

## **The Georgian–Abkhaz conflict: reflections on four study visits to the United Kingdom and Ireland**

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### **Overview and Objectives**

Between May 2002 and January 2003, four joint study visits to the United Kingdom and Ireland for politicians, officials and civic activists from the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict were organized by the London-based non-governmental organization Conciliation Resources. The rationale behind these visits was two-fold: to provide the participants with an opportunity to see how the United Kingdom is managing issues of ethnic diversity and conflict; and to provide an informal space for analysis and dialogue. Particular focus was placed on Northern Ireland because of the depth of the inter-communal tension that has existed there. It was felt that the participants would find it instructive to look at the ways the communities in Northern Ireland have been handling the conflict including the arrangements devised in the Belfast Agreement. It was felt that the Agreement itself provided an instructive case of how a framework can widen the parameters for finding a solution rather than narrow them. One group also made a visit to Wales to gain a different perspective on the question of devising policy to deal with ethnic diversity. In total 48 Georgians and Abkhaz, including representatives of different national communities, participated in these visits.

Each of the four visits explored a different set of issues – economic matters, security matters, cultural issues such as education and language, and political and constitutional arrangements – as they related to the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland and the nature of governance between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, as well as cross border relations with the Republic of Ireland.

### **Background and Planning**

The study visits aimed to build upon and reinforce Conciliation Resources' ongoing conflict transformation and peace-building programme to address the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict. Working in the region since 1997 CR seeks to develop civil society constituencies and capacities, to promote analysis and dialogue across the conflict divide and to provide politicians, officials and civic activists opportunities for reflection on democratic and non-violent options for change. The United Kingdom Global Conflict Prevention Pool supported the study visits.

The idea for the study visits evolved from aspects of CR's ongoing work. Since 2000 in collaboration with the Berlin-based Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, CR has facilitated a series of dialogue meetings with Georgian and Abkhaz officials, politicians and civic actors. This process has offered opportunities for a range of people from across the

conflict divide to engage in informal dialogue and joint analysis of the obstacles and opportunities in the peace process. Representatives from other conflict areas were invited to give insights into how their conflicts were being managed. Participants found this very useful and a number felt it would be instructive to explore the experience of another conflict situation in greater detail. Furthermore, CR's non-governmental partners on either side of the conflict divide felt it was very important to provide opportunities for other officials and politicians to take part in such informal events alongside civic actors, so as to gain new perspectives on conflict and peace dynamics. Such meetings also provide a valuable opportunity to share information and explore needs and fears.

Identifying the themes for each study visit was itself a process of dialogue with NGO partners, government officials and politicians from both sides. It was decided that each visiting group should concentrate on a specific theme in order to focus discussion and bring together participants with common interests and challenges to confront at home. The selection of the participants was also a collaborative process that involved much consultation across the conflict divide. The result was groups from each side that represented different political and institutional structures, in some cases displaying a considerable degree of heterogeneity. All participants took part in their personal capacity, notwithstanding the official functions that many fulfil.

The itineraries were designed so that each group travelled directly to Belfast and spent several days in Northern Ireland, with brief visits to the Republic of Ireland in two cases. The group examining cultural issues also visited Wales for two days. Each visit concluded with a couple of days in London. In addition to a programme of visits to political parties, government departments, NGOs, grassroots organizations, policy centres, security structures, trade unions, business and financial institutions (depending on the area of functional interest for each group), time was set aside for shared discussion and reflection. In some cases it was clear that insufficient time was provided for this, however it was necessary to find a balance between structured discussion (bearing in mind that informal conversations continued throughout the visits) and inputs from relevant sources on each theme.

As is often the case with initiatives that seek to bring together representatives from conflicting parties logistical questions required much planning. It is important to recognize this in itself is part of the process of reaching a common understanding of the purpose behind such visits. The politics of getting this right conditions whether such visits can take place in the first place and whether the learning opportunities, contact and dialogue that occur have a chance to be constructive.

### General Observations

The UK's recent experience in dealing with ethnic and national diversity and

competing claims over the distribution of political power provides a series of important challenges that can be instructive for political communities grappling with similar issues elsewhere. While many problems and mistakes have been made and are still being made, as evidenced by the suspensions of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the organizers felt there are lessons the participants could draw from the Northern Ireland experience. It is natural that participants would also draw their own lessons depending on their interests and points of view.

Perhaps one of the most instructive ways in which the parties in Northern Ireland have approached the conflict since the beginning of the peace process is the flexible and creative way that people have developed structures that can either meet the aspirations of all parties, or at the least, not compromise their aspirations. For example, there are cross-border bodies in which most parties have been willing to take part, without feeling that their participation compromises their position on the basic issue of the future constitutional arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Irish State. We therefore wanted the groups to meet the people working in these bodies and to see these bodies at work since they provide an example of concrete issues being addressed without prejudicing final outcomes. More generally, we wanted them to see how some political leaders have to a degree tried to be more open in their approach to opponents, and that this has had some positive response.

