

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

Background

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has deep roots. Competing claims to territory and political power came to a head with the collapse of the Soviet Union, resulting in full-scale war in 1992–93. At the heart of the conflict is a clash between the Abkhaz claim for self-determination and Georgia's claim for territorial integrity.

By the time a ceasefire was signed in 1994, at least 12,000 people had been killed, and Abkhazia had broken away from Georgian control. Most of the ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia, as well as many others, were forced to leave their homes: the numbers of displaced are contested but significant. Almost the entire population of Abkhazia experienced trauma and suffering during the war and its aftermath.

Different phases of official peace talks have not resulted in serious progress toward a negotiated peace, and prospects for a settlement are distant. Views differ concerning the roots of the conflict and terminology – the Abkhaz, for instance, use Sukhum or Gal as place names, where the Georgians use Sokhumi or Gali. The sides seek diametrically opposed outcomes from a negotiation process: the Abkhaz aspire to widespread recognition of their independence and insist on building relations with the Georgians on the basis of equal statehood; the Georgians aspire to the return of the territory of Abkhazia to Georgian jurisdiction, and insist on the right of return for the displaced population.

New layers of complexity were added by Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence after the 2008 war in South Ossetia. There is no agreement on who the parties to the conflict are – Georgia emphasises its conflict with Russia, while Abkhazia focuses on its

conflict with Georgia. At the same time, though, many in Abkhazia would argue that with Russian security guarantees in the form of military bases, there is nothing more to talk with Georgia about.

The conflict is exacerbated by its location on a geopolitical fault line. Crudely put, Georgia is backed by 'the West' and Abkhazia by Russia. The divergence in the geopolitical trajectories of the two sides has most recently been exemplified by two signing ceremonies: the Georgian signing of an *Association Agreement* with the European Union in June 2014; and the Abkhaz signing of an *Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership* with the Russian Federation in November 2014.

For well over twenty years the two societies have been living almost entirely separate existences. Years of blockade by all its neighbours cut Abkhazia off from the rest of the world and encouraged a siege mentality that continues today, in spite of ties with Russia in particular becoming increasingly close in recent years. There is minimal contact across the Georgian-Abkhaz divide, and limited contact between Georgians and Abkhaz within Abkhazia (see see Box 2, Gal/i region, page 22). Most of the younger generation on both sides have no experience of interaction with the other, let alone coexistence.

Unresolved conflict continues to shape the lives of many people – in restricted freedom of movement, contested identity documents, and infringements of basic socio-economic and human rights for people living in Abkhazia (Abkhaz and non-Abkhaz alike), as well as those who have been displaced.

The art of the possible: dealing with past violence in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

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Working on conflict is about the art of the possible. The absence of a political settlement to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict presents an apparently insurmountable wall to efforts to pursue reconciliation. The legacies of violence and how different communities remember the past add additional barbed wire to this metaphorical wall: the very concept of reconciliation itself has become highly politicised, and for the Abkhaz in particular associated with capitulation.

The conflict parties largely do not inhabit the same physical space and continue with diametrically opposed visions of the conflict – as a Russian occupation of Georgian territory on the one hand, and a Georgian inability to recognise the reality of Abkhaz independence on the other. The notion of coexistence is therefore inextricably linked to a political settlement. It is understood very differently, in terms of the final outcomes the parties aspire to: independence for the Abkhaz; reintegration of Abkhazia and expulsion of Russian forces for the Georgians. For the Abkhaz, safe relations means being good neighbours with Georgians in separate states, where for Georgians it means the opposite – to restore coexistence within one state.

Yet if we start from the premise that reconciliation does not mean restoring past relationships, but creating new ones, can attempts to promote relational change not start in advance of a peace deal? There is certainly a demand for progress. The multi-ethnic populations on both sides of the conflict want and need a stable peace and secure relationships. And one could argue that in the absence of settlement, a process to deal with past violence is a necessary starting point for a negotiation process that has some chance of success. Trying to improve relationships prior to political settlement might have limited impact on the institutions or socio-economic developments that can lead to more widespread and structural change. But laying the foundations for an honest acknowledgement of perceptions and past violations of rights, and engaging

both societies in deeper processes to address root causes of conflict is an essential component of conflict transformation, and is possible – and necessary – now.

Reconciliation before resolution?

