

Georgian/Abkhaz Youth Dialogue and Study Trip A roller coaster ride through Brussels

24-30 April 2010

REPORT

CR took fourteen young Georgians and Abkhaz on a joint study trip to Belgium's capital, a hub of international politics and the administrative centre of Europe. This was the fifth in a series of meetings targeted at young 'future leaders', typically students and recent graduates aged 18-28 who are active members of their own communities. These meetings aim to bring young Georgians and Abkhaz together outside the region to jointly analyse and discuss the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and understand each other's concerns. Such contact is rarely possible. It has become even more difficult since the brief war involving Russia and Georgia in August 2008 and the subsequent recognition of Abkhaz independence by Russia and three more UN member states.

In Brussels, the participants met with representatives of European institutions, NATO and independent experts to discuss developments in the South Caucasus and learn about the role and interest of EU in addressing ongoing conflicts and challenges in the region. In facilitated discussion and group work, participants shared their perceptions of the EU and NATO and exchanged views on the state of the negotiations process and current Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue initiatives.

Learning about European institutions and NATO

Over the course of a decade of conflict transformation work in the region, CR and its local partners have observed that many people in the societies of the South Caucasus have misapprehensions about 'the West', and do not fully understand its various institutions and the role these bodies are able and willing to play in the region. One of the objectives of this dialogue and study trip was to counter some of the misconceptions held by Georgian and Abkhaz youth, and at the same time give diplomats and officials who are based in Brussels the rare opportunity to hear how young people in the region feel about their future, and about the role played there by the EU.

This process was carried out in three ways:

- 1) Prior to the study trip, the Georgian and Abkhaz groups undertook an assessment of their **societies' attitudes and expectations toward NATO and the EU** at conferences in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i respectively, to which they invited larger groups of young people involved in the youth dialogue process as well as local and international experts. The results of these discussions at home were then shared when the whole group met in

Brussels, which provided a good overview of assumptions and questions that needed further clarification.

The Georgians pointed out that the younger generation in particular feels that the strategic priority of building relations with NATO and the EU is based on the desire of Georgians to orientate themselves towards **'Western societies', their values and their democratic systems**. Within Abkhaz society 'Western' institutions are perceived as **biased**, since they support Georgian territorial integrity and **help Georgia build up its military capacity**, which poses a **direct threat** to them and leads to **considerable distrust**, as Abkhaz participants explained.

Both were concerned about the **lack of reliable information** about international policies and interests in their region. The Georgians, for example, acknowledged that there have been **misguided expectations** within their society in regard to possible external intervention prior to and during the war in August 2008. Parts of the population had believed NATO members would provide military support to Georgia in its confrontation with Russia. When these expectations were not met, disappointment mixed with a certain degree of disregard emerged. The Abkhaz participants clarified that only the intellectual elite in their society understands that NATO would not actively engage in a war with Russia. All participants recognized the potential role EU institutions and NATO can play in **fostering democratization processes and stability in the region**, but appreciated their limitations, and called for better **mechanisms of checks and balances and stricter conditionalities**. Referring to the EU's policy of 'non-recognition and engagement' in regard to the non-recognized and partially recognized territories in the region, some of the Abkhaz pointed out that they would like to see a **"smarter non-recognition policy"** in place. *"Right now we feel unmistakably what they mean by non-recognition; but we have yet to see what they mean by engagement as clearly"* they said.

- 2) The participants had the opportunity to meet with NATO and EU representatives and to see **NATO headquarters and the European Parliament** from the inside. At meetings with officials and various committee members they could test their own assumptions and ask challenging questions. At the same time they were being confronted with the realities and policies prevailing in these institutions. Such visits pose **specific challenges to the dialogue process**: interaction with officials outside the workshop environment often makes participants retreat to their stated positions and leaves little room for a constructive exchange of views. However, the group received **useful and pertinent clarifications and insights** on various issues of concern to them, especially during those sessions that took place off the record. It was revealing for the young people to receive a snap-shot of the **diverse backgrounds and personalities** of those working in the respective institutions. While some interlocutors showed excellent insight and background knowledge of the situation and developments on the ground, others seemed less aware of certain sensitivities and nuances. With different sets of people one has to find the right language to bring messages across, which is not always easy.
- 3) On various occasions the participants had the rare opportunity to **engage with experts and practitioners during workshop sessions and at external events**. For example, Bruno Coppieters from the Free University in Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) followed the group discussion on **NATO perceptions** in the region and provided thoughtful feedback based on his own observations and research. Thierry Bechet from the European Commission shared some of his impressions from the **Geneva Talks**. Jaqueline Hale from the Open Society Institute gave a comprehensive overview of the **EU's interest in establishing stability in the South Caucasus region**, which was further illustrated by Adam Darby sharing some experience from working with the EU Monitoring Mission, as well as remarks by Maria van Ruiten and Frederik Coene from the European Commission Delegation in Tbilisi. The group was also invited to a reception hosted by the UK

Permanent Representation to the EU where they had a chance to **mingle with high-level diplomats dealing with the South Caucasus**, such as Pierre Morel, EU Special Representative for Central Asia and for the crisis in Georgia. Toward the end of the week, CR organized a **panel discussion *The role of Georgian-Abkhaz youth initiatives - Challenges and ways forward*** which was attended by EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby. Such informal interaction enriched the group dynamics and provided invaluable food for thought for the various issues discussed within and outside the framework of workshop sessions. One of the interlocutors remarked at the end of a question and answer session: *"I was impressed that on the basis of many statements and questions posed by the young people I would not have been able to tell whether they were Georgian or Abkhaz."*

Learning about one another

The main aim of the process was to facilitate dialogue in the true sense of the word: to listen to, and try to understand, each other's views and perspectives and explore areas of potential commonality, in spite of apparently irreconcilable standpoints.