It seemed important to show how the peace process in Northern Ireland has, as far as possible, been able to meet the concerns of all the parties in Northern Ireland and how, when it has not, it has come under strain. This issue goes to the root of the arrangements contained in the Belfast Agreement and it was one of the main issues presented to the final group interested in political and constitutional issues. However the implications of addressing the needs of all parties is evident in every field, including economic development, security and cultural expression.

One cause for concern in the Northern Ireland peace process has been the level of confidence in the process that exists in each party – in other words their confidence that the process will satisfy some of their concerns and meet some of their needs. This determined whether parties were prepared to enter into the process, whether they and their supporters were willing to support the outcome and whether they are prepared to stay with the process. It is apparent that trust has been eroding and it was instructive for the delegates to consider why. In Northern Ireland it is often stated in terms of lack of trust in the other parties, and certainly the good faith of other parties does effect levels of confidence in the process. But this concern might often be reflected back on the parties in terms of whether they are acting in ways which would demonstrate that they are trustworthy. Most interlocutors indicated they did not believe there was any alternative to the peace process and in this sense, they continue to have confidence in the process. But it was also clear that the resolution of issues of economic development, security, culture and political

development are all areas where a balance has had to be struck between the interests of the parties to the conflict and also with principles of good governance. At times this balance has been hard to find, putting the process under considerable strain.

We wanted all the groups to see how in Northern Ireland it is recognized that it is important for the population to feel that there are security, social and economic benefits of a peace process. When this is the case a benign circle is formed by which a stronger sense of well being creates the conditions that make a fair settlement possible, and progress on the peace process in turn enhances the feeling of well being. We also wanted to demonstrate the danger of negative perceptions that have the potential to undermine the peace process. Some people do not have a sense that they are benefiting and this contributes to a vicious circle because their negative perceptions slow down the implementation of the process and so there are fewer positive benefits reaching the community.

In addition to these recurring themes which all the groups were able to consider, particular issues arose in relation to each visit and there were specific insights which delegates took away.

### Economic visit

This visit aimed to show the role played by the business community and the trade unions in encouraging the politicians to work out a settlement to the conflict, and how general economic progress has encouraged a positive attitude to peace in the community. The Northern Irish experience suggests it is important to promote economic development and certainly not impede it in any way for political reasons. It even gives rise to the conviction that if one party supports the economic advancement of the party with which they are in conflict, this party may then be able to engage more constructively in the process.

A significant difference between Northern Ireland and the Georgian-Abkhaz situation is the level of economic subvention that Northern Ireland has received from the UK government and the European Union as well as other smaller sources of finance. Efforts were made to encourage the delegates to look beyond this advantage. One reason for going to Derry/Londonderry was to show the initial efforts at regeneration that were made in the early 1980s when there was very little external support available. This highlighted the fact that regeneration could commence without large-scale donor interest and before the conflict was resolved, but once underway it could attract donors to engage constructively and respond to community needs. Indeed one of the challenges of working with donors is to enhance the ability of communities to effectively communicate their needs rather than have them simply remain passive recipients of the donors' funds and values. Nonetheless the participants did feel that the lack of capital in their region and the transitional nature of their economies, not to mention the impact of trade restrictions,

made it difficult to conceive that they could achieve the level of economic growth that had occurred in Northern Ireland.

We also wanted to show the group the possibility of economic cooperation across international borders. In the case of Northern Ireland this is politically contentious: one community wants to reinforce the border while the other community wants to reduce its significance. This was another reason why we took the first group to the north-west and Derry/Londonderry where the natural economic unit straddles the international border between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

The group did discuss the scope for future economic collaboration across the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict divide as well as areas in which there has been some official collaboration, such as energy or telecommunications. Such areas are few and tend to occur because there is an imperative for cooperation. The participants were quick to highlight the considerable economic cooperation between illegal and criminal groupings across the Georgian–Abkhaz divide and that these groups seem to find a common language more easily than most others. Overall, participants felt that it is difficult to avoid the politicization of proposed joint activities, since no economic activity is seen as neutral.

In this light, although joint economic activities are often cited as a fertile terrain for confidence building, to begin to forge collaborative economic initiatives there is a need for creativity to ensure that shared economic interests do not compromise political aspirations. Ideas that make good economic sense can at times have too high a political cost. It is important to consider this and how to minimise the political cost of development so that any such engagement can become a source of renewed confidence, rather than competition and tension.

The group was also encouraged to reflect on the consequences that arise when people in positions of power find it more comfortable to maintain their present positions rather than address problems because they do not want to damage their vested interests. Such interests can obstruct peace processes and stability. This is an issue as pertinent to Georgian–Abkhaz experience as to Northern Ireland.