For most Georgians, reconciliation is positive; the outcome of a peacebuilding process, and a necessary precursor to resolving the conflict. Reconciliation works toward restoring relations that were damaged by the war, which in turn brings the societies closer together and makes the Georgian political goal of restoring territorial integrity, and reintegrating Abkhazia into the fold more likely. There are of course other, minority views that are more nuanced, but the general attitude can be summed up as 'we need first to reconcile with the Abkhaz, in order for them to return to us'.

The Abkhaz, on the other hand, do not seek a return to earlier relations perceived as having threatened Abkhaz identity and led to armed conflict. In their eyes, the Georgian aggressor continues to attempt to reintegrate Abkhazia through 'soft power' – working to improve relations as a means to a political end. Repairing relationships therefore is perceived as a return to the status quo ante, an ongoing threat to a vulnerable Abkhaz identity, and a step towards conceding defeat in the Abkhaz goal of self-determination. Reconciliation implies forgiveness without justice, the restoration of broken relationships without an acceptable political solution of the conflict or security guarantees, and without a critical assessment of the war and acknowledgement of Abkhaz losses. As Box 1 illustrates, this is at times compounded by Georgians' conflation of 'reconciliation' with 'reintegration' – which spells victory for them and defeat for the Abkhaz.

This polarisation plays across many spheres in the Georgian-Abkhaz context to build up a complex web of barriers to progress on reconciliation, of which the absence of a political



settlement is perhaps the single most significant. And there are few prospects for reaching political agreement even in the medium future on the fundamental issues at stake.

Caution about the term reconciliation is in some respects a question of semantics. People living on both sides of the conflict divide aspire to live in safety, with their rights protected, able to prosper and develop. To many outside the context, this would appear to be what reconciliation is really about – the achievement of a positive peace, of sufficiently inclusive and just societies that are no longer driven by mutually exclusive ethno-nationalist narratives.

Yet the term reconciliation has become so invested with contradictory political meaning, it is not useful to use it. And there are real constraints, linked to the conflict dynamic, that go beyond the language we use and militate against change. If improving relations in the absence of a final settlement (or in the words of one Abkhaz “before we have built the fence that will make us good neighbours”) is perceived on both sides as serving the political goals of one side more than the other, then the ‘first steps toward peace’ are unlikely to get very far.

Systemic change and the ‘national project’

The past is highly politicised: current debates about the ‘national project’ on either side of the divide have at their core fundamental identity issues – based on unilateral, often contested and incompatible narratives about the past. The war and relatively recent and widespread experience of violence exacerbate this – mistrust, insecurity and unaddressed grievances from the recent past are core drivers of the ongoing conflict and of nationalist agendas on both sides. The Abkhaz speak of the war as an attempt to wipe them out as a nation.

BOX 1

What’s in a name? The Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality

The renaming of the Georgian Ministry for Reintegration as the Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality in 2014 reflects a familiar dynamic in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In 2004, Georgia set up the State Ministry for Conflict Resolution Issues to be responsible for addressing its conflicts regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was renamed in early 2008 as the State Ministry for Reintegration, making explicit Georgia’s political agenda vis-à-vis the conflict regions: to reintegrate them back into Georgia.

On 1 January 2014, after a new government came to power, the name changed again, to the State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. This was also intended to send political signals – that Georgia was approaching the conflicts from a reconciliation and inclusion angle, and to mark an end to the previous era in Georgian politics.

The latest renaming was seen as a positive signal that could boost confidence by many inside Georgia, as well as by international actors supporting Tbilisi to adopt a different approach. Yet the response on the Abkhaz side was negative: a new label for the old goal of reintegration, putting a gloss on Georgia’s real intentions

This negative response reinforced Georgian perceptions that the Abkhaz are never satisfied, and that whatever Georgia does will necessarily be wrong in their eyes. Yet if anything, replacing reintegration with reconciliation has confirmed Abkhaz fears that the two are indeed synonymous, and has narrowed the space for ‘reconciliation’ work.

On the Georgian side, the fate of Georgians displaced from Abkhazia is seen as a gross violation of human rights.

Georgian political pressure on its Western allies not to support Abkhazia in statebuilding tends to prevent any form of cooperation between the West and Abkhazia, which in turn creates obstacles to potential reforms – for example in healthcare, policing and education – that could lead to improvements for the whole population, including Gal/i region, and to a political environment more conducive to embracing diversity.

