

**Opportunities and limitations for civil society in the conflict transformation process
(case study of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict)**

Format of civil society interaction:

- Bilateral Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue process
- Multi-lateral South Caucasus programs. The Caucasus Forum of NGOs.

Type of interaction:

- Academic, analytical level – conferences, joint analysis workshop (bi-lateral, multilateral)
- Practical level: mediation (multi-lateral), situation monitoring and needs assessment (multi-lateral), capacity-building (multi-lateral), information sharing (bi-lateral, multi-lateral)

Civil society dialogue prior to August 2008.

1/ Issues of common interest in the civil diplomacy process

- Awareness of the need to identify and articulate issues of common interests.
- Key common interest – conflict resolution by peaceful means.
- Understanding that there can be no simple, rapid solution to the conflict.
- Understanding that any strategy must be formulated on the basis of an in-depth analysis of the situation, investigation of the causes of the conflict, of interests, concerns and opinions of all sides.
- Agreeing that conflict operates on multiple level.
- Shared perception of the existence of the interests of third parties – Russia, USA, Europe.
- Particular attention to the process - unbiased facilitators, equal footing for participants.
- Participants from both sides, involved in the democratization processes within their own communities, viewed the situation in their countries and in relation to the conflict through democratic lenses.

2/ Goals and objectives of civil diplomacy.

Chief goal of the dialogue process - to develop a model of peaceful interaction between the two sides in the conflict on the basis of equal participation and free exchange of opinions on various aspects of the conflict.

Objectives:

- To achieve greater mutual understanding through raising awareness of the other's needs and fears, and through learning about the specifics of internal developments on each side;
- to identify mutually acceptable solutions to issues of common concern (e.g. such as the situation in the border districts);
- to propose to local authorities ideas and recommendations on various issues associated with the conflict (such as recommendations on the need to sign agreements on the non-use of force or during crisis situations);
- to gain public support in the two communities for these ideas and for the message that the conflict had to be resolved by peaceful means;
- to influence international approaches to conflict resolution through presenting to international institutions the results of independent expert analysis and recommendations based on a more comprehensive assessment of the situation that takes into account the interests and views on both sides of the conflict.

3/ Internal limitations of civil diplomacy – issues that divided the participants from Abkhazia and Georgia

- Key differences in the political positions of civil society representatives from the opposing sides: differing visions of the final outcome of conflict resolution:
 - The Georgian participants advocated for a peaceful unification of Abkhazia and Georgia, although they also acknowledged that Georgia today can hardly be called an attractive partner for Abkhazia.
 - The Abkhazian position was that after the war of 1992-1993 there was no chance for co-existence of Georgia and Abkhazia within a common state, and that the two entities could only co-exist peacefully as two sovereign neighboring countries.
- The Abkhazians focused more on the causes of the conflict while the Georgians - on its consequences.
- Differences in the perceptions of Russia's approach to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict:
 - Georgian emphasis on Russia's role as instigator of the conflict, while acknowledging the Georgian share of responsibility for conflicts (1992-1993, 2008)
 - Abkhazian insistence that while Russia has her own interests in the region, it is primarily the Georgian leadership that takes responsibility for unleashing several wars in the region.
- Differences in the perceptions of the Western approach - support for territorial integrity and neglect for the right to self-determination; sphere of influence or peace and security approach with regard to Russia's and Western policies.
- Differing perceptions of international processes and precedents – e.g. of the recognition of Kosovo.

4/External limitations in the civil diplomacy process.

- Relatively small numbers of people who take an interest in any contacts with “the enemy”.
- Differing perceptions of civil dialogue in Georgian and Abkhazian societies.
- Limited outreach of civil society activists to wider public.
- The complex internal political dynamics within Georgia and Abkhazia in which the conflict theme becomes instrumentalized in political struggle for power.
- Marginalization of civic dialogue by local authorities.
- Official Western view of civil society's peace-building activities mainly as an instrument for the reconciliation and integration of the two societies within a single Georgian state.
- Reluctance by Western officials to take on board the views and recommendations of civil society, not only in relation to the conflict but also in relation to the internal political developments in Georgia and Abkhazia.

