for the kind of issues that emerge from a focused discussion of the conflicts with a roughly representative, or at least varied, selection of people.

Respondents were selected in relation to the specificity of the contexts on either side of the conflict. On the Abkhaz side, 20 interviews and 4 focus groups were conducted, making a total of 48 respondents. On the Georgian side, 20 interviews and 7 focus groups were conducted in different regions, making a total of 83 respondents. People interviewed or participating in focus groups included public figures and policymakers, representatives of the authorities and of political opposition, experts and researchers, journalists, civic activists,

NGO representatives, unemployed people, and displaced people and youth.

On the Georgian side, because of the fundamental recent changes in political life in Georgia at the time the research was conducted, respondents fell more or less into two camps – those in favour of or in opposition to the new regime. On the Abkhaz side, the conflict, and the question of relations with Georgia, was a contentious subject to raise. Many people continue to be highly distrustful and people's responses to the request to participate varied. Some were cautious about engaging with questions about how to improve the relationship with Georgia for fear this was misunderstood as a betrayal of the Abkhaz interest, others were of the opinion that it is so unlikely that constructive steps could be taken there is nothing more to say on the issue. As a result, fewer, and less diverse, respondents took part.

The analysis and conclusions drawn by partners who led on the research on either side of the conflict are theirs, and do not necessarily reflect discussions in our dialogue meetings, or the views and opinions of Conciliation Resources or the publications' donors.

Since this publication highlights the perspectives of Georgian interlocutors, Georgian terminology has been used, including for place names. The preface, written by Conciliation Resources, uses wording that reflects the contested nature of this terminology.

Survey results

Tbilisi, 2013

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Fishermen in Batumi © Lika Lezhava

Introduction

In the summer of 2013, Conciliation Resources' partner organisations in Georgia conducted a qualitative sociological survey in Tbilisi and three Georgian regions (Adjara, Kakheti and Samegrelo), using in-depth interviews and focus groups.

The main objective of the survey was to identify those areas and issues in which the conflicting parties could undertake tangible confidence-building measures. Namely, to establish specific steps which, in the opinion of Georgian society, could be implemented at this stage without addressing the key political issues (independence for Abkhazia and restoring territorial integrity for Georgia), and which could contribute to the parties' rapprochement.

The survey also aimed to examine Georgian society's attitudes and, following on from the Georgian parliamentary elections of October 2012, potential opportunities for conflict transformation in the new political context. After its election defeat, the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party led by President Mikheil Saakashvili ceded power to the Georgian Dream Coalition (GD) of Bidzina Ivanishvili and went into opposition. A new government, formed by GD, came to power while the UNM nonetheless retained influence with certain segments of society. At the time of the survey, some UNM supporters and activists still held influential positions in national and local government institutions. The presence of these political forces in society is reflected in the composition of survey respondents and in the analysis of the results.

Altogether the survey engaged 83 respondents in 20 interviews (6 women, 14 men) and 7 focus group discussions involving 63 participants (41 women, 22 men).

The respondents fall roughly into the following categories:

1. UNM representatives and supporters (current and former government officials; Members of Parliament)
2. Representatives and supporters of the GD coalition (current government officials; Members of Parliament)
3. Experts/analysts/researchers
4. Journalists
5. NGO representatives
6. Internally displaced persons (IDP)/ Members of the 'Synergy' IDP network
7. Young people – participants in the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue initiative; activists from various political forces; students of the Social and Political Sciences Department of Tbilisi State University (TSU)
8. Unaffiliated people, both from a variety of professions and unemployed

Within each survey topic, the views of the GD coalition and the UNM representatives are presented first, as they are currently the main political protagonists in Georgia, representing the parliamentary majority and minority. As can be seen from the survey, the remaining respondents often share their opinions and offer similar arguments. Some of the respondents in the 'experts/analysts/researchers', 'journalists' and 'NGO representatives' categories made no secret of their sympathy for the GD or the UNM, or were associated with them in the public mind; for that reason they have sometimes been grouped alongside them within the general categories of the GD or the UNM supporters.

1. The new Georgian government and new opportunities for conflict resolution

Respondents were asked the following questions:

- Do the new government and the new ruling political force have any new approaches to conflict resolution, as distinct from the previous authorities?
- Have new opportunities arisen to facilitate communication and dialogue between the conflicting parties without first addressing the key political issues of Abkhazia's status and Georgia's territorial integrity?

By and large, the majority of respondents think that the new government is demonstrating a new approach to conflict resolution, which has opened up new opportunities for addressing some of each sides' major concerns, though without discussing the key political issues of status and territorial integrity. Respondents thought official rhetoric with regard to Russia and the parties to the conflict has changed noticeably. On the whole, UNM representatives and their supporters negatively assess the new government's policies, while GD representatives and supporters assess them positively. A positive attitude to the policies of the new government predominated among other categories of respondents.

In the view of the **UNM representatives and supporters**, the new government's rhetoric has become less confrontational and more conciliatory, but they do not see this as a factor that could improve relations between the parties. The UNM representatives said the difference in approach between the old and new leadership is purely 'cosmetic'. They emphasised that in their election manifesto, GD leaders had promised to revise the Law on the Occupied Territories and recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict, *"but after coming to power, they quickly realised that it is hardly possible in conditions of on-going occupation to recognise them as parties to the conflict, and therefore prefer not to talk about it any longer."* (Former high-ranking government official, UNM, Tbilisi)

The UNM representatives said the government softening its stance on Abkhazia, South

Ossetia and Russia is a mistake and will not yield positive results. Only a few individual UNM representatives rated as positive the government's recent steps to start a direct dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but they were certain that they are *"doomed to failure, since it is Russia that has the final word on the conflict."* (Former government official, UNM, interview, Tbilisi)

They also criticise the government for its clear aspiration to downplay the negative role of the Russian factor in the conflict. *"It is, essentially, a Russian-Georgian conflict. There are no Georgian-Abkhaz or Georgian-Ossetian conflicts. The war was instigated by Russia."* (UNM Member of Parliament, interview, Tbilisi)

Some UNM representatives equated that approach with a betrayal of Georgia's national interests.

The views expressed by **experts, analysts and journalists who openly support, or are associated in the public mind with the UNM** were not much different from those of the UNM representatives themselves. In their words, *"the new government does not have any clear-cut conflict resolution strategy, other than their declared willingness to enter into a direct dialogue with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia."* (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

One of the pro-UNM experts emphasised that, *"the new authorities have only one single 'asset' they can use to achieve a degree of success in the peace process – the fact that they played no part in the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia."* (Expert, interview, Tbilisi)

The analysts admitted that the new government has toned down its rhetoric, although they still consider Russia an occupying power that invaded Georgian territories. Their opinion was that if one were to believe the government's rhetoric, it may have drafted new approaches to improving relations – firstly with Russia, and secondly with Abkhazia and South Ossetia – but these approaches do not go beyond declarations of intent. Yet while some positive tendencies can be perceived in Russian-Georgian relations (for example, the export of Georgian produce to Russia has resumed), nothing has changed in relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.



Signposts in Tbilisi © Lika Lejava

The GD representatives and supporters

offered a completely different interpretation of the same issues. Unlike the UNM supporters, they consider the change of rhetoric to be an important factor for successfully establishing relations with the other conflict party. They positively rate the readiness of the new leadership to engage in a direct dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and to establish relations with Russia. *“The new government is ready to sit down at the negotiating table with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and discuss issues that are of primary importance to them – for instance, freedom of movement, recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict, etc.”* (Member of the Supreme Council of Adjara, GD coalition member, interview)

Other categories of respondents (**journalists, experts, analysts and researchers, IDPs, young people**) who support the change of regime in the country generally share the views of the GD representatives on questions of conflict resolution.

According to journalists and also **young people**, the new authorities have serious potential for resolving conflicts peacefully, and they view them as according greater importance to the human

factor and human rights than to territory. These groups interpret the government’s rhetoric as a complete renunciation of the use of force to solve the conflict. From this viewpoint the novelty of their approach lies in the fact that they are looking for a solution not just in the West, but in a direct dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while taking into account Russia and its interests. These groups regard the policy as having already borne fruit – for instance, the security requirements for crossing the administrative border with Gali have been simplified.

The majority of members of the IDP network ‘Synergy’ and other IDPs from Abkhazia

participating in the survey agreed that the new political reality has contributed to a rapprochement of the parties. In this group, the policy of rapprochement with Russia, the attempt to establish direct bilateral contacts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the end to hostile rhetoric directed at Russia, and the unambiguous renunciation of the use of force to resolve the conflict inspire hope that the new authorities will succeed in creating *“new opportunities for a dialogue between the sides and new mutually beneficial initiatives.”* (IDP from Abkhazia, Tbilisi, interview)

The young people, like many other respondents, held the view that the Saakashvili government has totally forfeited the trust of the Georgian and Abkhaz people. They also think that at the current stage, discussion of status and territory should be postponed to focus on the everyday problems of ordinary people on both sides of the conflict divide.

At the same time, a small group of respondents were sceptical about the new government's ability to resolve the frozen conflicts – there were more sceptics in the categories of unaffiliated citizens, regional NGO representatives, and journalists from central and regional media than among young people and GD supporters. They doubt the government has a concrete strategy and do not believe it will achieve positive results; on the contrary, they fear that the new government's policies could even exacerbate the situation.

Several respondents drew attention to the prevailing mood in Abkhaz society: *“Abkhazia’s reaction has been cautious and low-key so far, as it expects the new Georgian government to continue the old policy with only a few minor changes – there will be ‘carrots’ instead of ‘sticks’. People in Abkhazia understand that Georgian society as a whole is not ready for radical change. But the Abkhaz side, too, is not yet ready for positive reciprocal steps in the event of progressive moves, meaning there is no readiness for mutual compromises. For that reason, it is crucial to work on the kind of proposals that would help to shift to one side the issue of recognition and territorial integrity, and focus instead on social and economic projects beneficial for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which would be to Georgia’s advantage as well.”* (IDP from Abkhazia, Tbilisi, interview)

2. Recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict/ bilateral talks

The respondents differed considerably in their answers to these questions, but the majority (GD representatives and supporters, and a majority of the respondents in other categories) spoke out in favour of a bilateral dialogue and recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict. The UNM supporters opposed this idea, arguing that recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict is tantamount to recognising their independence, and only Russia would benefit from this.

