



Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: rethinking the paradigm

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

Cover: Eldar Kavshbaia, *Shoreline*. Oil on canvas.

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

Foreword

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

London, 14 February 2011

1. Introduction – Archil Gegeshidze

The end of the 1992-1993 war did not resolve the crisis in Georgian-Abkhaz relations. This was mainly due to incompatibility between the “national projects” of Georgian and Abkhaz elites, and of societies as a whole: Georgia strove to reinstate its territorial integrity, and Abkhazia sought independence. The mutually exclusive strategic goals of the parties, mistrust of each other, coupled with the deeply ingrained and constantly nurtured stereotype of Georgians as “the enemy” complicated the negotiation process. For its part Russia, guided by post-imperial ambitions and with no interest in conflict resolution, performed its role of intermediary and facilitator unscrupulously, thus promoting tensions in Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Attempts by the UN and other international players to promote greater efficacy in the peacemaking process also proved unsuccessful.

Georgian-Abkhaz relations have been defined by hypersensitivity to processes and changes both within the Caucasus and beyond it. Due to regional and international geopolitics, various players’ interests are implicated in the conflict – players both big and small, whose values and goals are often different. The confrontational nature of those interests and goals further exacerbated already thorny Georgian-Abkhaz relations, which had repeatedly experienced crises over the preceding decades. The latest period of tension, at the beginning of August 2008, eventually ended in the five-day Georgian-Russian war with the subsequent Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent. This resulted in the further strengthening of those negative dynamics already present in the Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

Despite the above-mentioned multidimensionality of the conflict system after August 2008, its Georgian-Abkhaz component certainly remains relevant. Despite the Georgian authorities’ attempts to reduce the essence of the conflict to a historical and geopolitical confrontation between Tbilisi and Moscow, the Georgian-Abkhaz confrontation remains a separate factor, complicating the search for a

formula for durable peace and stability in the region. A thorough analysis of the origins and outcome of the Georgian-Abkhaz war in the early 1990s, as well as the underlying nature of the conflict clearly points to its explosive potential and its availability for use as a pretext or tool of manipulation for alien and sometimes far-reaching goals.

A defining feature of the conflict is the different perceptions and attitudes towards it in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. This difference determines the mutually exclusive goals, paradigms and ‘national projects’ according to which the strategies of the conflicting parties were and still are being devised. Observation of the dynamics in possible changes in these paradigms must help to understand whether there is any possibility of convergence between the parties’ positions. Undoubtedly the study of this trend is an important academic task with evident applicability, since the facts and behaviours identified could serve as a foundation for working out relevant recommendations for Georgian and Abkhaz elites.

The *subject* of this research is the Georgian paradigm, i.e. the perception and conceptualisation of the conflict by the Georgian ruling elite and the resulting definition of objectives, as well as the drivers of its conflict resolution policy. The overall *objective* of the study was to determine changes in the paradigm, i.e. in the perception of the conflict and possible shifts in emphases in policy formulation. More specifically, the study focused on:

- a. factors influencing the formulation of Georgian attitudes towards the conflict, its origins, its course and its consequences;
- b. the paradigm of conflict resolution, its appropriateness and effectiveness;
- c. possible ways of improving national policy regarding the conflict.

It should be noted that August 2008 is taken as the point at which possible changes in the paradigm under investigation might have occurred. In other

words, the study represents a comparative analysis of two periods – before and after the events of August 2008. In particular, the various parameters of the paradigm were defined against these periods.

The *relevance* of the study lies in the experience of unsuccessful attempts to mitigate the confrontation by means of negotiations, accompanied by coercion and outbreaks of violence on both sides. While acknowledging the mistakes or deliberate destructive actions of other parties, it should be noted, however, that Georgia is in no small way responsible for the collapse of the peace process, because its inconsistency or inability (unwillingness?) to search for a reasonable compromise at every stage of the negotiations often brought the process to a dead end.

A key *methodology* of the study is to determine of the concept behind the *paradigm*, as the research subject. From philosophical and sociological points of view a paradigm is any basic conceptual pattern, a model for posing questions and answering them. However in political science a paradigm is the sum of cognitive principles and parameters of reflecting political reality, which determine the logic of how knowledge is organised, a model for the theoretical interpretation of a given group of social events. In our case such cognitive *paradigm parameters*,

based on the specific research agenda, are:

- the political formula of conflict resolution;
- the return of refugees/internally displaced persons (humanitarian and social aspects);
- the origins and the nature of the conflict;
- attitudes towards (perceptions of) the other party to the conflict;
- the conflict's influence on the development of the country;
- the goals.

The next specific objective of the study is to describe the perceptions and evaluations of the conflict system by the ruling Georgian elite (first of all, by the Georgian government) according to the above parameters, before and after the events of August 2008. Further, analysis of the current Georgian policy established the need to change the paradigm and to determine parameters for the creation of a new paradigm as a precondition for the transformation of the conflict.

For the study a *survey of experts* was carried out by means of in-depth interviews, whose respondents comprised both representatives of official structures and NGOs. In total ten experts were interviewed.

2. Perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict before August 2008 – *Ivlian Haindrava*

Causes and nature of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

Without going back into the many centuries of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, one can single out a number of key antagonistic periods/events, which eventually led to the armed standoff of 1992-1993. The starting point was in the 1860-70s, when as a result of deliberate Russian imperial policy, tens of thousands of the Abkhaz were forced to leave their homeland (in a movement known in Russian as the *mukhadzhirstvo*), which became literally

uninhabited. According to Thornike Gordadze: “The *mukhadzhirstvo* is the first tragic consequence of the classification which clearly differentiated the two ethnic groups in the region – the Abkhaz and the Georgians.”¹ The same period (1864) saw the abolition of serfdom in the Caucasus, and many western Georgian peasants who had no land relocated to the neighbouring uninhabited lands.

1. *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.2, Irvine (1999): 57.

The next important period was the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917-1918 and the appearance of new states in its place, including the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921). The leadership of the latter did not have a clear concept regarding the rights and powers of Abkhazia within Georgia. Despite the persistent attempts on the part of the Peoples' Council of Abkhazia delegation to reach an agreement with the Georgian Constituent Assembly regarding the status of Abkhazia, the finding of a mutually acceptable solution was delayed. It was only in December of 1920 that the Junior Constitutional Commission of the Georgian Constituent Assembly developed the *Draft Provisions on the Autonomous Governance of Abkhazia*, which were approved together with the Georgian Constitution, and entered into force on 21 February 1921. Article 107 of Chapter 11 of the Constitution provided for the autonomous governance of Abkhazia in internal matters. In the meantime, Bolshevik Russian aggression against the Georgian Democratic Republic soon culminated in the forced incorporation of Georgia into the USSR.

The years of the transformation of the Russian Empire into the USSR added one more political conflict into the relations between the Georgians and the Abkhaz: the former largely supported the Mensheviks (social democrats), and the latter supported the Bolsheviks (communists). This is explained not least of all by the disingenuous Bolshevik promise made to the small nations of the unrestricted right to self-determination. However at the same time there were also growing signs of the Abkhaz aspiration to dissociate themselves from Georgians, to be on the other side of the barricades.

The Soviet period, marked by an unconstrained and inhuman 'nationalities policy', deepened mutual distrust between Georgians and Abkhaz. At the outset of Soviet rule, on 16 December 1921, a Union Treaty was signed between Georgia and Abkhazia², even though Abkhazia did not figure in the Soviet law of that period as a real 'union' republic, i.e. as one of the state-forming subjects of the USSR. Moreover, according to a note to Paragraph 14 of Chapter 4, Section 2 of the Main Law of the USSR (Constitution) adopted on 31 January 1924, "The autonomous republics of Adjara and Abkhazia and the autonomous *oblasts* of South Ossetia, Nagorny Karabakh and Nakhichevan are each to be represented by one person at the Council of Nationalities."³ Therefore

it is evident that already in the process of the development and adoption of the first Soviet constitution, Abkhazia was viewed as an autonomy within Georgia, officially with a higher status of a 'treaty Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia.'

The final determination of Abkhazia's status within Georgia in the Soviet period occurred in 1931. In February 1931 the VI Congress of the Abkhaz Soviets approved the decision by the Central Executive Committee to transform the 'treaty Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia' into the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (AbASSR) within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (GSSR), still at that time part of the broader Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR), with the relevant changes made to the Abkhaz Constitution. The relevant decisions were also approved by the VI Congress of the Georgian Soviets. The *de facto* situation became a legal reality. Nevertheless this action became lodged in the collective consciousness of the Abkhaz as an injustice towards their people, perpetrated first and foremost by "Stalin the Georgian".

In 1936 the TSFSR was dissolved and Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia each became direct subjects of the USSR as separate union republics. The new constitution (Main Law) of the USSR was adopted on 5 December of the same year. Chapter II determined the form of government of the country, and Article 25 read: "The Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic includes: the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the Ajar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and the South Ossetian Autonomous *Oblast*."

However, the Soviet legacy was not limited to painful manipulations of the status issue (where Abkhazia was far from exceptional). The Abkhaz suffered particularly badly during the 15-year period from the late 1930s until the early 1950s. According to the Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba, "It was during that period that the Stalin-Beria leadership of the republic, against the will of the Georgian people, embarked on a process of suppressing the Abkhaz. They tried to make the Abkhaz lose their identity and to portray them as one of the Georgian nationalities."⁴

Those years were marked by the mass enforced resettlement campaign, when peasants from provinces in western Georgia were moved to Abkhazia (a number of them dared to return to their homeland without authorisation despite

2. *The Struggle to Strengthen the Soviet Government in Georgia. Documents and materials 1921-1925* (Tbilisi, 1959), p. 80.
3. *Ibid.*

4. Stanislav Z. Lakoba, *Essays on the political history of Abkhazia*, (Sukhumi: Alashara, 1990), pp. 91-9.

the repressive Soviet regime).⁵ The Resettlement Department of the USSR government was established and temporary instructions *On the procedure for engaging, selecting and resettling of agricultural persons from land-poor to land-rich areas of the USSR and on receiving the settlers* were approved on 14 September 1939 by the Decree of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist (Bolshevik) Party and of the USSR Council of People's Commissars (May 1939), entitled *On protection of collective farms' public lands from fraudulent alienation*.⁶ The explanatory note drawn up by the beginning of the process of agricultural resettlement in the GSSR in 1940 read: "The resettlement of collective farmers and farmers into the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was carried out for the purpose of utilising a large number of available lands which could not be farmed by the local population due to insufficient labour resources."⁷

In the mid-1940s this was accompanied by an onslaught on the Abkhaz language, toponyms and history. The Abkhaz historian Z. Anchabadze paints the following picture in his study *Essay on the ethnic history of the Abkhaz people*:

"In post-war years, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Beria and his henchmen tried to carry out a policy of great-power chauvinism in Abkhazia. The chauvinists abolished Abkhaz schools and all teaching was carried out in Georgian. Consequently many Abkhaz children who spoke no Georgian missed out on school. Abkhaz primary school teachers⁸ and Abkhaz language and literature teachers could not be employed in jobs for which they were qualified. Abkhaz history was falsified to reflect this bias; along with the georgianization of Abkhaz toponyms, Georgian words were unnecessarily introduced in the Abkhaz language, Abkhaz were being ousted from the top Soviet and especially party governing bodies, and so on..."⁹

Latterly G. Anchabadze interpreted those events as follows: "The policy pursued in Abkhazia was made in Moscow. In the 1930s – 1940s many minority

nations in the USSR were harshly discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity, up to the point of deportation from their historic motherland and official integration into other, more numerous ethnic groups. Could it have been, that the 'Father of Nations' viewed this measure as the first step towards the future fusion of all the USSR's nations into one single Soviet nation? However, it should be remembered, that infringements of Abkhaz rights were perpetrated by Georgian party bosses under the flag of georgianization. The open and public acknowledgement of this fact would have helped Georgians to distance themselves, yet again, from those who implemented Kremlin policies, and to better understand the causes of the events that followed."¹⁰ He continues: "stubborn suppression of the issues driving the conflict does not make them go away."¹¹

The change of Soviet leadership in 1953 put an end to this process, but it did not mean a move towards the normalisation of the Georgian-Abkhaz relations. The renewed campaign, rather similar to that of the *korenizatsiya* (literally 'enrooting', or indigenizing) campaign of the 1920s, meant that the official record of your ethnic origin (particularly if you were a member of the titular nation, in this case, the Abkhaz) was critical in determining your career prospects. Express anti-Georgian attitudes after the change of power in the Kremlin led to yet another extreme in Abkhazia: the 'nomenklaturisation' of the Abkhaz ethnic group to the detriment of other nationalities in the republic, as large numbers of ethnic Abkhaz were appointed to managerial and lucrative positions. According to the Abkhaz expert Natella Akaba: "It is true that in the middle of the 1950s Moscow made some attempts to balance its nationalities policy, namely, it started using a quota system, whereby the titular nation would be better represented in the top echelons of power. It is difficult to say whether Moscow pursued any hidden agenda; be that as it may, this approach distinctly lodged the idea in the collective Georgian consciousness that the Centre was indeed doing all that, with the sole purpose of creating problems for the Georgians."¹² Georgians in Abkhazia felt that they were discriminated against on account of their ethnicity, and such attitudes naturally permeated throughout Georgian society.

Of paramount importance to the escalation of the conflict potential was the fact that over the modern

5. *Abkhazia: documents bear witness, 1937-1953*, compiled by B. E. Sagaria, T. A. Achugba and V. M. Pachulia (Sukhum: Alashara, 1992), pp.338, 341, 414-415.

6. The peasants' resettlement campaign encompassed the Volga region, Omsk *oblast*, Chelyabinsk *oblast*, the Altai region, Kazakhstan, the Far East, etc.

7. *Abkhazia: documents bear witness*, pp.6-7.

8. Tuition in Abkhaz only existed at the primary school level (years I-IV), after which it continued in either Georgian or Russian (author's note).

9. Quotation from Lakoba, *Essays on the political history of Abkhazia*, p.87.

10. *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.2, Irvine (1999): 25.

11. *Ibid.*, p.36.

12. *Ibid.*, p.15.

era there were very troubling developments for the Abkhaz in terms of Abkhazia's ethnic composition. As a result of both natural migration and the central authorities' policy of enforced resettlement, between 1897 and 1959 there was a six-fold increase in the population of ethnic Georgians, a 10-fold increase in the population of ethnic Armenians and a 17-fold increase in the population of ethnic Russians in Abkhazia. As a result, by the late 1950s, against the background of a stable Abkhaz population over the preceding 60 years, the Georgians became the dominant national demographic group, whilst the numbers of the Russians and Armenians in Abkhazia equalled, and sometimes exceeded those of the Abkhaz. Thirty years on (in 1989) the ethnic composition of Abkhazia was as follows: Georgians – 45.7%; Abkhaz – 17.8%; Armenians – 14.6%; and Russians – 14.3%.¹³

Significantly, one of the main reasons for particular concern among the Abkhaz about the growth of the Georgian component of the population is the centuries-old cultural proximity and similarities in the way of life between Abkhaz and Georgians; hence the Abkhaz fear of “melting” into the Georgian, but not any other, nation. Moreover, the inadequate perception of the Abkhaz by some Georgians, as either a sub-ethnic group of the Georgian people or as later arrivals in Georgia, did not fail to engender protest and concern among the Abkhaz. Despite the lamentable experience of the immediate neighbours and relatives of the Abkhaz, the Shapsugs and the Ubykhs¹⁴, the establishment of Russian as the main language amongst the Abkhaz is testimony to the fact that currently the real threat to the uniqueness of the Abkhaz is coming from a different direction.

As a consequence, due to the chronic imbalance of national relations in the Russian empire (first tsarist, then Soviet), Georgians and Abkhaz had become mutually mistrustful and suspicious of each other towards the final years of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the places the Georgians and the Abkhaz occupied in each other's consciousness were not equal. According to I. Surguladze, the Abkhaz intelligentsia “began to portray all the atrocities, committed over the years by the Communists as a result of Georgian

nationalism; all abnormalities, typical of the period of Communist leadership were proclaimed to have been the manifestation of the Georgians' nationalist attitude towards Abkhazia.”¹⁵ This was largely influenced by the Georgian ethnicity of both Stalin and especially Beria, a Georgian from Abkhazia. In Georgian consciousness, though, it was Russian imperialism and that alone which was the source of all evil; Abkhaz problems were relegated to second place as a mere consequence of Russian imperial intrigues. This resulted in Georgians ignoring Abkhaz interests (which is an insult to the Abkhaz) and Abkhaz blaming Georgians for everything (which is unfair to Georgians).

