Conflict transformation is usually understood as creating an environment that rules out the use of force as a means of conflict resolution and which, conversely, strengthens the functional capacity of societies to deal with conflicts in a non-violent manner.

Conflict transformation cannot be achieved without identifying and analysing the entire range of the driving forces and root causes of the conflict which create a feeling of injustice among the parties and influence conflict dynamics. Apart from the primary root causes of the conflict, which go back to the history of the parties' relations, there are also contemporary factors which create structural pre-conditions for the exacerbation of the conflict, or, at least, for a sustained lack of trust between the parties. In part, these structural preconditions are linked to third-party approaches to the conflict situation.

We suggest that in the case of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, the external impact is informed by the existing imbalance in the international community's approaches to the parties to the conflict, both in terms of political positions with regard to the resolution of the conflict and of the provision of assistance, including development aid. On the one hand, such an approach exacerbates the existing conflict by adding to it new nuances and on the other, creates mistrust towards international institutions in their role of facilitators and arbitrators in the political negotiations. In a broader sense, this creates additional challenges for the democratic modernisation and for the overall perception of Western democratic values.

What are the deficiencies of international approaches to the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict which account for the lack of trust the Abkhaz have towards international facilitators?

Politically, the main contradiction of international approaches to the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict lies in the fact that the right of peoples to self-determination in this conflict (as distinct from other contexts, for example, Kosovo) is sacrificed to the principle of territorial integrity for reasons of geopolitics. Objectively, the international community cannot act as an unbiased mediator as long as it associates conflict resolution with achieving political goals of one of the parties to the conflict – namely, Georgia.

Secondly, mistrust towards Western mediators on the part of Abkhaz society is aggravated by the fact that the international community has not condemned Georgia for initiating hostilities in 1992 and has not investigated the developments that brought the conflict to the point of no return.
Thirdly, instead of condemning Georgia for the outbreak of hostilities in 1992 a whole series of resolutions has been adopted at different international levels in support of Georgia’s political ambitions. Moreover, starting from 2008 Abkhazia, which fell victim to Georgian aggression in 1992 and which currently is under the protection of its ally, Russia, has been increasingly referred to as an ‘occupied territory’ in various international documents and statements.

As regards the humanitarian aspect as well as international engagement to address the issues of Abkhazia’s development, absence of an objective approach manifests itself in the fact that the political bias of international institutions and, consequently, the relevant aims and objectives determine the rather limited and politically motivated character of the international presence in Abkhazia.

To begin with, what is presented as a prerequisite of international engagement is not normative conditionality which would be applied to other post-Soviet states, at least, formally (for instance, progress in building democratic institutions, changes in legislation etc) but the readiness of Abkhazian authorities to make concessions on the issues of political resolution. Abkhazia’s engagement with Western institutions is often made conditional on the need to maintain contacts with Georgia or via Georgia. Almost all international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in Abkhazia have a mandate as institutions which specialise in peacebuilding and confidence building or provision of humanitarian aid, rather than institutions directly involved in implementing development programmes.

Secondly, the inequality of the parties’ starting positions is not taken into account. This inequality largely results from the circumstances of the parties’ development after the 1992–1993 war. While Georgia was given massive assistance with its state building, its democratic development, and with solving its social and economic problems, Abkhazia – whose territory was the scene of hostilities – was left in isolation for many years after the end of the war. Trade and economic, as well as political, sanctions were levelled against the country, which had experienced widespread destruction of infrastructure and a traumatised society. With minimal external support Abkhazia had to overcome challenges not only of the need of economic survival but also of the difficult process of democratic transition. During that period people in Abkhazia had grown to believe that the international community did not respond adequately to the needs and requirements of Abkhaz society, moreover, its response did not even constitute the minimum level of international participation in the development processes in Georgia from the point of view of its scale and nature. Inequality of opportunities for the development of the parties to the conflict only increased the feeling of injustice in Abkhaz society, exacerbating the lack of trust in the opposite side, its allies and partners.

The bias of international institutions manifests itself both in the volume and in the nature of the aid provided. International aid in Abkhazia is mostly humanitarian by nature (with the exception of the funding of the Inguri hydroelectric power plant rehabilitation work and some small scale repairs of individual houses and schools). Despite the value of this type of social assistance to the most vulnerable groups, absence of larger scale international programmes in health, education and economic development has made it impossible to create fundamentally different conditions in Abkhaz society that would allow it to address its social and economic needs independently and with greater success.
Individual initiatives of international NGOs and the European Commission have pursued the objective to develop NGOs and support the free media. These initiatives have played an important part in supporting free press and in the overall emergence of civil society in Abkhazia. Programmes implemented by local NGOs with the support of international organisations are important because they meet the requirements of democratic development and are aimed at promoting human rights, increasing effectiveness of democratic governance and so on. Yet these programmes take place in the absence of systematic support for democratic processes in Abkhazia and are clearly insufficient. Despite the fact that in most unfavourable circumstances Abkhazia has succeeded in consolidating democratic standards in such areas as electoral process, freedom of speech and others, today it requires thorough reforms of its system of governance, its judicial system and support in its fight against corruption. There is a shortage of properly educated and trained modern-day professionals in different areas. In this respect, the assistance provided to Abkhazia by the international community is rather symbolic.