In the course of the survey, respondents were asked to assess whether it would be expedient for Georgia to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict and start a direct bilateral dialogue with them. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have long insisted on such recognition, but the former government refused to agree to it, considering it not to Georgia's advantage politically. These issues were discussed with respondents in the context of the following questions:

To what extent can recognition and bilateral dialogue contribute to a rapprochement between the sides and restoring trust between them?

To what extent is this to the advantage or disadvantage of the Georgian and Abkhaz sides?

The majority of **the UNM representatives and supporters** felt recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict would not contribute in any way to a rapprochement. In their opinion Georgia fought a war with Russia, not with Abkhazia or South Ossetia; therefore, only Russia can be considered a party to the conflict.

“Russia is referred to as an occupying country in all the documents adopted since the 2008 war. For that reason there are no grounds for considering the territories it occupied as parties to the conflict – they are simply Georgia’s occupied territories.” (Former high-ranking government official, UNM member, Tbilisi)

“It is not in Georgia’s interest to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict, because doing so would play down Russia’s negative role in the conflict.” (UNM member, Adjara)

“Recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict would mean recognising their statehood and give legitimacy to their claims to independence. This in fact is exactly what the Abkhaz are striving for.” (Expert, Tbilisi)

The **GD representatives and supporters** (with a very few exceptions) positively assessed the idea of recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict, as it would facilitate dialogue and rapprochement, to the benefit of all parties. They stressed that recognising Abkhazia

and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict is not in any way equal to recognising their independence. Several of them called for “not shutting one’s eyes to the fact that the war was between the Abkhaz and the Georgians”.

“It is crucial to engage in direct talks with Abkhazia; direct contact with Abkhazia will reduce Russia’s influence. Besides, by constantly blaming Russia and ignoring Abkhazia or even calling it ‘Russia’s puppet’, we are insulting the Abkhaz people, and demonstrate that we do not take them into account.” (GD Member of the Supreme Council of Adjara)

“In order to start talks with Abkhazia on issues that are important to us, Georgia should make this concession and recognise Abkhazia as a party to the conflict – otherwise, nothing will come of it. This should be made clear to Georgian citizens” (GD Member of Parliament, IDP)

Several GD supporters and representatives took a more cautious approach to this issue. In their opinion, it is crucial to think through and come to a clear understanding of what Georgia itself will gain from recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflicts. Besides, such recognition must form part of a comprehensive state strategy on conflict resolution.

Some of the **journalists** and **experts** were inclined to think it is necessary to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict, and that this would not amount to recognition of their independence or contravene international standards and documents. Several respondents linked this issue with the non-use of force agreement:

“It is crucial not just to recognise Abkhazia as a party to the conflict, but also to sign a non-use of force agreement with Abkhazia. That would encourage Abkhazia to distance itself from Russia and from Russian influence, and pave the way for direct talks between Abkhazia and Georgia as equal partners.” (Expert, Tbilisi)

One of the journalists defined the conflict as a ‘bipolar’ confrontation. On the one hand, it is a conflict between Georgia and Russia, which occupied Georgian territories; on the other hand, it is a conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, irrespective of the latter’s official status. Therefore, “it is essential to improve relations with Abkhazia regardless of its legal status, even when Georgia considers it an autonomy... while the Abkhaz themselves

[consider Abkhazia] an independent state. It would even have been possible to recognise Abkhazia’s independence, but that should have been done in the late 1990s, well before Russia recognised it, and strictly on condition that Abkhazia and Georgia move together towards European integration.” (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

The **IDPs** were not unanimous in their views on the issue, either. A considerable number of them, and some of the ‘Synergy’ members, thought that all – Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia alike – would benefit from recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict. This would facilitate rapprochement and strengthen mutual trust, which would enable the sides to structure relations on a completely new basis in line with Western standards. In their opinion, this would make it possible to:

- demolish the popular stereotype in Georgian society that the Abkhaz and the Georgians have no quarrel among themselves – all that is needed is to remove the Russian factor and they will immediately fall into each other’s arms;
- raise Abkhazia’s status at the negotiations to make it feel an equal partner, which Abkhazia has been trying to achieve for many years;
- improve Abkhaz society’s attitude towards Georgia;
- make the negotiating process more effective, as the sides would bear equal responsibility for its outcome;
- convince the international community that the change of government has truly created a new political reality in Georgia.

Another, relatively small group of IDPs suggested that Abkhazia should be recognised only as a party to dialogue, and not to the conflict, since Abkhazia is fully controlled by Moscow, and for that reason it is Russia that is a party to the conflict. Several IDPs pointed out that, “recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict would give Abkhazia greater grounds for considering itself a genuinely independent state.”

Young people, for the most part, were in favour of recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict. It would facilitate dialogue and contribute to conflict transformation. **TSU students** stressed that without mutual compromises the sides will be unable to solve conflict-related problems.

Participants of Georgian-Abkhaz youth dialogue and **young party activists** pointed out that recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict does not mean ignoring that Russia too is a conflict party. As several young participants said, the parties have to be equal in order to establish future relations, transform the conflict, and acknowledge their mistakes.

“It would be wrong to ignore reality and engage in the self-deception that Abkhazia and Georgia were never at war and there are no problems.”
(Georgian-Abkhaz youth dialogue participant, Tbilisi)

Although some young participants thought that recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict is of no use at this stage, they still felt

it was necessary because it would be a positive development that can open the door to future negotiations and relations.

“One of the compromises on Georgia’s part could be recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict. Abkhazia would take some steps in return. Nothing will change if both parties are reluctant to make the first step.” (TSU student, Tbilisi)

The position of ordinary citizens, journalists and representatives of NGOs outside Tbilisi largely coincided with the views cited above. The percentage ratio of those who came out against recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict was higher in this focus group, however, and they claimed that this would amount to recognition of Abkhazia’s independence.

3. Agreement on the non-use of force

The Abkhaz side has repeatedly demanded that Georgia sign an agreement on the non-use of force. Tbilisi’s position on this issue has always been that with regard to Abkhazia, such a document is redundant, as Georgia has no intention of using force to resolve the conflict. At the same time, the Georgian authorities have stressed the need to sign such an agreement with Russia as the country that occupied Georgian territories during the 2008 war.

*intend to use force against Abkhazia”.*¹ In their opinion, Sukhumi’s demand that Georgia sign such an agreement is directed solely towards legitimising its legal status as an independent state. Such an agreement can be signed only with the actual party to the conflict: Russia.

“Signing such an agreement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia would actually destroy the Geneva process framework and would mean denying Russia’s status as the occupying country.”
(Government official, UNM, Tbilisi)

Many respondents linked this problem to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the conflict, adducing similar arguments for and against such an agreement. The ratio of supporters to opponents of an agreement on the non-use of force was approximately the same as in the case of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to conflict. By and large, the majority of the respondents spoke out in favour of Georgia signing such an agreement, although several of them stressed that Georgia should do so only in the event of reciprocal concessions from the Abkhaz side.

The majority of the **GD representatives and supporters and respondents in other categories** agreed with the need to sign such an agreement, believing that it would help improve relations between the parties. A considerable number of the respondents who were certain that such an agreement should be signed stressed that this in no way means recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence. Some respondents, however, thought there is no need to sign such an agreement as the Georgian Parliament has already adopted a relevant resolution.

For the **UNM representatives and supporters**, signing a non-use of force agreement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia was just as unacceptable as recognising them as parties to the conflict. Several of them did not see any need for such a document, because *“Georgia does not*

1. Respondents quoted President Saakashvili’s statement at the European Parliament session on 23 November 2010 that Georgia had unilaterally undertaken never to use force. They also noted that the Medvedev–Sarkozy Ceasefire Agreement requires the parties to refrain from resuming military operations. In addition, the newly elected parliament has adopted a special resolution on the issue.

Supporters of an agreement think it is necessary in any case, even though the Abkhaz authorities and Abkhaz society are convinced that in the new political situation, with Russian troops deployed on Abkhazia's borders and the advent to power in Tbilisi of a new government, Georgia will not resort to force. One of the IDP respondents pointed out that, *"the non-use of force agreement is of paramount importance to Abkhaz society. That is why signing such an agreement would be widely interpreted in Abkhazia as a step by Georgia towards peace"*. Some respondents thought the document should have the status of an international treaty and provide for the imposition of sanctions against any party found to be in breach of its obligations under the agreement.

The journalists and experts stressed once again the importance of the human factor in comparison with the question of territory and political status:

"No territorial integrity is worth people's lives. Once such an agreement is signed, people in Abkhazia and Georgia will feel reassured that there will not be [another] war. Of course the danger will remain that the treaty will be violated, but it is better to sign it than for it not to exist at all. For the past 15 years, the Abkhaz people have lived in constant fear of a new war. Even the Russian troops could not guarantee this would not happen. For this reason, it would be best for all the three parties to sign such an agreement."

(Journalist, Tbilisi)

The majority of **young respondents** came out in favour of signing the agreement. **The TSU students** supported the idea almost unanimously, even allowing for the fact that it

may not lead to a final settlement of the conflict. For them, the most important thing is to ensure that Abkhazia and Georgia never go to war with each other again. The main message of the document is that "there is no alternative to peace," and that there should not be a repeat of the war. Besides, the respondents said, by taking this step Georgia would improve its rating in the eyes of the Abkhaz public and the international community, and lay the foundation for future contacts and solving common problems.

