

MEDIATION AND DIALOGUE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

A reflection on 15 years of conflict
transformation initiatives



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Mediation and Dialogue in the South Caucasus: A Reflection on 15 Years of Conflict Transformation Initiatives

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Acronyms

AGT	Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey pipeline
ASPR	Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution
ASU	Abkhaz State University
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline
CBDN	Caucasus Business and Development Network
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CR	Conciliation Resources
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (precursor to OSCE)
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EaP	European Union Eastern Partnership
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
ECRG	South Caucasus Economy and Conflict Research Group
ENP	European Union Neighbourhood Policy
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia
GIPA	Georgian Institute of Public Affairs
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IMTD	Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IWPR	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
JCC	Joint Control Commission for Georgian–Ossetian Conflict Resolution
JPk	Joint Peacekeeping Forces
KCR	Karachay-Cherkessia Republic
KGB	Committee for State Security
MID	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MLA	Members of the Legislative Assembly (Northern Ireland)
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RBC	Regional Business Centre
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
TABDC	Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council
TACIS	European Union Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
UCI	University of California Irvine
UNDPA	United Nations Department of Political Affairs
UNDPKO	United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency (UN High Commissioner for Refugees)
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNOMIG	United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSRSG	United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General
UNV	United Nations Volunteer

About the Contributors

Natalia Mirimanova is a conflict resolution scholar-practitioner and has extensive work experience throughout Russia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, in Moldova, Ukraine, the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Since 1993, she has designed and implemented conflict analysis and resolution programmes and trainings for universities, business and civil society sectors, as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community groups. Natalia has carried out interdisciplinary research projects under the aegis of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Internews, International Alert, Conciliation Resources, the Aga Khan Foundation and the National Democratic Institute, among others. She is also a co-author of several books – *From War Economy to Peace Economy in the South Caucasus* (International Alert, 2004), *Corruption and Conflict in the South Caucasus* (International Alert, 2006) and others – as well as articles and training manuals on conflict transformation, democracy building in transitional societies and mass media. Natalia received her PhD from the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, US.

Liana Kvarchelia is Deputy Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP), one of the longest-standing NGOs in Abkhazia, established in 1994. Working on a range of civil society development issues, she is regularly involved as a researcher facilitator, trainer and moderator in various projects related to democratisation processes in Abkhazia, and to conflict transformation and civic education both in Abkhazia and in the wider Caucasus framework. Since 1996, she has been actively involved in a number of projects concerning the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, including participation in long-term programmes together with the University of California (Irvine), Conciliation Resources and International Alert. From 1997 to 2000, she worked as National Community Facilitator in the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Abkhazia. She spent the academic year 2000–2001 as an International Fellow at the independent peacebuilding organisation Responding to Conflict in the UK. Liana has also served as one of the leaders of the “League of Voters for Fair Elections”, which has monitored elections in Abkhazia since 2004.

Jonathan Cohen joined Conciliation Resources in 1997 and developed the Caucasus programme focusing on dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives. In September 2008, he became Director of Programmes overseeing Conciliation Resources’ regional programmes in East and West Africa, the Caucasus, India/Pakistan (Kashmir), the Philippines, Fiji and Colombia. Previously, Jonathan was Deputy Director of the Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations in The Hague, working with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. Before that, he worked for International Alert and the Peace Research Institute Oslo. He has been a board member of the Department for International Development/Charities Aid Foundation (DFID/CAF) Partnerships in the Non-Profit Sector Programme for Russia, acted as a consultant to United Nations

Volunteers, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies, and taught at the London School of Economics. Jonathan has degrees from the universities of Bristol, London and Oxford.

Manana Gurgulia is Director of the information agency *ApsnyPress* and President of the “Sukhum Media Club”. Manana has worked with a number of international NGOs – such as Conciliation Resources, International Alert, Article 19 and the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management – focusing on a range of dialogue and capacity-building initiatives, as well as promoting access to information and the development of independent media in Abkhazia. She was Coordinator of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs and a participant in the Alert “Dialogue through Research” process. Prior to that, she was the Abkhaz Coordinator for the Schlaining Process. Manana is a philosophy graduate of Rostov State University and has lectured on the history of philosophy at Abkhaz State University.

Paata Zakareishvili has been Chair of the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflict (ISNC) since 2009. Between 2000 and 2007, he was the Georgian Coordinator of the Schlaining Dialogue Process for Georgian and Abkhaz politicians, officials and civic activists under the aegis of Conciliation Resources and the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Since 1996, he has been actively involved in a wide range of projects concerning the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, including participation in long-term programmes together with the University of California (Irvine), Conciliation Resources, Open Society and International Alert. In addition to his peacebuilding work, Paata was a member of the Tbilisi city council until 2007. He previously served as head of the penitentiary department of the Justice Ministry and as a member of the Georgian State Committee for Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities, where he led negotiations on the exchange of prisoners of war and on the protection of citizens’ rights in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone. He is a well-known commentator on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and contributes regularly to the Georgian press.

Paula Garb is Co-Director and a co-founder of the University of California Irvine’s (UCI) Center for Citizen Peacebuilding. She is a lecturer in anthropology, director of the minor in conflict resolution, and director of the minor in civic and community engagement at UCI. She has been a facilitator and researcher of citizen peacebuilding projects since 1995. Her primary project has focused on facilitating and studying peacebuilding efforts between Abkhaz and Georgian academics, journalists, NGO representatives and politicians. In 1999, she initiated a coordination network of peacebuilding projects and organisations working in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and continues to foster the network. Paula has an undergraduate degree from Moscow State University and a PhD from the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Anthropology.

Nodar Sarjveladze is a Doctor of Psychology, Professor and member of the Georgian Academy of Philosophy. He is the founder and Chair of the Foundation for the Development of Human Resources (FDHR) since 1996, where he has directed psychosocial rehabilitation projects among refugees and displaced persons in Georgia, engaging in public diplomacy and confidence-building initiatives with people from the conflict zones. Nodar has participated in the Caucasus Forum of NGOs and in various Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue initiatives and citizen peacebuilding with International Alert and with the University of California (Irvine) since the inception of their dialogue in 1996. He is also a member of the International Counselling Association and the author of dozens of books and articles published in Georgian, Russian, English, German and French.

Arda Inal-Ipa is the Abkhaz Coordinator of the University of California (Irvine) sponsored cross-conflict Georgian-Abkhaz peacebuilding dialogue of representatives from civil society organisations. Since its inception in 1994, she has been the Deputy Director of Research Programmes at the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP), one of the longest-standing NGOs in Abkhazia. She works on a range of issues concerning civil society development, conflict transformation and civic education. Before working in her current positions, she served as a researcher at the Abkhaz Research Institute of Language, History and Literature and a lecturer at Abkhaz State University. She also co-edited 15 volumes of the series *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*. Arda holds a degree from Moscow State University's Department of Psychology. Since 2007, she has been a member of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan is Country Director of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Armenia. He has 27 years' experience in the private, public and NGO sectors. He was previously Senior Policy Advisor and Eurasia Programme Manager for International Alert in London and Deputy Director of the Center for Regional Research in Yerevan, Armenia. Gevorg has taught courses on politics and the economy, with a focus on the Caucasus and the United States at both Yerevan State University and Bowling Green State University in Ohio, US. He has also worked as a business consultant in Moscow. Gevorg holds a PhD in Turkic Linguistics from Moscow State University, a Masters in Society and Politics from Lancaster University, and a Masters in Public Administration from Bowling Green State University.

Zhanna Krikorova is a prominent public figure in Nagorno-Karabakh, having been a journalist, civil activist and holding several positions related to the media. She was a former correspondent of Noyan Tapan News Agency and former Executive Secretary of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs. She was also an active member of the Caucasus Women's League until 2005. Zhanna was one of the founders of the local NGOs the Stepanakert Press Club and the Institute for Public Diplomacy. Since 2008, she has been the Director of the Centre for International Cooperation in Nagorno-Karabakh, responsible for NGO

sector relations with international organisations. Zhanna graduated from the Philology Department of Yerevan State University and has also worked as a teacher of Russian language and literature.

Alan Parastaev is founder of the South Ossetian Centre for Humanitarian Initiatives and Research since 1998. He has also served as a Coordinator of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs and has been involved in the Caucasus Business and Development Network in South Ossetia since its inception. Alan has participated in several research projects on resolving conflict issues in the Caucasus. He currently covers the South Caucasus as an independent expert and collaborates with the internet news agency “Caucasian Echo” (*Ekho Kavkaza*) as well as Regnum and Lenta.ru. Alan graduated in history and philology from the South Ossetian State Pedagogical Institute.

Diana Klein is Project Manager with International Alert’s Peacebuilding Issues Programme, currently heading the Economy and Peacebuilding team. Previously, she managed the regional research, dialogue and advocacy network “Economy and Conflict in the South Caucasus”, engaging private sector actors across the conflict divides in the region, promoting dialogue among different sides of the conflicts, and using economic approaches to peace and reconciliation in the region. Before joining Alert, Diana worked as an associate facilitator and project coordinator at the Harry S. Truman Peace Research Institute in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She holds an MA in Post-War Recovery and Development Studies from the University of York, UK, a certificate degree in Peace Studies from the European Peace University in Stadtschlaining, Austria and a BA in International Relations and Journalism from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. Diana has co-authored and edited several publications and articles on the subject of economy and conflict, natural resources, economic recovery and corruption.

Oskari Pentikainen leads the Economy and Conflict strand of the Eurasia Programme at International Alert. Prior to Alert, he worked at the European Centre for Minority Issues in Germany. Oskari received an MSc in European Studies from the London School of Economics and a BA in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Sussex, UK.

Aghavni Karakhanyan is Director of the Institute for Civil Society and Regional Development (ICSRD) in Yerevan, Armenia. She is engaged in several international research projects: Economy and Conflict (International Alert, UK); Globalisation, Regionalisation and Democratisation (GRAD) and Peace, Education, Art, Culture and Environment in a Globalising World (PEACE) (Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, Hawaii, USA), among others. She is also a member of the UN Expert’s Club and author of “Globalisation and Integration” for the UNDP Armenia Report 2001, *Ten Years of Independence and Transition in Armenia*. Aghavni holds an MA in Political History from Moscow State University and is pending a PhD in Political Science

from Yerevan State University. She received the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation 1999 Individual Research and Writing Grant for the research project “Conflict Resolution and Mediating Forces: In Search of Strategy: A Comparative Management Experience of the Irish and Karabakh Conflicts”.

Thomas (Tom) de Waal is a Senior Associate in the Russia and Eurasia Programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as well as an expert on the Caucasus and Black Sea region. He is author of the authoritative book on the Karabakh conflict, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (NYU Press, 2003). He is also author of *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and co-author with Carlotta Gall of the book *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (NYU Press, 1997), for which the authors were awarded the James Cameron Prize for Distinguished Reporting. Thomas graduated in Modern Languages (Russian and Modern Greek) from Balliol College, Oxford. He has reported for the BBC World Service, *The Moscow Times* and *The Times of London*. From 2002 to 2009, he worked as an analyst and project manager on the conflicts in the South Caucasus for the London-based NGOs Conciliation Resources and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR).

Karine Ohanyan is a journalist with the Armedia Information and Analysis Centre as well as head of Karabakh projects for the NGO “European Integration”. Since 1993, she has worked for various mass media outlets in Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, she has participated in the many peacebuilding and professional projects initiated by Article 19, Conciliation Resources, International Alert, the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (HCA) and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), among others. Karine has been a member of the jury for the South Caucasus Film Festival “I am Human” and has also worked as the Karabakh coordinator for the radio diaries project “True Stories”. She is a co-author of several documentaries and TV programme series, and has written over 300 articles for the regional mass media as well as the BBC, IWPR and *The Moscow Times*, among others.

Shahin Rzayev is Country Director at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Azerbaijan since 1999. He is also a co-founder and member of the board of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan as well as an expert at the Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations. In 1997, Shahin led the first group of Azerbaijani journalists visiting Armenia under the aegis of the Swiss organisation Cimera. Since then, he has been involved in implementing several cross-border journalist projects with Armenian and Georgian colleagues, including participation in the Caucasus Forum of NGOs and the Caucasus young journalists’ programmes of International Alert. He is the author of numerous articles on conflict issues published in a wide variety of local and international media, including IWPR and *Accord* magazine (Conciliation Resources). Shahin graduated from the Oil Academy in Baku and turned to journalism in 1991, working for the newspaper *Istiqlal* (Independence) where he was editor of the youth supplement *Tekamul* (Evolution).

Natella Akaba is Head of the Association of Women of Abkhazia, established in 1999, and Secretary of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia. She was previously elected a member of Abkhaz Parliament (1991–1996) and became Head of the Human Rights Committee. She was then appointed Minister for Information and Media. From 1997 to 1999, Natella worked as Director of the Centre for Support of Human Rights and Democracy and was among those who established the first oppositional political organisation in Abkhazia – “Aitaira” (Revival), which won a presidential election in 2004. Natella has written a number of articles examining the roots and various aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. She is also involved in a number of joint Caucasian initiatives which are focused on the empowerment of women and the realisation of their right to participate in decision making at all levels.

Marina Pagava was born and grew up in Abkhazia, moving to Tbilisi in 1993 with her family as a result of the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict. Since then, the focus of her professional interests has been on civil peacebuilding and on issues faced by displaced people from Abkhazia. She set up the NGO “Help Yourself” to raise awareness on issues concerning internally displaced persons (IDPs) and to enhance civic and social activities for IDPs. She is also a member of the “Synergy” advocacy network. Marina has participated in a number of dialogue initiatives, including women’s dialogue, with International Alert, the University of California (Irvine) and Conciliation Resources, among others. She has also published several articles about peace in periodicals and journals.

George Anchabadze is a Professor at Ilia State University in Tbilisi and also lectures at Abkhaz State University. He is a co-founder of the Caucasian Dialogue Foundation. He has written about 150 research pieces, based on which there are 18 books (monographs, collections of articles, textbooks). George’s areas of interest are: the history of the peoples of Georgia and the Caucasus, military history, historical geography and cartography, source studies and historiography. From 1984, he participated in conflict resolution initiatives in the Caucasus and is both a scholar and a practitioner in this area: he is a Peace Ambassador of the Universal Peace Federation and has been cooperating closely with International Alert since 1998. George is a graduate of the Oriental Studies faculty at Georgian State University (1971) and holds a PhD (History, 1975) as well as a Doctor of Sciences (History, 1990).

Batal Kobakhia co-founded the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes (CHP) in 1994. One of the first NGOs to be established in Abkhazia, CHP’s mission is to develop civil society institutions and democratic institutions, and work on conflict resolution issues along with the establishment of links and interaction with the various civil society organisations both in the Caucasus and in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries as well as abroad. He is also one of the organisers of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs. Batal has published a number of articles, political essays and analytical materials devoted to conflict resolution, migration processes, and the development

of democratic institutions and civil society in Abkhazia and in the Caucasus. He co-authored and co-edited a collection of short stories by writers from the South Caucasus, entitled *Time to Live*, as well as the literary almanac *South Caucasus*, published with the support of International Alert. He served as a member of the Abkhaz Parliament from 2007 to 2012.

Guram Odisharia is the author of over 20 collections of poetry and prose, and has written several plays which have been staged for theatre and even adapted for television. His work has been translated into 10 languages. Born in Abkhazia and now living in Tbilisi, Guram has worked as a correspondent for newspapers and the radio, as well as a literary consultant for the Abkhaz Union of Writers and as an editorialist for the social-literary journal *Ritza*. Since 1997, Guram has been an active participant in civil diplomacy meetings and has been implementing several projects contributing to this process – both as Coordinator of the NGO the “Caucasian Dialogue Foundation” and as a member of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs. He is also a member of the Authors’ and Publicists’ International Association (London-Riga). Guram has been awarded the Golden AP Chekhov Medal as well as the Golden Quill Award by the International Association of Journalists. He has also won several government literary and theatre prizes, including the State Award of Georgia.

Preface

Sandwiched between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus region consists of the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the disputed territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The wars of independence and self-determination of the early 1990s left more than 30,000 people dead and over a million displaced. While official ceasefires contributed to a fragile stability for over a decade, internationally mediated peace talks have so far failed to bring lasting solutions. In August 2008, violent conflict erupted in South Ossetia, leading to a five-day military confrontation between Georgia and Russia. Russia has since recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

In the South Caucasus, geographic denominations are a contentious issue. In the articles in this collection, the authors use their own preferred spelling and place names. This does not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of International Alert concerning the underlying political debates on legal or political status.

Introduction

Origins of the book

International Alert has been working on conflict transformation in the South Caucasus since the mid-1990s, specifically on the Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-South Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. Alert works mainly at the level of civil society, bringing civil society actors together from across the region in conflict transformation processes, broadening avenues of communication and attempting to reduce the likelihood of direct confrontation between conflicting sides by changing the nature of the relationships between the people involved.¹ Such a multilateral collaboration is the approach adopted in the South Caucasus Mediation and Dialogue Initiative, within the framework of which this book is published.

The South Caucasus Mediation and Dialogue Initiative works on three timescales, each with its own strand: past, present and future. The aim of the backward-looking strand of the project is to reflect on mediation in civil diplomacy processes facilitated by International Alert and other Western non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The results of this reflection are presented in this book. The strand of the project focusing on the present consists of research into the mechanisms behind the creation of “myths” and the perpetuation of “enemy images”, which feed into and exacerbate conflict dynamics in the region (such as political myths and narratives perpetuated by the media and politicians). The future-oriented strand of the project will draw on the findings of the first two strands and use them by developing education and training modules as a resource for future conflict transformation processes.

This book is thus the first intellectual output of the South Caucasus Mediation and Dialogue Initiative. The articles were written over a protracted time period between January 2009 and September 2011. The book is intended to be used to stimulate discussion and reflection about civil diplomacy and mediation, bringing together the perspectives of different stakeholders engaged in civil peacebuilding processes. This includes both the international facilitators and mediators of those processes, as well as the participants and “insider” mediators.

Purpose and target audience

Popular wisdom has it that ‘you will never get lost if you know where you have come from’. This book will help readers to look back and consider civil society’s experience of initiating, participating in and developing civil peacebuilding processes in the South Caucasus, with the facilitation of Western NGOs. It is designed to allow professionals

¹ For a definition of “conflict transformation” and other such terminology used in this book, please refer to the attached Glossary on pages 21,22.

engaged in conflict resolution and representatives of civil society to take a step back and review their work from a different perspective, to analyse and reflect on past experiences, to consider what works and what does not, and to understand what could have been done better.

We hope that the analysis presented in this book will allow specialists working in conflict resolution in the Caucasus and other regions to learn from our mistakes, discover successful initiatives and apply proven methods in their own practice.

Readers may find answers to a series of questions we asked ourselves during the process, although some of those questions remained unanswered.

The book is aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at the professional peacebuilding community of practice. We hope that its plain language and accessible style will also attract readers who are not necessarily well-versed in conflict theory. At the same time, we hope that it will help to inform peoples of the South Caucasus about different civil society initiatives aiming to restore and build peace in our region. We also hope that it will inspire some to launch their own new civil peacebuilding initiatives.

Early beginnings

Work on this book – which attempts to summarise over a decade’s experience of civil diplomacy – was already underway before the August 2008 war. Significantly, the last pre-war meeting of the book’s editors and some of its contributors took place at the end of July 2008. The August events resulted in a period of bitter disappointment for those representatives of South Caucasian civil society who had expended much time and energy on informal diplomacy over the years. This was partly a reflection of the general post-war disillusionment, but also an indication of the inflated expectations placed on civil diplomacy, now dashed. Once these emotions had subsided, people realised there was in fact even more need for a book that analysed the details, dynamics and impact of civil peacebuilding. The purpose of the book would be to lessen and “bring down to earth” the overly harsh critique of civil diplomacy. It would also seek to identify at what level civil diplomacy can in fact have an influence and what it can realistically achieve. Finally, it would aim to assess what type of initiative is worth continuing, what should be dropped, what should be kept ticking over and what could be safely ignored.

Explaining the term “mediation”

So far, we have used a number of terms to describe the initiatives presented in this book, and the focus on “mediation” deserves some explanation. While “peacebuilding” is a general term, covering any activity that aims to promote peaceful conditions, the focus of much of civil society’s work in this area in the Caucasus has been on “conflict transformation”.

The latter places a particular emphasis on transforming relationships between conflicting parties and perceptions of conflict. “Civil diplomacy” is often used to distinguish between processes that involve unofficial contacts between people of different nations, as differentiated from “official diplomacy” involving official contacts between governmental representatives. While official “mediation” as carried out by international, inter-governmental organisations and structures involves tightly defined channels of communication and negotiations based on specific protocols, the non-governmental sector can be quite flexible and civil initiatives tend to take a more flexible, facilitative approach. “Dialogue” is a popular tool in civil diplomacy and is normally facilitated by a third party. While dialogue is often an open-ended process, by contrast “mediation” normally involves an objective to reach some kind of agreement between the parties.

Often, during the process of implementing a particular initiative, the methodology would evolve. For example, it might veer from bilateral dialogue to multilateral collaboration, or from joint research across the conflict divide to facilitating the development of internal civil society initiatives targeting particularly vulnerable communities. In doing so, many conflict transformation or civil diplomacy processes switch between dialogue and mediation at different times, depending on the maturity of the process and the changing conflict or political context. As processes mature, we have observed how the role of conflict parties in these processes, who started out as mere “participants”, has evolved and they have become “mediators” in their own right, acting as brokers between their own society and the other side in the conflict. It was this particular aspect of mediation within these processes which interested us, and started out as the focus of this book. However, we did not insist that individual authors limit their reflections only to this aspect of the initiatives that they were involved in, just to consider the role of mediation in the overall process. Therefore, this book actually includes quite a broad spectrum of initiatives, none of which are straightforward “mediation” processes.

Eligibility criteria for inclusion of projects/processes in the book

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, we were reluctant participants in and witnesses to many conflicts that afflicted the post-socialist space and the Caucasus in particular. Over a long period, a number of different processes and projects emerged and evolved aimed at transforming these conflicts. This book does not claim to present all the processes relating to conflict resolution in the region.

The processes or projects described in the book were chosen to demonstrate the diversity of civil society peacebuilding. They are a reflection of the rich mosaic of its various sectors, ranging from work with politicians from the societies divided by conflict to collaboration on economic issues, gender equality, academia and culture.

In particular, the book describes the experiences of a wide circle of colleagues who have been engaged for many years in projects aimed at transforming the Armenian-Azerbaijani, Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts. The facilitators of the projects described in the book are the British organisations International Alert, Conciliation Resources and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, as well as the US University of California, Irvine (UCI). In addition to the Western partners, the project participants themselves, so-called “local partners”, also took on the roles of facilitator and mediator in the processes described.

Applying the “Rashomon” principle

This book is a collaborative effort. Each chapter analyses a specific process or episode from a particular peacebuilding project. Acting as an editorial team, we asked the co-authors to abide by the “Rashomon principle” in their writing.²

Under this principle, each chapter of the book describes one specific peacebuilding or conflict transformation project from different perspectives: from that of the Western (British or US) facilitators or that of the local partners (representatives of societies divided by conflict). All of the authors present their own perspective, whether as a person from one side of the conflict or as a neutral mediator/facilitator. They give their own analysis of the process, describing the outcome as they see it and the enabling factors and obstacles they came up against during the process. Their analysis culminates in an overview of lessons learnt from the experience. All of the authors use the toponyms for the geographical locations and names that correspond to their own views.

Structure and content of the book

The book is divided into eight parts, as follows.

Part 1 – Official and Civil Mediation is written by two authors: independent expert Natalia Mirimanova along with Liana Kvarchelia from the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes in Abkhazia. Both authors analyse the differences between the approaches of official and unofficial diplomacy, and the working principles of governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental mediators. At the same time, they attempt to show the differences, potential impact and results achieved, or not achieved, by them to date.

Part 2 – Politics and Mediation has three authors: Jonathan Cohen from the British NGO Conciliation Resources, and two representatives of civil society: from Abkhazia, the journalist Manana Gurgulia; and from Georgia, the political scientist Paata Zakareishvili.

2 Named after Akira Kurosawa’s famous film *Rashomon* (a screen adaptation of Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s novel *In a Grove*), in which each hero narrates their own version of events and a picture of reality is constructed from the subjective reality of each individual hero.

The authors describe one of the few processes of unofficial diplomacy, involving work on conflict transformation with both Abkhaz and Georgian officials, politicians and civil society activists over 10 years. The chapter describes the interesting and complex process, which although essential, came up against a number of “*realpolitik*” obstacles.

Part 3 – Permanent Conference as Mediation is again the result of three co-authors’ efforts: Paula Garb from UCI who facilitated the Georgian-Abkhaz unofficial dialogue for several years; the Georgian psychologist Nodar Sarjveladze and the Abkhaz psychologist Arda Inal-Ipa. The authors cover the long-term dialogue between representatives of Abkhaz and Georgian civil societies which gradually developed into a continuous exchange in the field of research and practice in different themes related to conflict resolution. The authors analyse the specifics, outcomes and essence of the process, along with its strengths and weaknesses. They share their experience, hopes and disappointments.

Part 4 – Civil Society Development and Mediation once again combines three co-authors: Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan writes of his experience of mediating a multilateral peacebuilding process involving representatives from almost all regions in the South and the North Caucasus – he facilitated the process from 1994–2004 while holding the post of Eurasia Programme Manager at International Alert; and the journalists Zhanna Krikorova from Nagorno-Karabakh and Alan Parastaev from South Ossetia also present their vision of the process. The authors describe how the Georgian-Abkhaz confidence-building project was transformed into a pan-Caucasus peacebuilding network – the Caucasus Forum of NGOs. They analyse the ways in which the Forum worked, the strengths and weaknesses of inter-regional collaboration, the dynamics of development of the civil peacebuilding network, and the factors enabling and preventing multilateral collaboration.

Part 5 – Economy and Mediation covers the International Alert project aimed at stimulating business cooperation between representatives of all the South Caucasus regions. The team of co-authors here, as in the previous chapters, includes Western facilitators – Diana Klein and Oskari Pentikainen, facilitators of the Alert project – as well as the local partner from Armenia, Aghavni Karakhanyan. The authors analyse the development of the Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN), which promotes regional economic collaboration and dialogue between business communities. At the same time, it describes the lessons learnt from this collaboration, along with success factors, results achieved to date, prospects for the future, etc.

Part 6 – Media and Mediation describes the collaboration between representatives of South Caucasus media within the project of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, which was aimed at dialogue, collaboration and increasing the level of professionalism in the Caucasus media. Here too, the co-authors comprise a mixed team. The view of the Western mediator is provided by the British journalist and writer Thomas de Waal,

who managed the Caucasus programme during the project implementation period. The Armenian journalist Karine Ohanyan and the Azerbaijani journalist Shahin Rzayev share their experience of participating in this process: they describe how their fellow citizens responded to it, the benefit that such initiatives can bring in terms of conflict resolution or transformation, the public attitudes which act as obstacles to such processes, and lessons learnt on the basis of which similar initiatives might continue.

From Part 7 onwards, the co-authors are exclusively local partners and the views of the Western facilitators are no longer presented. This is because the initiatives described here took place within the framework of the Caucasus Forum of International Alert, described in Part 4.

Part 7 – Gender and Mediation describes how the women’s peacebuilding network “The Caucasus Women’s League” functioned. It was facilitated by International Alert in the early 2000s. Here the authors comprise a leading representative of Abkhaz civil society, Natella Akaba, and the Georgian civil society activist Marina Pagava. The co-authors analyse the experience of the work of the women’s peacebuilding network, how it developed, its strengths and weaknesses, factors affecting its viability, the experience of working with politicians on security issues and the outcomes of their work.

Part 8 – Cultural and Academic Mediation describes civil peacebuilding initiatives where the ideas originate from the local partners. One of the authors is George Anchabadze, who started working on resolving the conflict long before the first armed confrontation took place between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. He remains active to this day as a mediator between society in Georgia, where he lives, and society in Abkhazia, where he has been teaching modern history at university level in recent years. Anchabadze analyses the experience of collaboration between academics on conflict resolution and explores ways of presenting history in a form that is acceptable to both sides in the conflict.

The book concludes with the final two chapters, which describe the experience of collaboration between writers from the South Caucasus on a book about war, entitled *Time to Live*. The book brings together representatives of the five literatures of the South Caucasus and issues a message of peace to the world. In this project, the Abkhaz and Georgian writers Batal Kobakhia and Guram Odisharia acted as mediators both between their respective societies and also between other conflicting sides in the South Caucasus. As initiators and coordinators of this process, they describe it in plain language – with their customary elegance and lightness of touch. However, this in no way reduces the practical value of this section of the book: it directly conveys the authors’ experience of civil diplomacy and, as such, is a useful resource for cultural actors who are interested in conciliation.

Some of the processes described in this book have long ago been phased out – either because they were transformed into new processes or funding ran out, or because the individuals involved moved on to other pastures. As such, some of the processes are reflected on from a distance, providing a degree of “hindsight”. Other processes are still ongoing, despite the hurdles put in front of them. None of them will serve as a blueprint for future initiatives or for similar initiatives in other conflict contexts, as each is so specific to the time, place, personalities involved and politics of the day. However, we do hope that this book will inspire its readers and help them to find new solutions to their longstanding “peacebuilding conundrums”.

Editors: Batal Kobakhia, Jana Javakhishvili, Larisa Sotieva and Juliet Schofield

Glossary¹

Civil diplomacy

Civil diplomacy (or “citizen diplomacy”) involves unofficial contacts between people of different nations, as differentiated from official contacts between governmental representatives. Civil or citizen diplomacy includes exchanges of people (such as student exchanges), international religious, scientific and cultural activities. It also includes unofficial dialogues, discussions, or negotiations between citizens of opposing nations.

Conflict transformation

Conflict transformation is distinct from conflict resolution, which is often focused on a short-term approach which may not be sustainable in the longer term, and differs from conflict management, which assumes that people and relationships can be managed as though they were physical objects.

Conflict transformation, on the other hand, reflects the notion that conflicts go on for long periods of time, changing the nature of the relationships between the people involved, and themselves changing as people’s response to the situation develops over time.

Dialogue

Dialogue is an open-ended communication between conflict parties that is facilitated or moderated by a third party, in order to foster mutual recognition, understanding, empathy and trust. Unlike mediation, the goal of dialogue is usually simply to improve interpersonal understanding and trust. Dialogue is not just about formal meetings. It is an extended process that develops relationships between diverse groups around common issues, that builds confidence and that fosters local ownership. Dialogue is a tool that can be used in civil diplomacy, mediation and conflict transformation.

Facilitation

Facilitation is done by a third party who assists in running consensus-building meetings. The facilitator typically helps the parties set ground rules and agendas, enforces both, and helps the participants keep on track and work towards their mutual goals. While similar to a mediator, a facilitator usually plays a less active role in the deliberations. They often do not see “resolution” as a goal of their work, as mediators may do.

¹ This glossary is adapted from the glossary of the Conflict Research Consortium (CRH) at the University of Colorado in the US [available at <http://www.beyondintractability.org/library/glossary>], with the exception of the definitions of “Peace” and “Peacebuilding”, and some aspects of “Dialogue”, which are taken from International Alert’s *Programming Framework*, available at http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/library/Programming_Framework_2010.pdf (830Kb PDF).

Mediation

Mediation is a third party-assisted, or third party-initiated and led, communication between representatives of conflict parties. Its aim is for the conflict representatives to directly talk to each other, discuss issues, reach an agreement and make decisions together. The goal of mediation is usually to reach a resolution or settlement of a dispute. An “insider” mediator is someone who is from one of the conflicting parties, rather than a third party, and who mediates within their own society.

Peace

Peace is not just the absence of violence. Peace is when people are anticipating and managing conflicts without violence, and when they are engaging in inclusive social change processes that improve the quality of life. They are doing so without compromising the possibility of continuing to do so in the future, or the possibility of others to do so. This is the idea of inter-dependent, positive peace.

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is a set of processes whose purpose is to gain and maintain peace. This encompasses activities and interventions that are designed to influence events, processes and actors. These activities seek to create new outcomes, so that peaceful conditions are gained and/or maintained.

PART 1

Official and Civil Mediation

CHAPTER 1

Mediation and Dialogue: Official and Unofficial Strategies

Natalia Mirimanova

Executive Summary¹

Mediation and dialogue are the most established strategies of conflict resolution. Grounded in the principle that the conflict parties need to resolve the conflict themselves with procedural assistance from a neutral and impartial third party, mediation and dialogue appear to be a fair, humanistic, cost-effective and democratic means of conflict resolution, as opposed to arbitration or military intervention by a third party. However, mediation and dialogue cannot be contained in an ivory tower and need to be placed in a real-life conflict context characterised by violence, mistrust, political opportunism, vengeance and systemic injustice.

The purpose of this paper is to explore approaches to and formats of mediation and dialogue, and the relevance and effectiveness of these strategies in the context of protracted violent conflicts, with particular emphasis on the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Differences and complementarities between official and unofficial mediation and dialogue are highlighted. Advantages and deficiencies inherent in unofficial mediation and dialogue are discussed and new creative strategies to get out of the loop of talks for the sake of talks are proposed. Innovative formats of unofficial dialogue are illustrated with examples from the conflict regions in the South Caucasus.

The EU has an important role to play in peacebuilding in the individual conflicts in the South Caucasus, as well as in the promotion of regional stability and security. Mediation and dialogue ought to be in the palette of EU strategies for conflict transformation. A more nuanced understanding of these processes, as well as of the interplay of mediation and dialogue and the conflict context factors, needs to be developed within the EU and its programmes and missions that deal with conflicts in the European Neighbourhood – the South Caucasus included. The present paper serves this purpose. Recommendations for the EU as a donor and a political mediator in the conflicts in the South Caucasus and for European NGOs that run unofficial dialogue and mediation projects in the region include the following:

1. The EU should sponsor dialogue and mediation not only on the core conflict issues, but where dialogue on the most contentious issues is not possible or cannot be effective. It should pay greater attention to the mediation and dialogue on second-order and side issues, or on the issues of supra-national, regional scale – such as environmental degradation, human and drug trafficking, labour migration and others.

¹ This article was originally published within the framework of the EU-funded project 'Initiative for Peacebuilding'. See Natalia Mirmanova, *Mediation and Dialogue: Official and Unofficial Strands*. Initiative for Peacebuilding and International Alert, January 2009. Available at http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/Mediation_and_Dialogue_Official_and_Unofficial_Strands.pdf [319 Kb PDF].

2. EU donors need to develop flexibility in their funding of ad hoc dialogue and mediation initiatives. Proper timing and capacity to accommodate a need for “flexible geometry” in the changing conflict context are important to amplify the impact of dialogue and mediation. Dialogue projects need to be implemented not when funding is available, but when they are most relevant. In addition to funding long-term, ongoing dialogue projects, a pool for the funding of emerging unofficial dialogue needs to be created.
3. EU donors and political bodies need to make adjustments to their evaluation of unofficial dialogue and mediation projects. A process-orientated evaluation strategy needs to be applied to elicit an impact of a long-term process aimed at attitudinal change.
4. Greater liaison between dialogue and mediation by the formal EU and individual state authorities, and by European NGOs is recommended to compensate for disadvantages of official mediation with advantages of the unofficial track and vice versa.
5. Tailored programmes need to be designed and implemented at the interface of mediation and dialogue and civil society capacity building, mass media development and good governance.
6. Cross-border dialogue and mediation at the periphery of the societies in conflict at the grassroots and local authority levels need to be supported and institutionalised. Positive experience of solving pressing social and economic issues through a dialogue with neighbours on the opposing side may become a model of conflict resolution strategy and a confidence-building measure for a wider society.
7. Novel formats should be further explored that address deficiencies of an unofficial dialogue. For example, mass media-mediated dialogue projects need to receive greater attention because of the outreach opportunities that they provide.
8. Whenever possible, unofficial mediation and dialogue need to be linked with practical projects that provide tangible peace dividends (e.g. jobs, better ecology, safe water and energy supply). Such dividends could capitalise on personal attitudinal change and improved interpersonal relationships between the dialogue participants, involving them as leaders of social change, irrespective of the scale and publicity of the projects.

1. Introduction

Mediation and dialogue are specific types of conflict intervention strategies. They are both grounded in conflict resolution through controlled communication by the conflict parties. These strategies serve different purposes and are guided by distinct rules. Mediation is a third party-assisted, or third party-initiated and led, communication between representatives of conflict parties. It allows them to directly talk to each other, discuss issues, reach an agreement and make decisions together. Dialogue is an open-ended communication between conflict parties that is facilitated or moderated by a third party. It seeks to foster mutual recognition, understanding, empathy and trust. The Conflict Research Consortium argues: ‘Unlike mediation, in which the goal is usually reaching a resolution or settlement of a dispute, the goal of dialogue is usually simply improving interpersonal understanding and trust.’² This does not mean, however, that dialogue is a lightweight process compared with mediation. Practitioners who have worked in the Balkans, South Caucasus and other conflict regions would probably disagree that ‘simply improving’ relationships and building trust is a simple task. Casual conversation, discussion or debate by members of the rival parties do not qualify as dialogue, because for dialogue to happen, communication of the parties ought to unfold according to certain rules. It ought to be orchestrated in a way that the participants can hear each other, acknowledge the other side’s part of the story, develop empathy towards each other and critically re-assess one’s position and behaviour – in sum, transcend the exchange of blows when one is trying to defeat or proselytise the other. Dialogue is a communication method where the parties create a new common communicative space. Mediation and dialogue have very similar communication processes. The distinction is that dialogue is generally process-focused, while mediation is a product-focused process. However, the distinction is especially blurred at the unofficial level. Dialogue may be product-focused when the parties have a super-ordinate goal (such as a prisoner-of-war exchange) which requires an agreement on specific issues that cannot be reached without building trust and developing empathy between opponents.

The conflicts dealt with in this paper are protracted social conflicts³ or deep-rooted conflicts⁴ marked by violence of varying intensity and duration. These conflicts cannot be resolved through a bargaining procedure, because non-negotiable basic human needs such as identity, security, participation and development are at their core. Containment of the warring factions may result in a short-term cessation of violence. However, it will not ensure lasting peace unless the institutions and attitudes that caused and aggravated the conflict are addressed and transformed.

2 ‘Glossary’, Conflict Research Consortium (CRH) - University of Colorado, US.

3 E.E. Azar (1983). ‘The theory of protracted social conflict and the challenge of transforming conflict situations’, *World Affairs*, Monograph Series, Vol. 20, pp.81-99.

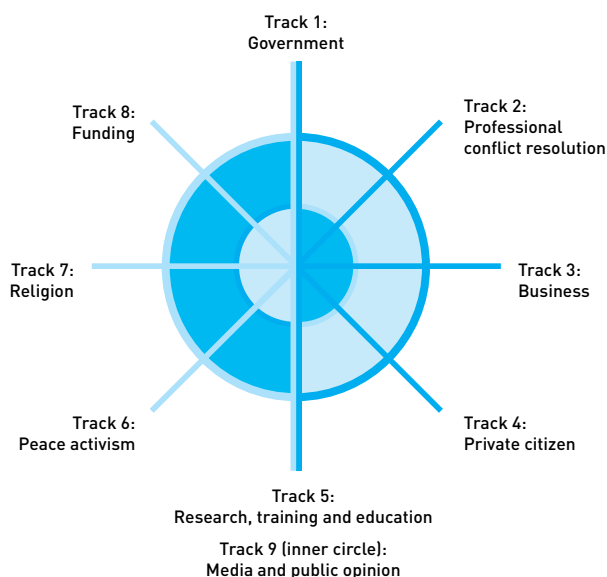
4 J. Burton (1987). *Resolving deep-rooted conflict: A handbook*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.

Mediation and dialogue are necessary strategies for conflict resolution and conflict transformation, but will not build peace if they are the only strategies used. They have to be part of a larger process, addressing issues such as transforming institutions, governance structures, alleviating poverty and demilitarisation. The interweaving of dialogue and mediation into multi-issue, multi-strategy interventions is an innovative and promising approach to peacebuilding.

2. The multi-track diplomacy model

Initially, the terms Track I and Track II were suggested to distinguish between governmental and non-governmental diplomacy,⁵ and to acknowledge that mediation and dialogue ought to take place at different levels of society and that elites should not have priority for making peace. The McDonald-Diamond model expanded this.⁶ Nine diplomacy tracks ranging from business-to-business to academics-to-academics and clergy-to-clergy and others demonstrated the richness and potential of unofficial diplomacy. Track I remained the top authority avenue, while the other eight tracks are a diversified and expanded version of the former Track II (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The McDonald-Diamond Multi-track Diplomacy Model⁷



5 J.V. Montville (1987). 'The arrow and the olive branch: The case for track-two diplomacy' in W.S. Thompson and K.M. Jensen (Eds.) (1987) *Conflict resolution: Track two diplomacy*. Washington DC, US: Foreign Service Institute, US Department of State. pp.253-269.

6 J. McDonald and L. Diamond (1996). *Multi-track diplomacy: A systemic approach to peace*. Virginia, US: Kumarian Press.

7 Available at the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy (IMTD) website, at <http://www.imtd.org/at-a-glance/mission/working-methods/what-is-multi-track-diplomacy>.

Although Track I remains the primary avenue for political negotiations, this does not imply that non-governmental actors are excluded from the processes and activities at the top level. Civil society actors have been participants in official negotiations in several conflict settings,⁸ while government representatives can partake in non-governmental dialogue. Official mediation has both visible and invisible parts. The latter usually involves behind-the-scenes shuttle diplomacy, clandestine talks between top leaders or people from the top decision-making circles. The Oslo Peace Process and numerous rounds of clandestine talks in the Northern Ireland conflict are examples of “unofficial official” mediation.

3. Official and unofficial mediation and dialogue: mapping the field

Official mediation and dialogue are defined here as dialogue and mediation between those who hold formal top-rank decision-making authority, or their delegated representatives. These can be *de jure* leaders of recognised entities, such as states or governments. They can also be *de facto* leaders who represent groups, such as armed “rebels” or self-proclaimed nation-states that either do not recognise the law and authority of the state and/or government they are in conflict with, or are not recognised by them.

Unofficial mediation and dialogue have many names, such as private diplomacy,⁹ public peace processes,¹⁰ problem-solving workshops¹¹ and transformative mediation.¹² It ‘denotes various informal, unofficial forms of interaction between members of adversary parties that attempt to influence public opinion, develop strategies, or organise resources toward the resolution of the conflict’, observes Ronald Fisher.¹³ In reality, unofficial interactive conflict resolution processes have grown to become hybrid relationship-product processes.¹⁴ This trend is partly due to the weariness of talking for the sake of talking,¹⁵ often resulting in a lack of tangible change in protracted conflict settings. The emergence of strategies at the interface of conflict transformation and the fields of development, human rights and media have opened up new horizons for cross-conflict

8 C. Barnes [Ed.] (2002). ‘Owning the process: Public participation in peacemaking’, *Accord*, No. 13. Available at <http://www.c-r.org/accord/participation>.

9 A term used by Crisis Management Initiative [CMI]. For more details, see: <http://www.cmi.fi>.

10 H.H. Saunders (1999). *A public peace process: Sustained dialogue to transform racial and ethnic conflicts*. New York, US: St Martin’s Press.

11 H.C. Kelman (1972). ‘The problem-solving workshop in conflict resolution’ in R.L. Merritt [Ed.] *Communication in international politics*. Urbana, US: University of Illinois Press. pp.168-204.

12 Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, USA.

13 R.J. Fisher (1997). *Interactive conflict resolution*. New York, US: Syracuse University Press. p.9.

14 In reality, unofficial interactive conflict resolution processes have grown to become hybrid relationship-product processes that aspire to produce outputs that legitimise the value of a dialogue as an efficient and effective conflict transformation strategy. Hence, dialogue at the unofficial level is being increasingly approached as a project and not as an open-ended process. Trust, understanding, empathy that a classic dialogue is aimed at fostering seem to be too fluid for the parties involved and for the sponsors.

15 Also known among practitioners as “hummus meetings”, named after the countless one-off dialogue meetings between Israelis and Palestinians with little or no result, at which numerous bowls of hummus were consumed.

dialogue and trust building. Such projects can yield tangible results, such as prisoner-of-war exchange, refugee assistance, economic initiatives, films and publications. These are multi-disciplinary initiatives that combine dialogue with practical conflict transformation outputs. Dialogue in these initiatives unfolds at different levels – between the initiative implementers themselves, between the initiative implementers and their respective target groups, and between larger communities across the conflict – and therefore becomes the means *and* the end. The increasing popularity of fusing dialogue with other peacebuilding projects can also be explained by pressure from the donor community to provide proof of the productiveness of dialogue as an activity that is worth continuous funding (i.e. as an activity that delivers trust, understanding, empathy and eventually peace).

Dialogue may be creatively modified to substitute face-to-face communication through words with communication through artistic means (e.g. films, photos, songs, plays, etc.). The *Dialogue Through Film* project is a vivid example of an unconventional yet genuine dialogue between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (see Box 1). The Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN) (see Box 2) is an example of dialogue through business. For instance, cheese-makers from the opposing conflict camps have arrived at an agreement on a new cheese brand and delivered the actual commercial product. In another case, farmers, having developed a joint strategy to fight a hazardous insect on both sides of the Inguri River,¹⁶ are engaged in a dialogue which has produced concrete dialogue dividends.

Box 1: *Dialogue Through Film* project

The *Dialogue Through Film* project started in 2006 as a collaborative project between the London-based Conciliation Resources, Internews-Armenia, Internews-Azerbaijan and the Stepanakert Press Club. This project aims at building bridges between young people, mostly journalists from the Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh, so they can directly communicate with their peers from Azerbaijan, including refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh. Participants produce short documentaries as a method of exchanging their ideas and emotions regarding the war and post-war life in their societies. The selected participants receive intense conflict transformation and film production training and go back to their communities in search of human stories that convey a message to share with a counterpart.

¹⁶ The Inguri River is the physical border separating Abkhazia and Georgia.

Box 2: Caucasus Business and Development Network

The Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN) is an example of cross-conflict dialogue in the South Caucasus. It uses a regional format and promotes dialogue through economic initiatives. CBDN was launched by a group of people from all sides of the regional divides who have the vision of an economically integrated South Caucasus. Awareness of the interdependence of people and economies, and the “unnaturalness” of impermeable borders in the South Caucasus, motivated CBDN to implement projects that were aimed at both structural change and awareness-raising. Structural initiatives have included drafting provisional rules for cross-conflict trade and business, creating a new Caucasus cheese brand as an embodiment of an integrated South Caucasus, a cross-conflict bilateral farming machinery lending scheme, and honey and juice production. Awareness-raising activities have included South Caucasus tea festivals and other public events, as well as political lobbying. It has incorporated regular research into the scope of its activities from the outset. Geographically, CBDN covers Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, encompassing Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Often, unofficial dialogue and mediation are combined with conflict resolution capacity-building training. In this training, members of the conflict parties jointly participate in either mock or genuine role play mediation and dialogue scenarios – but not scenarios based on their own conflict settings. They also engage in mediation or dialogue-type exercises to tackle real-life issues from their own conflict context. This approach is usually taken when the situation is volatile, when participants have not had experience of engaging in mediation or dialogue with members of the opposite side before, or when direct talks and other cross-conflict activities by unofficial actors are frowned upon or hindered by the authorities. Dialogue training may be a useful starting point for conducting larger initiatives aimed at training participants as implementers of cross-conflict projects who will need the skills to reach agreements with their conflict counterparts on difficult issues of various scale.

In the following section, the two clusters of mediation and dialogue are contrasted. In particular, the strengths and weaknesses as well as complementarity of the two are discussed at length.

Official and unofficial mediation and dialogue processes differ not merely because they take place at different levels of the society. There are other principal differences that set these two processes apart. It is important to understand what these differences are and plan the mediation and dialogue interventions accordingly. There is a danger of raising false expectations or getting the sequence and the emphases wrong. This may, in turn, devalue the mediation and dialogue as peacebuilding strategies in the eyes of the conflict parties and even aggravate the situation.

In the next section, we will map the field of interactive conflict resolution, of which mediation and dialogue are strategies. At the same time, we will highlight the distinctions and commonalities between official and unofficial processes.

4. Distinctions between official and unofficial mediation

Outcomes and timing

Official mediation is expected to yield solutions that concern cessation of armed hostilities and intermediate or final solutions to the conflict. Unofficial mediation and dialogue are rarely ever expected to stop violence or deliver solutions to the core conflict issues. These processes are primarily aimed at a personal change of the participants, which in turn is expected to lead to the “humanisation” of relationships between members of the opposing parties, trust building, and motivation for peacebuilding initiative design and implementation.

Participants

Participants in official mediation are the official leaders of their people and have the political power to change the course of a conflict. Participants in unofficial mediation and dialogue could be civil society leaders, students, entrepreneurs, journalists, ex-combatants, etc. Officials and politicians can also partake in unofficial dialogue and mediation, but only in their capacity as opinion leaders or experts, or when non-core conflict issues like local community problems (e.g. environmental hazards, epidemics, water management, cross-border trade, etc.) are being decided upon.

Legal enforcement of agreements

Intermediate official mediations (including clandestine and shuttle diplomacy talks) and unofficial mediation produce agreements that can be broken. Violations and revisions of intermediate agreements, including unilateral ones, are common. Mediation allows the parties to reach an agreement that is mutually acceptable – or at least not objectionable – to the different parties concerned. It enables exploration of various solutions beyond what is prescribed in international and national law and also creates precedents for innovative political, economic and security arrangements. This is an advantage of mediation and dialogue compared with arbitration or imposition of a solution by force. On the other hand, the non-legally binding nature of unofficial mediation and dialogue, and of behind-the-scenes official mediation, raises expectations that sometimes cannot be fulfilled. Violation of final peace agreements by one or all parties may entail sanctions from the international community. However, the threat of sanctions is not the only factor that makes the parties observe an agreement. The responsibility of conflict party leaders

for the enforcement of the mediation decisions could be of a moral and/or pragmatic nature: the top leadership may be dedicated to making peace or may see more privileges than disadvantages should it follow the peace agreement road to the end. Unofficial dialogue that involves civil society and other non-state actors is an important synergist for the official mediation in this case, as it legitimises official peace processes, anchors them and ensures the rootedness of official agreements.¹⁷

Unofficial mediation does not have any enforcement mechanisms, except for the participants' commitment to follow the agreements and their resolve to advocate for the mediation and dialogue achievements within their society and authorities.

Resilience

Unofficial dialogue processes can survive the different conflict phases in order to keep communication channels open and to continue confidence building, which is vitally important in protracted conflicts where levels of violence fluctuate. Official mediation processes frequently collapse at the onset of violence and proceed when it subsides, making it possible for those opposing a peace process to undermine it with violence. Throughout the “frozen” conflict phase, characterised by either absent or idling and extremely volatile official talks, an unofficial dialogue and mediation that generates innovative frameworks for addressing the core conflict issues and consequences of the violence may be a stimulus for the resumption of official talks as “face saving” and ensuring mutually needed progress. At the same time, unofficial dialogue may be instrumental in raising public support for peace talks within the rival societies that may influence the leaders' decision to intensify the peace process.

Impartiality and neutrality

Official and unofficial mediation differ in the adherence of a third party to the principles of impartiality and neutrality. When acting state leaders play a mediator role in official negotiations, mediation driven by the political interest of a third party is often confused with professional mediation. This is not to say that power-based mediation – in which a third party applies pressure on one or several parties, entices them to reach an agreement, and proposes and lobbies a particular agreement – is objectionable: ‘[...] worlds of war and politics tolerate and often demand a spectrum of mediating roles that exceed conventional notions of mediation practice because of the extreme human consequences and political ramifications of continuing armed conflict.’¹⁸

17 J.P. Lederach (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press.

18 H. Slim (2007). *A guide to mediation: Enabling peace processes in violent conflicts*. Geneva, Switzerland: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. Available at <http://www.hdcentre.org/publications/guide-mediation-enabling-peace-processes-violent-conflicts>.

Politically motivated official mediation may indeed be very effective in brokering a ceasefire, keeping the parties apart, preventing them from relapsing into a war and even signing a final conflict resolution agreement. However, when the main principle of impartiality (not siding with any of the parties) and neutrality (not having an interest in a particular outcome) are compromised, which is often the case in this type of mediation effort, it could jeopardise the sustainability and public endorsement of an intermediate or final agreement. The Russian Federation is one such example, claiming a role as mediator in the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia conflicts, while providing political, humanitarian and economic support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia did not trust the process and searched for a strong patron to equalise the power dynamics, refocusing on a military means to resolve the conflict. The US also has a record of biased mediation in the cases of crises in Bosnia and Kosovo.¹⁹ The Dayton Peace Agreement was timely and managed to stop the atrocious war. However, it was not instrumental in building a functional multi-ethnic state and eventually led to growing bitterness among all the communities in Bosnia. The legitimised cessation of conflict in Kosovo in exchange for the prospect for Serbia of joining the EU has led to a split within Serbian society, while the presence of international institutions in the security and governance sector of Kosovo is perceived by Kosovo Albanians as curtailing Kosovo's sovereignty. In sum, the region has not moved as much as possible.