International donors distancing themselves from official bodies in Abkhazia and focusing on the civil society sector alone in implementing different initiatives leave the Abkhaz leadership feeling marginalised by the international community; in turn this encourages them to marginalise their own civil society which they perceive as a partner to hostile international institutions. The painstaking efforts of international institutions to exercise extra caution and not make any moves vis-à-vis Abkhazia which could be interpreted by the Georgian leadership as support of state building in Abkhazia and a process of its legitimisation as an independent state, have de facto turned the international community, let alone Abkhazia itself, into a hostage of Georgia’s strategy to isolate Abkhazia from the West. In the meantime, the post-August 2008 declared EU strategy of ‘engagement without recognition’ remains largely on paper.

A qualitative/in-depth survey of public opinion in Abkhazia in the spring to autumn 2011 confirmed the overall expert assumptions with regard to the prevailing perceptions of the EU in Abkhaz society as well as views on the areas of potential engagement with the EU and on Europe’s participation in the resolution of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict. Abkhaz society's attitude towards a potential European input is shaped by the distinct political context of an unresolved conflict about which the EU has not been neutral. Besides we are dealing with the situation of partial recognition of Abkhazia’s independence and of the growing Abkhaz–Russian cooperation, the intensity of which is not always perceived unequivocally by parts of Abkhaz society who look at it through the lens of preserving Abkhazia’s sovereignty.

Given all of the above, it was decided that the survey should include a number of questions on the perception of relations with Russia, Georgia and Turkey. The Abkhaz–Turkish ties result from the presence of a large Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and from close trade and economic links which were not severed even at the time of economic sanctions against Abkhazia.

Four focus groups were conducted in the period of August to September 2011 (young people, civil society, community representatives in Gal and Ochamchira provinces), in conjunction with 13 in-depth interviews with government officials and members of the opposition, enterpreneurs and representatives of the Gagra community.
A summary of the in-depth/qualitative study results

Foreign policy priorities for Abkhazia

The majority of respondents think that the most important area of Abkhazia's foreign policy is the development of relations with the Russian Federation. Government representatives stress that Russia is trying to accommodate Abkhazia's interests as those of its partner. The treatment of Abkhazia is particularly friendly and partnership-like at the level of the highest echelons of Russian power. Some officials acknowledged that at lower levels, however, they sometimes have to overcome bureaucratic barriers created by different departments and agencies.

While the respondents who represent different branches of power in Abkhazia think that the Russian–Abkhaz relations formally are based on the principle of equality, some of them think that Abkhazia should be better prepared to develop objectively asymmetrical relations with Russia. Abkhaz authorities should themselves engage in preparing draft agreements or other important instruments in a more systematic, coordinated and quality fashion, to offer their own alternative solutions instead of passively waiting and reacting. The majority of respondents in that group think that it is important to develop further relations with other CIS countries (Central Asia), with Turkey and countries, which have recognised Abkhazia, as well as with the EU. They do, however, recognise the problematic nature of the latter because of the West's biased stance vis-à-vis Abkhazia.

Other groups also think that developing partner relations with Russia is an area of high importance. At the same time they stress that the asymmetrical nature of such relations is exacerbated by the fact that Abkhazia has not been recognised by other important actors, Europe included. They think that partnership with Russia must not result in the limitation of Abkhazia’s sovereignty. In order to reduce this one-sided dependence on Russia the Abkhaz authorities should establish contacts with the outside world and try to broaden the circle of countries that could recognise Abkhazia’s independence.

Political opposition representatives identify challenges to Abkhazia's independent stance less with its status as a partially recognised state and more with the inability of the Abkhaz authorities to stand up for Abkhazia’s national interests in its dealings with Russia. At the same time, even some opposition politicians still think that non-recognition of Abkhazia by Western states creates an unfavourable situation which leads to the growth of one-sided dependence on Russia.

The Gal group point out that relations with Russia are important because Russia is an influential player and Abkhazia’s neighbour. At the same a more balanced development of independent Abkhazia means fostering relations not only with the Russian Federation but with other states as well, in particular, countries of the European Union.

Respondents from the young people’s group associate foreign policy priorities with security issues. To this extent they consider Russia’s provision of security guarantees to be particularly important. At the same time they think that Abkhazia and Russia’s partnership should not turn into an anti-Western vector of the Abkhaz policy, nor should it be perceived by the West as a hostile alliance. They also think that Abkhazia should not freeload on its relations with Russia nor shift the responsibility for ensuring the survival of its own state onto Moscow.
According to the majority of respondents, increasing Abkhazia’s self-sufficiency requires development of Abkhazia’s economy. External aid should be channelled into development projects – mainly, economic development – rather than being used to tackle social and infrastructural problems only. Moreover, Abkhazia needs to diversify its economic links to achieve a more stable and secure development.

NGO representatives, journalists and businessmen also note that Abkhazia takes a rather passive approach, not only to its relations with Russia but also to the issue of expanding and diversifying foreign relations.

According to the respondents who are not representing the government, relations with Turkey, countries of the Black Sea basin and the EU are other important areas of foreign policy. Hardly anybody spoke of the importance of developing relations with the United States. The US is seen quite unequivocally as Georgia’s ally and partner. In this context the EU, although not perceived as an objective or neutral player, still does not inspire the same resentment as the US.