On the Georgian side, the context of an unresolved conflict increases fears of potential secession of other areas of the country where non-ethnic Georgians live in compact settlements. This hinders work to create a more shared, pluralistic society in which citizenship as a defining factor overtakes the pride of place currently accorded ethnic identity.

Domestic politics

The unresolved conflict provides easy ammunition for political opposition on both sides – what better way of critiquing the incumbent authorities than to accuse them of complicity with the enemy? The Gal/i region in particular has become hostage to domestic political dynamics in Abkhazia (see Box 2). For Abkhaz leaders to reach out to their own Georgian population in the current context can be construed as being pro-Georgian, which is political suicide.

On the Georgian side, the Law on Occupied Territories, adopted under President Saakashvili soon after the 2008 war over South Ossetia categorises Abkhazia as a territory occupied by Russia. This ignores the Abkhaz perspective and limits potential starting points for a conversation about political aspirations. It restricts, among other things, freedom of movement and economic activities in Abkhazia, and places legal constraints on international actors to engage directly with the Abkhaz. A ban on foreigners entering Abkhazia via the Russian Federation creates an artificial 'dependency' on Georgia.

Yet, since 2008 voices calling for the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict to be resolved using military force have all but ceased, and surveys, including a Conciliation Resources report (2011), *Displacement in Georgia: IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice*, indicate that the numbers of IDPs who believe return will be possible any time soon is now very small. There appears to be increasing readiness in some parts of the population to listen to and respect the rights of the Abkhaz, and to think beyond the mantra of restoring territorial integrity to consider a range of options for future relations. This includes discussion of the possibility of recognising Abkhaz independence under certain conditions as a means to transform relations.

In spite of arguably more diverse public opinion in Georgia, the government has felt under significant domestic political pressure not to rock the political boat. There are concerns that any attempt to lift the Law on Occupied Territories would be capitalised on by the opposition and presented as the government being soft on Russia.

BOX 2

Gal/i region

The one exception to otherwise very limited Georgian-Abkhaz inter-ethnic contact is the Georgian population in the Gal/i region of Abkhazia. They co-exist with Abkhaz and other ethnic groups, yet remain compactly settled in south-east Abkhazia along the river Ingur/i. There is much less interaction with them than among other ethnic groups in Abkhazia: many Abkhaz residents in the capital, Sukhum/i, have not travelled to the Gal/i region since the war over 20 years ago.

There is, though, more exchange than there was previously – some of the Gal/i population travel to Sukhum/i to trade in the market, to work in manual labour, or to study at the university – leading to the increasing distinction drawn in Abkhaz rhetoric between the Gal/i Georgians (often referred to as Mingrelians) and 'Georgians proper'. Many in Tbilisi see the emphasis by the Abkhaz authorities on Mingrelian identity as politically motivated: an attempt to assimilate the Gal/i Georgians by playing down, and indeed restricting, their links on the other side of the river Ingur/i.

What is clear is that the situation of the Gal/i Georgians has not created impetus for an improved relationship between the two sides of the conflict. The interactions that do exist across the divide are mostly hidden – people know there are Abkhaz travelling for healthcare in Georgia, for example, but they tend not to talk about it. Far more vocal are the hostile voices, particularly on social media, who feed the potential for destabilisation in the Gal/i region, and maintain the notion of a 'fifth column' as a live concern.

There have been improvements in living conditions for the Gal/i population, for example a reduction in crime, development of infrastructure, and transport links. At the same time, though, new legislation presents challenges to the right to school education in one's native language and to voting and property rights for the Gal/i population. This has a serious impact on the potential for relationships to improve among ethnic groups in Abkhazia. There have been attempts to initiate activities that build relationships – for example to jointly identify ways of addressing the problems faced by different ethnic groups within Abkhazia (see Conciliation Resources (2015), 'Dialogue and Diversity in Abkhazia') – but these are rare examples of collective exchange and action.

Geopolitics

There is also an overwhelming narrative among many Georgians that the Abkhaz in fact have no domestic agency: they are at best being cleverly manipulated by Russia and at worst have had their political agenda overtaken by Moscow. To engage with Abkhaz perspectives seriously, so the argument runs, is thus to play into the hands of the Russian aggressor, and weaken Georgia.