Some participants of the **Georgian-Abkhaz youth dialogue** and **young political activists** were more cautious in their approach than the TSU students. They focused attention on the legal aspects of the problem. They said the new Parliament's resolution, which is aimed at preventing a resumption of hostilities, makes any other document on the subject redundant from a legal viewpoint. Moreover, it remains unclear who should sign the document and how the status of the signatories should be determined.

A relatively small number of the **respondents in almost every category** suggested that Georgia should agree to sign such a document only in return for a reciprocal concession from Abkhazia, for instance, the return of IDPs. Several respondents stressed the text of the treaty should be drafted in such a way that it does not imply recognition of Abkhazia's independence.

A small number of respondents argued against such an agreement, pointing out that Georgia fought a war with Russia, not Abkhazia. Besides, signing such an agreement would be tantamount to recognising Abkhazia's independence. Furthermore, Georgian society is not yet ready for such a step.

4. Transfer of archive materials to Abkhazia

The majority of respondents were in favour of handing over these archive materials and documents to Abkhazia in the belief that this would help rebuild trust. Almost all similarly agreed that Georgia should also help to restore the destroyed Abkhaz archives. Several thought that Georgia should formally apologise for the burning of the Sukhumi archives. Only a small number of respondents said that Georgia should only agree to hand over archival materials in exchange for reciprocal steps by Abkhazia.

The survey asked whether Georgia should help Abkhazia rebuild its archives which were destroyed in a fire during the 1992–93 war, and hand over copies of all historical records and other documentary materials on Abkhazia that are stored in Georgia's repositories.

Most of the **UNM representatives and supporters** backed the idea, which they considered a humanitarian issue. They were sure that it would contribute to a rapprochement between the sides. Several of them specified, however, that documents that could be used against Georgia's or the IDPs' interests, or to incite a new conflict, should not be handed over.

GD representatives and supporters and respondents in other categories generally thought Georgia should unconditionally hand over to the Abkhaz side copies of all related documents in its possession, and that this would serve as a positive step in establishing relations. Young respondents pointed out that the Abkhaz people have every right to all documents and materials related to their culture and history.

“Abkhazia has a rich culture and history. We must help them fill all the gaps, especially if Georgia is to blame for those gaps. We should hand over to them everything that has been preserved in Georgia.” (Journalist, Tbilisi)

Some respondents specified that, “all archive materials should be handed over, with the exception

of those that contain state secrets or that could be used against Georgia. An ad hoc commission should be created to identify such documents, acting in accordance with Georgian legislation.” (GD activist, interview, Batumi)

Several young respondents suggested that the proposal had nothing to do with classified documents, which the Abkhaz side was not asking for anyway.

A number of respondents felt that in order to improve relations in the future, the Georgian side should apologise for the destruction of the Abkhaz archive during the war. One respondent (a journalist) called for a thorough investigation of the burning of the Sukhumi archive and a proper political and legal evaluation of it.

5. Resumption of rail traffic through Abkhazia

The prospect of resuming rail traffic via Abkhazia has been a periodic topic of discussion in political and social circles in Georgia, as well as in the national media.

The majority of respondents, except for the UNM supporters and representatives, were in favour of the resumption of rail traffic via Abkhazia, although they admitted that it could create certain problems. In each category individual respondents questioned the political and economic benefit for Georgia of such a move. As during the discussion of other possible initiatives, a small number of respondents said that Georgia should demand that both Abkhazia and Russia cede something in return.

Most **UNM representatives and supporters** assessed the proposal to resume rail traffic through Abkhazia negatively. They looked at it largely as a political, rather than an economic issue, which required taking into account the political interests of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and other stakeholders. As a consequence they see no particular benefit from resuming rail traffic: neither for Georgia, nor for transforming the conflict. Opening up rail traffic involves serious risks, and for that reason Georgia should abstain from doing so. They also pointed out that it could negatively impact on Georgia’s pro-Western course. Besides, the majority thought Abkhazia’s participation in the project could be interpreted as recognition of its independence.

On the whole, **GD representatives and supporters and other respondents** were in favour of the resumption of rail traffic via Abkhazia, arguing that it would facilitate rapprochement between the sides and contribute to their economic development, and would do more good than harm. They thought all the potential problems and dangers adduced by opponents of the proposal could be resolved through negotiations.

“Of course, many factors – political, economic, social and psychological – must be taken into account. But all this can be monitored, and all the problems can be solved. For instance, one of the major concerns is who would control the customs checkpoint at the Psou River, on the Russian-Georgian border in Abkhazia. This problem can be resolved through negotiations in which international organisations could participate. I fully support the resumption of rail traffic.”

(GD representative, interview, Adjara)

The **journalists and experts** backed the initiative, noting that Georgia should use all its transport, cultural and economic resources to build more trustful relations with Abkhazia.

“The more intensive the volume of traffic, the more contacts and the more chances for development.”

(Expert, interview, Tbilisi)

“This railway would make it possible to shift the focus of the conflict [from the political] to the economic dimension.” (Expert/Psychologist, interview, Tbilisi)



Disused railway tracks in Abkhazia © Ibragim Chkadua

One of the arguments against the resumption was that Russia could use the railway to transport military equipment to Armenia. Supporters countered that argument by asserting that Georgia would be able to monitor freight transit across its territory. Besides, many of them noted that, “it is important for Georgia to develop trade relations with Russia, and the railway could be particularly useful in this respect.” (GD representative, interview, Tbilisi)

The **young respondents** backed the idea of restoring the rail service via Abkhazia, saying that if the Abkhaz side is trying to bring about the opening of the railway, Georgia should meet them halfway and demonstrate that its commitment to the de-isolation of Abkhazia goes beyond mere words. In their view this would strengthen trust between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

Participants in the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue and activists from political party youth wings considered the judicial, political and economic aspects of the issue and discussed its potential positive and negative impacts in greater detail than the students. Several viewed the resumption of rail traffic as a political, not an economic issue. The respondents disagreed over which party would benefit most from the railway. Some believed that Georgia would be the biggest beneficiary; others thought that only Russia and

Armenia would benefit. A third group thought it would contribute to regional security.

“All countries in the region have specific political interests, which clash in some cases, but the railway could facilitate economic integration and bring economic benefits to all. This would create the potential for bridging political differences. Regional economic integration is not in contradiction with Georgia’s pro-Western policy.”
(Socialist Party Member, focus group, Tbilisi)

“I think this project would benefit Georgia both politically and economically.” (Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue participant, focus group, Tbilisi)

Some participants warned against overlooking the negative aspects of regional integration. They said the participation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in integration processes could elevate their political status to a certain extent.

Most of the **IDPs, ordinary residents, journalists and representatives of regional NGOs** unanimously agreed that the resumption of rail traffic would benefit Georgia both politically and economically and help to establish relations with Abkhazia. They said the railway poses no danger to Georgia, provided all potential risks and problems are carefully assessed and the relevant agreement details how traffic will be monitored:

“The railway will facilitate increased people-to-people contacts, and that is an opportunity to rebuild trust. It would offer convenient and affordable services to travel to Russia, Armenia, Abkhazia and elsewhere.” (Unemployed, focus group, Kakheti)

“The resumption of this railway service is vitally important for the populations of Georgia and Abkhazia. Everyone should have the opportunity to move freely. The more such opportunities, the

better for rapprochement between the conflicting parties.” (young person, focus group, Zugdidi)

Several respondents stressed that Georgia should give its consent only if the benefits to the Georgian side from doing so were clearly demonstrated and if it did not mean recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. Only a small number of respondents said they could not see how Georgia would benefit from the railway link.

6. Legalising the use of/ reopening the seaport in Abkhazia

Despite Georgia’s repeated protests, the Sukhumi seaport continues to function, and Turkish and Russian vessels call there regularly. The issue has been raised on numerous occasions in political circles and the mass media in Georgia. During the survey, respondents were asked to assess whether it is expedient to legalise the use of the Sukhumi seaport.

The majority of respondents, including UNM representatives, supported the idea, but some stressed that Georgia should put forward certain conditions for legalising the use of the port.

The UNM representatives and their supporters had mixed opinions on the issue. But compared with other survey topics they took a more positive view of this question. Most of the respondents found the idea acceptable, provided a number of conditions are met. Only a few respondents came out against it. Those in favour said this issue would be easier to solve than the resumption of rail traffic: *“it would be enough for Abkhazia and Georgia to sign a joint memorandum. Besides, the opening of the port would contribute to rapprochement.”* (UNM Member of Parliament)

One UNM representative stated that, *“Georgia should promote Abkhazia’s contacts with the outside world and its participation in international projects, and Abkhazia’s seaport could be one such example. However, opening the seaport is only permissible in the event that its legal status is clearly determined, a treaty signed at the international level, and effective control mechanisms put in place. Russia should not participate in this process.”* (Former senior official under the UNM government)

According to another UNM representative, *“the question of Abkhazia’s seaport, as well as its airport, can be resolved through negotiations. True, this would raise numerous legal issues. For instance, both the seaport and the airport would need an international registration code, which would immediately put on the agenda the issue of Abkhazia’s legal status. International mechanisms would have to be brought into play to safeguard Georgia’s interests.”* (Former senior government official, UNM)

Some UNM opponents of the idea argued that by agreeing to legalise the use of the Sukhumi seaport, Georgia would effectively recognise Abkhazia’s independence. Others noted that although Georgia could use the issue as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with Abkhazia and Russia, it was more likely to lose out than to benefit from the opening of the seaport.