**Perceptions of Europe**

Practically all the respondents express a high degree of frustration with Europe’s position vis-à-vis Abkhazia and the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict. Their remarks demonstrate that for a while they had entertained certain expectations about Europe as a neutral actor in the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict resolution that would engage with Abkhazia in a more visible way in the social, humanitarian, cultural, educational and economic spheres. Yet today many of them express regret over the fact that the EU has failed to become neutral as regards the conflict. No such regrets were voiced about the position of the US. This is an indirect indication of certain expectations the Abkhaz must have had about the ability of the EU to exercise a more objective and balanced approach.

Explaining the underlying reasons for the lack of trust in the EU in Abkhaz society, the respondents emphasise the following:

- Europe’s attitude to Abkhazia is largely determined by geopolitical factors, with Europe-Russia relations projected onto it. Abkhazia is often seen as Russia’s satellite, without any interests of its own, which does not correspond to reality.

- Respondents often have the impression that the EU’s long-term ambition in the region is to compete successfully with Russia, rather than strive for peace, stability and human rights. The result is the same unconditional support for Georgia and its aspiration to ‘reintegrate’ Abkhazia. A number of respondents stress the fact that Europe and the US want to push Russia out of the South Caucasus and to limit its sphere of influence. They think that any Western initiatives, including the strategy of “engagement without recognition”, should be considered from this angle.

- The West (Europe inclusive) has not condemned Georgia for the 1992–1993 war which leaves the Georgian government free to pursue its revanchist policies. Refusal to publicly condemn Georgia and the persistently one-sided support for Georgia’s political position does not encourage the Georgian leadership to look for peaceful solutions and compromises on various issues.

- Europe condemned Russia’s lifting of sanctions against Abkhazia in 2004. This was perceived by Abkhaz society as a manifestation
Perceptions of the EU in Abkhazia and prospects for the EU–Abkhazia engagement

of the EU’s one-sided support for Georgia in disregard of the needs of the conflict-affected population of Abkhazia.

• The EU perceives Abkhazia through the prism of Georgian interests, basing its actions on the information it receives from the Georgian leadership, without any consideration for the root causes of the conflict and its history. It is mainly concerned about the consequences of the conflict for IDPs. Such lack of balance in its position is reflected in a variety of official documents and statements by European officials.

• As far as the EU is concerned, democratic standards and processes in the region take second place. This is manifested in its rather uncritical approach to political processes inside Georgia. Moreover, Catherine Ashton’s statements about the non-recognition of the legitimacy of Abkhazia’s elections are perceived not as a simple political position vis-à-vis Abkhazia’s status but as testimony to the lack of interest in the ongoing democratic processes.

• The EU countries discriminate against Abkhaz citizens who hold Russian passports, refusing to issue visas to them in the Russian Federation. Cases of seriously ill patients being refused visas result in a particularly negative reaction in Abkhaz society.

• Another sign of discrimination against the Abkhaz is the fact that they are not allowed to bring their voice to such fora as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the UN.

• At the level of the Western expert community, including representatives of international NGOs, there is a considerable experience as well as a deep understanding about the situation as a whole, about attitudes in societies on both sides of the conflict divide, their interests and their fears. Yet this knowledge is not taken into account at the decision-making level in the EU.

The resolution of the European Parliament which first introduced the term ‘occupied territories’ was adopted after the end of the survey, yet the predictably negative reaction to the resolution in Abkhazia and opinions expressed as part of the commentaries demonstrate that Europe is less and less perceived as a player which has the potential to influence the situation in a positive way. The fact that there were few references to the resolution, points indirectly to the gradually diminishing interest in the EU as a player in the region. Just a few civil society representatives and members of the political elite talked about the EU’s hypothetical potential to become a neutral player. The majority of respondents and, one would imagine, the majority of Abkhaz citizens cannot entertain even a hypothetical idea of a neutral position of the EU.

Nevertheless, some respondents from within the government circles, from the ranks of the opposition and civil society as well as some business representatives think that from the point of view of its civic values Abkhazia is part of Europe. Moreover, these respondents are frustrated by the EU’s one-sided position vis-à-vis Abkhazia. At the same time, they recognise that Abkhazia also makes mistakes in its stance on Europe. Its principal error lies in the fact that the Abkhaz side itself does not show any initiative, does not come up with concrete ideas for cooperation, does not sufficiently inform EU officials about its problems and aspirations or engage in promoting Abkhazia’s interests in the West. These respondents think that one could have a process of gradual engagement with the EU with the ‘engagement without recognition’ strategy forming the first step in
achieving the long-term goal of the broad recognition of Abkhazia.

Another group of respondents, representing the government circles and the opposition, think that Abkhazia has sent plenty of signals to Europe that demonstrate its independent stance, adherence to democratic values and desire to cooperate but that Europe has remained blind to them. Moreover, the EU’s position does not match the situation on the ground post-August 2008. These respondents doubt the need to engage with Europe unless it recognises Abkhazia. They voice concerns over the fact that the EU might want to entice Abkhazia back into Georgia through its policy of engagement and with its promises of economic prosperity.

