



**CONCILIATION
RESOURCES**
working together for peace

Discussion

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The Realm of the Possible

Finding ways forward in the Georgian-Abkhaz context:
Challenges in education





Introduction

In a context of global instability, education is both a fundamental right, and a vital component of development: equipping societies to respond to global challenges and to reach their full potential. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has had a serious and long-term impact on education, particularly in Abkhazia, both in terms of limited access to education, and perceived inequalities in terms of access and opportunity. In this context, the younger generation will need to rise to a number of challenges, not least the unresolved conflicts in its region.

Access to education is one of the topics that has arisen consistently over recent years across the range of dialogue platforms, official and unofficial, and has been identified as a clear area of common interest by Georgians and Abkhaz alike. In the words of one dialogue participant, “educated people are needed everywhere”. Regardless of the outcome of an official peace process, it is clear that all societies need to prepare their young people for active professional participation in the social, economic and political life of their society. The better prepared youth on both sides of the conflict are for engaging in a process in pursuit of peace, the more likely it is that resolution can be found, and that the conflict does not descend into violence again.

The *Realm of the Possible* series focuses on areas of potential engagement to de-isolate the population of Abkhazia. This publication therefore focuses attention on educational needs and opportunities within Abkhazia, and explores ways in which progress could be made to help shift the conflict dynamic – improving relations across the divide, and also between Abkhazia and the rest of the world.

Problems and priorities

Education is certainly one of the areas where there is most obvious potential to make progress. What is meant by education, and understanding of different ways to resolve the existing problems, can often differ in the perspectives of the sides. Yet if sufficient positive steps are taken now, and there is enough common interest to avoid the overt politicisation of the topic, more space could be opened up for overcoming mistrust.

There are a number of key areas that need to be addressed in regard to pre-school, school-age and higher education, as well as professional and technical training. In dialogue meetings, participants have identified an interest in learning from international experience: in terms of transfer of knowledge and exchange of

expertise in educational best practice in regard to modernisation and systemic development of teaching methods, curricula and approaches; and in terms of technical expertise, including exposure to new software and technologies and provision of equipment for use in schools. They have emphasised the importance, both practical and symbolic, of enabling access for people living in Abkhazia to educational opportunities. This applies to travelling abroad for study, and to establishing education within Abkhazia that conforms to global standards. Alongside this, another key area of need relates to the question of providing teaching in different languages.

It is important to note that significant work has begun in some spheres. There has been support to a number of educational initiatives, from primary to post-graduate, formal and informal, led by local specialists and civil society organisations. This work has been supported by international NGOs such as World Vision, Euroclio, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and International Alert, and multi-lateral organisations such as the Council of Europe and UNICEF. Links have been established with academic institutions outside the region, such as a distance learning programme run by the University of California, Irvine; a visiting lectureship programme with the

involvement of the Free University Brussels; and an 'International Summer University' run by Conciliation Resources and partners for some years, involving visiting academics from Russia, Europe and the US. Schools have been renovated through development assistance from UNDP, and foreign language education has been promoted by different actors. In response to cross-conflict dialogue about the constraints on accessing educational opportunities for people living in Abkhazia, in 2015 a way was found to enable residents of the South Caucasus region who do not identify themselves with the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan or Georgia to apply for the Chevening Scholarship programme for post-graduate study in the UK. Even though the numbers involved in these different initiatives are small, their impact on public opinion and attitudes to 'the west' are significant.

Yet there is much more that is needed, and that can be done. This publication aims to provide some clarity regarding perspectives on either side of the divide, and a 'road map' of what is understood to be possible, and where changes can begin to be made. Based on extensive discussions in Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue facilitated by Conciliation Resources since 2000, and on research conducted in 2013 and 2014, it offers some suggestions for moving forward, within the realm of the possible.