The disintegration of the USSR during the 1980s-1990s became the final stage in the deterioration of Georgian-Abkhaz relations – the number of antagonistic factors was rapidly nearing critical mass and then exceeded it. The search for new markers of identity appropriate to the new conditions, the formulation of national projects, and tactical and strategic goals in both Georgian and Abkhaz societies literally pushed the two nations apart. It was in those years that in the collective Georgian consciousness stereotypes of the Abkhaz became fixed as an instrument of Moscow, be it willing or an unwilling, as Russia fermented and exacerbated separatist attitudes to further its own (neo-)imperial goals. Georgia's top priority was to acquire independence, in order to avoid the danger of “melting” into the depersonalised ‘Soviet people’; this superseded all other aspirations, including the similar attitudes of other groups. Abkhaz fears (both abetted from abroad and based on the memory of uncertainties in 1918-21 and the extremes of the Soviet period) of an uncertain future within an independent Georgia were exacerbated by the nationalist rhetoric of the segment of the Georgian national liberation movement associated with Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and by the works of unscrupulous historians, essayists, and writers. The Abkhaz saw the already agonising Soviet government (and after the dissolution of the USSR, its successor – Russia) as its only ‘protector’ from the Georgians. In the March 1991 referendum the Georgians voted for secession from the USSR whilst the Abkhaz voted for its preservation. The mutual lack of understanding and mistrust led to the fact that when the conditions were ripe to fight the communist system, the Georgians started to fight

13. See G. P. Lezhava, *Change in class and national structure of Abkhazia's population* (Alashara Publishing House, Sukhumi, 1989).

14. The Ubykh and the Shapsugs were related peoples belonging to the North-West Caucasian (Circassian) group, inhabiting lands to the north-west of Abkhazia, which were subjected to mass deportation and in the case of the Ubykh met with effective extinction as a result of Russian conquest – *Ed.*

15. *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.5, Irvine (2000): 272.

the Kremlin and the Abkhaz embarked on a fight with the Georgians. Therefore it is not surprising that the Kremlin and the Abkhaz found in each other allies against Georgia (at least on many, if not all, issues). At the same time it would be a gross simplification to ignore the following: "Abkhaz phobia of the Georgians and Abkhaz nationalism have their own roots, resources and traditions, often not connected to Moscow and Moscow's 'imperialism'."¹⁶ Therefore the Abkhaz argument, that short-sighted Georgian actions or omissions constantly pushed the Abkhaz towards Russia, is not entirely groundless.

The dynamics of Georgian-Abkhaz relations over one hundred years show that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict contains elements of both ethnic (inter-ethnic) and political confrontation, which is why many observers describe it as 'ethno-political'. However, according to George Tarkhan-Mouravi, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict ultimately transformed into a territorial conflict or into a conflict of sovereignties.¹⁷ A categorical formula,

16. Sergey Markedonov, "American interests in the Caucasus", 13 May 2010; retrieved from <http://polit.ru/analytics/2010/05/13/kavkaz.html>

17. George Tarkhan-Mouravi, "The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in regional context", in *The Georgians and the Abkhaz: the road to reconciliation* (Moscow: Ves Mir, 1998).

'Abkhazia is Georgia', became embedded in Georgian consciousness (of those resident both in Abkhazia and Georgia as a whole), while there existed a certain ambiguity in Abkhaz consciousness, with the dominant approach of 'Abkhazia is Abkhazia' co-existing with a contextual 'Abkhazia is Russia'. The existence of the latter was confirmed by the appeals to the USSR leadership of several mobilizations of the Abkhaz people (held during the Soviet period after World War II at 10-11-year intervals), asking for Abkhazia to be incorporated into the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) instead of the GSSR. However, according to Ghia Nodia, added together the two Abkhaz approaches became an 'Abkhazia is not Georgia' formula, irreconcilable with the Georgian position.¹⁸ Therefore the hope expressed by S. Arutyunov, that "...I think that both Georgians and Abkhaz will acknowledge, that it [Abkhazia] has never been wholly Georgian or wholly Abkhaz"¹⁹ has so far failed to realise. From here we can perceive the main risk, that Abkhazia will become neither Georgian nor Abkhaz, nor will it become their common country.

18. See more details in Ghia Nodia, "The conflict in Abkhazia: national projects and political circumstances", in *The Georgians and the Abkhaz: the road to reconciliation*.

19. *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.4, Irvine (2000): 99.

3. Conflict resolution policies before August 2008 - Ivlian Haindrava

The unstructured, fragmented nature and often indirect nature of Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue in the late 1980s and early 1990s are some of the main causes of the military standoff of 1992-93. Carried away by the formulation and implementation of their own national projects, neither side could hear or understand the other, nor did they show sufficient will or skill to do so. In particular, the Georgians could not provide a meaningful explanation to the Abkhaz of what they could expect if they were to live in an independent Georgia.

However, it was just as Georgia was restoring its independence, after Gamsakhurdia's accession to power, that Tbilisi came up with quite an unconventional measure: following legislative changes, the elections to the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia in 1991 were held on the basis of national quotas. This resulted in the ethnic Abkhaz (18% of the population of the Autonomous republic) being allocated 28 seats and ethnic Georgians (at 46% of the population) 26 seats (other nationalities were allocated 11 seats).

According to an amendment to the Constitution of the AbASSR introduced at the time, two-thirds of the total number of deputies in the Supreme Soviet was required to pass a law or other legislation relating to the legal status of the autonomy, which automatically required the cooperation of the Georgian and Abkhaz factions. This particular parity was also to be observed when forming the government. The parties reached an agreement during the visit of the President of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia A. Asatiani to Sukhumi. However, these developments took place in a rapidly deteriorating environment far from encouraging cooperation and compromise; trust between Tbilisi and Sukhumi was never achieved. The Georgian delegation to the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia did not have a plan of action, and it could not take immediate decisions without consulting the leadership in Tbilisi (also bereft of a clear plan of action), while the Abkhaz delegation, bypassing agreed and legitimate procedures, replaced laws with the resolutions of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and appointed “interim officers” to high offices without prior agreement with the Georgian faction.

In May 1992 (after the overthrow in Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Tbilisi) a delegation of the State Council of Georgia visited Sukhumi, but the negotiations with the Abkhaz leaders did not yield any concrete results. Soon afterwards the Abkhaz academic T. Shamba published his proposals for a draft *Law on the foundations of relations between the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of Georgia*²⁰, which contained a number of worthy provisions that unfortunately did not receive the attention they deserved.²¹ In August armed hostilities ensued, during which a variety of documents in different formats were signed; nevertheless these proved unable to prevent subsequent events.

In the post-war period attempts to find a formula for the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict more often than not boiled down to the determination of Abkhazia’s status, a simplistic approach to a complex issue. The resolution of the conflict requires not only a solution of the politically thorny issue of status, but also the resolution of the issues of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), multi-layered and

complex property issues, and a whole plethora of humanitarian, social, economic questions and issues of security at different levels. The order in which those issues were to be solved did not have a predetermined, or ‘received’, schedule and consequently, objectively speaking there was room to search for and find solutions in various areas. Any solution found and implemented would have contributed in turn to the creation of trust and an atmosphere of cooperation between the parties, thus transforming the conflict and facilitating its resolution.

It was the status issue, however, which continued to dominate socio-political discourse on both sides of the Inguri river. During the first years after the end of hostilities, the search for the key to the resolution of the problem by all parties without exception was conducted within the format of the territorial integrity of Georgia. In April 1994 in the presence of the UN, the OSCE and the Russian Federation, the parties’ representatives signed the *Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict* including, *inter alia*, arrival at a “common understanding regarding the authority to carry out joint activities.” The *Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons* (with the participation of the UN and the Russian Federation) was signed at the same time. This was followed by the *Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz Settlement*, dated 22 July 1995, in which the second paragraph in particular read: “The Parties declare their agreement to live in a single federative state within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Relations between them shall be regulated by the constitutional law.” The protocol set out a general framework for the division of powers between the federal centre and the Abkhaz authorities. The document was initialled but later the Abkhaz side recalled its signature.²²

The Georgian and Abkhaz sides again came close to reaching an agreement in June 1997. According to the draft *Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz Settlement* (Paragraph 2): “The Parties declare their agreement to live in a common state within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic at 21 December 1991.” The main functions of the “jointly established bodies of the

20. *Abkhazia*, newspaper, no. 23, June 1992.

21. See more detail on the pre-war period in Davit Berdzenishvili, “Tbilisi-Sukhumi: before and after the interim period”, in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.7, Irvine (2001): 141-148.

22. Vakhtang Kolbaia, Chapter 1 in *Guarantees of non-resumption of hostilities: concerns in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz relations* (in Russian) (Tbilisi, 2009), p.10; p.80. See also A. Lepsaia, “Situation in Abkhazia as a model of a closed society with an external conflict; factors, affecting conflict resolution” in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.4, Irvine (2000): 10, 82.

common state” were also determined. But this time it was Tbilisi which declined to legalise the agreement, and the chance to resolve the conflict was missed yet again.²³

The few unofficial initiatives that occurred should be noted too. The Abkhaz side came up with the proposals which their author – Vyacheslav Chirikba – described as follows: “The draft state model suggested below is based on a combination of federative and confederative principles, which is intended to reconcile the positions of the Georgians and the Abkhaz.”²⁴

Immediately after the non-signing of the June 1997 Protocol, the Republican Party of Georgia put forward an idea for splitting Abkhazia into two approximately equal zones (North-Western ‘predominantly populated by the Abkhaz’ and South-Eastern ‘predominantly populated by the Georgians’), the first called the Republic of Abkhazia and the second – the Abkhaz Region (in Russian, *kray*; in Georgian *mkhare*). The powers which this concept suggested for the Republic of Abkhazia was somewhat reminiscent of Chirikba’s above-mentioned proposals.²⁵

On the Abkhaz side the official turning point in attitudes towards Georgian territorial integrity as the essential principle of conflict resolution came about in 1999, when the Parliament of Abkhazia passed the *Act of Independence* (the legitimacy of this law and of associated presidential elections and a referendum to approve the Constitution of 3 October, was not accepted either by the Georgian side or by the international community). According to a group of Abkhaz experts, ‘From that moment on, Sukhum has declined to discuss the political status of Abkhazia...’²⁶

Despite the change in Sukhumi’s position, mediators in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict unequivocally upheld the principle of Georgia’s territorial integrity in their approach. In the “Boden Plan” of 2001 (*Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competencies between Tbilisi and Sukhumi*), which soon gained official support of the UN (UN SC Resolution no. 1393, 31 January 2002),

Abkhazia is viewed as a ‘sovereign entity within the Georgian state’ and the borders of the latter are ‘not to be changed outwith the Constitution of the State of Georgia.’

Formulas along the lines of the ‘fullest possible rights’, ‘competencies at the level of the highest European (world) standards for Abkhazia within Georgia’, ‘practically unrestricted autonomy’, etc. were often repeated by Tbilisi’s top officials – first by President Eduard Shevardnadze, and then by President Mikheil Saakashvili. However, following the failures of the 1995 and 1997 protocols these pronouncements did not gain any substance. The range of opinions regarding the status of Abkhazia remained considerable both in society as a whole and among the political elite, vacillating between the idea of Abkhazian autonomy within a unitary Georgian state and the idea of a constituent entity in a single or common federative state with two or multiple entities. During the period bridging presidents Shevardnadze and Saakashvili, a group of Georgian experts assisted by Conciliation Resources, developed a *Concept for the special status of Abkhazia within the state of Georgia*, the political and legal part of which were published in Georgian²⁷, with the English and Russian versions of the document distributed in parallel. In the foreword to the 2007 brochure, Laurence Broers characterised this work as an attempt to identify, in detail, practical means to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.²⁸ Unlike the ‘autonomists’, the authors of the *Concept* viewed Abkhazia as a nation-forming subject of a common state, with the relevant inalienable rights and privileges.

The new Georgian leadership, which came to power as a result of the ‘Rose Revolution’, for a long time either ignored the *Concept* or criticised its individual provisions superficially and selectively (read unscrupulously), and it was only in March 2008 that President Saakashvili mentioned it in passing in a positive context.

As has already been mentioned, however, the issue of Abkhazia’s status was by no means the only stumbling block on the road to resolving the conflict. The issue of the (non-)return of Georgian refugees and IDPs to Abkhazia acquired perhaps an even greater prominence. George Tarkhan-Mouravi has written in this regard: ‘Whatever the progress reached by the parties on the issue of political

23. Kolbaia, *Guarantees...*, p.10, p.82.

24. Vyacheslav Chirikba, “Georgia and Abkhazia: recommendations for a constitutional model” in *Search for alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia* (Moscow: Ves Mir, 1999), pp.387-435.

25. Ivlian Haindrava, “The conflict in Abkhazia and a possible way to resolve it” in *Search for alternatives...* pp.353-365.

26. International Alert, *Dialogue process on security guarantees in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict*, September 2009, p.12.

27. *24 saati*, newspaper, 30 June 2004.

28. *Responses to frequently asked questions in connection with the Concept for the special status of Abkhazia within Georgia* (in Georgian) (Tbilisi: Conciliation Resources, 2007).

status, it would be meaningless for the Abkhaz, should the pre-war demographic balance be restored.²⁹ Other Georgian experts also shared the understanding, that this ethno-demographic issue was of existential importance to the Abkhaz.³⁰

There was no such understanding at the level of the Georgian leadership, or if there was it was not voiced. Promises of speedy return (the terms varied depending on the stability of the government's position and the time remaining until the next election) were constantly present in official propaganda, which allowed the authorities to secure the loyalty of a significant number of people (voters). Manipulation of the numbers of refugees and IDPs continued; the fact that a considerable number of ethnic Georgians had returned to the Gali district of Abkhazia was ignored (the vulnerability and rights infringements of the returnees do not contradict the fact of return itself), and the process of the full integration of IDPs in their new places of residence did not receive the required government support (even after the development and approval of the relevant Strategy in 2007). In practice the issue of Georgian refugees and IDPs was used merely as an additional factor to exert continuous pressure on the Abkhaz; especially since those international institutions involved in one way or another in the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process, supported and were bound to support refugees and IDPs' right to voluntary return. At the same time international organisations contributed to the best of their ability to integration and adaptation processes.³¹

Saakashvili's speech at a meeting with IDPs from Abkhazia on 28 November 2007, as part of his election campaign, serves as an illustration: "I want to promise, that in the nearest future – I was going to have done this during my first presidential term, but reasons well-known I cut my first term short – that in the nearest future, and by this I mean the next several months not years, we will create, together with the international community, conditions for your dignified and safe

return to Abkhazia." After this, according to the materials of news website *Civil.ge*, Saakashvili criticised "some international organisations" for their assistance in creating conditions facilitating the integration of refugees into the local community in Tbilisi and other districts where they presently reside.³²

The use of the refugees and IDPs issue (which undoubtedly requires resolution) was not the only weapon for exerting pressure on the Abkhaz in Tbilisi's arsenal. At Tbilisi's suggestion CIS member countries introduced sanctions against Abkhazia in January 1996, although this clearly served the interests of others as well as those of Georgia. In the first paragraph of the *Decision by the Council of CIS Heads of State*, the CIS states denounced 'the destructive position of the Abkhaz side, which hindered the achievement of mutually acceptable agreements on the political resolution of the conflict.'³³ This could also be viewed as a reaction to the decision by the Abkhaz authorities to withdraw their signature from 1995 *Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict Settlement*, which they had initially signed. The military restrictions placed on Abkhazia were driven, among other things, by Russia's interests, since this allowed Russia to prevent the possibility of reciprocal assistance on the part of the Abkhaz to the Chechens (some of whom had fought on the Abkhaz side in the 1992-93 war), in the on-going Russian military campaign in Chechnya. This form of pressure, however, rebounded on Georgia: the instruments to implement the sanctions ended up in Russia's hands (which used these sanctions as it saw fit), and the Abkhaz population's discontent with the attempts to 'stifle' it economically turned against Georgia. Moreover, until the status-dominated negotiations reached a deadlock, the Georgian side paid little attention to the search for constructive ideas in the sphere of economy (such Georgian projects appeared later³⁴). As far as the Abkhaz were concerned, according to Jonathan Cohen '... the prospect of economic development appears to be an insufficient temptation to encourage the Abkhaz to compromise their long-term political goals...'³⁵

29. Tarkhan-Mouravi, "The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the regional context", p.140.

30. See, for example, Ivlian Haindrava, Paata Zakareishvili and Davit Berdzenishvili, "To consider and understand", *The Caucasian accent*, newspaper, no. 9, 19-30 April 2000 (published in Georgian in *dilis gazetis* newspaper, 18 March 2000. This article was also later published in the Abkhaz press, engendering lively debate.