The group took away a strong sense of the importance of individuals and leadership. They had a series of rather charismatic presentations while they were in Derry/Londonderry, including John Hume, the Nobel Prize winner, which emphasised the importance of knowing what you want to achieve and then being prepared to try a number of strategies in the effort to reach a resolution.

### Security issues

This visit wanted to address the relationship between security – its absence or presence – and the prospects for movement in political processes. In

Northern Ireland, different communities perceive this issue in different ways and the British government has often sought to find a balance in its actions between security and political imperatives.

One lesson learnt in Northern Ireland that we wanted to share with the participants is the need for sensitive policing, encompassing accountability, transparency and impartiality, and the difficulty in achieving this. We therefore spent time hearing from different communities on how they feel about the way they are policed. Some people, particularly in the Nationalist community, feel threatened by the security forces and want lower level policing while others, particularly in the Unionist community, feel vulnerable and want a stronger police presence.

An important issue for the group to consider was the difficulty of achieving public confidence in the security forces, especially in a divided society where there is a history of suspicion and hostility towards the state and a corresponding hostility towards sections of the public by the security forces. This touched on the relationship between security and legitimacy and raised the question: if a state cannot maintain the rule of law and a system of justice how legitimate is it? The group was introduced to the various official structures that have been put in place in Northern Ireland to represent the public in monitoring policing activities, and to seek redress for violations. We also met civil society groups that monitor and engage with policing issues. The role and extent of civilian control in security matters was a very striking feature for all participants.

Another source of discussion was the impact on the political process of terrorists, whose actions are designed to challenge the legitimacy of the state and its security services. One of the key challenges in Northern Ireland has been how to draw the paramilitaries into the political process while at the same time keeping on board those who feel that allowing paramilitaries to engage in politics can be construed as a victory for the men of violence. It was noted that marginalizing those willing to resort to violence leaves the process vulnerable to the disruption they can cause. At the same time those using violence or military threat as a strategy have to be conscious of the impact this has on the preparedness of opponents to engage in meaningful negotiations. Therefore paramilitary or terrorist activity has political, security and psychological consequences that interact with and impact upon a peace process. Participants in the visit heard how it is important to have an inclusive strategy to deal with the paramilitaries in a post-agreement phase to prevent them resorting to extra-legal and criminal activity. As can be witnessed in Northern Ireland to this day, the lingering threat of the use of force, however intangible, can have a significant and damaging impact on the political process.

The participants were invited to consider whether there are ways of ensuring security other than by military means, and what kind of confidence building measures can help to establish a more settled society. In discussing the role

of confidence building between parties in conflict, it was recognized that incremental measures to improve confidence require consistent patterns of behaviour if they are to lead to increased trust. The participants expressed an interest in the question of cooperation in the context of Georgian–Abkhaz relations, in particular discussing the possibility for joint training, in the first instance for mid–to–low level police working in Zugdidi and Gali.

We had hoped to explore the issue of cooperation between Irish and UK security forces but time constraints meant it was not possible to develop this theme to a fuller extent. The final group did however receive a briefing from the Irish authorities on the security and political elements of this crucial relationship.

### Cultural expression

The conflict in Northern Ireland revolves around issues of identity and culture and rights to cultural expression. It is a prime example of the important role played by identity in situations of conflict, and illustrates the degree to which finding ways for the different communities to express their identity through language and through various cultural activities can contribute to the process of resolution. Many of the participants also felt strongly about the importance of identity in their context, and were committed to promoting cultural awareness and development in their own community.

The participants were very struck that some of the groups they met in Northern Ireland were involved in a conscious effort to construct an identity and create cultural symbols. This led to an ongoing and often philosophical discussion of the nature of identity, the origin and authenticity of culture, and how to deal with the past. There was a tendency to explore the technicalities of subjects (such as linguistics) and it seemed important to keep the focus on the social and political implications of such efforts.

One aspect we wanted to highlight was that there can be negative aspects to identity building. The participants were confronted with some of the dilemmas in the Northern Ireland context and challenged by what they saw and heard to explore the way in which lack of communication and very differing perceptions of expressions of cultural identity impact on the community as a whole. They felt that some of the efforts at identity building they observed were artificial. At the same time, though, they had to consider the consequences of not respecting such efforts.

While the human need to have a sense of identity and bolster it if it is weak is understandable, it was evident that there were dangers in this process especially given that identity is often built on exclusivity and opposition to other identity groups. This can intensify the polarization of the community, and lead one to overlook the fact that one person's right to an expression of culture can be read by others as a threat to their own sense of identity and belonging. This is particularly pertinent in a climate of instability where fears for personal and collective security make identity questions a political

instrument. The more insecure a group is the more defensive it tends to be, and hence the more it will tend to exclude others and leave itself isolated and insecure. The participants in the study visit said that they did not find some of the expressions of culture they encountered very palatable.