Findings and conclusions

1. Work that broadens horizons for young people living in Abkhazia is of paramount importance in creating the conditions for development.
2. Opportunities for students living in Abkhazia to study abroad need to be enabled and expanded, and require sufficient investment in local preparation.
3. Progress towards reform and modernisation of the education system in Abkhazia would improve prospects for all young people living in Abkhazia and equip them with skills and knowledge to overcome isolation and address current challenges.

1. Work that broadens horizons for young people living in Abkhazia is of paramount importance in creating the conditions for development

People living in Abkhazia have experienced isolation to varying degrees since the end of the military phase of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in 1993. This presents obstacles to social and economic development. There is some contact with the outside world, primarily with the Russian Federation, which is of course important. But an entire generation has grown up with very little exposure to the rest of the outside world.

Ongoing insecurity, also linked to the unresolved conflict, contributes to a defensiveness and scepticism towards outside influence, which in turn compounds the isolation. This results in a frequent lack of knowledge as to what Europe, for example, may have to offer vis-à-vis certain aspects of education, and to suspicions as to the agenda of many 'western' interlocutors. The transition from Soviet times has not, as in some parts of the former Soviet Union, entailed exposure to a range of educational models. Overall, there is little in-depth understanding of the potential for educational reform, encompassing democratic values and human

rights. Civic education is not yet integrated into the Abkhaz educational system, and there isn't a clear understanding of what it could contribute to society. The current educational system may provide knowledge, but it does not necessarily equip young people with the skills to apply that knowledge.

At the same time, there has been a 'brain drain' of young people leaving to study or work abroad and not returning. For those who do return, there is no mechanism or system for facilitating exchange of knowledge, and alumni are not being systematically tapped into as a resource. The lack of specialists in certain professional areas, and/or people in positions of influence who have only superficial, or outdated, knowledge of their profession presents a serious obstacle to development. For people to take responsibility themselves for making changes to education in Abkhazia, there need to be opportunities to broaden horizons, and to start to overcome the isolation that shapes many people's experience of life in Abkhazia today.





What can be done?

- Support local capacity internally in Abkhazia to promote education, improve professional development and to create an institutional base for coordination of education activities.
- Promote informal educational initiatives, including youth camps and projects for young people from across the South Caucasus or Black Sea region with a focus on issues that affect the whole region (such as the environment), local civic education initiatives, and an annual International Summer University in Abkhazia with a focus on international relations.
- Encourage exchanges between Abkhaz young people and peers from outside, and create opportunities for Abkhaz youth to volunteer abroad and for foreign volunteers to come to Abkhazia.
- Expand opportunities for young people such as vocational training, internships, higher education (MAs), and/or online sessions for students.
- Provide opportunities for graduates to find out more about different professions that exist (and as an element of this, map what expertise is needed).
- Support 'alumni networks' of those who return from study abroad, and create opportunities for them to share their experience, feed in to internal debates, introduce young people to the professions they have trained in and where relevant help prepare them for the experience of studying abroad.
- Make fellowships and study programmes for students and young academics in the South Caucasus accessible to participants from Abkhazia, and be creative in establishing study programmes for them along the lines of work conducted by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Actively explore the potential for other foundations in Scandinavia, Germany or elsewhere, to get involved.
- Invest in more teacher training in Abkhazia for teachers of foreign languages, and in acquiring textbooks that expose Abkhaz residents to other languages and cultures.
- Institute a visiting lecturer scheme for regular expert input by academics from outside on a wide range of topics. Lectures, or courses taught at the University by visiting academics could be supplemented by talks at other youth hubs, and public events. This would also be a way to build links with outside institutions, and to facilitate academic exchange and information sharing, including on issues specific to Abkhazia (speleology, and philology, for example) that are of interest to the wider world.