Multi-party third parties are formed in some cases to eschew partiality. The mediation role of the OSCE Minsk group on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one example. In other cases, such as George Mitchell in the Northern Ireland peace process and Jimmy Carter acting as a mediator in several conflicts in Africa, the parties may choose a mediator who is not an acting politician. A mediator can be appointed by the UN Security Council, or the UN Secretary General may play this role, as was the case in the crisis in Timor-Leste in September 1999. This is a type of official mediation that is more professional than politically motivated. It has a serious disadvantage in terms of available leverage – either pressure or resources – to ensure the steady progression of mediation towards a peace agreement. The advantage, however, is that a neutral and impartial mediator who is accepted by all parties can work on the improvement of relationships and trust to cement step-by-step progress in talks.

Unofficial mediation and dialogue are guided by professional principles of neutrality and impartiality. Track II mediators and facilitators who are not bound by their formal role and status have greater maneuverability regarding the inclusion of various conflict parties in a dialogue, which allows them to increase fairness and impartiality of a particular dialogue process. A key predicament for the fully fledged involvement of individual

¹⁹ P. Wallensteen [2002]. *Understanding conflict resolution: War, peace and the global system*. London, UK and New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications.

European states in the transformation of state formation conflicts²⁰ is the principle of the inviolability of borders. This erects a wall between European states as interveners (as mediator and donor) and non-recognised political territories or *de facto* states like Abkhazia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh. European NGOs circumvent the issue of recognition by providing all parties concerned with the avenues for participation in research, confidence building, human rights and other cross-conflict projects. The perceptions among local communities of an outside third party's impartiality and neutrality is of key importance. In this regard, non-governmental actors usually enjoy greater trust among the communities.

Greater liaison between formal EU and individual state authorities and European NGOs is recommended for more comprehensive and effective dialogue and mediation. Disadvantages of official mediation need to be compensated by advantages of the unofficial track and vice versa.

Coercion

Official mediation in many cases is imposed on the warring parties. However, even when the parties are in agreement with a proposed mediation process, a third party still may be inclined to exercise a “mediation with muscle” approach when credible threats or actual use of force by the third party stimulate one or all parties to commit to a peaceful course of events or agreement. Talks that led to the Dayton Agreement were interspersed with NATO bombardment of the Bosnian Serb army positions. Unofficial mediation and dialogue is a voluntary process. Mediators are usually scholars or practitioners from international and foreign NGOs. They neither have the stick nor carrot to put pressure on and entice participants to stay in the process. The advantage is that those who have chosen to engage in dialogue and mediation are likely to be committed to building peace.

Traditional security framework for official mediation

Official mediation is being undertaken within a strong *realpolitik* framework. Coercion is frequently seen as the only sure way to guarantee peace and order. Those with greater power prevail. The weak ones either surrender or advance their position by siding with bigger powers. Within this logic, “mediation with muscle” is considered as a legitimate and effective way to get the parties to the table and to make them talk. A third party with its own preferred outcome exercising “mediation with muscle” is more willing to commit resources to the implementation of the desired solution. Thus, the US had a clear position throughout the course of the conflict in Kosovo, and it has become a major donor throughout the transition period and in forging an independent Kosovo.

20 A state formation conflict puts ‘an incumbent government against a regionally-based opposition demanding a radically different status for a particular territory. The demands concern autonomy, federalism, independence or joining a neighboring state’. See: P. Wallensteen [2002]. *Op. cit.* p.169.

Within the *realpolitik* paradigm, the state has the monopoly on the use of military force. Its use is frequently seen as a legitimate means to achieve a goal in addition to participation in the mediation process. The state is also the only legitimate actor within the international community of nation states; hence equal participation of non-state actors in an official mediation process is highly problematic. Official bilateral mediation between a recognised state and non-recognised *de facto* state or any other non-state actor has the added complexity of a lack of symmetry. Intra-state conflicts do not have a clear solution within the realm of international law, due to the clashing principles of territorial integrity and people's right to self-determination. States and inter-governmental organisations that act as third-party mediators usually favour the territorial integrity principle. Exceptions to this trend raise questions, stir emotions, challenge impartiality in the application of international law, but the ambiguity remains.

Human security framework for unofficial mediation and dialogue

A human security framework for unofficial mediation and dialogue opens new horizons in mediation, especially in the case of intra-state conflicts. Using this approach, which is people- rather than state-focused, representatives of identity groups are legitimate parties to official mediation processes. Within this paradigm, 'mediation can and should facilitate the articulation of legitimate needs and interests of all concerned into fair, practical and mutually acceptable solutions'.²¹ Their participation does not have to be defined as "official", and participants in unofficial mediation and dialogue sessions do not have any formal mandate from their identity group. They may not speak on behalf of their identity group, but their group identity speaks in them. While official mediators struggle with the dilemma of including non-recognised and/or *de facto* parties in negotiations, thus overtly legitimising their claims which challenge the existing world order of nation-states, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and academic institutions circumvent the issue of recognition by providing all parties concerned with the avenues for participation in interactive conflict resolution processes.

Relationships between parties

Relationships between a third party, a mediator or facilitator, and the conflict parties are different in official and unofficial talks and dialogues. In the latter case, the relationships ought to consist of genuine respect and mutual learning. Unofficial dialogue is aimed at the transformation of relationships between the participants, so that opportunities for cooperative efforts present themselves even without the participants having to change or question their cause. A mediator in an unofficial dialogue does not criticise or pass judgement on the individual participants, but encourages reflection and communication

21 J.P. Lederach (1995). *Preparing for peace: Conflict transformation across cultures*. New York, US: Syracuse University Press. p.14.

between the parties. How genuine is the commitment to assisting the parties to pave the way towards peace is under scrutiny on behalf of the dialogue and mediation participants and their societies. When academic research is being disguised as a dialogue and participants play the role of guinea pigs, the reputation of unofficial dialogue as a valid peacebuilding strategy may be undermined. Official mediators usually manage the peace process more strictly and are far less accommodating to the parties, because they have to deliver an agreement within a limited time frame.

5. Opportunities for a complementary approach

Unofficial dialogue processes in various spheres of society precede official negotiations, unfold parallel to official negotiations and continue after official negotiations either collapse or are crowned with an agreement. Without unofficial dialogue processes, official mediation may yield an agreement acceptable to the leaders but not to the public at large or to certain powerful factions that have not been involved in the cross-conflict dialogue and who may become spoilers of the official peace process. The legitimacy of governments to “make peace with the enemy” is rooted in people’s understanding that such an agreement will be beneficial to them and in people’s readiness to conclude peace with the opponent. It is not solely the state leadership that can order a political shift from armed conflict to genuine conflict transformation. The preference of the state leadership regarding the conflict certainly matters, but two other factors that define the shift are the relative weight of the war constituency and peace constituency in society, and the sensitivity of the state leadership to public opinion.²² The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin²³ was an extreme manifestation of a leadership being ready for peace but the “war constituency” in society prevailing over that of the “peace constituency”. Likewise, images of the enemy have been incorporated into the “national thinking” across the South Caucasus. A peace deal signed from one day to the next will do nothing to address those and other societal issues necessary for change.

Were a society largely in favour of peace in a democratic state, a hawkish leadership would have to follow the desires of their people. However, in a democracy where a society rejects talks, concessions and compromise, a dovish leadership would not be able to cut a peace deal. The modes of governance, quality of the civil society, degree of independence of the media and other structural characteristics of a society in conflict have an immediate impact on the effectiveness of official and unofficial mediation and dialogue, and the prospects for the complementarity of the two processes. Civil society is the main actor in unofficial dialogue, but it should be remembered that its capacity-

22 B.D. Mor (1997). ‘Peace initiatives and public opinion: The domestic context of conflict resolution’, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp.197–215.

23 One of the claims used by the opponents of the peace process to incite against Rabin was that the government did not have a ‘mandate for peace’.

building programmes do not automatically strengthen its dialogue and peacebuilding capacity. Civil society is often falsely perceived as a club of peace-loving moderates, while civil society is a part and parcel of the society at large, albeit organised and politically and socially active. NGOs, media and academics are often in the vanguard of nationalist movements, and can manipulate and manufacture historical evidence, stir hatred, and even call for war as a means of liberation and restoration of historical justice. Civil society may be divided on the issue of the use of violence. The ratio may change, but there are always those who consider war as an acceptable means of conflict resolution and those who opt for exclusively peaceful means. However, there is usually a broad consensus on the causes and the solution, and those who challenge public consensus have to struggle not only with the political authorities, but with civil society as well. Civil society organisations (CSOs) that call for and engage in dialogue with the “enemy” have to navigate between the Scylla of conformism and Charybdis of marginalisation: they need to preserve the trust and respect of their societies and retain their influence and authority on the one hand; yet they must also promote dialogue with the rival conflict side on the other. Tailored programmes need to be implemented at the interface between mediation and dialogue and civil society capacity building, mass media development and good governance, as shown in the case of the Consortium Initiative (see Box 3). Coalition building is combined with peacebuilding in the civil society strand, while development of parliamentarism is paired with the dialogue of parliamentarians on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, for example.

Box 3: The Consortium Initiative

The Consortium Initiative was established in 2003 and is led by International Alert, Conciliation Resources and the London Information Network on Conflicts and State-building (LINKS). The Consortium Initiative promotes a multifaceted process of engagement with the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. It engages with Armenians and Azerbaijanis from all strata, including the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azeri refugees. As part of this process, each Consortium member is responsible for a separate strand of work. Conciliation Resources addresses media and public awareness issues; International Alert focuses on civil society work, as well as addressing issues of conflict sensitivity; and LINKS works on the level of political dialogue.

The picture of an official mediation between “buttoned up” and cynical top leaders and of unofficial dialogue between open-minded pacifists is a simplistic one. Both processes are crucial for building peace and none of them can succeed in isolation from the other. There is a connection between the two. Civil society leaders may be elected or appointed to a position of political authority and get involved in the official dialogue.

It is expected that they will bring their experience of unofficial dialogue into the official talks. Likewise, unofficial dialogue may yield documents and proposals that would be further discussed and endorsed at the level of official talks.

6. Challenges to unofficial mediation and dialogue

Mediation and dialogue projects are slow to adjust to changes in the conflict context

Acknowledgement that issues, stakeholders – including primary, secondary and tertiary parties – the constellation of preferences and the conflict context all change over time, has made a substantial impact on the design and implementation of mediation and dialogue.²⁴ Internal conflict dynamics and changes in the context define the course of the conflict. Context changes may include: shifts in the regional power dynamics; international influences; energy, water and other resource supply-demand fluctuations; and environmental disasters. Both qualitative and quantitative changes in the conflict parties take place over time. New parties get involved, original parties split. New issues emerge in the course of protracted conflicts, causes and symptoms evolve, and symptoms become second-generation causes: hatred (attitude) and militarism (behaviour) evolve into issues in their own right.

Forexample, the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts have dramatically changed since they first manifested themselves. New context factors include: Georgia's aspirations to join NATO; Russia's rising neo-imperialism, backed by a strengthened state capacity to defend its security interests and open clashes with US security interests in the region; and Russia-Europe energy routes and interdependence in other areas, accompanied by complex relationships between Europe and Russia on the one hand, and Europe and Russia's rivals on the other. In addition, a new inter-state conflict between Russia and Georgia has been marked with a war, and Russia has become an explicit conflict party, yet remains a powerful regional actor. The US has also been manifestly one-sided. The EU has taken a balanced approach in this case.

Constant conflict analysis and its incorporation into the design of mediation and dialogue projects, or any other conflict intervention, is needed. The outcome of the analysis must be translated into action. Changes within and outside the conflict system that may shift the balance of power, open new opportunities or increase the likelihood of relapse into violence, ought to lead to adjustments in mediation and dialogue. While there is a healthy supply of conflict analysis by internal and external researchers, there

24 R. Vayrynen (1991) cited in H. Miall (2004). 'Conflict transformation: A multi-dimensional task', *The Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation - Concepts and Cross-cutting Challenges*. Available at http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/miall_handbook.pdf (241Kb PDF).

is often a disconnect between the numerous papers and conference presentations, and actual adjustments in the dialogue processes on the ground. Parallel conflict analysis by researchers across the divide is a challenging, yet very much needed, form of dialogue in itself at any stage of the conflict. On the other hand, mediation and dialogue processes inevitably affect the conflict system and need to be factored into conflict analysis by researchers.

Selection of participants

Selection of participants is a straightforward procedure in the case of official mediation: the prospective participants are known. However, this does not mean that they are readily convinced to engage in mediation. Selection of participants for unofficial mediation and dialogue is an open process. Some practitioners even suggest that the right selection of individual participants is the key to success, because it is individuals and not structures that build peace.²⁵

In the post-Soviet regions, the South Caucasus included, the idea to launch a dialogue and mediation in the unofficial realm is conceived either by an outside NGO, academic institution or a government alone, or in consultation and cooperation with an initiative group from one or more parties to the conflict. Further, the proposal is presented to local civil society or other non-state actors and participants are selected. Examples of locally-initiated and driven dialogue projects are rare, but the situation is changing. Driven by the desire to sustain and promote a positive dialogue experience or correct a negative one, several sustainable ongoing dialogue initiatives have developed in the region, marked by partnerships or coalitions between local civil society institutions and INGOs or designed and implemented solely by the actors across the conflict divide. They may evolve with or without an outside third party. In some cases, a third party becomes an external partner who provides advice, assists with fundraising and international advocacy, and acts as a facilitator when needed; but local activists are always the driving force. The partnership between International Alert and CBDN (see Box 2) is one such example. In some other cases, there is no external third party, but the role of a mediator or facilitator is played by a committee that consists of the members of all parties concerned; or there is no facilitator at all and the two sides craft the dialogue themselves. Internews *Front Line* (see Box 4)²⁶ and the “South Caucasus Integration-Alternative Start” citizen initiative and projects (see Box 5)²⁷ are examples of internally-driven and promoted dialogue projects.

25 G. Baechler [2008]. “‘Emerging archetypes’: A comparison of patterns of the peace processes in Sri Lanka and Nepal”, *Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series - A Systematic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations*. Available at http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/dialogue6_baechler_com.pdf (241Kb PDF).

26 For more information, see: <http://www.internews.am/projects/archive/frontline/index-e.htm>.

27 For more information, see: <http://southcaucasus.com/old>.

Selection of participants for dialogue and unofficial mediation ought to ensure equal status of participants in a symmetric conflict, or minority participants of higher status than majority participants in an asymmetric conflict. Dialogue between people from conflicting parties is usually more effective and efficient if the participants already have a common ground that is unrelated to the conflict, such as a profession, gender, generation, societal role, etc. Dialogues among women, youth, academics, journalists, human rights activists, ex-combatants and entrepreneurs, for instance, have been implemented in various conflict settings. The assumption that if people share an identity they can more easily engage in a cross-conflict interaction has never been empirically tested, yet is often a basis for many unofficial dialogue projects. If the project includes participants from the opposing sides who share a social goal, such as poverty reduction, support to independent media, the rehabilitation and social re-integration of ex-combatants, or the elimination of family violence, and who have established themselves as social activists, then this may create a transnational solidarity and even transnational social movements that could be an asset in conflict transformation.²⁸

There are also different views on how the constellation of moderates and extremists should be reflected in the list of participants in dialogue or mediation processes. Moderation and extremism may be reflected in the participants' positions on the cause and the solution, and also the means for reaching the desired solution. Proponents of the inclusion of all parties concerned in dialogue and mediation projects, including extremists, say that adding parties and goals instead of getting rid of them is the best way to achieve conflict transformation.²⁹ Opponents of mixing moderates with extremists argue that it is important to begin with dialogue among moderates to gain momentum. Moderates are those who can think of alternatives both regarding options for resolution and the course of action in the conflict. Moderates can then start working within their own society and consolidate public opinion in favour of dialogue. After that, involvement of extremists may be more effective.

Skilled “entrepreneurs of peacebuilding” who disguise themselves as peace activists, human rights activists, academics and so forth, may hijack entire mediation processes and intervention projects to fulfil their personal ambitions, lobby for a particular political party or simply get money.

28 J. Smith, C. Chatfield and R. Pagnucco (Eds.) (1997). *Transnational social movements and global politics: Solidarity beyond the state*. New York, US: Syracuse University Press.

29 J. Galtung (2000). *Conflict transformation by peaceful means [The Transcend method]*. Trainer's manual. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Disaster Management Training Programme. Available at http://www.transcend.org/pctrcluj2004/TRANSCEND_manual.pdf (1.5Mb PDF).

No clear link between dialogue and structural change

One of the evaluators of the long-term project of Arab-Jewish dialogue in Israel has articulated a valid point about dialogue in asymmetric conflict situations: ‘When dialogue becomes a substitute for action, there are two results. First, it assuages the conscience of members of the oppressor group to the point they feel they do not have to do anything else. Their conscience is soothed and satisfied. On the other hand, for the members of the oppressed group it becomes a safety valve for venting their frustrations. In both cases it becomes a means for reinforcing the existing oppression and therefore serves to perpetuate it.’³⁰ Indeed, what is the value of mediation and dialogue processes in relation to the structural change needed for peacebuilding? Any attempts to foster dialogue and to model co-existence in a workshop setting, regardless of the professionalism and commitment by facilitators and the participants alike, would eventually die out as the initial excitement of renewed communication and good individual relationships fade. Critics of dialogue processes in situations of protracted asymmetric conflict denounce dialogue that is not paralleled by change at the macro-level. Inter-communal and intra-communal dialogue ‘may generate a false consciousness of peaceful relations when the underlying processes are much more malign.’³¹ This is not to say that dialogue for the purpose of dialogue is a futile process. But pure dialogue projects need to be balanced with other conflict interventions. Proponents of dialogue as a conflict transformation practice claim that by the time there is a change at the macro-level, confidence and understanding will have been restored at the micro-level and people will be ready to live in peace.

A systemic approach to conflict and to conflict transformation is a promising paradigmatic, methodological and practical innovation in this regard.³² First, problem-orientation and vision-orientation need to be balanced in a dialogue or mediation methodology. A needs-based paradigm of conflict and conflict resolution is thus better answered by the vision-oriented approach to mediation (and structural change). However, a vision is not tantamount to a solution. The conflict persists because a solution for one party is a problem for the other. Hence, drawing a shared vision of the future is just a small step that ought to be followed by an intense search for political, territorial, security, economic and other arrangements (structural change) that would bring about the vision. This may sound idealistic, but there are examples when exactly this vision has driven the conflict transformation process.

30 J. Kuttub [1988] cited in M. Abu-Nimer [1999], *Dialogue, conflict resolution and change: Arab-Jewish encounters in Israel*. New York, US: State University of New York Press. p.152.

31 K. Clements [2004], ‘Towards conflict transformation and just peace’, *The Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. Recovering from War - Post-Conflict Regeneration and Reconciliation*. Available at http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/clements_handbook.pdf [244Kb PDF].

32 N. Ropers [2008], ‘Systemic conflict transformation: Reflections on the conflict and peace process in Sri Lanka’, *Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series - A Systematic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations*, pp.11–43. Available at http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/dialogue6_ropers_lead.pdf [379Kb PDF].

Second, involvement of those who are active and influential in the economy, politics and media, and motivated and capable of generating micro-scale structural change and conducting advocacy is important. However, all the challenges listed in the selection of participants section need to be overcome. Dialogue is aimed at personal change, but at the societal level this strategy is usually considered therapeutic conflict transformation,³³ which in itself does not challenge the distribution of power, institutions and laws in society. In order to contribute to peace and achieve the goal of conflict transformation, dialogue projects need to be complemented by advocacy and active promotion of structural change. Such projects are built on a dialogue foundation and yet evoke critical thinking in broader society, and promote a change in institutions and norms.

Third, dialogue and mediation can model some aspects of the structural change needed. For example, the bilateral archetype of a peace process may be deficient and even harmful when a community, political force or nation that has a stake in the conflict is being systematically excluded from the dialogue and mediation process. Two parties at the table reinforce the zero-sum game pattern of dealing with conflict, while eliciting and acknowledging factions within a conflict party or the introduction of a new party may open up new areas for finding solutions. Exclusion of refugee communities as a separate conflict party and merging ethnic Azeri refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh with the Azerbaijan conflict party have been questioned by some conflict transformation practitioners. Indeed, an Azeri refugee community may have a unique stand on the conflict that is not shared by their kin in Azerbaijan, who have not had the same experiences.

Dialogue as a surrogate of reconciliation – where is the justice part?

Mediation and dialogue are praxis that stem from the humanistic psychology tradition. Each view is given equal procedural respect and all participants are treated as equal irrespective of their side's record of behaviour in the conflict. This may seem artificial and even immoral, especially in the case of mass atrocities: 'When justice ceases to be the goal, any particular role, activity or strategy must be questioned. Where any approach is used as a ploy to co-opt or manipulate the less powerful and disadvantaged, it should not be pursued.'³⁴ However, dialogue and mediation are compatible with justice. The question is what kind of justice enforcement approach is being adopted. Restorative justice as opposed to legalistic justice is an approach promoted in peacebuilding in the cases of protracted communal conflicts. A restorative justice system 'assumes that settlements that rest on conflicting parties' subjective perceptions of fairness are longer lasting and more likely to promote reconciliation than imposed (i.e. adjudicated or arbitrated) settlements.'³⁵

33 K. Clements (2004). Op. cit.

34 J.P. Lederach (1995). Op. cit. p.14.

35 M. Estrada-Hollenbeck (2001). 'The attainment of justice through restoration, not litigation: The subjective road to reconciliation' in M. Abu-Nimer (Ed.) (2001) *Reconciliation, justice and co-existence: Theory and practice*. New York and Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Lexington Books. pp.65-86.

Dialogue paves the way for restorative justice, because it disaggregates the opponent into various factions, including those that have been opposing violence all the way. This sends an important message to the opposing side. In addition, having listened to the other side's story, or rather, stories of the conflict in the dialogue format, one may start seeing how one's own side's wrongdoings may have ignited violence. Dialogue is a forum for the conflict parties to reassure each other of their commitment to a peaceful course of events and to ask for forgiveness.

The relationship between justice and reconciliation is complex. Overall, a trend can be noted from the history of states where massive atrocities and human rights abuses have taken place: successor governments have had a better chance to move forward where transitional justice has been pursued to a certain extent.³⁶ The issue of the limits of applicability of legalistic and restorative justice approaches is very important, yet no simple typology can be proposed. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission strategy worked in South Africa, but was rejected in Bosnia. The evaluation of the role of the Hague Tribunal in the reconciliation in Bosnia or Kosovo is problematic. The level of hostility between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians is as high as it used to be. One may suggest that this was partly due to the perceived unfairness of the approach to justice taken, which bestowed Kosovo Albanians with the image of victims and victors, and Kosovo Serbs as perpetrators and losers. In the light of Carla Del Ponte's book revealing crimes committed by Kosovo Albanians against Kosovo Serbs that went unpunished, prospects for a dialogue in Kosovo are darker than ever.

Dialogue and justice are believed to reinforce each other and promote reconciliation when they are synchronised and when a restorative justice approach has been tried prior to or parallel with the application of a conventional legalistic approach. It is crucially important to include in dialogue projects dissidents from the conflict sides who uncover their own side's crimes and actively seek truth and justice.

Unofficial mediation and dialogue are important strategies for addressing the issue of justice by means of humanising relationships between the conflict parties and the disaggregation of the parties.

Dialogue and mediation do not translate into change in the public opinion structure

Dialogue at the unofficial level is important to counter war rhetoric, as well as the perception of helplessness and self-victimisation of the public. However, the issue of conducting dialogue and mediation publicly is difficult for participants. Dialogue through mass media

36 D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes and L. Huyse (Eds.) [2003]. *Reconciliation after violent conflict*. Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Available at http://www.idea.int/publications/reconciliation/upload/reconciliation_full.pdf (949Kb PDF).

is a creative way to solve the publicity and outreach dilemma. *Dialogue Through Film* (see Box 1) is an example of dialogue by means of documentary films, which form messages targeted at people on the other side of the conflict. Young Armenians and Azeris have grown up in the absence of direct communication and most of them have never met a person from the other side. Against the background of unleashed nationalist propaganda in their media and virtual wars of words on the Internet, war constituencies are being consolidated. *Dialogue Through Film* provides an alternative media format for the expression of each side's pain, fears, grief, anger and despair, and has the potential of bringing the rival sides closer rather than pushing them further apart.

The *Front Line* series, which broadcasts dialogue via video link between Armenian and Azerbaijani politicians, artists, civil society activists and others, successfully implemented the “Vis-à-vis” format pioneered by Internews (see Box 4). This format has become a groundbreaking technological solution to a social task. Vis-à-vis is a format where people in different parts of the world separated by distance or insurmountable obstacles cannot meet in real life, but get an opportunity of seeing and talking to each other through a digital video link. The audiences watch a dialogue as it is happening. This Vis-à-vis series was of particular interest for the conflict resolution field, as it brought together people divided by violent conflicts.

Box 4: *Front Line*: Television-mediated dialogue on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

In 2000–2001, Internews-Armenia and Internews-Azerbaijan started producing the *Front Line* programme, “Yerevan-Baku Spacebridges”. Government officials and oppositional politicians, civil society activists, intellectuals, former soccer star teammates, artists and other interlocutors went on air weekly over a six-month time period. The two crews rejected editing and chose to produce the programmes live to tape. That approach helped both to eschew subsequent problems with programme guests and made the dialogue look more trustworthy to viewers. This programme portrayed difficulties in relations and irreconcilable positions on a number of issues, while providing participants and broad audiences with an opportunity to listen to an array of viewpoints from across and within the conflict sides. Praised as an ‘outstanding format for dialogue’, the Internews television programme *Front Line* has been named “Best Journalism Project of the Year” by the Institute of Peace and Democracy in Azerbaijan. It was also awarded the annual Yerevan Press Club Award.

There are media dialogue products that are universally appealing to the audience, while some others can have their effect multiplied at the right time. The timing of the *Front Line* was good because of the intensification of the top-level 1999 peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and several meetings of the two presidents taking

place in 2000 and 2001.³⁷ The fact that all 24 spacebridges were broadcast in Armenia and Azerbaijan may be attributed to the general warming of political relations with the handing over of olive branches demonstrated at the top level. A sociological survey of the *Front Line* programme audiences revealed remarkable results. Over 50 percent of the randomly selected people watched the programme and 60-70 percent of them regarded the televised dialogue as a model and sign of hope for dialogue between the two peoples. An overwhelming majority of respondents in the two countries appreciated the openness of the dialogue and rated it as interesting and necessary. This is a demonstration of the impact of the televised dialogue on public opinion.

These examples of publicly conducted dialogue open new possibilities for media-mediated conflict interventions. However, the tyranny of the market and vulnerability of media to political pressure are major obstacles to the spread of media-mediated dialogue. Financial and political support from the EU and European NGOs are of key importance at the early stages and throughout these initiatives. These initiatives are not commercial and can rarely be self-sustainable, yet their societal and political impact may be worth funding. However, there are cost-effective media dialogue initiatives, such as an internet platform for the South Caucasus intellectuals, human rights, and peace activists and dissidents (see Box 5). Moderated by a team formed from various conflict regions of the South Caucasus, this internet dialogue is a good resource for those who are committed to the search for alternative solutions and are open to critical reassessment of their own position. This initiative also provides a platform for the diaspora from the South Caucasus to engage in a dialogue.

Box 5: South Caucasus Integration-Alternative Start initiative

The citizen initiative “South Caucasus Integration-Alternative Start” was started by a group of journalists to creatively use the Internet to link thinkers and activists all over the South Caucasus. This initiative has changed the conventional bilateral format of dialogue by making it multilateral and regional. At the same time, this initiative made the discussion platform accessible for people in different parts of the South Caucasus to participate in, share their ideas, reflections and emotions, and call for solidarity. This initiative combats nationalism and isolation not merely with essays on politics, conflicts, human rights and other pressing issues that every registered partner can submit and comment on, but by means of public awareness, advocacy campaigns and assistance to the victims persecuted on political grounds. This is an example of creating transnational and cross-conflict solidarity among those committed to human rights and the protection of freedom as an overarching goal. Importantly, this initiative has long been run on a voluntary basis with only occasional small funding for specific initiatives.

37 For more information, see: <http://www.internews.am> and <http://www.internews.az>.

Sustainability of unofficial dialogue

Key to any conflict intervention effectively promoting peace is its “staying power” – the ability to stay engaged in the conflict transformation.³⁸ The Inter-Tajik unofficial dialogue, which eventually led to the peace agreement and continued beyond the peace accord, lasted for over seven years.³⁹ This is a rather unique case of a dialogue that was not aimed at the production of formal agreements. The Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force model was successfully implemented in the Tajik civil war context. A society – especially one coming out of a protracted violent conflict – needs time to start using dialogue as a strategy to resolve differences. Hence, dialogue as conflict intervention at different levels and in different realms ought to be sustained until this habit takes root and the self-reproducing character of peacebuilding is fostered. In an ideal world, dialogue should never stop. Ongoing dialogue on race relations and other issues is a part of university life in the US, for example.⁴⁰ However, there are restrictions that apply in real life, particularly in protracted conflict settings. Lack of funding, fatigue of participants, increased threat to the participants, escalation of violence and other factors all interfere with the original plans. There are several suggestions that may help eschew situations of interrupted dialogue:

1. Parties involved need to be able to define an optimal time frame for the selected composition of a dialogue initiative;
2. Parties involved need to be skilled in navigating in a changing conflict environment in order to keep dialogue relevant and timely;
3. Parties need guaranteed long-term funding (the first two obstacles concern evaluation and adjustment capacity of the parties on the ground and a third party; the third obstacle concerns not only the parties involved, but international donor policies); and
4. Unofficial dialogue and mediation should not be isolated processes, but need to be linked with civil society projects, university programmes, economic initiatives and the media. This way, the spirit of dialogue will be sustained in the society.

Unofficial mediation and dialogue should neither be overestimated nor underestimated as peacebuilding strategies. They operate at the subjective level of people’s emotions, fears, illusions and revelations, and are at times regarded as a secondary “soft” type

38 F.O. Hampson (2001). ‘Parent, midwife or accidental executioner? The role of third parties in ending violent conflict’ in C.A. Crocker, F.O. Hampson and P. Aall (Eds.) *Turbulent peace: The challenges of managing international conflict*. Virginia, US: USIP Press. pp.387-403.

39 H.H. Saunders (1999). Op. cit.

40 For example, a dialogue between Israeli and Arab students and inter-racial dialogue at George Mason University, Virginia, US.

of intervention compared with “hard” aid, peacekeeping or political negotiations. Unofficial mediation and dialogue have their unique place in the spectrum of conflict transformation and conflict resolution strategies. At the same time, unofficial mediation and dialogue are crucial in multi-task and multi-strategy peace initiatives.

7. Recommendations for the EU and for NGOs working in the region

Below are some recommendations for enhancing the social and political effectiveness of unofficial mediation and dialogue, and the complementarities between official and unofficial mediation and dialogue processes. Together, these can encourage a more comprehensive, cost-effective and sustainable peacebuilding process.

1. Where dialogue on the most contentious issues is not possible or cannot be effective from the outset, the EU should pay greater attention to the dialogue and mediation on second-order or side issues, or issues of supra-national and regional scale, such as environmental degradation, human and drug trafficking, labour migration, etc. This may defuse tensions, empower the dialogue or mediation participants to tackle more challenging issues in the future, and most importantly sow seeds of hope within the societies in conflict for mutually acceptable and beneficial solutions.
2. EU donors need to develop flexibility in their funding of ad hoc dialogue and mediation initiatives. Changes in the conflict context may open opportunities for a dialogue that needs urgent support or may necessitate change in the composition of the parties at the table and sequencing in already funded mediation and dialogue projects that require additional funding.⁴¹ Dialogue projects need to be implemented not when funding is available, but when they are most relevant. In addition to funding long-term ongoing dialogue projects, a pool for the funding of emerging unofficial dialogue also needs to be created.
3. EU donors and political bodies need to make adjustments to their evaluation of unofficial dialogue and mediation projects. A proper process-orientated evaluation strategy needs to become an integral part of any mediation and dialogue initiative. A long-term process that is aimed at attitudinal change, such as dialogue at the non-state level, begs particular evaluation approaches, such as action research.
4. Greater liaison between dialogue and mediation by formal EU and individual state authorities and European NGOs is recommended to compensate for the disadvantages of official mediation with the advantages of the unofficial track and vice versa.

41 G. Baechler [2008]. *Op. cit.*

5. Tailored programmes need to be implemented at the interface between mediation and dialogue and civil society capacity building, mass media development and good governance.
6. Dialogue on the issues of energy, cross-border trade, organised crime, drug and human trafficking, epidemics and other basic survival issues at the grassroots and local authority level on the opposing sides needs to be supported and institutionalised. Cross-border dialogue and mediation at the periphery of the societies in conflict is a window of opportunity for sustained dialogue, since the immediate survival needs of people across the divide are at stake. This dialogue has a good chance to be a model of conflict resolution strategy and a confidence-building measure for a wider society.
7. Novel formats of unofficial dialogue that address deficiencies of unofficial dialogue should be further explored. Mass media-mediated dialogue projects need to receive greater attention, because of the outreach opportunities that they provide.
8. Whenever possible, unofficial mediation and dialogue need to be linked with practical projects that provide tangible peace dividends (e.g. jobs, better ecology, safe water and energy supply etc.) that capitalise on personal attitudinal change and improved inter-personal relationships between the dialogue participants and involve them as leaders of social change, irrespective of the scale and publicity of the projects.

CHAPTER 2

Opportunities and Limitations for Civil Society in the Conflict Transformation Process

Case Study of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict

Liana Kvarchelia

1. Introduction

Although the conflicts in the Caucasus have been extensively studied and reported on by local and international experts, discussion of peacebuilding at the civil society level has been confined to relatively narrow circles. Moreover, the ideas and recommendations of civil society diplomats are often ignored by official diplomats and communities on both sides of the conflict. Despite the efforts of peacebuilders to stimulate public enthusiasm for the idea of dialogue as an alternative to war in their communities, there has been no large-scale mobilisation of society against the use of force. The August 2008 war in South Ossetia and the resulting human casualties caused many people to question the value of the peacebuilding efforts by civil society and the ability of civil organisations to have any impact on the situation in terms of preventing the use of force. Today, those involved in peacebuilding initiatives in the South Caucasus are asking themselves the questions: ‘To what extent is civil society capable of having an impact on conflict transformation? Have all their efforts over so many years been in vain, given that politicians can still view force as a means of resolving conflict and this is not met with widespread public protests?’

In order to assess the effectiveness of civil peacebuilding initiatives and whether they are worth promoting, it is useful to analyse their strengths and weaknesses, the objectives and possible motivation of those involved, and the opportunities and limitations of such initiatives in terms of influencing conflict transformation. This article attempts to conduct such an analysis, using the case study of peacebuilding activities carried out within the framework of Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue.

The article focuses, in particular, on the activities of NGOs, since they were the initiators of and key participants in cross-conflict contacts at a number of levels and across a number of formats. It is important to note that the unofficial Georgian-Abkhaz process involved almost no interactions at a “grassroots” level. The contacts were made between experts from the non-governmental sector.

There were a number of formats used for interaction within the informal Georgian-Abkhaz process. In the bilateral format, contacts took the form of dialogue at conferences, roundtable meetings, seminars for joint analysis of the situation, etc. The topics discussed at these events covered a number of different aspects of the conflict. Meetings could, for example, include discussions on the interests and fears of the sides in the conflict, underlying causes of the conflict, the role of third countries, the influence of external factors on the conflict, issues of migration at various historical periods, etc. In parallel with this, research was carried out into a number of different aspects of the conflict and the results were used to prepare and publish reports with recommendations. Research topics varied from international guarantees on the non-use of force and international presence in Abkhazia to a number of aspects of human security, including the situation in the border districts. Conferences organised as part of the dialogue process were mainly

attended by representatives of civil society. However, where possible, representatives of official bodies from Abkhazia and Georgia, representatives of international NGOs and official bodies, and independent Western and Russian experts also participated.

It is important to note that interaction between the sides was not confined to the academic or analytical level. As well as analysing the conflict from different angles, the participants in the process were involved at various stages in advocating conflict resolution by non-violent means. At the international level, they attempted to influence the official approaches of mediators to conflict resolution, based on the view that these approaches were not only unjust but also ineffective, since they lacked balance and did not take into account the interests of all sides. At the local level, civil society diplomats submitted proposals to the authorities for their own vision of how to resolve a range of issues associated with the conflict. The most critically-minded Georgian participants in the process publicly debated Georgia's official policy, which demonstrated a lack of interest in serious dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Abkhaz participants, for their part, contacted senior members of the Abkhaz administration regarding the situation faced by the Georgian population in the Gal district of Abkhazia, helping them to resolve specific problems faced by a number of individuals whose rights had been infringed as a result of the conflict.

One initiative within the bilateral informal Georgian-Abkhaz process was the launch of a multilateral network of civil society representatives from across the Caucasus. The initiative was unique in that it allowed representatives of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh to participate for the first time in the regional dialogue process on an equal footing with Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia. This plugged a major gap that existed in many other regional initiatives. This multilateral Caucasian format allowed – in addition to conferences and discussions – joint training sessions and seminars to be conducted for the representatives of both the North and South Caucasus. It also permitted monitoring of the local situation and trips to various regions in the Caucasus by mobile groups of mediators during crisis situations.

2. Common ground in the civil diplomacy process

We will attempt below to sketch out the aims of NGOs in the Georgian-Abkhaz peacebuilding process, along with the principles they adhered to, and common ground and differences between the agendas of civil societies in the two countries. However, before we formulate potential common ground in civil diplomacy efforts, we will first analyse the factors that may have influenced the motivation of those involved in the process.

- An important factor that helped to facilitate peacebuilding activities was that representatives of civil societies from the two countries shared **common interests** in many areas. Those involved also understood the need for these common interests to be **identified and articulated**.
- The main area of common interest was **peaceful resolution of the conflict**. The fact that both groups spoke out against the use of force does not, however, mean that their involvement in the dialogue was motivated solely by a commitment to non-violent means of conflict resolution. The representatives from each side had their own political convictions and positions on the conflict and these certainly played a part in their motivation. For example, it is reasonable to assume that the Abkhaz felt able to speak out against the use of force because they calculated that Abkhazia – which by 1993 had regained control over virtually all of its territory, apart from the Kodor Gorge – was clearly not planning any attack on Georgia, whereas Georgia made no secret of its intentions to recover the “lost territories” at any price. For their part, many Georgian representatives were presumably well aware that in view of Georgia’s geopolitical situation, it was unlikely to “regain” Abkhazia by force without risking opposition not only from Abkhazia but also from Russia. An important point is that most of those involved on the Georgian side were interested in “regaining” its people rather than territory. Nevertheless, in spite of other potential motives, the principal stance of both sets of participants was that **dialogue is an alternative to military action**, although it was also aimed at achieving results over the longer term.
- There was a common understanding that there can be **no simple, rapid solution to the conflict**, that **any strategy must be formulated on the basis of an in-depth analysis of the situation**, an investigation of the causes of the conflict, interests, concerns and opinions of all sides.
- Another important factor was that the participants paid particular attention to **how the dialogue process itself was organised**. A crucial question here was **the selection of mediators and facilitators for the process**. Participants from both sides thought it was not only desirable, but essential, to select facilitators who were impartial. The facilitators were to provide participants with a neutral platform for discussion on equal terms. They were not to express their own point of view on any final formula for resolving the conflict and neither were they to insist on any particular formula as a baseline. Representatives from international NGOs acted as facilitators with these skills in the Georgian-Abkhaz civil dialogue process. The informal nature of the dialogue distinguished it favourably from the official negotiation process, where mediators and facilitators supported the position of one of the sides in the conflict. This meant that the official negotiation process used the outcome desired by one of the sides, in this case Georgia, as a negotiating framework.

This rendered the negotiations themselves ineffective, with little prospect of success in terms of achieving a resolution acceptable to all parties. Those involved in civil diplomacy (local and international) organised a process which was not restricted to any particular framework, and so they were able to table a wide variety of options for resolving the conflict.

- An important factor promoting better mutual understanding was that participants from both sides had been **supporters of democratic transformation within their own societies**. As a result, they viewed the situation in their countries and in relation to the conflict through a democratic lens. The level of openness in discussions on the internal situation in the two countries was relatively high, and because Abkhazia and Georgia were post-Soviet countries that had to some extent undergone the same processes, it was easier for them to understand the internal dynamic in each country. Such discussions enabled each side to have a better understanding of **how the internal political dynamic affects the conflict dynamic and vice versa**.

3. Internal limitations on the civil diplomacy process

At the same time, there was a range of factors associated with the individual situations and stances of those involved in informal peacebuilding themselves which had a significant impact on the dialogue process.

- The most important of these factors was the **differing visions of the final outcome of any conflict resolution**, which reflects the underlying difference in the parties' interests. The Georgian participants advocated consistently for the peaceful unification of Abkhazia and Georgia, although they also acknowledge that Georgia today can hardly be called an attractive partner for Abkhazia. The Abkhaz position was that Georgia and Abkhazia could co-exist peacefully as two sovereign neighbouring countries.
- Another important difference, particularly at the initial stages in the dialogue process, was the fact that **one group was more focused on the causes of the conflict and the other on its consequences**. For many Georgian participants, issues connected with the consequences of the war were more urgent than its causes. The situation of Georgian refugees and Abkhazia's responsibility for not putting in place conditions under which they could return to Abkhazia (apart from the Gal district), in particular, were of more importance to them. For the Abkhaz participants, the priority was to analyse the causes of the conflict and Georgia's responsibility for the unleashing of military action in 1992 which involved a large number of casualties and the destruction of property. This coloured Abkhaz views on the consequences of the conflict, including the refugee issue.

- It is also important to note that **Georgian and Abkhaz views on Russia's role in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict differ in many respects.** The Georgian participants feel that Russia exerts a considerably negative influence on the dynamics of the conflict. Although the Georgians acknowledge the responsibility of their own authorities for the events of 1992–1993 and August 2008, many of them also point out that it was Russian actions that provoked a response from Georgia's leaders. However, what is important is that unlike Georgia's authorities, the participants from Georgia in the civil diplomacy process insist that there is a specific Abkhaz-Georgian conflict separate from the conflict between Russia and Georgia. They contend that denying the existence of this level of the conflict will do nothing to promote Georgian-Abkhaz mutual understanding. The Abkhaz participants also acknowledge that the conflict operates on multiple levels, although the primary focus for them is the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Although the Abkhaz participants believe that Russia, as well as other external players (the US, the EU), is operating primarily in accordance with its own interests in the region, they do not share the view that it was Russia who initiated the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. As regards Russia's role as an intermediary in the conflict resolution process, the Georgian participants believe that Russia cannot be a neutral mediator since it has its own interests in the region. At the same time, they view official Western mediation as much more neutral and therefore more acceptable. The Abkhaz participants, on the other hand, certainly do not perceive Western mediation as more neutral. They remain of the view that there are no neutral mediators in this situation. Therefore, they see no particular reason to doubt specifically and exclusively Russia's mediatory role.
- Consequently, **the participants in the dialogue process differ in their assessments of the West's role in the region.** Although the Georgian participants acknowledge that the Western community has not exerted sufficient pressure on Georgia's authorities to reject the use of force, at the same time the majority see no problem in the fact that Western countries determined in advance that the conflict must be resolved exclusively within the framework of Georgia's "territorial integrity". For the Abkhaz participants, mediation on this basis through official channels did not appear to be neutral, since the Western countries supported Georgia's position on resolving the conflict. Moreover, some Georgian and Abkhaz participants shared the same view on the Western community's approach to internal processes in Georgia and Abkhazia and the South Caucasus as a whole. They felt that these approaches were insufficiently critical, since normative conditionalities were often sacrificed when geopolitical and economic interests were at stake. Furthermore, democratic values were often overshadowed by the importance of external allegiances.
- Divergent political positions also reflected differing perceptions of international processes, which were seen in terms of the consequences they might have for the outcome desired by each side. For example, after the recognition of Kosovo by

a series of countries, a source of particular irritation on the Abkhaz side were the attempts by Western diplomats to reject the idea that “Kosovo” established a precedent for the recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. Consequently, the topic of Kosovo was frequently tabled by the Abkhaz participants. Those Georgian participants willing to discuss Kosovo at all denied that it set a precedent, while others preferred not to address the topic at all.

4. Objectives of civil diplomacy

Quite clearly, from the very start, those involved did not consider the aim of the civil peacebuilding process to be the final resolution of the conflict. They could hardly set themselves such an ambitious goal, since they were not the key actors in the Georgian-Abkhaz process. They also understood quite well that the different sides had opposing views and attitudes on fundamental issues affecting the resolution of the conflict. Consequently, the objectives of civil diplomacy were formulated not in terms of a final formula for resolving the conflict, but instead in terms of **influencing approaches to conflict resolution**.

It seems that **the fundamental aim of civil diplomacy, and more specifically of the dialogue process, was to develop a model of peaceful interaction between the two sides to the conflict on the basis of equal participation and the free exchange of opinions on various aspects of the conflict**. To achieve this, the participants’ overall aim was interaction, within which they set the following **objectives**:

- To aim for greater mutual understanding, awareness of the other’s needs and fears, and an understanding of the specifics of internal developments on each side;
- To identify mutually acceptable solutions to issues of mutual interest or of common concern (such as the situation in the border districts);
- To propose to local government 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);
- 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 which were characterised by a unilateral stance that focused exclusively on the official Georgian position; to this end, to present to international institutions the results of independent expert analysis and recommendations based on a global assessment of the situation that took into account the interests and views existing on both sides of the conflict.

In setting themselves these objectives, civil society activists tried to make their own contribution to **the creation of an environment of sustainable peace.**

5. External limitations on the civil diplomacy process

It is important to note that as well as internal limitations arising from the individual situations and stances of those involved in the civil diplomacy process, there were also external factors that created specific obstacles.

Those involved in the civil diplomacy process acted as catalysts for discussion within the two communities of “difficult issues” associated with the conflict. This was, however, seriously hampered by the relatively small numbers of people who took an interest in the problems caused by the conflict and who were willing to enter into dialogue with the opposite side. Moreover, the fact that contacts had been established and that the dialogue with the opposite side was taking place outside the official framework was often perceived by the public in both societies as a challenge to a “world view” dominated by clear lines of demarcation.

Georgian and Abkhaz societies also had differing perceptions of civil diplomacy. For example, the fact that the Georgian representatives wished to establish contact with Abkhaz society did not contradict the Georgian public’s aim of a union with Abkhazia. Perhaps because of this, there was no serious public outcry in Georgia against the civil diplomacy process, although it did not enjoy widespread public support. On the other hand, Abkhaz society found it more difficult to understand how the Abkhaz participants could focus on Abkhaz independence but at the same time be willing to conduct a dialogue with Georgia, which was opposed to recognising this independence.

The complex internal political dynamics in the two countries occasionally created a situation where the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict – and with it the civil dialogue process – was hijacked by internal political struggles. A particularly clear example of this occurred during election campaigns, when the informal diplomacy process was used as a pretext to criticise and attack civil society activists.

The stance taken by official international agencies did not facilitate the conflict transformation process either. Some official Western institutions appear to have viewed civil society’s peacebuilding activities purely as an instrument for the reconciliation of the two societies within a single Georgian state. They were consequently more interested from the outset in the very fact that cross-conflict interaction existed at all rather than in the substance of such processes. As time went on, the official international agencies became more open to accepting the ideas developed by

independent local and international experts. However, this had little resonance in official approaches to conflict resolution.

Since Western officials had from the outset adopted a fairly hardline position on a formula for achieving a final resolution of the conflict, international institutions were generally reluctant to take seriously the views and recommendations of civil society – not only in relation to the conflict, but also with regard to the internal political developments in Georgia and Abkhazia. For example, the Georgian participants on more than one occasion expressed their disappointment at the role of Western institutions in the internal political situation in Georgia: they criticised them for their reluctance to condemn the Georgian president for serious violations of human rights and for restricting freedoms within Georgia.

6. Effect on the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict

Given the various subjective and objective factors limiting the impact of civil diplomacy, its main positive outcome may be considered to be that **it developed the basis for interaction at an informal level on issues of common interest.**

The civil dialogue process **opened up channels of communication**, which could be used as needed to resolve problems facing specific individuals whose rights were infringed, or individuals in need of assistance on the opposite side or during crises.

Importantly, civil society on both sides of the conflict **formed an understanding that peaceful conflict resolution is in the long-term interests of both Georgia and Abkhazia.**

Those involved in the informal process **formed a more complete view of the situation**, based on a better understanding of the concerns and needs of society on the other side of the conflict.

Owing, in many ways, to the dialogue process, **a more accurate view of the situation was formed not only by the local participants, but also by international experts and journalists.** Today, ineffective and unproductive approaches to conflict resolution and to the region as a whole are opposed not only by representatives of the two sides, but also by international NGOs and independent experts and journalists.

The civil peacebuilding process also has more **specific outputs** in the form of various publications, reports with recommendations, films and Caucasus peacebuilding networks.

7. New emphases post-August 2008

The use of force in August 2008 was condemned by all involved in civil diplomacy in Abkhazia, Georgia and the South Caucasus as a whole. However, the sides differed in their attitude to the consequences of the August events. For the Abkhaz representatives, as for Abkhaz society as a whole, the recognition of Abkhaz independence by Russia and a number of other countries represented, to begin with, the first stage in the process of restoring historical justice. For the representatives of Georgia, Russia's recognition of Abkhazia meant, above all, that the resolution of the conflict would be postponed indefinitely and that the issue of the restoration of Georgia's "territorial integrity" would become a matter for the longer term. Political discourse shifted its emphasis from Georgian-Abkhaz relations to relations between Russia and Georgia and between Russia and Abkhazia.

The Georgian participants would prefer Abkhazia to retain its independence in its relations with Russia. The Abkhaz participants want the same, although the underlying motivation is different on each side. In principle, the Abkhaz want to retain their sovereignty and hold amicable, although asymmetrical, relations with Russia. For some of the Georgian representatives, Russian dominance in Abkhazia means that there is no space for Georgian dominance in Abkhazia.

An important aspect on which Georgian and Abkhaz civil society representatives agreed was the issue of the de-isolation of Abkhazia and the creation of conditions where it could collaborate directly with the international community. When considering de-isolation, we should look in particular at the Georgian Law on the Occupied Territories and the so-called Georgian Strategy on the Occupied Territories.

Opposing positions with regard to the final outcome of the resolution of the conflict affect the attitude of those involved in the dialogue to the question of "occupation". For the Abkhaz representatives, the use of the term "occupation" in relation to Abkhazia is fundamentally unacceptable. The Georgian participants, on the other hand, do not question the law on "occupation" itself, but consider that it should not contain terms that might preclude international assistance or an international presence in Abkhazia.

Despite the presence of diametrically opposed attitudes to the use of the term "occupation" and the differing motivations behind support for an international presence in Abkhazia, the dialogue participants agree that Abkhazia cannot be allowed to remain isolated from the outside world. However, there is a risk that Georgia's official policy will lead to a complete embargo on Abkhazia's direct contacts with the international community.

For this reason, the Georgian participants criticise the political component of the Georgian Strategy on the Occupied Territories, which imposes a political framework that

limits the opportunity for an international presence in Abkhazia. In the view of many Abkhaz participants, the purpose behind the Strategy was to pre-condition the process of “de-isolation” of Abkhazia in such a way that it will “open up” Abkhazia, primarily to Georgia, while handing over de facto control over Abkhazia’s external contacts to Tbilisi. This would certainly be unacceptable for Sukhum. The impression is given that the EU’s announced, but not yet completed, policy on Abkhazia – “Engagement without Recognition” – has aroused disquiet in official circles in Georgia, since it could lead to Abkhazia being able to institute contacts with the outside world independently. However, any attempt by Georgia to restrict Abkhazia’s independent access to the outside world would only increase scepticism in relation to the de-isolation policy and undermine possibilities for any form of engagement. The Georgian “Strategy” and the policy as a whole will only increase the parties’ unwillingness to engage in dialogue with Georgia – all the more since many people feel there is little left to say to Georgia in light of the events in August 2008.