31. See for example *Out of the margins: Securing a voice for internally displaced people: lessons from Georgia* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2009); available at http://www.c-r.org/our-work/caucasus/documents/Out_of_Margins_Georgia_Russian_web.pdf

32. See <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=15001&search=>

33. CIS Heads of State decision, "On measures to regulate the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia" *Svobodnaya Gruzija* newspaper, no. 8, 29 January 1996.

34. See, for example, Davit Berdzenishvili, 'Opening Abkhazia: a joint corporate project', in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.8, Irvine (2002): 175-185.

Lastly, there has always been a discernable military component in the Georgian authorities' policy in relation to solving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict – appearing at different moments to a greater or lesser degree. Although Georgian military forces did not present a real threat of force until the mid-2000s, the periodic activities of the Georgian 'partisans' (or armed gangs as interpreted by the Abkhaz) did not cease. Events in the Gali district in May 1998 were the pinnacle of their activities, when paramilitary Georgian units attempted to gain control over the district – which dealt, according to a group of Abkhaz experts, a serious blow to the negotiation process and which perceptibly undermined Abkhaz trust in Georgian intentions.³⁶ At the same time tough retaliation measures by the Abkhaz affected not so much the instigators and participants of these irresponsible actions, but primarily peaceful civilians. This led to a new exodus of the Georgian population from the district and deepened their mistrust towards the Abkhaz administration.

The 'Gelaev raid' into the Kodori gorge in 2001, clearly a provocation in its own right and a mystery to this day, would have been impossible without the help of the Georgian authorities. It also exacerbated mistrust between the parties.³⁷ In this context it is appropriate to quote from the speech by the head of the Georgian delegation P. Chkheidze, at the 56th session of the UN General Assembly in November 2001: "The government of Georgia restates its determination to seek peaceful resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia (Georgia). We think that the use of force goes against our political interests, especially the interests of our multi-ethnic population, including the Abkhaz. At the same time the government of Georgia finds it increasingly difficult to restrain those who have lost faith in the possibility of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, from using other means."³⁸

Therefore the situation that had developed by the end of the 1990s meant that both fundamental principles of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution, promoted by international organisations and mediators, were undermined. The first principle (resolution of the conflict by exclusively

peaceful means) was disregarded by the Georgian side, while the second principle (conflict resolution within the framework of Georgian territorial integrity) came to be openly ignored by the Abkhaz. Furthermore the Georgian side spoke of a complete return of refugees and IDPs to the whole territory of Abkhazia, whilst the Abkhaz restricted the area of partial return to the Gali district, which set the parties' positions even further apart.

The analysis of the negotiation process during this period leads to the conclusion (and the fate of the 1995 and 1997 Protocols is vivid testimony) that each conflict party did not strive to seek mutually acceptable, sustainable solutions which could lead to resolving the conflict, with due consideration given to the basic interests of both parties, but unilaterally advantageous solutions, or to be more precise, solutions which appeared to be such. National interests were interpreted narrowly, or were simply reduced to ethnic interests. Unsurprisingly negotiations came to a stalemate, with only rare occasions when local agreements were reached on tactical issues; nonetheless these did not bring the parties any closer to strategic solutions. Efforts to resolve the conflict turned into a zero sum game; no discernable shifts towards conflict transformation occurred. In the meantime the process of alienation between Georgians and Abkhaz continued, the parties got used to living in conditions of unresolved conflict, without security guarantees, and with unresolved economic, property and humanitarian issues. It is from that position that some Georgian experts suggested a re-evaluation of the situation and the relevant risks, but their voices were ignored not only by the authorities but also by most of Georgian society that continued to live in the grip of stereotypes, prejudice and illusions.³⁹

Unable to find mutually acceptable solutions to a multitude of problems, the parties to the conflict short-sightedly sustained a high level of their own dependence on external players and intermediaries harbouring their own interests, often and in many areas at odds with the interests of the immediate parties to the conflict. In 1999 political scientist Bruno Coppieters wrote in this regard: "The poor record of Russian mediation in the conflict is partly due to the fact that Russia has particular interests to defend in the region. Russia's past as a colonial

35. Jonathan Cohen, "Incentive or obstacle?" in *A Question of Sovereignty: the Georgia-Abkhazia Peace Process*, edited by Jonathan Cohen, *Accord*, Vol. 7 (London: Conciliation Resources, 1999), p.34.

36. International Alert, *Dialogue process on security guarantees...*, pp.11-12.

37. See *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.9, Irvine (2002): 262-296.

38. <http://www.un.org/russian/documen/gadocs/56sess/georg.pdf>

39. Haindrava, Zakareishvili and Berdenishvili, "To consider and understand". See also Thornike Gordadze, "Moral and ideological impediments to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution", in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.2, Irvine (2002): 51-65.

power makes it poorly suited for the role of peacemaker. Both parties to the conflict depend on Moscow, but at the same time have a deep distrust towards its policies and intentions.”⁴⁰

The period of four-five years at the end of the 1990s/beginning of the 2000s can be described as a period of stagnation in the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process. This was true at least at the official level, even if civil society-level contacts were very intensive in this period. Those contacts were productive in terms of understanding the nature of the conflict and identifying the parties' expectations and fears. The lack of dynamics at the official level led to the conflict becoming 'frozen', when against a backdrop of sluggish official negotiations the main efforts were directed at prevention of a resumption of violence, rather than deep conflict transformation. While in the case of South Ossetia this period saw the resumption and strengthening of contacts (and trust) between Georgians and Ossetians, no such developments occurred in the relations with the Abkhaz.

A narrow window of opportunity to resolve the conflict opened as a result of the change of government, first in Tbilisi (in the 'Rose Revolution' of November 2003), and then in Sukhumi (the two-round presidential elections of October 2004 – January 2005). Shevardnadze (whom the Abkhaz hold responsible for the war of 1992-93) was replaced by politicians of the younger generation (Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania, Nino Burjanadze), who could not be considered immediately responsible for what had happened in 1992-3. And though "Abkhazia was not an election campaign topic either during the 2003 November parliamentary elections, or during the 2004 presidential elections or during the repeat parliamentary elections on 28 March 2004"⁴¹, the new Georgian leadership immediately took a number of steps, which were meant to serve as a signal of the new thinking and new approaches to the issue in the official Tbilisi. Tamaz Nadareishvili, head of the 'Abkhaz government-in-exile' and unofficial leader of Georgian hawks, which insisted that wartime losses could not be recovered through peaceful negotiations, was sidelined. The partisan movement in Abkhazia, troublesome not only for the Abkhaz administration but for the Georgian population of the Gali district, was quickly

and painlessly de-activated. The new parliament of Georgia terminated the powers of the so-called 'Abkhaz faction' – i.e. members of parliament elected from Abkhazia back in 1992, whose powers had been repeatedly renewed even though they no longer represented anyone. At Georgia's Independence Day parade on the 26 May 2004 President Saakashvili uttered several phrases in Abkhaz, calling for reconciliation and normalisation of relations.⁴² Giorgi Haindrava was appointed State Minister for Conflict Resolution, and Irakli Alasania was appointed the president's personal representative at the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations. Together they formed a tandem of official leaders of Georgian doves. Lastly, Tbilisi practically made hardly any attempts to interfere in any way in the epic process of the Abkhaz presidential elections of 2004-5 (at the same time as not acknowledging their legitimacy), which brought Sergey Bagapsh to power. Contrary to his predecessor Vladislav Ardzinba (who occupied in the Georgian mindset a comparably negative position to that of Shevardnadze in the Abkhaz mindset), he was not by and large actively resented by Georgians.⁴³

The signing of a protocol on agreement at ministerial level on guarantees of the non-resumption of hostilities on 5 December 2005 can be cited as one of the relative achievements of the first months following the change of governments in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. On 6-7 December consultations to rehabilitate the conflict zone were held under the aegis of the EU and the Council of Europe.⁴⁴

However, things did not go much further. This was not least due to the fact that together with peaceful and constructive messages addressed to Sukhumi, there was an increase in the military rhetoric of the Georgian leadership and a general increase in militancy. The build-up of the Georgian army became extensive, with defence expenditure and the number of military personnel growing considerably year on year (having exceeded 25% of all state expenditure – which constituted over

40. Bruno Coppieters, "The roots of the conflict" in *A Question of Sovereignty: the Georgia-Abkhazia Peace Process*, edited by Jonathan Cohen, *Accord*, Vol. 7 (London: Conciliation Resources, 1999), p.18.

41. Paata Zakareishvili, *Abkhazia in the pre-election campaigning of Georgian politicians* (in Russian) (Tbilisi: Conciliation Resources, 2004), p. iii.

42. See more detail in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.11, Irvine (2005).

43. Noteworthy here is an article by G. Sanadiradze and N. Saneblidze, "Ardzinba and Georgia", published in Georgian on 25 March 2010 in connection with Ardzinba's death, in which the authors dispel many stereotypes obtaining in Georgian society; retrieved from <http://presa.ge/index.php?text=news&i=9865>

44. For more on this period see G. Volski, "The Period Prior to the August 2008 Conflict: Peace Plan and Untapped Opportunities", Black Sea Peacebuilding Network, Bulletin 3, May 2010; retrieved from http://www.bspn.gfsis.org/docs/BSPN_Bulletin_3.pdf

8% of the GDP in 2008⁴⁵). Programmes for the training and retraining of army reserves were embarked upon, so-called 'young patriotic camps' were set up, some of them in immediate proximity to the conflict zones. Official explanations of these developments – that Georgia was bringing its army in line with NATO standards – sounded suspect, since the numbers of the military personnel exceeded the total number of the Baltic states' military personnel by two to one. The NATO standard of 2% of the GDP being directed towards defence needs was also exceeded several times over.

Having become president, Mikheil Saakashvili immediately put particular emphasis on the restoration of the country's territorial integrity despite the fact that, as noted above, this issue was by no means one of the priorities of the 'Rose Revolution' which swept him into power. He became a hostage of his own impatience. Having given rise to hopes (or illusions) of a speedy resolution amongst his compatriots, inspired by the success in Ajara in May 2004 and enjoying the patronage of the West, which enthusiastically and generously supported the breakthrough of the reform-oriented new leadership (it is fair to say that a number of genuinely progressive initiatives were born in those initial years), Saakashvili felt bound to act decisively in 'unfreezing' the conflicts.

The 'Ajara factor' deserves a separate mention here. Firstly, the new (and very young) Georgian leadership clearly underestimated the fundamental differences between the 'Ajar issue' where the centre-periphery conflict between the centre and local authorities (the later under the leadership of Aslan Abashidze) lacked an ethnic component, on the one hand, and the South Ossetian, and especially, Abkhaz problem, on the other.⁴⁶

45. http://www.mof.ge/budget/by_year/2008

46. The Autonomous Republic of Ajara enjoyed the same status under Soviet rule as Abkhazia. It was ostensibly created in the 1920s in recognition of a separate Ajarian sub-ethnic group within the Georgian nation, although its real purpose was as much if not more to do with securing harmonious Soviet-Turkish relations at the time. Ajara's population was at that time distinguished from other Georgians by religion, professing Islam as a legacy of its status as a border community periodically incorporated into the Ottoman state, but not language (a dialect of Georgian was, and in more remote areas still is, spoken in Ajara). Over the course of Soviet rule, however, aggressive anti-Islamic campaigning and emphasis on language, as well as the deleting of Ajars as a separate census category in the early 1930s (they were subsequently registered as Georgians) diminished a separate sense of Ajar identity. Although religious revival is a noted factor in post-Soviet Ajara, this phenomenon has played no role in identity politics; Ajarian identity is limited to regional variations in dialect and ethnography and there is little sense in which Ajars constitute a "national minority" – *Ed.*

Secondly, the breakthrough on the Ajar front had some rather dubious developments. Instead of opening space for political competition as much as possible there was yet another monopolisation of power. The constitutional law on the status of the autonomous republic of Ajara passed by the Georgian parliament on 1 June 2004, which considerably reduced its autonomous powers⁴⁷, has particular significance in the context of this study. Despite the authorities' assurances that this measure was in no way indicative of their approaches to Abkhazia (and South Ossetia), it did not contribute in any way to greater confidence among the Abkhaz. To make the matters worse, on 5 July after the ceremony of signing the law on the status of Ajara Saakashvili told journalists: 'We labour under no illusions and know that so far Georgia is not ready to recover Abkhazia. But we shall be able to do it in the next two to three years.'⁴⁸

The first alarm bells regarding the zones of 'frozen conflicts' rang already in the summer of 2004, when the 'humanitarian storming' of Tskhinvali acquired elements of violence, even though backsliding to a large-scale armed conflict was successfully prevented.⁴⁹ The ambition of the Tbilisi leadership to solve all issues in one go (through steps such as the closure of a unique market in the village of Ergneti, where counterfeit goods were traded in a mutually beneficial arrangement between Georgians and Ossetians⁵⁰, an attempt to restore and use the railroad from Tbilisi to Tskhinvali, to win favour with the local Ossetian people by means of handing out fertilisers and food, all circumventing the *de facto* authorities in Tskhinvali) were a real setback in Georgian-Ossetian relations and demonstrated that the hawks were gaining strength in Georgia at the doves' expense. The bells do not seem to have rung alarmingly enough, however, for Georgian society or for Georgia's Western partners and allies. According to Vakhtang Kolbaia: "The altered geopolitical situation engendered false expectations – the authorities thought that since

47. See for example the assessment of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission at [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2004/CDL-AD\(2004\)018-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2004/CDL-AD(2004)018-e.asp)

48. <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=5527&search=>

49. For more detail see International Crisis Group, *Georgia: avoiding war in South Ossetia*, Europe Report no. 159', November 2004; retrieved from http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/caucasus/georgia/159-georgia-avoiding-war-in-south-ossetia.aspx?alt_lang=ru

50. For more detail see A. Kukhianidze, A. Kupatadze, R. Gotsiridze, *The problems of smuggling in Georgia: Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali district* (Tbilisi: American University/TraCCC, 2004) (in Georgian).

the international community reacted positively to the changes in Georgia, giving it every support, this gave the Georgian ruling circles *carte blanche* in the speediest possible resolution of the conflicts. Such an approach played a disastrous role in conflict resolution in Georgia.”⁵¹ This remark applies first and foremost to the administration of President George Bush, which supported almost any actions on Saakashvili’s part right up to the end of its term in the White House.

On the other hand, the alarm bells were heard in Moscow. In response to the events of summer 2004 around Tskhinvali some elements in the Russian political establishment called for South Ossetia to be admitted into Russia as a unit of the Russian Federation.⁵² This was compounded by the total, aggressive and active antagonism of the Kremlin towards Georgia’s declared strategy to join NATO, and the already troubled Georgian-Russian relations began their downward slide.

These developments naturally caused concern in Sukhumi; as Vyacheslav Chirikba has written on the subject of Georgia’s potential membership in NATO: “Of utmost concern is the fact that NATO will supply Georgia with so much financial resources, military advisers, equipment, hardware, software – that it will make the Georgian army much more powerful than it is today. It will create a huge imbalance vis-à-vis the capabilities of the Abkhaz army. And this of course is a direct threat to our security.”⁵³ The fact that this point of view was prevalent in Abkhazia could be viewed both as a result of successful Russian anti-NATO propaganda and a failure of the West to bring its message home to the Abkhaz elite (not to mention ordinary people) that ‘under the NATO umbrella’ Georgia would be more predictable and disabled from carrying out unilateral and irresponsible actions. From the military point of view it would pose a lesser threat to Abkhazia than if it were outside direct NATO procedures and influences. A lot more could be said about the lost opportunities in the context of the EU, which unlike NATO, was not altogether negatively perceived in Abkhazia before the August 2008 war.⁵⁴

One way or another, a temporary period of calm settled on both South Ossetian and Abkhaz

fronts after the events in South Ossetia in the summer 2004, and for two years there were no dangerous incidents. It was a period of the relative achievements in Georgian-Abkhaz contacts mentioned above, although these achievements stayed firmly at the level of good intentions and went no further. On the other hand, 2006 saw a real collapse in the Georgian-Russian relations, bringing them almost to the “brink of war”, with very negative effects on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution process.⁵⁵

Despite, or quite possibly due to the increasing general tension, in the summer of 2006 the parties came up with their own suggestions regarding the comprehensive resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Despite the fact that both the Abkhaz document entitled ‘Key to the future’⁵⁶, and the Georgian response to it in the form of the ‘Road map’⁵⁷ contained a number of *a priori* mutually exclusive ideas and suggestions (automatically devaluing the practical value of the documents), some initiatives deserved close examination. The points which had real potential to be agreed by the parties should have been singled out to draw up a joint document, which would have allowed movement towards building mutual confidence through resolving those issues open to resolution. However, the opportunity was lost yet again and the events in the Kodori gorge in the summer, brought the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations to a stalemate.