2. Opportunities for students living in Abkhazia to study abroad need to be enabled and expanded, and require sufficient investment in local preparation

A small number of students from Abkhazia have been able to study abroad in recent years, but the overall percentage remains low, and the opportunity is not open to all, not least due to a number of significant obstacles to accessing educational opportunities. Some of these are linked to ongoing isolation, and a degree of inertia that accompanies this – some young people now accept that they will not have opportunities that are available to others, and do not see how to change this. There is patchy knowledge and a lack of information about existing opportunities. In the absence of a central hub where information can be accessed, many young people do not know where to start looking, and information tends to be shared by word of mouth which limits the number of people who are aware of it, and privileges those who are well-connected.

There are also practical constraints. There are few or no opportunities in Abkhazia to pass the tests that are required for entry into most universities, such as TOEFL, IELTS, GRE, LSAT. Countries that do not recognise Abkhaz independence also do not recognise qualifications, certificates and diplomas issued by the Abkhaz education authorities, and the Abkhaz State University is not included in international educational systems such as Bologna and Erasmus, or subject to international educational assessments/standards (PIRLS, TIMSS, PISA, TALIS). As Abkhaz documents are not widely recognised,

most people living in Abkhazia have taken Russian passports to enable international travel. Increasingly, Russian passports issued in Sukhum/i are subject to additional scrutiny and passport holders are less likely to be issued visas for foreign travel when using one of these passports. Many young people are not even issued these Russian passports and have only Abkhaz passports, and are not therefore able to travel beyond the Russian Federation at all.

Other practical constraints extend to computerised application systems in which prospective students have to choose a 'country', in which Abkhazia does not figure. Creative ways have been found of getting round this [see the example cited below of the Chevening scholarship], but there remains a big skills and knowledge gap that leaves many Abkhaz less than competitive by comparison with their peers. A lack of foreign language skills, and an absence of technical skills in information technology, statistics, modern research methods are impediments to applying, as is a relatively low level of academic proficiency. If students have poor writing or research skills, academic etiquette (such as the principle of avoiding plagiarism) or critical thinking, and indeed do not have the experience or knowledge of how to fill in a compelling application form, they will not generally be selected in a head to head competition with peers from elsewhere, and nor will they be prepared for the experience of studying abroad if they are selected.

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Practical ways to address challenges: the example of the UK Chevening Scholarship

The UK Chevening Scholarship, devised by the UK's Regional Conflict Advisor for the Caucasus, is the first international scholarship scheme that has managed to find a way to include students and young professionals from the disputed territories of the South Caucasus into its programme. This has been achieved by introducing the 'South Caucasus' into the list of countries eligible for applying. This has overcome a major obstacle that students and young professionals from unrecognised or partially-recognised entities faced in applying for international scholarship schemes, namely that students previously had to select a country of origin and there were no places available for students to apply from the region as a whole. Students from the South Caucasus who do not identify themselves with Azerbaijan, Armenia or Georgia are now able to apply via the newly-introduced regional option.

In under a year since the first students from Abkhazia took up their Chevening scholarships, the scheme has received positive attention and has been widely discussed among academic and student circles in Abkhazia. In the words of one Chevening scholar from Abkhazia: "I am grateful that the Chevening Scholarship board was able to take into account the regional realities, and the difficulties young people living in Abkhazia face. It has built a pathway that allows me and other young professionals to access international education".

The Chevening Scholarship has laid the first stone in what can become a solid foundation for other European educational programmes, to enable engagement and a process of de-isolation for populations directly affected by conflict in the South Caucasus.

What can be done?

- Establish a consultative centre to provide practical information and help to young people in Abkhazia applying for education abroad: provide them support in filling out application forms; offer advice on existing opportunities; and reach out to the broader community to ensure a wide range of Abkhaz youth are aware of and have access to opportunities.
- Map the current opportunities available for students from Abkhazia to study abroad, and include this information in an electronic database that is made widely accessible.
- Re-instate the practice initiated by UNDP to enable students to prepare for English language tests (IELTS) at higher education institutions in Sukhum/i and then sit them in Yerevan, and increase opportunities to prepare for these tests (including improving teacher training, see 1 above).
- Establish a scholarship system (consistent and over the long term) for Abkhaz students to study abroad, and/or find bursaries for young people from the South Caucasus to attend courses and training programmes abroad.
- Use the opportunity of Georgian-Abkhaz civil society dialogue to influence decisions on mobility challenges and push for changes to visa policy that can facilitate easier access to external education for Abkhaz young people.
- Find creative ways to recognise diplomas/ qualifications issued in Abkhazia to assist students in applying for places abroad.
- Research and advocate for the establishment of new educational opportunities for young residents of Abkhazia to study abroad (eg DAAD, Erasmus, Fribourg University). Build on the experience of Chevening, and share 'know-how' about finding creative solutions to existing political obstacles.