Almost all the respondents think that engagement with Europe is only possible if it does not pursue the goal of reintegrating Abkhazia into Georgia: “Don’t expect us to rush back if Georgia becomes more attractive, there is no point in trying to entice us back with promises...” Some respondents stress that Europe should be aware of the fact that the Abkhaz have fought for many centuries to preserve their identity and their statehood. Several generations have grown up in the independent Abkhazia in the knowledge of having their own state. For many this means, first and foremost, a guarantee of their self-preservation as a nation. It was suggested that Europe has restricted its own chances, not only in Abkhazia but in the whole of the Caucasus region: “It is a mystery what Europe fears to lose if it were to take a neutral position. Georgia would not turn away from Europe in any case. But it would make Europe’s influence in the Caucasus as a whole much greater...” Some respondents emphasised that if the EU were to change its stance vis-à-vis Georgia’s ‘territorial integrity’, it could considerably boost its presence in Abkhazia.

Only a handful of respondents state that Europe hasn’t got a strong interest in the region as a whole, as its priorities lie elsewhere. According to one respondent the EU displays more than a lack of interest, it shows total indifference towards developments in Abkhazia: “Such indifference is worse than hatred.”

**Attitudes to the European strategy of ‘engagement without recognition’**

Respondents from the provinces as well as those not involved in politics lack information on the EU strategy of ‘engagement without recognition’ – they simply have not heard about it. Those in government and members of the opposition have a general idea of the strategy, while civil society representatives are familiar with the idea in more detail.

Opinions on the strategy were divided. Some respondents, members of the opposition in particular, think that the strategy is a means of dragging Abkhazia back into Georgia, which makes it dangerous. They also think that this initiative is aimed at weakening Russia’s influence, at the time when Russia acts as a guarantor of Abkhazia’s independence. According to these respondents one should only consider engagement after Abkhazia’s recognition: “Let them recognise us first. We are not going to be fooled by their ‘economic carrots’”.

Others were not so dogmatic and saw a potential advantage in the EU policy of engagement without recognition: “This could be a breath of fresh air.” At the same time those who support engagement with the EU, stress that Europe should be aware of the fact that its strategy would only succeed if it is separate from the Georgian strategy. The survey participants stressed that the desire to bring Abkhazia closer to Europe means a desire to develop it on the basis of European
values. It should not be interpreted as a departure from its position of independence. "Europe should understand that we are not going back to Georgia." "The EU should not be haggling with us over the status issue". Many expressed a regret that the initiative, articulated by Peter Semneby, has not been underpinned by actions: "It (the strategy) has turned into a strategy of 'non-engagement.'" All the participants of this group emphasised the need for Abkhazia to deal directly with Brussels and the need for a EU regional office because Abkhazia will not deal with the EU representatives in Georgia.

One senior official, who was on the whole rather sceptical about Abkhazia's cooperation prospects with the EU, pointed out that the proposed engagement should mean something greater than small-scale one-off projects with vague objectives which mostly turn into a waste of resources – the latter, according to him, included confidence building projects as well. In his opinion, Abkhazia today needs proper assistance in building a modern infrastructure in such areas as in healthcare, for example; it needs to reform its education system and so forth. In other words, it needs help in the areas where it cannot meet some of the most fundamental needs of its population: "They [the West] have built a modern oncology centre in Tbilisi; why can't they do the same here? Why should our people face the choice of either going to Tbilisi for treatment or dying?"

The Gal respondents think that Abkhazia needs to expand its contacts with other actors, including the EU, to ensure a more balanced development and to strengthen its sovereignty.

**Potential impact on the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict**

Faced with the question of what area the EU could play a positive role in, almost none of the participants named the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict; the majority spoke about Abkhazia's domestic problems. The facilitator had to ask some questions of clarification to get the respondents to think about the EU's potential role in conflict resolution. The facilitator only succeeded in getting the participants to answer her question when she finally asked what role the EU could play if it were to take a neutral stance on the conflict. Still, some of the participants found it difficult to answer the question because they could hardly imagine the EU as a neutral actor. This shows the extent of their mistrust of the EU.

Those respondents who were sceptical about the EU's role stressed the fact that the EU lost time, that the EU and its approach were out of date and one had to face the new, post-August, reality. From their point of view the only thing the EU could do was to try to influence Georgia, to persuade it to recognise Abkhazia. Moreover, the EU would have to carry out a proper evaluation of past events linked to the Georgian–Abkhaz war, unleashed by Georgia: "We were on the brink of extinction but they [the West] could not care less. Why don't they condemn Georgia at least now?"

Another group of respondents emphasised that if Europe were neutral on the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict issue, Abkhaz society would not regard Europe's position as a threat and would trust it more. Some participants in the young people's group pointed out that should Europe take a neutral stance on Abkhazia's status, European observers could be deployed on the Abkhaz side of the conflict divide as well. The Gal residents think that the EU should treat Abkhazia as an equal party to the conflict. At the same time they pointed out that there should be a direct dialogue between Abkhazia and Georgia. No other group mentioned the need for a direct dialogue.
Many agreed that if Europe did not support Georgia’s position vis-à-vis Abkhazia’s status, the Georgian leadership’s ambitions would diminish and Georgia would have to show greater flexibility. According to the respondents references to the “territorial integrity” were totally unconstructive, together with the notion of “occupied territories”. Europe should not help maintain Georgia’s self-deception of Abkhazia ever returning into its fold. Moreover, some respondents pointed out that Europe was ‘tied to the US chariot’ and there was no point in expecting Europe to have an independent stance on the conflict.