Today, there is an urgent need for serious dialogue within each society. In Georgia, many people view the problem of “the restoration of territorial integrity” as an issue that has been postponed indefinitely, although it is not entirely off the agenda. Georgian society does not view Abkhaz independence as a deliberate choice made by the citizens of Abkhazia and one that they will not relinquish. Meanwhile, in Abkhazia itself, following its recognition by the Russian Federation, many people no longer view dialogue with Georgia as an urgent issue; instead, they believe that the conflict has been fully resolved, despite the fact that no agreement on the non-use of force has yet been signed. Nonetheless, until the wider public on both sides of the conflict, rather than just a small number of civil society activists, start to consider the cost of failing to achieve a resolution of the conflict, it will be difficult to achieve lasting and sustainable peace in the region.

PART 2

Politics and Mediation

CHAPTER 3

The Schlaining Process

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While I take sole responsibility for the content and views expressed in this article, the Schlaining Process itself was a collaborative endeavour. Martin Schumer and Norbert Ropers were critical in conceptualising what we called the “social infrastructure for peace”, the way a dialogue process could contribute to this and then making the process happen. Clem McCartney introduced an essential creativity and adaptive approach to the facilitation team. Colleagues at Conciliation Resources provided continuous and vital support – in particular Rachel Clogg, whose accompaniment of the process throughout was indispensable, latterly assuming a central facilitation role. Colleagues at the Berghof Centre were crucial to developing the process – in particular Oliver Wolleh and Antje Buehler, who acted as process observers, feeding ideas into the facilitation and undertaking support activities. A number of non-governmental donors and governments funded the process and the latter provided support in facilitating participant travel (especially the governments of Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). Representatives of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) provided invaluable insights, as did colleagues from a number of other initiatives – Paula Garb, Bruno Coppieters, Walter Kaufmann, Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan and Magdalena Frichova. The participants and many political and civic actors in their respective communities provided challenge, critique and support. Above all, the process would not have happened without Manana Gurgulia, Paata Zakareishvili, Liana Kvarchelia and Arda Inal-Ipa, whose courage and commitment to change the way their societies resolve conflicts was and remains inspirational.

1. Introduction

Peace processes generally operate on multiple levels. Negotiations between parties aimed at reaching agreements to bring a conflict to a conclusion take place in the domain of political leaderships and high-level diplomacy: political leaders, democratically elected or not, are those who sign agreements. However, resolving conflicts is about much more than the signing of an agreement – formal negotiation processes alone are insufficient for sustainable conflict transformation. While direct engagement between the conflict parties is the ideal means to arrive at an agreement, the deep-felt antagonism if not hatred engendered by violent conflict, not to mention the insecurities that are inherent in the asymmetries of many conflicts, make this extremely difficult. Furthermore, conflict itself has the effect of transforming the aspirations of communities that have endured violence. Therefore, to arrive at a point at which parties can conceive of agreement in the aftermath of violence, myriad efforts are required to prepare the ground and an holistic approach is needed reflecting on wider political and social changes, and working at different levels. These efforts often run concurrently and are undertaken by different types of actors, both insiders and outsiders.

This chapter explores the experience of the Schlaining Process (named after the Austrian town where the first meeting was held in 2000), which the author co-facilitated.² This process facilitated 20 dialogue workshops between Georgian and Abkhaz interlocutors between 2000 and 2007 and was part of a wider series of engagements undertaken by Conciliation Resources in partnerships (sometimes formal and structured, sometimes informal) with a range of Abkhaz, Georgian and international NGOs. In order to situate the specific process, some observations will be made about civil society roles in peace processes and the nature of the Georgian and Abkhaz conflict and peace process.

2. Civil society and peace processes

Civic actors play multiple roles in trying to contribute to the transformation of relations within as well as between communities fragmented by violence.³ Operating within and across societies, initiatives serve to promote rigorous analysis of the symptoms, causes and possible solutions, stimulate dialogue, challenge stereotypes, rebuild relationships, be more inclusive of marginalised groups, and devise and offer substantive suggestions to national politicians and international mediators. At the same time, through joint

² The Schlaining Process was co-facilitated by Conciliation Resources (CR) and the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management from 2000–2005 and thereafter by CR. See O. Wolleh (2006). *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue Process*. Also refer to the press releases issued following meetings 4 to 20. Available at http://www.c-r.org/resources?search_api_views_fulltext=Schlaining+Process%3A+Press+release&=Search.

³ See T. Paffenholz (Ed.) (2010). *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*. London: Lynne Reiner Publishers. This collection provides an excellent overview of different civil society engagements in peacebuilding.

endeavours, they seek to promote a transformation of analytical, behavioural and perceptual frameworks. Civic engagements promote change in many ways, but the contexts in which they operate make it clear that such efforts cannot be divorced from politics. Indeed, one of the innovative elements of civil society conflict resolution work has been that in contexts in which politics has been dysfunctional, civic actors have provided bridges between political elites and those social constituencies prepared to have a vision of what peace can mean. Public perceptions, expectations and fears relating to peace processes are often fundamentally detached from the limited interactions of elites at the negotiating table. Without significant work to engage societies affected by conflict, options for change will remain limited and the effectiveness of negotiations to carve out a sustainable resolution will be questionable.

Within the wide spectrum of civic engagement to promote change, a number of interlinked processes evolved in the Georgian-Abkhaz context. Some of these processes sought to promote dialogue across the conflict divide and generate ideas that could deepen and reframe understanding of options, as well as influence wider societal thinking and feed into formal processes. Most of these operated purely at the civil society level between specific professional, functional groups or with cross-sections of civil society. The Schlaining Process was explicitly designed to bring civic actors, officials and politicians together in a dialogue and problem-solving environment.

3. Understanding the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and peace process

Contested identities are central to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.⁴ From a Georgian perspective, the conflict is now often presented as a Georgian-Russian conflict. In the early 1990s, this conflict was about Georgia's attempt to secede from Soviet and then Russian influence. In the 2000s, it became increasingly about the Russian reaction to the Rose Revolution and the explicit desire of the Georgian leadership to move towards Euro-Atlantic integration. A key marker for the Georgians was the 1993 defeat and the mass displacement of Georgians, leading to accusations of ethnic cleansing, which continue to be used as a principled, rhetorical and political instrument against the Abkhaz and as a reminder of the humanitarian trauma experienced by tens of thousands of people. From an Abkhaz perspective, long-standing antagonisms and fears of political and demographic domination were aggravated by perceptions of Georgian colonialism and the nationalistic rhetoric present in Georgian discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This rhetoric was captured in the phrase of Georgia's first post-Soviet President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia –'Georgia for the Georgians'. While the factors that generated the

⁴ See: Y. Anchabadze, B. Coppieters and G. Nodia (Eds.) [1998]. *Georgians and Abkhazians, The Search for a Peace Settlement*. Kolln: Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien; L. Broers. "David and Goliath" and "Georgians in the Kremlin": A post-colonial perspective on conflict in post-Soviet Georgia', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 2, June 2009, pp.99–118.

conflict in the first place are not necessarily those that sustain it in the present, fears of assimilation or external domination continue to have a currency for both parties. Indeed fear, playing across generations and feeding off retelling of past experiences, is a driver of conflict like nothing else.

Like all conflicts, there are many layers that can and need to be analysed to inform possible approaches to engagement and peacebuilding. These layers are shaped by the parties' interpretations of the conflict. Some relate more to the internal politics and government-society relations on either side of the divide. Others relate to the relations of actors (internal and external) operating across the divide. Five layers that offer entry points for engagement can be identified as being:⁵

- Georgian-Abkhaz relations in Abkhazia (with a dimension focusing on issues of security and human rights in the Gal/i region, as well as encompassing the broader and complex relationship of the Abkhaz with the displaced ethnic-Georgian population);
- Georgian-Abkhaz relations in regard to rival claims to sovereignty over Abkhazia;
- Georgian-Russian relations (an elite-led, interstate dimension driven by different strategic visions and security concepts rather than by ethnic hatred);
- Russian-“Western” relations: driven by a renewed sense of rivalry that grew under the presidency of Vladimir Putin and most acutely seen in the issue of Kosovo's recognition, but reflected as a complex set of interstate relations between Russia, the US and the EU – such relations are nuanced by different dynamics and patterns relating to different issues and actors;
- Abkhaz-Russian relations: often underplayed and simplified to argue that Abkhaz leaders are seeking integration into Russia; this belies the Abkhaz assertion that independence is their aspiration and the veiled acknowledgement that dependence on Russia is potentially a threat to their identity.

These layers have evolved over time and continue to evolve, with different aspects assuming greater potency and priority at different times. For third parties assessing potential for engagement, the analysis reveals the very different starting points that the parties to the conflict have as well as their differing sense of what negotiations could produce. From the mid-1990s, negotiations facilitated by the UN struggled to create a common agenda and too often became a crisis management mechanism rather than one

⁵ I am grateful to Laurence Broers for sharing his ideas on the layers of the conflict from his forthcoming article, 'Unpacking the meta-conflict: claims to sovereignty, self-determination and territorial integrity in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict'.

able to promote substantive negotiations. Looking at the aforementioned five layers, the focus of the negotiations was the Georgian-Abkhaz dispute over sovereignty, but these efforts were continually bedevilled by the Georgian-Russian relationship and the interplay of Russia and the Western powers. However, the way the UN positioned itself in relation to the parties – essentially supporting the outcome promoted by one of the parties – resulted in a structural flaw that undermined its ability to mediate an acceptable outcome. This should not, nevertheless, detract from the role successive UN Special Representatives played in maintaining a process with the parties and addressing flashpoints.

As the negotiations continued for more than a decade, it became clear that neither the Georgians nor the Abkhaz bought into the idea that negotiations would bring them closer to their goals or generate an outcome in which they would have confidence. The Abkhaz perceived the UN as a club of states, which, notwithstanding its attempts to facilitate a Geneva process, made the territorial integrity of Georgia a pre-condition and therefore excluded their desired outcome – recognition of the independence they declared in 1999. The Georgians had less and less faith in Russia's integrity as a mediator (and member of the UN Secretary General's Group of Friends) and thus the ability of the Friends to generate its desired outcome – restoration of its territorial integrity. With both questioning the integrity of the negotiations, over time the geopolitics behind the peace process enabled the parties to effectively export the ownership of the conflict's resolution to external sponsors – the US/EU in Georgia's case and Russia in Abkhazia's case. The lack of a common voice and vision from the powers behind the mediation turned the negotiations process into a contested space. With other international priorities taking precedence, the external sponsors drifted in and out of modes of urgency. Generally, they were comfortable to maintain what was perceived as a stable status quo (allowing the misconstrued notion of "frozen conflict" to take root – the conflict was not frozen, the process to find peace was) and at times pushing with more energy for resolution.

Whereas under President Shevardnadze there was a sense that Russia could be used to resolve the conflict in Georgia's favour, after two years in power President Saakashvili was convinced that Russia was the key obstacle to resolution. This led to a new emphasis on the fact that it was not a Georgian-Abkhaz conflict but rather a Georgian-Russian one. This was accompanied by a more resolute strategy to reframe Russia's role, so that it was not seen as a third party mediator but a third party power player perpetuating the conflict. In doing so, the Georgian strategy sought to internationalise the conflict and gain more sustained external support. However, a corollary was that the Abkhaz perceived this as a strategy to isolate and pressurise them. This led to an increased reliance on Russia and resistance to Georgia. From Georgia's perspective, external support proved to be less unconditional than anticipated. As Georgia and Russia descended into a spiral of provocative steps, the 2008 war became increasingly likely.

This short summary of drivers of and layers to the conflict and the peace process that were at work during the period of the Schlaining Process cannot do justice to their complexity. However, it seeks to highlight that the nature of identity is both rooted in the political context but also evolving in response to it, as something that drives the conflict, something that is utilised by the parties to represent themselves and their cases, and something that actors seeking to intervene have to grapple with. Understanding this shaped the way in which the Schlaining Process evolved. While multiple layers conditioned the scope for resolution, our analysis of what we had to offer was that we should not lose sight of the centrality of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. In particular, it was perceived as important not to allow resort to big power politics, or expectations of what big powers could do, to undermine the agency and ownership of the process by those most directly engaged in and affected by the conflict. While a process such as this could not substitute the role of a mediator, let alone formal negotiations, it could provide challenges in a separate space not impeded by perceptions of partiality or the constraints that the UN faced in having to balance the different positions of members of the Friends Group. The lack of status and leverage enabled the Schlaining Process to be a creative environment for participants to explore issues that, in other contexts, could have been given unwarranted value or importance before they had been adequately explored. In many ways, this situation was ideal for the evolution of a track of this sort.

4. Track II and Track 1.5?

There is sometimes a lack of clarity as to whether or not there is a distinction between the levels at which Track 1.5 or Track II initiatives operate. One definition of Track II, which addresses this issue, is that: it ‘can broadly be understood to mean unofficial, non-governmental interventions to prevent or resolve violent conflict. Such efforts can attempt to mediate conflict directly in the absence of official mediation, prepare the way for such official efforts or work alongside formal talks to improve the climate and contribute to a successful outcome to negotiations. The focus is on unofficial work in support of official diplomatic negotiations that address civil war, as distinct from other activities that may contribute to a peaceful society such as the people-to-people peacebuilding ... Our notion of track two includes what some refer to as “track one-and-a-half” initiatives, which might be more linked to official processes than other initiatives in the track two spectrum, but generally involve many of the same people. Drawing the line around what constitutes “the second track” is inevitably a subjective judgement.’⁶

The facilitators of the influential Inter-Tajik Dialogue process, who from 1993 to 2000 convened a series of 29 meetings, spoke of the way in which ‘its members and their

6 P. Dixon and M. Simmons [2006]. ‘The role of track two initiatives in Sudanese peace processes’ in P. Dixon and M. Simmons (Eds.) *Peace by piece: Addressing Sudan’s conflicts, Accord: An international review of peace initiatives*. London: Conciliation Resources, pp.60–61.

process have become a mind at work in the midst of a country making itself'.⁷ The process had four stages: deciding whether to risk talking with the adversary and ensuring that there was broad representation from conflict factions; mapping problems and relationships to get beyond blame and move into analysis as well as to create the space for pre-negotiations or negotiations; probing problems and relationships; and building scenarios and planning strategies that contain mutually reinforcing or complementary steps to create the momentum for overcoming obstacles.⁸

Hal Saunders, a former US diplomat who co-facilitated the process, commented on the “Sustained Dialogue” approach that ‘many conflicts are not ready for formal mediation and negotiation. Given that formal negotiations seldom explore the issues of identity, fear, historic grievance and injustice, which are vital to the resolution of a conflict, “Sustained Dialogue” provides a space where citizens can begin to change the relationships themselves’. The Inter-Tajik experience was one that the facilitators from Berghof and Conciliation Resources had in mind when embarking on the first meetings of what became known as the Schlaining Process.

The Schlaining Process was an initiative that involved those engaged in formal mediation processes (officials) in an informal context. Having participated in and helped facilitate initiatives that only involved civic actors as well (more often seen as Track II as opposed to Track 1.5), two observations stand out. Firstly, Track 1.5 is inherently linked to the macro-political process and while Track II might not be, it is still necessary for the facilitators to be acutely sensitive to these dynamics. Secondly, such processes, whatever we label them, are, however, about facilitated dialogue and not mediated negotiation. They are inherently about reframing opportunities and preparing the ground for more effective negotiations.

5. Evolution of the Schlaining Process

The Schlaining Process sought to provide a format that respected the vulnerabilities and insecurities of parties, while giving them space to explore ways in which to find more cooperative approaches to shared problems. There was an aspiration to influence the context and even the negotiations, but not an intention that the parties would start to negotiate within the framework. Having said this, the encounters between participants clearly involved negotiation in the sense that ideas were put on the table and pushed back and forth to test traction and resonance. The testing of ideas and examination of issues was a way to explore the degree to which they might be malleable in other contexts.

⁷ R. Slim and H. Saunders [2001]. ‘The Inter-Tajik Dialogue: from civil war towards civil society’ in K. Abdullaev and C. Barnes (Eds.) *Politics of compromise: The Tajikistan peace process, Accord: An international review of peace initiatives*. London: Conciliation Resources, p.44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.45–46.

Given the level of participation, these other contexts included formal negotiations between the parties.

The process grew out of capacity-building work with Abkhaz and Georgian NGOs in the 1990s. This work was initiated by Martin Schumer, a United Nations Volunteer (UNV) field worker. In working with civic activists in Sukhum/i and Tbilisi, Schumer responded to a perceived need to bring activists from across the Caucasian conflict divides together. A Caucasus-wide meeting on human rights and conflict resolution was organised by UNV and the Helsinki Citizens Assembly for NGO activists in Stadtschlaining at the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR) in the summer of 1996. Discussions between Schumer, the author (who was an invited presenter at this meeting) and a couple of the participants led to a week-long meeting of 22 Georgian and Abkhaz civil society actors (including one official and one member of parliament) in January 1997. UNV and Conciliation Resources then worked with the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes in Abkhazia to organise a series of civil society training activities for nascent NGO activists, journalists and students, but also drawing in young officials. Activities were also organised for journalists and IDPs in Georgia as a means to support activists there and to learn more about their context. Discussions were held with local partners about systematising involvement to create what was termed a “social infrastructure for peace”, linking community level work to the provision of opportunities for political dialogue.

Based on what we were learning and our assessment of what might be a constructive contribution, the facilitators of the January 1997 workshop⁹ were interested to explore whether or not a problem-solving approach could be introduced to interlocutors close to the respective seats of power. Local NGO partners also saw a need for dialogue encounters not to be restricted to civic activists, as had largely been the case to that date. A couple of civil society processes were developing at this time¹⁰ and Abkhaz partners in these were also involved in developing civil society capacity-building initiatives within their own community. They articulated the position that it was critical to reach beyond the narrow circle of NGO activists in order to have a wider social and political impact within their community. They also wanted to diminish their own vulnerability in the face of criticism that they were talking to Georgians at a time very soon after the conflict, when many resisted this.

A key Georgian interlocutor shared this analysis, adding that there was insufficient contact between officials and politicians across the divide. Furthermore, partners felt officials and politicians should be introduced to the rigorous debate experienced by civic

⁹ They comprised the author and Norbert Ropers from the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, with Martin Schumer providing essential guidance but choosing not to facilitate the workshop because of his role working in the communities.

¹⁰ One under the auspices of Paula Garb and the University of California, Irvine (http://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/pb_cs_abkhazia/); another under the auspices of the London-based NGO International Alert, whose process soon assumed a Caucasus-wide dimension, leading to the establishment of the Caucasus NGO Forum.

actors in informal processes, which they considered to be qualitatively different to those in formal processes, in which the officials found it easier to hide behind the smoke and mirrors of formal negotiations. The consensus was that what were termed as “meetings without ties” would be of benefit to political actors.

Both Georgian and Abkhaz partners were also concerned that the democratic space in their respective societies was limited and that the prospects for widening this space and resolving the conflict were linked. Democratisation was seen as being of value in its own right. However, broadening the democratic horizon would also create a more pluralistic environment for a more profound discussion of conflict-related issues. This thinking was unlikely to come from elites constrained by fears for wider security on the Abkhaz side and managing an increasingly dysfunctional state in the latter Shevardnadze years on the Georgian side. There were different perspectives within opposition circles in Georgia. Some argued that it was more critical to focus on building a democratic polity in Georgia and that only then would it be possible to turn to the resolution of the conflict. However, one of Conciliation Resources’ main partners was of the view that without integrating the resolution of the conflict into the democratic transformation that was necessary, the process of entrenching democracy would be hostage to the risk that the conflict could become part of a nationalist agenda that would undermine democracy.

Throughout 1999, Conciliation Resources conducted extensive discussions with civic actors, officials and politicians. In addition to making the case for the validity of a problem-solving approach to officials and politicians more accustomed to Soviet-style rhetoric and diktat, one of the key issues that had to be overcome was facilitating travel for the Abkhaz participants. They were in possession of Soviet passports, which were not regarded as valid documents to travel to Austria, the designated venue for the first workshop. This issue was resolved when the Austrian authorities agreed to issue *laissez-passer* documentation after agreement on this had been reached with the Russian and Georgian authorities.

While such technical issues were being resolved, political issues continued to be discussed. In addition to support from the Austrian Ambassador for the South Caucasus, the US Special Negotiator for Conflicts in the former Soviet Union spoke with President Shevardnadze on behalf of the organisers to encourage him to support the participation of senior Georgian officials in the first meeting. This external encouragement accompanied the efforts of Conciliation Resources’ key civil society partner in regard to Georgian participation. On the Abkhaz side, the persuasion primarily had to come from within. Abkhaz civic interlocutors navigated the sensitivities of senior Abkhaz officials, some of whom saw the utility of engagement. Even those who were in favour were nonetheless cautious – the most supportive stating to the author at that time that ‘we don’t want to engage in a solely Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, but we are open to you facilitating some informal contact’. Initially, the facilitators did explore the option of a wider dialogue framework to address the

desire expressed by the Abkhaz official. However, a structured dialogue involving too many parties risked negating the objective of direct Georgian-Abkhaz engagement. Therefore, the notion of the “prism” arose as a means to address this, as explained below.

Against this background, a more structured and sustained dialogue process commenced in 2000. From then until 2004, there were three five to six-day meetings a year. In 2004, tumultuous political developments on either side of the conflict divide allowed for only one meeting. In 2005–2006, there were three meetings each year, with the format evolving to three to four-day meetings because the more senior-level participants found it hard to have longer meetings.

The process of reframing the conflict from mid-2006 had an impact on the space for Track II initiatives. From mid to late 2006, as the Georgian authorities promoted a policy of internationalising the conflict (aimed at diminishing Russia’s influence), the focus on the Georgian-Russian dimension of the conflict had the effect of diminishing the space for Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue and isolating Abkhazia. Purely civil society processes were not formally prevented, but in official circles in Tbilisi there was a mood that they were less welcome. Therefore, civil society initiatives that sought to engage senior officials and politicians in cross-conflict work were increasingly regarded as unproductive. As a result of this dynamic, it became harder to convene meetings just at the point at which it seemed meetings were more necessary than at any previous time. In the summer of 2007, a meeting took place in London which included MPs but no government officials. However, two Georgian MPs from the governing party withdrew their participation three days prior to the workshop, indicating that they had been pressured to do so. Conciliation Resources perceived an urgent need for continued engagement, as the security context in the region deteriorated and rhetoric suggested a rise in tensions. Nevertheless, efforts through the spring and early summer of 2008 to convene further meetings did not meet with the support of sufficient constituencies within the Georgian authorities.¹¹ From the perspective of the facilitators, the lack of willingness to engage on the part of Georgian officials signalled the end of the Schlaining Process.

6. Structuring and sustaining the dialogue process

6.1. Objectives

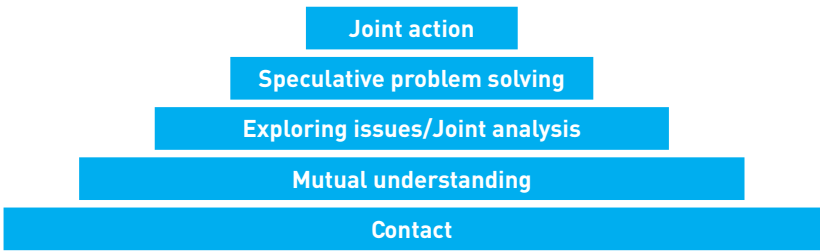
As conceived by the facilitators, the dialogue process had several objectives. A key aim was to provide an opportunity for influential actors on either side of the divide to engage with one another in a secure space. This objective sought, in part, to build relations

¹¹ In June 2008, a meeting of senior politicians and officials from the respective parties took place in Stockholm. Irakli Alasania, the Georgian President’s Special Representative on the conflict, initiated the meeting with the support of a Swedish academic. In discussion with several participants shortly after the meeting, they indicated that it served to confirm divergent positions that were being entrenched during the summer of 2008.

between decision makers across the divide as well as among those influencing decision makers. It also aimed to provide a forum in which, over time, analytical thinking could take place and through speculative problem solving feed new ideas into the formal process. Addressing the absence of communication across the divide in the aftermath of war was not just about informing the formal process; it also aimed to create a space to challenge stereotypes that were being entrenched and to see ideas percolate into the public domain. This recognised the need for change in both contexts – official and public.

From the outset, the facilitators conceived of a series of interlocking phases, represented in the diagram below.¹²

Figure 1: Key interlocking phases in the dialogue process



These phases were not conceived of as mutually exclusive steps nor as engagement restricted to the Schlaining Process. While each subsequent phase was built on the previous phase, this did not mean that more work was not required to consolidate the previous phase, nor that phases could not be skipped: the phases outlined were not presented as a precise continuum, but as an ongoing mutually reinforcing process. This pattern of thinking linked the idea of the dialogue process as part of a multi-dimensional approach. An important element of this was recognising that effective work across the divide would be more productive when built on single community work. An assumption was that in order to have confidence to engage on sensitive issues with interlocutors across the divide, it would be necessary for the actors seeking to do so to have roots in their own community. This would provide them with credibility and mean that the ideas and issues they were representing in the dialogue would be reflective of concerns in their own society. Conciliation Resources therefore facilitated a range of activities with civil society and political actors on either side of the divide as well as bridging the divide.¹³ These efforts were undertaken in a context in which other actors engaged in

¹² C. McCartney (1986). 'Human Rights Education' in Northern Ireland Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights, *11th Annual Report*. London: HMSO.

¹³ See Conciliation Resources' website for information on some of these ongoing activities and reports of initiatives, available at <http://www.c-r.org>.

activities, and at times there was close cooperation between different civil society actors. Cumulatively, this contributed to a nascent “social infrastructure for peace”.

6.2. Getting started – the prism

In order to get the process started, the facilitators needed to achieve the “buy-in” of senior interlocutors. There was scepticism about what dialogue could offer, and it was important to present a structured rather than open-ended format with which they would feel comfortable. This scepticism, in part, came from a hesitancy to discuss their own situations because this could have exposed vulnerabilities. The facilitators therefore decided to introduce thinking from different contexts, both regional and thematic. This had both a substantive rationale (to introduce new perspectives) but also a political one (to dilute emphasis on the Georgian-Abkhaz dynamic, which some participants were wary of discussing at the outset). The facilitators initially discussed the idea of bringing interlocutors from several conflicts together. However, they recognised that this would be a logistical nightmare as well as such a dilution of the Georgian-Abkhaz focus as to comprehensively change the objective. Therefore, the notion of a prism was devised: experts or participants from another conflict zone would be invited to take part in the first days of the workshop so that it was not solely a Georgian-Abkhaz meeting but also a forum to share their perspectives and thereby support the Georgians and Abkhaz to reflect from a different perspective on their own experience. For the first workshop, two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Northern Ireland – one from the Ulster Unionist Party and one from the Social Democratic Labour Party – were invited. However, prospective participants had also indicated that there would be an interest to have a thematic focus as well as a conflict prism. As a result, an expert on the application of sanctions was also invited to attend for one day in the middle of the workshop.

As it transpired, the presence of these additional resource people, and especially the Northern Ireland MLAs, helped save the process when on the eve of the workshop the Georgian State Minister unexpectedly sent an additional participant who had not been agreed upon. The participant was a senior political figure from the community of IDPs and the Abkhaz threatened withdrawal – partly because he was not an agreed participant and partly because he was a figure of prominence in IDP political circles. The issue of IDP participation, which the Abkhaz authorities were very reluctant to entertain, had in fact been circumvented by the presence of a young IDP who worked for the Two-sided Coordination Commission, which had been supportive in preparing the workshop. The problem was the *fait accompli* of an unannounced arrival – despite the fact that the individual was known and respected by most of the Abkhaz participants. Indeed, he was better known among the Abkhaz participants than among the Georgian participants.

The workshop opened with the participants sitting in separate rooms discussing how to respond to the imminent arrival, later that day, of the additional participant.

In their separate rooms, they reviewed their options and then came together to develop a joint solution: to have a “non-dialogue” workshop – a meeting not discussing the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict but other conflict-related issues, starting with Northern Ireland. This was a ruse to enable the Abkhaz participants to say that they had been at an international seminar should there be criticism that they had been present with a leading IDP politician. It was also a means for the Georgians to save face, knowing that the near collapse of the meeting had emanated from the impromptu arrival at the instigation of Tbilisi.¹⁴ The fact that the workshop was effectively transformed into an academic seminar on issues beyond Georgian-Abkhaz relations (although informally the participants were exploring their own issues) also gave the parties the confidence that the facilitators were not pushing a separate agenda, but rather giving the parties the space to form their own view and agenda about the process. This was a crucial confidence-building step for the process.

The prism remained an introductory part of each workshop (usually for up to two days) for the first two years. This was partly due to the structure it provided (thereby increasing participants’ comfort), partly because of its symbolic or political value to the Abkhaz, but increasingly because of the substantive comparative contribution that was made. This enabled the parties to run their own story through the experience of another conflict. In the first four workshops, political actors representing different parties to the conflicts in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Sri Lanka and Cyprus – each being conflicts with relevant comparative elements – presented the prism. The fifth prism was the issue of dealing with the past seen from the perspective of a South African who had worked on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission there. This provided an effective introduction to the theme of reconciliation that had persistently bubbled beneath the surface of debates but with which it was hard to grapple. This difficulty was perhaps due to the participants’ reluctance to let go of positions that they felt bolstered their respective interests. It was also a reflection of the deep challenge presented by the need to look critically at the conduct of their sides in the lead up to war and during the war. To this day, the divergent narratives of the conflict parties and their societies remain a fundamental issue separating them.

6.3. From prism to politics

Following the fifth workshop, the process could have gone in different directions – deepening the comparative and thematic issues that were undoubtedly helping each of the workshops. On the one hand, the participants could be eased into the critical issues pertinent to their own situation; on the other hand, they could choose to pursue a

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the arrival of this individual was a response by the then State Minister to pressure exerted on him by representatives of the Government-in-Exile, which felt excluded from the meeting and therefore sought to disrupt it through public critique. The new arrival was an adviser to the State Minister but was not close to the head of the Government-in-Exile. Therefore, his participation protected the State Minister and deflected the Government-in-Exile’s critique.

dialogue explicitly and solely focused on the Georgian-Abkhaz dynamic. To an extent, the path was becoming clearer as the participants increasingly wanted to focus on their own experience and a more meaningful dialogue. Events in the Kodori Gorge in November 2001, as preparations were being made for the sixth workshop, decided the course. A period of increased tensions almost led to a resumption of hostilities. As a result, up until 10 days before the workshop, there was no confirmation of participation. On the one hand, the organisers did not want to commit additional funds to flying in “prism” resource people when it was far from certain that the workshop would happen; on the other hand, more decisively, it was clear that if the workshop happened, it would need to focus on the critical moment at hand.

The workshop that ensued in December 2001 was important on a number of levels. Firstly, it brought the participants into their most rigorous critical dialogue to date, allowing them to utilise the safe space of the forum to explore why hostilities almost resumed. This enabled them to begin a more creative discussion about how to avoid such a scenario in the future. This paved the way for considerably more speculative problem solving in the subsequent workshops. Secondly, Dieter Boden, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (UNSRSG) availed of the opportunity of the workshop being in Berlin, where he was at the time, to come to speak to a group of senior actors from the respective sides about a UN plan that was being devised to structure future negotiations. The plan, which became known as the Boden Document, was instigated at the request of the Group of Friends. However, it proved controversial for the Abkhaz because it precluded their desired outcome and therefore they refused to receive it. In what was a period of heightened tension, Ambassador Boden conducted a two-hour question and answer session with the participants. This allowed him to convey his ideas and impress the participants with the integrity of his thinking. While the wider context did not allow a resumption of the negotiation format, the conduct of the workshop at this time was a significant statement of intent to talk on the part of the parties.

The idea of using prisms to reflect on one’s conflict from a different angle was still used after the fifth workshop, but in a less formal way. Speakers from other conflict zones were no longer invited; instead, the facilitators occasionally interjected structured mini-sessions about other conflicts. With more structured comparative insight being provided in other contexts, the Schlaining Process became much more focused on the dialogue between the parties.¹⁵

The presence of Ambassador Boden at the workshop also highlighted another important issue worth noting: the need to create communications channels with the mediators of

¹⁵ In 2002, Conciliation Resources organised three study visits to Northern Ireland for political and civic actors from the two sides. See its report at <http://www.c-r.org/resources/occasional-papers/study-visit-reflections.php>. Further study visits organised by Conciliation Resources, Berghof, Alert and others to other conflict regions over subsequent years have continued to generate significant comparative insight.

the formal process. The facilitators regularly met with the UNSRSG and senior UN staff in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i. On several occasions, the facilitators were invited to travel to New York to brief representatives of the UN Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA) and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO); on one occasion, they organised a brainstorming meeting for the SRSG in London. These interactions, together with regular meetings with representatives of the Group of Friends, enabled the facilitators to better understand the constraints impacting on the formal process and to share insights from the Schlaining Process. The clearest element of the relationship between processes was the involvement of some of the same participants in both tracks. Those who did participate in both credited the Schlaining Process with providing an environment in which informality allowed issues to be explored in different ways than in the official process, which rarely had the luxury to explore issues in creative or unorthodox ways. Ambassador Boden's participation in the workshop in Berlin was one of two occasions when an external diplomatic actor took part in the workshops. There were, however, other occasions when the facilitators organised meetings between participants and diplomats in the countries where the workshops took place as a means to better inform these diplomats and expose the participants to a wider circle of diplomatic approaches.

6.4. Rolling planning and facilitation

In order to provide a forum that could meet the above-stated objectives, a very elicitive style of facilitation evolved – this entailed listening to the participants and constructing agendas for discussion around their needs. A rolling planning approach was part of the process from the outset, although as indicated above, to ensure the participants were comfortable, the very first workshops were more structured. The facilitators did not arrive at workshops with set models to share, but rather constructed the content of the workshop by being aware in advance what the parties were emphasising about their needs and priorities. In addition, space was provided at the outset of each workshop for the participants to highlight the issues that were currently important to them. Indeed, the custom evolved that the first day would be a time for the participants to scrutinise one another's analysis of the context; the facilitators would then use this analysis to identify those issues that might lend themselves to a more tractable discussion and those that were stuck but in need of reframing. The approach demanded intense reflection at the end of each day in a facilitators' team meeting. The facilitators would then conceptualise a structure for the ensuing days or day, often delegating one or other facilitator to lead in the building of particular frameworks to facilitate the discussion.

It was important that the facilitators had a close relationship, often working together in other contexts as well. As a result, there was an almost intuitive interaction. The process was made possible by the marriage of a team of facilitators that contained detailed contextual knowledge, broad experience of other contexts and conflict transformation

concepts that could be interjected at appropriate moments. Underpinning this was a willingness, indeed an eagerness, to hear how the participants processed their context and experience and then a desire to find ways to feed this back to them from different perspectives. The facilitators' roles also evolved over time: the author had more experience of the region and, in the first phase of the process, was responsible for getting the buy-in of the parties and linking the discussions in the workshops back to the political and civil societies on either side in order to maintain the buy-in. Norbert Ropers and Clem McCartney had more conceptual and facilitation experience and led the dialogue process. Over time, the author's role changed, becoming more prominent in the direct facilitation, especially after Norbert Ropers withdrew from the process to concentrate on a substantial initiative in Sri Lanka. Members of the wider team, who started as process observers, feeding ideas into the detailed team discussions at the end of each day, began to play roles in facilitating smaller working group sessions and subsequently full sessions. The collective inputs of the team were critical – pushing and prodding our respective ideas and acting as safety nets for insights that escaped one or other of us.

The facilitators sought to provide a confidential space in which participants could exchange information, undertake joint analysis of key issues and systematically reflect on possible scenarios. Information exchange was critical – in the post-war period, many of the participants' assumptions about the other side were either dated, viewed through rose-tinted glasses, or seen through lenses which imposed antagonism that for some was needed to justify post-war political agendas relating to their own constituencies. However well the participants thought they knew one another and “the other side”, the workshops persistently acted to dismantle stereotypes and misconstrued illusions. Joint analysis was crucial in regard to understanding the conflict itself, the process of attempts to resolve it and the opportunities that could be seized. The importance of this in a conflict resolution process is critical, given that the lack of a shared understanding of the conflict is something that severely impedes the possibilities for parties to the conflict to find mutually acceptable outcomes. Scenario building – exploring what the desired or likely context could be in a number of years' time – was intended to generate fresh perspectives on situations that could arise, in contexts defined by the participants themselves.

In creating the space for interactive engagement, the facilitators aimed to maintain the dynamic of debate, being sensitive to bottlenecks that arose in specific discussions and judging when to push participants or the group as a collective. At times, there were moods of avoidance in regard to tough issues, either from one or other side or from the group as a whole. If the participants were not testing each other, the facilitators had to judge whether or not to introduce an element of challenge, or whether there were genuine reasons relating to politics or emotion that meant an issue was best left for the moment and returned to in a different way at a later point. Likewise, debates sometimes reached an impasse and the facilitators had to decide whether it was worth allowing a seemingly stuck discourse to continue and find its own way out, or whether it was better to bring it to a conclusion.

At times, a change of method was a way to introduce a new dynamic and revitalise a stalemated discussion. Maintaining the tempo and managing the list of speakers involved ensuring that all had the opportunity to express their views, while trying to avoid deference that could slip in, be it in relation to gender or the political status of some participants. At the same time, it was important to judge when the flow of the debate needed a change in the order of speakers and whether someone's seemingly urgent interjection should be heard. What would this mean to the group dynamic and other participants' sense that they were being given a fair voice? Often the group could self-regulate but not always. In general, the participants were very trusting of the facilitators and the different tools and methods that were introduced to maintain the flow of discussion.

In addition to plenary discussions in which all participants could take part, from the beginning of the process the facilitators introduced small working groups to facilitate more intimate discussion. The working groups were initially single community. This allowed participants to reflect on their own situation in a more secure space, without "the other", before regrouping in plenary. At the third workshop, mixed working groups were instituted. Much reflection was given as to whether or not the participants would respond constructively to this. Over time, however, the participants became very comfortable and familiar with this style of work, which allowed them to test issues and one another. These working groups were sometimes moderated by one of the facilitators or one of the extended team members. However, more often than not, the participants were given the space to interrogate issues without any external actors present. Reporting back to the plenary became a time for ideas to be articulated and scrutinised beyond the initial circle of those who had discussed them. This perhaps gave participants a sense of how ideas might then be transferred to other forums on return home.

The object of this style of discourse and facilitation was not to generate specific outcomes or agreements, but rather insights that could inform the search for these outcomes in other contexts, such as formal negotiations, whose participants had the legitimacy to endorse them. The facilitators regarded this as a forum to stimulate thinking that would be fed back into the respective political communities and influence engagement in the formal process.

6.5. A dynamic phase of dialogue – influenced by political change

As noted earlier, the process evolved in content and character. In 2002 and 2003, the workshops took on an increasingly analytical and penetrating character. The participants became increasingly familiar with one another; the political context was fluid as the Shevardnadze regime stagnated and it was clear that something had to change; and perhaps also because Conciliation Resources' wider engagement was deepening on either side of the divide, with a greater breadth and depth of engagement (accompanied by that of other civic actors) creating some momentum.

The Rose Revolution in November 2003 acted as a catalyst of change in many ways and inevitably impacted on the Schlaining Process. A meeting was due to take place in mid-December, six weeks after the early November election in Georgia that sparked the change of regime. Despite the very fluid context, the organisers remained in touch with key interlocutors. Both sides maintained expressions of interest to convene the meeting. Georgian partners and leading participants who had committed to the meeting wanted to convey to the Abkhaz their excitement at the change they were witnessing in Georgia and to put relations on a new and positive footing. Abkhaz partners and senior officials saw the meeting as an opportunity to get a firsthand account of what was happening in Georgia; the recent events were generating considerable concern in Abkhazia, where there had been a degree of comfort with the “devil they knew” as opposed to the less familiar constellation of actors now coming to power.

The discussions in the workshop proved to be very frank. The Abkhaz participants in essence challenged the Georgians to say what would be new and in what way a different approach to the conflict could prevail. In many ways, it was too early for Georgian participants to talk coherently about a different approach; instead, what they sought to convey was a different vision of Georgia, although this was a vague and intuitive expression rather than one that was fully articulated. Nonetheless, there were some precise formulations. Over the year prior to the December 2003 workshop, a couple of the Georgian participants had been involved in drafting a detailed concept note articulating a new relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia. This process is detailed below, but they saw the workshop as an opportunity to present the key ideas to the Abkhaz participants and gauge their reaction. This and the wider context made for an exciting meeting. Something of this mood continued through to the next workshop in May 2004, when the Georgian Minister for Conflict Resolution and other senior figures participated. However, coming as it did only days after the removal of Aslan Abashidze from power in Batumi, the May workshop found key Georgian participants on the crest of a wave and not so open to the caution that Abkhaz participants were urging upon them that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were very different cases from Ajara.

Hostilities in South Ossetia in the summer of 2004, and the protracted and conflictual Abkhaz presidential election process in the autumn and winter of 2004–2005, meant that it was not until April 2005 that another workshop was convened. By this point, a more sober mood had descended over the Georgian euphoria stimulated by the Rose Revolution. At the same time, the Abkhaz had assumed more confidence in the wake of their presidential election, which, despite requiring mediation from Moscow, saw a candidate prevail who had not been Moscow’s choice.

These developments required the facilitators to constantly refresh their analysis, in consultation with civil society partners, and to build new relationships with changing political elites. The process of doing this contributed to the deepening of discussion during

the meetings in 2005 and 2006. The Georgian President's Special Representative himself took part in a couple of meetings in 2005. He revealed an ability to convey empathy to the Abkhaz in a way that suggested there was an openness to new approaches. In the workshops, the conversation started to analyse future options. This evolution in the process coincided with the development of the "Key to the Future" and the "Road Map", respectively Abkhaz and Georgian documents. Contributing authors of both these documents took part in Schlaining meetings in 2004–2006. In June 2006, these respective visions were examined side by side by participants in the 18th workshop. They critiqued the plans and found many shortcomings; for all their limitations, however, they were perceived by participants to articulate a space in which cooperative options for the future could be identified. This analytical optimism was short lived. Six weeks after the workshop, a new set of "Kodor/i events" heralded an apparent triumph of hawks over doves in the Georgian strategy for progressing the conflict resolution process. Thereafter, the space for both informal and formal engagement between officials and politicians from the two sides narrowed. Civil society engagement did not wield sufficient leverage to redirect the oncoming juggernaut of deeper estrangement and resumed hostilities that culminated in the August events of 2008.

6.6. The role of insiders and partners

As outlined above, the Schlaining Process evolved out of discussions between the UNV/Conciliation Resources/Berghof team and Abkhaz and Georgian civil society actors between 1997 and 2000. The early discussions that developed the vision of the process took place in bilateral frameworks between the external facilitators talking separately with Abkhaz and Georgian partners – the opportunities to meet altogether were few. Over time, as the process evolved, the workshops themselves provided a space in which to discuss collectively how to proceed, what sensitivities existed, whether or not the process was having an impact, and how to engage with the conflict dynamic and the wider societies. The "outsiders" brought the bridging opportunity, a sense of solidarity in addressing very challenging issues, insights from other contexts, a willingness to critique and push colleagues out of their comfort zones, and access to resources to enable the meetings to occur. The "insiders" were, however, the critical interlocutors navigating the psychological and political minefields of their respective societies.

The process was nurtured by relationships that call to mind the notion of "insider partial and outsider impartial" actors. This idea was developed by John Paul Lederach, reflecting on his experience in Nicaragua. Lederach realised that his task as an outside impartial mediator would not have been possible without close working relationships with insiders close to the factions with which he was working, but committed to the peace process. Acknowledging the importance of insiders to the facilitation process points to the importance of culture and context in peacemaking, as well as the power (and rightful ownership) of agency from within. But it also highlights the secondary role and limitations of an external mediator/facilitator, no matter how experienced and skilled she or he might be.

As an external third party, it is critical to appreciate the cultural context of the society or societies in which the intervention is being made. Cultural difference can be difficult to penetrate and it is important to avoid being deceived by first impressions or to reach hasty conclusions. For example, in the Schlaining Process, Georgians and Abkhaz got on well at the margins of the workshops, even during the sessions: they would tell jokes, reminisce, eat and drink together, assuming specific cultural patterns, which at times needed to be interpreted for the facilitators. Participants from both sides, however, would be clear that this cultural empathy should not disguise the very real political interests dividing them. Partners, the insider facilitators, were important in providing reference points to help the external facilitators navigate this.

Yet, it is also important not to get bogged down in socio-cultural issues. In all conflicts, the cultural patterns and conflicting perceptions of parties are crucial, and this demands sensitively expanding one's access points within a society. It also necessitates recognition that the third party is not by definition trusted, and there might be many tensions around the role of an outsider seeking to facilitate change. Confidence has to be gained through acting in good faith, but at the same time the parties might have different perspectives of what this means because of their different perceptions of the conflict – a third party has to enter into the motivations and rationale of the parties with which it is working, rather than blithely impose an external value system. This makes the relationship with trusted insiders critically important.

The insiders were facilitators within their own societies, but in terms of the process they acted as critical connectors. They made connections between participants as well as with the facilitators. They acted to bridge the gap between elite negotiations and other levels of social organisation, from the grassroots up. They brought “real-life” concerns to outside facilitators, conveying perceptions, reactions, demands and grievances from ordinary people – something that local elite negotiators often failed to do, given that they were politically tied to particular outcomes or averse to the risks that might be implicit in change and compromise. In the case of the Schlaining Process, key individuals from either side of the conflict divide accompanied the process throughout. They constantly excavated the issues at the root of the conflict that impeded progress in peacemaking. They challenged the thinking of the facilitators as well as political actors within their own communities, “mediating” discourse back into their societies. In this context, they were exploring the transformation of relations within their own societies as well as across the divide. Such connectors can operate as individuals but, more often than not, they need institutional backing or to be affiliated to an institution – educational, local/central government, religious or non-governmental. This is, in part, for the logistical support that is required but also for the moral and intellectual sounding board that is required to reflect on the efficacy of such work, which can be an isolating process.

The partners were performing mediatory tasks with no presumption that they were in fact mediators. They performed a task of horizontal mediation as trusted individuals who appreciate sensitivities within their own community and are able to mediate the interests of other members (individual or group) with competing agendas. At the same time, they acted as vertical mediators, working back and forth between the elite and the community levels. In some of these tasks, the external partners were able to play support and indeed occasionally lead roles – be it in holding meetings with government ministers on both sides or with formal mediators (the UNSRSG and representatives of the Friends Group). Sometimes, the external facilitators would meet with government representatives separately; in fact, this increasingly became the trend as the process progressed, because the insider connectors often felt that they needed to maintain separate relations with these political actors in an increasingly complex political landscape and they encouraged the facilitators to develop credible relationships with these governmental and political interlocutors. Different agendas were at play: a Georgian partner might meet a minister to discuss the Schlaining Process, or to discuss a separate issue relating to the conflict/peace process or to wider processes of change. A similar process was underway with the Abkhaz partners. In addition to the vertical dynamic, the partners (inside and outside) also engaged with the wider community in a range of initiatives, again separately or jointly – sometimes as part of what the facilitators saw as contributing to the development of the “infrastructure for peace” but also as part of the insiders’ efforts to promote the transformation of their respective societies.

It was important for the facilitators to be seen as independent of the partners and to elicit analysis from a wide range of interlocutors – both in civil society and among political and governmental circles. As the process evolved, one element of this was that the facilitators began to engage in a process of shuttle analysis with politicians and experts on either side. Frequent trips were made back and forth, sharing analysis. This helped to promote discussion, often in one-to-one meetings, about strategies being pursued by the parties and how they might be perceived on the other side. This both helped to inform the content of each workshop and also fed ideas back to official interlocutors, who knew that the facilitators were having parallel discussions with counterparts on the other side.

Working with the partners, it became clear that an insider connector does not need to be impartial but does need to be committed to the peace process. The insider connectors were holding on to their principles and goals, but also looking at how these interacted and evolved in relation to a changing context: for them, the process was not designed to compromise on their objectives. Throughout the Schlaining Process, it was clear that the Abkhaz partners held firmly to their aspiration for the recognition of an independent Abkhazia; meanwhile, the Georgian partners maintained a clear articulation of a territorially integral Georgia in which Abkhazia would have a respected role. What was critical was that they did not demand of the external facilitators that they commit to the objectives of one or other party; rather, they required the facilitators to abstain from

taking a position on the outcome of the conflict and to provide the political, intellectual and psychological space for engagement in an open dialogue that could support the parties in reframing what could be a mutually acceptable and advantageous outcome.

To navigate such a role in politically fraught contexts, an insider connector needs to have empathy and to be creative, assertive, honest and brave. The connectors were at times accused of compromising the aspiration of their community. As a result, they had to constantly balance their belief in change within their own communities with their belief that cross-conflict engagement did not undermine their goals. For the process to be rooted in the respective societies and to have traction with the political debates in both elite and civil society circles, these insiders needed to be respected across political and sectoral divides. In the Schlaining Process, this was something that changed over time: the insiders were actors in the political life of their own communities – the Schlaining Process was one vehicle for them to be so, but certainly not the only one. As the politics of the decade evolved, the reception for civil society actors to play their respective roles also evolved. This impacted on the ability of the individuals to be trusted to play credible, impartial roles.

While the partners did not lose their impartiality in regard to their views on the conflict transformation process, they were perceived as increasingly engaged, and thus partial, in regard to the internal processes of change within their respective polities. This had an impact on the way in which they were seen as actors able to convey insights from the Schlaining Process vertically and horizontally. Bringing an authentic voice to their work, they established credibility individually and collectively within their communities. But there is no doubt that this changed, as did the close access that some had to political elites. This change also had an impact on the way in which the external facilitators were seen. Combining the multiple roles – facilitating dialogue and supporting processes of internal social and political change – had clearly been essential to the credibility of the Schlaining Process at its outset. Over time, however, it began to colour perceptions of the facilitators as well as the insider connectors. For critical constituencies, in particular among senior figures within the Georgian government, this ultimately undermined the credibility of the process.

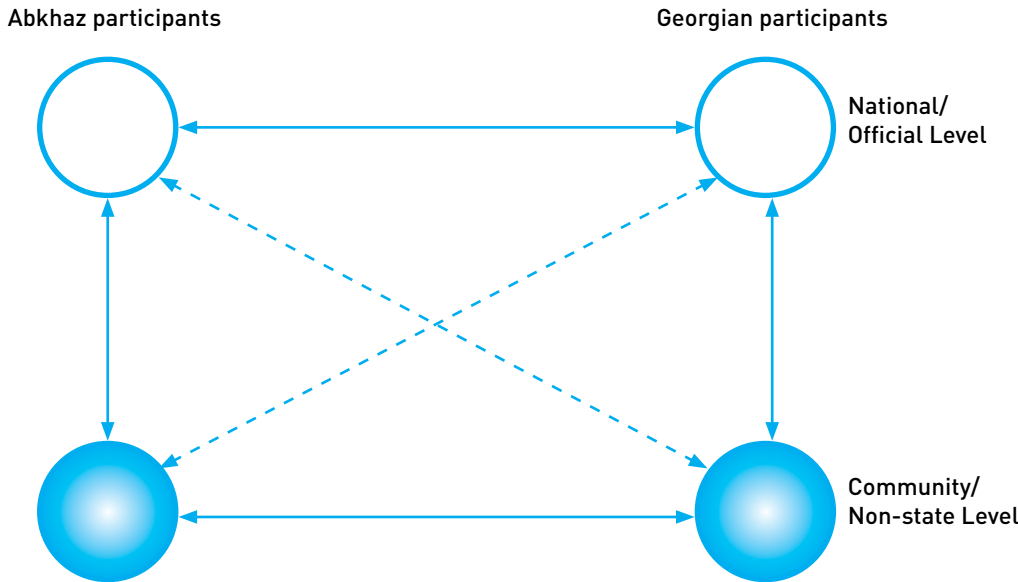
Language is another cultural factor that should not be ignored in undertaking such a process. Undoubtedly, language knowledge is an important issue for facilitators and participants alike. The Schlaining Process operated in Russian – a *lingua franca* for most participants, but not the first language for all and not the first language for the facilitators, although there was knowledge of Russian in the facilitation team. For the facilitators, interpretation was crucial. It was of great importance that a trusted team of interpreters was integrated into the process, having the confidence of facilitators and participants. Knowledge of language is a reflection of insight into a culture and therefore an ability to understand issues from the perspective of those with whom a facilitator is interacting. An insider facilitator has a far greater degree of access to this emotional and political hinterland.

Conversely, the intimacy can serve as a major constraint because of the degree of connection. This leads to a crucial dimension of the work of insider facilitators: being able to connect and at the same time retaining the capacity to detach themselves. Likewise, the facilitators had to navigate the evolution of their personal relations with colleagues from either side with whom close relations were developed over an extended period, and with the ability to remain detached and reflective concerning the meaning of the engagement.