It was made clear repeatedly that participants were not representing their authorities, or their respective community as a collective, but that they were taking part in a private capacity as individuals with their own personal backgrounds and views. Unfortunately, some participants had difficulty buying into this approach and appeared at times to be seeking to dictate a unified group voice, which hindered the dialogue process. Others were more constructive and engaged in genuine exchange with one another, which was evidently more effective, particularly when working in smaller groups.

During the workshop sessions interspersed across the 6-day programme, apart from discussing the **role of NATO and the EU** in the region, the group looked in more detail at **results, challenges and ways forward** in the context of Georgian-Abkhaz youth dialogue processes. An initial mapping exercise of previous youth dialogue events and exchange about recent socio-political developments in the region helped the participants to gain a comprehensive overview and take stock of what has already been achieved, but also to pinpoint concrete shortfalls and challenges.

The participants also compared their views in regard to the **most recent negotiation documents** that had been proposed by the Georgian and Abkhaz sides, and about issues concerning **displaced communities and returnees** to the Gal/i region. The aim of this exercise, which was undertaken by small mixed groups, was to compare perceptions in both societies on certain key issues and to analyse where these perceptions stem from.

Some participants were surprised to learn that Abkhaz and Georgian group members actually concurred in their analysis of a number of points and could even draw out **some common conclusions**, and in other cases at least managed to constructively debate the issues and **accept that they do not agree**.

Reflection

During the joint trip young Georgians and Abkhaz learned a lot not only about international institutions in Brussels and about each other's societies, but also about their own societies and – just as importantly – about themselves. Some insights gained can be very positive, others rather painful. The group as a whole certainly experienced various **highs and lows**: sometimes all participants worked really well together; at other times feelings of distance and provocation were dominant. Some individuals lived through **emotional roller coasters** during the process, especially when discussing difficult and sensitive issues with their peers. It will

take some time to process all these moments of collective and individual learning. Most participants are committed to **continuing the dialogue and moving things forward** within their own societies. Some have already written articles and taken part in radio shows and debates to **feed back** some of their experience into broader circles in their respective societies. Some are working on joint and individual **follow-up activities**.

The environment the young people live in is not favourable for the type of work they have been engaged in. Tendencies towards **polarization** and against flexible pragmatism are on the increase at different levels. However, without openness to '**constructive ambiguity**' and determination to find **practicable solutions** that can be **acceptable for all parties**, genuine engagement in the region, especially across conflict divides, will hardly be possible.

Below is a selection of impressions that came up during the final reflection of the meeting. After a couple of months of digesting their impressions, the participants will be encouraged to provide more substantial feedback and demonstrate to what extent they have been able to use the lessons learned in Brussels back home.

I gained so much experience during this trip. The insightful talks with diplomats at the reception were very encouraging.

We had a few hefty arguments during the sessions; but that didn't negatively affect our relations with one another.

I am very pleased with the process; now it is important to move forward and work on projects.

For me working in groups on the negotiation documents was the most difficult but also the most important part of the workshop: we made joint efforts and looked to the future.

Youth dialogue is important because it gives us a chance to talk about the conflict and different approaches to resolving it. We worked effectively on some aspects; and we even found some commonalities.

I learned a few things about the other society, some positive, others negative. But it was difficult to warm up on a personal level.

Not everyone in the EU institutions is well informed about what's going on in our region; the EU should have been more actively involved from an earlier stage.

I cannot believe that such high-ranking bureaucrats are genuinely not aware of the situation; I think it is more likely that they pretend not to be.

I am very disappointed in the process. I would have liked to talk more about serious issues such as the roots of the conflict.

I will take very ambiguous impressions back home with me; some are easy to digest, others are not. Before the trip I could not have imagined that we could actually find agreement on certain issues.

It was interesting to see that both Abkhaz and Georgians are concerned about similar issues, which came out when we discussed recent developments in our societies.

Once again I understood that our society needs to improve; and gradually it is improving.

People in Europe and in our societies need to understand that our dialogue process is necessary and meaningful, and that it needs to continue.

Acknowledgement of support

This trip is part of the project 'Understanding the past and facing the future', which CR is implementing in cooperation with Saferworld and which is funded by the European Union under its Instrument for Stability. Our youth work programme is generously funded by the UK government's Conflict Prevention Pool, the European Union, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Netherlands' Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

If you wish to learn more about CR's youth dialogue work, please contact:

Mira Sovakar
Caucasus Projects Manager

msovakar@c-r.org



The project is funded by the European Union