Some respondents, predominantly, civil society representatives, stressed the need for the EU to exercise greater political flexibility in the region. Some expressed regret that the UN mission in Abkhazia had been wound down. They felt that international engagement with Abkhazia should be more visible and substantive, with both Abkhazia and Europe looking for mutually acceptable formulae. Some respondents stressed that Russia was also improving its relations with the European Union. A better climate in European-Russian relations could lead to the improvement of the European–Abkhazian relations.

**Potential areas of engagement between Abkhazia and the European Union**

The moderators had to ask follow-up questions in order to get the more reluctant respondents to volunteer ideas about European engagement with Abkhazia. Both sceptics and pragmatists stressed that Abkhazia could interact with Europe but not at the cost of capitulating on the issue of independence which was not negotiable, according to the respondents. There was a total consensus among them on the issue of independence. The rest of their responses proceeded from that premise.

To begin with, government representatives spoke about EU engagement with Abkhazia from the point of view of its political impact, in other words, as a step towards eventual recognition of Abkhazia. Some of them, similar to the rest of the respondents, pointed out that such engagement would create a better balance in the international presence in Abkhazia. In answer to the follow-up questions, the respondents named different areas that such engagement could cover but they did not come up with many concrete suggestions. Some stressed that European expertise reaches Abkhazia via Russia in a modified fashion while it would be important for it to come directly: “Russia itself is nourished by European practices and know-how whereas we receive a revised version of them.” There were a large number of general comments such as: “The whole world learns from Europe, so should we”; “Europe is the most organised part of mankind, we need to learn from its experience of good governance”; “European values are important for any person of good education”, “We need to work out what their [European] well-being is built on and adopt those standards.” One respondent pointed out that one could occasionally raise some money to start a new business but there was a dearth of innovative ideas. In answer to the follow-up question as to which areas engagement was possible in the participants of the survey identified the following:

**Business and finance**

- European business and management expertise (business community representatives)
- Economic development, investment in small and medium-sized enterprises (government and business community representatives)
• Banking system – Visa and Mastercard licensing (variety of respondents)

• Development of tourism, environmental tourism (variety of respondents)

**Social services, health and science**

• Healthcare – technologies, latest treatment methods, creating diagnostics and treatment infrastructure for complex disorders (cancer, HIV/AIDS, neurological disorders) (government representatives and other respondents)

• Education – Abkhaz students going to study in Europe, setting up a European Study Centre/university in Abkhazia. School education reforms, setting up a network of English language schools (young people, civil society, opposition, the regions)

• Professional training and education of lawyers, economists, journalists and others (civil society)

• Links with European research centres (government officials, other respondents)

• Culture links – contacts with literary clubs, cultural exchanges, festivals (different groups)

• Preservation and development of mother tongue (young people and civil society)

• Different technologies, for example, rubbish recycling

**Democratic institutions:**

• Expertise in democratic development (government officials, civil society)

• Good governance at different levels of government – from city councils to the Cabinet of Ministers (opposition, civil society, some government officials)

• Fighting corruption (opposition, Gal residents, civil society)

• Taxation system and fostering a ‘taxpayer’s psychology’ among rank and file citizens (opposition, government officials, business community)

• Protection of human rights (Gal residents)

• Legislative process, including, electoral legislation (opposition)

• Law enforcement agencies and their work (government officials, opposition, civil society)

**Agriculture**

• Development of farming
Possible defects in the Abkhazian approach

In answer to the question whether Abkhazia had made any mistakes in its dealings with Europe, some respondents said that there were no mistakes committed, since Europe itself was shutting itself from any engagement with Abkhazia (view expressed by government officials and members of the opposition). Those groups of respondents thought that Abkhazia had always shown readiness to cooperate with Europe but that Europe did not reciprocate. They thought that, “the ball was now in Europe’s court.”

The rest of the respondents think that Abkhazia’s main mistake is that it is not proactive and does not propose areas and forms of cooperation thus taking an unnecessarily passive approach. There is no common understanding in Abkhazia as to what specifically Abkhazia loses as a result of this isolation. In addition, Abkhazia does very little to destroy stereotypes that Georgia promotes internationally. This makes it essential to step up an awareness campaign in Europe about the root causes of the conflict, Abkhazia’s interests, its approach and the needs of its residents.

Some respondents (civil society, business community, members of the opposition) spoke about the need for Abkhazia not only to show to Europe its readiness for engagement but also to demonstrate to Russia that such engagement is not to the detriment of Abkhaz–Russian partnership. Respondents representing young people emphasised the importance of contacts with Europe to make Europe realise that Abkhazia’s voice is the voice of its people and not that of another country.

Answers to the follow-up question on the cost to Abkhazia of its isolation from Europe were as follows:

- It slows down democratic development.
- It delays modernisation of governance, slows down technological and technical innovation.
- Abkhazia becomes even more dependent on Russia.
- It results in lower professional standards.