6.7. Whom to invite - the participants

Critical to the purpose of a dialogue process is the issue of who should take part. The partners – representatives of local NGOs and civil society activists – played an essential role in the selection of participants. Together with the facilitators, the partners defined one of the objectives of the process as bringing together senior officials, politicians and public figures (civil society activists included) in order to create a dialogue across the divide as well as within the different communities, as represented in the figure below.

Figure 2: Representation of dialogue between different types of participants



A type of rotating participation evolved to build upon past experience and to widen the circle of those engaged. This expanded exposure to the nature of the dialogue and its outcomes. At the same time, it introduced new figures as and when they assumed appropriate office or became influential within their respective societies. There was a dilemma in that new participants had not gone through earlier stages of analysis – in the first few workshops,

there was extensive analysis of needs and fears, interests and positions, which provided those who participated with a common lexicon and framework on which to build their subsequent joint analysis. These discussions tended to reappear in later workshops but often in different forms and building upon earlier analysis. Therefore, new participants sometimes felt catapulted into an ongoing discussion and set of relationships. While efforts were made to engage prospective participants in advance of workshops and to brief them about the process that they were going to embark on, this was rarely a sufficient introduction. As a result, some new participants integrated into the dialogue more easily than others. Over 100 people participated in the 20 workshops. Some of the participants were influential decision makers, others had responsibility for advising decision makers at the highest level. Some were opinion-formers, and on occasion people were invited for symbolic reasons, relating to their status or to reach out to a particular constituency perceived as being worthy of integrating. These explicit choices were calculated through discussion with partners, based on the balance of participants from the respective sides and the internal politics at any given time. Over time, an increasing number of ministers and parliamentarians took part, although from the first meeting there were deputy ministers, senior presidential advisers and parliamentarians.

In selecting participants, Conciliation Resources consulted widely: with civil society partners, officials/ministers responsible for the peace process and other political actors with influence. Lists of potential participants emerged. The facilitators took responsibility for the list but always informed the respective sides in advance to ensure there was no strong opposition to any individual's participation. The Georgian Minister for Emergency Situations (subsequently the Minister for Conflict Resolution) and the de facto Abkhaz Foreign Minister were the key interlocutors in this regard. A critical issue was to ensure that someone was not invited by the facilitators only to be rejected by the other side – thus, before issuing invitations, confirmation was sought from the other side. We were conscious of the need to build and nurture relations with the respective government representatives dealing with the peace process so that we could have frank conversations about the list of participants and the rationale for inviting certain individuals (as well as being able to have frank discussions about the substantive issues discussed in the process). Approaching participant selection in a consensual way meant that, over time, the participation of certain individuals who represented important constituencies, which were perceived as unpalatable, became feasible. This was particularly relevant in regard to the participation of IDP representatives and especially those with links to the Government-in-Exile. As indicated above, the participation of one such individual almost derailed the first meeting. Subsequently, it was possible to involve an individual who was a member of the Government-in-Exile, but who was explicitly invited in his capacity as a participant in the Two-Sided Coordination Commission. The individual in question did not use his participation to compromise the Abkhaz; over time, this allowed the Abkhaz to be more flexible about the participation of other IDPs.

Selection of participants was driven by a number of factors. An individual's relation to the conflict and peace process was always paramount. Their capacity to engage with the "other" was also important. We wanted to invite people who had something to say and who reflected what we perceived, through our joint analysis with partners, to be important dimensions of thinking regarding the conflict, peace process and the aspirations of the respective parties. The relevance of what they had to say and our judgement as to whether they would be able to listen was accompanied by a critical need to include people who either were or had access to decision makers on either side and who would thereby feed ideas back into the political discourse of their respective sides.

Another important factor was the politics of the situation – people were invited on the basis of their relation to the political process within their own communities. We sought to achieve a balance between different forces within the respective political communities – government and opposition, official and civil society. This was clearly a different approach from the formal process, which was oriented around bringing together the representatives of those wielding power on the respective sides in order to reach an agreement. In Track II, it was feasible to bring together different voices from within the respective communities – in addition to government and official actors, this might mean opposition, civil society or minority voices and often people closer to the communities in conflict. A corollary was that the format could promote improved interaction between officials and civil society actors. Although those in positions of authority did not always welcome the fact that a diversity of opinion was given a platform, the meetings did at times offer one of the few channels of communication between government and opposition representatives from the Abkhaz side.

At the outset of the process in 2000, there was great caution on the part of the Abkhaz. Although there was a willingness to see officials, politicians and civic actors participate together, there was no space for representatives of the nascent opposition. This evolved over time such that, by the fifth workshop, there was more flexibility on the Abkhaz side, which became more restrictive during the Kodori crisis in 2001 and more relaxed thereafter. In the first few years of the process, the Georgian authorities were considerably more relaxed regarding the participation of opposition politicians or thinkers alongside senior government representatives, including the minister responsible for the conduct of the peace process and the President's special representative for the negotiations. However, by the end of 2006, the situation reversed in that the Georgian authorities strove to exert greater conformity on the composition of the participants; the Abkhaz, on the other hand, were much more comfortable seeing opposition figures take part. This resetting of the scales was part of the reframing of the Georgian government's overall approach to the conflict resolution process: it wanted greater internationalisation, but it also wanted greater conformity of voice so that a consistent line could be presented. This reflected impatience with the peace process as a whole. It also pointed to a perception that dialogue workshops, which some in government called "talking shops", were not leading to desired outcomes. This context was critical to Conciliation Resources reluctantly recognising that there was less and less scope for

a dialogue process engaging political elites in reframing approaches that could challenge increasingly entrenched positions.

Whether to work with moderates or hardliners was also central to the “who” issue. While it was deemed important to invite people who wanted to engage, it was also important to involve those who had potential vetoes or were linked to actors in society who did. This evolved over time: at the outset, it was especially important to have those who wanted to engage in order to get the process going; but it was also important to have people who represented the thinking of their political communities – otherwise, the process would not have been credible. As the process developed momentum, it then became easier to bring on board those who presented greater obstacles. A balance was needed in that if a veto managed to disrupt dialogue, then the process could not continue; but if the dialogue was too comfortable, then it was not relevant. For the credibility of the process, it was important to work with a range of actors. In the Schlaining Process, it was deemed necessary to create a space in which people could talk and challenge one another; but it was also important to have a space in which the dialogue could continue and not be disrupted by intransigent behaviour, as opposed to intransigent opinions and interests. This did not mean that people with strong views were not invited, but rather that such people who nonetheless saw the value of engagement were. The facilitators also recognised that the nature of the track was such that it was not a shadow environment for the formal process. Therefore, it was feasible to have more heterogeneous participant compositions – had the process been one that was more integral to the official process, then it would have been necessary to have participants who reflected the official line rather than participants who could open up thinking and cross this line.

As facilitators, we continuously reflected on the representativeness of the participants. It was important to achieve a balance between different forces within the respective political communities – government and opposition, politicians, officials and civic actors. Given the informal nature of the track two process, the participants were not being asked to play an official role in representing their society: we wanted them to reflect the society and its interests; but we did not want to put them in a context in which they had to be responsible for or formally accountable to the society – although the likelihood was that they might well feel they were. However, they were not being asked to deliver an outcome in the way that participants in a formal process would be expected to. We refrained from calling the groups “delegations”: people were invited to participate in their individual capacity and because they performed functionally relevant roles in relation to the peace process. To call them delegations would have assumed a more formal character than the facilitators, the respective authorities or our NGO partners considered appropriate – although sometimes the participants did see themselves as such and did behave as such. This was more the case when the participants were a more homogeneous group, as was the case with the Abkhaz at the outset of the process and the Georgians for the last but one workshop.

As the process evolved, and as more and more people took part, maintaining relations with participants also generated considerable work: some assumed new positions in different spheres, some fell away, some were integrated into other activities, some were offended at not being invited back, and some did not see the utility of the process. However, an expanding core valued the opportunity to test ideas and assumptions with interlocutors from the other side and to have opportunities to be regularly apprised of the thinking and developments on the other side – in recognition of the fact that such information was very difficult to obtain otherwise.

6.8. Confidentiality and press releases

The participants were conscious that the debates in the workshop could inform discussion outside. From the outset, there was a tension between those who felt it was important to communicate the ideas from the workshops widely in society and others who felt that to do so would be dangerous. The latter were concerned that the speculative nature of the discussion would be lost and creative ideas would be presented as commitments, which was far from the case. The tension reflected the wariness that participants had for one another, which was greater at the outset of the process, as well as the different attitudes towards influencing their own societies. Early in the series of meetings, it was agreed that it was important to convey ideas to the immediate circles within which people worked; but there was also consensus about the need to be cautious about public statements and not to cite the names of participants in relation to specific lines of debate.

An agreement on confidentiality was deemed necessary to provide an environment in which people would be prepared to explore issues more openly without fear of being compromised. To create such a space took time – there was no *a priori* reason why a facilitator or an adversary should be trusted to honour confidentiality and not to compromise those participants who were prepared to make use of the opportunity for speculative and creative analysis. Participants quickly saw that if they wanted the process to continue, they needed to create a relationship of respect. Failure to do so would mean that the parties would not regard the format as one that could enable worthwhile discussions. Confidence in this sense derived from a perception that interlocutors were reliable and worthy of trust. The appreciation of confidence had to be renewed at each workshop as new participants entered the process and it became an important part of the culture of the workshops.

One means to manage the tension between confidentiality and the dissemination of ideas and information became the post-workshop press release, initiated after the fourth workshop. The first press release was issued at the request of the participants. The rationale was twofold: firstly, in small societies it is hard to keep meetings of senior political and public figures secret or to avoid speculation, and such speculation could be damaging if not appropriately managed; secondly, the press release gave participants a

means to honour confidentiality but also to speak about the meetings on return home (the Georgians were more inclined to do so in public than the Abkhaz).

Press releases therefore created a framework for wider discussion. They were drafted by the facilitators at the end of each workshop and agreed with the participants. Drafting the press release was always a question of trying to indicate the parameters of the dialogue without exposing the participants by publicising some of the more creative speculative analysis they had undertaken. As such, the language of the press releases was at times intentionally opaque. Nonetheless, the objective was to signal that it was possible for frank and creative discussions designed to contribute to a culture of dialogue and peace to continue – despite the fact that for much of the time the Schlaining Process was underway, the formal negotiations were in abeyance. In part, this goal was achieved: participants felt secure to discuss the process in their own communities, although Georgian participants tended to be more open and active in conveying insights than did their Abkhaz counterparts; at the same time, there was growing awareness of the process in political, diplomatic and public circles. However, the opaqueness of the press releases did act as a barrier to clarity. In general, the facilitators found that a more effective way to communicate about the process and its nuance was through one-on-one or group briefings. While this limited the scope of the dissemination of ideas generated by the process, it did protect the integrity of the process.

7. Impact and influence of the process

The methodology employed was designed to stimulate reflection on mutually beneficial outcomes and to create an environment for parties to think about their “enlightened self-interest”. However, the facilitators acknowledged that the parties did not necessarily subscribe to this or find it easy to step outside power-based paradigms that dominated relations between them at the time. Despite the lack of confidence the parties had in the formal Track I negotiation process, they nonetheless saw it as a means to ensure that any outcome would be guaranteed through the mechanisms of power politics. Therefore, assuming a more exploratory approach in Track II could make parties vulnerable and entailed risk.

Addressing this dynamic, the Schlaining Process was conceived as being “process oriented” rather than “results driven”. Nonetheless, processes have impacts and produce outcomes, and to be able to fund them donors need to be persuaded that there is progress relating to specific objectives. In the case of the Schlaining Process, a range of outcomes were identified in regard to substance (analysis that could generate fresh insights), attitudes (through exchanging information and enhancing communication), and behavioural changes among civil society and political actors concerned with the conflict and peace process. It can be difficult to track the passage of ideas from an

informal process into a formal negotiation process or into public discourse: ideas are rarely the property of one individual, organisation or meeting; they tend to percolate through systems at their own pace. Furthermore, change comes as a result of cumulative efforts and is rarely attributed to one specific input. Nonetheless, it is important to examine how the Schlaining Process contributed to each of these domains.

7.1. Substantive outcomes

Through joint analysis and addressing both underlying and emerging issues, the Schlaining Process sought to introduce new frameworks for understanding the sources of the conflict. At the same time, it sought to generate and test ideas and concepts that could contribute to its resolution. During the eight years of its operation, participants in the Schlaining Process analysed all key issues in the negotiation process, such as: the presence/removal of the CIS Peacekeeping Force; the role of external actors, status and constitutional frameworks for the resolution of the conflict; processes for ensuring security to promote IDP and refugee return; the lifting of sanctions/trade restrictions; the feasibility and content of a non-resumption of hostilities agreement; and restitution for IDPs. At different points in the process, different issues had more or less prominence in the negotiations or in public discourse, and the Schlaining Process allowed politically engaged participants to explore them in a joint way that rarely happened elsewhere.

The workshops enabled participants to probe ideas, and the climate of reception for those ideas, in ways that could feed into the political negotiations process. The elicitive nature of the process meant that participants were able to construct the process themselves according to concerns at particular times. The informal dialogue format also provided opportunities for exploring issues that resonated deeply in the collective psyche of the participants. Furthermore, participants had the room to explore hypothetical future scenarios. From 2001 on, there were periodic debates envisioning the future, exploring what the situation might be like in five, 10 or 20 years, and identifying what steps would be necessary to achieve the change (and economic development) that both sets of participants aspired to.

The process was also a forum for exchanges on very specific confidence-building measures. Sometimes, these were ideas that participants worked on in advance and brought to the workshops to test with interlocutors from the other side. For instance, a Georgian participant presented a plan that he and a group of experts developed to promote economic cooperation through the establishment of an economic free zone. On other occasions, confidence-building ideas arose as part of the debate. At a workshop in 2002, there was extended discussion about the possibility of opening representative offices, or failing this press and information offices, in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i respectively (with an Abkhaz team running the office in Tbilisi and a Georgian team running the office in Sukhum/i).

At a more conceptual level, by providing space for an analytical appreciation of opponents' perspectives, aspirations and motivations, it was possible to explore security concerns in an in-depth way that was rarely the case in other forums. A repeated undercurrent was the exploration of the classic "security dilemma" of viewing the other party's actions as hostile and responding with counter-actions to defend one's own interests, which are in turn perceived as hostile by the others and therefore further entrench and escalate the conflict.

As the series of workshops progressed and participants became more familiar and comfortable with one another and the facilitators, they were able to engage in more speculative thinking that would have been highly problematic had it been officially linked to formal positions. A good example of this was in 2003, when an exercise involving respective presidential advisors examined the conditions under which Georgia could envisage Abkhaz independence and the conditions under which Abkhazia could envisage a return to Georgian jurisdiction. Such discussions were challenging and were designed to help the participants to understand the perspective of the other side as well as to deepen their analysis of their own interests and positions. Sometimes, these discussions were held in open plenary sessions, sometimes in role-play exercises and sometimes in a fish-bowl format (with one group discussing and the other group observing). This provided the space for participants to scrutinise the validity and feasibility of the others' aspirations as well as the coherence of their positions and interests. While these explorations did not necessarily lead to a narrowing of the gap between participants' positions, they did contribute to a growing mutual respect. Many participants acknowledged that, in doing this, it enabled senior-level officials to better understand the other and to conceive of a different relationship with the other side.

One senior Georgian official later reflected on these debates. He observed that had he and his authorities been prepared to act upon the insights they were deriving, they would have been able to devise a more effective strategy for responding to the Abkhaz needs. His involvement enabled him to understand why proposals made in the official process were not conducive to progress. However, he acknowledged that the timing of the discussion was such that the increasingly weak Georgian state (pre-Rose Revolution) was not able to respond to creative ideas. Experience of the workshops highlighted that shifts in analysis take time to percolate through to those making decisions. Furthermore, the ideas often arrive in a filtered way that changes their potency.¹⁶

The most dynamic example of how ideas were fed into the formal political arena is the way in which a concept note on constitutional options (and in particular federal arrangements) for resolving the conflict was developed under the auspices of the Georgian National Security Council. In 2002 and 2003, an adviser to the National

¹⁶ Based on the author's discussion with a Georgian participant who served in a senior advisory position in the Shevardnadze administration, June 2007.

Security Council (who in 2008 became Speaker of the Georgian Parliament) took part in two Schlaining meetings and a study visit of senior Georgian and Abkhaz officials under Conciliation Resources' auspices to Northern Ireland.¹⁷ Subsequently, in early 2003, at the request of the then Secretary of the National Security Council, Conciliation Resources provided support to an informal group of Georgian experts, several of whom had taken part in the Schlaining Process, to devise a strategy to present to the President. Conciliation Resources provided funds for the group to meet and to purchase a computer and facilitated discussions with several international experts on legal and conflict resolution issues. The participants saw the strategy as a constitutional proposal to present to the Abkhaz. It was completed in October 2003. However, the subsequent Rose Revolution temporarily mothballed the concept.

As indicated above, a Georgian participant at the Schlaining meeting that took place in December 2003 – in which key allies of Mikheil Saakashvili and leading Abkhaz officials participated – informally presented the concept. At the time, understandably, Georgian officials and politicians were preoccupied with the unfolding Rose Revolution, the conduct of new elections and the establishment of a government. In 2004, the newly appointed Minister for Conflict Resolution publicly spoke of a document under preparation to present to the Abkhaz.¹⁸ Several of the authors were, at the time, close allies of the new President Saakashvili. However, the government chose not to take the concept on as official policy. A couple of the concept's authors put it in the public domain and conducted a series of presentations to different audiences. While this generated debate and some Abkhaz reaction, the fact that the Georgian government chose not to endorse the document meant that Abkhaz officials felt no obligation to respond to it – especially since, despite going beyond the usual generalities in regard to offers of the “widest autonomy”, the concept remained one that emphasised Georgian territorial integrity, which was not acceptable to the Abkhaz.¹⁹

The Abkhaz political community then became involved in its own challenging internal political context during the second half of 2004, distracting attention from the peace process. The document was not explicitly discussed in the Schlaining meetings that resumed in 2005, when the issue of non-resumption of hostilities and the drafting of a Georgian “Road Map” had become the paramount issues in the formal arena. These were also issues brought to the Schlaining Process with the participation of key interlocutors from both sides. Indeed, on one occasion in 2005, the margins of a workshop were used as a venue for an extended discussion between one senior interlocutor from each side to expressly review a text on the non-resumption of hostilities being prepared in the formal process.

¹⁷ See C. McCartney, J. Cohen and R. Clogg (2003). *The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: Reflections on four study visits to the United Kingdom and Ireland*. London: Conciliation Resources. Available at <http://www.c-r.org/resources/occasional-papers/study-visit-reflections.php>.

¹⁸ 'Saakashvili to announce Abkhazia concept on 26th May - State Minister', *Civil Georgia*, 13th May 2004. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=6933&search=>.

¹⁹ Based on author's conversations with senior Abkhaz officials during 2004–2005.

As the negotiations evolved in the subsequent months, these critical issues were repeatedly discussed in the Schlaining meetings. However, the concept note was marginalised from the public agenda, apart from in regard to a series of meetings, especially with IDP organisations, in which one of the concept's authors sought to publicise the content. Unexpectedly, core ideas from the concept were aired in March 2008, on the eve of the Bucharest NATO summit, when President Saakashvili unveiled a new peace plan in a public seminar in Tbilisi.²⁰ Constitutional ideas presented in the speech were clearly informed by the concept note. Moreover, a leading opposition figure who was present at the seminar – and who had been one of the authors of the concept note (at a time when he had not been in opposition) – was cited during the President's speech as having been one of the inspirations behind his new plan.

Relating this process serves to indicate how ideas can transfer from an informal dialogue process into the strategies of parties. However, their efficacy or potency is in many ways contingent on the political context and timing.

7.2. Influencing attitudes – informational and communications outcomes

As the process evolved, one of its key elements was the structured exchange of information between participants about unfolding developments on either side of the conflict divide. Participants frequently indicated how much they valued the opportunity to interrogate one another about the internal politics of their respective communities. They used this to contextualise the developments relating both to the conflict and broader dynamics, to understand the trajectory of the other community, to test the political mood and diversity of the respective societies and thereby to be able to judge which actors and issues were influencing developments. Providing this opportunity in the overall vacuum of reflective political exchange between the sides was an important means to create more nuanced political thinking as well as to feed into more effective decisions. Examining their respective needs, fears and hopes, the participants created a space in which analytical empathy could develop. This empathy did not arise from participation in one three to five-day problem-solving workshop; it evolved over time through several and preferably regular encounters. Participants were sufficiently sophisticated to recognise the need to triangulate the insights they were gaining with other sources of information. The Schlaining meetings gave direct access to the other side that could not be obtained on a regular basis elsewhere. This was an important outcome of the process, but it was also a limitation – periodic constructive interaction of this sort occurred in a political environment that was characterised by the absence of such interaction.

The exchanges tended to generate a particular dynamic: many Georgian participants wanted to convey the extent of the changes that had occurred in Georgia since the war in 1992–1993.

20 'Saakashvili outlines Tbilisi's Abkhaz initiatives', *Civil Georgia*, 28th March 2008. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17473&search=>.

Through doing so, they wanted to highlight that the Georgian state that was seeking to resolve the conflict with the Abkhaz in the present was not the state that had become embroiled in the war. Therefore, it was a state of which the Abkhaz might be able to consider being a part. For these interlocutors, the process was not a question of the Georgians demanding Abkhazia's return as a matter of course or right, although there were some Georgian participants who assumed this approach. Rather, they presented a vision that there would be value in a more plural, sophisticated political community that contained the Abkhaz as well and that Georgian democracy was moving in a direction that merited their return. In this vein, a key Georgian interlocutor articulated the view that including opposition figures in the dialogue displayed the degree to which Georgia was increasingly able to countenance debate and pluralism. In response to this, the Abkhaz over time came to state that a developed and democratic Georgia would be in their interest – but not because it made Georgia more attractive to them, rather because it made Georgia less prone to instability and the use of force and thus less of a threat to Abkhazia. The Georgian participants in their turn frequently used the opportunity to interrogate the Abkhaz about the situation of different ethnic communities within Abkhazia, particularly the Georgian Gal/i population and the Armenian population. In part, this was a means to emphasise human rights obligations, but it was also a means to tease out vulnerabilities. In addition, a frequent component of these debates was the role of and relations to Russia and how this influenced attitudes to possible outcomes.

These issues were explored repeatedly in the workshops. Participants came with agendas, with arguments and with convictions: some sought to understand and gather insight that might help them recalibrate their arguments and strategies; others sought more explicitly to persuade. In emphasising this, they risked the delusion that the other should think as you want them to rather than that you should understand the motivations driving the other person's thinking. This was a tension running through many participants – the ability to use the format to explore or the desire to use it to convince. The role of the facilitators was to sustain an environment in which debates could persist – literally facilitating debate but also offering challenge to participants. Challenge principally came from the participants themselves – they wanted to ask searching questions of one another. However, at times the collective, regardless of origin, avoided tough issues. As a result, the facilitators tried to encourage them to dig deeper and then reframe their understandings.

Following the December 2006 workshop, a Georgian official, himself an IDP, stated that 'the meeting gave me a different perspective on what motivates the Abkhaz'. This was an important admission, given that the Georgian elite had increasingly limited exposure to the Abkhaz. It reflected how the workshops provided a space in which the sensitivities and strategies of the parties could be better understood and in which people could talk openly. One observer of the process commented that this form of dialogue between political actors was a means of 'creating the space for change' by generating new communication dynamics and perspectives that might be able to bear fruit once

conditions became ripe for more effective negotiations. Another participant likened the process to a marathon race, which demanded thorough preparation and sustained effort over a long time. He regretted that there was a tendency among many political actors to treat the resolution of the conflict as a sprint.

One seasoned Schlaining participant, several years after he ceased participation, recognised what he could gain from such a process when he observed: ‘when I took part in negotiations in the early 1990s, I now realise that I just did not know how to talk to the Abkhaz. I didn’t know what they were trying to say to me. I didn’t know how to listen to them. I did not know how to articulate to them what was important to me. I constantly said things to them that, on reflection, were bound to antagonise them. My experience of the Schlaining Process helped me understand them in a way I could not through the formal process and therefore to know what I could and shouldn’t say.’²¹

7.3. Changing behaviour?

A critical question to come out of the dialogue is whether the efforts to develop communication channels between parties and spaces for informed but informal and constructive dialogue could influence not just perceptions but also behaviour. Part of the rationale of the meetings was that relationships were being built and channels of direct communication fostered through face-to-face meetings. The participants could then use these in further communication and to develop constructive working relationships with counterparts previously perceived as “the enemy”.

From 2004 to 2006, as noted above, the participants were much more central figures in both the negotiation process and the internal political developments on either side of the divide. This led to the dialogue workshops having a more direct relationship to the formal peace process as well as the political life of the respective parties. The space provided by the process for discussion of the Georgian government’s Road Map and the Abkhaz Key to the Future has been noted above, as has the work on the concept on constitutional reform. Another short-lived back channel came out of the participation of senior figures in the Schlaining Process in 2005–2006. These senior figures met in a couple of workshops and then, with the knowledge of their presidents, had further meetings on a couple of occasions near the line of separation. The specific objective of this channel was to lay the ground for a meeting of the respective presidents. While this meeting did not come to fruition, the fact that the channel was initiated was a significant step at the time. It reflected the contribution of the Schlaining Process as a communications channel for parties to convey messages to their counterparts as well as a means for influencing the behaviour of the counterparts. Senior political actors used the Schlaining Process to test ideas in regard to substance and process, reflecting on the reception of these ideas

²¹ Taken from an interview conducted in June 2007.

and then refining them to present again in future workshops or in discussions in other forums. In this sense, many participants assumed a different approach to dialogue as a result of participation in the Schlaining Process. However, calibrating the scale of individual change is different from pinning down sustained changes in policy or strategy by the parties.

Nonetheless, the Schlaining Process does appear to have informed specific confidence-building measures that were undertaken by participants. While attitudes to what constitutes confidence building can often be misconstrued – parties often placing emphasis on what should be demanded from the other rather than reflecting inwards on the way in which the increased predictability and transparency of one's own side can instil confidence in the other²² – civil society participants seized opportunities to build relationships that informed a range of cooperative activities. Confidence-building activities initiated, discussed or agreed at Schlaining meetings included: the development of a summer university on international relations in Abkhazia (that enabled more than 20 Georgian and 100 other Caucasian, European and North American students and young professionals to visit Abkhazia between 2002–2006); and invitations to a number of senior Georgian public figures to conferences in Abkhazia in 2004 and 2006. Participation in such events provided a good opportunity for Georgian public figures to meet with and address a wide audience in Abkhazia. It also allowed them to hear the opinions of people outside the circle of those involved in structured dialogue. There was also agreement for Abkhaz and Georgian journalists to make a joint film about the Gal/i region in 2002 and reciprocal films in 2003. In addition, it was agreed that they would work jointly on the publication *Materials for Discussion on the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*,²³ published in 2002 following a year-and-a-half-long process involving more than 30 Georgian and Abkhaz experts and then used extensively in civic education work. As a result of inviting the head of the Open Society Foundation Georgia to one of the early workshops, an ongoing arrangement was initiated for grants to be provided to Abkhaz civic initiatives through the Open Society Institute.

The above initiatives represent collaborative behaviour, which is an important component of a reframing of opportunities in a peace process. While these initiatives were primarily led by civic actors, they were discussed in the presence of politicians and officials, who observed the cooperative and yet mutually challenging relationships of these civic actors. Over time, more important than specific actions were the cumulative responses of official and non-official participants, who continued to engage with one another – both in the Schlaining Process, in other fora and informally – using their insights and analysis to

22 See the author's paper on confidence building and civil society in the South Caucasus, presented at the German Foreign Office conference on the South Caucasus in October 2009. Available at <http://www.c-r.org/resources/conflict-post-soviet-europe-south-caucasus-are-there-scenarios-resolution> [2.4Mb PDF].

23 Available in Russian on Conciliation Resources' website at http://www.c-r.org/our-work/caucasus/documents/Discussion_Pack_Russian.pdf [676Kb PDF].

inform a wide range of engagements. Perhaps above all, the fact that civil society actors participated together with political actors gave the former confidence to push their ideas into the political arena, to increase notions of accountability, and to sustain an array of other single and cross-conflict civil society engagements.

8. Prospects for dialogue

Following the events of August 2008, a mutually acceptable resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict seems a very distant prospect. For facilitators who invested considerable time and resources in the process prior to the August war, this raises questions about what was achieved, what went wrong and what prospects there might be for future initiatives that can contribute to a reconfiguration of relations.

Achievements in the sphere of peacebuilding and conflict transformation are generally collaborative and cumulative. Over an eight-year period, the Schlaining Process succeeded in: cultivating spaces for contact and dialogue; fostering communication channels across the conflict divide and building relationships; generating insights and new perspectives; and occasionally establishing concrete collaborations for addressing the conflict. Many of these relationships, ideas and collaborations have been sustained to one degree or another, despite divergent trajectories of the respective societies in the period since the Schlaining Process concluded.

In the early 2000s, when there was little structured engagement between political and civic actors across the divide, the process enabled such engagement to become more frequent. In the post-Rose Revolution period, when there was political momentum for reinvigorating talks, the Schlaining Process was able to contribute opportunities for engagement. Such opportunities complemented UN-led talks and broadened the discourse by giving senior-level officials and civil society representatives scope to understand each other and their respective aspirations. Naturally, the process was affected by the dynamics of growing polarisation between Tbilisi and Sukhum/i from mid-2006.

In a context in which the longstanding fragility of the formal negotiations meant that notions of a peaceful transformation began to lose credibility, it was hard for an informal dialogue process to gain traction in helping to shape attitudes to the peace process. The strategic calculations of the parties did not lead them to view their best option as a negotiated solution, thus requiring some form of cooperation and compromise. The parties considered their pursuit of unilateral options to be a viable means of gaining strategic advantage and avoiding the need to make fundamental changes to their basic positions on the key conflict issues, such as political status and IDP return. In this context, it was difficult for initiatives such as the Schlaining Process to fundamentally influence the parties' engagement in dialogue, let alone negotiations.

By 2008, the overall conflict dynamic was such that a process that had highlighted that dialogue was possible and could contribute something, however modest and incremental – and particularly one that emphasised the importance of the Georgian-Abkhaz dimension – was not something the government of Georgia saw as being in its interests.

Observing the conflict post-August 2008, it is clear that there will need to be a reframing of Russian-Western relations, Georgian-Russian relations and especially Georgian-Abkhaz relations in order for progress towards a mutually acceptable outcome to be made. This is the work of multifaceted diplomatic, political, economic and international relations. However, none of this should distract attention from the urgency of inter-communal conflict transformation initiatives, such as the dialogue fora provided by the Schlaining Process. The Schlaining experience also suggests that if in the future peaceful transformation of the conflict is to have a credible currency, then efforts to resource communication and generating ideas will continue to be essential components of the “groundwork” for peacemaking. This groundwork, by its nature, cannot be generated quickly; yet, it would be crucial if more conducive political or contextual conditions were to suddenly emerge. This kind of work is now doubly important, because the current generation of political leaders in Georgia has had limited exposure to the Abkhaz. The latter, in turn, are increasingly drawn to engagement with Russia. As a result, there is very limited direct experience or understanding of the other on which to base decisions. Yet, the cumulative engagement, in processes such as Schlaining, of over 100 individuals and tens of organisations, each with networks and hinterlands, remains a hidden capital of peacebuilding. Such “hidden capital” may pay dividends as and when the much needed reframing of the conflict becomes possible.

CHAPTER 4

The Schlaining Process: An Abkhaz Perspective

Manana Gurgulia

1. Introduction

The Schlaining Process was the working title given to a series of dialogue workshops on the peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The workshops were organised by two international NGOs with many years of experience of working in the Caucasus – namely, the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management in Berlin and Conciliation Resources in London. The idea of holding informal meetings of politicians and civil society activists from Georgia and Abkhazia was originally proposed at the first major meeting of representatives of Abkhaz and Georgian NGOs in January 1997 in Stadtschlaining, eastern Austria. The first workshop in the series was also held there in February 2000. A total of 20 meetings were held between February 2000 and July 2007, with Conciliation Resources taking on the organisation of workshops for the final two years.

Since I was the coordinator from Abkhazia, this article gives a view of the Schlaining Process from the Abkhaz perspective.

The Schlaining Process was a unique platform for informal dialogue between representatives of the two sides to the conflict. It allowed the participants to discuss their concerns and work together on analysing factors that enable and get in the way of conflict resolution. It also provided an opportunity to exchange information on what was happening on the ground.

I would define the overall aim of the project as enabling joint discussions of the various options for long-term resolution of the conflict. This project also provided an informal setting on neutral territory in which the Abkhaz side was able to convey to the Georgian side its vision of the situation, future prospects, its own interests and concerns, as well as gaining a better understanding of the Georgian side's position. When I say "understand", I do not mean "accept" the other side's position – it would be naïve on my part to expect that. The positions of the sides have remained virtually unchanged throughout the whole process. The Abkhaz side insist on a nation's right to self-determination, the de facto independence of Abkhazia and the impossibility of re-incorporation within Georgia. For its part, the Georgian position is based on the principle of national territorial integrity, refusal to accept secession by Abkhazia and the rights of all refugees to return to their homes. Despite these differences, however, there was generally a shared understanding that conflict must be resolved by peaceful means and that any attempt to impose a military solution would be disastrous.

A further major benefit of the process was that it helped to redress the lack of information about the situation on the ground.

Each of the 20 meetings had their own specific aims and objectives.

To summarise these, I would single out the following objectives:

- To study the experience of conflict resolution in various regions of the world (Northern Ireland, Bosnia Herzegovina, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Cyprus, etc.) where, despite differences, certain structural and procedural parallels can be identified;
- To discuss specific steps the parties should take to break the deadlock and make progress towards a lasting peace;
- To discuss draft interim agreements to achieve mutually acceptable outcomes;
- To develop guiding principles and defining steps that the sides could take jointly or unilaterally to resume the negotiation process and move the conflict resolution process forward;
- To discuss potential guarantees on non-resumption of military action and the conditions under and on which the parties would be prepared to sign an agreement on security and non-resumption of military action.

Despite the wide variety of topics discussed at these meetings, they all bore a direct or indirect relation to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and potential approaches to its transformation and resolution. These included: how to minimise risks when holding negotiations; the democratisation of society and state as a basis for a more constructive approach to conflict transformation; confidence-building measures; human rights and collective rights as part of a peaceful resolution process; the effectiveness of the various forms of economic and political pressure applied to one of the sides in the conflict in order to transform it; how to minimise the unintended effects of economic sanctions; how to overcome obstacles to exchanging information between the sides in the conflict; the role of the international community in conflict resolution; Russia's role in the negotiation process; the return of refugees and displaced persons; and the impact of internal political processes on prospects for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Although escalation of the conflict in the region – such as events in the Kodori Gorge or the Gal district – caused additional problems in the already complex dialogue between the Georgian and the Abkhaz side, most participants in the Schlaining Process attempted to keep to the basic principles of openness, respect for the other's opinions, the capacity to listen and confidentiality (according to the Chatham House Rules, under which participants may not be quoted directly).

2. Selection of participants

A total of 57 people took part in the Schlaining Process from the Abkhaz side. They consisted of parliamentary deputies, representatives of the Presidential Administration, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other ministries, along with NGO representatives, experts and journalists. Participants were selected on the basis of the agenda topic (where this had been agreed in advance), the situation on the ground, the status of the official negotiation process, the competence of the potential participants, their influence in the country as a whole and the representativeness of the various official structures (parliament, the executive). Wherever possible, the dialogue workshops were attended by participants in the official negotiation process. Priority was given to ensuring that a wide range of political opinions from Georgian and Abkhaz society was represented.

Since the Schlaining Process does not constitute official negotiations by the sides in the conflict, where binding documents and decisions were taken, attendance by representatives of the Abkhaz and Georgian NGOs was a necessary precondition. The meetings were usually attended by between six and eight persons from each side, including two to three civil society activists.

Participants from the Abkhaz side were selected in consultation with the facilitators – in particular, Jonathan Cohen (Conciliation Resources), the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Shamba, and the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes in Abkhazia, with which the Sukhum Media Club has collaborated on several projects.

The composition of participants was changed from time to time to reflect the bodies represented by the Georgian participants. When the Georgian side sent more deputies to the meeting than representatives of the executive branches, whose participation was subject to presidential approval (particularly after Mikheil Saakashvili came to power), we also made adjustments to our list.¹

The most sensitive issue related to the participation of the representatives of the “legitimate government of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic”.² The Abkhaz side objected categorically to their participation in both the official negotiation process and in unofficial meetings. This categorical rejection can be explained by the fact that it represented an attempt by Georgia to present the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as an internal Abkhaz matter. The Abkhaz authorities had agreed to hold negotiations with the official Tbilisi authorities. Meanwhile, Georgia continually attempted to include representatives of refugees from Abkhazia in the negotiating process, maintaining that they were actually the “legitimate government”,

1 See P. Zakareishvili. ‘How the “rose” government of Georgia systematically destroyed the informal Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process’, *Rezonansy* newspaper, Nos. 256, 257 and 259, 19th, 20th and 22nd September 2008.

2 This is a reference to the Abkhaz government bodies created in Tbilisi following the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war in 1993.

forced to operate in exile after the war. The first meeting of the Schlaining Process thus came close to breakdown over the issue of participation by the representatives of the “government in exile of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic”. Further down the line, the Abkhaz side reconciled itself to some extent with their participation in the process. This was firstly because all participants in the informal dialogue were speaking in a private capacity and not on behalf of the organisations and entities within which they worked. Secondly, people in Georgia itself gradually started to take action towards curtailing the activities of the “autonomous structures”. Thirdly, some of the “autonomous” parties with which the Abkhaz participant refused to meet in the initial stages were already involved in the process, because they were either working for NGOs or in Georgian government ministry offices.

3. Dangers and risks associated with the project

The Georgian side, particularly after President Saakashvili came to power, continually attempted to prevent the Abkhaz side having direct contact with the various international and European organisations. President Saakashvili also insisted that any meetings with the “separatists” should be held not on neutral territory but in Georgia, which again was entirely unacceptable to the Abkhaz participants. The government in Tbilisi was clearly concerned that the representatives of Abkhazia, who were unable to present their views officially within the different European structures, would use the Schlaining Process as a platform to state their position. President Saakashvili also introduced a ban on officials from participating in the informal Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue.³

Overall, the Abkhaz side had no particular concerns about the project, apart from the negative attitude expressed by a portion of the population to any Georgian-Abkhaz meetings. People could occasionally be heard asking: ‘Why are you at the meetings?’, ‘Who authorised you?’ and ‘Why are there all these meetings if there is an official negotiating process?’ In some cases, people were reluctant to talk about their participation in the Schlaining Process when they returned home. However, the majority of participants understood the importance of informing the population of the process and its objectives, along with the issues discussed and the conclusions.

4. Facilitation of the process

The facilitators of the Schlaining Process were Norbert Ropers and Oliver Wolleh of the Berghof Research Center, Jonathan Cohen and Rachel Clogg of Conciliation Resources, as well as the independent expert Clem McCartney, who was invited by the workshop organisers.

3 See P. Zakareishvili, *ibid.*

As Oliver Wolleh, one of the process facilitators, outlined, the international team's role was that of facilitators rather than mediators. Mediation tends to focus on “objective” aspects of the conflict, with discussions on the positions and underlying interests of the sides in the conflict held solely in order to achieve a specific result in the form of an agreement that takes into account the interests of all those involved in the negotiation process. Facilitation, on the other hand, emphasises the “subjective” aspects, such as perceptions, feelings, opinions and communications skills.⁴

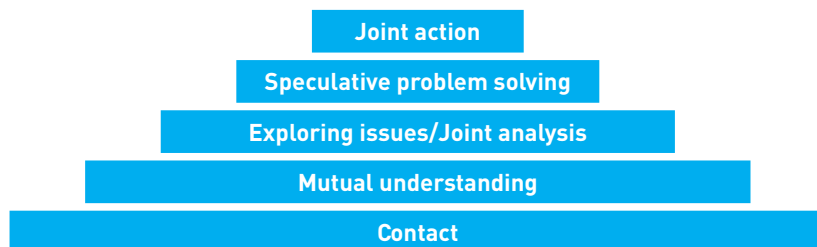
Our facilitators aimed, I would say successfully, to create an environment where the participants in the dialogue workshops could exchange opinions freely and openly. Participants were encouraged to analyse the various aspects of the conflict, its causes, dynamic and the difficulties facing them on the path towards its transformation and resolution.

The dialogue workshops were designed to allow for some issues to be discussed at plenary discussions and others in small group sessions. This gave virtually all participants the opportunity to express their opinion. Even those who would have preferred to “keep quiet” in the large group did speak in the small groups. The plenary sessions were usually run by one of the international facilitators, while in the small groups the participants themselves chose a leader and a rapporteur. No importance was attached to whether the feedback was given by an Abkhaz or a Georgian participant. The small group work was observed by one of the international facilitators, who was on hand to explain the task in more detail if necessary.

The team of facilitators kept the discussion going by presenting the tasks and suggesting discussion topics. Rather than imposing its own topics, the team based the discussion on what the participants had written on cards at the start of the meeting.

Clem McCartney presented an interesting “pyramid” of group interactions, as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 1: Pyramid of group interactions in the dialogue process



⁴ See O. Wolleh (2006). *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhazian Dialogue Process*. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Available at http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/SC_Difficult_Encounter.pdf [1.4Mb PDF].

The facilitators designed the process to help us to climb up this “pyramid” by discussing the various issues related to the conflict. The highest stage we reached was “speculative problem solving”, although not on every occasion.

The organisers and facilitators of the Schlaining Process clearly demonstrated that they had a sufficiently profound understanding of the essential nature of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. We could see that they were committed to helping us find peaceful means of resolving it. Warm and friendly relations were developed between the workshop participants and the facilitators, without, however, preventing them from adopting an open-minded and unprejudiced approach.

5. What got in the way of the project activities?

Practical obstacles to the organisation of the workshops and informal dialogue were created by the periodic exacerbation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the rise in tension and interruptions to the official negotiation process. Nonetheless, at the same time, these obstacles underlined the real need for an informal arrangement for discussing sensitive issues. Moreover, during periods when the authorities, for one reason or another, discontinued official negotiations, the Schlaining Process provided one of only a small number of opportunities for direct bilateral contacts.

Problems or obstacles of a more subjective nature were caused by the personal qualities of individual participants, an inability or unwillingness to listen to opponents, and excessive emotionality. However, on most occasions the international facilitators managed the situation by allowing people the opportunity to speak out during the meetings or by smoothly shifting the discussion to the “coffee break”.

Extending direct participation in the Schlaining Process was undoubtedly a positive factor. At the same time, however, the dynamics of the process were affected each time a new participant was introduced. The new participants, particularly those who were meeting with Abkhaz or Georgians for the first time, wanted to “speak out”, pour out their grievances, and give a detailed exposition of their own view of the causes and history of the conflict.

One issue that cannot be avoided is the problem with the passports of the Abkhaz participants. Because our passports had been issued by the former USSR, it required no small effort on the part of the organisers to persuade the embassies of Western countries in Moscow to agree to issue visas. We also had to obtain special permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Federal Border Service for the Abkhaz participants to fly from Sheremetyevo International Airport in Moscow. Due to the problems with the passports – which continued until Russia agreed to confer its citizenship on Abkhaz

residents and issue international passports – some Abkhaz representatives were unable to attend the dialogue workshops, although their involvement in this process would have been very desirable and helpful.

6. Results and lessons learnt from the project

The seven-year Schlaining Process is not the only project within which Georgian-Abkhaz meetings have been held. There were also other projects run by Conciliation Resources (London), International Alert (London), the University of California (Irvine, US), the South Caucasus regional office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Berlin), the Danish and Norwegian Refugee Councils, and the Swedish organisation *Kvinna till Kvinna* in partnership with local NGOs, etc. However, unlike these projects – which published materials such as studies, reports and transcripts of meetings (15 volumes of meeting transcripts have been published so far within the University of California project) – the dialogue workshops under the Schlaining Process were confidential. Press releases were issued on the results of the workshops. However, the participants, as required by its ground rules, did not quote specific persons in their interviews or public speeches directly.

This confidentiality policy had both benefits and disadvantages. One advantage was that the officials attending the meetings (although in a private capacity as experts) could talk freely, discuss sensitive issues and hold an open and principled dialogue. A disadvantage was that the public in each country were not well informed about the project. I heard on several occasions the process being criticised for its “secretiveness”, both by the public and by journalists.

The Schlaining Process provided all its participants with an opportunity to obtain a fuller understanding of the positions, interests and fears of the sides in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. At the meetings, information was exchanged about the latest political events in Abkhazia and Georgia, and the potential consequences of these events for the peace process were analysed. The various draft interim agreements, framework principles for reviving the negotiation process, guarantees for non-resumption of military action, and much more, were discussed.

The Schlaining meetings were not only a platform where an informal dialogue was held by the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. They also consisted of training components, such as a number of methodological approaches to conflict analysis and ways of transforming it – for example, conflict mapping, the “conflict prism”, Gradual Reduction in International Tension (GRIT) and much more.

The participants were also given the opportunity to view our conflict through the prism of other conflicts – that is, those in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sri

Lanka, South Africa and Cyprus. Experts in these conflicts gave some very concise, thought-provoking and memorable lectures, which had a great deal of relevance to our own situation.

Unlike Georgia, which had a large number of international channels open to it for presenting its own version of the “truth” about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, Abkhazia had only a limited number of options. The Georgian government’s efforts meant that the representatives of the official Abkhaz authorities (unlike their counterparts in Kosovo) had virtually no opportunity to participate, whether in an expert or observer capacity, in the various international forums where the Georgian-Abkhaz issues were being discussed. The Schlaining Process filled this gap to some extent.

Without wishing to minimise the significance of the plenary sessions and small group work (whether mixed or just one-sided), we should also refer to the intense discussions that took place outside the auditorium. Since the process included senior government officials, I believe that these informal discussions provided them with an opportunity to state their detailed positions, and to gain a better understanding of the interests and concerns of the other side. This enabled them to take these into consideration as they developed their strategic and tactical approaches to the official negotiating process.

The Georgians wanted to persuade the Abkhaz that the war had not changed the fact that they were two closely-related peoples who had to live together within a unitary state. They constantly raised the issue of Georgia’s territorial integrity and the return of refugees, linking these to the resolution of all the other issues (political status, removal of sanctions, re-instatement of rail routes, security guarantees, etc.). The Abkhaz tried to persuade the Georgians that Abkhazia would never voluntarily be re-incorporated into Georgia, insisting that its desire to be an independent state, with good international relations with its neighbour Georgia, was fully justified. Achieving this would take more than the 20 workshops within the Schlaining Process.

The events of August 2008 changed the situation in the region. Abkhazia became a partially recognised state and an agreement on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance was signed with Russia which was vitally important for Abkhazia. However, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict remains unresolved, with the drafting and signing of an agreement on the non-resumption of military action remaining an urgent issue. In this new situation, new approaches will be needed.

CHAPTER 5

The Schlaining Process: A Georgian Perspective

Paata Zakareishvili

1. Introduction

This chapter examines, as one of the forms of conflict mediation, a series of informal meetings between Georgian and Abkhaz politicians, and the obstacles to this process, from a Georgian perspective. Peace practitioners have informally coined the term the “Schlaining Process” to describe the series, which is named after the small east Austrian town of Stadtschlaining where the first meetings were held.

The process began in 2000 and was halted in 2007 for reasons outlined later in this chapter. A total of 20 meetings were organised between 2000 and 2007, attended by 57 Abkhaz participants and 56 Georgian delegates.

The first 14 meetings were organised by the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management in Berlin and the UK organisation Conciliation Resources in London, which started its mediation work on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in 1997. Conciliation Resources took on the direct organisation of the project from the 15th meeting onwards.

Conciliation Resources’ overall objective in Georgia is the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict by peaceful means. The organisation works with politicians, officials and activists to achieve this by convincing them of the viability of a democratic and non-violent resolution of the conflict. Conciliation Resources also facilitates support for constant dialogue between representatives of both sides. These two areas of the organisation’s activities came together in the Schlaining meetings. The meetings took the form of a series of informal workshops, where representatives of the political elites from both sides were given the opportunity to talk freely, discussing and analysing in a workshop setting the key factors preventing and promoting conflict resolution.

Since the organisers of the Schlaining Process also acted as mediators at the meetings, they consistently avoided making any definitive statement on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict itself. Instead, they simply facilitated the development of constructive dialogue between the sides. Those attending the meetings did not have the status of official delegates and thus did not publicly issue any decisions. They did not represent their organisations or ministries and attended the meetings as experts in a purely private capacity.

2. Benefits of the Schlaining format

The process was based on the Chatham House Rules, whereby it is agreed that none of the participants or parties may be quoted in public. This confidentiality agreement enabled participants to discuss matters openly and directly within an agreed framework.

An important feature of the project was that the meetings were attended exclusively by Georgian and Abkhaz senior officials, politicians and experts. No third parties – Russia or other countries and even international organisations – were represented at the meetings.

This format allowed the meetings to have palpable results at the individual level. The process gave Georgian and Abkhaz politicians the following opportunities (the information below is based on the participants' feedback):

- **To communicate regularly in an informal, confidential setting away from third parties** – the regular nature of the meetings allowed participants to exchange crucial information regularly and on a scheduled basis; it also enabled them to be confident that any complex issue that might crop up occasionally between the sides would be discussed in detail in a calm setting, where questions would receive clear and detailed responses rather than demagoguery or propaganda;
- **To familiarise themselves with the opposite side's position and interests** – this would then enable them to take these into consideration when developing their own strategies and tactics;
- **To identify (through dialogue) each other's position on a range of issues** – this enabled them to prepare for the next meeting or for other official or unofficial meetings;
- **To check that they had “done their homework”** – in particular, the meetings gave the participants a chance to see and hear each other's response to new proposals and initiatives, which they could later present for official consideration.

The design of the meetings also meant that the process enjoyed high levels of trust from Abkhaz politicians and experts. This was evidenced by their statements at the meetings. It was also reflected by the fact that they did not withdraw from the Schlaining Process during periodic rises in tension in Georgian-Abkhaz relations when they refused to attend other meetings.

As a result of the Schlaining Process, some of the Georgian participants realised the need to prepare systematic proposals which could be submitted to the Abkhaz side (based on extensive public discussions within Georgia). One such example was the document *Concept on the special status of Abkhazia in the Georgian state*, which was in fact written by them and presented to the Georgian public and authorities for discussion – without, however, leading to any change.

After the Saakashvili government came to power in 2003, the Schlaining format had real potential as a sounding board, where the new Georgian politicians could test ideas on

resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict directly with their Abkhaz colleagues. This could have provided them with much-needed encouragement and support. Since the meetings were designed from a mediation perspective, the benefits far outweighed any risk of them damaging the conflict resolution process. Instead, it enabled the participants to become better informed and prepared for action on conflict resolution at the political level.

Despite this, the Schlaining process did not result in any clear outcomes or affect the conflict dynamic, and gradually petered out. In the following section, I consider the political stances adopted by the Georgian side that prevented the process from being taken up and which may well have contributed to its lack of results.

3. Political obstacles to the informal bilateral process from the Georgian side

A brief description is needed of the context in which political factors affected the informal bilateral peacebuilding process from the Georgian side.

While Eduard Shevardnadze held power, Georgia did not object to government representatives participating in the Schlaining Process, although they did not show any interest or support for it. This “non-objection” policy allowed the process to develop, and by 2003 it had already achieved an important output in the form of the document on conflict resolution referred to earlier.

In 2004–2005, the social and political situation was radically transformed across the whole of Georgia and particularly in Abkhazia. Despite opposition to the results of elections, voters in both Georgia and Abkhazia were able to oust the old undemocratic, corrupt regimes and bring new forces to power. Amid these upheavals, the conflict resolution process also gained a new dynamism to match the changes in society. Interest in the Schlaining Process from the Abkhaz side grew. By June 2008, and thus even before the events in August of that year, the Abkhaz side was prepared to attend the Schlaining meeting planned for that month, despite the political tensions. However, in relation to the new Georgian government, it gradually became clear that it was preventing Georgian politicians from attending the regular bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian informal meetings. From the summer of 2005, this position became entrenched, resulting in the Schlaining Process ending after July 2007. A number of specific instances are given below.

Deliberate attempts to obstruct the Schlaining Process

From 2005 onwards, there were a number of instances of influential political figures on the Georgian side agreeing to attend meetings with Abkhaz politicians, and emphasising the importance of these meetings in preparatory discussions with the Georgian

coordinator (and author of this chapter). However, they withdrew from the meetings at the last minute without giving any explanation for their sudden change of heart. This happened not only in the Schlaining Process but also, for example, in the meeting between Georgian and Ossetian politicians in Ljubljana, Slovenia in February 2005: although two representatives of the Georgian parliamentary majority had agreed to attend the meeting, they withdrew at the last minute.