In Cardiff there was an opportunity of looking at how issues of culture, and in particular language, are dealt with within the framework of UK devolution. An important element to examine was how language and cultural expression link into broader questions of protecting minority (and majority) rights and the need to deal with social diversity, recognizing cultural difference, and including more isolated or marginalized communities in the political process. Excluding such communities is often a first step towards conflict. We wanted to emphasise to the group the shift in emphasis that has occurred in Wales, away from simply protecting the minority to enlightening the majority.

Many of the meetings in Wales touched on the need for recognition of and respect for equal rights within the community. This was of particular relevance for Georgian–Abkhaz experience, given that the language question is somewhat contentious, particularly among those who do not speak Georgian or Abkhaz. The group also explored mechanisms for language promotion (at community and policy levels), and ways in which an infrastructure can be created to encourage people to use and learn a language, which in turn contributes to a ‘social space’ in which the language can continue to exist. They were struck by the emphasis placed on bilingualism, and the objective not of making Welsh dominant in Wales, but of giving validity to Welsh as a language central to the social and political life while not denying the importance of the use of English for the non–Welsh-speaking community.

Intellectuals and academics occupied a significant position in society in the former Soviet Union, and were highly influential in the lead up to the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict. Discussion among the group touched on the current role of intellectuals, and on how the contribution made by scholars and those working in the fields of cultural development and education could be made stronger and more effective. Much of the discussion focused on internal questions of cultural development and community relations, but the participants were invited to consider ways in which questions of security, rights and responsibilities with regard to the identity issue link in to the conflict as a whole.

### Political and constitutional issues

The final group came at a very interesting time in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were under suspension and all the parties were engaged in a constant round of meetings to see whether a formula could be devised to provide new broad-based confidence and commitment to the institutions created under the Belfast Agreement. In these circumstances, it was noteworthy that senior representatives of all shades of



political opinion set aside time to meet with the participants. The timing allowed the visitors a close-up view of the current issues and how the parties are responding to them. Included in the schedule were visits to working class Protestant and Catholic working class communities on opposite sides of the peace line. This provided an opportunity to learn what people living in a hostile environment think of their political leaders and of the peace process in general.

The participants learnt something of the institutional arrangements established under the Belfast Agreement, but they were particularly interested in the political implications of those institutions and of the actions of the politicians not only in Northern Ireland but also in Dublin, London and Washington. They were made aware of a series of challenges and dilemmas that the communities faced (and continue to face) when taking difficult and necessary decisions and actions. These are dilemmas that confront most communities in conflict and the participants were able to consider how and whether they applied to their own choices and options.

The political leaders reflected on the decision to enter the peace process back in the 1990s and how that came about. We heard a variety of insights as to why people (many who had carried arms themselves) made the choice to engage in a peace process. Some believed it was the result of war weariness and the desire not to inflict the same experience on the next generation. Some came to realize their intransigent position was counter-productive because their community was actually becoming weaker and they were encouraging continued resistance by their opponents. At the same time they needed to have some hope that dialogue and a democratic process might lead to a better outcome and we heard how some interlocutors helped parties to assess the potential of a peace process.

The parties also had to decide whether to support the outcome of the negotiations in the Belfast Agreement. Even apparently uncompromising politicians spoke of the need to compromise and balance what you give with the benefits you receive. One person had not supported the Agreement because he felt the balance was wrong, but he did not reject the need to reach such a balance.

It was striking that all the people whom we met did not want the process to fail even though some may have had doubts about how the actual process had developed. Most spokespersons had problems with the implementation of the Agreement, rather than with the Agreement itself, feeling that it is particularly in the process of implementation that big risks have to be taken. Some of the concerns might have been written into the Agreement but then one or another party might have refused to sign it. Reference was made to the phrase used in a speech by Tony Blair: "acts of completion". This is the idea that parties had begun to implement some of the obligations under the Belfast Agreement but had not completed that process. One weakness of the Agreement may be that it did not include threshold points when parties

needed to begin implementing their commitments, and deadlines by which those commitments should be completed. One politician suggested there was a need for a “compact on implementation” which would spell out those thresholds and deadlines.

The perception that other parties have not carried out acts of completion has contributed to the loss of trust in the other parties and the loss of confidence in the process. We have noted that this issue was an underlying theme for all the groups yet it was especially pertinent for this group as it was a key concern at the time for the people they were meeting in Northern Ireland. They heard politicians talk in terms of reliability: patterns of reliable and accountable behaviour are crucial if the parties in a peace process are to be regarded as trustworthy. Instead of asking whether one side can trust the other side it is more relevant to ask whether the behaviour of your own side is viewed as trustworthy by the other side, and the reasons why they should or should not trust your side.