One of the experts noted that, *“this issue is easier to resolve than the railway problem, because in this case Russia will be formally excluded from the process, although in reality it will have the opportunity to participate. Nevertheless, its formal exclusion would still increase the chances of striking a deal directly with Abkhazia. This is why Georgia should make a concession to Abkhazia on this issue, as a sign of goodwill and reconciliation, even though it is unlikely to benefit from this move due to Russia’s behind-the-scenes role”.*

The GD representatives and their supporters, journalists, experts and young people were generally in favour of legalising the use of the Sukhumi seaport, being certain that – just as in the case of the railway – this initiative would help bring the sides closer. At the same time, several of them thought it necessary to analyse all potential risks beforehand, and that Georgia should be able to control the port’s operations.



Harbour © Ibragim Chkadua

“Both Abkhazia and Georgia would reap political and economic dividends from freight transit. If the seaport in Abkhazia contributes to Georgia’s and Abkhazia’s development, it would help to bring the parties closer together and promote contacts.”

(Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

A number of respondents stressed that legalising the use of the port is acceptable only if Georgia’s pro-Western orientation does not suffer as a result. Some of them thought Georgia should agree to the port’s opening only in the event of reciprocal gestures by the Abkhaz side. Only a small number of respondents (including some who favoured the resumption of rail traffic) spoke out against legalising the use of the port, arguing that this would give Abkhazia greater room for manoeuvre and strengthen its claims to independent status.

Those in favour of opening the port thought that, as a focus of mutually beneficial co-operation, it would create favourable grounds for rapprochement between the sides, including with Russia. At the same time, they specified that legalisation would in no way mean abandoning Georgia’s pro-Western orientation.

Individual respondents who categorically supported the idea of legalisation as an important part in an overall de-isolation strategy were even ready to recognise Abkhazia’s independence if this meant that the latter

would become a strong and developed country. Some stressed that since the port is functioning anyway, it is better for Georgia to legitimise this process and participate in it.

“The seaport would undoubtedly facilitate Abkhazia’s development, the development of tourism and the economy, etc. If this helps Abkhazia become a strong and developed country, I would have nothing against that, even if it were an independent state and not a part of Georgia. I think that a strong and independent Abkhazia would eventually be a better neighbour for Georgia than Abkhazia under Moscow’s control.”

(Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

In the opinion of **several younger respondents**, if Georgia is truly not against de-isolating Abkhazia and wants to improve relations with the Abkhaz side, it should agree to open up the port without any preconditions. They said *“it is imperative to stop blockading Abkhazia in any shape or form, Georgia will achieve far more in this way than by confrontation. Abkhazia is lost for Georgia anyway, but taking a step towards building relations could bring positive results”*.

Among those in favour of opening the port several suggested that a new port be built as a joint venture involving several partners. It could become an important transport hub under joint management and a basis for mutually beneficial co-operation:

“A joint seaport, with the participation of Abkhazia, Georgia and international bodies, would preclude a new war. A shared port would be a peace initiative in its own right. Russia’s interests also need to be taken into account, and Russia needs to be invited to join the project. This would have a positive impact on the peace process and co-operation between the sides. The port should be placed under offshore management.” (Expert, interview, Tbilisi)

Although most of the **IDPs** did not seem particularly interested in this question, a considerable number nonetheless came out in favour of legalising the use of the Sukhumi seaport as an important factor in strengthening trust between the sides. Some respondents thought that Georgia should ask for reciprocal concessions from the Abkhaz side in return. Several stressed that the Sukhumi port should allow Georgian ships from Batumi to dock there too, to make it possible for the Georgians to

use its services. Several IDP respondents also proposed organising regular flights from Sukhumi to Kutaisi and Batumi. They said Batumi would be particularly attractive as a destination to residents of Abkhazia, as it would enable them to go on shopping trips and visit relatives in Turkey, and allow the descendants of Abkhaz Mukhadjirs in Syria and Turkey to visit Abkhazia.

The **ordinary residents, journalists and representatives of regional NGOs** were generally cautious about the prospect of legalising the use of the Sukhumi port. Some supported the idea with the caveat that Georgia should consent only if Abkhazia made some concessions in return. Those who opposed opening the port felt it could lead to the recognition of Abkhazia’s independence and that Georgia would be unable to control the port’s operations. Only a small number of respondents advocated opening the port without any preconditions.

7. Freedom of movement

The question of freedom of movement as put to respondents in the course of the survey comprised three main aspects:

- 1. International travel for residents of Abkhazia²**
- 2. The possibility for young people in Abkhazia to study at Western universities**
- 3. Recognition of the Abkhazian passport as internal identity document within Georgia.**

The majority of respondents knew very little about the different aspects of the freedom of movement issue. For instance, they had no idea what kind of identity or travel documents residents of Abkhazia, including those in the Gali region, currently use.

The vast majority of respondents, except for some UNM representatives and supporters, and a few respondents in other categories, agreed that residents of Abkhazia have the right to complete freedom of movement, and young Abkhazians should have the opportunity to study at foreign universities. UNM supporters and some of the respondents in other categories said that as a travel document residents of Abkhazia should use Georgian passports or the so-called neutral passports issued by Georgia. Some proposed the idea of a neutral travel document issued by an international body. Only very few respondents agreed to the prospect of Abkhazian passports being used as travel documents; while almost all respondents, with the exception of the UNM representatives and supporters, agreed with the idea of recognising them as valid identity documents within Georgia.

2. Residents of Abkhazia possess, or may possess, one or more of the following five identity documents: a Russian passport issued on Russian territory; a Russian passport issued on Abkhazian territory by the Russian consulate; an Abkhazian passport; a Georgian passport; the so-called neutral passport introduced by the Saakashvili government and issued by the Georgian authorities.

7.1 International travel for residents of Abkhazia

UNM representatives and their supporters agreed that Abkhaz residents should enjoy freedom of movement. At the same time, however, they came out against recognition by Georgia of Abkhazian passports or of Russian passports issued to residents of Abkhazia. In their opinion, if Abkhazian residents reject Georgian passports they should use the neutral passport issued by Georgia. As one UNM member said, there is no need to invent other types of identity documents for residents of Abkhazia, as *“no other document is more neutral than the one issued by Georgia.”* Another UNM representative argued that an internationally issued neutral passport in practice meant the Kosovo ‘model’, that being recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. Respondents thought that Abkhazia’s rejection of the Georgia-issued neutral passports was intended to put pressure on the international community to recognise Abkhazia’s independence. In the same way, they argued, does it pose a threat to Georgia’s interests when the international community accepts Russian passports issued to Abkhazian residents by the Russian consulate in Abkhazia. Therefore the Georgia-issued neutral passport is the only acceptable option for Georgia. According to UNM supporters, the idea of the neutral passports is already working in practice and, they say, some 400 residents of Abkhazia have obtained the neutral passport but prefer to keep it a secret. Gradually, more and more Abkhazian residents will accept such documents.

Several respondents noted that unilateral concessions to Abkhazia by Georgia on passport-related issues would not advance the peace process. On the contrary, they would serve to justify the Russian occupation. Georgia has already made a unilateral compromise by offering the neutral passport, and it is now up to Abkhazia to make reciprocal concessions.

GD representatives and their supporters, and respondents from all other categories were on the whole in favour of granting residents of Abkhazia full freedom of movement. They said ordinary people living in the conflict zone should not suffer from the wrong decisions and mistakes made by politicians and governments that unleash conflicts and wars. Their rights should be protected in the same way as the rights of other residents of Georgia – they should have what they consider acceptable travel and



Top: Russian passport issued at the ‘Russian Embassy in Abkhazia’
 Middle: Russian passport issued in the Russian Federation
 Below: Neutral travel document issued by the Georgian authorities



identity documents, including, if required, an “international passport”. Some respondents urged caution, however, and suggested that the neutral passport offered by Georgia constitutes a proper solution for residents of Abkhazia.

A considerable number of respondents said they understand why the Georgia-issued neutral passport is unacceptable for residents of Abkhazia. But at the current stage they see no other concrete solution to the problem except for an ‘international neutral passport’ (one issued by an international body), provided this was a possibility from a legal point of view and did not contravene international law. Several **IDPs** who backed the idea of an ‘international neutral passport’ pointed out that, “*there are precedents in international practice; such passports are in use in Cyprus, for example.*” Several respondents stressed that this option would be acceptable only if it does not encroach on Georgia’s sovereignty.

Several respondents agreed to legalise the Abkhazian passport as a valid travel document. In their opinion, Georgia’s interests would be better served by allowing residents of Abkhazia to travel using Abkhazian rather than Russian passports, insofar as this would lessen Abkhazia’s dependence on Russia.

Most of **the young respondents** unequivocally favoured the concept of freedom of movement, bearing in mind that some were much better informed about this issue than others. Participants of Georgian–Abkhaz youth dialogue initiatives commented that the Saakashvili government used the passport issue to ‘blackmail’ Abkhazia. The time has come to discuss the problem directly with the Abkhaz side and reach a mutually acceptable solution.

“I understand the Abkhaz, their attitude to Georgian passports. It would be good to discuss with them the question of passports, independence, etc. Like the Georgians, they want to build an independent state. They paid for their independence with their blood; every Abkhaz family was affected. With its approach Georgia is pushing Abkhazia closer to Russia. For instance, we take a hard line on the problem of identity documents and use the ‘passport issue’ to blackmail them, so they respond by saying – we do not need your passport.” (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

“The Abkhaz people should not live in isolation. It is better for everyone if they have the same

opportunities to travel in Europe as Georgian citizens do. Let’s stop talking about territories and independence. Let’s just open up the world to them, and they will respond with reciprocal co-operation.” (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

7.2 Opportunities for young people in Abkhazia to study at Western universities

Because of the problems connected with freedom of movement, in particular the passport problem, young people from Abkhazia experience serious difficulties in enrolling at Western universities. Many foreign countries where they would like to study will not issue visas on the basis of Russian or Abkhazian passports.

According to the majority of the **UNM representatives and their supporters**, the more young people from Abkhazia study at Western universities, the better. At the same time, all respondents were unanimous that residents of Abkhazia, including young people, should hold Georgian identity documents. Individual respondents were categorically against any concessions to Abkhazia in this regard.