In the Schlaining Process, this pattern (agreement, interest, willingness to attend followed by withdrawal just before the meeting with no reason given) became the norm.

The idea of a **16th** Schlaining meeting was suggested by Irakli Alasania, who was at the time the personal representative of the president of Georgia for the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. At the previous Schlaining meeting in April 2005, he had proposed holding a shorter and smaller bilateral meeting. The Abkhaz group responded that they were very interested in a dialogue with Alasania. With this proposal in mind, the process mediators carried out a number of consultation meetings with the representatives of both sides. This resulted in agreement to hold a two-day informal meeting with a small number of participants in Vienna. From the Abkhaz side, those who agreed to attend comprised: Stanislav Lakoba, the then Secretary of the Security Council; Leonid Lakerbaia, the Abkhaz Vice-Premier; Batal Tabagua, the Chairman of the Central Election Committee of Abkhazia; and Sokrat Dzhindzholia, a representative of civil society. The members of the Georgian group were proposed by Irakli Alasania. They comprised, in addition to Alasania, Gigi Ugulava,¹ the Head of the Presidential Office, and Nika Rurua, the Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security. However, just before the meeting, after the Abkhaz group had already left Moscow for Vienna, all the participants apart from Alasania withdrew. The situation was saved at the last minute by State Minister Georgy Haindrava, who came to the meeting with his deputy. On the morning of the day on which Alasania was due to fly in, he telephoned and withdrew from the meeting without providing any reasons.

The **17th** Georgian-Abkhaz Schlaining working group was held in London on 18th–20th March 2006. A month before it was held, Irakli Alasania, Nika Gvaramia (who at the time was the Public Prosecutor General) and David Bakradze (the then Chair of the Parliamentary Commission on European Integration) stated their willingness to attend. Nevertheless, with a week to go before the start of the workshop in London, all three withdrew for various reasons. Ivlian Haindrava, Vakhtang Kolbaia and David Bazgadze (members of parliament) were obliged to replace them at the last minute.

¹ Following Gigi Ugulava's appointment as Mayor of Tbilisi, the Chair of the parliamentary majority, Maia Nadiradze, was invited. She stated her interest in the meeting and agreed to attend.

The **18th** working group was scheduled for 9th–13th June 2006, once again in the Austrian town of Schlaining. As early as 20th April, Irakli Alasania and Nika Gvaramia stated separately that they intended to attend the meeting in June. They promised to give a final answer by 10th May. However, on 9th May, Alasania and Gvaramia informed us that they were withdrawing.

Prior to the **19th** Schlaining Process meeting – which was held in London on 15th–18th December 2006 – Georgy Lomaia and Georgy Volsky, officials from the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, withdrew.

The **20th** Schlaining Process meeting was due to be held in London on 27th–30th July 2007. David Bazgadze and Roin Janashia, parliamentary delegates and representatives of the parliamentary majority, along with Georgy Kadzhaia, an official at the Council of National Security, provisionally agreed to attend. However, seven days before they were due to leave, all three withdrew from the meeting. On 20th July, David Bazgadze contacted the process coordinator on the Georgian side and informed him that the then Speaker of the Parliament, Nino Burjanadze, had required him and Janashia to withdraw from the London meeting. Burjanadze told Bazgadze: ‘We [author’s note: presumably the Georgian authorities] will not attend this type of meeting.’ This was despite the fact that, a year earlier in March 2006, she herself had agreed to David Bazgadze attending the 17th meeting. So what had changed in one year?

In 2007, on 21st–25th September, the German Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management organised a Georgian-Abkhaz meeting in Cyprus. Despite originally agreeing to attend, the representatives of the State Ministry on Conflict Resolution, Ruslan Abashidze and Dmitri Manjavidze, decided not to attend this meeting.

Following consultation with politicians from both sides, carried out by Conciliation Resources, a further, **21st** Schlaining Process meeting was scheduled. Despite the serious escalation in tension in the conflict zone in June and July 2008, the Abkhaz side agreed in principle to the Abkhaz group attending the meeting, which was scheduled to take place on 27th–30th July 2008 in London. Parliamentary deputy Petre Mamradze agreed to attend the meeting but asked for time to consult with the parliamentary leaders. There were no other government representatives willing to attend. Three representatives of the parliamentary majority responded to the invitation with a firm, resounding rejection.² While the negotiations with them were still underway, Petre Mamradze also withdrew. After further consultation with the Georgian side failed to yield any results, the organiser of the process decided to postpone the meeting indefinitely.

² I cannot give their names because I did not hold talks with them on their participation in the next meeting.

On 4th August 2008, Kakha Lomaia, Secretary of the Council of National Security of Georgia, told a meeting of the Special State Committee, convened to discuss the Georgian president's peace initiative on conflict resolution in Abkhazia and the events in the conflict zones, which was attended by representatives of various state bodies: 'Let's not fool ourselves. We need to have a dialogue with Russia rather than storming into Sukhumi and Tskhinvali.' This statement was made three days before the 7th August and the dramatic escalation of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, which plunged the region into war between Russia and Georgia.

Thus, the halting of the Schlaining Process meant that officials were prevented from participating in a regular informal Georgian-Abkhaz process. Such a process could have built confidence between the Abkhaz and Georgian sides and allowed common interests to emerge in a bilateral format, without the participation of Russia and international organisations.

Given the total absence to this day of any form of Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, it seems rather perverse to ignore the only continuous (informal) arrangement that exists. Logically, Georgia should have been the first to show interest in changing the status quo in the conflict and exploring any means of finding routes and ways to restore trust with the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides. This would have allowed it to gain a better understanding of their interests, fears and expectations. These constant informal bilateral meetings represented the best opportunity to gain regular information on the processes unfolding in Abkhazia and the former autonomous region of South Ossetia. The groundwork done under the Schlaining Process had created a sustainable format for dialogue of this type. Rejecting it closed one of the few existing routes for dialogue and led to the sides becoming even more isolated from one another. This had to be counter to Georgia's interests.

There were certainly specific reasons for the systematic sabotaging of the well-worn peace process. However, in the absence of reliable facts, we are limited to speculations, suspicions and a number of contradictory versions, which are outlined below.

4. Possible reasons for the demise of the process

Version 1

This version of events relates to a number of public statements by President Saakashvili that any negotiations with the separatists must be held on Georgian soil and that meetings with them outside of Georgia were unacceptable. On 7th April 2005, the president insisted: 'Running off to other cities to meet Kokoit and Bagapsh is over. I am not personally prepared to meet Kokoit and Bagapsh and I am not going to seek them out anywhere.

If they need anything, let them come to Tbilisi. I will give them my office address and even my home telephone number. Let them come, I am ready to talk openly with them.’³

In this case, Saakashvili, on coming to power, was simply reviving the stance adopted by Tamaz Nadareishvili, Chair of the Supreme Council of the [Georgia-backed] Abkhaz Autonomous Republic from 1994–1999. Nonetheless, there has never been any convincing explanation as to what threats or risks might have been posed by holding informal meetings of representatives of the upper echelons of power outside of the country – particularly given that the alternative was to have no such meetings at all. This position ran counter to the principles of peaceful conflict resolution, which place great emphasis on maintaining constant dialogue.

For their part, the Abkhaz and Ossetians were interested in distancing themselves as far as possible from the other side. If the Georgian authorities attempted to impose their own preconditions for meetings, the Abkhaz and Ossetians would be only too pleased to reject them. The onus was on Georgian politicians to decide for themselves whether or not a constant bilateral, informal political dialogue with leading Abkhaz and Ossetian politicians was necessary. If it was, they should have set up meetings with the Abkhaz and Ossetian representatives at whatever location the latter found acceptable, since the process was more in our interests than theirs. It was extremely counterproductive to impose a requirement that meetings with the separatists could only be held on Georgian territory. Unfortunately, these serious decisions were clearly taken and continue to be taken by individuals at the highest level, without any collective or expert discussion.

Version 2

With hindsight, the interruptions and obstacles to the informal peace process may be seen as an indication that the Georgian authorities were seriously considering the option of using force to resolve the conflict. This is brought up periodically by government representatives openly or in more guarded terms. One example is the statement by the head of the General Staff of the Georgia armed forces, Levan Nikoleishvili. In January 2006, he remarked: ‘Georgian peacebuilders will if necessary use the experience gained in Iraq to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.’⁴

If this version is to be believed – in other words, that the Georgian side was planning to escalate the “frozen conflict” at the time – then clearly it would not have been in the government’s interests to restore trust between the Georgians and the Abkhaz or Ossetians.

³ Interview, *Sakartvelos Respublika*, No. 81, 8th April 2005.

⁴ Interview is available in Russian at <http://www.apsny.ge/analytics/1137455619.php>.

If the sides had in fact succeeded in creating preconditions for a serious peace process through these regular informal meetings, any subsequent withdrawal by Georgia from that process might well have jeopardised the support given to the Georgian authorities by their allies and their own population. So, in this version of events, the Georgian government withdrew from the regular informal meetings in an attempt to avoid being held to account in the future by global public opinion and its own population.

If this version has some basis in fact, the government's behaviour at the time is entirely logical. It preferred to continue a policy of "megaphone diplomacy"⁵ in relation to the separatist leaders, so that the lack of progress on conflict resolution could be used as a pretext to place the blame on the separatists. This would then be grounds for claiming that resolution of the problem by military means was the only option left open to them. In this view, the sabotaging of the Schlaining Process can be seen as an indicator that we were on the way to war.

Version 3

Some readers may be surprised to hear what sounds like a classic conspiracy theory from the author of this chapter, who has always emphasised Georgia's responsibility for stoking the conflict. However, it is possible that the "Russian factor" also played a part. It is no secret that Russia adopted a challenging position on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and the methods it used to advance its goals were certainly lacking in political correctness. If there is any external power with no interest in the success of regular bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian meetings, that power can only be Russia. The Roman law principle of "*cui bono*" states that any investigation of cause and effect in a situation should start by considering who stands to benefit from it.

This requires us to consider how Russia could have influenced Georgian policy. Mikheil Saakashvili's aggressive statements regarding Russia are well known. But in that case, how could the "Russian factor" influence the Georgian president? It is difficult to identify with any certainty specific Georgian politicians who are lobbying for Russian state interests in the Georgian parliament. It is all too easy to draw the wrong conclusions by extrapolating in the absence of any hard evidence, and so we will not develop this version any further. However, as an illustration of how Russia is playing along with Georgia, it is worth quoting the words from a speech made by President Saakashvili on 4th December 2007: 'So we are talking in fact about a short period. Even the Russians have repeatedly agreed that South Ossetia is no longer of any interest to them. They have agreed.'⁶

⁵ This means when the sides only communicate via televised speeches and official statements.

⁶ 'S.Ossetia a Matter of, at Most, Months' – Saakashvili', *Civil Georgia*, 4th December 2007. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16489&search=>.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight that regular bilateral dialogue between the conflicting sides was and remains one of the most effective means of weakening Russian influence and preventing Russia from achieving its aims in Georgia.

Version 4

This version of events refers to the weakening of the civil sector's role in the peace process in order to discredit it. In fact, government representatives generally withdrew from meetings a few days before they started, when it was virtually impossible for the coordinators to take steps to address the situation. If the government representatives had really wanted to stop the process, they could have refused to participate from the outset. However, the authorities may have been pursuing a deliberate, perhaps covert, policy of preventing any position from emerging that would be acceptable to both the Georgian and the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides by first announcing their willingness to attend the meetings but then withdrawing at the very last moment. This may have sought to create the appearance that the informal bilateral meetings initiated by the non-governmental sector were badly organised and that the organisations running them were unreliable. Another possibility is that the authorities were aiming to discredit the process in the eyes of the donors and organisers of the dialogue, so that they would ultimately withdraw funding from projects of this kind.

Version 5

It is possible that the authorities were acting in support of their own bilateral contacts with the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides. However, if they understood the need for such dialogue, it would surely have been more consistent to make use of any other meetings to obtain additional information and to check the information they already had, rather than placing obstacles in their way. We are therefore inclined to believe that no such contacts existed. If indeed there had been, those privy to information in this field would almost certainly have got wind of it. However, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the level of confidentiality was so high that these contacts were kept completely secret.

It is in fact quite possible that there were contacts with the Ossetian side prior to the creation of Dmitry Sanakoev's temporary administration on the territory of the former South Ossetian autonomous region in order to act as a counterweight to Russian influence and provide evidence that not all of the population of South Ossetia supported the separatists. Ultimately, this escalated the conflict, reinforced the perceived threat by Georgia and pushed the inhabitants of South Ossetia even more towards Russia. As time went on, it became clear that these contacts did not lead to peaceful conflict resolution, but rather exacerbated the conflict.

5. After the war: what now?

Whatever the actual causes of its demise were, the Schlaining Process should not have been abandoned. It is quite clear that government representatives are not currently willing to participate in similar processes, which continue today exclusively in the form of meetings between civil society representatives.

All our attempts to accommodate the ruling party's changing policies towards the peace process have so far been met with blank indifference. Since the authorities refuse to collaborate with us, we feel justified in the interests of Georgian society to involve experts and representatives of the political opposition in the process. Even if the authorities continue their familiar policy of indifference to these meetings, the meetings will nevertheless continue at least in a formal sense and give opposition representatives more opportunities to provide the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides with information and proposals of importance to them. At the same time, we should always leave the door open for government representatives to engage with the process at any time or to use the resources of civil society to develop other acceptable formats.

6. Conclusion

The problems in the peace process, including the Schlaining Process in which representatives of civil society took an active role, reflected the rising threat of war. Civil society's fears on this score were borne out by the events of August 2008.

People often criticise us for not being able to stop the war. However, we can hardly be expected to act as fire-fighters or an alert system. It is our view that the search for an acceptable format must go on, so that projects such as the Schlaining Process continue.

Unfortunately, developments in the conflict have also changed the international community's attitude to peacebuilding projects. It no longer treats them seriously. Nevertheless, if it was to listen more closely to what was said within the Schlaining Process, to the alarm expressed by those involved at the time, then it would realise that its sceptical attitude in recent times to peacebuilding projects is not justified.

The international community could, in our view, make a significant contribution to the peace process by convincing the Georgian authorities of the need for bilateral collaboration and encouraging them to acknowledge their mistakes in this regard.

PART 3

Permanent Conference as Mediation

CHAPTER 6

Building and Sustaining a Permanent Conference

Paula Garb

1. How the project was conceived

In the summer of 1995, I travelled to Abkhazia with a group of colleagues from the University of California Irvine (UCI) and from the Carter Center's programme on conflict resolution to conduct a workshop on conflict resolution theory and practice. Regarding my own background, I had done anthropological fieldwork in Abkhazia in the 1970s and 1980s, establishing close ties with local academics, and I wanted to introduce them to current developments in the conflict resolution field. My desire was to give back to the people and communities who had been so hospitable to me and who had so generously shared with me their indigenous conflict resolution practices for my earlier research. Now, my close friends and colleagues were struggling to recover from a devastating war with few resources. The workshop was for local academics, politicians, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), people who had become disconnected from their professional networks across the former Soviet Union by the breakup of the Soviet Union and by the war. The host was Abkhazia's first post-war civil society organisation, the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes.

At the final session of the three-day workshop, the topic of discussion was positions versus interests in conflict and how looking for underlying interests can move peace negotiations out of a deadlock. To my surprise and that of my colleagues, during a brainstorming session to identify the interests of both sides, the workshop participants showed an appreciation for the interests of the Georgian side of the conflict. Afterwards, when we asked our Abkhaz hosts if they wanted to further explore these issues in a dialogue with their Georgian counterparts in civil society NGOs, they were hesitant, but open to further discussions about the idea and its possible implementation.

I was excited and inspired to make plans for such a dialogue, but also apprehensive. I knew I had to make progress slowly, being aware of the strong resistance among many Abkhaz to engage with Georgians in any way. The wounds of war were so fresh. But the leaders of a burgeoning civil society believed it was necessary to meet with Georgians to ensure a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Some had already done so through the efforts of International Alert, Conciliation Resources, the University of Maryland, College Park and a few other international peacebuilding organisations. Subsequently, however, these same Abkhaz had refused to meet with Georgians outside of an all-Caucasus context. These considerations led my colleagues and me at UCI, between 1996 and 1998, to organise parallel meetings of Georgians and Abkhaz to assess the possibilities for face-to-face bilateral meetings. We believed that bilateral meetings were just as important as all-Caucasus projects. The parallel meetings were held in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i within days of each other. My UCI colleagues and I carried the content of those conversations back and forth across the conflict, trying to build trust.

The first opportunity for a face-to-face bilateral meeting was in February 1998, when we brought two Black Sea environmental scientists from Abkhazia and Georgia to meet with their US counterparts at a conference we organised at UCI. This meeting formally launched the series of conferences that continue to the present and which have been referred to as a “permanent conference”.¹ That meeting, however, was the last one that focused on environmental issues. By August 1999, we had held eight parallel meetings and four joint conferences – that is, in February and September 1998, and in March and August 1999. Two of the joint conferences were held in Sochi, Russia (for both sides this was the closest site outside the conflict zone), one was in Moscow, Russia, and the first one already mentioned was held at UCI in Irvine, California.

Initial funding came from UCI sources, then from the Winston Foundation for World Peace. The big breakthrough in funding came when the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation approved two-year funding for dialogue meetings and related research; this funding was subsequently renewed for several more years, until 2006. This generous funding enabled us to convene Georgian-Abkhaz conferences that resulted in the series of conference proceedings known as *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*. At the time of writing, there are 16 volumes in this series, each focusing on a distinctive set of topics chosen by the Abkhaz and Georgian participants together with the organisers.²

Our purpose in organising these conferences was to provide a forum where intellectuals in both societies could explore topics of mutual interest in a safe and open environment. It had been several years since academic conferences were held in the region. Therefore, even Abkhaz who had no incentive to meet with Georgians to engage in dialogue with people on the other side of the conflict were willing to participate in an academic conference on topical issues. The initial topics were environmental research on Black Sea degradation, indigenous traditions of peacebuilding, best practices in civil society development, the role that citizen peacebuilding could play in resolving the conflict peacefully, and the efficacy of such citizen-led initiatives.

As mentioned, the Abkhaz were a close circle of friends and colleagues I had known while doing my early anthropology research in the region. We identified Georgian counterparts based on recommendations from Abkhaz partners, and afterwards based on recommendations from our newly identified Georgian partners. We chose people from the middle level of society following Lederach’s theory (1997) that peace initiatives involving people in the middle level of society have the greatest traction because middle-level actors have influence in the grassroots as well as at the highest political levels. We also selected participants for their ability to be good listeners. Western partners in the

¹ In Russian “*postoyannaya deistvuyushchaya konferentsia*”.

² These proceedings are published in Russian, partially in English, and can be downloaded at http://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub. The list of conference proceedings and the topics discussed is also provided on the last page of this chapter.

project were colleagues at UCI – John Whiteley, Joseph DiMento and Amy Stafford – and colleagues at other institutions – Susan Allen Nan (George Mason University’s Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution) and Jay Rothman (Aria Group).

2. How the project evolved

In the first two years of the project, we used a systematic evaluation method to elicit everyone’s goals in participating, and to track changes in those goals. The method is called Action Evaluation, developed by Jay Rothman. The purpose of this evaluation method is not only to determine the shared and contrasting goals of the participants, including those of the facilitators. It also acts as a tool for team building and conflict resolution, by providing a constructive process of making these goals explicit to each other. Since the beginning of the project, the vast majority of participants have expressed the following shared objectives:

- To ensure a forum where participants could exchange information, so that they could be better informed about public opinion in each other’s communities, and about political and socio-economic developments;
- To ensure a forum for frank discussion about all aspects of the conflict – the causes, consequences and its resolution;
- To publish complete proceedings of these discussions to make the entire process transparent and available to everyone in each other’s communities;
- To develop a constituency for peaceful resolution of the conflict in both communities.

The key contrasting objectives were that the Abkhaz openly supported Abkhazia’s full independence, while Georgian participants preferred that Abkhazia be part of Georgia. Some Georgian participants said that if Abkhazia’s return to Georgian jurisdiction would jeopardise Georgia’s democratic development because of the potential need to use violence to maintain this control, they valued democracy over the reintegration of Abkhazia. It appeared that there were shades of difference among the Georgians regarding the reintegration of Abkhazia, under what conditions and for what purposes. The Abkhaz participants were unequivocal and open about their advocacy for independence.

The objectives of the project facilitators since the beginning of the project have been, on the one hand, to promote constructive dialogue between citizens on both sides of the conflict. At the same time, they have sought to help project participants achieve their goals of ensuring constructive dialogue and action towards a peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Shifts in scope

Over the course of the project, there were significant shifts in terms of the scope and direction of our work – albeit not in the four modest shared objectives identified earlier. Funding was the pivotal factor in determining the scope of our work. Seed money from UCI provided the necessary funds for the facilitators to travel from California to Tbilisi and Sukhum/i for exploratory conversations with potential partners to elicit their willingness to engage and their vision of how to begin. This enabled us to develop a project proposal for dialogue around civil society development that found support from the Winston Foundation for World Peace. That work laid the foundation for the major breakthrough in funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to support a multi-year project involving several meetings a year, the writing and publication of conference proceedings, and research.

A shift in the content of the conversations occurred in August 1999 at a conference we held in Konobeevo, Russia. This meeting took place after 14 parallel meetings, beginning in 1998 and 1999, and five joint conferences. The conference was held near the end of the second year of the Hewlett funded project, which was preceded by multiple parallel meetings that set the firm groundwork for the Hewlett funded project. Until the Konobeevo conference, the Georgians and the Abkhaz deliberately avoided any serious conversations about how they saw the roots of the conflict and all the major events leading up to the armed conflict of 1992–1993, the armed conflict itself, and the aftermath. There had been no formal discussion of grievances against the other side. At Konobeevo, Arda Inal-Ipa's presentation, *The Issue of Land and other Problems in Resolving the Abkhaz-Georgian Conflict*, opened up this subject. This led to a floodgate of emotions and grievances that participants from both communities expressed passionately. The initial conversations were heated and appeared to be leading to a deadlock in our process.

We came through this critical moment, however, for several reasons. Firstly, in all of the previous meetings, relationships had developed that proved strong enough to not only allow people to be honest with each other about their grievances; it also enabled them to stay with the difficult conversations long enough to emerge from them with relationships intact. Secondly, even though people appeared to be upset with each other when the conversation had to be ended because of the late hour (around 11pm), we decided against going back to our rooms alone; instead, we went as a group to one of the cottages where everyone could stay together for an informal conversation that was not about the conflict. This had been our tradition from previous conferences. That late-night gathering broke the ice and healed the wounds of what had been a most difficult conversation.

When we began the conference session the next morning, we resumed that discussion without the animosity of the previous evening. From that point on, whether participants

were veterans or new to the project, they were always able to face their differences openly and talk about them constructively. This is evident in reading all the conference proceedings, starting from the second volume representing the Konobeevo conference.

This success shifted the goals of the project directly into the realm of policy analysis. We had, in fact, deliberately avoided this until Konobeevo, fearing that going into the realm of politics would derail the dialogue. The most immediate results of this shift in goals and the sense that we had built a strong foundation of relationships were seen: (1) in December 1999, when three Tbilisi participants went to Abkhazia to be the first Georgians to address a public meeting in the six-and-a-half years since the fighting ceased; and (2) in December 2000, when four Abkhaz went to Tbilisi to address public forums (see Volume 3 in the series *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*).

Policy-oriented conferences

These breakthroughs led to two important policy-oriented conferences. The first was held on 19th–23rd March 2001 in Sochi, Russia. The 14 participants discussed the following topics: (1) A Stability Pact for the Caucasus; (2) An analysis of the interests of the parties in conflict; (3) Approaches to developing interim agreements; and (4) Peacebuilding strategies. This was the first time that we invited an outside expert to participate in the conference. Our guest was John Paul Lederach, an internationally known author on the theory and practice of citizen peacebuilding. We asked him to comment on our project goals and activities, and to make presentations on developing peacebuilding strategies and analysing conflicts. Lederach's presentations prompted lively discussion on the application of his concepts and methodology. His remarks along with all the paper presentations and discussions were published in the conference proceedings, Volume 7.

The second policy-oriented conference was held on 20th–25th August 2001, also in Sochi, Russia. The topic was 'An Analysis of the Parties' Underlying Interests towards Developing Viable Models of Relations'. The goal was to analyse the interests of the parties in conflict; then, based on an understanding of those interests, a discussion would begin to develop some interim, short-term solutions that could build trust in the process of finding long-term conflict solutions. This was the first time that analysts either at the official or unofficial level of peacebuilding discussions had undertaken a serious examination of the parties' underlying interests. Dieter Boden, the then Special Representative to Georgia from the UN Secretary-General, expressed particular approval of and interest in this undertaking.

A few months before this conference was held, the Abkhaz authorities had granted permission for the first time to hold our regular summer dialogue conference on Abkhaz territory. However, that permission was withdrawn just before our conference was to be held, due to the military escalation that began in July and that was leading to rising

tensions between the two sides and to disruption of the peace talks. Therefore, this conference was held instead in Russia, as close to Abkhazia as possible. The transcript of the paper presentations and discussions was published as the eighth volume of conference proceedings.

Coordination network

Around this same time, the project participants added another goal – to facilitate collaboration of all citizen peacebuilding projects by building a coordination network. We hoped that this would enhance all of our efforts, helping us to complement each other's work for maximum benefit towards our common goal – to end the conflict peacefully. The coordination network quickly evolved into dynamic working relationships among the peacebuilders. This involved shared information, shared analysis, coordination of separate work, resource sharing and collaboration on joint work.

Over a three-year period alone (2000–2003), we facilitated seven major coordination meetings, dozens of email exchanges, and several conference calls among local and international organisations working on Abkhaz-Georgian peacebuilding initiatives. The purpose was to keep abreast of each other's project activities and of our different perspectives on the peace project. At the same time, we sought to explore how we could be supportive of each other's work and to encourage complementarity of our multiple efforts. By working with other organisations, we were enhancing the potential to constructively impact the conflict more quickly. This also enabled us to provide the international community with an effective model of cross-project collaboration. One of the most significant results of these efforts to coordinate all the peacebuilding projects underway in the region was that when the Hewlett Foundation ended its emphasis on international conflict resolution work and the UCI project had increasingly fewer resources to conduct its work in the region, colleagues from other organisations helped to sustain the UCI project to this day. These organisations are the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Conciliation Resources and International Alert. Details about the evolution of this coordination effort and lessons learnt can be found in a publication by Paula Garb and Susan Allen Nan.³ Since 2003, the above-named organisations have co-organised and co-funded all of the conferences.

3. Conclusion

This project has achieved its main goals – the four shared goals outlined earlier in the article. We have ensured a regular forum where participants can exchange information

3 P. Garb and S. Allen Nan [2006]. 'Negotiating in a Coordination Network of Citizen Peacebuilding Initiatives in the Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process', *International Negotiation*, Volume 11, No. 1.

to be better informed about public opinion in each other's communities, and about political and socio-economic developments. We have facilitated a forum for frank discussion about all aspects of the conflict – the causes, consequences and its resolution. The results of these open and in-depth discussions are published as complete conference proceedings that make the entire process transparent and available to everyone in each other's communities. Finally, we have developed a constituency for peaceful resolution of the conflict in both communities. Admittedly, it is a small community, a community that has still not impacted the policymakers in any significant way, locally or internationally. This constituency, however, is stable and has the potential to grow. What follows is a summary of the indicators of these achievements.

From March 1999 to August 2010, at the time of this writing, the project has conducted 16 major dialogue conferences. The 17th conference was set to take place before the end of 2010 and was in the planning stages. At least that many working meetings of the project's leadership have been organised between those major conferences. Due to the consistent organisation of these conferences for over a decade, participants have referred to the meetings as a "permanent conference". Clearly, the project has become a permanent fixture in peacebuilding efforts in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Veteran project participants look forward to each conference. In fact, we frequently receive requests from civil society actors who want to participate for the first time, because this is a forum where they can get first-hand analysis of developments on the other side of the conflict. This is because they can be heard, not only at the conference, but also in their published presentations and comments circulated around the region and available online.

Another tangible and permanent result of the project is the publication of all conference papers and discussions in their entirety.⁴ The topics include the development of civil society in post-Soviet societies, the role of civil society in peacebuilding, the Russian factor in the conflict, the role of the EU and NATO in the conflict, and options for resolution of the issues of political status and the return of refugees.

The number of people from Abkhaz and Georgian communities who have participated in this project is close to 100 persons. The project leaders estimate that around 9,000 people in these communities may have heard about the conferences directly from the participants or from seeing or reading one or more of the 16 published conference proceedings.

As for the goal of building a constituency for peaceful resolution of the conflict, the indicator in both communities is that the direct participants in this permanent conference and the many individuals they influence inside and outside of government

⁴ These proceedings are published in Russian, partially in English, and can be downloaded at http://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub. The list of conference proceedings and the topics discussed is also provided on the last page of this chapter.

constitute what John Paul Lederach refers to as “critical yeast”.⁵ Lederach developed his critical yeast theory out of recognition that mobilising a critical mass for peace is next to impossible in a conflict zone, where there has been violence and the potential for more violence persists. Critical yeast is not only possible but also necessary to grow in a conflict zone. Only a few extraordinary individuals on each side of such a conflict have the credibility and respect in their communities to be willing and able to meet and listen to the other side, and to return home and be heard. Attempts can be made to ostracise and marginalise these people. However, because of their integrity and high standing in their communities, they cannot be shut down.

The “critical yeast” we developed over the decade before the South Ossetian war of 2008 did not deteriorate, even in the extremely unfavourable climate of the war. All the Georgian-Abkhaz projects, including the UCI process, survived the crisis of August 2008, fully intact. To my knowledge, we did not lose one granule of that yeast. It was gratifying to see that participants in this process across the conflict were actively communicating with each other from the first 24 hours of the outbreak of violence in South Ossetia in early August 2008. Many of the veterans met in third countries as soon as it was possible to fund and organise such meetings. This allowed them to continue planning and organising projects to promote peaceful resolution of the conflict and credible information sharing. There continues to be strong commitment in both peacebuilding communities to keep talking and disseminating the results of these conversations within their communities and to international actors. Project participants in Abkhazia and Georgia continue to work on the UCI-initiated project – organising and attending conferences, transcribing, editing and publishing the volumes – although no funding remains to pay for their time spent carrying out these activities.

Formation of a coordination network of local and international peacebuilders is also part of the critical yeast that continues to operate collaboratively. This book project and related meetings of local and international peacebuilders is one of many examples of the trust and respect we share. It is in contrast to the initial concerns about competition that characterised relations among international peacebuilders in the very early and mid-1990s, when we began our various projects in isolation from one another. The coordination participants built relationships and a culture of coordination that helped the members of the network move from simple information sharing, to resource sharing, to joint strategy development, joint dialogue conferences and joint projects, such as those highlighted in this chapter and throughout the book. This chapter is being written at a time when the project has no funding, but continues to operate on volunteer labour by our partners in Georgia and Abkhazia and on funding from other peacebuilding organisations for a minimum of one dialogue conference a year and the resulting publication. All of the project facilitators and most of the Georgian and Abkhaz participants still maintain a

5 J.P. Lederach (2005). *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

strong commitment to contribute to the citizen peacebuilding efforts, despite the ups and downs of the political context. All of us who have been doing this work to promote dialogue and conflict resolution for so many years are committed to continuing our work, no matter what the obstacles. We are not going to go away. We may be short on funding, but not on commitment. As Margaret Mead, the American anthropologist, once said: ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.’

List of Publications

Volumes 1-16 of the series *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*

- Volume 1 – *Testing Assumptions about Unofficial Diplomacy: The Perspectives of Citizen Participants*, March 1999
- Volume 2 – *Proceedings from a Georgian-Abkhaz Conference*, August 1999
- Volume 3 – *Transcripts of Georgian-Abkhaz Meetings and Georgian TV Programmes on the Abkhaz Issue*, December 1999–January 2000
- Volume 4 – *Civil Society, Refugees and State Structure*, 25th–26th March 2000
- Volume 5 – *Cultural Continuity in the Context of Statebuilding*, 26th–28th August 2000
- Volume 6 – *Tbilisi Meetings*, October–December 2000
- Volume 7 – *The Caucasus Stability Pact and Peacebuilding Strategies*, 19th–23rd March 2001
- Volume 8 – *The Caucasus Stability Pact and Peacebuilding Strategies*, 20th–25th August 2001
- Volume 9 – *Initial Summaries*, 4th–8th July 2002
- Volume 10 – *A Time of Change*, 2003–2004
- Volume 11 – *The Russian Factor*, 21st–22nd June 2004
- Volume 12 – *Russia’s Role: Realities and Myths*, 28th–29th June 2005
- Volume 13 – *Prospects for Georgia and Abkhazia in the Context of Black Sea Integration*, 24th–27th June 2006
- Volume 14 – *Georgian NATO Accession and Potential Impacts on the Georgian-Abkhaz Peace Process*, 12th–15th June 2007
- Volume 15 – *The Georgian-Abkhaz Case in a European Context*, 18th–19th June 2008
- Volume 16 – *Civil Society and the Peace Process*, 4th–6th June 2009

CHAPTER 7

The University of California (Irvine) Georgian-Abkhaz Civil Dialogue Process: A Georgian Perspective

Nodar Sarjveladze

1. Introduction

For the past 14 years, I have been actively engaged in people-to-people diplomacy as part of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian dialogue process. Despite my commitment to and close involvement in the peacebuilding and conflict transformation process, I have mixed feelings about it. This has sometimes discouraged (and occasionally encouraged) me in the search for new ways of restoring or improving relations between the conflicting sides. I keep coming back to fundamental and well-known questions on peacebuilding such as ‘What is it for?’, ‘Is there any point to it?’ and, if so, ‘What?’

I cannot speak for our Abkhaz and Ossetian colleagues, but I think the Georgian participants have been disappointed with the results of people-to-people diplomacy, since it has failed to persuade the Georgian government to adopt the right policy in terms of conflict transformation.

I therefore begin this evaluation of the University of California, Irvine (UCI) project on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict by considering the purpose of this project, which has been of such significance for me personally.

2. Purpose of the project

It took me some time to understand what the purpose of the project was. Our work on the psycho-social rehabilitation of refugees, which we have been carrying out since 1996, had shown us that for the refugees themselves the issue was not just about returning home but something far wider: how to resolve the conflict and create the conditions for the reconciliation of the Georgians and the Abkhaz, despite the bloodshed. Therefore, reconciliation was an issue raised spontaneously by the refugees themselves.

It was around the same time, 1996, that Professor Paula Garb of UCI and her colleagues arrived, intending to launch a Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue. As they made contact with various people, including me, the idea emerged of arranging a meeting with the Abkhaz side. However, we first had to identify whether our society was ready for people-to-people diplomacy meetings with the Abkhaz. With this in mind, I began holding focus groups attended by representatives from the few NGOs present in Georgia at the time. These included Sasha Rusetsky, Paata Zakareishvili and Goga Khutsishvili.

Out of these focus groups emerged the idea of holding a Georgian-Abkhaz people-to-people diplomacy meeting on the position of the Black Sea coast (along the lines of the Israeli-Palestinian coastline project). The late Shalva Dzhaoshvili joined the project as a geographer, and Professor Garb arranged for the ecologist Roman Dbar to participate from the Abkhaz side. Four people from the Abkhaz side and four people from the

Georgian side joined the project. Working in parallel with an Abkhaz psychologist, Arda Inal-Ipa planned holding a survey in Georgia and Abkhazia on the meeting between Georgia's then President, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Abkhazia's first President, Vladislav Ardzinba, which had taken place that year. This rapid research and the exchange of results were the first token of a burgeoning collaboration. They also marked my own debut in a career in people-to-people diplomacy. At that time, my own role in the project was very specific – helping Georgian refugees gain access to their homes in Abkhazia. Even before the project started, my work with refugees had convinced me that their main concern was not so much to restore territorial integrity, or to define status, etc., as simply to return to Abkhazia.

I joined the project out of a desire to help people live where they wanted. The Abkhaz side will doubtless have had its own reasons for joining the project. One of the procedures used in the project and developed by Professor Garb is interesting in this regard. At the start of every meeting, all participants were asked what their short-term and long-term aims were and what their motivation was for taking part in the process. Each of us actually reformulated our purpose and motives from meeting to meeting. Defining the purpose of the project by encouraging participants to redefine their reason for attending thus became an integral part of the meeting process. Indeed, the reasons varied not only between the Abkhaz and the Georgians, but even between each individual participant.

The project had its own trajectory, as the books published after each meeting clearly show. The first book covered opportunities for people-to-people diplomacy, and people-to-people diplomacy itself was conceived as a means of reconciliation and conflict resolution. In other words, the project's core purpose was defined as to resolve conflict by reconciling former enemies. As one of the participants from the Georgian side, this was also my own view of the project.

3. Selection of project participants

By my calculations, up to 100 people have been involved in the project in total. Some participants, including me, made up a kind of “anchor group” – a nucleus around which Georgian participants clustered at each meeting. There were no particular “filters” used to select participants, but there was a relatively simple rotation procedure: the participants gradually came to comprise all categories of people – refugees, representatives of various groups and various professions. It was of course not possible to cover everyone, but there was a rotation system.

4. Risks and concerns

It is difficult to talk about the risks associated with the project. Our meetings consisted of two parts: dialogue on previously agreed topics (16 volumes of the transcripts of these meetings have already been published); and planning of the topics for discussion at the next meeting.

This advance planning helped to reduce specific risks and those that remained related mainly to general risks. Such risks included an escalation of the conflict, resumption of the war, and the negative or cautious attitude of the Georgian or Abkhaz establishment to representatives of civil society or participants in the people-to-people diplomacy meetings.

5. An impartial mediator

Professor Garb, a highly experienced and skilled facilitator, was hugely important in ensuring that the mediators were impartial. In the early stages, she herself led the process but then delegated it fully to Georgian and Abkhaz facilitators – namely, the project coordinators Paata Zakareishvili and Arda Inal-Ipa, who ran meetings on an equal footing basis. Professor Garb listened closely to the process without acting as a facilitator. In fact, she was like an active facilitator but “without becoming actively involved”. This was the key to her impartiality. Trust in Professor Garb built up trust between the sides and participants.

6. Were expectations met?

The UCI project was a self-organising process and we referred to its meetings as “ongoing people-to-people diplomacy conferences”. Although we were small in number, we gave addresses, prepared for the meeting, developed papers, recruited new participants and then held discussions on the topics. The project was oriented to a process and a product, which in this case was 16 solid volumes of the publication *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*.

Despite these efforts, in my view, the expectations of the Georgian participants were not ultimately met since they were unrealistic. The real situation changed so dramatically that quite the reverse occurred and our very worst fears were borne out: the 2008 war led not only to Abkhazia entirely rejecting Georgia, but also to new Russian military bases being deployed in Abkhazia. This confirmed the idea actively supported by Georgian nationalists since the 1990s that it was Russia that was “behind it all”.

In the aftermath of the 2008 war, there was no question of any of the expectations of people-to-people diplomacy being met. I was deeply disappointed with the people-to-people diplomacy process itself. I was convinced that there is little we can do once *realpolitik* kicks in, along with the huge structures of the military industrial complex in a number of countries – that huge military industry which exists not only in the world as a whole, but also in Georgia and Abkhazia.

The UCI project led by Professor Garb was put on hold and it is difficult to say anything about its results.

The results of the development of the political situation, on which the project was incapable of having any significant impact, are clear: Abkhazia is under Russian domination and Georgia has lost territory. Moreover, my dream – more precisely, my profound misapprehension – of the refugees returning home has remained a dream.

7. Personal experience gained

On the whole, the personal experience gained has been reduced to participation without results. I am particularly disappointed with myself: I should not have set such high expectations for my participation in a project which in fact turned out to be “a process for process’ sake”. If the project were to start up again, I would only take part if it was designed around a specific outcome. Then again, as a psychologist, I cannot remain indifferent to crucial aspects of human existence such as war and peace, suffering, people’s hopes and the pursuit of happiness.

8. Lessons learnt

When we talk of lessons learnt, we usually mean constructive conclusions. However, the lesson I have personally drawn from the project is that people-to-people diplomacy is sustained not only by sincere motivation and a search for a way out of a difficult situation. It is also sustained by sincerely held illusions – the kind of illusions that are often entertained by sincere people. People-to-people diplomacy is thus utopian, to say the least.

In fact, there is even a view expressed in Georgian public and political discourse that these meetings actually reinforce the Abkhaz national project and undermine the Georgian one. According to this view, the Abkhaz partners are using their participation to achieve their aim of Abkhaz independence. They support this view by citing the fact that Abkhaz participants in the project skilfully coordinate their actions with their government, an option not available to the Georgian participants. For me personally, the priority and

reason for participating was to relieve people's suffering. I was far less interested in Abkhaz sovereignty. But in any case, I cannot see how implementing this project – apart from establishing human relations between Georgian and Abkhaz participants – has led to any institutionalised mechanisms for interaction between the parties in terms of conflict transformation.

Moreover, people-to-people diplomacy does not influence decision makers in practice. The effectiveness of people-to-people diplomacy is a separate topic. What is clear, however, is that any attempt to promote an idea, however high-minded, requires extensive knowledge of the specific situation if it is to succeed. Either that or the people-to-people diplomacy movement needs a charismatic leader on the scale of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others. This has made me question whether I am qualified to meet the challenges involved in people-to-people diplomacy.

CHAPTER 8

The University of California (Irvine) Georgian-Abkhaz Civil Dialogue Process: An Abkhaz Perspective

Arda Inal-Ipa

1. Context

The Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 came about, in my view, not only as a result of decades of ethno-political conflict. From 1988 or earlier, “*perestroika*” had brought freedom of speech to the various constituent peoples of the USSR. The next four years saw all imaginable (and unimaginable) negative stereotypes, prejudices and myths about each other being splashed across TV screens and on the pages of newspapers and journals. Supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia – the leader of the Georgian national movement – were particularly adept at publishing articles insulting the Abkhaz people. Gamsakhurdia explicitly set out his strategy of an ideological struggle with the Abkhaz in a manual for Georgians living in “north-western Georgia”, the term he and his followers used to refer to Abkhazia.

Anyone unfamiliar with the articles published at the time – denying the existence of a separate Abkhaz people and their history or culture, and referring to them as barbarians who seized Georgian land – will find it difficult to understand the resentment that still persists between the Georgian and Abkhaz people. But ordinary people do not simply take up arms against one another. A classic psychological campaign of disinformation was deliberately launched to manipulate public attitudes, deepen the conflict and prepare for war. Once hostilities or open warfare are triggered, the damage to relations between peoples is, of course, incomparably greater. Trust is shattered regardless of how long a war lasts, whether it is a war lasting 13 long months or five days. In our case, we experienced a two-pronged attack: propaganda followed by all-out war, making it extremely difficult to restore peace, not only in political terms, but also in terms of normal human relations. In the current extremely unfavourable situation, the process of achieving mutual understanding will take much longer than the “acute phase” of the conflict, including the war, as we edge towards an objective view, analyse the roots of the conflict, separate myths from reality, and acknowledge one another’s concerns, grievances and aspirations.

Such a process would be impossible without a dedicated system of communication, as the war destroyed virtually all normal forms of interaction between academics, journalists and public figures. A project set up by the University of California, Irvine (UCI) did in fact create the conditions required for organising and maintaining a Georgian-Abkhaz civil dialogue over many years. This project addressed the war’s antecedents, post-war realities and future prospects.

2. A brief overview of the foundations of the process

As the conflict escalated in 1988–1989, but before it entered the stage of open warfare, it was already clear that there was a need for representatives of the Georgian and Abkhaz public to hold roundtable discussions on key issues. A number of attempts were made during these years to organise public meetings, with mixed success. Later on, in 1992–1993, by which time the war was already raging, some meetings were held between academics in Moscow.

After the end of the war, from 1995 onwards, Professor Paula Garb of UCI visited the region on a number of occasions and met with representatives of the authorities and civil society in Abkhazia and Georgia to discuss the possibility of holding bilateral discussions. From 1997 onwards, such conferences were already a regular feature as part of a project supported by UCI. At the first meetings, practically every sensitive topic prompted detailed debate, whether on geographical names, historical events in the recent and distant past, demography, economics or politics. Many facts discounted or ignored by one side, or simply unknown to them, had to be continually clarified. Much time was also spent on identifying what lay behind the radically differing interpretations of specific events.

Discussions focused not only on the causes of the conflict and the current situation. They also explored the prospects for transformation of the conflict and what was needed to avoid a resumption of hostilities. Participants saw one of their tasks as assessing the potential impact of unofficial civil diplomacy on the process of conflict transformation and a political settlement. Discussions also regularly covered domestic issues, such as the development of civil society and other democratic institutions.

In the beginning, the process was more structured. The participants started each meeting by stating their motives for participating in the dialogue and outlining what they saw to be the short-term and long-term goals of the process. The research component was crucial as it lent a degree of academic respectability to the proceedings, although this was limited by the sensitivity of the issues under discussion, given the conflict situation. Some meetings were designed and run as academic conferences on a chosen topic, with prepared lectures given by participants from both sides and occasionally by international experts. Other meetings focused more on discussion and analysis of current events in the region. The result was a dialogue that combined the academic community and civil society. The project participants felt that the dialogue process needed to be as transparent as possible. As a result, from 1990, all of the conference materials were published; indeed, from the second edition onwards, the publication *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict* contained not only the lectures, but also verbatim records of the discussions.¹

¹ *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, Volumes 1–15, 1999 to 2008. Available at http://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.

3. Objectives of the project

The principal objective of the project, and one shared by virtually all of the participants, was to contribute to the conflict transformation process by maintaining a sustained bilateral dialogue. The participants insisted that dialogue itself had the potential to build peace, defining peace not only as a void or the absence of war, but also viewing it as something actively embodied in defined mechanisms and processes – including communication, exchange of opinions, and attempts by each side to acknowledge and understand one another’s concerns and interests.

Conflict studies purport that maintaining permanent communications is essential for preventing escalation of a conflict and for avoiding a descent into the use of force to resolve it. Without the communication channels that were kept open almost constantly through the civil society dialogues, I am sure that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict would have escalated even further. It was crucial to keep some sort of communication channel open to maintain the connection between the two hostile societies. Use of this channel prevented either side’s view of the other from diverging too far from reality, thus reining in each side’s own fears and expectations. This channel enabled each side to see through the disinformation that might otherwise exacerbate already hostile relations.

Another crucial aspect was that we were able to obtain information first hand. This allowed us to build further dialogue on the basis of trust. It also enabled the discussions to focus on problems of real public concern in both countries. Obtaining information in this context meant not only listening to the news but also familiarising ourselves with analyses from other positions, allowing us to study the issue “in stereo”.

The project participants understood that external intervention can end wars. However, it is only through a society’s own efforts that disparities in perceptions of the causes of conflict can be addressed, trust restored, levels of aggression reduced, and stable and rational relations restored between societies. Bilateral processes can help to achieve progress towards this aim.

Another important aspect of the process was that it developed a highly effective model of inter-communication. Ground rules were established at the civil dialogue table between representatives of the conflicting sides. This laid the basis for a full and frank exchange of views. Respect for the other’s views, equal rights and equal opportunities for all participants to speak, as well as equal opportunities to be a facilitator of the discussion, all helped to reduce the level of nervousness and mistrust. A similar approach would perhaps be useful in high politics.

This project and a series of later peacebuilding projects also had another important function: by maintaining communication between researchers and civil society activists from both

sides committed to resolving the conflict exclusively by peaceful means, it gradually created a community of experts who thought and worked on conflict transformation issues. As a result of the constant dialogue, they remained unfettered by misrepresentations and national mythologising. Unfortunately, the full potential of this community remains unrealised, apart from the joint press briefings which helped to debunk misconceptions about the conflict and the current situation in Abkhazia and Georgia in the minds of diplomats and journalists of the different countries.

4. Selecting the participants

Careful recruitment was required to ensure the continuation of the process. Representatives from different social strata and political circles had participated in the dialogue from the start, and so it closely reflected the range of political views and opinions. However, the process was built mainly on representatives of civil society from Abkhazia and Georgia. Participants were required to have one thing in common, despite the disparities in their positions: a commitment to resolving the conflict by peaceful means and to democratic values overall. The project attracted people who were prepared to discuss complex and difficult issues calmly and soberly with representatives of the other side in the conflict. However, at each meeting it became increasingly clear that there was only a limited pool of people prepared to do this. Many people thought that it might actually be useful to meet people with a tougher stance, the so-called “hawks”, in order to understand the arguments put forward by those advocating resolving the conflict by violent means. Nevertheless, attempts to include such people in the project failed, as the “hawks” tended to deliver monologues, attending meetings to issue prepared statements, making speeches but not listening to others. In fact, any widening of the pool of participants was difficult as there were few candidates from either side interested in maintaining the dialogue. As a result, the pool was unfortunately kept relatively small, partly to prevent the collapse of the process and to avoid excluding interested and experienced participants. We always invited one or more new person to attend each meeting to avoid becoming too exclusive. We hoped the process would continue later on in this format, with a core of more experienced participants supplemented by new individuals joining at each meeting.

The first participants from the Abkhaz side were staff from Abkhaz NGOs working on conflict issues, along with journalists and academics. Over two years, participants were recruited on the basis of letters of application. The selection committee consisted of three persons, all employees of US universities with a close knowledge of the conflict. With many people attending more than one conference and workshop each, just over 40 people took part from the Abkhaz side over the whole period of continual dialogue. This is of course a small number. Although in some respects a disadvantage, it also worked in the project's favour by ensuring continuity and the accumulation of experience. Although a rotation of participants would extend the pool of people attached to the dialogue

process, it would also make it difficult to achieve the other objective of deepening the dialogue, advancing analysis and extending the number of topics under discussion.

5. Role of the mediators

All project participants remarked on the friendly tone in which the workshops were conducted. For this, they had to thank its leader, Professor Paula Garb. Professor Garb facilitated the first meetings and ran the discussion expertly, despite it not always being possible in advance to predict the way the conversation would go and how events would develop at the meeting. The flexible agenda and ground rules created a free, creative atmosphere. With her excellent knowledge of the context, her detailed understanding of the situation, her awareness of linguistic subtleties and her humour, Professor Garb was not viewed as an external facilitator. The process was also helped by Professor Garb's fluency in Russian, the language in which the discussions were conducted. No interpretation was needed, except where meetings were attended by external experts. All of these factors led to superb communication.

The lack of restrictions allowed a wide range of issues to be touched on. The atmosphere of goodwill created an excellent working environment in which participants could express sometimes challenging opinions on difficult issues.

As the meetings went on, Professor Garb gradually “faded into the background”, handing over the facilitator and chairing role to the coordinators or participants from both sides. This required them to take a wider view than an ordinary representative of one of the sides. I particularly recall my astonishment and even opposition when I was invited to act as a facilitator. I thought this was entirely artificial and clumsy. However, after just a little experience, I became skilled in the role, settling into it and feeling a sense of responsibility, not just to the participants, but to the process as a whole.

Professor Garb's approach contributed significantly to the success of the dialogue. Its success can also be attributed to the fact that no one was forcing the process, that the objective was not to achieve a result, come what may. Instead, the value of the process itself was constantly emphasised, enhanced by the fact that the project manager was objective and impartial on all issues. All of this naturally and imperceptibly created the conditions necessary for an open and free exchange of views in which any fears, proposals and new ideas could be voiced.

6. Some key characteristics of the process

A crucial characteristic of this project was that it did not impose rigid procedures; instead, it constantly developed and adapted the process. Although this meant that initial discussions tended to be relatively open, as time went on the meetings increasingly took the form of conferences focusing on a single topic of mutual interest. These topics progressed from relatively uncontentious issues, such as the environment or traditional forms of people-to-people diplomacy and mediation, to discussion on the “Russian factor” in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, or on the prospects of Georgia joining NATO.

From 2003, the meetings went beyond the bilateral format when the participants who had constantly raised issues regarding Russia’s role in the Caucasus thought that it would make sense to include representatives of the Russian side in the discussion. In later years, international experts were also invited, making an important contribution to the discussion on the various conference topics.