Relations with Georgia

In response to the question about how Abkhazia’s relations with Georgia should develop, almost every one of the respondents spoke about the need to sign a non-aggression pact between Georgia and Abkhazia. Some found it difficult to imagine any relations with Georgia in the foreseeable future. Others – government officials and members of the opposition among them – noted that signing a non-aggression pact could create a more favourable context for the parties’ engagement, including legalisation of the existing trade with Georgia across the sovereign borders. Every one of the respondents thought that the only type of relationship Abkhazia and Georgia could have would be that of equal neighbours. Many understand that Abkhazia and Georgia cannot remain locked in a conflict forever but stress that a complete conflict resolution can only be achieved after Georgia’s recognition of Abkhazia’s independence, which can happen only in remote future. Two respondents (a member of the opposition and a civil society representative) mentioned that if Georgia signs a non-aggression pact with Abkhazia there could be gradual interaction in a number of areas. Those respondents spoke about the possibility of studying Georgia’s experience of healthcare and education reforms.
Abkhaz–Turkish relations

Apart from one government representative all the respondents think that Abkhazia should actively develop its relations with Turkey. This was argued on the grounds of the existence in Turkey of a large Abkhaz diaspora, with whom it is important to maintain good relations, and also longstanding Turkish–Abkhaz economic ties. Trade with Turkey continued right through the period of economic sanctions, albeit at a diminished rate. All the respondents consider Turkey an important regional actor.

One government representative expressed doubt regarding the expediency of broadening links with Turkey fearing a potential growth of Islamic influence in Abkhazia. When asked about the possibility of establishing closer links with the diaspora and accelerating the process of their repatriation he pointed out that he considered integration of theGal residents in Abkhazia a greater priority.

Participants noted the importance of opening a sea link passenger service with Turkey as a means of expanding contacts between the two countries.

Some stressed the need to establish contacts with official and public institutions (other than the diaspora) in Turkey, which is not being undertaken at the moment.

Conclusions

• The moderators/facilitators had the impression that the community of people who are thinking about and who are ready to discuss foreign policy topics – especially, the issue of relations with the West, and in particular, with Europe – is rather small and restricted to politicians, civil society activists and young people. The majority of the respondents who were not involved in politics, especially those coming from the provinces, have a vague understanding of the foreign policy agenda, such as the EU and its potential role in the region. Their comments on the matter were of a rather general nature as they preferred to discuss their day-to-day problems.

• The interviews and focus groups in Sukhum involving government officials, political parties, civil society representatives etc revealed that these participants were much better informed on this issue. The majority of them spoke in favour of contacts with the EU although there was criticism of Europe’s biased stance on Abkhazia.

• Young people’s focus groups, involving those who attend workshops run by NGOs and who travel to Europe and the US, revealed a much better informed audience who have a point of view on this issue, who speak their mind and are less influenced by stereotypes. This testifies to the importance of de-isolation and of creating a conducive learning environment and conditions for young people from Abkhazia to have an experience of living and studying in the West.

• The respondents found it hard to imagine Europe having a neutral position. There was a widespread fatigue with the EU’s one-sided approach and even a certain hardening of EU’s position, not only among the ‘eurosceptics’ but also among those who would welcome a closer engagement with Europe. Different groups of respondents who were familiar with the European policies in the region voiced frustration with the EU’s double standards, not only on the subject of recognition but also in relation to its inability to imbue the idea of ‘engagement without recognition’ with real meaning.
According to the respondents there has been no meaningful ‘engagement’ while the ‘non-recognition’ part has become more tangible. A further hardening of the EU position towards Abkhazia could only result in minimising the space for any EU engagement.

- One of the more influential government representatives expressed an even greater doubt in the EU policies, pointing out that the EU had missed its opportunity and could hardly play an important role in Abkhazia any more. Such a view, given the respondent’s status, could have been considered part of a formulated political agenda at the level of higher echelons of power had the official not softened his stance in the course of the interview, when asked about the areas Abkhazia and the EU could successfully engage over.

- Almost the entire cohort of respondents emphasised the fact that the EU had a potential to increase its role in the region, provided it stopped supporting the idea of Abkhazia’s ‘re-integration’ into Georgia. The European strategy should not be a conduit for the Georgian strategy for ‘reintegrating’ Abkhazia.

- In a number of cases the respondents demonstrated little awareness of the nuances in EU policies vis-à-vis Abkhazia and they had few concrete ideas as to what such engagement might entail. This dearth of good ideas on the prospects of the EU–Abkhazia engagement and the rather general nature of statements about potential areas of cooperation suggest that the respondents are poorly informed about the EU projects in the countries undergoing democratic transition; they have a limited knowledge of the functioning of different European institutions and they find it hard to make concrete suggestions as to different aspects of European expertise from which Abkhazia could benefit.

- Most of the respondents have an exaggerated idea of the level of European interest towards Abkhazia. They do not make a connection between the rather symbolic presence of international, including, European, institutions in Abkhazia and the fact that Abkhazia as well as Georgia, is not a priority region for the EU.

- Both government officials and members of the opposition underestimate, on the whole, the negative impact of Abkhazia’s own lack of initiative with regard to its relations with Europe. This may be a result of the objective lack of trust in the EU; of the expectation that European institutions should make the first step towards a rapprochement with Abkhazia; or of the fact that local political actors exercise caution, fearing potential accusations from their political opponents of being too open to Georgia’s ally. They could also be cautious in trying not to irritate their main partner – Russia.

- Almost all the respondents stress the importance of signing a non-aggression pact between Georgia and Abkhazia and of the existence of Russia’s security guarantees. Signing a non-aggression pact is considered more than a simple step towards the recognition of Abkhazia’s legitimate status as a party to the conflict and to the negotiations on the conflict; it is seen as a step towards restoring the minimum level of confidence and a manifestation of goodwill and peaceful intentions.