At the end of July 2006 the leadership of Georgia sent interior ministry troops to suppress the open insubordination of the former presidential representative in the Kodori district, who headed a semi-official paramilitary detachment. On completion of the operation some Georgian units (together with equipment and weapons) stayed in the upper part of the gorge. Moreover, the operation was publicised as the beginning of the process to reinstate Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia, and President Saakashvili ordered for the ‘Abkhaz government-in-exile’ to be relocated to the gorge. The status quo determined by the Ceasefire agreement of 14 May 1994 was broken by Georgia, which fact was reflected in the UN SC Resolution of 13 October 2006.⁵⁸

51. *Guarantees on non-resumption of hostilities* (in Russian), p.14.
52. “State Duma is ready to incorporate South Ossetia into Russia”, 6 August 2004; retrieved from <http://www.newsru.com/russia/06aug2004/osetduma.html>

53. *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.14, Irvine (2007): 144.

54. Iraklii Khintba, “Abkhazia’s stance on the EU policy in the South Caucasus”, *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Vol.13, Irvine (2007): 65-78.

55. For more detail see M. Muskhelishvili and G. Georgioliani, “Georgia and Russia in 2006 : new realities” in the 2006 almanac of the Caucasus Institute of Mass Media (KISMI-Kavkaz) (Yerevan, 2008).

56. <http://www.abkhaziagov.org/ru/president/activities/programms/detail.php?ID=3106>

57. <http://www.apsny.ge/analytics/1149889066.php>

58. <http://www.un.org/russian/document/sresol/res2006/res1716.htm>

Given that even before the Kodori events – in March 2006 – Irakli Alasania was appointed Georgia's Ambassador to the UN (he formally remained presidential representative at the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations, but in essence was removed from the epicentre of events) and that in July of the same year Giorgi Haindrava was relieved of his duties, it can be surmised that from that time on the negotiation process in the existing format completely lost any prospects for the Saakashvili administration. According to a group of Abkhaz experts, Georgia was pressing heavily in favour of changing the format of the peace-building operation and re-formatting the negotiation process, whilst Moscow, although not recognising Abkhazia, would not give Georgia a chance to reinstate its territorial integrity on its conditions.⁵⁹ (It should be noted here that the Abkhaz conditions did not envisage the reinstatement of Georgia's territorial integrity at all). Moreover, Russia took a number of unilateral steps such as issuing *en masse* Russian passports to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, exiting the CIS sanction regime imposed on Abkhazia, and introducing its troops to Abkhazia to repair its military infrastructure such as the railway. In parallel with increasing its political and military-economic support for Abkhazia, the Russian Federation introduced bans on Georgian food imports into Russia, stopped not only air but also postal communications between the two countries, and opened a multiple extensive 'offensive' on Georgia. On 10 February 2007 President Vladimir Putin made his 'Munich speech' in which Russia openly announced that the West would not get away with the recognition of Kosovo's independence. On 12 July 2008 the new president, Dimitri Medvedev, signed the 'Russian foreign policy concept' in which NATO's enlargement to include Ukraine and Georgia was said to be unacceptable for Russia and which spoke of Russia's intention to protect the interests of its citizens in Eurasia. In 2005 Russia held large-scale 'Caucasus frontier' airborne exercises during which troops from inner Russia were deployed to the North Caucasus, or to North Ossetia, to be precise. The exercises were also held in 2006 and 2007 and, lastly, immediately in the run-up to the August war – in July 2008.

Against this background of gradual escalation of tensions a number of other attempts were made, to save the negotiation process and peace itself. At the end of March 2008 President Saakashvili put forward

a number of various, if slightly confused, peace initiatives addressed to Abkhazia⁶⁰, which some viewed as a message to the Bucharest NATO summit of 1 April, scheduled to consider the issue of Georgia's joining the NATO Membership Action Plan.

On 12 May Irakli Alasania and Sergey Shamba held a meeting behind closed doors in Sukhumi, where they discussed the signing of an agreement on the non-resumption of hostilities, but the document was not signed this time either. Lastly, in July the German Foreign Minister V. Steinmeier brought a three-stage proposal for a peaceful settlement to the leaders of Georgia and Abkhazia, meeting with controversial reactions, however. Tbilisi was suspicious about the third paragraph of the plan which discussed Abkhazia's status, noting that it needed to be worked on, but overall it reacted favourably to the document; Abkhazia, on the other hand, raised so many objections so as to effectively reject the document.⁶¹ At the same time Russia treated 'the Steinmeier plan' as conceptually appropriate, with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noting: "This plan encompasses all the aspects of the issue, including problems as difficult as the return of refugees and the socio-economic rehabilitation of the conflict zone. It is particularly important that the plan starts with the suggestion that the parties sign a non-aggression pact first."⁶²

Armed hostilities in the conflict zone (albeit the different arena of South Ossetia) began three weeks later.

* * * * *

In conclusion, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution policy before August 2008 can be divided into the following stages:

1. 'Dialogue between the deaf and the blind' from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s, which largely predetermined the armed standoff of 1992-93;
2. 1994-97: lost opportunities to agree a formula of conflict resolution;
3. 1998-99: events in the Gali district and the *Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia*, which drove the parties' positions further apart;

60. <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=16064&search=>

61. "Abkhazia rejected the German plan of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution" retrieved from <http://www.lenta.ru/news/2008/07/18/reject1/>

62. <http://www.newsru.com/russia/18jul2008/plan.html>

59. International Alert, *Dialogue process on security guarantees*, p.13.

4. 1999-2003: stagnation in the negotiations and 'freezing' of the conflict;
5. 2004-06: change in the governments in Tbilisi and Sukhumi and revivification of expectations with regard to transforming and resolving the conflict;
6. 2006-08: further stagnation in Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, accompanied by escalating tensions in the relationship between Tbilisi and Moscow.

The fundamental principles of Georgian approach to conflict resolution, though, remained unchanged at all times, based as they were on determining the status of Abkhazia within the framework of Georgia's territorial integrity and the unconditional return of refugees and IDPs to Abkhazia. To this end a combination of political, economic and, sometimes, military and coercive pressure on the Abkhaz side was applied, using Georgia's own and third party resources.

At the same time the reasons for failure in resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict on Georgia's part

were dictated by different factors with each new government. During the relatively short incumbency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia nationalist rhetoric together with the failure of state building led to the loss of potential allies and partners of Georgia, and to the loss of public trust in the leadership. In Eduard Shevardnadze's case it was the vulnerability of his internal political position, the unattractiveness of Georgia's condition at the time, insufficiently articulated and consolidated support of the West, mutual mistrust between Georgia and Russia that resulted in a real deficit of political will and determination to take unpopular decisions. During Mikheil Saakashvili's term in office it was the overestimation of Georgia's own capabilities, of the attractiveness of Georgia with its unfinished reforms and of Georgia's significance, together with the underestimation of the Abkhaz problem overall, and of Russia's capabilities and capacity to preserve at all costs its sphere of influence in the 'near abroad' that led to excessive machismo and hastiness in taking decisions.

4. New realities after August 2008 – Archil Gegeshidze

4.1. The (geo-)political situation

4.1.1 Global politics: a strategic shift

The Russian-Georgian war of 2008 became a clear manifestation of the changing balance of power at the global level. With the arrival of the new century the unipolar world which had emerged at the end of the Cold War started to change. On the one hand, the war in Afghanistan and NATO's expansion to the East resulted in the 'over-stretch' of the West. Coupled with Europe's growing dependence on Russia's energy resources and disagreements between the US and the leading EU countries over the war in Iraq this led to a weakening of transatlantic solidarity and finally, to an overall strategic 'fatigue' of the West. On the other hand, Russia which had restored its

jurisdiction over Chechnya and secured a stable flow of easy 'petro-dollars' had recovered its spirits and set itself an ambitious goal of regaining its superpower status. One of the essential requirements for the implementation of that strategic goal was the strengthening of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, particularly, along its southern borders neighbouring the politically unstable North Caucasus.

Georgia's aspiration to NATO membership ran counter to Russia's interests and compelled it to try and hamper the process of NATO expansion 'at all costs.'⁶³ However, Georgia was a convenient target for Russia for many other reasons as well. After the collapse of the USSR Russia found itself forced to yield to the West. It had to agree with the West

on issues which put it at a strategic disadvantage or else make do with the decisions already taken as a *fait accompli* which in the eyes of the Russian elite was 'debasement' for Russia as a world power. This 'humiliation' culminated in the unilateral recognition of Kosovo's independence by the US and some leading EU countries in February 2008, despite Russia's calls not to make any decisions in circumvention of the UN Security Council. In the situation of the new power balance Georgia, considered a favourite and a protégé of the West in the post-Soviet space, especially by the US, became a convenient target for 'retaliation'. An excuse to retaliate quickly presented itself, not without some essential help on the part of the Georgian authorities, and nemesis was played out in August 2008.⁶⁴

One consequence of the war was that Russia partially achieved its goal of stopping NATO's expansion to the East and to 'cross the Rubicon' in the dismantling of the unipolar world order. Although the West did not formally agree with Russia's policies on Georgia and with its strategic gains in the region as a result of the war, in practice it accepted the reality of the new power balance. Realisation of its own 'strategic fatigue' and a need to cooperate with Russia on the WMD non-proliferation issue, supplies to the theatre of operations in Afghanistan and combatting international terrorism and so on forced the West to change its tactics in relation to Russia: it was there to be reckoned with.

4.1.2 Implications for the region

In the short term the current strategic shift has affected the nature of the developments in the post-Soviet space and has led to the emergence of moderate and even openly pro-Russian forces in some pro-Western countries of the region. This trend is already evident in Ukraine where the new president has announced the winding up of the NATO-Ukraine Commission and a 25-year extension of the Russian naval base lease in Sebastopol.

For its part Turkey has channelled all its efforts into becoming an important player in the region.

Against the background of rather dim prospects of its accession to the EU and the continuing rift with the US over events in Iraq, Turkey, acutely aware of the abovementioned geopolitical shift, has started to manoeuvre in order to seek geopolitical advantages for itself. If as recently as five to seven years ago Turkey was seen as the main deterrent to Russia in the Black Sea region, there is now increasing talk of a growing coordination in the foreign policy efforts of the two countries which do not necessarily coincide with the interests of the EU or the US, let alone smaller, weaker and more vulnerable countries of the region.⁶⁵

The new reality is having a significant effect on the prospects of transregional energy projects. Current trends do not meet the energy security needs or help achieve the integrational goals of the region and/or the West. In answer to Turkey's procrastination in setting transit prices for Caspian gas for the Nabucco project, Azerbaijan signed an agreement with Russia's Gazprom for the sale of one billion cubic metres (cbm) of gas in 2010. In 2011 Gazprom plans to buy an additional 2 billion cbm, which in effect is the entire amount on offer from Azerbaijan. In this way Russia aspires to monopolise the acquisition of Azerbaijan's gas which undermines prospects for the creation of the Southern Corridor and strengthens Europe's dependence on Russian energy resources.

There has been a noticeable weakening of strategic ties between some regional players, which for years had been growing around energy and transport infrastructures. Their weakening is in turn causing a reduction in the effectiveness of security systems and transport communications which link the region with the West. The West's current tactics of focussing on 'soft power' are clearly no match for the Kremlin's aggressive military, political and energy policies in the region. Turkey's new regional policies and the US' diminished strategic interests in the region help Russia's efforts to assume the strategic initiative.

At the same time experts agree that Russia's long-term chances to recover its position as a superpower cannot be taken for granted. Even if it does have a chance, this could only be realised after the much needed restructuring of its political system and modernisation of its economy. To succeed it would need to overcome corruption and embezzlement which are Russia's principal 'internal enemy'. Its resource-based model of development

63. See statements by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russia's Chief of General Staff Yu. Baluevsky after the NATO Summit in Bukharest in *Civil Georgia*, 9 and 11 April 2008; retrieved from <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17551&search=>; <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17561&search=>

64. For more details of this analysis see Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the West's Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, edited by Svante Cornell and Frederick Starr (M.E. Sharpe, 2009); IIFMCG Report, 2009.

65. Mamuka Tsereteli, "New Strategic Realities in the Black Sea/Caspian Region", *CACI Analyst*, 17 February, 2010.

and inefficient system of governance seriously undermine Russia's position in the post-Soviet space, making it unattractive for cooperation and lacking authority to take decisions on integration. Will Russia have sufficient willpower, know-how and resources to overcome these problems? It trails the West on many counts. The main weapon in this battle is not missiles, airplanes or tanks, nor the threat of their use but the high living standards of the European 'conquerors' and the prosperity of their populations. The fast expansion of the European Union is supported by the persistent reciprocal aspiration of poor European nations outside its boundaries to join this affluent society, one which provides legal and social safeguards to its citizens.⁶⁶ Add to this a demographic problem and a very tense political situation in the North Caucasus and it looks highly unlikely that Russia would hold on to the strategic initiative even if it succeeded in capturing it in the first place.

4.1.3 Lessons of the war: consequences for Georgia

The Russian-Georgian war of 2008 shattered peace and stability in the region. All negotiation and peace mechanisms and formats, whose function it was to maintain stability, collapsed overnight. The August events and their impact on regional and global security will long remain the focus of attention for many politicians and political analysts. For the purposes of this research paper, the interest lies largely with seeking an answer to two questions: (a) is it possible to return to a lasting process of nation-building in Georgia and as a result, to avoid the spread of hotbeds of destabilisation to other countries and regions? And: (b) do there remain opportunities for conciliation between the Georgians and the Abkhaz, the Georgians and the South Ossetians? There are no ready answers to these questions at present but it is quite clear to everyone that attempts to understand these events are still going on. The crisis in August became a moment of truth for everyone in a different way: there is a continuing process of reassessment, the breaking of stereotypes and the formation of new approaches.

The consequences of the August events have been particularly hard for Georgia. The most direct and immediate negative consequences of the war include the following:

- the prospect of restoring its territorial integrity has been lost for the indefinite future;

- Russia's influence in the occupied territories has enjoyed a fast and steady growth;
- the social situation has been further exacerbated by the appearance of tens of thousands of new IDPs;
- Georgia's jurisdiction in the Ksani (the Akhagori district, South Ossetia) and Kodori (Abkhazia) gorges has been lost;
- investment prospects of the country have diminished due to increased political risk-factors;
- although it has survived, the country's economy is now more vulnerable to the pressures of the global financial crisis;
- there has been a serious damage to several infrastructural facilities as well as different eco-systems; expensive military equipment has been either destroyed or taken out of the country;
- the issue of Georgia's entry into NATO has been taken off the agenda.

The most serious consequence of the war which would continue affecting developments in the region for some time is the new status quo emergent after Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the deployment of its military bases on those territories. This has further complicated Georgian-Abkhaz relations, partly due to the fact that since the Russian-Georgian war the Russian Federation has become yet another and, without doubt, the most important 'party to the conflict' for Georgia. The complexity of this situation is mirrored in the Geneva negotiation process where fourteen rounds of talks have not yielded tangible results.⁶⁷

It is clear that the war will have a number of short and long-term consequences for Georgian economic and political life. It is still difficult to carry out a comprehensive assessment of these consequences. However, some conclusions can already be drawn:

- There is no military solution to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If there is any solution at all, it can only be achieved through dialogue and rebuilding of trust.* Following a significant military defeat and with the continuing presence of Russian troops in the occupied territories their return by force to Georgia's fold appears highly unlikely.

66. Anatolii Leirikh "Modernisation: how much time do we have left?", retrieved from <http://slon.ru/blogs/leirikh/>

67. Fourteen rounds of these discussions have been held at the time of writing.

- b. *Russia has made it perfectly clear that good relations with the West do not constitute a guarantee of security if Russia's interests are ignored.* In the case of Russian aggression the existing security mechanisms in the form of direct links with the US and/or intensive dialogue with NATO are insufficiently effective because they do not constitute 'hard security guarantees'.

One can assume with a high degree of certainty that Russia's policies in relation to Georgia and its partners for the foreseeable future will be determined by its desire to consolidate its strategic position in the region gained as a result of the war, by legitimising the decision to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The signed treaties on defence cooperation between Russia on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other, have laid down a legal foundation for the creation of two Russian military bases in Gudauta⁶⁸ and Tskhinvali. According to the signed agreements they are to stay there for a minimum of 49 years. There is a provision for an automatic five-year extension of this term. In other words, if no problems arise in Russia's relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and none are envisaged by Moscow, Sukhumi or Tskhinvali, the presence of Russian troops in the South Caucasus region is going to stretch to many decades.⁶⁹ It is worth noting that given the growing scepticism among some NATO members regarding the expediency of Georgia's joining NATO against the backdrop of the new developments in the Caucasus, so far Russia's calculations have been vindicated.