3. Progress towards reform and modernisation of the education system in Abkhazia would improve prospects for all young people living in Abkhazia and equip them with skills and knowledge to overcome isolation and address current challenges

There has been little reform of the educational system in Abkhazia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and while significant improvements have been made by comparison with the immediate post-war years, serious challenges remain. Experiences of the formal education system vary, and it lacks a unified approach that addresses the needs of Abkhazia's diverse and multi-ethnic society. Modernisation of the system, introducing the practice of inclusive education and improving access to education within Abkhazia requires investment of serious resources, and an overhaul of approaches across the tiers of education. There is a clear need to develop a culture of critical analytical thinking, and access to modern, interactive teaching methods is poor. The Bologna system is adopted formally, but there is little evidence of it in practice. New textbooks and learning methods, and improved

teacher training and professional monitoring are needed for Abkhazia to compete in the global educational context.

In order for all young people's right to education to be realised in Abkhazia, there is a need for comprehensive changes to improve and reform the existing institutions – something that many are open to, but that needs to be implemented in accordance with a careful, gradual and long-term plan. Significant work has already been done, including by UNICEF and World Vision, to begin to address educational challenges, particularly at primary level. The need to provide for multi-lingual education also requires sufficient textbooks, and the methodology to support study in different languages. There is a clear need to support and develop access to education in Abkhaz (the state language), not least as perceived

threats to the Abkhaz language were one of the key factors in the conflict and it is in danger of disappearance.

In doing this, it is important not to exclude native speakers of other languages. Many Georgian school pupils in the Gal/i region, for example, have limited or no access currently to teaching in their native language. By addressing needs of different sectors of the population as part of a package that addresses the need to develop

the Abkhaz language alongside provision of education in other languages, systemic reform will become more possible. Particular challenges left by the legacy of conflict include the issue of history and geography textbooks, which remain a sticking point. Yet progress can be made in spite of the political situation, and in key circles there is an understanding of needs and a readiness to think about the creation of a system to meet the needs of all the groups in Abkhazia, including Gal/i region.

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What can be done?

- Support internal dialogue in Abkhazia, enabling a group of specialists and officials with a remit for education policy to take part in regular discussions and/or exchange with visiting experts on approaches to education and reform; the challenges of language teaching in diverse multi-cultural and post-conflict societies, something of particular relevance for the population in the Gal/i region; special needs education and disabled access.
- Provide external input on modern teaching methods, norms and standards for developing curricula and approaches in response to local needs and the findings of needs assessments into current educational practice.
- Arrange study visits for key stakeholders and exchange, also through Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, on best practice internationally.
- Support work (conducted currently by UNICEF) to improve mother tongue based multi lingual education, translate and/or produce new textbooks in a range of languages and provide primers and other resources for teaching in the range of native languages (Abkhaz, Armenian, Georgian, Russian).
- Provide expert support to research and implement improved exam practice (both entrance and final exams) in line with the requirements of the Bologna process.
- Provide better access to modern technical expertise in the field of education, including developing an Abkhaz script for computers, the acquisition of new software and technologies, and provision of equipment to use in schools.



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Key conclusions

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Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We believe that building sustainable peace takes time. We provide practical support to help people affected by violent conflict achieve lasting peace. We draw on our shared experiences to improve peacebuilding policies and practice worldwide.

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