The language is changing in Georgia: it has become more acceptable in some circles at least to talk about a 'Georgian-Abkhaz conflict', and to acknowledge the Abkhaz as a party to the conflict. Yet a predominant focus on Russia as the architect of instability in Georgia, and doubts as to the ability of the

Abkhaz to control their fate, continue to undermine Georgian attempts to reach out to the Abkhaz. This predominant view affects many Georgians' attitudes to reconciliation: they view a return to the status quo prior to the establishment of Russian military bases as sufficient for restoring peaceful relations – that is, there is no fundamental conflict between Georgians and Abkhaz.

Many Abkhaz want external links beyond Russia, too. While Russia is clearly their key strategic partner, there is a vulnerability inherent in such circumscribed foreign relations. Some are concerned that a Russian-Georgian *détente* might damage Abkhaz interests. There is, though, little interest in developing international diplomacy if this is done exclusively via Tbilisi. A common perception is that Western interlocutors promote interaction between the Georgians and Abkhaz, and emphasise confidence-building measures across the conflict divide over other elements of direct engagement with Abkhaz needs, in order to support Georgia in its aim of reintegrating Abkhazia. In light of this, the Abkhaz authorities try to limit possible cooperation with Georgia and downplay what little exchange or trade relations exist between the two. This in turn distorts the reality of how relationships are developing, which is precisely what needs to be taken into account when aiming to build peaceful and stable relations across the divide.

Civil society

Civil society efforts to reach out across the conflict divide can also meet with unintended consequences. The 'Sorry Campaign', launched by a Georgian NGO in 2007 attempted to initiate a grassroots movement to apologise to the Abkhaz people, in order to 'change the dynamics and direction of relationships established between Georgians and Abkhazians in recent years [and to] encourage people to think about the horrors of war and the mistakes we have made'. While the campaign mobilised limited support, it never really gained momentum in Georgia. And on the Abkhaz side it was largely dismissed as either naive or insincere. Although designed to try to shift the debate in a positive direction, the framing of the text of the apology and the nature of the campaign arguably created more ill will in a context where acknowledgement, and even more so apology, were absent at the official level.

In 2010, a film made by a Georgian peace activist titled 'Absence of Will' was shown in Abkhazia. The film focuses on two young Georgians' journey of discovery as they set out to understand what the conflict with Abkhazia is about. It is a challenging film, which explores Georgia's role and responsibility. On the Georgian side the film was contentious and perceived by many as overly self-critical.

After several unsuccessful attempts by Abkhaz civil society to arrange a screening, an opportunity arose to show the film on Abkhaz state television. The last minute-decision to screen the film and the consequent lack of public preparedness was an aggravating factor. Even so, the depth of negative reaction to the film was surprising. Many Abkhaz were highly suspicious of this attempt to re-frame Georgia's role, and the agenda they presumed must lie behind this.

The political opposition seized on ambivalent feelings, particularly among the 'Mothers of the Fallen' – a group of

women who lost sons and other members of their families during the war – and publicly exploited negative responses to the film for political ends. Although the film provoked a more nuanced reaction among many people, the loudest public resonance was negative. Overall, civil society supporters of conflict transformation in either society, and particularly on the Abkhaz side, do not occupy a comfortable position and run the risk of marginalisation or even ostracism.

The art of the possible: dealing with the past

Over decades of Georgian-Abkhaz peacebuilding work, 'dealing with the past' has emerged as a key conceptual space to address the legacies of violence that are such a barrier to a peaceful future. In the words of one dialogue participant: "Only if the mistakes of the past are acknowledged will it be possible to talk about future relations." Initiatives that enable a more reflective, and potentially more inclusive, conversation about the violent past are essential to building the possibility for more constructive relations in future.

There are of course challenges in embarking on a process of dealing with the past in the absence of political agreement: there is no common legal framework within which to address the legacies of violence; there is no point in time at which a line can be drawn in the sand, and the parties can agree that the war and the deep-seated grievances associated with it are in the past. Moreover, some fear that to open up old wounds when settlement is a long way off would only further damage relationships.

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Activities that focus on the 'right to know' have proved most appropriate to a context in which political settlement is such a distant prospect. Significant work has been done by the International Committee of the Red Cross to conduct exhumations on Abkhaz territory and enable exchange of remains of missing persons between the sides. A number of different initiatives, some led by civil society and also at the level of the formal peace process, are working to transfer archival material from Tbilisi to Sukhum/i to restore a small part of what was lost during the 1992–93 war when the Abkhaz archive was burnt. This is in part a symbolic reparation, in part an effort to rebuild missing elements in Abkhaz cultural history.