For their part, the EU, US as well as the UN and the OSCE refuse to recognise the 'new reality' and stick to their policy of 'non-recognition' vis-à-vis Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Given the West's 'strategic fatigue', however, there are no signs of any forthcoming active opposition by the West to Russia's policies in Georgia. At the same time, it is likely that if Russia continues to build on its strategic initiative, it could lead to the emergence of 'Georgia fatigue' syndrome in the short term. This could result in the weakening of the above-mentioned policies of 'non-recognition', underpinned by the strengthening of the pro-Russian vector in Ukraine's foreign policy and Turkey's growing ambitions in the region. This, in its turn, might encourage the governments of

these countries to review their position on the issue of non-recognition.

The US and the EU continue to exercise their strategic patronage of Georgia: within the framework of the Charter on Strategic Partnership in the case of the US and as part of political dialogue with Moscow in the case of the European Union. Yet neither the US nor the EU have a clear idea of what should be done in order to prevent the 'frozen conflict' from exploding again. The 'Geneva discussions' have not borne any fruit so far. It appears that the West is totally disoriented and is biding its time. In the meantime, the West urges Georgia to display 'strategic patience' and pin its hopes on hypothetical future geopolitical developments whereby a 'Europeanised and attractive Georgia' would gain sufficient 'soft power' to 'provoke' a voluntary return of the separatist regions against a background of universal disillusionment with a weakened Russia. In the meantime there is a real prospect of the complete absorption of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia in the near future.

This is taking place in the context of Western governments' increasing alienation from Georgia. While Georgia as a state has retained its strategic importance for the West and has therefore remained an object of its patronage there has been a noticeable depersonification of relations between it and the West. This can be accounted for by the following:

- a. Russian diplomacy and its propaganda machine have succeeded in persuading political elites of Western states of the Georgian government's 'culpability' in starting the August war. It is also likely that following the 'reset' of their relations with Russia, countries of the West, the US included, are mindful of their own 'strategic fatigue', and have followed Russia's lead and have reduced both the extent and the intensity of their contacts with Georgia and cut down their weapons supplies to it;
- b. the EU-sponsored fact-finding mission to investigate causes of the Georgian-Russian war concluded that Georgia (i.e. the Georgian government – A.G.) caused the war by its actions when its heavy artillery attacked Tskhinvali on the night of 7-8 August 2008.⁷⁰ Despite the fact that this prestigious mission accuses Russia of having provoked Georgia into a military confrontation by its own illegal actions⁷¹, this

68. In fact, this refers to several facilities used for military purposes.

69. It should also be borne in mind that the tenure of the Russian military base in Armenia has also been extended.

70. IIFMCG Report, 2009, Vol.II, p.238.

71. *Ibid*, pp.263-289

has not prevented the stigmatised image of the Georgian government from entering the collective mind of the international community;

- c. following the war in August 2008 both the West's strategic interests and its reputation suffered a blow, first and foremost, in the eyes of its allies. In the resulting situation which the West had clearly tried to avoid, it finds it more convenient to bury its head in the sand rather than accept its own share of blame for the developments. It is much easier in these circumstances to lay the blame squarely on the 'erratic Georgian authorities' and to express this through a 'cooling off' in relations with Georgia. The recent deterioration in human rights standards in Georgia, including attacks on civil liberties, mistreatment of political opposition and the inability to create conditions for democratic elections, have all contributed to the change in the West's approach to Georgia⁷²;
- d. the after-effects of the August war have seriously undermined the authority and reputation of the government both inside and outside the country. Despite the powerful anti-Russian propaganda campaign the government failed to find a convincing rebuttal against the incriminating criticisms regarding the 'lost territories' and 'Russian tanks within 40 kilometres of the Georgian capital.' This finally resulted in the weakening of the president's position, and the position of the government as a whole. The situation reached a critical point in spring 2009 when the opposition succeeded in mobilising frustrated voters, who continued to wage mass street protests for two months running. Although the government managed to weather that storm the size of the protest vote has not diminished, disaffection with the government is as high as ever while the authorities' legitimacy in the eyes of international community has been dealt a serious blow.

72. This assessment of Georgia's domestic situation was characteristic of the entire post-war period until the municipal elections in May 2010. According to the statement of the Preliminary Findings and Conclusions on the municipal elections of 30 May 2010, published on 31 May by the International Election Observation Mission, the municipal elections demonstrated 'clear progress' in their compliance with international standards. This was later followed by a slight 'détente' between the West and Georgia with relations with the Georgian government and its leader entering "a stand-by mode" of waiting for a change of government in 2013.

4.2 Perception of the conflict after August 2008: factors and aspects

The Russian-Georgian war introduced significant corrections into the perception of the conflict. It is worth noting that despite the sobering effect of the war, *subjective factors* such as *stereotypes, prejudices or illusions* continued to influence public opinion on the conflict. To be fair, one must note that the war also dispelled some of these modes of perception yet a number of old stereotypes and illusions have survived and continue to influence perception of the conflict. Paradoxically, the war also gave rise to new stereotypes. Thinking in stereotypes is always conservative and prevents a search for mutually acceptable solutions in a situation of acute political conflict. In addition, illusions have a negative effect on the potential for developing a realistic policy, by making it difficult to identify the real roots of a problem and to mobilise the resources necessary for a solution.

4.2.1 Stereotypes

One of the stereotypes which has survived the August war is the idea that Georgians and Abkhaz have always lived in peace and accord, and if it had not been for Russia pitching the two brotherly nations against each other to suit its own selfish interests, there would have been no wars between them and they would be living under the same roof. Without trying in any way to undermine the potential accuracy of this historical assumption⁷³, one should mention that at present it is counterproductive for a host of reasons. Firstly, it does not contribute to the awareness of one's own responsibility (for past mistakes) in fomenting Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic antagonism. A direct and tough stance towards the other conflict party, which is counterproductive and inhibits the restoration of confidence, is largely based on the false sense of one's own righteousness and innocence; secondly, it prevents identification the real and/or immediate causes of the conflict and thus determines the inflexibility and intractability of the parties' positions in the negotiation process; thirdly, it creates a tendency to hyperbolise Russia's role in the escalation of Georgian-Abkhaz confrontation. Moreover, by exaggerating the Georgian-Russian factor it also contributes to an almost total neglect of the significance of Georgian-Abkhaz ethno-political antagonism.

73. The author of this study does not use historical facts either to support or to refute assumptions about the roots and causes of the conflict.

A new stereotype was born after the August war. Or rather, it is a 'rehashed' old stereotype based on the assumption that Russia is potentially a weak state. According to this stereotype, Russia is doomed to strategic deterioration as a consequence of the global financial crisis and the existence of internal structural (systemic) problems. The resulting weaker Russia would make it much easier to solve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Without commenting on the likelihood of such a scenario it is worth noting that this is a useless stereotype, both distracting and providing fertile ground for further illusions of all kinds. The latter are totally counterproductive when developing a sensible agenda for ensuring (one's own) security and long-term national development.

4.2.2 Illusions

On the whole the August war and its aftereffects created a situation whereby Georgian society and its political elite has begun to consider their own prospects in a more sober light. The war did not create or give rise to new illusions in relation to Georgian-Abkhaz settlement. On the contrary, some of the illusions faded or simply vanished. Yet other illusions still linger in the public consciousness of some segments of Georgian society and are linked to the wish to view the future in a more positive, rather than negative, light.

One should single out two interlinked illusions. Both are based on the belief that sooner or later the Abkhaz will come back to Georgia of their own free will. This does not only imply restored confidence between the two peoples, but also Abkhaz willingness to live in the same state with Georgians. One of the illusions is linked to the expectation that sooner or later the Abkhaz will become disillusioned with the Russians and a return to Georgia will be their only option. The second illusion grows out of the expectation of the inevitable prosperity of Georgia and a shift in the centre of gravity from Russia to Georgia. It is important to note that both cases rule out the possibility of Abkhazia's independent development and the realisation of its national aspirations without finding itself *either* under Russia's wing or entering into some sort of arrangement within the state of Georgia.

Apart from these subjective factors there are a series of *objective conditions* which are just as important in shaping perceptions of the conflict.

4.2.3 Nationalist revival and revanchist sentiment in society

The present stage of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict can be traced back to the period of emerging nationalism and nation-state formation.⁷⁴ The war of 1992-1993 became possible as a result of nationalism entering the political stage of its development. From that moment on, nationalist sentiment in Georgian society and in the minds of the elite have determined the ethno-centric imperatives of their policies as a whole and those related to the conflict in particular. At the same time, military defeat in South Ossetia and Abkhazia at the beginning of the 1990s, the loss of central jurisdiction over these territories and the appearance of thousands of refugees and IDPs gave rise to revanchist sentiments in society and parts of the elite. Nationalism and revanchism reinforced each other, dictating the uncompromising character of Georgia's position and its predilection for military solutions to the conflicts. Since the events in August 2008 nationalist and revanchist ardour against the Abkhaz has somewhat abated, giving way to an ambiguous attitude towards them: sympathy – "they are going to perish!", mixed with *Schadenfreude*, along the lines "serves them right! Russia will have them for breakfast".

4.2.4 The Russia factor

The aggressive and pitiless actions of Russian armed forces during and immediately after the war directly or indirectly contributed to the burning down of Georgian villages in the Tskhinvali region, to ethnic cleansing, looting, and later, to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the deployment of military bases, all of which provoked protests and feelings of hatred towards the Russian state and its leaders. The anti-Russian sentiment which had already been present in Georgian society and its elite during the years before the war was reignited once again. In the eyes of Georgian society Russia turned overnight into an absolute evil, an occupier and the main party to the conflict, whereas the main issue of the conflict was no longer Russia's bias towards Sukhumi but its occupation of Georgia's territories. Accordingly, in the eyes of society and its ruling elite the very nature of the conflict had changed: the Georgian-Russian dimension eclipsed the Georgian-Abkhaz component, pushing it to the sidelines.

74. Nodia "Conflict in Abkhazia: national projects and political circumstances"; see also Laurence Broers, "'David and Goliath' and 'Georgians in the Kremlin': a post-colonial perspective on conflict in post-Soviet Georgia", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June 2009): 99-118.

4.2.5 IDPs

The national strategy on IDPs which was adopted on the eve of the August events was different from its predecessors in that it did not officially consider integration a temporary measure. It was supposed to help IDPs to be integrated into Georgian society in a dignified manner. In fact, however, as research has clearly demonstrated true integration was never the goal of that strategy.⁷⁵ There was a real fear among the government that IDPs' motivation to return would start to wane if they were fully integrated. Measures aimed at effective integration were often carried out half-heartedly. With the loss of the prospect of IDPs' return to Abkhazia and with the appearance of tens of thousands of new IDPs from parts of South Ossetia and the Kodori gorge after the war, the government changed its emphasis and turned its attention to tackling the housing and social issues facing IDPs in a more determined manner. In particular, greater emphasis was put on transferring the ownership of collective IDP settlement centres to the IDPs themselves. It is quite possible that until very recently such "unprecedented attention towards IDPs" on the part of the authorities has been motivated by their desire to prevent a growth of discontent in this segment of the electorate, and/or to prevent opposition parties from using this disaffection for their purposes. If we had appropriate studies of this phenomenon we could, perhaps, ascertain the extent to which most recent IDP policies were genuine on the issue of IDPs' dignified integration into society. At the end of July and beginning of August 2010 there were mass evictions of IDPs from government buildings, with police kicking out hundreds of IDPs from the collective settlement centres in Tbilisi. The real motivation behind this move by the authorities requires further study but the evictions were condemned by UNHCR, which stated that "together with the international community it expressed concern with the recent evictions of IDPs from collective settlement centres, conducted without due transparency and without providing information to IDPs."⁷⁶ For its part, the Ombudsman's office voiced its own criticism of the Ministry for IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees.⁷⁷ A little later the Representative of the UN Secretary General on the human rights of IDPs Walter Kalin expressed his own negative reaction to the events. Speaking in Tbilisi, he called on

75. Archil Gegeshidze and Elene Chomakhidze, *Enhancing human security of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia (Policy study)* (Tbilisi, 2008), pp. 36-41.

76. *Civil Georgia*, 24 August 2010.

77. *Ibid.*

the Georgian authorities not to proceed with IDP evictions as they had done in the previous months. He labelled the evictions a "repeat" of the original displacement.⁷⁸ Since, notwithstanding these condemnations, similar events still took place.

4.2.6 Government propaganda

The effect of government propaganda on public opinion has always been considerable. In a situation of a very weak general political culture, and, particularly, of the emotional shock society experienced after August 2008 it was easy for the propaganda machine to achieve its aims and objectives. These aims and objectives post-August 2008 consisted in trying to instill in the public mind the image of Russia as the main enemy and the sole source of all their problems and misfortunes. This was not concerned with the occupation alone or the tens of thousands of IDPs who lost their homes in South Ossetia. It was about a complex transformation of public awareness around the conflict, the main thrust of which was the proposition that there had never been any ethno-political conflicts between Georgians and Abkhaz or South Ossetians. Rather, the only conflict Georgia had ever had was with Russia, and events of August 2008 were a case in point. To reinforce this propaganda message its authors resorted to such public relations clichés as "Russia is the enemy of Georgian democracy", "Russia is the enemy of Georgian economy", "Russia is the enemy of Georgian sovereignty" and "if it were not for Russia Georgia would already be part of NATO" or "if it were not for Russia Georgia would be a prosperous country..."

Centering criticism on Russia serves many purposes. It is frequently used by the government as an excuse or justification of its own unwillingness or inability to implement reforms of democratic institutions or establish a dialogue with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. The "Russia factor" is systematically used to discredit political opposition, especially on the eve of elections. A perfect example was the well known simulated TV piece broadcast on the Imedi TV channel on 13 April 2010.⁷⁹

4.2.7 The expert community

The expert community is one of the segments of the elite least affected by government propaganda by virtue of its job to engage professionally with security and development issues in Georgia and, in particular, issues around resolving the Georgian-

78. *Civil Georgia*, 10 September 2010.

79. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22080>

Abkhaz conflict. In fact, their opinion is often sought by external actors and thus can become a factor influencing perception of the conflict by the rest of society. It is important to note, however, that with the polarisation of Georgia's political life in line with one's loyalty to the authorities, the ranks of the expert community itself are not uniform, especially in regard to their interpretation of different events. Experts loyal to the authorities usually express sympathy with the official political course and support every government decision on every question of domestic and foreign policy, including the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. This group of experts, although small in number, has access to the national media and thus disseminates views acceptable to the authorities. According to their version of the conflict, the latter has a dominant Georgian-Russian dimension and could be considered resolved as soon as Russian troops leave Abkhazia and South Ossetia, bringing the situation back to the status quo before August 2008. The second group of experts is much more numerous and favours an impartial analysis of processes and events. It also recognises the fact of significant changes in the structure of the conflict resulting from Russia's sudden emergence as the main party to the conflict. At the same time, these experts completely disagree with ignoring the Georgian-Abkhaz component of the conflict, and insist on exploring ways to establish dialogue with the Abkhaz. It is noteworthy that while neither group rules out potential reunification of the country, the latter see it as a prospect in the more distant future, with a considerable input of serendipity.

4.2.8 Political parties

Opposition parties, with few exceptions, have never been known for their ability to develop programmes or concepts of conflict resolution. Typically, they limit themselves to occasional hasty statements or criticise existing government policies excessively without offering alternatives. After the August 2008 events opposition parties, with few exceptions⁸⁰, while recognising the dominant role of the Russian factor in the conflict, accused the Georgian government of starting the war which, in effect, was tantamount to saying that the war could have been avoided. This idea formed the basis of one of the main criticisms levelled at the authorities during the continuous mass protests of spring 2009. Given the impressive scale of the protests one would assume that the approach promoted by the opposition parties, had been "noted" (by the electorate) and, perhaps, even

imprinted on the minds of a considerable portion of society.

4.2.9 International NGOs

International NGOs have an indirect impact on the perception of the conflict. Using different projects they are involved in (meetings of representatives of different social groups in Georgian and Abkhaz societies, joint research, conferences, humanitarian aid, social and psychological rehabilitation of IDPs, etc.) such organisations contribute to the development of a particular attitude to the conflict among appropriate stakeholders. The total number of these stakeholders is quite modest, however, but they include opinion makers (experts, journalists) who have access to different audiences big and small.