“What I’m saying may sound harsh from a human rights perspective, but I’m against any concessions to young people. If they want to study at Western universities, they should accept Georgian passports. It’s not Georgia that requires this of them, but international law.” (UNM Member of Parliament, interview, Tbilisi)

Only one respondent in this category said that receiving a decent education is so important that Georgia should agree to certain exceptions and compromises on travel documents for residents of Abkhazia.

The majority of **GD representatives and supporters** and **respondents from other categories** supported the idea of letting young people from Abkhazia study at Western universities. They said the Georgian government should do everything it can to make this happen: it should include young Abkhaz in the relevant programmes, grant them freedom of movement, and use all available international legal mechanisms to give young people from Abkhazia the chance to attend Western universities.

“All young people should have the chance to exercise their right to education.” (Journalist, focus group, Kakheti)

“The Georgian government should support the young Abkhaz in every way possible, make it



Young girls at a procession in Abkhazia © Ibragim Chkadua

easier for them to cross borders, provide them with financial assistance, etc.” (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

“Russian-educated and Western-educated Abkhaz are as different as chalk and cheese.” (Young person, focus group, Tbilisi)

Some respondents thought it imperative to send as many young Abkhaz as possible to study in the West, but only within the framework of joint educational programmes with young Georgians. Many respondents agreed that for this purpose it is essential to provide young people from Abkhazia with a valid identity document that is acceptable to them. Individual IDP respondents thought Georgia should recognise Abkhazian passports as legitimate documents for travel to study abroad, or offer an alternative that would



Boys playing football in Abkhazia © Ibragim Chkadua

be acceptable to the Abkhaz side: “It would be a positive step in any case. It would show the Abkhaz that Georgia is helping them to get an education and, consequently, supports their development, and that Georgia is truly engaged in de-isolating Abkhazia.” (IDP, Synergy member, interview)

Some respondents (IDPs) thought that, given the problem of travel documents, young Abkhaz should decide for themselves whether to apply for Georgian documents in order to enter a Western university. Individual respondents categorically insisted, however, that residents of Abkhazia should use only documents issued by Georgia – a Georgian passport or a neutral passport – in order to travel abroad to study.

Some respondents could not understand why Georgia should concern itself with the education of young Abkhaz. In their opinion Georgia should not waste budgetary funds on their education, insofar as Abkhazia considers itself independent and rejects any kind of compromises with Georgia.

7.3 Recognition of the Abkhazian passport as an internal identity document within Georgia

The idea to recognise the Abkhazian passport as a valid identity (ID) document inside Georgia was first put forward in 2011 by then opposition figure Paata Zakareishvili under the previous

government. After the change of regime, Zakareishvili was appointed State Minister for Reintegration (renamed in January 2014 as State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality) and again floated this proposal for discussion.

The UNM representatives and their supporters have always been against this suggestion, and still are. In the words of one survey participant from this group: *“If a passport is required to identify a person, one can use on territory controlled by Georgia either a birth certificate or a Russian passport. Both those documents are perfectly legitimate. An Abkhazian passport is not suitable for this purpose as it lacks validity.”*

The GD representatives consider recognising the Abkhazian passport as a valid identity document in Georgia quite acceptable, but do not consider it necessary as residents of Abkhazia can freely use their Abkhazian ID cards to obtain social benefits in Georgia. The majority also thought that even if the Georgian authorities recognised Abkhazian passports as a valid identity document within Georgia, this would in no way mean recognising Abkhazia’s independence.

Respondents from all other categories almost unanimously gave a positive assessment to the proposal to recognise the Abkhazian passport as

a valid identity document in Georgia. Given that residents of Abkhazia refuse to take Georgian passports, and because on the international level Abkhazia is *de jure* part of Georgian territory, it would be only logical to legalise the Abkhazian passports as valid identity documents in Georgia. Their holders would be entitled to all kinds of social benefits available to Georgian citizens. They felt this would contribute to establishing personal contacts and building trust.

Only a small number of respondents were sceptical about the idea, calling it *“legally absurd”*.

“People should not be forced to choose between their principles and getting help. If they are not faced with such a dilemma, i.e. if the Abkhazian passport is recognised as valid in Georgia, they would become more favourably disposed.”

(Expert, interview, Tbilisi)

“Does it really matter what document they have when they cross over to this side? What information does the passport contain about its holder? Their name and address. Any other document would contain the same information. What difference does it make? It would be even better – we shall know that this person comes from Abkhazia.” (IDP, focus group)

8. Legal status of the population in the Gali region/ Acknowledgement by Georgia of IDPs’ return to Gali

Almost all survey participants noted how difficult it is to solve these problems. But a majority of respondents in all categories, except for the UNM representatives and their supporters, believed that Georgia should find an appropriate legal framework to acknowledge the return of Georgian IDPs to Gali. They said this would facilitate dialogue between the sides and improve the situation of the Georgian population in Gali. Respondents did not have a clear answer with regard to what official status the Georgian residents of Gali should have. Most of them thought these people should retain their IDP status for the time being, as it entitles them to certain socio-economic benefits.

them are registered as IDPs in Georgia, while in Abkhazia they are viewed as refugees that have *de facto* returned. According to available data, some of them hold a Georgian passport (citizenship), as well as an Abkhazian or Russian passport, and some have a neutral passport as well. The Abkhaz side has more than once rejected as unjust Georgia’s accusations that the Abkhazian authorities do not allow IDPs to return to their homes. It maintains that a considerable number of IDPs have already returned to Abkhazia with the *de facto* government’s approval, but Tbilisi is unwilling to acknowledge this.

The UNM representatives and supporters considered it politically inexpedient for Georgia to recognise Georgian residents of Gali as returned IDPs: *“If Georgia agrees with the Abkhaz position and recognises the Georgian residents of Gali as IDPs that have returned, the repatriation question in general could be considered closed. That is why it would be wrong to acknowledge the return of the IDPs to Gali.”*

According to various different sources, some 45,000–50,000 ethnic Georgians currently live in the Gali District of Abkhazia. A large number of

With regard to the Gali IDPs' passports and citizenship, representatives and supporters of the UNM said that they should have Georgian passports and Georgian citizenship. At the same time, they stressed that they consider it acceptable for Gali residents to be issued Abkhazian passports and granted citizenship of unrecognised Abkhazia, as, *"the main thing is that the rights of Georgian IDPs in Gali are not violated."*

"If the Abkhaz side wants to issue Abkhazian passports to Georgian residents of Gali, and if some of the Gali Georgians decide to become Abkhazian [citizens], that's their business. But the Georgian authorities should not turn their back on their own citizens by recognising them as citizens of an occupied territory." (UNM Member of Parliament, interview, Tbilisi)

The UNM representatives explained that under all international laws, IDPs have a right to return, and the Abkhazian authorities are well aware of this. That is why they keep saying that they have abided by this law and permitted the IDPs to return to Gali. In reality, the IDPs returned of their own accord, and the Abkhazian authorities simply had to accommodate them. *"But this cannot be regarded as a proper return because the basic criteria have not been met – the repatriation must be safe, dignified, well organised and institutionalised. Besides, the Georgian residents of Gali did not in fact flee Abkhazia – they left their homes for a short time during the war and were back a week later."* (Former government official, UNM, Tbilisi)

The majority of the **GD representatives and supporters and respondents from other categories** felt that Georgia should find a formal way of acknowledging the return of IDPs to the Gali region, although they also had certain doubts. Several respondents thought that doing so was not in Georgia's interests. But the majority were in favour of accepting reality and finding a suitable legal formulation for it, insofar as Georgians do indeed live in the Gali region. At the same time they thought that Abkhazia should also admit that it does not permit IDPs to return to other parts of Abkhazia.

"Stop playing games with people's lives. The Georgian authorities should devise a proper legal framework for acknowledging reality and the fact that Georgians do live in Gali today." (Journalist, Tbilisi)

Respondents thought acknowledgement by Georgia that Georgian IDPs have returned to

the Gali region could be an important positive strategic step towards dialogue between the sides. Besides, as some respondents noted, it would enable the Georgian population of Gali to receive international humanitarian aid.

Several respondents cited international norms to argue that at the current stage Georgian residents of Gali should not be stripped of their IDP status; also that they cannot unequivocally qualify as repatriated IDPs since their return fell short of international norms and the UN guiding principles on internal displacement.

Other respondents argued that Georgia should recognise the return of Georgian IDPs to Gali only if it is certain that doing so would improve their situation. In this case Abkhazia needs to assume responsibility for the security of the Gali Georgians, guarantee them decent living conditions, and agree to pay them compensation, and so forth.

Some respondents (mostly **IDPs and young people**) stressed that no one facilitated the return of Georgians to Gali. They returned on their own initiative, at their own risk, without any support either from Georgia or from Abkhazia. They were not only faced with serious security problems and economic difficulties, but had to withstand tremendous moral pressure: in Georgia they were considered traitors and in Abkhazia they weren't trusted. The authorities and politicians tried to manipulate them and use them for their own political ends.

Young people focused attention on the fact that the Georgian residents of Gali face a dilemma with regard not only to their official identity (citizenship), but to their moral and social identity as well – they don't know which society to consider themselves part of. They view this problem as having been created largely by both the Georgian and Abkhazian authorities, neither of which has done anything to help the Georgian residents of the Gali region to form their identity and feel safe and secure. The unresolved legal status and unclear citizenship makes them more vulnerable, and the question of security is more acute than for other residents of Georgia and Abkhazia.

Some respondents thought that the Gali Georgians should integrate into Abkhazian society given that they live in Abkhazia. But at the same time they should enjoy the right to freedom of movement, including on Georgian territory.

