

Press Release 21 December 2003

The twelfth dialogue workshop in an ongoing series on the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict and peace process took place in Stadtschlaining, Austria from 15–20 December 2003. Bringing together government officials, politicians and civil society representatives from both sides of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict the objective is to provide a forum where participants discuss and analyse opportunities and obstacles in the peace process in an environment that encourages creative thinking, realism and mutual respect. As an informal and non–official process no decisions are taken.

The workshop took place against the backdrop of dramatic events in Georgia in November 2003 that led to the removal from power of President Eduard Shevardnadze, and ahead of the presidential election of 4 January 2004, following which a new generation is expected to come to power.

Discussion commenced with a detailed examination of the November events. The Abkhaz participants acknowledged the importance of hearing directly from participants in these events. It was recognised that there are high expectations in Georgia in regard to the opportunities presented by the changes but that many complex problems persist. Georgian participants were keen to hear about Abkhaz responses to the changes as well as to learn more about political developments within Abkhazia in the run up to the expected presidential election in 2004.

Participants were eager to analyse the implications of recent political developments for the peace process. They agreed that persistent instability would not be in the interests of either side to the conflict. There was a shared assumption that further democratization of Georgian and Abkhaz societies would contribute to a favourable climate for resolution. Whilst all acknowledged that it is too early to draw precise conclusions participants generally considered that the changes present a new opportunity. In this light the Abkhaz wanted to hear what the expected priorities of the new leadership would be and whether this might allow for a new approach to Georgian–Abkhaz relations.

This led to an examination of the scope for change in the positions of the sides in regard to a series of issues: the acceptability of economic pressure as a strategy for conflict resolution; freedom of movement and human rights; political and legal frameworks for negotiating a long–term resolution; Abkhaz relations and contacts with the international community as an aspect of democratization; and the use of force in resolving the conflict. It was acknowledged that there is more room for manoeuvre on some issues than others. In addition to the need for clear frameworks for negotiations it was also accepted that there is scope for unilateral gestures of good will to enhance trustworthiness and thereby transform the context of relations conditioned by a decade of non–resolution.

The dialogue was characterized by an open and frank exchange. It is hoped that this will contribute to a culture of dialogue between the respective communities.

The Abkhaz participants in the workshop were Oleg Arshba, Beslan Butba, Ilya Gamisonia, Manana Gurgulia, Leonid Lakerbaia and Stanislav Lakoba. The Georgian participants were David Darchiashvili, Koba Davitashvili, Zurab Erkwania, Giorgi Kacharava, Konstantin Kublashvili, Shalva Pichkhadze, and Paata Zakareishvili. Everyone took part in their individual capacity, not representing any organization or institution.

The workshop was organized by the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management (Berlin) and Conciliation Resources (London), two international non-governmental organizations that have worked in the Caucasus for a number of years and with experience facilitating similar processes in other regions of the world. Facilitation was by Jonathan Cohen, Oliver Wolleh and Rachel Clogg.

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Jonathan Cohen (Conciliation Resources) 21 December 2003