- The participants’ answers clearly demonstrate that no promise of economic benefits could make the Abkhaz agree to a compromise over Abkhazia’s status. Society’s position has not changed since
the time of economic sanctions when Abkhaz society did not agree to any compromises on the de facto independence under a considerably more difficult situation. Besides, new opportunities for economic development through the Russian Federation that have arisen in the post-August period, even from a formal point of view, make economic stimuli tying Abkhazia to Georgia ineffective.

- The majority of the respondents speak about potential engagement with Georgia, for example, in such area such as cross-border trade, less emotionally than in previous years (before the recognition of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation), yet for some of them it is conditional on signing the non-aggression pact, as a minimal requirement. In the majority of cases, however, engagement is only considered possible on the condition of Georgia’s recognition of Abkhazia’s independence.

- Many respondents think that Abkhazia’s growing dependence on Russia might affect its sovereignty. Some (members of parliament and the opposition) spoke of the need for the Abkhaz to prepare their proposals more seriously and to take a more principled approach to their negotiations with Russia. Others (some politicians, civil society representatives and businessmen) stress the importance of diversifying Abkhazia’s economic and cultural links, as well as of widening political contacts with the European countries. No one questions the importance of developing further relations with Russia or speaks about Abkhaz–Georgian or Abkhaz–European relations as an alternative to Abkhazia’s partnership with Russia. The respondents refuse to even consider a possibility of Abkhazia’s “return into Georgia’s fold.”

- When asked about potential engagement with the EU only the Gal group discussed engagement on the issue of human rights and stressed the importance of adhering to international standards in this area.

Recommendations

Results of the survey and our analysis of the current situation allow us to make the following recommendations on the degree and areas of potential engagement between the EU and Abkhazia:

- The EU should begin by persuading the Georgian leadership to abandon its policy of denial as regards the existence of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict proper. The adoption of the Law on Occupied Territories, the lobbying by the Georgian authorities of resolutions on ‘occupied territories’ in various international fora, and the adoption of such resolutions by European institutions not only make the prospect of conflict resolution more remote, but exacerbate a lack of trust in the EU as a mediator and potential partner. A public contestation by the EU of the ‘occupation’ idea would send Georgia a signal that the conflict cannot be resolved without Abkhazia’s participation.

- The EU strategy of ‘engagement without recognition’ was initially perceived by Abkhazia as the first step towards a more neutral EU stand vis-à-vis Abkhazia. Yet the increasingly frequent statements by European diplomats in support of Georgia’s ‘territorial integrity’, the appearance of the European Parliament resolution that uses the term ‘occupied territories’ and the absence of more tangible steps towards direct engagement with Abkhazia undermine belief in the possibility of such engagement without it negatively impacting on the fundamental interests of the Abkhazian side. Moreover, linking
the European strategy with the Georgian government’s approach blurs the distinction, if there is a distinction, between the two strategies. It is important to clearly separate the two approaches and to formulate more clearly the goals of the actual European strategy.

• The EU strategy should not be aimed at the ‘reintegration’ of Abkhazia, otherwise, it is doomed to failure. The European representatives’ declaration about the freezing of political issues become meaningless if practical steps by the EU assume political concessions on the part of Abkhazia with regard to the status related issues (for example, on the issue of the so-called ‘neutral Georgian passports’). Against the background of statements about respect for Georgia’s ‘territorial integrity’ and demands that Abkhazia should cooperate with Georgia and via Georgia (with other countries), the argument about the de-politicisation of the European strategy sounds unconvincing. The discourse of ‘reconciliation’ and ‘confidence building measures’ as cornerstones of the European strategy not only ignores the priorities of Abkhaz people, but also acquires in this context a clear political connotation since it is conducted within the framework of the Georgian ‘reintegration’ and ‘de-occupation’ strategies. The European strategy should not make creation of conditions for Abkhaz–Georgian interaction the sole focus of its policy. Rather, its priority should lie in opening up communication channels between Abkhazia and the outside world: Europe, countries of the Black Sea basin and the South Caucasus. This would, in turn, create a more favourable climate for Abkhazia–Georgia interaction in the areas of mutual interest. One should not expect interaction to take place where there is no real need for such engagement. Good examples of cooperation based on real needs are the joint work on the Ingur hydroelectric power plant and the penta-partite Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism. It is important to set out realistic and constructive objectives, having renounced repressive measures as a start.

• The emphasis that international organisations put on confidence building measures between Georgian and Abkhaz societies does not resonate with the population of Abkhazia; moreover, it is a source of annoyance. The official Tbilisi’s actions meet with rejection and mistrust in Abkhaz society because their aim, according to the State Strategy on Occupied Territories, is political revenge through ‘reintegration’ and ‘de-occupation’. One has to be aware that support for the Georgian strategy means support for actions which undermine prospects of conflict resolution. This is the lens through which one should consider the Georgian government’s development of the so-called ‘neutral passports’ carrying a special code which would allow Georgia to regulate and control Abkhaz citizens’ contacts with the outside world. The Georgian government’s idea of setting up a special Trust Fund to regulate funding of projects in Abkhazia also pursues political objectives because it is aimed at creating levers of control and supervision of international organisations’ work in Abkhazia.