Many respondents said the Gali Georgians should not reject Georgian citizenship, they should officially have dual citizenship: Abkhazian and Georgian. They should retain their IDP status at the current stage as otherwise they will not be able to claim benefits and other social assistance from Georgia. Proceeding from this, until all the political disagreements are finally resolved, the

two sides should work together to try to solve the problems of the Gali residents, including that of their security. The status of the Georgian population of the Gali region should become one of the main items of discussion between the sides. In order to reach a compromise in this regard, the opinion of the Gali Georgians themselves needs to be solicited.

9. Questions concerning the return of displaced persons

Respondents were asked whether Georgia should initiate direct talks with Abkhazia on the return of IDPs to all regions of Abkhazia, and whether a discussion of this issue could lead to improved relations between the sides.

Most of the respondents replied that it is inexpedient to put the issue on the agenda at the current stage, because it is one of the most sensitive issues for both sides. On the other hand, many respondents noted that the issue should remain one of the most important ones in Georgian–Abkhaz relations.

Responding to this question, the majority of the **UNM representatives and supporters** initially confined themselves to general phrases about how Georgia should use all available means and

mechanisms to ensure the IDPs can return to their homes. Only when asked a second time to be more specific and consider whether return as a topic would contribute to rapprochement, did they admit that as this is the most sensitive question for Abkhazia it is unlikely to bring about a warming in relations between the sides. The respondents also said they see no prospect of the problem being resolved in the near future.

The GD representatives and their supporters and all other respondents also believed that the return of the IDPs is one of the central points of disagreement between the Abkhaz and Georgians and it would be absurd to put it forward for discussion as a way to facilitate rapprochement. It must be clear from the outset that at the present stage such a move would only fuel tensions between Sukhumi and Tbilisi.



Railway tracks near an IDP settlement in Samegrelo region © Dato Meskhi

10. Jointly resolving security-related issues in the Gali region

In recent years, security-related problems in Gali have been discussed repeatedly at the Geneva talks, the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meetings, and in the Georgian media. Respondents were asked to consider whether joint discussion of the problems facing local communities in the Gali region, joint human rights monitoring and joint planning of measures to address these problems would contribute to the confidence-building process. Within that context, the expediency of allowing free access to Gali for international organisations and observers was also discussed, including the potential consequences of such a step for each of the sides of the conflict.

Almost all respondents supported the idea of jointly resolving problems in the Gali region. Most of them were also in favour of granting access to Gali for international organisations and observers. Many respondents pointed out that Georgia has always advocated the presence of international observers in Gali, while Abkhazia was against it.

Respondents proposed the following monitoring models for the Gali region:

1. Joint Abkhazian–Georgian monitoring/patrols
2. Joint Abkhazian–Georgian monitoring with the participation of international organisations
3. International monitoring
4. Joint Abkhazian–Georgian monitoring with Russian participation.

The UNM representatives and supporters accused Abkhazia of preventing a positive outcome by adopting an uncooperative stance at the Geneva talks and IPRM meetings. They fully supported the idea of international monitoring in Gali and Abkhazia as a whole, but stressed that the Abkhaz side will inevitably block such initiatives. Individual respondents in this category backed the idea of joint Abkhazian–Georgian patrols.

“Since we’re unable to ensure the security of the Gali population by ourselves, it’s imperative to involve international organisations and organise a

bilateral Georgian–Abkhazian monitoring process. If it weren’t for the Russian troops, we would have settled all the problems ourselves.” (UNM representative, interview, Zugdidi)

The GD representatives and supporters, journalists, experts, young people, IDPs and ordinary citizens agreed that Abkhazians and Georgians should jointly tackle the problem of security for Gali residents. Some respondents advised a more flexible policy, given the presence of the Russian troops in Abkhazia, and proposed looking for ways to involve Russia in the joint Georgian–Abkhazian monitoring. Individual respondents were against Russia’s participation.

The respondents said they would welcome the deployment of international observers in Abkhazia. They said this would benefit both Abkhazia and Georgia and would contribute to establishing relations between the sides. Many emphasised that the presence of international observers would open up new opportunities for the development of Abkhazia, but that the Abkhaz side would agree to provide access to international organisations only in the event that their local offices would be independent from their representative missions in Tbilisi. Several respondents considered it necessary to take Sukhumi’s position into account and find a way to ensure the presence of international organisations that would be acceptable to the Abkhazians.

The main arguments in favour of the deployment of international observers in Gali and the rest of Abkhazia were that this would facilitate the economic growth and cultural development of Abkhazia; preserving its national identity, resolving security problems, and distancing Abkhazia from Russia:

“The presence of international missions would benefit not only Georgia in defending the rights of its citizens in Abkhazia, but also the Abkhaz themselves. They would have more opportunities and a broader choice.” (GD Member of the Supreme Council of Adjara, interview)

“The Abkhaz view international organisations as Georgia’s agents, not as neutral mediators. We need to help them start to trust Western organisations. To do that, those organisations



Police station in the Gali region © Olesya Vartanyan

should take into account the concerns and interests of the Abkhaz side, inform Abkhaz society in detail about their tasks and objectives in Abkhazia, and find a monitoring format that would be acceptable for the Abkhaz.” (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

“The presence of international observers in Abkhazia would not only preclude a new escalation of the conflict, but also facilitate Abkhazia’s development.” (Psychologist, interview, Tbilisi)

“The presence of international observers on Abkhazian territory is important for Georgia, as their reports would shed light on what is going on there. It would be beneficial for the Abkhaz as well – they, too, want peace and stability in Gali.” (IDP, Synergy member)

Individual respondents argued that there is no point in discussing this issue with the Abkhazian side, because Abkhazia is wholly pro-Russian and has no desire for rapprochement with the West.

Several respondents said international monitoring would make no difference, as in practice the observers would not be able to influence events on the ground.

When asked about the crime situation in Gali, several respondents described frequent burglaries, attacks and kidnappings. At the same time they pointed out that ethnic Georgians tend to be involved in such criminal activity together with the Abkhaz, although the Georgian side usually tries to offload the blame onto the Abkhaz and the Russians.

11. The possibility of opening a UNESCO representation in Abkhazia

In the context of international organisations' access to Abkhazia, respondents looked at the prospects for UNESCO, an organisation that focuses on cultural monuments, not politics, opening an office in Sukhumi. The Georgian media have repeatedly warned that Georgian cultural and historic monuments on Abkhazian territory are in danger of disappearing. The previous government (UNM) insisted that UNESCO could only work in Abkhazia with Tbilisi's approval.

Most respondents were in favour of granting UNESCO access to Abkhazia and thought this would ensure the conservation of cultural monuments and bring the sides closer together. A relatively small number of respondents thought that Abkhazia has little interest in this. Few respondents were sceptical, saying UNESCO's presence in Abkhazia would not impact on the state of cultural monuments or on relations between the sides.

The UNM representatives and supporters were not unanimous on the issue. The majority of them focused on the political aspect of the problem, suggesting that the Georgian side should be able to control and coordinate all UNESCO programmes and activities in Abkhazia. They said the Abkhaz side is trying to ensure that UNESCO works with Abkhazia directly, sidestepping Tbilisi, in order to demonstrate once again that it is an independent state. And this, they say, must not be allowed:

"UNESCO can co-operate with Abkhazia only as part of Georgia, not as an independent country. It is necessary to preclude any actions at all that could be interpreted as international recognition of Abkhazia's independence." (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

Several UNM representatives would agree to direct bilateral cooperation between UNESCO and Abkhazia, bypassing Tbilisi, on the assumption that it would facilitate conflict resolution. However, they thought Abkhazia had no interest in this.

The GD representatives and supporters, and respondents from other categories were in favour of a UNESCO presence in

Abkhazia, thinking this would contribute both to the conservation of monuments, and to the confidence-building process, and would also make it possible to, *"integrate Abkhazia into the Western world."* (IDP, Synergy member)

Several respondents said that apart from the conservation of monuments, UNESCO's presence, *"would remind the Abkhaz of their historical ties with Georgia."* (Focus group of ordinary citizens, Batumi)

In contrast to the UNM supporters, these respondents did not demand that UNESCO cooperate with Abkhazia, *"only through Georgia."*

"UNESCO could help determine the real condition of monuments in Abkhazia." (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

"UNESCO should have an office in Abkhazia. It's not just about visiting, inspecting and evaluating, it means implementing various projects to protect cultural heritage. Georgian and Abkhaz experts would work shoulder to shoulder together with UNESCO specialists and this would be a step towards rapprochement. Both sides would benefit as a result." (Teacher, focus group, Tbilisi)

According to one expert, the problem of UNESCO's presence in Abkhazia, like many other issues, is over-politicised: *"We need to abandon political radicalism and get serious about preserving historic monuments. UNESCO's activities would benefit both sides and bring them closer together."*

Many respondents expressed concern over the poor state of cultural and historic monuments in Abkhazia as a whole. Individual respondents also thought it important to pay attention to the preservation of the Abkhaz language in this context:

"Thought should be given to preserving the Abkhaz language. A proposal could be submitted to the Endangered Languages Fund and qualified experts invited to help develop targeted programmes to preserve the Abkhaz language, which is ranked ninth in the UNESCO list of disappearing languages." (IDP from Abkhazia, interview)

A small number of respondents were sceptical about UNESCO's activities. They noted that the conservation of historic monuments is a

serious problem for the whole of Georgia, but UNESCO's presence in Georgia has done nothing to alleviate it.

Individual IDP respondents expressed concern,

wondering, "if UNESCO embarks on direct cooperation with Abkhazia, bypassing Tbilisi, could that not be interpreted as recognition of Abkhazia's independence?" (NGO activist, Zugdidi)

12. The Abkhazian Government-in-Exile

There has been a long-running debate in Georgian political circles and civil society about the functions and activities of the so-called government-in-exile. Georgia's attachment to official bodies, which Georgian official sources refer to as, "the legitimate government of Abkhazia", irritates the Abkhaz side. As part of the survey, respondents were asked to assess whether the continued existence of this 'government' is expedient.