The diverging perceptions of the project between the two communities perhaps deserve separate mention. Much of the Abkhaz public, with only a hazy idea of what was covered in the bilateral dialogue, were sceptical about the benefits of any communication with the other side and of people-to-people diplomacy in particular, even if it did not cause damage directly. By contrast, Georgian public opinion tended to view any projects aimed at collaboration, contacts and dialogue with the Abkhaz side as a means of achieving their political objective – namely, the unification of Abkhazia with Georgia. As a result, Georgians did not at first object to the dialogue. Nonetheless, when it later became clear that these meetings were becoming a kind of platform for the Abkhaz to voice their position, the Georgian leaders started to place obstacles in the way of the projects, or rather in the way of the staff of the organisations trying to create a neutral platform for bilateral discussions.

It is worth mentioning in passing that, at the outset, many representatives of foreign organisations also mistakenly viewed the participation of Abkhaz in projects involving interaction with Georgians as evidence of their support for a political rapprochement with Georgia. At some point, there did appear to be a “dramatic epiphany”, whereby it was understood that both sides had their own view of how the conflict should be solved. However, it turned out that the only common ground between the Georgian and Abkhaz peacebuilders was their commitment to achieving their political aspirations by peaceful means. In other words, for most of the participants, the conflict would only be resolved once their country’s political goals were achieved. Many Georgian participants hoped that the meetings would help them to recover Abkhazia by peaceful means. The Abkhaz hoped that they would be able to persuade the Georgians to give up the idea of restoring Abkhazia and instead establish peaceful, good neighbourly relations. Of course, much was implicit and not always openly discussed, so that international representatives did

not always interpret what had happened correctly. Other differences were more explicit and occasionally came to a head during discussions. These reflected disparities in visions of the future: on the one hand, Georgian participants tended to look to the past and pre-war relations; the Abkhaz, on the other hand, looked at the present. For the Abkhaz, the war had cancelled out many things. A new Abkhazia had emerged along with new and irreversible post-war realities. The Georgian participants tended to take the view that both sides used to live together and that the current situation with refugees was not a continuing present but merely a temporary “camp” before a return to normal life – that is, as in the “past”. These psychological factors were also occasionally dictated or nurtured by the political positions of the countries. However, for all that, for a number of the regular participants the overriding objective was to enable people to achieve an objective view of the realities and to ensure that public opinion in each country had an accurate perception of the other. These people sought to influence politics in the direction of rejecting violence, moving instead towards a new concept of state power and authority which does not rest in the capacity to crush other people and impose their will on them, but rather in identifying areas of common interest and determining common threats as the basis for interaction and collaboration in a number of sectors – such as regional transport links, energy and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

7. Abkhaz society’s attitude to the project

The Abkhaz public’s attitude to the dialogue was complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, there was great interest and support, with people always wanting to join the group and to participate in the discussions; many took a lively interest in how the discussions were proceeding, advising us on what issues to bring up at the meetings, and so on. On the other hand, some of the public mistrusted the entire concept of people-to-people diplomacy and occasionally there would be open criticism in the media. This negative attitude was underpinned by a number of concerns. Some suspected that informal diplomats, with no “red lines”, might go too far in their talks or be misled by foreign mediators who were viewed with suspicion since they were from countries that supported Georgia’s position. There was, in fact, no basis for these concerns since, as mentioned earlier, there was no undue pressure exerted by the facilitators. Another concern was that the willingness of dialogue participants to speak about the most painful topics might be misinterpreted and give the illusory impression that conflict relations did not in fact exist. Indeed, as already noted, some international “experts” did unfortunately take such an over-simplified view of the project, which otherwise worked effectively. It took some time to explain that aspirations for independence and equal rights should not be associated with aggressive behaviour or avoidance of difficult conversations with one’s opponent.

Sharp criticisms, when they arose, were less to do with a failure to understand the motives for participating in the dialogue. They were more related to the fact that its

core participants were fairly active representatives of civil society and took a principled stand on domestic politics, often criticising political forces directly. When politicians could not respond to the substance of the criticism, they would resort to accusations of holding “talks with the enemy” – one of the safest and most risk-free ways of dealing with opponents in post-war society. While criticism of the participants in the project was done in a more or less orderly fashion during calm periods in domestic politics, in the period running up to parliamentary or presidential elections such condemnation took the form of formal charges laid before the public prosecutor’s office. However, these formal charges, which were later broadcast on Abkhaz television, were generally signed either using pseudonyms or by the “political councils” of political parties, or by the leader-writers of newspapers. This suggests the unease of the detractors over whether they were morally justified in making such charges, since otherwise they would have been only too pleased to be seen exposing “presumptuous peacebuilders”.

Ironically, therefore, even though our objective had always been to bring about the conditions for ensuring stable peace, we found ourselves in the firing line in our own country.

The sharp criticism of the project and its participants by some sections of the Abkhaz population was due, in part, to a number of crucial factors affecting how it was perceived. The war, the non-recognised status of Abkhazia and the blockade had all led to its isolation and the prolongation of harsh post-war conditions. The public response was to develop a kind of siege mentality in which no dissent was possible and where there was only one version of the truth. Domestic political discourse regularly overstated the situation and was distorted to fit its own demands and views. Our domestic understanding of politics at times was very far from the “art of the possible”. Propaganda and bravado would often replace sober and considered analysis of the complex and at times unpalatable reality. Without anyone to question it, wishful thinking was frequently accepted as the reality. Policy as presented at the actual talks with Georgia, brokered by Russia and the UN, was in some ways entirely separate from the policy statements issued for domestic consumption. While discussion at the official talks could make reference to models of a state in some sort of union with Georgia, at home any Abkhaz experts who examined theoretical models of co-existence were vilified – even while persuading the Georgian side that unification was just as much not in their interest (at a deeper level) as it was not in Abkhazia’s interest. In the official negotiation process, officials were permitted to visit Tbilisi. At home, however, NGO staff were vilified for participating in international civil and academic forums at which they voiced the Abkhaz point of view, simply because the international format of these forums required participation and discussion with civil society actors and experts from Georgia. Clearly, most of this negativity was caused by Abkhazia’s isolation and the absence of overt communications with its neighbours. The Abkhaz media would occasionally publish assessments and proposals for resolving the conflict, but these did

not take into account the complex post-war reality, the requirements of international law and the complex constellation of political forces on which the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was played out. Our publication *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict* forced people to consider the other side in the conflict, which they were reluctant to do as it called into question the bravado of much of Abkhaz reporting, with which our publication was quite simply out of step.

We were not surprised at the failure to understand the need for a dialogue with representatives of the opposite side: such a response was only to be expected from a society traumatised by war. Indeed, many dialogue participants saw the need to find a way to overcome this trauma as being the key issue. The ideas of the prominent conflict theorist and mediator John Paul Lederach are helpful in this context: he highlighted that peacebuilding is only possible if its proponents can rise above the processes within society while not at the same time being perceived as marginal or a traitor. The survival of our project in such difficult circumstances proves that the dialogue participants retained enough public confidence to avoid being vilified by the majority. As another famous specialist in conflict studies and peacebuilding, Professor Hizkias Assefa, once said, support for peacebuilders can sometimes be manifested only in the silence of the majority. The fact that individual charges were not taken up by the wider public is an indicator that the project in fact enjoyed public support and that public faith in the project outweighed their suspicions and doubts. As for doubts, we ourselves had many of them. Could our activity really have a positive impact on the situation? Was the dialogue becoming bogged down in endless debates by old participants? Did our efforts have any real outcome?

8. Potential outcomes

Looking back, we have come a long way from the original proposals of the Georgian participants to expunge the name Abkhazia entirely in favour of the term “land between the rivers”. We have moved to an understanding that Georgian politicians will never secure a robust and lasting peace in the region while public demands are based on nationalism. Similarly, we have moved from a refusal by the Abkhaz participants to discuss refugee issues to the organisation of an international conference on “Conflict and Migration”. On both sides, the participants in the process managed to become more objective, more wide-ranging in their views and assessment, and started to acknowledge the existence of other points of view. The UCI project was in some respects a pioneer, blazing the trail for many subsequent peacebuilding and research projects, including a significant number of conferences, seminars and publications. Many bilateral and multilateral initiatives were planned on the basis of experience accumulated within this project and the response it met from the various political and social groupings.

It is clear from the criticisms of the project that many people expected significant political achievements from this civil society process. Obviously, it would have been naïve to expect a political outcome outside of the official decision-making framework of official talks and similar initiatives. So what results can we expect to attain from an informal dialogue – resolution of the conflict or a change in public opinion? These are clearly unrealistic goals. One possible outcome of the project was that it addressed the dearth of information, presenting instead a multi-factorial analysis of the situation and an objective view of the facts. This has helped to distinguish myth from reality and stereotypes from the objective truth, providing a multi-dimensional representation of the conflict and a wider vision of the complex reality. Therefore, it has helped to establish at least a prototype of a Caucasian community of like-minded people committed to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Such commitment is based on the desire to sign an agreement on the non-use of force and the aspiration to make the South Caucasus accessible to all its residents, by promoting a culture of peace in the Caucasus. The initiative has created a mechanism for discussion across the conflict divide, accumulating over many years an exchange of views, opinions and assessments from both sides. These views and assessments have, in turn, been made available to interested researchers, politicians and journalists through a series of publications.

However, the chief outcome achieved by the permanent dialogue and conferences was the creation of a platform for different opinions which allowed for discussion and analysis of urgent conflict-related issues of mutual concern. This platform became a type of laboratory, where understanding and acceptance of ideas from different stakeholders were tested – political, economic and civil – in an effort to get closer to a settlement of the conflict.

Summarising this crucial stage in the work of the project, we wrote the following in the preface to the ninth volume of *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*: ‘... each meeting has confirmed our conviction that dialogue is valuable *per se* as an attempt to achieve mutual understanding at the civil society level and is an essential component of the peacebuilding process. The bilateral meetings may not always have gone smoothly and indeed discussions were very heated at times. However, the process of joint analysis of the conflict continued because both Georgian and Abkhaz participants understood that the road to peace cannot be one-sided; it must be built from both sides.’

PART 4

Civil Society Development and Mediation

CHAPTER 9

The Experience of the Caucasus Forum: An Experiment in Holistic Peacebuilding¹

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan

¹ I started writing this analysis before the August 2008 war and finished it in the autumn of 2008, after the war. It was revised and published in Russian in the summer of 2009, with the permission of International Alert. Available in Russian at <http://www.southcaucasus.com/index.php?page=publications&id=2335>.

1. Early beginnings

The Caucasus Forum evolved in 1998 from a project of confidence building between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. The project was supported by the EU and implemented by International Alert, and Alert hired me to supervise this project.

The Georgian-Abkhaz project

In February 1998, I first travelled to Tbilisi and then to Abkhazia to start planning the project. Phil Champain and Sofi Cook (Alert staff) accompanied me. We had been on very good terms since our January meeting in Washington. They flew in from London and summoned me from Ohio to discuss the project. The project included six planned meetings, one each between members of parliament (MPs), women, young people and NGO activists, and two – the first and the last – between the organisers. The meetings were to be held in various locations, including the former Yugoslavia (Dubrovnik and Ljubljana), Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Crimea and so on.

The intended venues were also conflict areas, and the project was designed to combine confidence building with learning about the situation on the ground.

The project had been formulated two years previously; prices had risen quite a bit since then. It was clear that the budget was not sufficient to hold all of the planned meetings. Besides, we had no idea what the meetings were to be about. We decided with Phil that we would travel to the region and discuss the following option: the first meeting would bring together all of the people who wanted to take part in the project, let us say, 10 people on each side. At this first meeting, they would discuss the vision and content of the subsequent meetings. Then we would help them, to the best of our capacity, to implement what they agreed to do.

It was with this open-ended programme that we went to Tbilisi. Here, at George Khutsishvili's office,² I met a number of people who played important roles in civil dialogue and became my friends: Marina Pagava, Guram Odisharia, Gia Anchabadze, the late Aniko Abramishvili (a scholar of international recognition), the late Elsa Ter-Martirosyants (one of the leaders of the Armenian community of Tbilisi), Misha Mirziashvili, Mamuka Kuparadze (both of whom were leading a non-governmental film production company, Studio Re then), Nodar Sarjeladze (one of the leading psychologists of Georgia) and others. I also tried to make the acquaintance of Paata Zakareishvili, who was by then already a famous human rights activist and peacebuilder, but I did not meet him this time and we only met each other later.³

² George is a seasoned conflict resolution specialist and an NGO leader who leads the International Center for Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN), our main partner in that first project.

³ Marina Pagava, Guram Odisharia, George Anchabadze, Nodar Sarjeladze and Paata Zakareishvili are all authors of chapters in this volume.

In Abkhazia, I met with our project partners, Manana Gurgulia and Diana Kerselyan. Manana told me how the project idea had emerged: the then Secretary General of Alert, Kumar Rupesinghe, and Anna Matveeva, whose post I was now holding, had organised a conference in Moscow in which Tamaz Ketsba (a renowned lawyer and activist from Abkhazia), Manana and George Khutsishvili took part. It was at this conference that they decided to launch this project. The whole cycle of writing and submitting the proposal, along with its review and approval by the European Commission, took two years to complete. As a result, the project became outdated.

Manana and Diana took me to a gallery café where almost the entire civil society of Sukhum/i was assembled. I was surprised that they already knew what civil society and NGOs were all about. I had only learned about those things two years previously while writing my Masters paper in Ohio. Back in 1990, we had started an NGO in Yerevan, Armenia with some friends but we had no idea that what we had started was an NGO. I was also impressed by the way Abkhaz NGOs were united and able to do things together. I was already aware that there was much less unity among Georgian and Armenian NGOs.

I met Batal Kobakhia, from the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes, at the Abkhaz news agency *ApsnyPress* the day before. I noticed how attentive others were to him and wondered why. At the meeting in the gallery, I handed out copies of a paper in which I outlined the empty framework of our project: six meetings, the first of which would decide what the rest would be about. The agenda of the first meeting was as follows: getting acquainted, deciding on rules, discussing the agenda and then working on each of the topics agreed on the spot. All of a sudden, however, Batal threw the paper in my face and yelled that it was nonsense, that we were not serious and that he would not work with such an empty paper.

This was the first serious challenge in my new job. I did not expect things to get so heated and I had to think quickly on the spot. For some reason, instead of doing something else, I yelled back: ‘You are talking nonsense yourself. You’re in the midst of a war, people sincerely want to help you and you tell them it is nonsense. The paper is empty because we want you to fill it with your own content. If you don’t want this project, that is very well. Just sit there in your isolation and go on feeling forsaken by the world.’

Batal walked out. The women tried to console me, assuring me that he was very nice really but that was the way he was and that I would get used to it over time. They explained that he had lost many family members in the war. Therefore, we continued working on the structure and the agenda of the first meeting as if nothing had happened, and even feeling closer as a group as a result. The women promised me that Batal would be back and would join the project.

When I decided to yell back at Batal; I was intuitively using a mediation trick. Shouting at him showed that I had no hidden agendas; I was a regular Armenian. I could be nervous, upset and provoked. My yelling back served as a confidence-building measure. Had I been better prepared for this outburst, I would have tried to refrain from yelling. This was certainly a blunder, although it dispelled the official atmosphere and it was nice that the Abkhaz forgave my unprofessionalism. However, getting emotional can be a mediation trick.

It was not long before I got proof that they did not just forgive me but started to trust me a bit. Leila Tania and Lika Kvarchelia, both of whom were NGO leaders by then, gave me coffee and began convincing me that they wanted to build confidence with the Georgians, but only in the capacity as their future neighbours and on a par with other nations living in the Caucasus. Therefore, they insisted that if we were to undertake a real confidence-building project, we had to involve people from all over the Caucasus, not just the Georgians and the Abkhaz.

This idea evoked something archetypal in me. While working in Armenia during the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1989–1993 and taking part in discussions on the region's future,⁴ I became convinced, although I knew very little about the rest of the Caucasus, that the solution to conflicts lay in inclusivity. This necessitated the creation of a system representing all stakeholders – something like a Caucasus United Nations or a Caucasus version of the OSCE. At that time, this idea was promoted by Suren Zolyan, now the Rector of Brusov University in Yerevan and then an MP and member of the Karabakh Commission, who took part in the Minsk Group negotiations. He called his project the “Caucasus Switzerland”. Its proponents included Ashot Manucharyan (then Senior Advisor to the Armenian president, and beforehand a charismatic leader of the popular movement which overthrew the Communist rule in Armenia), Ara Sahakyan (then Vice Speaker of Parliament) and others. There were supporters of this vision in other countries too – for example, the German MP, Dietrich Sperling. The idea was to create a supranational system that would include the recognised and the unrecognised entities of the South Caucasus. I subsequently outlined this vision in a published book about conflicts in the Caucasus.⁵

While talking to Leila and Lika, I was aware that we were discussing civil diplomacy, not Track I processes or official mediation. And yet, so what if we were? What if we could start implementing the vision of a pan-Caucasian peace process? If we succeeded,

4 I was vice-director of the newly established Center for Regional Studies, which dissolved for political reasons several months after I left Armenia; its curator Ashot Manucharyan resigned from his post of Senior Advisor to the President of Armenia.

5 'Strategies in Ethnic Conflict and a Regional Cooperation System for the Caucasus' in G. Bonvicini, E. Greco, B. von Plate and R. Rummel (Eds.) *Preventing Violent Conflict: Issues from the Baltic and the Caucasus. A Joint Study by the Institute for International Affairs, Rome, and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Ebenhausen. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998* (Aktuelle Materialien zur Internationalen Politik, Band 50).

I thought, we could then model the official process, preparing the ground and showing the world how this is done.

I highlighted that this would change the project and that I would have to go back and ask the Georgians if they agreed. I liked the idea. Maybe this made me sound convincing when I talked to the Georgians.

This was not news to the Georgians. Back in the 1990s, in the time of President Gamsakhurdia, Naira Gelishvili had proposed an initiative for a united, peaceful Caucasus; she had even put together a group of activists who met with some of the leaders of Caucasus nations. As a result, an NGO called Caucasus House was founded in Tbilisi. At the start of his second term in office, Eduard Shevardnadze proposed establishing a Caucasus House that would unite Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although conflict zones remained outside of his initiative, if the initiative had materialised, it would have created a new field for activity. However, Shevardnadze's project soon became defunct because Azerbaijan rejected it.

Later, when the Caucasus Forum was already in place, Michael Emerson, a think-tank leader from Brussels, came up with his Stability Pact for the Caucasus. Similar ideas were promoted on political levels, and some pan-Caucasus projects were launched – such as the project started by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, the Article 19 “Freedom of Expression” project and the “Gringo” project, a Caucasus-wide coalition of NGOs for IDPs, launched by the Danish Refugee Council.

On the whole, Georgians tend to identify more strongly with the Caucasus than Armenians living in Armenia. In other parts of the Caucasus, Armenians have this Caucasian identity; however, Armenians in Armenia, just like Azerbaijanis in Azerbaijan, have weak Caucasian identities. The Georgians are different. It explains perhaps why Ossetians, including Northern Ossetians, call Tbilisi “*Kalak*” or “city”: Tbilisi was for many years perceived as the centre of the Caucasus.

Anyone who takes the trouble to search the Internet for my publications on the topic will see that the pan-Caucasus peace process is an ongoing interest of mine. Had the Abkhaz agreed to a bilateral process without reservations, I would have probably kept looking for a pan-Caucasus format elsewhere. But since they themselves asked to widen the scope, I did not mind.

Mediators are often non-neutral. Are the OSCE Minsk Group mediators entirely neutral? Of course not, because they represent states and mediate in a conflict between a state and a non-state. This is why they try to represent the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, although this does not reflect the whole picture. Nor were the “Friends of the Secretary General” entirely neutral because they

reflected the viewpoint that Abkhazia must be part of Georgia. They were originally called the “Friends of Georgia” but Abkhazia and/or Russia objected, and they were renamed.

Even when they are non-neutral or even biased, mediators can do some good. This depends on the individual or the organisation. Paata Zakareishvili has often said that he would like Abkhazia to become part of Georgia. He says this openly. However, this does not make him the worst of mediators between other Georgians and the Abkhaz with whom he has been building relations for many years.

In a way, I was neutral: I had no vision of the final status of Abkhazia (or Nagorno-Karabakh). I thought any status would do as long as it would be accepted by the population (preferably including the refugees) and would enable people to live safely and at peace in their surroundings. My position has been criticised by the Armenians for its lack of patriotism, and by the Georgians for its failure to stick to the international standard about Abkhazia being part of Georgia. I was proceeding from the assumption that the de facto Abkhazia is not part of Georgia and did my best to bring together members of both nations’ civil societies.

The Abkhaz were probably friendly to me partly because I was Armenian, and the local Armenians had helped the Abkhaz during the war – in fact, only local Armenians had done so. As for the Armenians in Armenia, especially on a political level, they were well aware that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict placed them in isolation and facing a blockade that was worse than ever: for instance, Armenia’s railroad connection with Russia was broken off for many years as a result of that conflict, something which they would have preferred not to happen.

The Georgians resisted my proposal at first, but not very strongly: they needed to meet the Abkhaz and start the dialogue. They regarded the pan-Caucasus format as a temporary concession. The idea was, however, fully approved by those who knew Abkhazia in depth – for example, by Gia Anchabadze, Guram Odisharia and Marina Pagava. Representatives of Georgian pro-Western intellectual circles were more sceptical.

This was the second time that I had achieved something as a mediator and that something had not originally been part of the project. I achieved two things: a) the Georgians and the Abkhaz would meet in Sochi, north of Russia’s border with Abkhazia (we chose less exotic and cheaper meeting places); and b) they would meet in a pan-Caucasus format. Cynics might say that the Abkhaz and the Georgians would agree to go to Ljubljana or Dubrovnik just for the fun of it. Sochi on the other hand was not a popular shopping destination, which meant that whoever went to Sochi would be going for the sake of work and peace.

Only four people from other parts of the Caucasus were invited to the first meeting. All of the rest were Abkhaz and Georgians. The role of these four people was to work on the pan-Caucasus format and to facilitate the meeting. They would help the Georgians and the Abkhaz by telling them about other regions and conflicts and generally keeping them from becoming centred on their problems.

The meeting established a working group on the pan-Caucasus dimension which agreed to: a) make the pan-Caucasus meeting the next event in the project; and b) invite people from other parts of the Caucasus to every event, while continuing to have a majority of Georgians and Abkhaz.

It was decided to hold the next event in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, and it was there that the Caucasus Forum was born.

Another secret mediation trick was that I did not say “no” to the Abkhaz. An international British organisation coming via Tbilisi and seeking to start a peace process at a non-governmental level, agreeing to suggestions made by the Abkhaz, was I guess a rarity. However, our office was not based in Georgia and there was no need to coordinate our project with the Georgian government; otherwise, they would have had difficulty allowing something of its kind, if at all. All we had to do was inform them of the project. Running ahead, I will say that we informed, for example, Vakhtang Kolbaia, the then deputy head of parliament. Originally from Abkhazia, Vakhtang understood perfectly the logic behind the all-Caucasus approach and almost welcomed the idea; he was most likely aware of its potential benefits – that is, the building of genuine confidence with the Abkhaz.

We also did not need to coordinate every change in our project with the European Commission. They had no reason to oppose such changes because their grant was not allotted strictly to Georgia.

My frank overview of the situation to Alert and my question – ‘Shall we do the pan-Caucasus thing or give it up?’ – met with the support of Phil Champain, Sofi Cook and Martin Honeywell. Martin was the then Vice Director of International Alert and played a key role in the establishment of the Caucasus Forum. These three people had no political agendas and were not under pressure from official British circles; they were true NGO people and believed in taking risks and acting independently of the government. This is why the Caucasus Forum came about.

In Nalchik, I met Professor Paula Garb from the University of California (Irvine).⁶ She wanted to attend our meeting and I invited her. She was just starting her project.

6 See Chapter 6 of this volume.

I had met Jonathan Cohen⁷ from Conciliation Resources back in London, and we trusted each other from our first meeting. Three main Georgian-Abkhaz peacebuilding projects were thus launched almost simultaneously and were cooperative rather than competitive. There was competition too, but in the final analysis, we saw our activity as part of one project. Jonathan, Paula and I managed to make an important, mutually complementary intervention in the conflict; we mediated between ourselves without external support. Martin Schumer from the United Nations Volunteers helped us at that time; sadly, he died young. However, we would not have been able to achieve anything had it not been for our partners: the goodwill of the Georgians, the Abkhaz and other participants from the Caucasus, and their determination to relate to each other, were crucial.

How the Caucasus Forum came about

While we were preparing the meeting in Nalchik, Martin Honeywell asked me what the scenario for Nalchik was because I had invited him to facilitate. We discussed the scenario with Phil and with one of our Board members, a retired general who was very understanding. When they made remarks that reflected their poor knowledge of the situation in the Caucasus, I would correct them excitedly, almost yelling at them. They had to put up with this. In Alert, people understood that emotional behaviour that is not accepted in the West does not reflect disrespect but only temperament. They realised that while the English are reserved and precise, many non-English have a high context culture – meaning that, for example, if a person is late for a meeting, it isn't because they do not respect the people they are meeting, but because they are doing several important things at once and do not prioritise the meeting against something which is equally important in their eyes. In this culture, raising one's voice is not an insult but merely a sign of excitement and a desire to convince.

At the end of our working meeting, Martin asked: 'Are we going to create a network or aren't we? Shall we adopt some sort of document?' I responded by asking 'if they wish, they will create a network and adopt a document, but how can we make them?' Martin replied: 'No, my friend, you must foresee everything. We mustn't impose things on them, but you must be ready for this development. Go and write a scenario for the option that they decide to have a network and a final document.'

The least we wanted to achieve was a successful meeting. The best case scenario was the creation of a network and a long-term project. However, there was also the possibility that the meeting would fail. We knew about a failed meeting organised by the George Mason University, when the Abkhaz refused to sit in the same room with the Georgians, and the Americans had to run from room to room, doing "shuttle diplomacy" instead of a workshop. This happened because of a mediation error: the two sides had not

⁷ See Chapter 3 of this volume.

coordinated the list of participants in advance. Alert had made mistakes too: many years ago, Alert sent a mission to Abkhazia that produced a document which was uninformed as well as pro-Georgian. I have read it; it said that the reasons for the conflict were poverty in Soviet Abkhazia and religious tensions, because the Abkhaz were Muslims and the Georgians were Christians. After its publication, the Abkhaz refused to deal with Alert, and cooperation only resumed after Kumar Rupesinghe apologised in person to Natella Akaba, a public figure who is both an NGO leader and who has held official positions from time to time, when they met at a conference.

I discussed both scenarios with Martin, with an emphasis on the best case scenario. We did not draft a final document because we surmised that we could not foresee what the participants would want to include. I did remark, however, that lots of declarations were signed at Caucasus gatherings, and that it only made sense to sign one more if it would lead to action. I told Martin: 'It means that if they sign anything, Alert gives them a *carte blanche* and commits to support them.' This meant revising the Alert strategy because Alert had no plans to implement pan-Caucasus projects. This implied a strategic U-turn, an expanded strategy and more fundraising. Martin responded that he gave "them" (and me) a *carte blanche* and would take care of coordinating the changes with the Board. The general who was then acting Chairman of the Board gave his consent on the spot.

This is how we put it on the agenda: 'Should participants wish to create a network and sign a document, they will have this opportunity.'

The first day of the workshop (40 people attended, so it was more like a conference than a workshop) was spent recounting local stories. Every speaker talked for an hour and everyone was exhausted afterwards. The second day focused on creating a joint platform and visioning – that is, imagining a network, the future of the Caucasus, etc. At the end of the third day, I was exhausted and decided to take a break but Martin stopped me, asking: 'Will we sign anything tomorrow?' I replied: 'They will sign it if they want.' But he warned: 'No, my friend, if they are going to sign anything, they must get the draft in the morning.'

Martin asked me, Sofi, Anton our interpreter, Diana and a few other organisers to gather in the headquarters room and spend four hours coordinating a document based on the issues discussed during the day. The document was ready by 2am. The next day was spent on agreeing every word. Then the participants went on a trip to Mount Elbrus and I stayed behind to revise the document and print it. When they returned, the participants organised a dance party and signed the text right in the middle of it. They finished signing the next morning before going home.

This was how the Elbrus Declaration came to be.

First lessons learnt

The Elbrus Declaration was the result of group mediation: our whole team, led by Martin Honeywell, did everything to facilitate the signing of the document. Even the trip to Mount Elbrus was a facilitation tool that served to cheer people up.

The phrasing of the document was diplomatic, not radical – after all, this was a declaration about cooperation and peacebuilding in the Caucasus. I was, however, aware that such documents are plentiful; what mattered was what would follow.

I also came to the conclusion that I was working on an **intersection of interests** – in other words, this was not a zero-sum game. Let us suppose that I want two people to meet, and one is against the idea. I ask the latter on what terms would he agree to meet the other person and he tells me his terms. I advise the other person to agree to his terms if meeting him is more important to them than keeping their ground and just sitting on their own. If the meeting is really important to them, they will agree. The meeting does not go the way this person would have liked it to go, but it does take place. This shows how we can start the process from a more basic level – which although it is less adequate for the interests of some participants – is nevertheless a start. All participants are sufficiently interested in the process to agree to each other's terms.

In our case, we would start discussing the issue but we could not come to an agreement – for example, on whether Abkhazia should be independent or part of Georgia. The Abkhaz would say one thing and the Georgians another. At this point, we would **stop discussing the content and start discussing the form of the process** – in other words, how we would continue discussing this and other problems, the when, where and whys.

At the first meeting in Sochi, before the Nalchik meeting, the question arose as to what the Georgian-Abkhaz project was all about. Discussing the status of Abkhazia would lead us nowhere. We moved onto the process and decided that a meeting of MPs was not feasible (Georgians said their MPs did not officially recognise Abkhaz MPs as such). However, we concluded that we could have meetings of: a) the pan-Caucasus group (in Nalchik); b) women; c) young people; and d) ex-combatants. Then we would have a final meeting in which the same people now meeting in Sochi would evaluate the project. There was a “but”: the meetings would not just be about getting acquainted and discussing issues. **Every meeting would seek to elaborate future joint projects.**

The meetings of young people, women and ex-combatants thus received an impetus. The goal was not just to meet and build some personal trust, but also to design joint projects. Alert would then help to get financing for the projects and to launch them. Our project therefore became a catalyst, an umbrella project that would lead to a host of new joint projects.

Turning to the issue of the best case scenario, it should be pointed out that if every meeting was to result in one or more joint projects to be implemented, there would have been so many meetings and discussions and so many joint decisions would have been made that confidence building would have really made a big leap. I am saying this to illustrate the role of the mediator: when you realise you cannot move ahead with the content, you must go ahead with the process. On concrete points, you can achieve results which are no less important than, for example, the coordination of the Abkhaz and Georgian visions of the conflict. If women, young activists and ex-combatants work on their respective issues, if business people start joint ventures, and if politicians see how this works and join in the process, there will be a realistic chance for the conflict to move in the direction of peace. This was the way we and our partners saw this project.

The mediation (or facilitation) tool in this case is that if we cannot resolve the conflict, we must not just look for a bypass but for a process that will foster the resolution of concrete problems. This will pave the way to finding a solution for the main problem.

Of course, one can question this approach and say that small concrete actions, however successful, may not necessarily lead to a major solution. Our strategy was founded on the assumption that this reservation was not a good reason to stop trying.

Theoretically, our method was as follows: **Never despair, never stop the process, see a positive side in everything and be able to point it out to the participants. Move away from the content and towards the process if the content does not lend itself to a resolution. Never forsake your goals and come back to them at the next stage of the process.** It is important to understand and remember this now when it seems that a holistic pan-Caucasus agenda is all but non-existent.

Another component is finding the point where interests converge (even when it lies very low) right at the beginning of the process. As we bypass the content in favour of the process, we find the “positive sum”. If the parties disagree on something, we can descend to a lower level where we have consensus and interest, and work from there. For example, one party may want to set up a joint business venture and the other may not, but agrees to do parallel business projects. In this case, we would launch the parallel business projects and organise a meeting of the project managers so that they could discuss the results.

The process constitutes a long road that can get longer every day. Its efficiency can fall to almost zero, especially if the other components of the process are lacking – in our case, if nothing happens outside of our project to stimulate mutual interests and to push other aspects of the conflict towards a stable peace process. Whenever the atmosphere around the peace process improved, our project would achieve meaningful albeit minor results. Whenever the atmosphere deteriorated, our project would become inefficient.

However, this only concerned the Georgian-Abkhaz project. The latter was different from the Caucasus Forum in that it was managed by three partner organisations: International Alert, the Georgian organisation and the Abkhaz organisation. It was comparatively easier to achieve consensus between three actors than between 15, and there were about 15 partners in the Forum.

2. The struggle for a holistic Caucasus

Some of the events in the Georgian-Abkhaz project were similar to those conducted by the Caucasus Forum, and could be included in its activity. A book entitled *Time to Live: Caucasus Writers About War* – which included stories by Abkhaz, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani and Ossetian authors – was prepared and published by Guram Odisharia, Batal Kobakhia and Daur Nachkebia in the framework of the Georgian-Abkhaz project. Guram and Batal travelled all over Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, meeting writers and convincing them to give us their stories to be published in the book. In essence, this was a typical Forum project, although it was part of the Georgian-Abkhaz project.⁸

The Forum spent lots of time on creating and refining its structure and procedures. Perhaps we were spending too much energy and money on this, and not being very successful. It was a big challenge.

Of the entire multitude of projects, events and developments, I will dwell on the following initiatives: the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Working Group on Conflict Prevention, the ex-combatants' meeting, the mediation mission to Karachay-Cherkessia, the All-Caucasus Youth Creative Game, and the elaboration of decision making and internal procedures in the Caucasus Forum.

UNHCR Working Group

The UNHCR Working Group on Conflict Prevention was established as part of a UNHCR project called the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Conference. This conference was held every year for five years, bringing together several hundred civil society actors from the entire CIS who would prepare their recommendations for the CIS Council of Ministers in the sphere of refugees and IDPs. As part of the same plan to enable civil society to influence governments, the UNHCR proposed the creation of several working groups, including the Group on Refugee Legislation and the Group on Refugee Rights. The Conflict Prevention Group was one of them. When Alert and I were invited to join it, it had existed for about two years; unlike other working groups,

8 See Chapters 20 and 21 in this volume.

however, it was not clear on what its results were. When I joined, I learned its history: it had not been planned by the UNHCR but was proposed at a Conference, where many of the participants came from refugee organisations; they were interested in conflict resolution and insisted on having an ad hoc working group.

I was invited to participate in this project by Kirsti Floor, who was then with the UNHCR, and by Elena Sadovskaya, who led the Conflict Management Centre in Almaty, Kazakhstan. I met Kirsti and Elena at the Moscow conference of the Working Group, where I also got acquainted with its participants. At the conference, I was asked by Kirsti to facilitate a mixed sub-group, which had two hours to draft an action plan. I listened to the sub-group's participants, drew a table on a flipchart and proposed to organise the ideas into columns: who, what, when, who can help, what has been done, etc. By the end of the session, we had an action plan of sorts, and my sub-group was inspired. I was not much of an expert on the matter; so during the presentation, every time someone from another sub-group asked a question (the questions were adversarial and deliberately tricky), I would give the floor to the person in my sub-group who had suggested that particular idea. We got profound and argumentative answers to all the tricky questions. My participant-oriented, inclusive approach thus proved fruitful.

Kirsti asked Alert to lead the Working Group. I told her that we were joining the project at a late stage and that the project was too large, stretched all over the CIS, recommending that the people who founded the group should therefore continue helping us. Kirsti proposed that Elena Sadovskaya's organisation should co-manage the project, and I was happy to accept. Elena had been one of the founders of the group, and besides, I realised Alert would not be able to work on its own in Central Asia where it had no prior experience.

Kirsti, Elena and I met in London and drafted the general principles of the project. I believed it was intrinsically wrong to discuss conflict resolution unless all parties to the conflict were involved. I also believed it was impossible to have an impact on the conflict resolution by theoretical means, through recommendations and expert statements. Therefore, I proposed inviting members of civil society from "unrecognised" entities to the Working Group. This was easier to do via the Forum. My other idea was to have three sub-nets: one in Ukraine, Moldova/Transdnistria and Belarus (so-called Western CIS); one in the Caucasus; and one in Central Asia. I believed this would make it easier to devise plans and raise funds for those sub-nets, and also to implement those plans which would be about civil society peacebuilding projects. For all this, UNHCR allocated very basic funds. Alert added a little and Kirsti promised to do some fundraising, but unfortunately we did not secure any more funding and had to settle with the minimal option.

The Caucasus Forum was going to have its next meeting shortly, at which we could discuss the idea of the Working Group. Therefore, money was allocated for the three

remaining meetings: one in Central Asia, one in the Western CIS and the final meeting of all sub-nets.

The plan looked convincing and theoretically correct. However, inexperienced as I was, I failed to take a whole range of factors into account, and no one had warned me about them. The refugees who were well represented in the Conference were against letting “the other side” join in the Working Group because they believed that the “other side” was to blame for their having become refugees. Moreover, a number of organisations which had originally been in the Working Group before I joined were excluded because they did not fit into the Caucasus Forum, although they came from the Caucasus. At the next meeting in Geneva, Elena Sadovskaya and I were condemned by critics, who were right about some things but unfair about others. They were right in reproaching us for not having discussed the project with all stakeholders in advance. The reason for this was that the Internet was out of bounds for many people in the CIS, and there was no other way to discuss things as surface mail did not work either. This was 1999. They began criticising us exactly at the point when we all came together to discuss things. The critics joined with people who had no reason to attack us but who had other concerns: for example, Azerbaijani refugee organisations joined against us because I was Armenian. One well-known Russian activist supported them, probably because he thought the Forum was anti-Russian. Some Armenians also joined because they felt excluded from the Forum. In any case, the conflict in Geneva was not settled and this impacted on subsequent stages of the project.

The fact that some Armenians supported the criticisms wielded against us could have been useful for diplomacy purposes: it made me look neutral, not pro-Armenian. However, it did not work out like this: the Armenians criticised me but the Azerbaijanis did not support me either.

The main emphasis was still on my ethnicity, which allegedly reflected on my activities: people believed that the inclusion of some players in the Working Group and the exclusion of others had been motivated by the interests of “my side”, presumably the Armenian side, in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and in the post-Soviet geopolitical layout. For the first time, I felt discriminated against on ethnic grounds. They seemed to be saying: ‘This guy is Armenian. Whatever he does is because of his ethnicity, it cannot be otherwise.’

I have not often been discriminated against. For instance, I was never discriminated against in the US; when a friend of mine, who was the only black professor at his university, told me about the discrimination he experienced, I could understand it but not feel it, because on the surface nothing like this existed. In Russia, I often witnessed the discrimination of people from the Caucasus but had not experienced it myself or seen it in relation to Armenians, because they had become the “valuable Jews” of modern Russia.

A few years later, I left Alert; one of the reasons for this was that I could not “help” being Armenian anymore. It was like what happened to Mowgli when he said: ‘Ye have told me so often ... that I am a man ... that I feel your words are true.’ It was in the UNHCR project that I realised for the first time that I could be perceived as someone whose every action is guided by their ethnic interest.

According to the Alert Code of Conduct,⁹ which was also the basis for the Forum Code of Conduct, we built our strategies from the bottom up, based on the peacebuilding visions of our partners from the conflict sides. The Alert Code also mentioned the importance of remaining unbiased. However, I could not stay entirely unbiased. There is an “ideal” model of intervention in a conflict, involving two sides and a neutral mediator. A mediator from abroad is supposed to be neutral. To compensate for being foreign, the mediator must become an expert on the conflict, become fascinated by it, study it in detail and develop a connection with the locality where it is happening, but still remain neutral. The mediator will then remain a “foreigner”, which is supposed to be a good thing. However, I could not mediate like that and did not think this would do any good. Others operate on this basis but I believe it is usually useless. I proposed a different peacebuilding model: engaged and biased work for peace; a Caucasus-wide peace movement; the solidarity of all who want to do the hard work of peace. My model was based on the ideal of class solidarity or the solidarity of human rights protectors. I believed this was the only way to get things moving in the Caucasus. In my first years of work, my approach was accepted and welcomed, but over time the “ideal” intervention model described above prevailed in most of the conflict resolution work done in the Caucasus. As a result, a widening gap developed between the agendas of international organisations and those of the parties in conflict back in their localities. The “ideal” model represents a simplistic version of liberal ideology in conflict resolution. It relies on the assumption that if two persons representing parties in conflict can come to terms with the mediation by a third party, then their societies can do the same. This approach fails to include a credible theory about moving from individuals to society; it regards society as a mere aggregate of so many individuals.

It was getting too difficult for me to fill that gap and to keep mediating between the two discourses – that is, the liberal one and the coalitionist peacebuilding one. If I ever succeeded in mediating, it was not between the parties in conflict but rather between Western discourses and ones coming from the post-Soviet world, and from the Caucasus in particular. It was probably my ability to translate post-Soviet and Caucasus problems into the language of Western concepts – and vice versa, to translate Western agendas into concepts that are important in the post-Soviet Caucasus – that made me a successful fundraiser.

⁹ Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/library/Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf> (606 Kb PDF).

Ever since, I have been doing the same thing in all my jobs: translating Western notions into local languages and back. I try to explain that neither of the two sides is uncivilised, and try to build conceptual bridges between the two discourses and the two contexts. Essentially, it is all about translation. **Maybe a true mediator is like a transparent translator, an educator for both sides who helps the West understand the Caucasus, and vice versa** – rather like a professor who teaches students about physics and physicists about students.

In the UNHCR project, I felt for the first time that people were trying to portray me as an Armenian nationalist. Social pressure built up over time. I felt like they were saying: ‘Get into your cage. Be part of the social machinery that we can understand and know how to deal with. Give up. Accept the fact that none of us has any future.’ The fact that I was an Armenian without nationalist views, a post-Soviet manager as well as a conflict resolution professional and, worse still, very probably a non-mercenary – all increased the pressure.

There was another delicate issue – that is, whether a project manager can act as a mediator. A project manager who handles administration and finance has much more power than any of the participants. This was why we often invited external facilitators, so they would not have a hand in the management. In any case, we all came from this mediating Western organisation that had more room to impose its agendas than any of the participants. To compensate, we had to empower the participants; otherwise, bias in favour of the mediator would have been excessive. I tried to position Alert as the catalyst of the partners’ peacebuilding agendas: we did not take any leads, but we did not impose our agendas either. This did not always work.

There were some conflicts at the meeting in Central Asia, but on the whole it was a success. The Western CIS meeting also went well, and it was here that I had my first chance to meet people from Transdnistria. The Kiev-based organisation that was helping us was great in terms of both efficiency and excellent staff. The Caucasus Forum held its meeting. The time was ripe for the joint meeting of the three sub-networks in Golitsino. It was at this stage that the disagreements really started to break out, starting with whom we could finance to go to the meeting, and whether one could consider people to be peacebuilders if they made radical extremist statements that rhetorically demolished the other side. It was hard for me, Martin Honeywell and the other facilitators to handle this; a solution was needed.

I learned a few lessons from this project. Refugee rights activists are frequently not peacebuilders. People who have not been exposed to a violent conflict causing death and devastation do not usually understand those who have. The UN and other international organisation projects attract all kinds of people – sometimes those who totally lack values and principles, who are there for the sake of grants or travelling abroad, or for a

chance to provoke others. My assumption was confirmed that it is pointless discussing conflicts if you are a highbrow expert who looks down on the stakeholders. The way to promote peace is to work in the here and now with the people who are in the midst of a conflict. Conflict resolution trainings do not teach one to resolve one's own conflicts. The efficient method is to organise trainings in which the parties in conflict are directly involved – that is, to model the resolution of the actual conflict.

Martin and I had to deal with all of this. To appease the 50 to 70 persons who gathered in Golitsino and resolve the controversy, we proposed creating a sort of “High Court”: a group of intermediaries whom the others trusted and would abide by their decision. It was more or less clear who these “judges” were to be. We proposed Paata Zakareishvili from Tbilisi, Batal Kobakhia from Sukhum/i, Natalia Ablova from Bishkek and Eldar Zeinalov from Baku. Every one of them had unquestioned authority in the CIS civil society. Batal was the man whom Alert and I lobbied as the “unrecognised entity” representative to be included in the Working Group. Paata and Natalia, both old-timers of the CIS Conference, agreed that it had been, to put it mildly, a lack of foresight on the part of Alert and the Conflict Management Centre to exclude or try to exclude any of the old Working Group members, even though by omission and not by malicious intent. Eldar thought the same. Alongside Batal, he was a signatory of the Elbrus Declaration, in other words a founder of the Forum, and one of the key Working Group members.

We thus had three people from the Caucasus and one from Central Asia – three men and one woman. We did not have any Armenians but one Azerbaijani and one Abkhaz. Two of the group members came from conflicting parties and two did not. We talked to each member of the “High Court” and asked to help. They all agreed and started work at once: they had meetings, interviewed “witnesses”, and eventually made a number of decisions that put the general public at ease and appeased the hottest tempers. This way, the Working Group survived. Six months later, the next CIS Conference was held in Geneva, and Batal Kobakhia as well as Alan Parastaev from South Ossetia were its fully-fledged participants. No one minded their participation; there were also representatives from the North Caucasus there from Chechnya.

Several months later, at a Danish Refugee Council Conference in Baku (it was my last time in Baku but hopefully not the very last), I met Andrei Kamenshikov, head of the Moscow-based group Non-Violence International and an active member of the Working Group. We agreed that Alert would hand the management of the Working Group over to Andrei's organisation, which was what he wanted. The project was too complicated, Alert was unable to pay sufficient attention to it and I had to strengthen the Caucasus Forum. Now that the organisations had been identified and were in touch with each other, it was easy for them to do projects with Alert or the Forum or with each other. The ties established then gave rise to projects in the future. Kirsti agreed that the management of the Working Group would now be Andrei's job; I have no idea what happened to

the Working Group afterwards. I remember hearing from Batal or someone else in the Forum about another meeting or two, but that is all I know.

I therefore discovered that from a mixed and scarcely manageable group that calls itself civil society, one can select people of authority, appeal to their conscience and ask them for help. They will in turn appeal to the conscience of others, and people will listen to them. **Peer mediation is a really powerful and efficient tool in the CIS – if only we had the chance to use it.**

Alternative systems of dispute arbitration do not work well in our societies because there are few people of unquestioned authority; moreover, they are especially scarce among lawyers and former judges who could mediate and resolve disputes outside of the official judicial system. There are few people whose authority is strong enough for others to accept and implement their decisions. Our experience shows that these people exist, and few though they may be, I am sure there are more than just our four. We must not look for former judges or people who “think” they have authority, but for those who really do. This is the way things work in the criminal world but not amongst ordinary people. However, there is a nuance: had Alert not given conference participants the tip that the decision can be handed over to the four, people would not have found this solution themselves. However hard we tried to make them understand that the decision was in their hands and Alert would back them up if they proposed a fair process of decision making, they could not make up their minds. Empowerment did not work. People were not used to taking the lead unless for escalation; they could not make a creative move for a fair conflict settlement.

We prompted them by showing that we trusted those four people unconditionally and would accept any decision of theirs. **For authority to be recognised by the parties in conflict, someone must thus give the process an impetus by showing that they recognise the authority of certain people.** Otherwise, people might not get the idea to do this, or will not propose the truly respected candidates as a result of a habit never to propose any candidacy but their own – a common habit in the Caucasus and the former USSR in general. **The actor who gives an impetus to the process must also have some authority – perhaps not enough to be the arbitrator, but enough for people to pay attention to his/her suggestion that a certain person has authority.**

Ex-combatants' meeting

The meeting between ex-combatants was one of the most important events at the time when the Forum had just been created. People still remember it, including, strangely enough, those who did not take part. When we launched the Georgian-Abkhaz project, we were aware that a bilateral meeting between ex-combatants would not work: people who had fought against one another could meet by chance in twos at some sort of

peacebuilding meeting, but bringing together a considerable number of ex-combatants from both sides would have been impossible as well as wrong. Therefore, the meeting of Forum Coordinators decided to have a meeting of ex-combatants from all over the Caucasus. The Caucasus Forum was full of energy and felt it could handle a project like this. The method of the meeting was discussed in detail and intelligently implemented in the subsequent two months. Every Forum coordinator was to identify two ex-combatants who would be willing to meet with other ex-combatants. Those coordinators who did not have sufficient skills or training to act as psychological assistants were to find experienced professional psychologists to accompany the delegation. As men who had fought in wars, the ex-combatants were a natural peacebuilding resource because they more than anyone did not want the wars to start again. However, in the event of a new war, they would fight again and so they wanted to talk to their colleagues and potential enemies about the rules of combat, which were, alas, violated more than once during the wars in the Caucasus. They also wanted to discuss psychological and social rehabilitation, ways to help persons with limited physical abilities as a result of being wounded in the war, and support for bereaved families. If possible, they wished to elaborate a joint platform.

There were no regular soldiers in our group but just volunteer combatants. Only from Russia did we have young men who were drafted and had fought in Chechnya; Lusya Pavlichenko, who was then working with Women of Don, brought them from Novocherkassk. We also had combatants from Abkhazia, combatants and refugees from Georgia, and combatants from Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and various parts of the Northern Caucasus. Only the Azerbaijanis did not show up. Despite this regrettable fact, the meeting was a success. Emotions were high but the coordination of a number of principles and documents went surprisingly smoothly and efficiently. People from a military background were dignified and principled; they did not like to bother with trivialities, acted responsibly and had strong moral values. A minor issue was that differences in military rank sometimes made it difficult for people to talk as equals.

We decided against bringing any foreigners to the meeting, either as facilitators or observers; the whole crowd came from the Caucasus. The facilitators were those Forum Coordinators who had brought delegations from their regions. There were about eight facilitators; they all met as a group each night and stayed up late to coordinate the process for the following day. The ex-combatants' group seemed to shed a bright light on everyone because the facilitation group also worked smoothly and efficiently. The tension of this meeting really threw the coordinators together; the ties are still there many years later, although the Forum has been "frozen" or "dormant" for a while, the way some conflicts are.

We learned the following lessons about mediation from this meeting.

1. Bring together civil peacebuilding professionals from the parties in conflict in the Caucasus and, if they wish, they can organise a meeting between the least compatible groups or types of people.
2. Good quality preparatory teamwork and the profound commitment of the mediators can work wonders.
3. A meeting that is well prepared, with various factors and details accounted for, will be a success.
4. Despite seeming complexity, the most successful projects are the ones motivated by the wishes and visions of grassroots actors, i.e. the very people we are working for. This last point is often theoretically acknowledged but not practically implemented either by international actors trying to achieve something in the region or local ones who indiscriminately agree to become partners in initiatives handed down from the top.

A meeting is just a meeting after all. But is it a valid result? Should one spend a considerable amount of money on just having people meet and talk?

In recent years, the European Union Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has acquired a new official dimension called “people-to-people contacts”. This initiative seeks to ensure that Europeans and non-Europeans meet each other. Europeans are not hard to find nowadays in the Caucasus, yet this dimension is one of the main focuses of the ENP and Eastern Partnership (EaP) programmes.

In the Caucasus, isolationism is another way of making war. People are isolated from the rest of the world and even from their neighbours, not to mention their recent enemies. The very existence of the other party and of “unrecognised entities” is denied for many reasons. The conflicts have become a lever that the leaders at the top use to retain and fortify their grip on society. This is also instrumental for the authorities’ personal mercenary motives and/or for preventing democratic trends – that is, not letting people decide about their own lives, choose lifestyles and engage in politics or other activities, and limiting their freedoms in every other possible way. “Divide and rule” is an excellent maxim for this purpose – the government plants mistrust and creates the enemy image. Even if two neighbours are not at war, they are prevented from meeting and relating to each other lest they join ranks and move against those at the top.

Bringing together people who would not have met otherwise due to conflicts that have frozen the Caucasus has become my key maxim. I have used this maxim to justify the need to finance conflict transformation projects, although none of them promised a miraculous settlement of the conflict.

This begs the question why the ex-combatants' meeting had no follow-up. However, it did have indirect follow-up events, flowing into another large event: the Moscow meeting of people with disabilities from the entire Caucasus. This meeting led to many joint projects, including ones between the Abkhaz organisation led by Alkhas Tskhagushvili and the Nagorno-Karabakh organisation led by Vardan Tadevosyan. Armenian, Georgian, Ossetian and other ex-combatants with disabilities initiated joint projects in the framework of the Philosophy of Independent Life approach. Another follow-up of the ex-combatants' meeting was a conference held in Tsakhkadzor, Armenia, which discussed traditions of peacekeeping in the Caucasus and ways they can be applied now; Professor Sergey Arutyunov, a major authority on Caucasian studies, took part in this event. It was at the ex-combatants' meeting that someone proposed the idea about codes of ethics of Caucasus nations containing something which could now be used for conflict resolution. The Georgian and Ossetian groups of ex-combatants continued meeting and keeping in touch. However, the disintegrative policy which started with the rise of President Saakashvili to power prevented this rather intensive communication from having an effect on later developments. The second Chechen War (1999) started soon afterwards; then there was the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003). Official governments did not welcome the success of civil peacebuilding, and the international community was becoming more and more responsive to governments, choosing to do the governments' bidding in this and some other issues rather than trust civil society. Civil society itself was playing its own part: some sections of it were trying to be more "Catholic" than the governments, and other sections were shamelessly trying to use their non-governmental status to promote the agenda of their side in the conflict; others were simply pursuing mercenary goals and using gossip and other similar means, so widespread in the Caucasus, to undermine the authority of those of their colleagues who had initiated genuine civil movements.