5/ Impact of civil dialogue on the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict

- Establishment of frameworks for interaction at an informal level on issues of common interest.
- Established channels of communication including in crises situations.
- Awareness on both sides of civil society activists that peaceful conflict resolution is in the long-term interests of both Georgia and Abkhazia.
- A better understanding of the concerns and needs of society on the other side of the conflict.
- A more accurate and comprehensive view of the situation formed not only by the local participants but also by international independent experts and to a certain extent by officials.
- Those involved in the civil diplomacy process act as catalysts for the discussion of ‘difficult issues’ associated with the conflict in their own communities.
- More specific outputs in the form of various publications, policy papers, recommendations, films, Caucasus peace-building networks.

II. New realities post-August 2008

- Shifts in the political discourse:
 - Georgian discourse – emphasis on Russian-Georgian conflict
 - Abkhazian discourse – emphasis on Russian-Abkhazia partnership
- New myths in the societies:
 - Georgian discourse – the conflict is with Russia and independence is not a need and a choice made by Abkhazians. Abkhazians will turn to Georgia when they realize what they lose being with Russia.
 - Abkhazian discourse - conflict with Georgia has been resolved, hence no need for peace-building initiatives. Contacts with Georgia give wrong messages to Georgia and the international community that the Abkhazian society wants to be re-integrated in Georgia.
- Perceptions of the recognition of Abkhazia' independence by Russia:
 - In Abkhazian society –recognition closes down the topic of “territorial integrity”; it marks the beginning of the process of restoring historical justice towards Abkhazians; it creates new opportunities for a peaceful life, that the Abkhaz have been denied during decades of living under sanctions and under the threat of resumption of hostilities. It also means a new situation in which the Abkhazians want to retain their sovereignty and hold amicable, although asymmetrical relations with Russia.
 - In Georgia - recognition of Abkhazia means above all that the resolution of the conflict would be postponed indefinitely and the issue of the restoration of Georgia's ‘territorial integrity’ becomes a matter for the longer term. Some Georgians would prefer Abkhazia to retain its independence in its relations with Russia since for them Russian dominance means that there is no space for Georgian dominance in Abkhazia.
- Differing perceptions of security: the importance of signing a non-aggression pact between Georgia and Abkhazia.
- Attitudes towards the issue of de-isolation of Abkhazia
- Georgia's law on the so called “occupied territories” and the new modalities: Differing attitudes to the question of ‘occupation’ among civil dialogue activists across conflict.
- Georgia's Strategy for the so-called “occupied territories” and it's goals.
- Fatigue over EU's inability to come out as a neutral actor.
- Notions of confidence-building and rapprochement discredited by various political agendas.

Opportunities for initiatives contributing to sustainable peace in a new context

- Dialogue within each society:
 - Addressing the myths related to the conflict and challenging the utilization of the conflict theme and of the enemy image within the societies.
 - Initiating discussions about the cost of an unresolved conflict.
- Support for democratization processes in Abkhazia and Georgia and pluralistic political culture.
- Limited scope for bi-lateral contacts:
 - areas where there is practical need for interaction – cross border trade, security issues, Ingur Hydro power station, medical programs etc.
 - Cross conflict dialogue through research and on-going joint analysis of the situation and information sharing.
- Confidence building measures are more appropriate in relation to internal minority situations in Abkhazia and Georgia.
- De-isolation of Abkhazia as a way to overcome past injustices in addressing the needs of the Abkhazian population and a means to expose Abkhazia to Western expertise in various areas.
- Regional approach to conflict resolution and interaction and its benefits:
 - Regional identity as common ground
 - Issues of common interests (e.g. environment, professional interests)

- Inclusive approach towards otherwise excluded Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh
- Access for external actors to otherwise inaccessible South Ossetia and partly Nagorno Karabakh.
- Provision of a less sensitive environment compared to bi-lateral format.