The vast majority of the respondents, except for the UNM supporters, came out in favour of disbanding or downgrading the official status of the 'legitimate government of Abkhazia'. Those who advocated disbanding it cited two main reasons: first, this government is unable to fulfil its functions and, second, it would be a step towards improving relations with the Abkhaz.

The UNM representatives and supporters

were firmly opposed to the abolition of the government-in-exile. They felt this structure plays an important political role and represents residents of Abkhazia in exile – the Georgian IDPs. Besides, in their words, there should be no unilateral concessions without serious reciprocal steps on the part of the Abkhaz side.

"Even if this government does not fulfil its functions, this does not justify its disbandment, as it plays an important political role. It is a reminder both to the Abkhaz and to the international community that this government was expelled from Abkhazia." (UNM Member of Parliament, interview, Tbilisi)

"This government should continue to exist until we recover Abkhazia." (UNM representative, interview, Adjara)

The GD representatives and other respondents

explained that the government-in-exile has a purely symbolic role and lacks real functions. It exists solely to be displayed to international organisations. According to one expert, this is a potentially damaging position for Georgia. Several respondents questioned the legitimacy of this institution, stressing that the IDPs were not given a single chance to elect their representatives since they were displaced from Abkhazia. Many complained about the fact that the government-in-exile receives significant allocations from the Georgian budget while in fact it fulfils no real functions.

"The Mayor of Sukhumi sits in Tbilisi with nothing to do, but he receives a handsome salary from the [state] budget." (IDP, Synergy member)

"It's a completely inadequate institution in many respects. But most importantly, its existence is politically disadvantageous. Besides, it's a heavy burden on the state budget." (Expert, interview, Tbilisi)

A considerable number of respondents were unanimous in their desire to see the Supreme Soviet and the government of Abkhazia in exile abolished, insofar as, "these structures are a mere formality, a fake." Others proposed downgrading the government to a department and reducing its staff. This would be perfectly adequate to cater for the needs of the IDPs, who are the people it is supposed to represent. Some respondents thought that it could survive as an advisory board only. Several respondents (mainly ordinary citizens) suggested that the government-in-exile should be preserved in its current form for symbolic purposes.

13. The significance of symbolic gestures

Respondents were asked to assess the potential impact of symbolic moral and psychological steps on confidence-building efforts – using the example of the ‘Sorry’ Campaign initiated by Ucha Nanuashvili, then chairman of the Human Rights Centre, in 2007. The idea behind the campaign was to offer an apology to those who had suffered during the war.

Most of the respondents supported symbolic initiatives such as the ‘Sorry’ Campaign. At the same time, they stressed the need to establish an appropriate format for such campaigns and hold a broad public debate on the matter beforehand. Some respondents said it is important that the government too should participate in and support such campaigns. Others were against Georgia apologising to the Abkhazian side, but nonetheless agreed that the events of the 1990s should be impartially assessed and the mistakes and crimes committed should be acknowledged. The theme of symbolic steps was closely linked with that of dealing with the past in a broader context.

The UNM representatives and supporters were not against symbolic gestures on the whole, but argued that they should have a clearly defined framework. The majority were opposed to sorry campaigns, as they believed such initiatives would not promote reconciliation but on the contrary make Georgia look like the guilty party. Besides, they saw no reason for Georgia to apologise to the Abkhaz side. A small proportion of the respondents supported the idea of an apology, on condition that it was mutual. Discussing who should offer that apology, some respondents thought that public organisations or individual citizens could do so, but not official bodies. Others in contrast thought that only the government is empowered to offer such an apology. Some pointed out that, “*apologies should be offered only if there is broad public consensus on this issue.*” (UNM representative, interview, Adjara)

“Georgia has nothing to apologise for. An apology means saying we are guilty, and instead of a positive result it will bring about a negative reaction. I would rather support other symbolic gestures, for instance the handover of archive materials.” (Expert, interview, Tbilisi)

GD representatives and supporters, journalists and experts, and young people were in favour of apologising to war victims and the Abkhaz people and acknowledging Georgia’s mistakes. They felt this would facilitate dialogue between the sides. Respondents cited historical examples attesting to the usefulness of such symbolic gestures. At the same time, they emphasised that sorry campaigns must not be in pretence, but rather an honest and sincere admission of mistakes. Otherwise they would yield negative results. Nor should one expect or demand reciprocal actions.

“I understand that it’s hard to apologise, especially for the losing party, but apologising doesn’t humiliate a person and it brings results. There are examples of this in history. For traditional societies like ours, such gestures are very important and valuable.” (GD representative, interview, Adjara)

“It’s necessary to apologise, but sincerely, so the whole thing doesn’t turn into some sort of game, especially not a political game.” (GD Member of Parliament, interview, Tbilisi)

“I welcome any such initiative. I subscribed to the ‘Sorry’ Campaign too. There is nothing degrading in offering an apology!” (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

Journalists and experts suggested launching a broad public debate on the matter first, since part of Georgian society views apology campaigns as a betrayal of national interests. In that case the initiative should come from the people, but the authorities should also demonstrate political will. The respondents thought the ‘Sorry’ Campaign should definitely be continued, and the authorities and the media should support it and not obstruct it the way the Saakashvili government did. Respondents thought it would be useful if such campaigns were reflected in the arts scene as well.

“A lot depends on the authorities; there needs to be the political will to do it. When the TV channel Rustavi-2 labels everyone who says ‘sorry’ to the Abkhaz a ‘traitor’, ordinary people will of course find it hard to embrace the idea. We should launch a broad public debate on the issue and speak openly about past mistakes. The government must back this process. As I understand it, the new ruling team is divided over this issue. After all, the Georgian people, including government representatives, are still living on the myth that

Russia is to blame for everything that happened, that it was a Russian conspiracy against Georgia. There may be an element of truth in this, but there is also a large element of our mistakes. We need to realise and acknowledge this.” (Political analyst, interview, Tbilisi)

“Apologising verbally isn’t enough. We could, for instance, hand over the remains of the Abkhaz who died, if there are any, and take other similar steps so they can see we really do care about this.” (Psychologist, interview, Tbilisi)

Many respondents explained that prior to admitting past mistakes and offering an apology to the Abkhaz people it is necessary to evaluate what happened in the 1990s. Georgia should assume moral responsibility for past wrongdoing and crimes. Respondents cited examples of other conflicts in which the parties had apologised to one another.

“We should assume the moral responsibility, and honestly and impartially rethink our past: the events of the 1990s. The current government could assume responsibility for its predecessors’ mistakes. The Serbian President visited Croatia and made an apology at the grave of the Croatian war victims. It was a very important step.”

(Participant of Georgian–Abkhaz dialogue, focus group)

“It’s because we failed to critically assess the 1992–93 conflict that we ended up in the war of 2008.” (Participant of Georgian–Abkhaz dialogue, focus group)

The issue gave rise to heated discussions in all other focus groups (**ordinary citizens, journalists and representatives of regional**

NGOs), and there was no unanimity among them. The majority of the participants were in favour of apologies and symbolic gestures. A small number were against, while others thought it necessary first to persuade Georgian society of their significance. The respondents suggested that Georgian society, including the IDPs, is not ready for such gestures. Several of them echoed these sentiments: *“it is not ordinary people, but the Georgian and Abkhazian authorities, the politicians and presidents of that period who should apologise to both nations for having embroiled them in the war.”*

“We must sincerely acknowledge our mistakes and repent.” (Focus group, Batumi)

“We should offer our condolences to all residents of Abkhazia who lost their loved ones.” (Focus group, Kakheti)

“We must apologise to the Abkhaz people, not the Abkhazian authorities; this can be done either by the government or by society as a whole.” (Focus group, Kakheti)

“Both parties should apologise to one another, since they both committed crimes and there were casualties on both sides.” (Journalist, focus group, Zugdidi)

The opponents of such steps felt that *“these standardised, formal apologies won’t lead to anything.” (Focus group, Batumi)*

Several suggested that the Abkhaz should offer an apology to the IDPs for having driven them out of their homes. *“I don’t agree that we should apologise. It is us who suffered most.” (Unaffiliated professional, interview, Tbilisi)*

14. Assessment of the 1992–93 conflict

The respondents touched on the question of a critical assessment of the 1992–93 war while discussing the importance of symbolic actions, and suggested that the two issues should be considered in the same context.

In the course of the discussion, respondents looked at different aspects of the problem and expressed a wide range of opinions. On the whole, the majority – with the exception of the UNM representatives and their supporters – agreed that it is very important for Georgian society to objectively assess the 1992–93 conflict and August 2008 war (as well as other key events of the 20th century) from a political, legal and moral point of view. People saw this as a significant step towards restoring trust between the two sides. Some respondents thought Georgia should impartially evaluate the past and acknowledge its mistakes, irrespective whether or not Abkhazia does likewise. Others felt that a critical assessment of the 1992–93 events, together with the acknowledgement of mistakes, should be a joint effort by both sides.

The UNM representatives and their supporters were generally against an evaluation of the 1992–93 conflict and the 2008 war and adduced various arguments in their support. Some of them said such an assessment is useless, as it is universally known that Russia is to blame for all the conflicts in Georgia. Others argued that it is for NGOs, and not the government, to carry out such an assessment of the past. Several respondents feared that in the event of a negative evaluation – meaning if Georgia admitted its guilt – this could be used against Georgia. The country could forfeit the support of the West and the conflict regions would be lost for good.

“If the Georgian side starts talking about all the stupid things the Georgian authorities did in the 1990s and admits that we are to blame for everything that happened, what would we receive as a result? Most likely, after this the Abkhaz will go all over the world and push for recognition of [their] independence. I think now is not the time to do this.” (Former government official, UNM, interview, Tbilisi)

One respondent in this group agreed that Georgia could pass moral judgement on past

history as it might possibly restore trust between the parties.