After the meeting, I kept in touch with the ex-combatants (they disliked the "ex" part, saying that the wars were not over yet – regrettably, they were right in at least two cases, Chechnya and South Ossetia). The sense of dignity that I got from these men – combatants from Abkhazia, Georgia, North Caucasus, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh – has stayed with me throughout my life. These people have held their heads up high at all times, whatever social problems peaceful times may have brought them. They have guarded their ethnic groups in a very literal and much respected way. They have been the Ambassadors of Goodwill forged in wars and have expressed the strongest peace message that I have ever heard: **we have fought, we know what war is about and we want to act together to stop it happening again. If we fail, we want our children to stick to humane rules even while at war.**

What made the combatants different was their integrity: they never accepted bribes and were never economical with the truth. They did not allow falsehood into their lives.

Mission to Karachay-Cherkessia

Unrest began in the Karachay-Cherkessia Republic (KCR) when presidential candidate Stanislav Derev failed to get elected in 1999. The situation in the KCR became tense once in a while. It was there that, many years after our visit, female protesters occupied the presidential palace, and the Representative of the President of Russia, Dmitry Kozak, knelt in front of them, promising to handle their complaints. This was a daring and very Caucasian thing to do, and Kozak has been respected ever since in the Caucasus. This is how things stand in the Caucasus: you do not need to be brave, because you are not allowed to. Just behave decently, support regular humane values, and you will be respected. You will be forgiven for being passive in the fight against lawlessness and injustice, for being unable to stand up for the truth. The Caucasus is like that: it is suicide to stand up for the truth. If you want to do some good, you need to be clever about it.

At the time of the conflict over Derev's election, Caucasus Forum members from the KCR asked the Forum to send over a field mission to put together an unbiased report about the unrest. The information flow was weaker at that time and there was less manipulated information too, so our mission was also about informing people.

We took great care to plan the mission. We met a few days before the trip, discussed it in great detail, and put together an action plan and a list of pre-arranged meetings. We also took a lot of trouble with staffing the mission. Unfortunately, the aforementioned Tamaz Ketsba from Abkhazia had to cancel his participation at the last moment, and we went without him.

The situation in the KCR was really tense. We were not received by top-level officials but by second or third ones. Even they did not want to see us at first, but then realised that our delegation of five was quite representative and agreed to receive us.

The Cherkess and Karachay populations barely communicated with each other, staying away from shops and cafés owned by someone from the other ethnic group. We talked a lot to people on the streets, in our hotel, in public places and offices; we talked to government officials and the general public, trying to appease them and point out that political disputes must not impact on inter-ethnic relations. It was a difficult and almost hopeless job. People listened to us and studied us, wondering how five people from various parts of the Caucasus, including an Armenian and an Azerbaijani, were doing this together. They asked about the Caucasus Forum, if it was really true and wondered how such things could come about.

Derev was a Cherkess, the “offended” party, and it was easier to find Cherkess people who were willing to talk to us. The Karachay people, on the other hand, would not dare say anything apart from official clichés, especially if they were public officials.

Some Cherkess people told us that they wanted to secede from the KCR. They already had maps with theoretical borders drawn, based on the difficult past of this long-suffering republic. For me, the turning point was our meeting with the Minister of Nationalities, who had just returned from Moscow. He was a young Karachay, educated and civil, a true expert who held a PhD in ethnic studies of the Caucasus. After listening to him, I really understood what was going on and felt there was a good chance of finding a solution if there were educated individuals like this among the Karachay. A few months later, however, I learned that he had been forced to resign and left to teach at a university.

What we heard and understood, we put down on paper in as much detail as we could. The report of the Caucasus Forum was never published but was widely disseminated; I was later told that it had been read in both White Houses. The report did not focus as much on facts as on recommendations. It was nothing outstanding, but it was a text coordinated by the five mission participants and later by the 15 Forum Coordinators who signed their names to it. The report was popular in the KCR too, and we were told that the different ethnic groups – the Karachay, Cherkess, Cossacks and Abazins – all liked it. Perhaps its biggest strength was that it was a fair and respectful report. It did not have any of the superciliousness that often emerges in reports by international organisations and even NGOs; its tone was appeasing rather than neutral, and it avoided unbalanced judgements which are so common in journalistic scoops.

Grassroots diplomacy was thus gaining strength. It was still more or less possible to travel across the Caucasus at that time. It seems strange now, but this was a time when Russia blocked Abkhazia and when Georgians did not need visas to enter Russia. One could make an appointment with a top official in the name of a network that was not even registered as an NGO. There was a sense of freedom in the air and it was up to people how to use it: for war or peace, for destruction or creation. Alas, most people chose war and disintegration. As a result, freedom was no longer in the air. The people had made their choices – to kidnap, swindle, steal, take bribes and torture other humans.

We travelled all over this region, tense as a bowstring, at our own risk, unprotected, uninsured, relying on our friends and connections, and the gamble that we were hosts as well as guests because we all came from the Caucasus. As I walked down a street in Cherkessk, I gazed around and saw passers-by quickly look away, although they had been staring at our backs a moment before. We had women in our mission but we did not have any special concerns about them; on the contrary, we felt safer in their presence because it conveyed the message that our mission was peaceful. Had this courage and readiness to help in times of trouble been understood and used by those who supported peace initiatives, had the powers-that-be relied on it, had it spread wider and reached society at large, our peace mission would have planted the seed for the future peace process in the Caucasus.

A similar mission was later organised by Guram Odisharia and Batal Kobakhia within the writers' project;¹⁰ that mission was less stressful but also marred with some difficulties. In addition, we later organised visits to some of the regions in the framework of the youth journalism project. An Armenian and an Azerbaijani went together to the Georgian regions of Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli and wrote a report. However, journalists are not peacebuilders, and there is nothing special about working as a "stringer" in a conflict. What is really rare is real people, genuine peace messengers, using realistic, modern methods to deal with the situation (not the legendary "women who throw their headscarves on the ground", so common in the mythologies of all nations in the Caucasus and the "Wider Near East"). If I could find the time and some like-minded people, I would launch peacebuilding courses for young people coming from conflict areas; one of the things they could do would be to travel together to problematic locations and try to understand what is going on, learn not to do any harm and do some good.

There were other missions later on. Yet, it is this first peacebuilding mission of the Caucasus Forum which remains unforgettable for me. I would not have dared to go on my own, as I would not have accepted this much responsibility. Moreover, it would have been less interesting, because I felt that it was this model of accountability to the entire Caucasus that made the conflict parties express themselves "the right way", i.e. with dignity and candour, without focusing on trivialities; it made them ready to listen to us and sometimes change their views. I would not have gone with foreigners either. For the mission to work, we had to be invited, the Forum had to be willing to dispatch the mission, and people had to be willing to travel over from their regions, come together and become a team. Missions like this are, regrettably, very rare; even when there are people who are ready to organise them and who have the right skills, they do not find support. Perhaps this experience was not lost on people; in a recent report on South Ossetia, compiled by Larisa Sotieva (an old devoted Forum leader from Vladikavkaz and a peace specialist who currently works at Alert), I recognised that very same prudence, responsibility and balance, the same integrity, the same tone as in the first report. Larissa's report was different in two respects: it was much more in-depth than ours because she has a profound knowledge of her own country; moreover, she wrote it on her own without coordinating with anyone else, whereas we coordinated every little detail many times over.

The All-Caucasus Creative Youth Game

The All-Caucasus Creative Youth Game was held in February 2003, at the time of the Forum's short-lived golden age and maturity. It was one of the last events in the framework of a two-year project of civil society capacity building in the Caucasus, supported by the UK Big Lottery Fund. A "creative game" is a method of group work

¹⁰ See Chapters 20 and 21.

which can be used for developing skills and thinking abilities, for making decisions in a situation of extraordinary uncertainty, and for strategic planning based on in-depth review and reassessment of existing views and concepts.

The project was planned to involve young people, but it was not clear exactly how and in which ways. The Forum could, for example, hold a tender and finance 10 low-budget projects in various regions of the Caucasus. The projects would probably have been traditional ones: during the first meeting which discussed “forgotten regions”, most youth project proposals were about playing a joint game of football or some other sport, or giving a karaoke machine to a village club. Would those projects promote ties between young people from various regions and help them learn more about each other? Would they teach them to raise concerns and jointly address their own future? We tried to make sure that the Forum only handled projects that were directly within its mandate: doing things within an all-Caucasus scope, not just in some of its areas.

The creative game was organised at the end of the Big Lottery-supported project, at a time when many negative tendencies in the Caucasus were accelerating. We wanted to find a way to work with young people that would have at least some strategic effect. In various regions where the internationals were working, a variety of projects were being implemented, but they were still not enough. In some regions, there were no projects at all and traditional projects were important; but the Forum had a special dimension for this, called “Forgotten Regions”. This was a time of “donor fatigue”, maybe as a result of the political crisis, or for some other reason. People were bored with implementing and sponsoring projects, they felt that civil society projects failed to produce visible or significant results, and so on. Old methods seemed no longer useful and new ones had not emerged yet. It is fun to arrange a meeting of people who would never have met otherwise, but we wanted to do more: hold the meeting and make the most of it. So what could we do? Give them training on skills for implementing civil society projects, so that they would go back home and have no fundraising channels for these projects?

In these circumstances, I and Nune Dilanyan (then Deputy Executive Secretary of the Forum in Yerevan) came up with an idea to hold a youth meeting in the form of a creative game. We prepared the initiative thoroughly. First, our team held a game of this kind for high-school students in Abkhazia on behalf of the UN and the Sukhum/i Youth House. We realised that problems would arise if all of the facilitators in an all-Caucasus creative game were Armenian; therefore, we organised a training game in Armenia at which we trained our colleagues from various regions to become game facilitators. As a result, we were able to put together a group of people from various regions who were capable of handling a game with just a little help: Zaurbek Kozhev from Nalchik, Valya Cherevatenko from Novocherkassk, Jana Javakhishvili from Tbilisi and Vlad Jenia from Abkhazia.

Why did we need an all-Caucasus creative game? We wanted young people to meet and relate to each other, but we also wanted to work with them and teach them to work with each other so intensely that those six days would provide a learning experience on a par with a whole university term. This is the way the “systemic thinking activity” method works in the format of a creative game. The impetus one gets in five or six days of the game is equivalent to the impetus from a whole term of education at any post-Soviet university with its typically outdated teaching system based on boring lectures. There is not enough room to go into the methodology here and it has been well described elsewhere. What we wanted was to help the young people boost their skills and thinking abilities, including collective thinking, using the radical method of “brain shock” during a creative game.

We faced a number of problems, some political and some conceptual. Because the training method was not of Western but of local origin,¹¹ various local groups were very sceptical about it. People seemed to say: ‘the Western aspects are fine because people give us money and insist that we learn Western techniques, things like participatory trainings, facilitation and so on. But if you are local, what can you have to offer? Only recently, you lived in the Soviet system; when it broke apart, you were dumped into this anarchy, and you are still living in the midst of war, lawlessness and failure to build your societies properly. If you are people like us, what new methods can you have to offer?’

Without even saying it, our opponents were saying to us: ‘No way – we don’t trust you. There must be a catch: you must come from a sect of sorts, or maybe you are just Armenians who want to extend your influence over us in some strange, ingenious way that we cannot control. That is all there is to your creative games.’ They asked us: ‘What is the result of this game going to be, what exactly?’

The question was asked by people who rarely asked what the result of any civil society project was going to be. Some of them had uncritically adapted to the slapdash blowing of funds in international projects supposedly developing civil society. Others were able to distinguish between efficient projects and fictitious ones; there were critics of the game idea among these people too – including, for example, some Abkhaz civil society leaders. I guess people stopped believing or had never believed that they could come together and really **make an impact, not on politics or social issues, but on more than just that: on the future, on the rules for designing the institutions** that we are all part of – such as family, war, statehood, or even more importantly, the values which we relate to and which define our behaviour. However, not many people really understand what those values are about. During the wars, people did make an impact, societies were mobilised, but this was war. In the absence of visible threats to physical security on a mass scale, it is easy to lose touch with governance and become reactive, never really strategising.

11 In 1953, the Moscow Logical Circle was established, later converted by Georgy Petrovich Shchedrovitsky into the Moscow Methodological Circle. It was there that the “thinking activity” method was born. In the early 1970s, Shchedrovitsky began to organise the first large-scale Organisational Activity Games (OAG).

The underlying principle of the creative game concept is different from the traditional facilitation techniques used in meetings in the Caucasus. For example, political correctness does not apply. Is this good or bad? It depends on the angle. From the moment you enter the world of the creative game, you must start thinking and acting outside the box and stop using stereotypes. However, stereotypes play an important role: they regulate communication between humans. It is stereotypical behaviour to help a woman put her coat on. In the US, the middle classes have got rid of this stereotype and replaced it with another: that helping a woman put her coat on is emphasising her weakness and is therefore degrading.

Gender balance does not matter in a creative game; no kind of balance does. Participants do not speak in turns but follow an invisible rating: the game facilitator gives the floor to people who he/she believes have something to say in the context of the game flow, and interrupts them abruptly if he/she believes they are going off track. Insistent and loquacious players will be interrupted; active creative players get the upper hand over passive creative players, although a good game facilitator will try to involve the passive players too, exposing their creativity. Some players will have a flash of inspiration and some will be down for a while, and might, for example, decide that “intellectualism” is not the right thing for them.

Imagine that you are managing a game and you come from the Caucasus. A representative of nation A is talking nonsense, whereas a representative of nation B, which is at war with nation A, is saying relevant and important things. What should you do? If you allow the representative of nation A to continue talking nonsense, the game will stall and fall apart. If you decide to be balanced and let both speak for the same length of time, through external timekeeping, the game will fall apart anyway. The only thing you can do is to stop representative A talking. You will thus have shown a preference for B, and many will jump to the conclusion that you did not prefer what B was saying, but just favoured the party in conflict that B represents. Worse still, you also belong to a nation, so they might think that it was your “nation” that upset the balance and preferred “side B” to “side A”. This is what a stereotyped observer can surmise from watching a creative game. Why does this happen? Because the game challenges the Caucasus, the entire post-Soviet space, and in fact the entire world to divide itself based on a mix of creative and intellectual ability, not by nation or religion. **How about accepting the fact that although you consider nation A to be your enemy, its representative A1 is a profound and original thinker?** The moment one understands and accepts this, one becomes more intelligent, because the ability to appreciate the intelligence of others is the best sign of one’s own intelligence. The “horizontal” conflict between nations is thus replaced by a “vertical” arrangement and healthy competition.

We do not use intelligence tests and do not believe in them. Unfortunately, some people are unable to accept, understand or internalise the above statement. They are unable to

appreciate one's own and other people's creativity, think boldly, engage in joint thinking activity, and redefine the stereotypes inherited both from the Soviet times and from the post-Soviet era. In the case of the latter, people were busy creating a new value system to replace the old Soviet one and ended up creating rigid stereotypes about religion, ethnicity, nation, ethics, gender and so on. The message of the creative game is different: **redefine everything that happened, make up a new programme, a new vision and a new vocabulary.** This is how ambitious the concept is and what it aspires to achieve.

We planned to do this with young people from the Caucasus, most of whom did not have a good education, just a post-Soviet one. Throughout the game, the young players worked during the day, partied, danced and argued during the night; however, they remained friends, regardless of how deep they went into the trials and tribulations of their own conflicts.

We brought together about 70 people. Our Abkhaz colleagues managed to get permission for us to bring a few Georgians to the game by helicopter. The principles of selecting participants for a creative game are different from those used in peacebuilding initiatives. For example, what should the number of Abkhaz and Georgians be compared with that of other events? Can we have more Armenians than Azerbaijanis? Why is the game happening in Pitsunda? It is not a neutral location.

Concerning the neutrality or non-neutrality of locations, the Forum's argument was that its events were held in non-neutral places, because the Forum itself was about peacebuilders in the Caucasus wanting to introduce more order to their common home. However, a properly neutral location in the Caucasus does not exist. Only the entirety of the Caucasus is neutral, if taken holistically.

We had a problem with selecting participants because Forum members wanted to bring their children and relatives to the game. The principles of fair selection and the idea of a conflict of interests were non-existent in the minds of many of our colleagues. This was incompatible with the ideology of our donor. Was there indeed a conflict of interests?

This issue would be worth discussing in greater detail perhaps some other time. I will just point out that the problem of selecting participants looks different from the perspective of the "systemic thinking activity" method. Everyone is a person. Participants are not supposed to have any advantages over non-participants; in fact, the non-participant is probably lucky because the participant makes a commitment. They must start thinking and thinking differently. They must learn and accept responsibility. The way our critics described the trip to Pitsunda sounded like it was a party. In a way, it was a party, but not quite.

The issue of participation versus non-participation is the cornerstone of the peacebuilding get-togethers in the Caucasus. It is also a problem elsewhere, but in this case it becomes

all-encompassing. The UNHCR Working Group impasse was also about participation/non-participation: they wanted to exclude some people – those from “unrecognised entities”, allegedly because the conference was held under the auspices of the UN and therefore the existence of “unrecognised entities” had to be denied; at the same time, they wanted to include others, blaming Alert for having excluded them.

As someone who has been advocating the participatory approach all his life, I have nevertheless been consistently accused of excluding a participant. Why is this? Why does the participation issue assume such strange forms? After all, the participants of all kinds of conferences do not go to them to have fun; in any case, there are so many conferences that anyone, even if they come from an “unrecognised entity”, can go to one of them sooner or later if they really want to. There are more conferences than people in some parts of the Caucasus. Is shopping the main motive after all to go to such events? If so, this is a bitter truth. It seems ironic that the civil society of the Caucasus has agreed to being excluded from political decision making, but is fighting for little “places under the sun” of conferences. I realise of course that there is no irony here: people fight where they can and swallow humiliation when they are excluded. The fact that they do fight is a good sign.

Such irony does not stop here. When civil society actors manage to become accepted as participants, sometimes via a conflict, they can come back from conferences in various resorts and immediately try to exclude others by not sharing what they have learned or telling them what they said. Once again, is this really ironic or something that is quite obvious?

In order to deal with the participation issue and avoid accusations of being “closed” – as well as to make the work of the Forum and the peacebuilding agenda available to the wider public and allow the masses to have an impact on the Forum – we assigned duties to the Coordinators. Prior to travelling to a meeting of the Coordination Council, they had to summon Support Groups and ask them what they should put on the agenda of the Forum. On their return, they had to summon Support Groups again and tell them in detail what had happened in the meeting. We also tried to get coverage of Forum activities in the local media: newspapers, television and so on. This was possible in Georgia, Armenia and Abkhazia. However, in Azerbaijan, this created risks for the participants of Forum events, because its government banned contacts with Armenians, especially Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result, there was not wide coverage of the Armenians’ activities either, out of loyalty to the Azerbaijanis, because Armenian media are accessible in Azerbaijan and wide coverage of Forum events would have been conspicuous. Colleagues from Azerbaijan would then have been charged with treason, as has actually happened several times. This result is regrettable: lacking the opportunity to get widespread television coverage, the Armenian-Azerbaijani projects do not have enough societal impact to change attitudes in the communities.

At any rate, in the days of the Forum, those Coordinators who brought together Support Groups were deemed more acceptable by societies than Coordinators who did not. Being informed is a great strength and having information that others do not is a great power. Share your information, and people will approve of you. The majority of peacebuilding projects are accused of secrecy anyway.

For some reason, it is thought that a meeting of two opponents, even if they are presidents, will lead to agreements if the negotiations are secret but not if they are open. I have come to the opposite conclusion. Secrecy is about fear; it is about feeling threatened and afraid to open up, when you do not want to put all your cards on the table, when you have no trust and want to keep your trump cards to yourself. Information, on the other hand, is a weapon. I constantly disarm, disrobe and expose myself – I am an informational exhibitionist. Ask me something and I will tell you. Transparency is my weapon, not secrecy, even if transparency can be cruel to some people. You cannot build trust in secret.

Fortunately, compared with other development projects sponsored by international donors, peacebuilding projects are less often accused of corruption. This phenomenon can only be positive. It happens because these projects are smaller in scope and consume less money than non-peacebuilding projects or those which are neutral with respect to peacebuilding. Meanwhile, it is obvious that sustainable development will not be possible in the Caucasus until the conflicts are resolved.

The “Support Group” deserved its name: it gave the Coordinators legitimacy, provided them with information and ideas, and spread information about the Forum further in the society. It was also a group selected by the Coordinators themselves among those civil society actors on whom the Coordinator could rely to some extent. With the societies deeply immersed in political and other discord, many civil society actors were unable to cooperate as a result of previous conflicts and skirmishes, or due to an ethical divide that arises when one does something the other disagrees with in principle, or because of mercenary competition. At this point, it was no longer possible for Coordinators to fulfil the requirement that they should work in the societies, if that requirement meant that the civil societies at large were to be involved in the work regardless of whether the Coordinator respected them and recognised their authority or vice versa. It was eventually decided that while consultations were to be held and information was to be disseminated, it was up to the Coordinator to decide with whom they would cooperate in their civil society. However, the Support Group was to include, alongside the Coordinator’s close associates, some neutral actors: people with whom the Coordinator was not in a state of conflict, even if he or she did not work directly with them.

This complicated arrangement was necessary because the very basics of civil society work – openness, communication, transparency – were often impracticable in the Caucasus after the disintegration of the USSR. Conflicts separated whole nations. Cold and hunger

left people even more isolated within their communities. People tried to help themselves and others, but the mutual support was narrowed down to clans: it happened in the *Gemeinschaft* (community) not in the *Gesellschaft* (society). Even when the mutual support went beyond clan limits, the people who gave it would merely “join” each other’s “clans”. Some of the mutual support was based on class unity: for instance, intelligentsia helped each other as a group (which was becoming extinct). However, the classes thinned out and disintegrated. Groups of such varied origins were co-opted into new units, so that mutual help within the same unit acquired the traits of clan support. This phenomenon, as either cause or consequence, reflected on the relationship between government and people, government and civil society. These two entities found themselves poles apart, and any real dialogue between them was virtually impossible. “Divide and rule” was the principle being applied by leaders of all types almost throughout the Caucasus. As a result, these leaders were left in extreme solitude, so that they had little power left except over their own, albeit extended, clans and families. Such a government does not help other people, it just robs them; or the people simply ignore it and survive as best they can.

Because of the problem of selecting participants for the game, we came up with an idea to hold, at some opportune moment, a “family convention”. Had the Forum not gone into standby and had sufficient funds, this was certainly worth doing as a response to the complaints of Forum leaders and participants that their children were being left out of their parents’ professional activities. There was less and less opportunity to communicate on an all-Caucasus level outside the Forum activities. Children of the Forum members were deprived of all the opportunities open to children whom we selected based on abstract principles of fairness. The Forum children badly needed to understand what their parents were doing. So we had this idea of bringing together the Forum leaders with their families. This would have been a creative way to challenge the issue of conflict of interest; unfortunately, it has not yet been implemented.

The methodology of “thinking activity” implies that people meet as independent entities. Their ethnic affiliation, family ties or professions do not matter. What matters is their thinking style. Holistic personalities meet and must find a common language not just between themselves, but in a way “above” and “beyond” themselves, and then draw their findings on flipcharts.

Despite the abovementioned controversies, the youth game was a great success. It was one of the most significant events in the thinking activity genre that I have ever attended. For many participants, it formed the backbone of their worldview. It worked that way for me too. I had taken part in games since 1989 as a game facilitator. However, during the February 2003 game in Pitsunda, I had several flashes of inspiration that consolidated my worldview, which had been more fluid up to that point. It may sound selfish but it is true: I probably got more from the game than I gave to others; I learned more than I taught.

Facilitators and Western consultants often say this, but I would not like it to sound politically correct: I do not know how much good I did there and what I taught others, but it is my personal belief that this event defined my life.

I will not dwell on the content-related results of the game, which included: new words and concepts such as “catachagrace” (catastrophe, chaos, game and grace); understanding certain trends (the “diagram” of a person coming from the Caucasus); setting down principles for understanding the world (the “kaleidoscope diagram”); strategic ideas (the criteria of a “good project”, a “central project”, a “project engine”, etc.); and political perceptions (e.g. that of the role of the Gali region in Georgian-Abkhaz relations). The outcomes of the game in terms of building relations were also significant. We had a few more games later in the framework of other projects: one in Abkhazia, one in Georgia and one in Armenia. After a long break, we recently organised another game in Armenia.¹² The games do not happen often but the results are significant. These results can be used to achieve profound and radical solutions to problems arising because of partial and inconsistent reforms. They can be used for building a civilised Caucasus, but can also be used in any other part of the world. Despite this, they do not yet occupy the central place that they deserve in the arsenal of means for designing social development programmes. As they say, no prophet is accepted in their hometown or, for that matter, in other places either. David Hovhannesian, the leader of the creative games, along with myself and our fellow game facilitators are not against other development methods. As for the creative games, their acceptance as a means to strategise in every possible field of development is imminent.

A huge amount of mediation efforts were needed to conduct the game in Abkhazia. But this is not the point. The game facilitator is not a mediator or a facilitator in the traditional sense, but someone who mediates between ideas not people – this is the best type of mediation. If I was offered mediation between myself and someone else versus mediation between their ideas and mine, I would choose the latter. All people need is to learn the skills of this “mediation” and then figure out how to use it in their lives.

It was not mediation that characterised our little “*coup d'état*”, leading to the hosting of creative games in the Caucasus and the establishment of the Caucasus Game Methodologists' Committee; it was leadership. This was probably the only non-Western technique for organisational activity that reached the Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was also a unique technique to have originated in the USSR and worth transferring, as well as being transferrable to the rest of the world – with the exception of money laundering techniques, which originated in the USSR and were refined over time with no less innovation than the creative games, and then successfully implanted

¹² In the year after writing the first draft of this paper, we have held four organisational activity games and will have more [note added in August 2009].

in the rest of the world. There do not seem to be any other locally born techniques: the Forum had applied, researched and modernised a few techniques originating from the Caucasus,¹³ but this work has remained unfinished since the decline of the Forum.

We started out as mediators and ended up as leaders; not leaders who try to reconcile the parties, preferably without a personal agenda, but ones who begin to understand what should be done, who use this understanding to make an impact and who look for like-minded people who share this understanding. We were inevitably becoming civil society leaders – that is, people who do not aspire to obtaining political power within the framework of existing political institutions, but who aim to influence the minds of people at large, throughout the Caucasus; leaders whose ambitions are about large-scale constitutional change at the systemic structural level.

Meanwhile, the political situation in the Caucasus deteriorated. There were terrorist raids at the Nord-Ost theatre production and at the Beslan school; the Northern Caucasus disintegrated. Then came the 2004 events in Adjara and the first attempt for a Georgian-Ossetian war in the 2000s. Subsequently, Aslan Maskhadov, the former Chechen President turned rebel leader, was murdered. We suspected that the situation would turn out like this and felt the effects when it happened. As the events unfolded, I and some of my colleagues from the Forum tried to look for alternative solutions – radical ones like creative games. The reaction was mistrust and cries of indignation, because people are conservative, especially in the Caucasus. However, lazy thinking is a universal human feature. As the saying goes, ‘people do not start making their cloaks until it begins to rain’, especially in the Caucasus. Even when it has started raining, there seems to be no point in making a cloak. You are already wet. It is not customary in the Caucasus to promote the sustainability of innovations.

Quite naturally, the political development of the region combined with our personal growth was pulling us apart. Some left for new, unknown realms and were heartbroken to leave their fellow peacebuilders behind. Some stayed to continue reactively fighting for their rights and the rights of their communities whenever they were violated, or to reactively come up with helpless joint statements when something happened or failed to happen. Others joined the political struggle on the terms set by existing political actors with mixed success, instead of dedicating their valuable abilities to the creation of radically different conditions.

I am continually driven by the need to go back to the subject of mediation. In the way that the Forum had exhausted itself in the shape that it took, mediation had also exhausted itself as a concept – within the Forum and within this project, I believe.

¹³ There was, for instance, the “Adyge Consensus” – a complex, impressive and fully functional method for achieving consensus through a combination of voting and coordination, based on dividing the electorate into groups of three.

Rather than asking us to describe our experience, we are asked to write about mediation. Then we are asked to write about facilitation or confidence building. A subject handed down from the top, a social or donor requirement, serves as a Procrustean bed for our writings, forcing us squeeze our lives into a framework that is too small for it. This is the tragedy of our time: people tell us what to do instead of valuing the free creations of free people as they exist and unfold. I have to admit (better late than never) that **the Forum was not about mediation, and explaining the Forum in mediation terms is as good as doing a heart operation via the nose.** This may be theoretically possible but a bit too far-fetched. The strength of the Forum was that it created its own agendas. Sometimes, it would “take the power in its hands”, and then the managers and international mediators had to follow its agenda. To this end, the Forum was remarkably interesting and profound in its urge to amplify peacebuilding trends in the Caucasus.

Management and decision making in the Forum

The administration and management of the Forum revealed its strengths – its pan-Caucasus approach, solidarity, pure intentions and belief in a better life. On the other hand, they also showed its weaknesses – the lack of unity in the Caucasus, the lack of skills and institutions for disciplined joint activity, a vague divide between what is acceptable and what is not, and the lack of trust due to ongoing or latent conflicts and moral vagueness.

At the March 1999 meeting, we invited NGOs from the entire Caucasus that we knew were active in peacebuilding or similar issues. Some even came uninvited. The ensuing discussions were heated. It was clear that the Forum would be unable to survive and implement its grandiose plans without an executive body. It did not make sense for the London-based International Alert to become the executive body of the Forum: the Forum needed some degree of self-management. It was therefore decided that since no one in the Caucasus was trusted by people from other parties in conflict, the office of the Forum would move from place to place and someone neutral would be appointed as its head executive officer. It so happened that, just before going to Sochi, I was in Moscow and I got in touch with Maxim Shevelev, a psychologist whom I had known for many years. Maxim did not have a job at that time. I called him from Sochi and asked if he would like to work for the Forum and spend a year in Nalchik if he got the job. He said he would and came to Sochi right away; the Forum members interviewed him, liked him and gave him the job. There were no other candidates: no one else was prepared to make up their minds so quickly. Our young Chechens had their doubts because they believed that a Russian was not neutral from their perspective; but on the whole, the Forum liked the idea. This was how the management of the Forum was arranged for a whole year. Maxim went to Nalchik and set up an office there, assisted by local Forum members. Coordinators from other regions went there and took turns working at the office for a few months each. At that time, the Forum structure was as follows:

Coordinators represented the Forum in their regions and the Executive Secretary worked at the Forum office. Coordinators were signatories of the Elbrus Declaration. The Westminster Fund gave us a small grant to support the office of the Forum (we did not waste time at Alert and, between July 1998 and March 1999, we raised some funds for the Forum administration). The funds enabled us to rent office space, buy computers, etc. The Forum was not registered because it was not clear where to register it; as a result, its office was funded via local NGOs in the region where it was currently located. However, the Forum was already a strong network with the basics of an organisation.

And so it continued. I can remember one of the subsequent meetings. The mixed crowd that came together for the Forum did not let us do serious work and make decisions. Everyone was calling themselves the Coordinator of their region. We needed to sort things out. The signatories of the Elbrus Declaration, joined by a small group of friends, made a *coup d'état*: they announced that only they, i.e. the regional representatives appointed by the Forum founders, had the right to vote. The Forum founders were signatories of the Elbrus Declaration (although some signatories never had to deal with the Forum since the signing). This group appointed the first batch of Coordinators from among themselves and some other NGO leaders. Later the Forum co-opted more people into its ranks when needed, whereas the civil society “masses” with whom, and for whose sake the Forum was working, were deemed “participants” rather than members of the Forum: there was no membership.

This arrangement was essential for a unique organisation like this to be able to survive. A year later, at the meeting in Kislovodsk, a new issue arose. Maxim had set up the office and provided the logistics needed for the Forum to work successfully: he sent emails and organised events. However, he did not have sufficient knowledge of the Caucasus to make people feel comfortable with him. We needed to appoint a new Executive Secretary. It was clear that we could not identify a “neutral” person in a hurry and did not have the funds or time for a thorough search. Besides, the office was supposed to move from place to place. The question was to where. The idea was that the office would move every year so that, after 15 years, it would have worked in each of the main regions of the Caucasus.

A creative solution was found. Several circumstances coincided: these were the last years of the Shevardnadze rule; there was no visible movement towards resolution of conflicts of Georgia but visa-free travel to Russia was still possible. The market in Ergneti, on the border between Georgia and South Ossetia, was thriving; at the same time, Georgian-Ossetian relations seemed to be developing in a way that, although the conflict remained formally unresolved, informally it was the least painful of the conflicts in the Caucasus. The Forum Coordinators decided that from that point onwards, one of them would be the Executive Secretary and that this position would rotate. The problem was that if the Forum was based in a city where there was a strong Forum actor who would become

the Executive Secretary, they would be unable to assure neutrality or parity, because no person from the Caucasus would even think about the entire Caucasus while back at home, let alone sustain a balance.

Finally, the following solution was proposed: the office would go to Tbilisi – bearing in mind that people from so many parts of the Caucasus could meet in Tbilisi; even the Abkhaz agreed to go there as long as it was for Forum events, not bilateral efforts aimed at reconciling them with the Georgians. The job of Executive Secretary would be offered to Alan Parastaev from South Ossetia who would have the full support of the Forum actors in Tbilisi. It was about 11pm when the idea was proposed. Alan agreed to move to Tbilisi for a year and serve as the Executive Secretary. The combination of Tbilisi and Alan suited everyone, and the next day the general meeting unanimously approved this decision.

Therefore, Alan moved to Tbilisi and the Forum went with him. It was a busy year. The Forum's peacebuilding projects were gaining momentum, as was the resistance to them. Anti-peacebuilding political developments were also gaining pace, along with the activities of people who thought they were “building peace” but were in fact “building war”. Many people in the Caucasus theoretically understood the logic of peacebuilding but believed that their role was to promote their “side” at the expense of others and to use peacebuilding projects as an opportunity to do so. Fortunately, the Forum methodology allowed us to compensate for these situations. For example, the draft of the report written by the monitoring mission to the Pankisi Gorge was full of expressions which were offensive in terms of peacebuilding (for example, the representatives of one ethnic group were groundlessly and unfairly referred to as “bandits”, and the like). However, since people from various regions took part in the mission, the final report was deemed acceptable and meaningful.

By now, the Forum had to face the language issue and invent principles of decision making. Questions arose, for instance, over which spelling should be used: Sukhum, Sukhumi or Sukhum/Sukhumi? Such issues had to be analysed and regulated using consensus-based principles. Decision making was based on consensus between regional Coordinators. However, the signatories of the Elbrus Declaration, as well as other “Elders” (i.e. people who had acted as Coordinators at some point, although they were not signatories), had consultative voting rights. It was getting harder every time to bring all or at least most of the Coordinators to events, let alone all or most of the signatories and Elders.

Procedures were becoming more in-depth and more complex. It was decided that the consensus would hold even if someone was absent (almost like diplomatic battles at the OSCE: can we have consensus minus one?). It was becoming clear that if the Forum continued to rely on a multilateral principle, its efficiency would be low. What could we do? Someone suggested that in order to elaborate an idea or project prior to discussing

it at the Coordination Council, we could form Initiative Groups of three to seven people which had to include representatives of both sides of at least one conflict. For example, a group composed of an Abkhaz, an Ossetian, a Chechen and an Armenian would not be allowed to submit proposals to the Coordination Board; however, a group composed of an Armenian, an Azeri and an Abkhaz would. **The structural balance of interests in the Caucasus includes the interests of those who want to go back to the status-quo-ante – that is, deny self-determination to entities which are smaller than the former Soviet republics – and the interests of those who wish the opposite.** Therefore, the presence of people who represent two sides in at least one conflict balances perceptions and ensures an even-handed approach to issues. Adding some “neutral” actors steadies the balance some more.

A “neutral” actor at any given moment is the side whose ethno-political and/or national interests do not allow it to side unequivocally with one of the parties in a conflict. For example, Armenians are “interested neutral actors” in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and in the Russian-Georgian one; so are Georgians in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, and so on. Georgians would probably not like the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict to be resolved in favour of Armenians rather than Azerbaijanis, but from their perspective the need to resolve it has priority over the form of its solution. Of course, I am talking here about actors who try to act rationally and about rational aspects of the conflicts (which is a simplification).

It was decided at the conference in Tsakhkadzor that the Forum office would move to Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia. It was also considered that trust between Coordinators had grown to such an extent that there was no need to send a representative of a different region to head the office; everyone trusted Larisa Sotieva and she became the Executive Secretary. Moreover, the term for which the office would stay in one region was extended to two years instead of one, so that it would have time to develop and become institutionalised. This also reflected the growing understanding that the Forum was becoming detached from “local realities”, or that this was an imminent threat. There was also a need to become more immersed in the “local” issues. Two years later, the Forum moved to Yerevan for two years, but did not go anywhere after this because its executive agency ceased to exist. Only the network remains.

It was becoming clear that many issues could not be dealt with consensually, especially in between meetings. We needed to increase the powers of the Executive Secretary, who was meanwhile becoming extra-sensitive and diplomatically correct, and who resented making too many decisions so as not to seem imposing; boosting efficiency thus led to diplomatic problems. Back at the time when we had decided to create the position of Executive Secretary, we proceeded on the understanding that the Forum could not succeed without an executive body. Now we were in a deadlock because the Forum was so diplomatic and multilateral; we needed to stick to its principles while also increasing its ability to react quickly. This was so difficult, it was almost impossible.

At one of the last meetings, in Moscow, we discussed the Forum strategy for the future (which never came). Some people raised the question of whether the Forum and its Coordinators were trusted in the communities, i.e. in the regions of the Caucasus. It emerged first of all that different Coordinators had different degrees of authority in different regions. Secondly, the abundance of mutually uncoordinated projects, including peacebuilding projects of all sorts, in some of the regions and government pressure on NGOs in other regions led to a situation where there was little or diminishing trust in the Coordinators, the Forum and its activities. We wondered how we could make the Forum more representative without introducing a representation system, but rather letting it remain as a type of self-proclaimed academy: a body into which current members (Coordinators) invite new members. It was clear that trust in the Forum was falling in places, with the gap widening between society and government, with suspicion increasing towards pan-Caucasus activities, and with anti-peacebuilding attitudes and trends growing. We never found out how this problem could be handled on an all-Caucasus level.

The last but nevertheless one large-scale activity of the Forum was a conference called “The Language of Conflict”. However, its proceedings were never published. The fact that this was not done, and that many previously active Forum actors were losing interest in it, were signs that the Forum was no longer actively functioning the way it had been for the previous six years.

3. The Forum, the Caucasus and Europe

Lessons learnt from the Forum

All that remains of the Forum now is the mailing list of its Azerbaijani representative – human rights leader Eldar Zeinalov, whom we have to thank heartily – as well as the ties between people.

So why did the Forum go into standby despite the efforts of so many people to create and institutionalise it? There are many answers to this question, and I have mentioned some of them: for example, it was too big and it did not have sufficient funds. However, I believe the two main reasons were as follows: on one hand, there was a lack of or decline in leadership in its original form; on the other hand, there was the abrupt deterioration of the political environment in the Caucasus. These two reasons were interlinked. It was long past the time when the Forum actors were young in terms of their energy and could organise a complex event like the ex-combatant meeting, relying on little else than their enthusiasm. Yet, it should be mentioned that even when the Forum was in standby, some projects were implemented with enthusiasm alone: for instance, the exhibition of children’s art dedicated to the children of Beslan which travelled all the way from

Karabakh via Yerevan, Georgia and South Ossetia to the Northern Caucasus, and from there to Abkhazia. Enthusiasm is a unique force and there is always the possibility that it can be revived.

Whereas in Georgia, Russia, Azerbaijan and even Armenia (the “recognised countries”), the Forum was subject to doubts and criticism, one would expect that people in the “unrecognised entities” and North Caucasian republics would welcome it wholeheartedly. It was indeed like this at first. However, we later realised that in South Ossetia, for example, there was little trust in the Forum and no serious move to support it. Perhaps the reason for this was that the South Ossetians were, on the one hand, trying to build horizontal relations with the Georgians; on the other hand, they may have been feeling strongly pressurised by the Russian special services. At some point, Abkhazia – where the idea of the Forum was originally conceived during my chat with Leila Tania and Lika Kvarchelia – suddenly lost its passion for the Forum. This is also understandable: Russia regarded the Forum as a new tool for breaking the North Caucasus apart; there it was tightening the screws, exterminating rebellion in Chechnya and putting a stop to ethnic movements throughout the North Caucasus – and then along comes the Forum. Abkhazia, as Russia’s strategic ally and dependant, was becoming increasingly critical of the idea to cooperate with the North and South Caucasus at the same time. Besides, the presidential race was starting in Abkhazia; civil society invested all its efforts in political advocacy, with some success: President Bagapsh was more or less fairly elected despite Russia’s pressure, so that **Abkhazia now had relatively democratically elected authorities which made it unique in the Caucasus**. Fearful of developments in Russia, or perhaps unwilling to annoy it any more than necessary (and probably unwilling to annoy Azerbaijan and do the bidding of the “new Georgians” led by Saakashvili), Western donors were also disinterested in supporting the unusual and complex machinery of the Forum – despite its capacity to cross-cut through several levels of governance, and several countries and jurisdictions, including ones which were internationally recognised and ones which were not. The Forum got its best support ever from non-politicised, non-state donors such as the Mott Foundation and the Big Lottery Fund.

Disintegration and breakup policies got the upper hand in the Caucasus. The Caucasus Forum, alongside the Caucasus nations, was just another broken egg for the big omelette of new wars between actors who proved unable to resolve their differences in a civilised way.

The experience was almost beyond words. Although I was since asked to write this essay, I still feel unable to convey that experience adequately. The world remained aloof to the idea of the Caucasus Forum – with the exception of Armenia, where discussions re-emerged from time to time in relation to genuine all-Caucasian ideas. But few people from outside heard about these discussions.

I know one thing that I feel strongly about: we must organise all-Caucasian gatherings. Should they be bilateral ones? What can be more hopeless than doomed attempts to “marry” two Caucasus nations that want to get a divorce. Multilateralism is the answer.

Bilateral meetings in the Caucasus only make sense when a conflict has not yet erupted and two neighbours can still be helped to become friends; bilateral meetings can work for Georgians and Armenians but not for nations that have become “enemies” in a war.

This was the end of our mediation efforts in an all-Caucasus framework. Other things happening in that framework stopped too, perhaps temporarily. The Forum involved a “different” kind of mediation. I have already mentioned that some schools of thought believe that a mediator in a conflict situation must be a “stranger”, because lack of profound understanding of the region is the only way to preserve neutrality. Otherwise, the mediator starts favouring one of the sides and it marks the end of mediation. Other schools say that the concept of mediation is wider, including facilitation and arbitration; the latter is done by professional lawyers, albeit in an unofficial setting. The lawyers do not have to be experts in the region but should have experience in conflict resolution, skills and techniques, and of course the law. Until a structure similar to the EU is established in the Caucasus, arbitration will not be possible – except perhaps for EU arbitration, because arbitration requires the sides to accept or at least practise common laws and rules. There is anarchy and war in the Caucasus rather than any overarching legal system. The CIS failed to become one and others did not emerge.

I did not see my role as that of mediator but rather as a catalyst of peacebuilding initiatives. However, some critics believed I had no right to “catalyse” them too much, making the following argument: ‘He knows and understands too much, a foreigner would have done better.’ By this logic, it is better to start from scratch every time: a foreigner arrives in a region, falls in love with it, studies it and becomes an expert; until he has become an expert, he can still be a good mediator because he is unbiased. On this basis, it is better to be inefficient, flying in strangers every time for the sake of abstract impartiality. Foreigners (ambassadors, staff of international development agencies, etc.) are sent home after a few years in the region on the pretext that they are no longer impartial. By this logic, someone who knows or understands too much is not suitable for the job. **But the approach of ‘let’s have a stranger so we don’t suspect him of bias’ has a distinct flavour of cheating. It is easier to swindle a foreigner than a native of the Caucasus.** For many years, I watched new heads of missions and ambassadors of the UN, the OSCE and other agencies try to promote peacebuilding agendas and leave after achieving little or no success. New ones would come in their stead and lots of time would be lost before they realised what they could do and how to go about it.

It is all about different understandings of partiality. There is abstract impartiality which serves abstract fair play. There is concrete partiality which can serve concrete fair play.

However, abstract impartiality can be very unfair in concrete terms. For example, if two people apply for the same job and the company has a policy of affirmative action so that they choose a representative of an ethnic minority, this can be unfair because a better professional can be rejected based on an abstract fair principle, which gives priority to a member of an ethnic minority.

To ensure that my partiality did not affect my work, I consulted others and asked them for advice. In my decisions, I tried to rely on the “holistic” consensus of the entire Forum Council. The Caucasus Forum was designed so that it could avoid concrete unfair decisions by remaining impartial in its entirety. Only the Forum as a whole could work like that. The result was striking: it became clear that if the Forum was a model of the Caucasus and the Caucasus had more unrecognised and smaller-than-state entities than states, the Forum would tread too hard on the toes of the states. It became obvious that **the Caucasus is not about states**, at least in their post-Soviet incarnation. Alas, people did not have enough imagination to invent management and action systems in the Caucasus that would not be based on post-Soviet statehood, and the mercenary motives of the powers-that-be were in the way.

I would only be too glad to cooperate with states. However, the situation that emerged after the disintegration of the USSR, usurping the name of “state”, was too strongly focused on surviving at the expense of “expendables”, i.e. their citizens. It is too much like a shop run for the sake of the shopkeeper. **The states proved to be leeches sucking blood from the society, not tools used by the societies to implement their plans to become prosperous. The societies were estranged from their governments on a yet unseen scale.** A conflict with governments was inevitable. The conflict could involve more or less bloodshed and make more or less noise, but it intensified every day; the societies became polarised, and the Forum felt this pressure.

Another problem resulted from the deeply rooted and almost invisible psychological “ethnicism” that was widespread in the Caucasus and reflected on the structure of the Forum. Whether we liked it or not, every Coordinator would become a “representative” of their “side”, i.e. their ethnic group. If the Coordinator from Kabardino-Balkaria was Kabardinian by ethnicity, it meant the Balkars were not represented in the Forum. To mollify this effect, we tried to position the Forum as an expert body, not a representative one. This implied that Coordinators were experts in certain issues and in peacebuilding who did not represent their regions or ethnic groups, but rather who were committed to represent the Forum as an organisation in their regions.

The misled and simplistic vision that someone who is Abkhaz represents the Abkhaz and someone who is Armenian represents Armenians – equating ethnicity with representation and specialisation – continued to be a weakness of the Forum and of the Caucasus in general. For many years, I have been exposed to the misconception that since I am

Armenian, I must be an expert on Armenia. Whenever I spoke about Armenia, people would listen attentively. Whenever I spoke about the US, the UK or Georgia, people were sceptical because I was an outsider. However, what I said about Armenia was by no means more informed, as I did not even live there.

The Forum made steps to escape from this deadlock. Avenues of activity were supervised by people who were more interested or better suited professionally. The “Facilitation School” was organised in Tbilisi because Georgia had the best psychology school in the Caucasus dating back to Soviet times, and facilitation skills were better developed there. The “Forgotten Regions” were supervised chiefly by Ossetians and Karabakhis – the people who felt especially “forgotten” in the Caucasus.

We found out, for example, that the Ossetians were trusted by many ethnic groups in the Caucasus, despite their conflicts with the Georgians and the Ingush. Ossetians were even trusted by the Georgians, not to mention the Russians, Armenians, Azerbaijani, Kabardins, Karachay, etc. Only the Ingush could have some reservations but the ones with whom we worked did not see any problems in this respect. There was a reason therefore why two of the four Executive Secretaries of the Forum were Ossetian. As for the Armenians, it was enough that I was Armenian; had we wished, we could have staffed the Forum offices in every region with Armenians. They are dispersed everywhere and hold key positions in the civil society of many regions. We had to balance the ratio of Armenians but did not succeed very well, especially after the Forum moved to Yerevan. It was difficult to do this when there were Armenians everywhere, and besides it was possible to move the Forum to Armenia but not to Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, the Forum would have become paralysed or else we would have had to exclude Armenians from almost all activities. It would have been great, of course, to move the office to Baku and start working with the Azerbaijani and a number of other regions and ethnic groups which were less included in Forum activities for political and other reasons – such as the Dagestan and Turkic nations of the North Caucasus. Alas, this proved impossible for political reasons.

Ethnicity thus defined priorities to some extent. Had the Forum existed in a more or less civilised environment, it would have achieved more due to rotation (which would help keep parity in the long term), penetrating various corners of the Caucasus.

One of the reasons why the Forum was unable to get on its feet after International Alert left the project was its “ethnicism”: its multilateral management system made it inefficient. This deadlock was never overcome on a conceptual level. For anyone who tries to launch a similar project in the future, the solution to this deadlock would be as follows: **to create an organisation working in an all-Caucasus scope but not dependent on the views of people from various parties in the Caucasus; it should be a strong organisation with a clear hierarchy. Its all-Caucasus ideology should rely on its mission**

and mandate, not on the influence of people from all over the Caucasus. Staff should be recruited not on the basis of ethnicity, but on professional qualities and their commitment to the mission of this organisation.

A conclusion that I can make at the end of this essay is that when representatives of the civil societies of conflict parties meet and want to do things together, mediation becomes a side effect, albeit a permanent one. The representatives are not mediators in the literal sense. They are not impartial but partial facilitators; I was one too. There are, however, two ways to understand the word “partial”. One understanding is that a partial facilitator has a selfish interest, in this case, doing something good for their “side” of the conflict. If we see the world in terms of *realpolitik* and zero-sum game logic, such a person can never be a true peacebuilder. The other way is to see the positive sum of things: the individual is not trying to help their side “win” and their motive is not selfish but idealistic; they want the people involved in the conflict to be happy and to find a solution. Under this logic, a partial facilitator is very strong, being partial to finding a solution that suits everyone. As a pure altruist, the facilitator is part of the *realpolitik* zero-sum game logic: someone who sacrifices the needs of their “side”. But the partial facilitator is not a pure altruist; they are no pacifist or defeatist. They are idealists; they do not simply believe but know that *realpolitik* is a lose-lose game, that compromises are sometimes impossible and that it is sometimes no use to hope for them (a “compromise” is a *realpolitik* term); they realise that there are situations where one needs to change the paradigm in order to really achieve something.

During the work of the Forum, there were signs that a change of paradigms was possible. There were even concrete examples that are relevant to mediation – such as the use of peacebuilders from two parties in conflict for a joint peace mission trip to another conflict region. There was also the fact that regions sandwiched between other conflict regions – such as the Gali district and South Ossetia – **could rethink their situation and transform themselves from victims into mediators between the conflict parties, thus consciously implementing the mediation role which they play anyway.** Had the Forum survived, the next stage would have involved planning this type of project: for people from the Gali district to mediate between the Abkhaz and the Georgians, and for Ossetians to mediate between Russia and the Georgians at the level of civil initiatives. This potential is still there despite the twists and turns of recent years; it can still be revived and put to good use.

Inter-Caucasus relations

In the context of pre-emptive measures in the Caucasus, it would also be very important for the Caucasus to facilitate Armenian-Georgian dialogue. This is an old, albeit unacknowledged, issue. It is not just about Javakheti; the region of Javakheti is only one of many problems in relations between the two nations. There are other problems too. Like two jealous siblings, these nations have accumulated lots of problems in their

relationship but neither wants to acknowledge them and start a serious dialogue. This is a topic that international donors would support provided there is interest on the Georgian and Armenian sides – but there is no such interest. The two nations muddle through their relationship, restricting it to infrequent interstate-level contacts and the numerous international get-togethers which are not, however, focused on Armenian-Georgian relations. As for Georgian-Azerbaijani relations, there are problems here too. However, there is cooperation on the pipeline project and Georgia, Turkey and Azerbaijan are part of the “East-West” axis, in contrast to Armenia which has conflicts with both Turkey and Azerbaijan. The fact that Georgia has lost control over some of its territory causes it to align with Azerbaijan in matters of territorial integrity and makes the two countries’ relations less problematic.