Related to this is the need to be inclusive and retain the commitment of all parties. All people have a voice that needs to be heard. It is important to gain the consent of as many people as possible and find mechanisms to give representation to different communities in such a way that all could feel protected. Excluding or marginalizing some groups was detrimental to the process because it enabled these groups to dig in and feel embattled, and therefore less receptive to change and more suspicious of new opportunities. One person reported the comment that even if it is not possible to get the agreement of all sides, it is important to involve dissenters in the discussions. One interlocutor reported the words of the dissenting Boer in South Africa, Mr Terreblanche, who had told Northern Ireland politicians that it was important never to lose contact with the process, even if you do not approve of it, as was the case for him in his own situation.

While the groups were told of the importance of trust and inclusiveness they could also observe that the communities were turning inward and giving more attention to internal cohesion than reaching out to opponents. It was also clear that much of the political culture remains confrontational and it is difficult to move towards a co-operative way of doing politics in Northern Ireland. A culture of violence still dominates many urban areas and in such an environment, violent incidents can often set the tone of public debate.

The group explored the relationship between leaders and society – do leaders shape public opinion about the compromises that might have to be part of an agreement or does public opinion shape the leaders? In Northern Ireland (as with most places) it was a bit of both. However what was important was that leaders were at times prepared to take risks and even change strategy without necessarily having public support when they felt that the strategies that they pursued for many years were not leading them any closer to their goals. While leaders were prepared to take risks in the lead up to the negotiation phase, it has been more difficult in implementing the agreement.

They often say things aimed at one audience (their supporters) which might antagonise political actors on the other side of the conflict divide. Or they may try to reach out to the other side but if they have not prepared the ground with their own supporters they can unintentionally weaken their own position.

One of the participants said at the end that it was evident that it was important for politicians to be flexible in strategy while holding to their political goals. It was easier to do this by working on root causes of the conflict, such as inequality and discrimination.

The participants had a very positive view of the role of United Kingdom and Ireland whom they compared to the third parties interested in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. For many generations they have both been parties to the conflict and yet in recent years have managed to develop constructive (though neither impartial nor disinterested) third party roles. They were particularly impressed with the willingness of the British government to state that Britain had “no strategic or selfish interest in Northern Ireland.” It seemed necessary to remind the participants that they had heard many criticisms of Britain’s performance. Britain was accused (by both sides) of being partial and some felt that on occasion Britain had interfered to avoid issues being discussed and coming to a head. These accusations were reflected in its underlying approach: a reliance on giving gifts and inducements; trading concessions to each party; concentrating on leaders with vetoes and ignoring the role of the popular base; taking the line of least resistance depending on whose veto on the process is more worrying at the time; and trying to persuade and cajole rather than getting real commitment from the parties. In the last couple of years, as the challenges of implementing the Agreement have mounted, this behaviour has often acted as a disincentive for the parties to deal with each other. The issue of identity had been an important theme for the group looking at cultural issues but it arose many times during this visit. Unionists in particular were asked about their national identity and it was noteworthy that they tended to reply in terms of citizenship rather than ethnic or national identity. This may indicate one way to transcend the issue of national identity.

Perhaps one of the most enduring impressions that the participants will have taken away is the time, courage and persistence needed to take the process this far, and which will still be needed for further progress.

Many of these insights may be applicable to other conflict situations though there were of course obvious differences with the specific issues in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Northern Ireland does not have an identifiable group of displaced people, though many people remember being uprooted from their homes. As mentioned, the third parties interested in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict have very different interests from the British and Irish governments. In the seminar on the global strategic environment at the International Institute for Strategic Studies towards the end of the study visit,

however, a panel of international experts cautioned the participants that they should not overestimate the strategic significance of their conflict. If they were not careful the conflict would be allowed to fester because no major power has a compelling interest in trying to ensure its settlement. Some participants were not ready to accept this assessment. Yet it is clear that the Georgian and Abkhaz parties have very different perceptions about the roles of the third parties active in their peace process. The assessment therefore suggests that if the Georgians and Abkhaz were prepared to focus more on improving their relationship they might be better able to address their different concerns about the third parties' roles. This would provide these third parties the space to play a more constructive role in facilitating a mutually acceptable outcome.

## Conclusions

At times the delegates found it hard to comprehend that conflict occurs in a place so neat, orderly, settled and comparatively affluent as Northern Ireland. But they often remarked that the problems in Northern Ireland seemed more intractable than their own. All groups thought there was more bitterness in Northern Ireland and that the problems were greater, but they did not seem to see the paradox that, in spite of this, more progress has been made in Northern Ireland along the path of political resolution.

Standing outside the Northern Ireland conflict and seeing people from all sides, the delegations were aware that many sections of the Northern Irish community feel they are being asked to make the major concessions and do not appreciate the demands made on other communities. This reinforced the need to try to understand and respect difference and to build institutions that can respect difference. These were John Hume's words to the economic group, but they are equally relevant in relation to the others. The delegations could see the need for arrangements that each side views as fair and just, and on the basis of which they can more easily respect the needs of the other side. Every group met people who were willing not only to think of the needs of their own community but also had taken steps to build cooperation with other communities. In doing so they had taken significant risks, and the delegations in their own discussions returned to the question of what had made it possible for them to do this.