The majority of **GD representatives and supporters, as well as other respondents**, were in favour of carrying out an objective assessment of the 1992–93 conflict, but stressed that it would be a long, difficult, and painful process. Nevertheless, they were certain that conflict transformation is impossible without an objective political, moral and legal assessment of the 1992–93 conflict, and the past in general. They said it is important for the healthy development of society and the country as a whole: *“One must first deal with the past in order to be able to move forward”*. One member of the IDP network Synergy proposed setting up a commission of international independent experts to evaluate the events of 1992–93. At the same time, individual respondents echoed the UNM representatives’ concern that the Abkhaz could use such assessment against Georgia.

“An objective investigation is needed of what happened during the war and how it started, to make sure it never happens again. This is equally important for the Abkhaz and the Georgians.” (Unaffiliated focus group, Tbilisi)

“We, the refugees, have often said that there should be an assessment of what the Abkhaz did to us. But there should also be an assessment of what the Georgians did. I used to live in Gali and I witnessed how – long before the Abkhaz came and took everything – marauding Georgian gangs ransacked it, plundering Gali and the whole of Samegrelo. Let them apologise to us now. Why don’t we call them to account?” (IDP, focus group, Zugdidi)

Many agreed that the evaluation should be both political and moral and include an admission of past mistakes. However, views diverged when it comes to a legal assessment of the conflict and prosecuting those responsible for starting the war and committing war crimes. Some respondents said it is imperative to punish all those who are guilty; others feared that this could have dangerous impact on both societies. Some respondents suggested that evaluating the past and potential apologies should become topics of a broad public debate in Georgia. Without this it will be difficult to achieve a positive outcome.

Several respondents thought such an evaluation requires a broad consensus and close cooperation between all parties involved in the conflict. Some suggested such a moral judgement should be reflected in art, literature,

films and so on. Individual respondents (young people, IDPs) believed it would be very difficult, if indeed it is possible, to paint a full picture and determine the truth. Moreover, they thought the society is not yet ready for such an evaluation.

15. The de-isolation of Abkhazia

One of the central themes of the survey was the de-isolation of Abkhazia. Respondents were asked to describe their understanding of de-isolation, their attitude towards the prospect of de-isolation, and to assess its significance for the sides and for establishing relations between Abkhaz and Georgians.

There was quite a broad range of opinion on this issue. A significant number of respondents (mostly the GD representatives and supporters) were in favour of the de-isolation of Abkhazia, while a relatively small number (mainly, the UNM representatives and supporters, some of the IDPs and some of the ordinary citizens) came out against it. Some respondents said that they would agree to de-isolation only if it benefited Georgia as well. During the discussion some respondents focused on the political aspects of the problem, while others highlighted its human or humanitarian dimension.

The UNM **representatives and supporters** were mostly against the de-isolation of Abkhazia, seeing it as dangerous for Georgia. In their view the de-isolation of Abkhazia means in the first instance recognising its independence, rather than an opportunity for rapprochement. Several respondents considered the very term “de-isolation” inappropriate. They thought it made sense to talk about integration and its mechanisms, such as humanitarian programmes, developing trade and economic co-operation, and so on.

“Georgia will gain nothing from the de-isolation of Abkhazia. Russia will not withdraw from Abkhazia. It will simply exchange the uniform of an occupier for the mask of a friend, which is dangerous for Georgia.” (UNM Member of Parliament, interview, Tbilisi)

The GD representatives and supporters, journalists, experts and young respondents, for the most part, supported Abkhazia’s de-isolation,

which for them meant that, *“Abkhazia will be open to the world, and the world will be open to Abkhazia”*, which would help Abkhazia to develop and become stronger. The respondents saw no danger for Georgia in this. On the contrary, they believed the de-isolation of Abkhazia would facilitate rapprochement and establishing relations between the sides. They pointed out that Georgia’s isolation of Abkhazia only draws it closer to Russia, while de-isolation would lessen its dependence on Moscow. Individual respondents thought Georgia should examine all the pros and cons of de-isolation before agreeing to go ahead with it.

“An isolated, economically backward Abkhazia will disappear from the map, it will not be able to withstand Russia’s expansionism. De-isolation means that Abkhazia will be open to the world and, vice versa, the world will be open to Abkhazia in terms of culture, trade, etc. De-isolation would mean freedom of movement. It’s a real way for Abkhazia and Georgia to develop. If in future Georgia and Abkhazia achieve a sufficiently high level of development and become part of Europe, it’s possible they may decide to unite, or at least establish normal relations. Georgia should not be afraid of Abkhazia becoming stronger, of the opening of the Sukhumi seaport, etc. All this is good for Georgia too.” (GD Member of the Supreme Council of Adjara, interview)

“I’m for open borders in general. Closed territories are doomed to perish. De-isolation is vital for Abkhazia, and we must support it.” (GD Member of Parliament)

Several **journalists and experts** said in order to break free from Russia’s influence and control, Abkhazia needs to become integrated into the global community and establish direct contacts with foreign states. An appropriate model needs to be found, based on international experience. At the same time, several respondents thought that Abkhazia should not break away from Georgia.

“I’m against the isolation of Abkhazia; I’m for its integration into the global community. To be



Young boys at a festival in Abkhazia © Ibragim Chkadua

realistic, political ties between Abkhazia and the West are impossible insofar as it is still part of Georgia from the legal point of view. But it can be involved separately in many other areas, such as education and commerce.” (Journalist, interview, Tbilisi)

“By isolating Abkhazia we’re pushing it towards Russia. We should help Abkhazia integrate into the Western world. We and the Abkhaz should both move closer to the West.” (Expert, interview, Tbilisi)

The **young respondents** called for an end to the economic blockade of Abkhazia, especially as it is not working in practice and contacts with Russia and Turkey are maintained anyway. In that sense Abkhazia is isolated only *de jure*. They suggested the de-isolation of Abkhazia could and ought to begin with the sphere of education.

The **IDPs** had mixed opinions on the issue. Some came out in favour of de-isolation, while others were ready to support the idea only in the case of reciprocal concessions on the part of Abkhazia, for example with regard to the return of the IDPs. Some respondents were opposed to the de-isolation of Abkhazia for fear that it might lead to the recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. Others felt that de-isolation would enable people to acquire new knowledge and transform their mind-set, exposing them more to democratic values. Abkhazian society has been long trying to break free from isolation, since it is far from happy with the status quo.

The IDPs opposed to de-isolation, as well as those ready to accept de-isolation only in return for concessions from Sukhumi, called for scrupulous examination of all aspects of the problem to ensure Georgia would not lose out. They said: *“the Abkhaz must not be given a platform in Europe to defend their rights, while the rights of the IDPs fall behind.”* In addition, the de-isolation of Abkhazia should encompass the unrestricted right for Georgians to visit Abkhazia.

“Alright, let’s give them everything, the archives, contacts with the West. But I want to return to my home in Abkhazia. Why should they not agree to our step-by-step return, as was the case in Cyprus? If the doors are opening only to them but not for me, I don’t want this kind of de-isolation. I’m for Abkhazia’s de-isolation only if it means my de-isolation as well.” (IDP, focus group)

Some of the **ordinary citizens, journalists and representatives of regional NGOs** agreed that de-isolation is necessary, as this would liberate Abkhazia from Russia’s influence, which is an important aspect. Moreover, they believed that de-isolation would facilitate Abkhazia’s development and pave the way for a better future for the younger generation of Abkhazians. Others argued that at the present stage it is premature to talk about de-isolation, as the key political prerequisites are not in place and Abkhazian society seems quite content with Russia’s patronage. Several thought that the de-isolation process should be carried out in parallel in Abkhazia and Georgia.



The Black Sea © Conciliation Resources

Conclusion: possible first steps towards confidence building

The survey shows that there exists within Georgian society a high degree of readiness to discuss openly conflict-related topics, both internally and in a dialogue with the Abkhaz. When asked to specify the areas that should be discussed first in the framework of a Georgian–Abkhaz dialogue, the respondents almost unanimously chose **education, health care, culture, and economy**. As to the rest of the issues covered by the survey, the majority of the respondents were confident that, with the exception of the IDPs' return, all of them could be brought to the negotiation table and could mark the beginning of a rapprochement between the sides within the framework of adequately facilitated talks.

It is difficult to list the issues discussed in the order of priority, since different groups of respondents used different criteria to assess the importance of a particular issue. All the same, the survey topics can be divided into those that are considered more or less critical for Georgian–Abkhaz relations, and that are fairly easy or, by contrast, hard to resolve.

The following issues are regarded by the respondents as less critical and relatively easy to tackle:

- **Transfer of archive materials to Abkhazia**
- **Reorganisation or abolition of the Abkhazian government-in-exile**

The following issues (listed in no particular order) are perceived as more critical and harder to deal with, but at the same time important for starting a dialogue:

- **Recognising Abkhazia as a party to the conflict/bilateral talks**

- **An agreement on the non-use of force**
- **Assessment of the 1992–93 conflict**
- **Symbolic gestures**
- **Resumption of rail traffic through Abkhazia**
- **Opening of the Sukhumi sea port**
- **Jointly resolving security-related issues in the Gali region**

Several topics would be difficult for Georgians and Abkhaz to discuss with one another, as there is no consensus about them even within Georgian society and little information available. However, the majority of the respondents agreed that they are as vital to improving relations as the other issues.

- **Legal status of the population of the Gali region / Acknowledgement by Georgia of IDPs' return to Gali**
- **Freedom of movement**
- **De-isolation of Abkhazia**

With the exception of the representatives and supporters of the UNM, the majority of respondents expressed readiness, and consider it necessary, to discuss almost all the above-mentioned topics, and consider them important potential steps toward improving relations between Georgians and Abkhaz. Most respondents realise that the return of IDPs is too sensitive an issue and is unlikely to facilitate rapprochement in the current climate. For that reason, in the context of Georgian–Abkhaz talks, it should be put aside for the time being. Some respondents pointed out the need to discuss jointly with the Abkhaz which problems to address first in order to resolve the existing deep disagreements.



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