4.2.10 International organisations/governments

International organisations, their constituent bodies and the negotiation process under their auspices have always had an impact on the perception of the conflict. Depending on the organisation and the situation in question, this impact has been varied, intermittent and sometimes leading to contradictory expectations. For example:

- a. the popularity of the EU, and especially France as chair of the EU at the time, sharply increased after the events of August 2008. After the signing of the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Georgia, brokered by France, the emphasis in the perception of the conflict in the public mind shifted to the Russian-Georgian dimension. When shortly afterwards there was a freeze in NATO/EU-Russia relations, the general public began to speak of another conflict between Russia and the West;
- b. official statements made by NATO, the US, EU and German and French leaders during that period calling upon the sides to comply with their obligations under the agreement also mentioned the need for a speedy resolution of the "frozen" Georgian conflicts in order to prevent another meltdown. Such statements were perceived by some in society as a sign of renewed prospects for a speedy resolution of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It must be said, however, that well-informed parts of the public gave little credence to the likelihood of such an outcome;
- c. the forced withdrawal of UNOMIG from the conflict area on the one hand, and the denial of entry to Abkhazia for the EU Observer Mission, on the other, created a feeling of the total isolation

80. The Republican Party was one such exception.

of Abkhazia from the rest of the international community and a corresponding sharp decline in the range of alternative tools to counterbalance Russia's increased influence.⁸¹ It is in this context that the conflict is perceived as practically intractable, especially as the prospect of Abkhazia's political and socio-cultural alienation from Georgia is becoming more apparent;

- d. the US' appeal for "strategic patience" is interpreted by the Georgian elite as a sign of absence of any prospects to resolve the conflict. The resulting attitude to the conflict does not encourage efforts for its resolution;
- e. conclusions drawn by the EU fact-finding mission to investigate the causes of the Georgian-Russian war⁸², have not had any noticeable impact on the perception of the nature of the conflict. This is no surprise as the three volumes of their report in English are hardly accessible to the wider public⁸³; secondly, the wealth of factual data quoted in the report might be of real value to interested researchers but it simply confirms what has long been known about the conflict in terms of its origins, its development and its consequences;
- f. discussions taking place in Geneva are important also in that the very fact of their existence as a format only strengthens the perception of the growing role of the Georgian-Russian component in the conflict and the motivation of mediators to keep "an eye on the conflict". Yet from the point of view of conflict perception the "Geneva discussions" are yet further proof of the difficulty of its resolution.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the August war and subsequent events have undoubtedly affected perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. And yet these changes did not include some "inert" aspects of perception. In particular, there has been no subsequent rethinking by Georgian society and especially its elite, of the main drivers of the conflict. The war simply became another proof of their belief that Russia played a part in the conflict and is, in fact, a party to it. Furthermore, despite everything that has happened, Georgian society and its elite

are still hopeful of the country's reunification and chances of restoring its territorial integrity. They are not ready to accept an irreversible loss of Abkhazia and to consider the possibility of recognising its independence. At the same time, the most important change has been the final realisation that there can be no alternatives to peaceful resolution of the conflict on the basis of restored trust and reconciliation. Finally, nobody entertains any illusions any more about a speedy solution to the problem.

4.3. The political situation around the conflict

The political situation around the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict underwent serious changes after the war of August 2008. *To begin with*, there was a change in the balance of power around the conflict as Russia openly became a party to the conflict. That resulted in Georgia losing some of its political weight; its ability to influence the conflict by putting political and/or psychological pressure on Abkhazia sharply declined. In the meantime, having hidden behind the "broad back" of Russian security guarantees Abkhazia fenced itself off from Georgia even more, thus accelerating the process of mutual alienation; *secondly*, with the partial recognition of Abkhazia⁸⁴ and the deployment of Russian military bases on its soil the prospect of conflict resolution vanished indefinitely while the negotiation process is stalling.⁸⁵ In the resulting situation Georgia retains only the legal right to the territory of Abkhazia, albeit recognised by the majority of the international community, including the UN, OSCE, EU and NATO; *thirdly*, the Russian Federation's goal in the August war and the means of achieving it took international organisations and countries of the West by surprise. Later, against the background of Russia's resolute efforts to achieve legitimisation of the "new reality" it had created, the international community appeared totally lost with no idea of what could and should be done in order to resolve the situation. In the absence of any game plan, the West continues with its refusal to recognise the

81. It should be remembered that the same fate had befallen the OSCE Missions when following Russia's pressure the organization had to quit Georgia.

82. IIFFMCG Report, 2009.

83. There is an unauthorized translation into Georgian of the first part of the report on the Heinrich Boell Foundation's website, well known to a narrow circle of its users (see <http://georgien.boell-net.de/web/98.html>).

84. At the time of writing Abkhazia's independence had been recognised by the Russian Federation, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru.

85. The main purpose of the multiparty format of consultations in Geneva set up after August 2008 is to guarantee the compliance by Russia and Georgia with their ceasefire undertakings of 12 August and 8 September. At the moment it is the only forum which is formally committed to dealing with the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, including, alongside others issues, the return of IDPs. So far, however, the main emphasis of the talks has been to ensure stability along the demarcation line.

“new reality”, on the one hand, and urges Georgia to exercise “strategic patience”, on the other. It is hinting that this “new reality” is going to be there for some time and that Georgia needs to get used to it. At best this approach (strategy) could lead to the “freezing” of the situation, at worst to the weakening of the policy of “non-recognition” of Abkhazia as a subject of international law, and ultimately, to Georgia’s loss of the internationally recognised right to Abkhazia⁸⁶; *fourthly*, both inside and outside the country the Georgian government’s legitimacy has been seriously undermined. Internally, the government has failed to “shift the blame” for “losing 20 percent of its territories”, despite the fact that it exploited enemy stereotyping to the full in order to justify and keep its hold on power. At the same time, with Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia the government is incapable of offering society a constructive and competitive project as compensation. The constantly growing importance of the Russian factor for the West in the context of its “reset” policy on the one hand, and the post-August image of the Georgian authorities as “unpredictable and unreliable partners” on the other, undermines their status in international affairs; *fifthly*, despite the considerable donor assistance after the war⁸⁷ and the relative painless consequences of the world financial crisis for the Georgian economy⁸⁸ there is a growing realisation that the freezing of the post-August reality will have a negative impact on the long-term development of the country.

The new circumstances listed above, constituting the new reality, determine the post-war paradigm of the Georgian government’s attitude to the conflict and the particular characteristics of its policies.

86. European officials articulated elements of a new emerging EU policy towards the occupied territories – the so-called “engagement without recognition” policy. This policy had not been properly defined at this time of writing, neither are its exact aims, instruments or resources clear. In any case, it has yet to be publicly debated and so the expert community is not familiar with its parameters. What is known is the fact that the EU Special Representative in the South Caucasus Peter Semneby had several discussions on this subject in Sukhumi, with some moderate interest expressed in the matter. “We are ready to develop economic, cultural and scientific ties with the EU, without recognition. We understand all too well that the question of recognition is not an easy one, yet I am confident that the political situation will change with time and the issue will be solved. We shall await better times”, commented Sergey Shamba (see <http://www.apsny.ru/apsnynews/apsnynews.php?mode=more&more=14998>).

87. A donor conference held in Brussels on 23 October 2008 decided to allocate USD \$4.5 billion to Georgia for dealing with the consequences of the military confrontation with Russia. According to the Georgian Ministry of Finance USD \$3.69 million of that package had already been spent by September 2010. See <http://www.mof.ge/en/3812>

88. GDP growth for Georgia dropped by 4% in year post-August 2008. Compared with the rest of the Black Sea Basin countries this was a fairly good indicator. Armenian GDP dropped by -15%, Ukraine’s by -14%, Moldova’s by -9%, Russia’s by -7.5%, Turkey’s by -5.8%, Bulgaria’s by -5%. Only Azerbaijan and Greece had better indicators – +7.5% and -2%, respectively. See: *A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region: A report by the Commission on the Black Sea*, 2010, p. 53.

5. Conflict resolution policy after August 2008 – Archil Gegeshidze

5.1 The attitudinal paradigm: main parameters

The Georgian government's attitude to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is a complex psychological precept with moral as well as intellectual components. It is based on a particular understanding of historic justice, goal orientation, perception of the character and nature of the conflict, as well as internal and external political contexts at regional and global levels. Analysis of this phenomenon is important because it allows us to distinguish, and where possible, to explain the principles and imperatives which, in their turn, lie at the heart of government policies towards the conflict. The preceding chapter dealt in part with this topic but a complex analysis requires a more profound interdisciplinary research which is outside the scope of this study. At the same time what we offer here is a brief description of the parameters of this new paradigm, which forms the framework for government policy.

5.1.1 The political formula for conflict resolution

In the post-war context, territorial integrity remains the highest priority for the absolute majority of Georgian citizens despite the tragic situation around the conflict and its unlikely resolution in the near future. Moreover, the topic remains a taboo and, except in private discussions, there is no public consideration of alternative models of conflict resolution. On the whole, reunification of the country as a national objective remains a subject of public consensus and serves as a motivational philosophy of the government. At the same time one should emphasize that nobody has in fact studied the entire spectrum of prevailing public sentiments within different social groups so, accordingly, there is no accurate picture. As for the political formula of conflict resolution it still

consists of two components, as was the case before the war: Abkhazia's status as part of a unified state and the return of refugees/IDPs.

It is interesting to note that contrary to expectations the government's position on the status issue is getting tougher. This is caused by the factor described in Chapter 2 of this study, that all manner of concepts containing a broad range of political formulae on the status of Abkhazia, from an "autonomous republic inside a unitary Georgia" to a "nation-forming subject of a common state" were developed and discussed before the war. Against the background of this discourse, as well as the evolving political situation around the conflict the authorities showed their readiness for compromise. The country's Constitution mentions, without specific reference to Abkhazia's status, creation of a two-chamber parliament when conditions are ready, with one of the chambers (the Senate) including Abkhaz, Ajars and representatives of other territorial units.⁸⁹ Such flexible wording, among other things, allows the possibility of transferring to a federal state model. After the war the issue of Abkhazia's status practically disappeared from political discourse. There are, nevertheless, signs of the government's new attitude to this issue. Thus, Article 2 of the *Law on Occupied Territories*, adopted soon after the war in August 2008, refers to Abkhazia as an autonomous republic. The notion of the "Abkhaz autonomous republic" is further mentioned in the constitutional law *On introducing amendments and additions into the Constitution of Georgia*, adopted by Parliament on 15 October 2010. This is evidence of a movement away from a flexible position on the issue.⁹⁰

89. Article 4 of the Constitution of Georgia, see: http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_951190_CONSTIT_27_12.06.pdf

5.1.2 Refugees/IDPs and the population of the Gali district

The return of refugees still remains a top priority on the agenda. This issue acquired an even greater urgency with the new wave of IDPs from South Ossetia. Despite the lack of any prospects to resolve the issue of return, especially to Abkhazia and/or property restitution in the foreseeable future, Georgia continues to keep the issue current. To begin with, this problem has an important social aspect in terms of assuring the socio-economic well-being of society as well as internal political stability, because unresolved problems create fertile ground for all sorts of political speculations. Secondly, the humanitarian aspect of this problem constitutes an important political argument for Georgia in the negotiation process and, more broadly, in the diplomatic standoff with Russia and the Abkhaz during the Geneva discussions, among others. On the eve of the war and after it, Georgia received the support of the UN General Assembly on the issue of refugee return on three occasions. It is worth noting that following the war this support acquired a more pronounced character.⁹¹ It is true that resolutions of the General Assembly are not binding, unlike resolutions of the Security Council, but they are important from the point of view of creating favourable public opinion for Georgia internationally. Thirdly, the new developments put the Georgian population of the Gali district in a particularly difficult situation. On the one hand, the Georgian residents of the Gali district lost their ability to move relatively freely across the Inguri River, which they enjoyed before the war; on the other hand, Tbilisi lost its leverage over the situation in the district, including provision of economic and humanitarian aid to local residents. This forces the Georgian authorities to keep bringing the issue of the physical and human security of Gali residents on the agenda of various fora and negotiating formats.

90. It must be said that the *Strategy on Occupied Territories* adopted by the Georgian government on 27 January 2010 states that: "The future political status of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia within the Georgian state will be determined by means of peace negotiations..." This indicates absence of a coherent position on the political formula of conflict resolution (see: <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/SMR-Strategy-en.pdf>).

91. At a plenary session on 7 September 2010 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution initiated by Georgia by 50 votes to 17; the resolution recognizes the right of all IDPs to return to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Although 86 countries abstained during the voting the resolution was passed by more votes than similar resolutions in 2008 and 2009.

5.1.3 Origins and nature of the conflict

The war of August 2008 established a clear connection between, on one hand, Russia's refusal to accept NATO's continued expansion to the east, and especially into the South Caucasus region directly bordering the politically sensitive North Caucasus, and, on another, its manipulation of the situation around the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgian society's consciousness. Practically no-one would argue today with the proposition that Russia needed the war more than any other party. It needed the war in order to "stop Georgia" and thus to prevent the spread of the West's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space.⁹² The only questions which continue to cause controversy in academic circles are either: "had Saakashvili done everything to prevent the war?" or "should Saakashvili have ordered the shelling of Tskhinvali by Grad rocket launchers?" The above-mentioned proposition, in turn, enhances the geopolitical component of the conflict's origins. For their part, the authorities, motivated by their own particular interests, have tried to exploit prevailing public opinion and to over-emphasise the significance of the geopolitical factor, at the expense of minimising the significance of the Georgian-Abkhaz confrontation. This way the Kremlin is presented as the main subject of the conflict and the imperial ambitions of the Russian state in the post-Soviet space as the cause of the conflict. For Tbilisi this means that its "enemy", "opponent", "interlocutor" or "counterpart in the negotiations" is now known (and has been known for some time) and that it is Russia that Georgia needs to "sort things out" with. If (and as soon as) this is done, the conflict will disappear.

5.1.4 Attitude to the parties in the conflict

The somewhat simplistic idea of the conflict structure described above, in turn, determines the government's attitude to the parties to the conflict. The conflict with Russia, geopolitical by nature, prepares the Georgian authorities for a "long game" ahead. In this "game" the roles of the "referee" and the "fans" are of particular importance. Without them Georgia is doomed to failure. At the same time, while "ignoring" the conflict with Sukhumi, the Georgian government feels the need to stop the ever increasing process of the alienation of Abkhaz society from Georgia. Instead of a party to the conflict, the Abkhaz and Abkhazia are thus viewed as "victims of an assimilation and annexation policy

92. See more details in *Guarantees on non-resumption of hostilities* (in Russian), p.26.

perpetrated by the main (common) enemy”, who should be rescued from it.

5.1.5 Impact of the conflict on the country's development

Persisting tension in relations with Russia and the ongoing conflict as a whole will continue to have a negative impact on the general situation in the country. The consequences of the war which have already occurred, together with likely complications in the future caused by the unresolved nature of the conflict, could result in dangerous trends vis-à-vis the long-term development of the country and its security. It is, therefore, important to note the following: firstly, despite the unchanged course of the country's foreign policy, progress along one of the main vectors, that of euroatlantic integration, has clearly slowed down. Furthermore, relations between Georgia's international partners and the government have become noticeably cooler. This might affect – to a greater or lesser extent – the general security situation in Georgia. Secondly, the multibillion donor aid which has helped the Georgian government to weather the global financial crisis so far is soon to run out. In the meantime, foreign investment flows are insufficient and, more importantly, irregular while Georgia does not possess necessary resources itself to ensure self-sufficient development. Thirdly, the potential for internal political instability is still there. Against a background of weak democratic institutions and the low confidence they inspire in a significant segment of society, potential failures of future foreign and domestic social and economic policies could lead to an aggravation of tensions with unpredictable consequences.

5.1.6 Objectives

The “strategic patience” which Georgia's Western partners have been calling for, although a necessity, is not an ideal choice for Tbilisi.⁹³ The unacceptable nature of “new reality” suggests very limited political space for manoeuvre. To some extent Tbilisi has limited its own options, having overlooked the importance of the Georgian-Abkhaz standoff as a factor in the conflict. Nevertheless, Tbilisi sees room for manoeuvre in the diversification of its attitude to the parties in the conflict. Such differentiation of perception and of attitude towards Moscow and towards Sukhumi, in turn, determines Tbilisi's different objectives. The minimum goal in its “long game” with Moscow is the withdrawal of Russian troops from Abkhaz and South Ossetian

soil, i.e. their de-occupation, whereas the maximum goal is to get Moscow to reverse its decision on the recognition of their independence. In the case of Abkhazia, it pursues a clear policy of “keeping it in check.” In other words, Abkhazia must be kept in isolation from the rest of the world or in a regime of “managed de-isolation” so that it is not irrevocably “lost” for Georgia. In the meantime, by using soft power it should engage Abkhazia in a process which would gradually bind it back to Georgia. To be fair, one must add that the Georgian authorities do not consider enforcement and/or pressure on the Abkhaz to be part of their policy of “binding” it to Georgia. On the whole, however, Tbilisi has never totally ruled out the policy of putting pressure on Abkhazia; its continued isolationist stance on Abkhazia is a case in point (see section 5.3 for more detail).