Experience in Northern Ireland has shown that it is not so much a question of how much politicians trust one another that is important, but rather the extent to which politicians and administrators on all sides have been prepared to take risks. For twenty-five years politicians on all sides of the conflict were not prepared to take risks and therefore the communities struggled to move forward. However, being prepared to take risks demanded that the parties seriously reflected upon their strategies and what they expected to gain from the course they were pursuing. It became possible to take risks as the parties developed flexible strategies that widened their options rather than narrowed them – but this also required politicians to

challenge their own and their supporters' preconceived views, and think the unthinkable. This meant that leaders had to be conscious of being able to handle disaffected constituencies within their own community. Politicians in Northern Ireland frequently have to address different and competing constituencies at the same time and become very artful in the ways of political communication. While the detail of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict dynamic is different, the impact on political behaviour is in many ways similar.

It can be very difficult during the course of a short study visit to appreciate the degree to which individuals and the political parties that they represent have changed over time. However this is at the heart of what has happened in Northern Ireland. It is often easier to wait for others to change or to wait for change (if not salvation) to come from outside, but it is much more difficult to drive change yourself. Given the entrenched and often bitter feelings of one community towards another in Northern Ireland, finding the space for change was no easy task. Understanding the needs and fears of the other side remains a precondition for reconciliation. It is noticeable that many have yet to overcome the challenge of seeing issues as common problems rather than as reasons to blame the other side. This makes reaching out to the other side to enable them to move forward very difficult. Indeed the knowledge that uncompromising approaches frequently lead the other side to become more intransigent does not always prevent the parties from pursuing such strategies. However, experience in Northern Ireland suggests that notwithstanding the difficulties, the parties are committed to a political process rather than a violent one.

Having the opportunity of exposure to a different situation, different challenges, obstacles, and ways of approaching them was an important element in the visits, particularly for the Abkhaz participants who have had few opportunities to exchange experience and view their own situation against a different backdrop. Yet the value of meeting was never seen as purely learning from the experience in the UK and Ireland. The interaction between the delegates was seen to be an important part of the visits. Indeed in each of the groups some asked for more time to talk together because many had had little contact with people on the other side of the Georgian/Abkhaz divide in the past ten years. This was significant in terms of encouraging openness to engage in discussion, especially from the Abkhaz side, given that cross conflict dialogue is approached with considerably more caution there. There was a good deal of frank exchange, which at times was difficult for the participants since they were confronting serious challenges to their positions, interests and aspirations. While this may have been psychologically difficult it was politically important.

We should not judge the success of these visits by whether or not people return home and begin to speak publicly in a different way or promote new ideas about the peace process or options for the future. Some have done so, however most are embedded in specific political situations that are not

conducive to quick or easy change. Key criteria for assessing the value of the visits are how these people relate to their own societies and how the insights percolate through their behaviour and perceptions over time. The key moment will be as and when there is opportunity for political change, to what extent those people involved in these visits will be able to draw on their insights, and possibly even relationships, to seize it.

One person on one visit said he had been shown that there is a way out of conflict, and it is to be hoped that others also gained some hope. Certainly most said that they had a new resolve to make greater efforts to work on the situation at home.

### **ANNEX: Study Visit Programmes and Participants**

The Abkhaz and Georgian participants met with the following people and organizations in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom during their study visits. A list of the participants from each thematic visit can also be found at the end of each section.

### **ECONOMICS VISIT 7–15 May 2002**

#### **Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland**

- John Hume, MP/MEP
- Department of Regional Development officials
- Nigel Smyth, Director of the Chamber of Commerce
- Peter Bunting, General Secretary and Brendan Macain, The Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Richard Ramsey, Ministry of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- Carmel Hanna (Social Democratic and Labour Party) Minister of Employment and Learning
- Visit to Inner East Youth Project, including discussion with its director Raymond Laverty and Patsy Laverty, Women's Inter-Community Development Worker
- Cookstown Rural Community Network
- Paddy Doherty from the Derry Inner City Trust, regeneration agency
- Series of presentations by the Derry City Council economic development office; local strategic partnerships representative, North-West Cross Border Initiative
- Northside Centre, Director of the Social Economy Agency and local Community Group
- Foyle and Carlingford Loch Agency (cross-border agency managing water resources)
- Donegal County Council
- Enact Telecommunications
- Mark Durkan MLA, Leader, SDLP, Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland
- Greencastle Community Association
- Bushmills Distillery
- Garvan O'Doherty, Chief Executive of a local company also involved in

reconciliation work

- Civic Reception with Ald Mildred Garfield, Democratic Unionist Mayor of Derry, Gregory Campbell DUP MP/MLA and John Kerr SDLP Councillor