Other work aims to create space for people to talk about their experience of the war years. International NGOs – the Berghof Foundation and Conciliation Resources/swisspeace – work with local partners to capture oral history accounts, with some

focusing more on 'ordinary' people's experience, and others on key actors' and decision makers' testimonies. Work of this nature, that acknowledges the existence of different narratives, is an important precursor to thinking about a shared narrative moving forward post-settlement.

These initiatives contribute to peacebuilding as they enable people to acknowledge there were victims on both sides. They entail bearing responsibility, an appreciation of the others' grievances, and a readiness to acknowledge the irrevocable damage done to people's lives, identities and relationships. If reconciliation is seen negatively by many in the region as seeking to restore prior relations, or even brushing over difference, dealing with the past is perceived as more transformative – it is about creating a new basis for building different relationships, not a return to what there was before. One colleague from the region put it this way:

“If a vase was made badly and broke because it was not sufficiently robust, and we then try to stick it back together as it was – this is reconciliation. But if we try to understand why it broke and then rebuild it in a sturdy and lasting way – this is dealing with the past, and transformation.”

There are a wide range of efforts within the separate societies for long-term conflict transformation: working with young people to try to equip them to address the myriad challenges resulting from isolation and a lack of post-war investment and development; work on governance and participation, including of marginalised communities such as Georgians displaced from Abkhazia during the war; encouraging greater transparency and access to information for the public in Abkhazia; and promoting inclusion, making links across the diverse communities within the two societies.

Civil society is active in identifying, through Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, issues of common interest (or indeed unilateral interest) where there is potential for progress. These include the de-isolation of Abkhazia by promoting international engagement; a wide range of measures to improve the

security and rights of the Gal/i Georgians; freedom of movement; access to education and healthcare; and economic development.

Looking forward

For talk of reconciliation to be meaningful in this context, it cannot mean restoring past relationships but rather creating fundamentally different relationships in the future.

In the absence of political progress in the peace process, activity at 'people-to-people' level, if done well, can have transformative impact on the individuals involved. Yet it can at best have limited impact on the structures or systems that need to change in order to begin a broad process of 'reconciliation' that impacts on the fabric of post-war society. Before this inclusive process of reconciliation can begin, and without political settlement, those working to lay its foundations remain largely marginal within their own societies.

While civil society initiatives can clearly feed into political-level processes, ultimately it is important that mechanisms are also found for decision makers to meet directly on key issues. Seeing practical returns from dialogue would strengthen relationships and potentially enable bolder steps to be taken, eventually kick-starting a serious peace process on the basis of mutual understanding, and taking into account each side's interests.

For example, a decision by Georgia to sign a non-use-of-force agreement with the Abkhaz would provide a clear statement of intent and would arguably open up more space for progress to be possible. It is only worth the paper it is written on in some respects, and there are clear reasons why it has proved impossible to agree the conditions for such a signing to date. Yet for many in Abkhazia, the symbolic importance of Georgians finding a way to sign is not to be underestimated. A signing would be perceived by them as a clear signal that Georgia rejects military means of resolving the conflict, which could open up space for a change in the conflict dynamic and enable new relationships to be forged.

While the contested past remains so much a part of the present, and acts as a block to progress towards peace, it is essential to find ways of engaging with it. Work focused on dealing with the past or conflict *transformation* in the shorter to medium term contributes directly or indirectly to challenging nationalism, and the unilateral and selective historical discourse that underpins domestic political agendas. In doing so, it promotes the potential for more just and stable political and social contexts in future.

In the longer term, this is key to creating the conditions for an open-ended negotiation on final settlement that can encompass very different perspectives on key issues, such as status or the return of the displaced. And in the meantime, such work can only help in building the mutual understanding and respect necessary to prevent further outbreaks of conflict.

BOX 3

The Memory Project

The Memory Project is an ongoing initiative to document the violent history of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, creating a basis for understanding the past. Groups are working in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i to collate and systematise existing materials (news clippings, video footage, official documents, photographs and personal archives) and new oral histories in two parallel archives, which together will create as full a picture as possible of Georgian-Abkhaz relations from 1989–94.

The impact to date has been limited – there is no public access to the materials at present. Yet when the core groups first watched eyewitness testimonies together, the potential for a different, and transformative, discussion was clear. At a future point, in the form of interactive websites, films or research, the archives will be a resource for coming generations trying to understand and assess the war through an inclusive lens.