• Abkhaz citizens feel that the international community has taken an unfair stance on Abkhaz society, which is expressed not only in political decisions (non-recognition of its right to self-determination), but also in the fact that there are no tangible development programmes implemented in Abkhazia. As regards social issues, for example, such as healthcare, the existing international projects, however important, are still very limited in scope, are largely aimed at low-income families and do not include technical or
technological modernisation. The number of education initiatives is even smaller and they cannot compete with the opportunities provided by the Russian Federation. Any advantages of engaging with Europe will be appreciated by Abkhazia’s population only if Europe’s priorities in Abkhazia match more closely the needs of the people, if conditions are created to promote internal development and if the nature of such assistance is not symbolic and sporadic.

- While adhering to the non-recognition of Abkhazia’s political status policy the international community could, nevertheless, show a more consistent interest in democratic processes in Abkhazia in such areas as judicial reform and professional development of law enforcement agencies which are essential for the adequate protection of human rights. It is important to pay attention to the electoral process, to good governance, in short, to strengthening democratic institutions. Supporting democratisation processes by strengthening NGOs, free media, training young professionals – lawyers, economists and others and by supporting reforms in these areas would mean a long-term contribution to Abkhazia’s political modernisation.

- Engagement with different branches of power in Abkhazia in implementing reforms is an important aspect of the democratic process. Public refusal by European officials to recognise Abkhaz elections at different levels is perceived in Abkhazia as geopolitical considerations taking precedence over the interests of the region’s sustainable development on the basis of consolidating democracy. Conditionality of international aid should be linked, first and foremost, to democratisation instead of being linked to political concessions in favour of Georgia. This makes it essential to exercise international monitoring of the development of democratic institutions in Abkhazia. A higher level of cooperation with official bodies is also important because of the difficulty of implementing different rehabilitation programmes in an effective, non-duplicating way, and of creating an atmosphere of confidence towards the European agenda in the region.

- There is a widespread belief in Abkhaz society that the conflict with Georgia is now resolved, following the events in August 2008 and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation, and that the Russian military presence provides the necessary security guarantees. At the same time Georgia is still perceived as an enemy. There is a paradoxical situation when it is considered that “the conflict no longer exists but the enemy remains.” On the other hand, in Georgia it is often believed that the conflict is still there but it is a conflict with Russia, not Abkhazia. Neither approach corresponds to reality. Abkhaz society experiences a clear and understandable conflict fatigue. It has lived for far too long under the regime of economic sanctions and under the threat of war. Therefore now it is focused on using every opportunity to build a peaceful life and such opportunity is provided by recognition from Russia. In such a situation the circle of people who think about the price of an unresolved conflict and about sustainable peace is rather small and there are no reasons to suggest that their ranks on the ground are going to grow. In this regard it is important to support the existing dialogue initiatives and expand them through the international and regional formats.

- The question of confidence building measures seems more appropriate in relation to the Gal region and the rest of Abkhazia. But even in this context confidence building measures should be
seen more as a result than as an objective or a tool. Given that
the current government of Abkhazia considers the reintegration of
the returnees to the Gal region one of its main objectives, creating
conditions for the social and economic development of the district/
region and for establishing the rule of law there, can be an important
area of potential cooperation between the Abkhaz leadership
and civil society organisations and the EU. At the same time, the
situation in the Gal district should not be considered in isolation from
the socio-economic situation in other districts of Eastern Abkhazia
such as Ochamchira and Tkvarchel, which in this regard can be
characterised as depressed provinces. Abkhazian authorities today
are largely skeptical about the prospects for EU’s engagement. On
the other hand, if the EU were to initiate concrete, de-politicised
steps of more than purely symbolic nature, that is serious projects
that meet the priority needs of Abkhazia’s people, the Abkhaz
authorities would perceive the EU’s presence in the region with
greater optimism. Moreover, the Abkhaz leadership needs to be
pro-active and develop its own concept of engaging with the EU
instead of taking a passive approach. So far the Abkhaz authorities
have not proposed a single document that would outline or contain
concrete ideas of engagement with Europe. On that score the
Abkhaz side needs to offer its own agenda for discussion.

- It is important for the European idea of engagement with Abkhazia
to reflect the needs of Abkhazia’s population. To this end it has to
be formulated on the basis of discussions with the Abkhaz side,
both at the level of leadership and the level of civil society. When
a mutually acceptable programme of actions is developed it would
be desirable to hold a donor conference on its implementation

Quotations from the interviews

“We are interested in democratization, in democratic processes in our
republic. Europe is interested in promoting democracy. So that’s one
area where we could work together.” Representative of the opposition

“If Europe wants to play a more important role, it needs to gain the trust
of the local population.” Civil society activist

“We know there are small countries in the European Union, and we
could learn from their experience of preserving their culture, language
and traditions.” Journalist

“If there were some independent European agencies or centres in
Abkhazia, they would be able to do some research and find out more
about public opinion here. Then they would understand what it is
that our society wants, what worries people and what our priorities
are.” Youth activist

“Economic development is key. The Abkhaz economy needs foreign
investment in order to develop. We are not in a position to revive our
shattered economy on our own. And we need the kind of investments
that protect the interests of our people.” Journalist

“At some stage or other our relationship with Georgia will be sorted out,
because we all want to live together peacefully. Over there (in Georgia)
you don’t feel aggression at the level of ordinary people – it’s more
on the political level. At the end of the day we’re all going to have to
live like neighbours.” Community representative, Ochamchira