5.2 Basic premise underlying the attitudinal paradigm

Almost on the day of the first anniversary of August 2008 war US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton urged Georgia on behalf of the US to exercise “strategic patience” in relation to the breakaway entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the Russian occupation of the two regions.⁹⁴ In clarification of Hilary Clinton's words, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip H. Gordon told journalists that “there's not a short-term fix to the problems of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as much as we want Russian troops to leave those territories as soon as possible...the best way forward would be one of strategic patience whereby Georgia shows itself to be an attractive place, a stronger, democratic [country].”⁹⁵ Speaking a little later at the meeting of the European Parliament the European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner reiterated Hilary Clinton's words and supported the idea of strategic patience, while adding that Tbilisi should abandon its policy of isolation of the breakaway regions.⁹⁶ The Georgian government reacted with understanding to such calls and even promised to “be patient”.⁹⁷

The concept of strategic patience was first formulated by First Assistant Secretary of State

94. <http://www.america.gov/st/peacesec-english/2009/September/20090922122840dmslahrellek0.4532892.html>

95. *Civil Georgia*, 22 September 2009; retrieved from <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21485&search=>

96. *Civil Georgia*, 16 December 2009; retrieved from <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21789&search=>

97. <http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=2088>

93. For more on this subject see the following sub-section.

in the Clinton administration Strobe Talbott. The concept became the basis of the US administration's approach to its Russia policy. Variations on this concept have been used before and after Talbott; the American administration resorted to it each time it could not accomplish a quick and glorious victory over its enemies: during its confrontation with the Soviet Union or in the "war on terror", for example. But its classic version was formulated by Strobe Talbott after the White House and the Congress became totally disillusioned with the prospects of true democracy in Yeltsin's Russia.⁹⁸ If one could count this policy successful in the case of the Soviet Union, so far it has not yielded any tangible results in dealings with the present-day Russia or in America's "war on terror". Neither is it clear if this time too we are to see any results. Another question which is bound to arise and a very important one for Georgia is the following: who do American politicians consider the subject of this "patience", i.e. who is supposed to be "patient" – Georgia alone or together with the West? If this means Georgia together with the West, then the West's "patience" should be accompanied by elements of confrontation and containment policy as was the case during the Cold War. But what we see now instead is the growing trend to engage in "mutually beneficial cooperation" and "resetting relations" with Russia which means that Georgia is asked to "be patient" all alone. In such a situation the Georgian authorities have to decide for themselves – should they meekly "be patient" or be proactive at the same time? It appears that the choice has already been made in favour of the latter. According to them, "patience" does not have to mean "indifference" and inaction. In President Saakashvili's words on 9 April 2010 at a meeting with MPs from NATO countries, Georgia is making active steps to react to difficult challenges which the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia presents, specifically, through a planned implementation of the specially developed *Strategy on Occupied Territories*.⁹⁹

Here, however, a question arises concerning the correct identification of the *basic premise*, "the pivotal point of conclusions" without which it would be impossible to formulate a correct policy within the framework of strategic patience. In other words, if we are forced to "exercise strategic patience" we need to know "what we have to be patient about" or "for what reason?" In order to

achieve results in a situation of limited room for manoeuvre (a proactive policy), including by means of the above-mentioned Strategy, it is important to determine "what has and what has not been lost?" for Georgia in the context of Abkhazia. Only then does it make sense to develop a policy within the framework of strategic patience.

In interpreting the consequences of the August war for Georgia, one could consider two potential differing scenarios of the basic premise, of which the authorities need to choose one and base their strategy on it. These two alternatives are as follows: a) Abkhazia has not been irrevocably lost and it should be "held on to" until better times; b) Abkhazia has been lost once and for all and it is necessary to start from scratch to restore any chance of reunification (i.e. to recover what has already been lost). The choice of the correct premise will have decisive importance for correctly answering the question of "what should be tolerated?" and "for what reason?" In the first case, the Georgian government has to "be patient" about the *de facto* loss of Abkhazia and its occupation by Russia ("what to be patient about?"), while preserving international legal rights to its territory and relying on the fact that a more favourable political situation in the future would allow it to restore temporarily lost *de facto* jurisdiction ("for what reason?"). We must point out that a favourable political situation, according to Tbilisi's assumptions, will be linked, on its own or in combination with other things, with: a) a sharp increase in the quality of life in Georgia compared with that in Abkhazia; b) a change in the nature and political weight of the "Russian factor" in the medium term, due to a potential strategic weakening of Russia and its disintegration, or its "de-imperialisation against a background of deepening democratic changes/reforms ("Perestroika-2"). This premise suggests, among other things, the expediency of using pressure tactics vis-à-vis the Abkhaz side by "keeping" it in a transport, economic and diplomatic isolation. These tactics could be used in combination with engagement" ("binding") tactics (see subsection 5.1).

In the second scenario, Georgia "is being patient and tolerates" the bitter reality of the ultimate loss of Abkhazia ("what to be patient about?") and pins its hopes on the fact that the Abkhaz side, for one reason or another, might itself initiate the process of conciliation and even reunification of the country ("for what reason?"). Within the framework of this premise pressure tactics become

98. http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/russia/1998/98110607_wlt.html

99. <http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=2088>. See subsection 5.3 of "Policy of conflict resolution: goals, objectives, prospects".

meaningless and the emphasis is put fully on restoring confidence and voluntary conciliation by using “soft power” (“engagement tactics”). A benign policy which would include a de-isolation of Abkhazia economically and in terms of its transport communications, would be pursued at the same time. This would not be an altruistic policy because it does not include its diplomatic de-isolation (for example, abandoning the policy of “non-recognition”¹⁰⁰). The “benign policy” does not allow for such an eventuality because the Georgian version of the “strategic patience” concept clearly contains two interconnected pieces of advice: “hold on to the legal rights to the Abkhaz (and South Ossetian) territories” and “all things come to those who wait!”

The main feature these two basic premises have in common is the fact that both allow a theoretical possibility of conflict resolution. In the first case the government counts on a favourable outcome, which it can help to create, in the second it plays a rather passive role and simply hopes for a miracle.

In the meantime, in the context of general disarray in which Western political circles found themselves after the August events and in the absence of any idea of how to exit this situation (see subsection 4.3), there is no obvious agreement even among representatives of the international expert community. One has a feeling that its representatives are also involved in a continuing search for solutions, with some positions at the level of ideas and suppositions already quite clearly defined. It is, however, impossible to determine if any of these approaches or positions belong to either of the above-mentioned basic premises. We should note straightaway, however, that all experts, without exception, who entertain a possibility of Georgia’s reunification, do not see it happening in the foreseeable future. They are unanimous in the opinion that it would take years, maybe, even decades. At the same time the same experts make different suggestions as to the conditions under which a favourable political situation for conflict resolution might emerge. Yet none of them are totally confident at the same time that such positive outcome will definitely come about for Georgia. Thus, the famous analyst and proponent of Georgia’s euroatlantic aspirations Ronald Asmus thinks that it has to become an attractive country first. This is the only way Georgia could breathe some life into the hope that when and *if* “history reopens Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s status

issue again”, Tbilisi would be able to convince them to return peacefully into the fold of the unified Georgian state.¹⁰¹ Another example: researchers at Columbia University Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell state that “strategic patience” alone is not sufficient to prevent the inevitable “swallowing” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. Although, in Cooley and Mitchell’s eyes, the new strategy of the Georgian government which envisages mutual “interdependence” of the former and the existing residents of Abkhazia, should be supported¹⁰² it is not enough on its own, and the US has to develop its own strategy of “engagement without recognition” in relation to Sukhumi.¹⁰³ The idea of the proposed strategy consists in first de-isolating Abkhazia and then assisting it in developing its economy to a certain level. After Abkhazia begins to see the West as an alternative to Russia and develops a taste for further democratic and institutional development, Washington and Brussels would have greater leverage over it. At that moment the West would be able to seize the opportunity and “link” further aid to Abkhazia with negotiations on the status issue with Georgia or with initiatives on reconciliation and confidence building.¹⁰⁴

The second group of experts who consider Abkhazia and South Ossetia lost for good as far as Georgia is concerned, consists mainly of the majority of Russian experts, including those who at the time considered the recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence unwarranted. Even the staunch supporter of the Georgian government’s position, the famous political journalist Yu.Latynina, said in one of her rare examples of criticism of the Georgian authorities that “the territory [Abkhazia] is lost but instead of building relations based on the status-quo, the relations are being built on the basis of personal phobias and national ambitions.”¹⁰⁵

A well known expert on the region who has made numerous visits to Georgia, Professor Charles King at the University of Georgetown also belongs to this group of experts. Back in the days of the war he wrote that “the war had been a terrible miscalculation for Georgia, with South Ossetia and Abkhazia lost forever. It is hardly possible to imagine a scenario under which these territories

100. See Section 5.3 for further information on the policy of “non-recognition”.

101. Asmus, *Little War that Shook the World*, p. 231.

102. That is, the *Strategy on the Occupied Territories*.

103. Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell, “Action Memorandum”, *The American Interest*, Publicity copy, Summer (May/June), Vol. V, No. 5 (2010).

104. *Ibid.*

105. Yu.Latynina, “No more insurgents”, *Novaya Gazeta*, no. 140, 16 December 2009.

could ever return into the fold of the Georgian state, which they perceive as an aggressor".¹⁰⁶

Despite the generally pessimistic attitude of the foreign academic circles, the Georgian authorities proceed from basic premise number one, especially, as it meets with the prevailing expectations in society, including those of the local expert community. It is quite significant that this premise is shared by the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Catholicos Patriarch of all Georgia Ilia the Second, who enjoys a consistently high reputation in the country, has been preaching repeatedly in his liturgies and epistles that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are inalienable parts of Georgia and that they will definitely return.¹⁰⁷

5.3 Conflict resolution policy: goals, objectives, prospects

Changes in the nature of the conflict taking place after August 2008, together with changes in society's perceptions, have found expression in Tbilisi's official policy. The focus of this policy is the reversal of the military and political consequences of the war, namely Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's (and South Ossetia's) independence and its deployment of military bases on their soil. As for the Georgian-Abkhaz component of the conflict, its significance as an object of policy has been played down. This is particularly noticeable at the level of rhetoric where Georgian officialdom has exaggerated the dominance of the "Russian factor" to such an extent that the word "conflict" is used in the singular, as though there were no conflicts between Georgia and Abkhazia, Georgia and South Ossetia. In practical policy terms and contrasting with the rhetoric, the government has, however, been paying the same amount of attention to the Georgian-Abkhaz component of the conflict. Due to the fact that the "Russian" component of the conflict has a geopolitical basis and that its elimination has practically nothing to do with Tbilisi, official policy on this issue limits itself to appeals to the international community and accusations of aggression and occupation levelled at Russia. This is the background against which issues associated with different aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz (and the Georgian-Ossetian) conflicts have been discussed for some time at the Geneva talks.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, the Georgian

government has developed and approved a *Strategy on Occupied Territories* and a document for its implementation (*Action Plan*).¹⁰⁹

5.3.1 Aims and objectives of the policy

In the context of reluctant 'strategic patience' with the military and political consequences of war, the Georgian government has to pay increasing attention to the "Abkhaz" component of the conflict. In the absence of any possibility of resolving the conflict in the foreseeable future, Tbilisi's principal aim at the moment is to preserve the prospect of the country's reunification until better times. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to solve two crucial tasks:

- a. conflict transformation, understood by the government as the gradual establishment of mutually beneficial cooperation in humanitarian, economic and other areas, without resolving sensitive political issues. There is evidently a calculation that the resulting feeling of the mutual dependence may reduce excessive tensions in Tbilisi-Sukhumi relations and quite possibly create conditions for restoring confidence;
- b. stalling the process of recognition of Abkhazia (and South Ossetia), i.e. securing the sustainability of the "non-recognition" policy on the part of the international community. Despite the declared firm position of the US, EU and other countries on supporting Georgia's territorial integrity and non-acceptance of the new realities after August 2008, it appears that Tbilisi is not fully confident in the future sustainability of these positions.

5.3.2 Approaches and resources applied

The basic premise that Abkhazia has not been lost irrevocably and that it has to be "kept" in the internationally recognised legal field of Georgia until better times (see subsection 5.2) underlies Tbilisi's present policies. It consists of the idea of de-isolating Abkhazia in one direction only, in the direction of Georgia. In other words, by "keeping" Abkhazia in isolation¹¹⁰, the former tactics of diplomatic and psychological pressure, including the threat of force (see Chapter 3), has

106. Charles King, "Russo-Georgian Conflict is not all Russia's Fault", *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 August 2008.

107. See for example: <http://www.georgiatimes.info/ru/news/26075.html>

108. The six-point *Protocol d'Accord*, signed by the presidents on France (then Chair of the EU), Russian Federation and Georgia besides the obligations of Georgia and Russia on the cessation of military actions and non-resumption of hostilities, included a provision on the "commencement of international debates about the format (conditions) of stability and security in Abkhazia and South Ossetia."

109. http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/action_plan_en.pdf

to be replaced with a “caring attitude” towards the Abkhaz side. In order to achieve this, a tactics of “soft power” has to be used. The above-mentioned *Strategy on Occupied Territories* which clearly counts on “binding” Abkhazia to Georgia, is based on this same tactic of using “soft power”. In particular, this refers to giving the population of Abkhazia access to health care services in Georgia, access to education in Georgian and foreign educational establishments, joint business in the area bordering the demarcation line, and so on.

5.4 Policy components

Tbilisi’s policy on the conflict post-August 2008 could be divided into the following components:

5.4.1 Policy aimed at deoccupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

There is no clear explanation of what is meant by deoccupation: whether it is simply the withdrawal of the Russian troops to their pre-war positions¹¹¹, or Russia renouncing its own recognition of these territories. International organisations (the UN, EU, NATO, OSCE, PACE and others) and leading countries of the world (the US, Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy and China) form the main target audience of this component of the policy. These are the parties Georgian diplomats keep appealing to in order to remind them of the facts of aggression, ethnic cleansing and occupation. The format of Geneva discussions is used for the same purpose;

5.4.2 Policy of ensuring security along the confrontation line as well as resolving short-term and medium-term humanitarian problems

The Geneva format is the main forum used for this purpose, together with the Mechanism for the Prevention and Reaction to Incidents (MPRI), set up as a result of these discussions.

5.4.3 Policy of isolating Abkhazia and South Ossetia

The instruments used for this purpose are as follows:

5.4.3.1 Policy of non-recognition.

Two aims are being pursued as part of this component:

- a. *ensuring international non-recognition of Abkhazia (and South Ossetia)*. In contrast to the first component, the target audiences of this policy are the neighbouring countries and the Central Asian states. Moreover, after their independence was recognised by peripheral states of Central America and Oceania, attention was focussed on all subjects of international law. For this purpose Georgia immediately established diplomatic relations with over 50 countries and this process is continuing. Diplomatic missions in some of the key countries were established ahead of schedule;
- b. *travel restrictions for the Abkhaz and South Ossetian residents who hold Russian passports, through the blocking of visa applications*. This applies, first and foremost, to people accused of committing war crimes and ethnic cleansing.

5.4.3.2 Law on occupied territories.

The law which came into action on 31 October 2008 stipulates, among other things, that:

- a. foreign citizens and non-citizens can enter the territory of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic from Zugdidi only, and the territory of Tskhinvali region can only be entered via Gori. In exceptional circumstances one can obtain a special permission to enter from other directions;
- b. any transaction concluded in the above-mentioned territories and not registered in accordance with the legislation of Georgia is deemed void. Acquiring a right to property is only allowed if received through *inheritance*;
- c. no economic activity that requires *licensing* or approval is allowed in the above-mentioned territories. In exceptional circumstances a special permission can be obtained to engage in such activities;
- d. *international air, sea and railway communications* are forbidden, together with international road transportation¹¹²;

110. In spite of Russia’s recognition the isolation of Abkhazia on the part of the international community continues. There are a few violations of this regime by foreign, mostly Turkish, merchant ships.

111. According to clause 5 of the ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008.

112. Abkhazia’s ports and its sea border were first officially closed following a Georgian presidential decree of 31 January 1996. A similar decree was again adopted after the Rose Revolution on 3 August 2004. These decrees are still in force. As for Sukhumi airport’s closure it did not possess international status even before the adoption of the Law because the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) considers Abkhazia part of Georgian territory and does not assign it an international code.

- e. there is a ban on using government resources, *remittances* as well as *financial services* stipulated in the law.