### **London**

- European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
- BBC World Service
- Conciliation Resources dialogue session
- Lembit Opik, MP, Liberal Democrat Spokesman on Northern Ireland
- Meeting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with FCO, Ministry of Defence, Department for International Development, Ambassador Barnes Jones and NGO representatives Tom de Waal (IWPR), Dennis Sammut (LINKS) and Kevin Clements (International Alert)

### **Georgian participants**

- Alu Gamakharia – General Director, Sukhumi JSC Orgtekhnika, Kutaisi
- Roman Gotsiridze – Head of Budget Office, Parliament of Georgia
- David Kirvalidze – Minister, Ministry of Agriculture and Food
- David Mirtskhulava – Minister, Ministry for Fuel and Energy
- Natela Turnava – First Deputy Minister, Ministry of Economy, Industry and Trade
- Sandro Tvalchrelidze – Chairman of the Board, Georgian Resources and Sustainable Development

### **Abkhaz participants**

- Ilia Gamasonia – MP, Chair of Parliamentary Commission Budgetary Issues
- Beslan Kubrava – Deputy Prime Minister
- Abesalom Kvarchiya – Director Sukhum-Babaevsk Factory
- Leonid Osiya – Chair of Union of Entrepreneurs, Deputy Mayor of Sukhum
- Vakhtang Pipia – MP, Director of Universal Bank
- Emma Taniya – Deputy Head, National Bank

### **Additional participant**

- Zurab Lakerbaia – (Executive Secretary of the Two Sided Coordination Commission)

### **SECURITY VISIT 11–19 June 2002 Northern Ireland**

- Visited Protestant areas of South Armagh. Met with Danny Kennedy, Ulster Unionist Party MLA and local community leaders
- Visit Catholic areas of South Armagh. Met with Connor Murphy, Sinn Fein MLA and local community leaders
- Visited regional police headquarters and met with Assistant Chief Constable of Northern Ireland Stephen White to discuss policing in South Armagh and wider policy issues
- Dromantine: Brendan McAlistair, Mediation Network for Northern Ireland
- Belfast: North Belfast District Police Headquarters: briefing and patrol of North Belfast; the Northern Ireland Policing Board; Nuala O'Loan, Police Ombudsman; Maggie Beirne, Committee on the Administration of Justice

- and Nadia Downing, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
  - Gerry Ruddy, Political Wing of the Irish National Liberation Army
  - Jane Kennedy, MP, Minister of State for Northern Ireland
  - Gregory Campbell Democratic Unionist Party MP/MLA
  - Dialogue Session
- London**

- Lord Maginness Ulster Unionist Party, Security Spokesperson (Westminster) and Lord Fitt, former leader SDLP (Westminster)
- Meeting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with FCO, Ministry of Defence, Department for International Development representatives, Dennis Sammut (LINKS) Magdalena Fricova (International Alert), General Sir Garry Johnson, Chris Nunn (Military Attache to Georgia designate)

#### **Abkhaz participants**

- Oleg Arshba – Gal State Security Services
- Vladimir Arshba – Dep. Minister of Defence
- Vitalii Darmava – Dep. Minister of Interior
- Manana Gurgulia – Civic Initiative Foundation/Abkhaz Press
- Eshsoou Kakalia – Procurator in Gal
- Astamur Tarba – Secretary, National Security Council

#### **Georgian participants**

- Irakli Batiashvili – MP New Right, Chair of Parliamentary Security Committee
- Mebrdzoli Chkadua – Procurator in Zugdidi
- Paata Gaprindashvili – Head of International Department, Ministry of Defence
- Avtandil Ioseliani – Chair of State Department Intelligence
- Koba Liklikadze – Journalist, Radio Svoboda, former press spokesperson MOD
- Vitalii Mikhelidze – Deputy Minister, Ministry of Security, Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia/Government-in-Exile

#### **LANGUAGE/EDUCATION/CULTURE VISIT 2–12 July, 2002 Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland**

- European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages: Ann McQuiston, (Stormont)
- Martin McGuinness (Sinn Fein), Minister for Education
- Linenhall Library, Stormont: Briefing on Culture and Conflict in Northern Ireland and the role of the library by John Gray, Librarian
- Human Rights Commission: The legal framework for managing cultural rights: Tom Hadden, Commissioner and Professor of Law
- Ultach Trust: The Promotion of Irish Language: Roise Ni Bhaoil and Gordon McCoy
- Board of Ulster Scots: The promotion of Ulster Scots culture and language:
- Culturlann: A community resource for promotion of Irish Language: Finnoula Nic Convery
- Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
- Parades Commission: Andrew Elliott, Secretary
- City Tour of Belfast including wall murals/peace line
- Craigavon: Civic Reception with Council



- Orange Hall, Portadown: Meeting with representatives of local Orange District
- Meeting with Garvaghey Road Residents Coalition, Portadown
- Meeting with Portadown loyalists
- Visit to Drumcree and observed initial phase of parade
- Visit to Rosnowlagh, Co Donegal and observe Orange procession