5.5 The “binding” strategy

The *State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation* was drawn up by the Office of the State Minister for Reintegration and published at the end of January 2010. The strategy was published in five languages (Georgian, English, Russian, Abkhaz and Ossetian) and is formulated in a much more conciliatory manner than is usually characteristic of Tbilisi; it emphasizes the need to conduct a “people-oriented policy aimed at engagement with the residents” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The strategy, which provides for a whole series of social programmes, is aimed at the development of health care systems for the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as road rebuilding projects and the introduction of bus services. Measures for the development of the Abkhaz language and strengthening people-to-people contacts between populations on both sides of the *de facto* borders are also planned. The former Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Temuri Yakobashvili stated at the time that “the two issues we intentionally overlook in this strategy are those of status and security, because we have put people at the centre of our strategy.”¹¹³

Still, this strategic document openly recognises that its function is to help the Georgian government to achieve its objective of returning the territories under its control. As stated in the Preamble, “the Strategy is part of Georgia’s overarching determination to achieve the full de-occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, reverse the process of annexation of these territories by the Russian Federation, and peacefully reintegrate these territories and their populations into Georgia’s constitutional ambit.”¹¹⁴ It is no surprise that the Abkhaz and South Ossetian governments, as well as the Russian government which exercises considerable control over these territories, reacted to the new Georgian strategy with antagonism.¹¹⁵

Tbilisi does hope, however, that with time “soft power” will prevail.¹¹⁶ This is the logic behind the creation of necessary mechanisms¹¹⁷, which sometimes contradict the existing legislation due to their special nature. The necessary amendments to the legislation are planned as a result. On the whole, the document is an attempt by the Georgian government to make a conceptual breakthrough on the issue of engagement with the populations of Abkhazia (and South Ossetia), but its implementation appears problematic, according to the experts.¹¹⁸

5.5.1 Expected results

The main anticipated (desirable) results of the Georgian government’s conflict resolution policy are the following: a) withdrawal of Russian military bases from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and b) reliable consolidation of the internationally recognised legal rights to these territories. In the first case the likelihood of achieving a result is completely unclear for such an achievement depends on the dynamics in Russia’s relations with the West which is difficult to forecast. As for the second result, there is more confidence that it can be achieved. Particular hope is pinned on the above-mentioned new *Strategy*. It is anticipated that in the absence of any plan of action by the international community vis-à-vis the post-August status quo, this strategy would appear as a pro-active step by Tbilisi aimed at building peaceful relations with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. With this perception of Tbilisi’s policy by the international community it would be much harder for Moscow to promote its policy of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s independence in particular, and its policy of legitimising the new post-August “reality” in general. Furthermore, it is expected that the new *Strategy* would gain the support of international organisations and donor countries and thus the officially stated goal of rapprochement and engagement of Georgian and Abkhaz citizens into mutually beneficial projects

113. <http://russian.eurasianet.org/node/31030>

114. *Ibid.*

115. According to Sergey Shamba “the fallacy of this strategy ... lies in the fact that it isolates Abkhazia from the rest of the world and opens it up for Georgia alone. We have no intention of developing relations with Georgia and no-one else. We want to be open to the whole world.” (see <http://www.apsny.ru/apsnynews/apsnynews.php?mode=more&more=14998>).

116. At present several dozen Abkhaz citizens, non-ethnic Georgians, are already receiving treatment in Georgian clinics; there are cases of young Abkhaz studying in Georgian universities; small tradesmen buy goods in the Georgian markets for resale in Abkhazia, and so on.

117. According to the Action Plan the creation of special documents is intended to make it easier for the residents of Abkhazia to participate in Georgian government programmes in healthcare, education, pension provision and others, without the need to take out Georgian citizenship. It is also envisaged that a financial institution will be set up which would contribute to the development of mutually beneficial business relations between the citizens of Abkhazia and Georgia. Another plan is to set up a joint investment fund to finance joint economic activities.

would be achieved.¹¹⁹ And finally, it is also important that when the first results of the new *Strategy* start to appear, the Georgian authorities could count on at least a partial recovery of their shaken legitimacy, both at home and abroad (see subsection 4.3).

118. <http://russian.eurasianet.org/node/31030>

119. There have been early successes in mobilizing international support for the proposed strategy. For example, the statement distributed by the US Embassy in Tbilisi notes that the Embassy “resolutely supports” the objectives and goals of this strategy. “The strategy is a constructive step forward to a reduction of tensions and a way of establishing contacts with the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”. (see <http://georgia.usembassy.gov/latest-news/press-releases-2010/u.s.-welcomes-georgias-new-engagement-strategy-with-separatist-regions-january-28>). The strategy has been given preliminary approval by the UN, OSCE, EU, PACE and NATO, as well as by Paris, London, Berlin and Washington.

6. Prospects for the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

– Archil Gegeshidze and Ivlian Haindrava

6.1 Justifying a paradigm change

As already noted in subsection 5.3, Tbilisi’s policy on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is met with active antagonism by Sukhumi. Initial hopes entertained by Tbilisi that the new *Strategy* will start to work, albeit slowly, have not been confirmed so far. Even if the implementation of the *Strategy* were to begin it would sooner or later run into obstacles, difficult to overcome and connected to various risks and barriers.

The main reason for this lies in the contradictory nature of the post-August paradigm. The defectiveness of the paradigm lies in the fact that it requires an abrupt change in the orientation of the Abkhaz elite from Moscow to Tbilisi. Hence the policy’s ambivalence: on the one hand, a wish to engage various social and professional groups in Abkhazia in humanitarian and economic relations with Georgia (the “binding” strategy); on the other hand, the intention to keep it in isolation from the outside world (not including Russia, which is actively increasing efforts to implement its own policy to “bind” Abkhazia).

At the same time, the second component – Abkhazia’s isolation – is not fully understood in

the West. Despite the fact that officially Western governments and international organisations follow the policy of ‘non-recognition’ of Abkhazia and support the Georgian *Strategy* and its implementation plan¹²⁰, they still do not intrinsically agree with Tbilisi’s interpretation of Sukhumi’s isolation. They do not accept strict isolation and put forward their own ‘engagement’ options. Western NGOs working in the region are in a particularly difficult position, because the imposition by Tbilisi of new rules and conditions for their work to fall in line with the *Strategy* means their denunciation of the principles of ‘neutrality’ and ‘impartiality’.¹²¹ The realisation of the need to ‘engage’ (read to ‘de-isolate’ – A.G.) Abkhazia in order to prevent its full absorption by Moscow is gaining momentum in Western capitals. In other words, the West prefers Abkhazia to be opened to the outside (read ‘Western’ – A.G.) world through some sort of its

120. When this chapter was being completed, an example of such support came in the form of a statement by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, who welcomed the Georgian Strategy *Action Plan* in relation to the occupied territories and called it ‘an important step towards engaging the populations residing in those areas’ (*Civil Georgia*, 8 July 2010).

Europeanisation.¹²² It should be noted that this approach is at odds with the Georgian policy of an ‘abrupt vector change’ in Sukhumi towards Tbilisi. In essence, the emerging EU policy of ‘engagement without recognition’ focuses on changing the Sukhumi clock to Brussels’ time, not to Tbilisi’s time. It can’t be ruled out that the US, in its turn, will become active in the search for a solution and adopt the kind of approach advocated by Cooley and Mitchell (see sub-chapter 5.2).

Still, the ‘Europeanisation’ of Abkhazia, however distant and difficult to imagine, is still seen from the outside as a more realistic goal than a direct change of the Abkhaz vector from Moscow to Tbilisi. In this case, it is thought, it may be possible to extract Abkhazia from Russia’s embrace. During that time Georgia, having been ‘strategically patient’, would have been modernised and become an attractive partner. As a result, opportunities for conflict resolution would widen. Tbilisi, on the other hand, fears that as a result of Abkhazia’s ‘Europeanisation’ it could be lost forever. One way or another, in the end the incompatibility of interpretations of the notion of Abkhazia’s isolation by Brussels (and Washington) on the one hand, and by Tbilisi, on the other, can in time affect the level of Western support for the *Strategy* and other Georgian initiatives. In the worst-case scenario for Georgia, the West could even soften its position on the non-recognition of Abkhazia. As a result, in the medium-term there are doubts regarding the sustainability of Tbilisi’s policy to isolate Abkhazia. Under the circumstances, the hopelessness of the existing conflict resolution policy is obvious and there is a clear need to review the paradigm.

121. *The Regulation of the Government of Georgia on Modalities for Engagement of International Organizations and Foreign/International/Local Non-commercial (Non-governmental) Organizations in the Occupied Territories of Georgia* adopted by the Georgian government set out provisions for establishing state censorship and procedural rules for carrying out peace building and humanitarian projects. Distributed by the Georgian government among international NGOs, it met with notable opposition. See <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/041010/Modalities%20for%20Engagement.pdf>

122. So far such signals have only come from the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus Peter Semneby. Commenting on the prospects of the EU policy of ‘engagement without recognition’ he said: ‘If the first steps were to succeed, other opportunities would arise. Our goal is engagement with the purpose of developing contacts with the population of Abkhazia, so that they would feel European. This is clearly European soil, and we need to take this into consideration’ (see <http://www.rus.ghn.ge/news-7560.html>).

6.2 Main elements of the new paradigm

Change in the original premise is hardly to be expected since it is firmly lodged in the consciousness of society as a whole and in its various segments (the ruling elite, political society, expert communities, etc.). Consequently, ‘not to lose Abkhazia completely’ is going to remain the main goal for a long time. Despite this, there is still room for reviewing the paradigm.

First of all, the Sukhumi authorities should not be ignored as an object of politics. Tbilisi’s current policy towards Sukhumi clearly distinguishes between the wider population and the authorities. It is a fact that the Georgian *Strategy* towards the occupied territories is directed at the population and ignores the ruling elite in Sukhumi. This is one of the main miscalculations in Tbilisi’s policy. The new paradigm must acknowledge the authorities in Sukhumi as an important partner with whom a special agenda must be pursued. In the current scenario Tbilisi’s policy is directed at ‘re-recruitment’ of the population (read: the electorate – A.G.), which naturally and automatically undermines the legitimacy and privileges of the *de facto* authorities. This is the main motivation for Sukhumi to block any of Tbilisi’s initiatives, including the *Strategy*.

Additionally, policy regarding the Georgian-Abkhaz problem should be imbued with a systemic character. In particular, it should be viewed through the prism of Russian-Georgian relations. Currently, the Georgian government does not manifest any signs of having a strategy on Russia. In the current situation of acute crisis in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, any serious initiatives to rebuild trust with the Abkhaz party are doomed to failure. First of all, crisis in Georgian-Russian relations has always been an obstacle to progress in Georgian-Abkhaz relations, to which numerous research projects bear witness, some of them conducted by the authors of this paper.¹²³ The Abkhaz have always been cautious in their dealings with Tbilisi, when the latter had problems with the Kremlin. Secondly, in the situation of a standoff with Georgia, Russia, striving to strengthen its hold over the occupied territories, will counter any initiative, including initiatives to restore trust between Sukhumi and Tbilisi. It has sufficient resources for overt or covert sabotage of any projects forming part of the Georgian strategy. Consequently, protective mechanisms need to

123. See for example *Guarantees on non-resumption of hostilities...* (in Russian).

be created, through finding some sort of a *modus vivendi* with Russia, on the one hand, and through engaging the international community, on the other.

The next element of the new paradigm should be resolve to achieve a compromise. Despite the obviously grave consequences of the August events for Georgia and lack of any prospects for the restoration of its territorial integrity in the foreseeable future, the discourse and actions in Tbilisi still manifest a proclivity for the zero-sum game. Too many ‘big’ red lines are drawn, engendering a lack of flexibility in Tbilisi’s approach to relations with Moscow, Sukhumi and international NGOs.

Finally, Tbilisi must acknowledge the inevitability of Abkhazia’s de-isolation. The new paradigm must be built on the principles of a ‘delayed status’ and voluntary reconciliation between the Georgian and Abkhaz parties, and not on coercion of the latter by means of isolationist policies. The incentives, offered by the *Strategy*, are insufficient in terms of ‘soft power’ to engage the Abkhaz in a confidence-building process with Tbilisi. Increased compatibility of Sukhumi’s political, legal and administrative institutions with European institutions is the only correct path towards the ‘de-russification’ of Abkhazia’s political processes and rapprochement in the value systems of the two conflict parties. Therefore, harmonisation of Tbilisi’s policy with the EU policy of ‘engagement without recognition’ must form the foundation of the new paradigm.

6.3 Risks and limitations

In addition to the risks and limitations already noted, linked to the implementation of a reconciliation policy, the current absence of trust between the parties remains the main obstacle. The current leadership in Tbilisi will hardly manage to induce Sukhumi towards mutually beneficial dialogue and cooperation. Unfortunately, mistakes made by Tbilisi in bilateral and regional politics have robbed it of sufficient political resources to ‘reset’ its relations with Sukhumi.

The lamentable state of transport and communications infrastructure will undoubtedly be an obstacle in the realisation of projects/initiatives to restore trust and cooperation. The information vacuum factor, characterising the population of Abkhazia and their habitual indifference towards events and processes in Georgia, is also of relevance here. If and when the parties decide

to make steps towards each other, the above-mentioned factors will definitely restrict the process, especially at the outset.

A possible lack of intra-governmental consensus regarding policy goals and the timeframe for achieving results might engender inter-departmental disagreements and friction, which can affect negatively the course of a reconciliation policy. Inconsistency of the policy could seriously undermine successful implementation of the projects, as in a context of the virtual absence of trust all new initiatives will be subject to failure.

The ongoing process in Serbia, where the country and the government have to resolve a dilemma – to come to terms with the loss of Kosovo and be welcomed into the EU, or to continue the struggle for the return of the breakaway region and not be included in the prosperous alliance – could become a precedent for Georgia. If Serbia were to give up Kosovo, then Tbilisi could be faced with a similar dilemma, when and if as a result of Georgia’s and Abkhazia’s “Europeanisation”, their integration into the EU could become a realistic scenario. Considering the possibility of such a prospect, the Abkhaz party will not be disposed towards too close a rapprochement with Tbilisi, possibly inviting the latter’s mistrust.

Possible vacillations of Ukrainian/Belarusian positions (or other post-Soviet countries) regarding Abkhazia’s recognition could lower Abkhaz motivation to engage in the process to restore trust and mutually beneficial cooperation with Georgia.

6.4 Conditions for conflict transformation

To begin with, we need to define the concept of ‘conflict transformation’. In conflict analysis this term is often preferred to those of ‘conflict resolution’ and ‘conflict management’. It denotes actions directed at transforming a destructive conflict into a constructive conflict. According to the *Code of Conduct* developed with the support of international NGO International Alert, conflict transformation means the process of deep transformation of a situation of violence and fear, which contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of reconciliation and social justice.¹²⁴ In other words, stable peace is built by means of exclusively peaceful methods of resolving disputes. To that end, conditions of violence and fear need to be

124. International Alert, *Work to transform conflicts*; see http://www.3view.az/files/russcoc_guideprin.pdf

transformed to create an atmosphere of peace and respect for human rights.¹²⁵ For our part, we should like to add, that a transformed conflict is a situation which not only ensures peace and respect for human rights but which creates conditions for the resolution of problems of development and modernisation of economy, infrastructure, political and democratic institutions and so on.

Furthermore, all the above-mentioned risks and limitations have a direct bearing on the prospect of transforming the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Only if they are minimised and neutralised can this prospect be discussed. At the same time it should be remembered that it 'takes two to tango'. Realisation of interdependence and a shared sense of responsibility is a very important precondition of conflict transformation. Georgia and Abkhazia are akin to two mountain climbers, tied with the same rope: they can either kill or save each other. The consensus about this understanding is particularly important in the context of a common European future. Therefore when one talks about Georgia's responsibility or the steps it should be first to make, it is important to bear in mind the need for reciprocal steps on the part of the Abkhaz. In other words, the de-isolation of Abkhazia by Tbilisi is both necessary and possible, however, it must not resemble a one-way street. Moreover, it must be a conditional and gradual process. Such issues as the property abandoned by IDPs in Abkhazia, human security for the residents of the Gali district, etc. must be resolved in parallel. De-isolation cannot be the only element of the process towards conflict transformation.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that an essential requirement of conflict transformation is an agreement between parties to the conflict as well as international facilitators on the strategy of transformation and the structure of this process. In particular, it is assumed that there must be mutually agreed goals and deadlines for their implementation. Such transformation goals should include changes in the behaviour of protagonists as well as changes in the political agenda of the conflict and a shift of emphasis from the analysis of causes to the possibility of reconciliation.

125. *Ibid.*

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