#### **Cardiff**

- Professor Robert Jones, Welsh Language Training Centre
- John Walter Jones, Director, Welsh Language Board
- S4C Welsh Language Television
- Professor Colin Williams, Dept. of Welsh, Cardiff University
- Phil Davies, Thomson Foundation
- Welsh Assembly: Presiding Officer, Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas, Jenny Randerson, Culture Minister; Rhodri Glyn Thomas, Chair of Culture Committee; and various other Assembly Members

#### **London**

- Jagdish Gundara, Institute of Education and Commissioner for the Commission for Racial Equality
- Matthew Pike, Director of Scarman Trust and adviser to the Home Office Community Cohesion Unit
- Kevin O'Connor and Shakeel Meer, Home Office Community Cohesion Unit
- Dialogue Session
- Meeting with Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the British Council, Department for International Development and NGOs

#### **Abkhaz participants:**

- Viacheslav Bganba – Abkhaz Institute for Humanitarian Research
- Beslan Dbar – Minister of Education
- Leonid Enik – Minister of Culture
- Aleksei Gogua – Writer
- Elena Kobakhia – Sukhum Youth House, Abkhaz State University
- Galust Trapizonian – MP, Chair of “KrunK” Armenian Association

#### **Georgian participants:**

- Emil Adelkhanov – Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development
- Shukia Apridonidze – Institute of Languages
- Levan Gvinjilia – Chair, Chamber of Languages
- Aleksandr Kartoza – Minister of Education
- Manana Gigineishvili – MP, Head Subcommittee on National Language
- Revaz Gergedava – Council of Ministers of the “Government-in Exile” withdrew shortly before the visit.

#### **POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES STUDY VISIT 18–27 January 2003 Belfast**

- Briefing on Northern Ireland situation with Paul Arthur, Professor of Political Science University of Ulster
- Angela Smith, MP. Minister in Northern Ireland Office

- Mark Durkan MLA, Leader, Social Democratic and Labour Party, former Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland
- Monica McWilliams MLA, Leader, Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
- Visit to Short Strand Community including a discussion with Councillor Joe O'Donnell, Sinn Fein and Deborah Devenney, Women's Development Officer, Short Strand Community Centre
- Visit to Inner East Youth Project, including discussion with its director Raymond Laverty and Patsy Laverty, Women's Inter-Community Development Worker
- Sue and Steve Williams, Former Representatives Quaker House Belfast
- Esmond Birnie, MLA, Ulster Unionist Party
- Jeffrey Donaldson, MP, Ulster Unionist Party
- David Ervine, MLA, Leader, Progressive Unionist Party
- Lord Alderdice MLA, Speaker of Northern Ireland Assembly
- Martin McGuinness MP, MLA, Sinn Fein, former Minister of Education Northern Ireland Executive
- Nigel Dodds MP, MLA, Democratic Unionist Party, former Minister for Social Development Northern Ireland Executive
- Avila Kilmurray, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
- Eamon Macaodha, Assistant Joint Secretary Irish Inter-Governmental Secretariat
- Bob Brown, Security Adviser in the Secretariat  
**Dublin**

- Albert Reynolds, former Irish Taoiseach
- Senator Martin Mansergh, formerly adviser to Irish Prime Minister
- Barbara Jones, Counsellor, Department for Foreign Affairs, Ireland
- Garret Casey, Cooperation Ireland

#### **London**

- Meeting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with representatives from Eastern department FCO, Sir Brian Fall, representatives from DFID and the Ministry of Defence, General Sir Garry Johnson (ISAB), Dennis Sammut (LINKS), Gevorg Ter-Gabrielian and Magdalena Fricova (International Alert)
- Roundtable Discussion at the International Institute for Strategic Studies: Global Strategic Environment after 9/11 with IISS speakers: Dr Gary Samore, Dr Dana Allin, Oksana Antonenko; Implications for the Caucasus with Anatol Lieven (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) and Col. Christopher Langton (IISS) Dialogue session

#### **Abkhaz participants**

- Gena Alamia – Chairman of the Writers Union
- Marina Bartsits – Member of Parliament
- Beslan Butba – Member of Parliament
- Liana Kvarchelia – Center for Humanitarian Programs
- Aleksandr Gulia – Deputy Minister of Taxation, Director of the Sukhum Open Society Foundation
- Sergei Shamba – Minister of Foreign Affairs

#### **Georgian participants**

- Merab Antadze – Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Akaki Asatiani – Member of Parliament, Leader of the Traditionalists Party
- David Bakradze – Adviser on Security Issues, National Security Council
- Archil Chitava – Chairman State Department Gosimushestvo Abkhaz Autonomous Republic
- Malkhaz Kakabadze – Minister of Emergency Situations
- Paata Zakareishvili – Caucasian Institute for Peace Democracy and Development

**Additional participant**

Zurab Lakerbaia– Executive Secretary of the Two Sided Coordination Commission