Armenian-Georgian relations are far more problematic. The Georgian language and culture are not sufficiently taught in Armenia, at least on an institutional level, even though this would strengthen the identities of both nations. It is the same situation in Georgia, with the exception of Armenian schools which are having a difficult time and only exist because there are some Armenians living in Georgia, and not only in Javakheti. This population is decreasing though; there are fewer Armenians in Tbilisi than there used to be, but there are still some. Armenians go to Adjara for their summer vacations and travel via Georgia to Turkey to do trade. On the whole, Armenians know more about Georgia than Georgians do about Armenia. Georgians do not travel to Armenia; some went there for the first time during the August 2008 war, when they wanted to catch flights to the West but because the airport in Tbilisi was closed, they went to Armenia instead. There are a couple of all-Caucasus or international universities in Georgia which have a few Armenian lecturers or students, whereas in Armenia there are scarcely any Georgian professors or students. When Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Armenia did not, but relations with Georgia remain tense; apart from Javakheti, there is now the issue of Armenian churches in Georgia. The two neighbouring nations do not know each other’s histories and do not realise how tightly interwoven they are. It would be a good idea to write a comparative history of Armenia and Georgia. In Georgia, there is some resentment against Armenians; one of the reasons is that Armenians used to play an important role in Tbilisi but not any longer. Another is that Armenians living in Abkhazia supported the Abkhaz during the war. A third issue is Javakheti. There are negative attitudes to Georgians in Armenia too, despite the friendship and cooperation. Armenia is dependent on transit via Georgia, and this does not do much good for the relationship. Georgia is afraid that Russian military bases on Armenian territory may be used against it. Finally, after the August 2008 war, even though Georgia did not officially enter NATO, the West decided to enhance Georgia’s defence potential, whereas the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) also decided to fortify itself. The result is that the border between Georgia and Armenia is the only open border between two military alliances. Should it close, the breakup of the Caucasus would be almost certain. Given the situation in the Caucasus and around it, there are actors who would

like to make more trouble, perhaps causing an abrupt deterioration of relations between Armenia and Georgia. “Divide and rule” is the motto.

Against this background, it is crucial to have a serious dialogue at a civil society level about the entire range of problems and cooperation opportunities. The civil societies of the two countries are insufficiently aware of this. Georgia usually brushes off Armenia’s efforts to enhance mutual relations so as not to annoy Azerbaijan. Although it is the location for most Armenian-Azerbaijani or trilateral get-togethers, Georgia has not accepted the role of facilitator in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue. It has not wished or dared to, due to conflicts of its own. As a result, two countries whose alliance and joint activity could enable a U-turn in the negative trends currently unfolding in the Caucasus are opposed ideologically and almost poles apart in terms of interests. A regional crystallisation axis does not work in the Caucasus.

Involvement of the EU

Meanwhile, the EU is accelerating its involvement in the Caucasus and establishing new ties there. The experience of the EU – in which the ideal of cooperation started from a concrete economic and security basis and led to the creation of a unique, inclusive union of 27 countries – was our guiding light when we established the Forum, and still remains so. Efforts to create united structures in the Caucasus continue in some form or another, and there might be more efforts in the near future. However, the idea of uniting the South and North Caucasus now appears very dangerous, as it seems to “trespass” on Russia’s sovereignty in the North Caucasus. Yet, this is a misconception. The world is more complicated than sovereignties. Russia can only come across as a legitimate actor in the Caucasus if it acts via the North Caucasus, or if the North Caucasus is at least involved in developments in the Caucasus in general. How can we speak of South Ossetia if we ignore North Ossetia? The idea that if we do not restrict our unification efforts to the South Caucasus and try to involve the North Caucasus also, we shall make Russia our enemy, is quite wrong. The word “idealism” has another familiar sense: the belief that whatever reality is like now, it will change for the better and follow logical patterns quite soon. When the French political economist and diplomat Jean Monnet put forward his ideas, no one could even suppose what they would lead to in just a decade or two. Back in 1985, only a few people in the world believed that the USSR could disappear. Few people now believe that joint structures are possible in the Caucasus that can enable people to live and move freely, and that goods and ideas will also move freely in the region one day.

It is certainly difficult to work with the entire Caucasus. But trying to unite just the South Caucasus is, to me, like trying to put together half of a body: it will not work. When I speak about Russia’s participation, I do not mean the inclusion of the South Caucasus in Russia; I am speaking about a different way to “unite” the Caucasus. What I mean

is Russia's legitimate and sincere participation in united structures in the Caucasus. However, this requires an *idealpolitik* vision.

If Europe really wants to listen to and understand the experience of civil society peacebuilders from the Caucasus, my advice is as follows: let them work and implement their ideas. Do not channel your support via governments which are corrupt or hostile; give it to civil society. Establish a school for young peacebuilders, one that is serious, permanent, good quality and practical. Do not dictate your agendas, but let them jointly elaborate independent agendas the way it happened in the Caucasus Forum.

I am finishing this essay at a difficult time for the Caucasus: the August 2008 war and the financial crisis have made the situation in the Caucasus even worse. Whereas until the war, at least some peacebuilding projects in the North Caucasus were financed by Western donors, this support stopped after the war. South Caucasus projects are also at risk, especially ones concerning Georgia and Abkhazia, or Georgia and South Ossetia. Russia is unable to finance development projects, not to mention peacebuilding projects: it does not yet have this kind of vision whereby citizens of the world try to help a region out of deadlock. Other donors have become even more cautious than before when it comes to financing cross-border projects. The EU decided to intensify its strategy with regard to six post-Soviet states and is thus becoming more active in the region. This is a welcome development, but it will be catastrophic for the Caucasus and the entire world if the Caucasus ends up even more divided as a result of the new EU approach. Conversely, if Europe acts with determination and prudence, it can promote the mission of the Caucasus Forum and enable the freer circulation of people, goods and ideas in the Caucasus.

In terms of the circulation of ideas, this is really about the circulation of cultures. Regrettably, Western donors try to promote democracy, the market economy and human rights but forget about culture. Or rather, they have not forgotten but decided that cultures are national things and must be developed by the nations themselves as best they can. As a result, there is a universal decline in culture; money is in short supply and culture gets the leftovers. However, it is culture that creates mechanisms for the absorption of the ideas of market and democracy. It is culture that can help the nations of the Caucasus know each other better. I do not mean low-taste, quasi-ethnic music and toasting, which many foreigners like to think is the Caucasus culture – it is not; I mean the serious culture. We did little work on culture at the Forum because Western donors can only justify projects on culture if they are a direct means of promoting democracy or the market economy, or if they help to promote Western culture in the Caucasus. We did not make much use of the peacebuilding potential of culture. There was also another reason for this: too many joint concerts and film festivals are held in the Caucasus. They are supposed to have a peacebuilding impact but they do not change the attitudes of nations to each other because culture, the way it is mainly understood in post-Soviet societies, contains a strong component of traditionalism, and traditionalism is nationalistic and

chauvinistic. Thus, while creating a joint cultural space, we must overcome the narrow-minded provincial “nationalism” of old culture.

We still initiated some powerful all-Caucasus cultural projects: for example, the “Caucasus Writers on the War” project and an exhibition of children’s art on behalf of the children of Beslan. The topic closest to culture which is usually welcomed by Western donors concerns media and journalism, including producing peacebuilding documentaries about “the other side”. We had some significant projects in this sphere too. Nonetheless, the technique of implementing cultural projects aimed at strengthening the basis of peacebuilding has not been elaborated well enough. This is a task for the EU, which must understand better than other actors how important it is to develop cultures in a polylogue and polyphony, to acquaint nations with each other’s cultures and to create preconditions for joint creative action. It needs to recognise the importance of developing the methodology of cultural peacebuilding projects by reflecting on and generalising the experience of projects already implemented in the Caucasus or other conflict regions, in order to have a wide-scale impact on the cultures of the Caucasus. This would help to take culture away from corrupt and decayed post-Soviet institutions, like Unions of Writers and Artists. It would help to support alternative youth culture, and identify the truly valuable and transferrable culture of every ethnic group in the Caucasus. It would allow the nations to understand each other on a new level, so that joint cultural activity and competition can become a new foundation for regional platforms – because we live in a global civilisation, in a multitude of cultures and in one region: the Caucasus.

CHAPTER 10

The Phenomenon of the Caucasus Forum

Zhanna Krikorova

‘Even constellations are not free associations of stars.’

Stanisław Jerzy Lec

1. Origins of the Caucasus Forum

The Caucasus Forum of NGOs was launched in July 1998 at a meeting held in Nalchik, near Mount Elbrus, in Kabardino-Balkaria. The Forum was part of a project aimed at building confidence between Georgian and Abkhaz NGOs. At the suggestion of the Abkhaz and with Georgian agreement, representatives of NGOs from 12 regions of the North and South Caucasus and Moscow were invited to attend the meeting. The Abkhaz had felt somewhat under pressure in a bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz format, concerned that the peacebuilding process could be perceived as an attempt to persuade them to return to Georgia. The pan-Caucasian format was also based on the idea that peace initiatives needed to be discussed in a regional context. Virtually the entire Caucasus had been engulfed in ethnic conflicts since the collapse of the USSR: as borne out by the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia and Abkhazia, Georgia and South Ossetia, Ossetia and Ingushetia, as well as Russia and Chechnya. Armed groups of volunteers from Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygeya also took part in military action in Abkhazia.

The Georgian-Abkhaz project was organised and mediated by the UK NGO International Alert. Alert agreed to the pan-Caucasian format, in part because it acknowledged the strength of these arguments, but also out of a general desire to support any measures which would move the bilateral project forward and make it more effective.

However, it then transpired that the pan-Caucasian nature of the initiative, which was originally intended to make the bilateral process more effective, at the Elbrus meeting became the very *raison d'être* of the whole process. At the meeting in Nalchik, over 40 invited experts and NGO leaders rapidly came to the conclusion while discussing the situation in the Caucasus that they needed to direct their efforts at reversing the general alienation that had arisen between the peoples of the Caucasus. The aim was to help them to rediscover each other and to develop a civil space for interaction. What was needed was a civil society forum that spanned the whole of the region. The decision to launch a pan-Caucasus non-governmental network was outlined in a document approved at that meeting. This document later became known as the Elbrus Declaration (see Appendix). The Declaration announced the creation of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs and was much more than just an administrative document. It contained the aims and objectives of the new association and became the Forum's founding charter that was used throughout its existence.

The Elbrus Declaration focused on building trust and relationships between the peoples of the Caucasus. It provided for the revival of Caucasian culture and maintaining joint civic initiatives aimed at building tolerance, the development of political culture, the assertion of civic consciousness, the revival of traditions of peaceful coexistence and overcoming ethnic hatred and prejudice.

The main objectives for the Caucasus Forum were: to ensure regular contacts and dialogue between people in the Caucasus; to establish effective communication among Forum participants; and to support the development of NGOs and specific projects initiated by the Forum.

2. Institutional set-up of the Caucasus Forum – from idea to ideology

The institutional set-up and development of the Caucasus Forum as a network continued virtually throughout its whole lifetime. Following the Elbrus Declaration, two more statutes were approved by the Caucasus Forum as it expanded its activities: namely, the Resolution of the Caucasus Forum: Towards peace and stable development (Vladikavkaz, March 2002) and the Regulatory Standards of the Caucasus Forum (Vladikavkaz, March 2004).

After lengthy discussions, the idea crystallised of a new community – a Caucasus Forum of NGOs acting as an open conference for NGOs and other civil society institutions. The Forum would be a safe space for informal dialogue between civil sector representatives from all regions of the Caucasus – particularly for representatives of the various parties to post-Soviet conflicts. It would be a peacebuilding organisation, modelling future peaceful coexistence and collaboration between the peoples and communities of the Caucasus.

The Forum's mission, as laid out in general terms in the Declaration and subsequently in more detail in the other statutory documents, could not have been realised without a well-organised institutional framework. Its structure, guiding principles and operating procedures had been drafted in some detail a year before (Sochi, autumn of 1999) by the Coordinating Council, which was set up at that meeting as a successor to the original initiative group. The decisions taken at the Sochi meeting remained in force throughout the Forum's lifetime, essentially unchanged apart from minor adjustments and improvements.

The main coordinating body was the Coordinating Council, staffed by one NGO representative from each of the Caucasus regions represented in the Forum at that time. When the Forum was launched, there were 12 people in the Coordinating Council; this later rose to 16 people as new regions were added. It was later decided to rotate the post of regional coordinator.

An executive body was also created. Overall coordination of activities was performed by the Executive Secretary, with support from a regional representative. Both of these posts were rotated – the first on an annual basis, the second on a monthly basis. In the first year it operated, the post of Executive Secretary was filled by a neutral person with no affiliation to the Caucasus.

This was in response to a proposal by International Alert. It was felt that, despite the atmosphere of trust that characterised these initial stages of the Forum, it was still too early to be sure that there was complete trust between the Forum participants, as some people may simply have been reluctant to voice their concerns. People agreed to this conflict-sensitive choice of Executive Secretary, as he was able to maintain a territorial and emotional distance from the Caucasus. Nevertheless, the following year, a member of the Coordinating Council was appointed as Executive Secretary, and this became the norm over the remaining years of its operation in line with the Forum's principles.

Appointments were then made on a two-year rotating basis. The regional representative's duties were transferred to the position of technical secretary from the city in which the Forum office was located at the time. A Forum office was opened, also on a rotational basis, initially for a one-year period and then for two years. Over the lifetime of the Forum, its office was moved from Nalchik to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia and then to Yerevan in Armenia, with the previous office kept on in each case as a resource centre. An office was also opened in Moscow and, in its last three years, the Forum in effect had three centres with executive functions – Yerevan, Vladikavkaz and Moscow.

The Coordinating Council met annually to approve a report from the executive bodies, to discuss the situation across all regions and to adopt the strategic plan for the following year. In the regions, the Forum was represented mainly by regional coordinators, whose principal role was to ensure that the Forum's work reflected the position of civil society within their region and to publicise the Forum's position within civil society in their region.

The principal representative of the Forum was its Executive Secretary. When in office, the Executive Secretary was expected to be extra-territorial, representing the Forum's interests alone rather than the interests of their region. The Executive Secretary's duties included representing the Forum at various events, developing contacts and keeping the Coordinating Council informed throughout the year of all projects under discussion, facilitating agreement on any issues that arose. The secretary was assisted by the technical secretary. Head office was responsible for, amongst many other duties, the agenda, participant list, recruitment of experts and facilitators, and above all preparation for the annual conference attended by Forum delegates.

The main function of the Moscow office was to maintain contacts with other organisations and networks working on the Caucasus. In practice, however, the activities of the Moscow coordinator were rather wider, encompassing: provision of organisational support and information for almost all of the Forum's meetings; monitoring of visits and performing rapid analyses of the Forum's activities; provision of resources for Forum members visiting Moscow and much more.

Decision-making procedures

Decisions were taken only once consensus was reached – in other words, each member of the Forum Coordinating Council had the right of veto. As far as I recall, there was no case in which anyone exercised this right. There was, however, another special arrangement, described in detail at the time by Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, the then Eurasia Programme Manager at Alert (without whose personal enthusiasm, active support and incredible efforts the creation and launch of the Forum would not have been possible). He called this arrangement “minimum consensus”, whereby a proposal was generally accepted without much difficulty by the other parties if the main “opposing sides” involved had agreed to it (for example, the Armenians and Azerbaijanis).

From idea to ideology

The organisational development of the Caucasus Forum clearly reflected the fact that all decisions made regarding its structure and operating principles were designed to further the Forum’s aims of building up trust and mutual communication between peoples of the Caucasus. The principle of rotation at all levels and the principle of consensus during strategic planning and decision making created a partnership of equals, ensuring that the Forum’s ideas were disseminated across the whole of the Caucasus region.

For the Forum to achieve its mission, however, it needed to raise its game: to transform these ideas into an ideology. By “ideology” we mean an expression of a consistent world view reflecting specific historical and social realities. If the aim was to create an “ideology” of this kind on a mass scale (and it is hard to imagine how the Forum’s goals might be achieved without this), it required dissemination on a mass scale. In other words, as many people as possible had to come on board and share the Forum’s views on its aims and methods. Such a system of interconnected ideas and concepts would require adopting a specific policy, which could only be put into practice if the Forum had some form of authority. We use “authority” here in the sense of an ideology used to unify the various world views. An ideology in this sense thus requires a distinct, specific aim as well as an historical perspective.

We will attempt here to analyse which of the criteria listed above apply to the Forum. This requires an answer to the following questions:

1. Did the aims and methods used within the Forum reflect a consistent world view?
2. Did the Forum have the resources to disseminate its ideas on a suitable scale?
3. Did the Forum have a distinct, specific aim?
4. Did the Forum have the necessary authority?

System of values

We should also note the internal and external context, or the conditions in which the Forum was created and operated. In particular, there was the issue of the difference in status of the various regions from which the NGOs involved in the Forum came (entities within the Russian Federation; sovereign states from the South Caucasus; unrecognised republics in the South Caucasus). This was frequently a source of difficulties for other Caucasus networks. In the Forum, this problem was resolved by insisting that the Forum's coordinators were not authorised to represent their territories or any political formations or forces. They merely represented themselves and their NGOs. The coordinators were referred to by their cities rather than regions. This essentially made the Forum a community of tolerant, like-minded adherents of civic values who also believed and located themselves in a pan-Caucasus identity. This depoliticised the Forum's activities by ensuring it was a solely civic process. In this respect, the Forum was in fact based on a consistent set of values.

An important part of the Forum's work was the dissemination of its ideas. Here too, the context should be borne in mind – for example, varying levels of commitment. Civil society in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia was developing actively, with relatively free access to donors. NGOs from these regions were already participating in a multiplicity of networks and working on dozens of projects. Therefore, they did not see the Forum as particularly special, in any way different from the others or as crucial for their survival. This contrasts sharply with how the Forum was perceived in the North Caucasus and the unrecognised republics of the South Caucasus. Here they saw the Caucasus Forum as a way out of their isolation, an opportunity to communicate across the whole of the Caucasus and internationally, and as providing an opportunity for development. The level of interest in the Forum also varied between Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi. Tbilisi was always happy with the pan-Caucasian idea. Some of the Yerevan NGO establishment supported the Forum for the sake of the same idea, while others supported it for the sake of Stepanakert. In this situation, Baku simply did not want to be left out. The key to this issue was the Forum's sphere of success. Everyone knew that interest would grow naturally once the Forum became an entity to be reckoned with and an authority in the region. The executive bodies and coordinators in the regions were both involved in disseminating the Forum's ideas. The post of regional coordinator was unpaid and many coordinators were employed on other projects in addition to their Forum duties with their own programmes. At one stage, the coordinators themselves offered to devote all the work they did from home to the Forum; they said that they were ready and willing to contribute their own efforts and those of their NGO colleagues to one Forum “piggy bank”.

However, human resources and efforts alone were not enough to achieve effects on the scale required. Funding was extremely important, and time was needed to achieve results on a suitable scale. Over the seven years the Forum was active, around 600–700 people

were involved in its activities. It is hard to judge whether this was too many or too few. However, in our view – even if the Forum did have potential, even if it could legitimately claim to embody its ideas at the regional level, even if it had received permanent funding and had managed to scale up its activities – at that particular moment in history, it had no real prospect of developing into a long-term ideology that would underpin a system of regional interaction. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the Caucasus was at the time, and still is today, split and divided as a result of the political processes that have occurred there. Secondly, neither the political authorities in the Caucasus nor external forces are committed to the model of collaboration the Forum was trying to construct. The authorities are simply not prepared to give up the political and material resources they have grabbed for themselves, and external forces pursuing their own interests find it easier to manage such authorities.

Thus, although dissemination of the Forum's ideas had enormous internal potential and legitimacy due to its pan-Caucasus nature, it was severely restricted by funding, time and particularly by the political environment.

Specific aims

The aims outlined in the Elbrus Declaration present a historical perspective to some extent, but they were hardly specific. As is only to be expected in this type of document, they are declaratory in nature, reflecting an approach based on values and civil society. In no way do these aims represent a strategic plan for building peace and stability in the Caucasus. However, given the realities at that moment in history – and even more so today, for that matter – the aims in the Declaration were realistically the only ones possible.

People could often be overheard in the Forum's corridors floating the idea of a more specific aim, such as using the Forum to create an organisation along the lines of the OSCE. However, no one would ever have formally voiced a proposal to this effect. This was partly because they knew the idea would never gain a consensus and partly because they thought it was simply impossible and unrealistic.

At a certain point, people realised that the Caucasus Forum needed radical institutional transformation. The Forum did strive to become independent and autonomous. Why did the Forum want to transform itself from a conference of Caucasus NGOs into a fully-fledged international organisation? The reasons for this are not entirely clear. Was it interested in gaining the freedom to formulate its own strategy, or was the Forum ready to set itself more ambitious goals? Was it merely a coincidence that the Caucasus Forum ceased operations just a year later? Or can we see a pattern emerging? From a socio-historical and realistic perspective, the external environment played an important part in this: Forum funding had ceased, donors had lost interest in regional projects generally, and the Russian authorities had tightened their stance on international NGO

programmes, which particularly affected our colleagues from the North Caucasus. These would appear to be just a series of coincidences, but a pattern does emerge, albeit of a different order, philosophical or even metaphysical. Despite raising its institutional game, the Forum retained its old mindset. It did not set itself correspondingly more ambitious objectives.

Sooner or later, the Forum might well have been in a position to formulate a set of entirely clear and precise new aims. However, formulating an ideology first of all requires authority.

Issues of authority in the Forum

As the description of the management and operating policies above makes clear, the Coordinating Council was in practice responsible for identifying the Forum's strategy.

The open decision-making procedure at the Forum was all very well and an essential part of its value system. However, there are always situations in any enterprise when personal responsibility has to be taken for decisions. The executive bodies at the Forum lacked the authority to do this and all issues had to be checked with the Coordinating Council. Many members of the Council were unable to provide rapid responses to requests and sometimes did not provide any response at all. This held up the entire process, reduced interactions and the quality of the work, and made prompt action impossible. The democratic system degenerated into bureaucracy. No manager dared to take a decision on his own authority, fearing that it might be construed as breaching the principle of equality and consensus, which was such a fundamental component of the idea of the Forum.

Consequently, the Forum had no authority, and the conditions were not in place whereby a strategic plan could be developed that reflected the institution's ambitions. This was an essential precondition for further development, even though many might have found it unacceptable. Thus, the "idea" of the Caucasus Forum as a conference of NGOs never became an "ideology" of the Caucasus Forum, the international organisation. However, the Forum did have some very clear successes. Of course mistakes were made too, but both successes and mistakes are equally valuable in terms of lessons on mediation.

3. Practical activities of the Caucasus Forum

Within the set of objectives outlined in the Elbrus Declaration, the Caucasus Forum carried out a range of activities. The principal ones were: the development of civil society in the regions of the Caucasus; support for peace initiatives; peacebuilding missions; study of the ethno-political situation with the aim of conflict prevention;

and humanitarian missions. The consistent guiding principles of the Forum's work were fairness, transparency and independence. The Forum's activities included: seminars and conferences; training events; monitoring exercises; creative games; humanitarian campaigns; and declarations and petitions on breaches of human rights when these endangered peace and stability in the region.

Of the Forum's most successful projects (by successful I mean those that received a positive reception by the public and international organisations or that impacted to some extent on later processes within the region), I would like single out the following:

- A conference on traditional forms of conflict resolution in the Caucasus (a book based on the conference materials was subsequently published in two editions, demonstrating that this topic remains highly relevant);
- The project “Forgotten Regions”,¹ aimed at supporting and developing civil society in Karabakh, South Ossetia and the North Caucasus;
- Meetings between ex-combatants of the Caucasus and between people with disabilities as a result of armed conflict; and meetings of women civil society leaders which later led to the formation of the new pan-Caucasus network, The Caucasus Women's League;
- The peacebuilding mission to Karachay-Cherkessia in 1999 – this not only marked the start of real peacebuilding by the Forum; the report on the mission's findings, according to Western experts, also contained an outstandingly objective and comprehensive analysis;
- Monitoring of the presidential elections in Kabardino-Balkaria in 2002, when a serious new force appeared on the political scene, representing a real alternative to the incumbent president which threatened to destabilise the situation. The Forum's report was used by presidential candidates who disputed the election results to file an international lawsuit;
- Publication of a collection of short stories by writers from the South Caucasus, entitled *Time to Live*.²

The list of successful examples of the implementation of the Forum's strategy would run into several pages. Here we focus on what brought about these successes and what were the unique features of the Caucasus Forum's model of regional collaboration. Such

¹ See Chapter 11 of this volume.

² See Chapters 20 and 21 of this volume.

successes and unique features could have been – and perhaps one day will be – used to build up national systems of cooperation, which (in my personal view) are essential to ensure security and peaceful development.

The following are a few of the distinct features of the Forum's success.

Format

The pan-Caucasian format of mediation which launched the Caucasus Forum was confirmation of the old but crucial principle: if the community looks after each individual, each individual will look after the community.

History shows that individual self-interest increases alienation, makes genuine communication impossible, generates false stereotypes, increases mistrust and culminates in fears and insecurity. This is fertile soil for “the bigwigs of international politics”, who know how to manipulate these feelings for their own ends. In the end, everyone loses.

The pan-Caucasian nature of the mediation process, as embodied in the Forum, was confirmation that the best way of achieving long-term peace is an evolutionary form of conflict management.

The process of collaborating and developing together without reference to conflict is itself the most sustainable model of peaceful coexistence. The pan-Caucasian mediation format demonstrated that it is much easier to ensure that a process of this kind can work and achieve concrete results in a regional context.

Trust

The format created trust within the Caucasus Forum in many ways. Once trust was established within the Forum, people from civil society – and in some regions, the authorities themselves – began to trust the Forum. But no format could of itself have created trust unless people shared the same vision and the same values, and “spoke the same language”. It is hard to understand quite how, but it really was a case of the right people being in the right place at the right time. Many people who came into the Forum's orbit later on found this atmosphere very contagious. Even then, of course, it was clear that some people within the Forum were born leaders irrespective of their status or the position they held within the Forum. They set the tone, communicated their enthusiasm and belief in what they were doing, generously sharing their experience and resources, giving their time to the Forum, and putting their heart and soul into it. It was, in many respects, these people who created the Caucasus Forum and who naturally became the face of the Forum for the outside world. Human capital was the driving force behind the Forum.

Methodology

The Caucasus Forum employed a wide range of methods in its work, helped by the fact that the European style of workshops without lecterns or desks was entirely in keeping with Caucasian culture. The Forum's principal methodological achievement was its flexibility when choosing methods, its openness to new creative methods, and its ability to adapt its tools to the specific situation and geography of the project.

For instance, a team responsible for implementing a project might include representatives from regions in conflict with each other. One example was the election monitoring process in Kabardino-Balkaria, which involved an Armenian and an Azerbaijani; another was the book of war stories, which was coordinated by a Georgian and an Abkhaz. Such mixed teams inspired the trust of the project participants, although ethnicity was later on relegated to third priority when selecting candidates for teams, the first being commitment to the Forum's ideas and the second the candidate's professional and personal capacities.

The Forum's flexibility was also reflected in its approach to facilitating the process. This was sometimes done by International Alert, or sometimes by the Forum leaders, whether members of the Coordinating Council or the executive coordinators; on other occasions, the Forum would invite external facilitators.

The Caucasus Forum focused on action rather than training, and any research projects were always of an applied, practical nature.

The impact and effectiveness of the various projects was due, in no small part, to the multiplicity of methods used, the flexibility, openness and ability to adapt them to local circumstances, and the focus on action.

Modelling consensus

Consensus was the basis for decision making in the Caucasus Forum, as highlighted in some detail in the previous section. Here we will merely cite a quotation from an article by Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan which may help readers to understand the value of consensus and the extent to which the process would not have been possible, let alone successful, without it: 'If the young generations rush to implement their ideas, and even for an instant forget that they have not achieved consensus, a voluntary body such as this may perish. In the Caucasus, agreement is a fragile matter; multilateral agreement even more so. And that's also why it is so precious.'³

3 G. Ter-Gabrielyan (2001). 'The Caucasus Forum is five years' old' in Z. Krikorova, Z. Melnikova, A. Nedolyan and G. Ter-Gabrielyan (Eds.) *Tradition of Conflict Resolution in the Caucasus and Methods of Civil Society Institutions*. Chapter 4, pp. 250–251.

Another key factor

The Elbrus Declaration was also signed by representatives of International Alert. This automatically made them partners and they became part of the Forum. As the formal grant recipient and manager of the Caucasus Forum project, on a practical level International Alert had the same rights and responsibilities as all the other entities in the Forum. This equal footing sometimes caused problems for International Alert, but the partnership was effective for some time.

In these assets, the Caucasus Forum had the resources required for sustainable development. Yet even so, its activities stalled and it is already more than five years since the Forum ceased to function.

4. External and internal factors leading to the demise of the Forum

This section attempts to identify what led to the end of the Forum's activities. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that the Forum 'ceased to exist' since the Forum's statute states that it may only be dissolved by a resolution at the annual general meeting. Furthermore, the Forum still exists virtually through contacts maintained between partners and individuals and in terms of the formal registration documents sent to the last Executive Secretary by the Dutch Ministry of Justice. Nevertheless, the Forum is not functioning.

The external factors leading to the demise of the Forum were listed in the first part of this article: cessation of funding; increased complexity of the internal political situation in the region; and lack of trust or interest in the Forum by the states in the region, as well as a lack of interest from international bodies.

In terms of lessons we can learn about mediation, it is more useful to analyse the internal circumstances and the factors that prevented the Forum from making the most of its considerable assets. Unsurprisingly, for a living, breathing entity, the Forum did have its contradictions. We would like to focus on just a few of these problems here.

Ideology failing to keep pace with institutional changes

See the first part of this chapter for details.

Varying levels of personal involvement

Everyone in the Forum had equal rights but many were cavalier about their responsibilities, at times ignoring them completely. For example, a prompt decision might suddenly be needed. Some coordinators would not respond to the Executive Secretary's request, only

to demand an explanation at a later meeting as to why this or that decision had not been agreed in advance with them. Some contributed to the Forum, giving up their own time and the resources of their own NGOs to help create and develop it. Others felt it was enough to restrict their work in the Forum to attending a session of the Coordinating Council or other activity. This attitude understandably curbed others' enthusiasm, and discussions on operational matters turned from being constructive to "nit-picking".

Varying extent and levels of commitment

For some participants, the Forum was a top priority affecting all of their professional lives. For others, it remained a mere formality. Part of the organisation was committed to collaborating with the Forum on the basis of a commitment to its ideas, whereas a certain section was only interested in the Forum's resources. At a certain point, regional support for the Forum fell, since a number of NGOs had been expecting financial and technical support (and the Forum had provided this support). Once the flow of resources ceased, they were no longer particularly interested in publicising its ideas on peacebuilding.

Methodological contradictions

As the Forum gained ground, it started to expand its range of methodology. However, not everyone was pleased with some of the new methods used. In some cases, their resistance was due to a clash between conservative and creative mindsets, between successful experience and untried and unproven methods. Consensus was achieved but a feeling of dissatisfaction remained.

Absence of a new trained generation

The principle of rotation that applied to all of the Forum's systems allowed new people to join the Forum. This of course corresponded perfectly with its ideological objectives, but it was initially difficult for the new people to grasp the process fully. Since they were not familiar with the Forum's origins and had not been involved throughout, everyone else was forced to go through the process all over again. The new generation accepted the ideas and agreed with the guiding principles. However, whereas the Forum's founders saw it as a developing infant, the new generation viewed it as a fully-formed entity. Like it or loathe it, they could not change it. This altered the internal context, and the varying levels of commitment caused ripples within the system of equal rights between participants.

Fundraising problems

On completion of the International Alert project, Alert provided the Forum with sufficient funds to cover the office budget for a further year, during which it was to raise funds to continue its activities.

Whether due to external factors or to a lack of effort by the Forum staff, fundraising was not successful. Funding was found for just one project for a mobile exhibition of applied Caucasian art, which toured to four cities of the Caucasus and was presented to the children of Beslan. This was the Forum's final project.

It is clear, on the whole, that these contradictions are entirely natural and are not in themselves insurmountable. In that case, why did the Forum stagnate? Many of the Forum's leaders are likely to have their own answer to this question. I give my own perspective in the afterword.

5. Afterword

In my view, external factors were dominant in the demise of the Forum. With funding, the Forum would have made the right decisions in time. However, its main mistake, in my opinion, was in institutional change. We exceeded our strategic capability and overestimated our resources. We did not conduct a sober and pragmatic assessment of the situation. We did not foresee the crisis and did not reflect seriously and deeply enough during the post-crisis period. This may be due to our headlong pursuit of our dream, where we wanted something so badly that we felt we could achieve it by belief and our efforts alone. It was like deciding to climb to the top of a mountain without the necessary equipment. We got stuck half way up, and now we will just have to wait and see what happens next.

Note

The Caucasus Forum was active until 2005.

International organisations continue to work in the Caucasus region, launching new peacebuilding programmes, which are increasingly needed in the face of persisting tension in the region. We feel that the Caucasus Forum project provides a useful, timely and interesting perspective on the experience of mediation. An analysis of the Forum's achievements and mistakes can, we hope, not only provide useful methodological material for building confidence between opposing sides in conflicts in the future; it is also an example of a unique model of collaboration, which was perhaps a couple of decades ahead of its time.

Appendix

Elbrus Declaration

We, representatives of a number of non-governmental organisations from the Caucasus that met in the Russian town of Nalchik at the foot of Mount Elbrus between 19th and 26th July 1998, have established the Caucasus Forum of non-governmental organisations.

Noting that many of the problems facing the Caucasus today stem from the lack of a suitably developed civil society and the isolation of its peoples, the Forum has the following **aims**:

- To strengthen trust and improve communication between the peoples of the Caucasus;
- To bring about a cultural revival of the Caucasus;
- To provide support for joint civil society initiatives aimed at promoting tolerance, developing a political culture, raising civic awareness, reviving the traditions of peaceful coexistence and overcoming inter-ethnic hostility and prejudice.

The **main objectives** of the Forum shall be:

- To create opportunities for regular contact and dialogue in the Caucasus;
- To establish an effective communication network between all Forum participants;
- To support and develop NGO activities;
- To provide support for specific projects relating to the Forum's objectives.

The founding meeting of the Forum established a steering group, which will coordinate the Forum's future activities.

The Forum shall be open to non-governmental organisations representing all regions and peoples of the Caucasus that share the Forum's aims and objectives.

The Forum also wishes to express its concern at the growing tension in a number of regions of the Northern Caucasus, and considers that it is essential to find ways of stabilising the situation in the Caucasus.

The founding meeting of the Forum was made possible by the Confidence-building Programme for Georgian and Abkhaz NGOs which was part-funded by an EU TACIS grant, with assistance from the international conflict resolution NGO International Alert.

Nalchik, Pension "Dolina Narzana", 24th July 1998

Signed...(Founders of the Forum)

CHAPTER 11

Remembering the Forgotten

Alan Parastaev

1. Introduction

In preparing this article, I decided not to use the Caucasus Forum's archive records and documents. This is an attempt to describe events as I remember them, or rather as I recollect them now, over six years since the network delegates and International Alert staff last met under the aegis of the Caucasus Forum. This should allow me to present a picture of what actually happened on the ground in order to supplement what I suspect will be rather more academic and structured contributions from my respected colleagues. I will focus instead on what I found to be the most problematic – and hence, perhaps, more memorable – aspects.

The first problematic aspect is the terminology or more precisely the term “region”. Along with many readers of this book, I suspect, I object to the use of this albeit neutral term to describe the state formations of the Caucasus with which we worked (although this should not stop them reading it). I would have preferred the term “constituent region”.¹

Here I would like to add a few words on how I view this publication. I see its role less in terms of researching and popularising the mediation methodologies used in conflict transformation processes and more as a guide to networking. There are specific examples of major networks benefiting from the experience of the Caucasus Forum – such as the “Gringo” network of IDP organisations, launched in 2002 under the aegis of the Danish Refugee Council. The Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN)² is a successful and well-functioning structure in many ways due to its use of templates developed by the Caucasus Forum and because it has learnt from the Forum's mistakes. CBDN is in some ways the successor of the Caucasus Forum, certainly in terms of its work with ex-combatants.

Although our achievements are important for other organisations, I would say the main thing they can learn from is our mistakes. These mistakes are particularly useful since they illustrate the capacity of the peacebuilding movement. I see networking projects come and go. Huge amounts of money and effort are spent on them. Moreover, when they fail to achieve their objectives and collapse, they tend to cause more damage than bilateral regional projects. Participants and organisers of networking projects in the Caucasus, however innovative, should study the experience of the Caucasus Forum – particularly the negative aspects – if they want their efforts to be effective.

What makes the Caucasus Forum so important? Apart from its many unique initiatives (such as the combatants project, work with Chechen NGOs, mobile groups) the Caucasus Forum is the first and so far only network I know of that also acted as a facilitator and mediator in the settlement of a specific conflict between two constituent regions.

¹ Translator's note: literally “subject region” or “regional subject”.

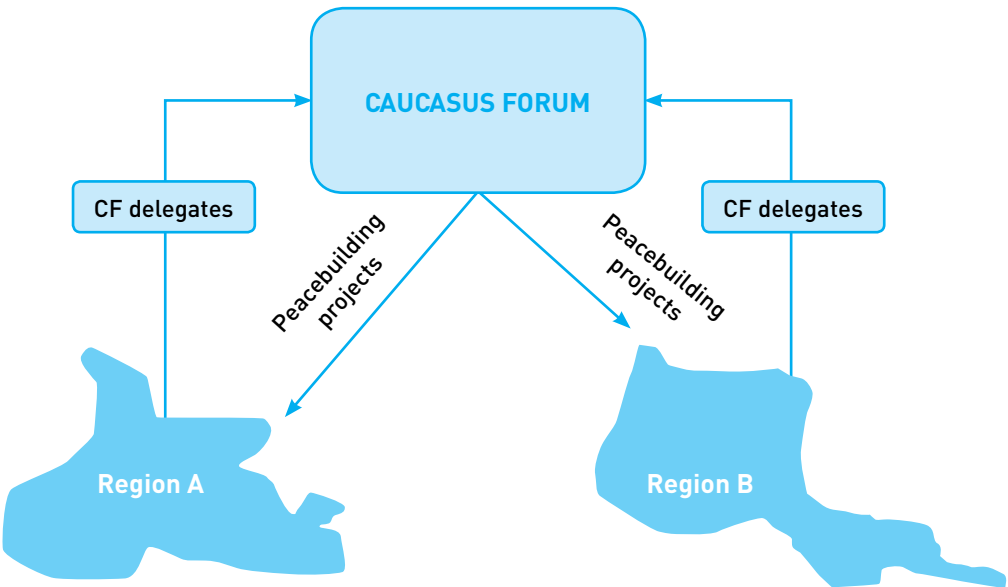
² See Chapters 12 and 13 of this volume.

As I see it, as the Abkhaz-Georgian civil dialogue, mediated by an international organisation, was starting to reach an impasse, the idea emerged of including other representatives of the Caucasus in the mediation process. But, having played such a worthy role at a subsequent meeting held in Nalchik in the summer of 1998, the participants decided not to go their “separate ways” but instead to set up a platform for NGOs and civil society activists across the Caucasus. In this way, one meeting aiming to tackle a specific mediation task in the end resulted in the launch of the rolling conference known as the Caucasus Forum. I see this as a crucial factor in the process of institutionalising mediation-related networks.

2. A new pan-Caucasian format

I am sure that this publication will deal extensively with the creation of the Caucasus Forum. I would like to focus on the new pan-Caucasian format that the participants in the Abkhaz-Georgian dialogue selected to rescue the process from stagnation. This gave a “kick-start” to the mediation process in two ways. On the one hand, once the Caucasus Forum was established, its pan-Caucasian remit helped to increase the effectiveness of the Abkhaz-Georgian dialogue. On the other hand, the experience and techniques developed within the Abkhaz-Georgian dialogue were applied to a number of constituent regions in the Caucasus where there were problems, conflict or post-conflict situations.

Figure 1: Format of the Caucasus Forum



One example is the brilliant work carried out by the Forum members who visited Dagestan in the North Caucasus, in response to an invitation to a seminar for civil society organisations by a peacebuilding organisation from Novocherkassk in southern Russia. In the process, they engaged with issues raised by the seminar participants themselves on developing civic initiatives, subsequently involving many of them at various levels of the Forum's network activities, and helped others with their work as local facilitators. As well as involving them in the Forum, they also helped many of the participants to take an active part in a number of civil initiatives both in Dagestan itself and in other regions in Russia. To take just one example: the Peacebuilding Centre (Director: Tamara Osmanova) in Dagestan's southeastern city of Derbent, which owes its success in many ways to its membership of the Caucasus Forum, has contributed and continues to contribute to the complex issue of maintaining stability in the ethnically diverse region of Dagestan. Back in 1999, Derbent was not an area of ethnic confrontation and many thought that there was no urgent need for assistance to a Peacebuilding Centre. Today, however, with the increase in inter-ethnic, inter-faith and socio-political divides in Dagestan and in particular in Derbent, the urgent need for the Peacebuilding Centre's activities is evident.

The success and effectiveness of the Forum's initiatives in the field gave the Forum participants the idea of setting up a separate section covering work in the regions. At that time, in 2002, the public in the constituent regions were generally aware of the Forum's work and its potential for peacebuilding. However, their views were often deliberately distorted by certain players on the socio-political scene to promote their own interests. This was exacerbated by the less than helpful system adopted by international organisations and donors to identify needs and select partners, for example in South Ossetia. In 90 percent of cases, the preference was for bilateral projects. These were prepared in advance by one partner (the lead partner) and then presented to the second partner more or less as a *fait accompli*. Since the lead partner was always a Georgian NGO, this allowed forces within South Ossetian society, who were not interested in stabilisation and cross-border collaboration, to accuse the international organisations and local NGOs of all sorts of wrongdoings, even betrayal. We will come back to this issue when we examine the situation in South Ossetia.

3. Focus on the constituent regions

One further argument for the Forum to expand its fieldwork in the regions was to increase its effectiveness in certain regions. As the Caucasus Forum expanded and recruited more and more new participants, "outsider" regions also began to be included. With their poorly developed civil society institutions, these "outsiders" could not provide fully-fledged delegates to the Caucasus Forum. This was either because there were none, or because of the lack of a clear conception of NGOs and the role of civil society. This was what happened in the case of the ex-combatants project. The idea of setting up

meetings between those who had been directly involved in the hostilities had emerged at the very first founding meeting of the Caucasus Forum. Indeed, the Forum delegates included some people who had fought in the conflict. It was decided to organise meetings between people who had fought in the wars in the Caucasus, who had some standing in society and who were willing to take part in peacebuilding initiatives. Even so, two further meetings of Caucasus Forum representatives were needed before people capable of participating fully in Forum initiatives were recruited in South Ossetia. This was certainly not down to a lack of effective work by the regional coordinator (the author of this article). In the end, a young academic specialising in the Caucasus and an official from the Ministry of Justice were invited to attend the first meeting of ex-combatants.

Within the ex-combatants project, the plan was to work on two areas: the security forces and the cultural and historical unity of the Caucasus. Although the main activities of the South Ossetian organisations involved were in line with the Caucasus Forum's aims, they did not take an active role, even though they now have fond memories of that first meeting of ex-combatants. Later on, Timur Tskhovrebov became an active participant in the ex-combatants project. This also spurred Tskhovrebov on to work in the NGO sector. He launched an independent newspaper, became an activist in the aforementioned CBDN, and in a series of other networking and Georgian-Ossetian initiatives and projects. Tskhovrebov is currently (2010) launching an independent political party, which, given the political environment in the Republic of South Ossetia, means an opposition party.

I say 'spurred on' rather than 'prompted' since by the time Tskhovrebov entered the ex-combatant movement, he already had experience of civil society activities and NGO work, whereas the previous participants did not. This further convinced us of the need to work to increase public awareness in the regions, with a view to involving them in the Caucasus Forum's programmes and projects and in the peacebuilding process generally. The first meeting was attended by representatives of all the armed conflicts in the Caucasus. A matter that attracted particular attention was that there were some regions where there was a real danger of hostilities being resumed, but which were being ignored by international organisations working in the sphere of developing civil society institutions and peacebuilding. These were primarily South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus, as well as Chechnya in the North Caucasus.

4. Situation in South Ossetia

In fact, the UNHCR and the OSCE were working in South Ossetia, while the Soros Foundation had even opened a local office there. However, their funding policies were based on the principle of bilateral NGO projects: projects in South Ossetia were only eligible for funding if they included a partner from Georgia. Clearly, bilateral Ossetian-

Georgian projects are a crucial element in peacebuilding at an NGO level. But if bilateral projects are the only measures eligible for funding, this will have a negative impact on real peacebuilding.

Firstly, the NGOs themselves were caught between government policy and public opinion, on the one hand, which both insisted on the autonomy of South Ossetian civil society; on the other hand, international organisations insisted that functions be shared with Georgian NGOs. The situation was further complicated by the fact that international foundations and organisations located and officially registered in Tbilisi had far more contacts with Georgian NGOs than with South Ossetian ones. Prior to setting up programmes or projects in South Ossetia, they met with Georgian NGOs, discussed ideas for projects in South Ossetia with them and only then took the completed project proposals to Tskhinval, South Ossetia's capital city. Once there, the potential donor and the Georgian partner invited South Ossetian NGOs to join in the project in a farcical tendering process. The project was naturally awarded to South Ossetian NGOs that were willing to implement the project without making any changes. In other cases, NGOs tried to get round the donor's formal eligibility requirements and allocate as many functions as possible to themselves while retaining a merely formal bilateral element. Collaboration as such was thereby kept to a minimum.

A second problem to emerge was that the public became increasingly convinced that international foundations were championing Georgian interests and supporting Georgia's official policy.

Given this situation, the Caucasus Forum initiative could not have come at a better time. The regional approach of the Caucasus Forum, which did not stress whether this or that constituent region was recognised officially, allowed South Ossetian NGOs to collaborate fully with Georgian NGOs in a pan-Caucasian format. Examples of cooperation between NGOs within the Abkhaz-Georgian and Armenian-Azerbaijani projects also helped the NGOs from South Ossetia to counter criticisms by particularly "patriotically" minded state and civil society actors. They used them to convince the public and officials that such cooperation did not involve a betrayal of the republic's interests.

A revolutionary-style situation then developed in which International Alert was not willing and local NGOs were unable to operate as before. This is the fertile ground on which the Caucasus Forum was to launch its work in South Ossetia.

5. The "Forgotten Regions" and a changing format

The first real contact with the South Ossetian NGO community came when a group from the Caucasus Forum attended the First Conference of NGOs of South Ossetia.

This took place in September 1999 at a practically derelict tourist resort which the NGO community itself had restored in the Mziu Gom (Java) district. Although the conference was funded by the UNHCR mission's Tskhinval office, it covered the prospects of network collaboration, in particular within the Caucasus Forum. The Forum organisers, represented by Larisa Sotieva, Zaur Borov and Alan Pliev, introduced the idea of NGO networking to the conference delegates. This was essentially the first step towards involving South Ossetian NGOs in the work of the Caucasus Forum and vice versa. But then everything stalled. The Forum did not show any further interest in South Ossetia, and it was five long years before the Caucasus Forum next engaged with the problems in South Ossetia.

The Forum carried out field studies into the need and conditions for developing civil society institutions, which helped them to emerge and consolidate. This was one of the Forum's fundamental objectives. The work led to a project idea provisionally entitled the "Forgotten Regions". The seminar topics were selected so as to be possible using the Caucasus Forum's own human resources, with minimal involvement of invited experts. This was also dictated by the fact that the seminars were not only to involve training but also research. The plan was to recruit potential activists for the Caucasus Forum from the seminar participants. We also wanted them to find out as much as possible about the Forum itself and to immerse themselves in its atmosphere.

The initial plan was to hold a series of workshops for NGOs and civil society activists from Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia. A proposal emerged during preparations for implementing the initial projects to widen the remit of the "forgotten regions" and include delegates from Chechnya, along with Karachay-Cherkessia and Ingushetia in the North Caucasus. The first stage of the project did in fact include this measure and took the form of a seminar entitled "Development and strengthening of civil society organisations from the regions of the Caucasus", which was held in November 2003 in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia.

The benefits of widening the remit were, in my view, as follows.

- We were able to involve new regions from the North Caucasus in the activities of the Caucasus Forum. This had not been possible previously due to factors such as the low level of development of NGOs. For example, in Karachay-Cherkessia – despite what was clearly a pre-conflict situation caused by inter-ethnic relations (between the Karachay and the Cherkessians, the Karachay and the Russians) and religious issues (the spread of Wahhabism) – the authorities reacted extremely negatively to any peacebuilding initiatives of international organisations. It was more advantageous for them to keep quiet about the conflict than to talk about it and attempt to influence it.

- The participation of North Caucasian NGOs in the Forum also had a positive effect on the position of South Ossetian NGOs within South Ossetian society and on the image of the Caucasus Forum itself.

I recall the words of Dina Alborova, one of the founders of the Caucasus Forum and a participant in the seminars within the “Forgotten Regions” project: ‘I don’t much like projects that concentrate solely on the South Caucasus. Joint projects are much more interesting, for example those involving NGOs from Chechnya or Karachay-Cherkessia. This idea came out of conversations with Chechen acquaintances. They themselves proposed the idea of a joint project because, as it turned out, they knew nothing at all about South Ossetia – just as we knew nothing about them – and we both thought in terms of stereotypes. They are great guys and are not at all xenophobic. We all live in the Caucasus, we are neighbours; the events of the last 10 years have isolated us from one another. But today we need to carry out joint peacebuilding actions under the motto “The Caucasus – our shared home”. And this is precisely why the Caucasus Forum was originally founded in Nalchik in 1998.’

Nevertheless, widening the Forum’s remit also had some disadvantages. It detracted from the idea of a single focus group, since the problems of the North Caucasus are different in some ways from those of the South. In particular, the South Ossetian issue, which was viewed as fundamental by the project’s authors at the initial stages, was virtually eclipsed by pan-Caucasian issues. However, by 2003, hostilities had resumed in South Ossetia and there was virtually no discussion of the Georgia-Ossetia problem. We abandoned the original policy of allowing NGOs in particular from Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia to speak freely, and share the quite distinct nature of the issues that they face. Thus, the mediation function of the Caucasus Forum was limited when its remit was expanded to cover the whole of the Caucasus, however illogical this may sound.

Opportunities for mediation were restricted by the simple fact that there were now several levels and sets of interests represented. Since Moscow had officially announced that the separatist opposition in Chechnya had been crushed and the Ossetian-Ingush territorial conflict had been resolved, it viewed as undesirable any discussions on the resolution of these problems which had already been allegedly “resolved”. In these circumstances, any discussion of issues connected with the international non-recognition of South Ossetia and its struggle for independence in the presence of participants from Chechnya would have condemned them to an enforced silence. The same also applied to discussions of territorial problems in Nagorno-Karabakh in the presence of representatives from Ingushetia.

6. The Caucasus Forum, International Alert, Abkhazia, South Ossetia: politics, projects and war

We are grateful to International Alert and to the Caucasus Forum for giving us the opportunity to raise and discuss the problems of South Ossetia at pan-Caucasian and international NGO levels, within a context of conflict resolution across the Caucasus as a whole. We are also grateful to them for undertaking specific related measures, such as developing links between combatants, involving business people in peacebuilding and running the Women's League project. It is a shame that we were unable to implement a fully-fledged project in South Ossetia, although we did at least try.

The significance of the Caucasus Forum's efforts becomes clearer when set against the background of the international community's generally accepted position: under this position, South Ossetia is not seen as a fully-fledged player on the political scene, even more so in terms of military strategy.

The international community's approach to resolving the South Ossetian problem was to offer the Ossetians some alternative to independence in the form of economic and other preferences. But even these proposals to the South Ossetians were made in a rather bizarre form. I have in mind the plan for the "alternative government" of Dimitri Sanakoev – a project designed as "bait" to demonstrate to the people of South Ossetia the attractiveness of the prospect of incorporation within Georgia. The "alternative government" was created by President Saakashvili's regime on South Ossetian territory which was outside of Tskhinval's control. However, this project ultimately failed since it took absolutely no account of contemporary realities and the fundamental nature of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. It focused in particular on changing the government of South Ossetia, which was seen as the underlying cause of the conflict and the Ossetian-Georgian discord.

The OSCE's economic recovery projects also operated in an environment similarly devoid of almost any analysis of the causes of the conflict. For example, no agricultural or small business project was implemented on Tskhinval-controlled territory in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone. Meanwhile, dozens of enterprises and farms were funded in the Georgian enclaves. It is not my intention in any way to accuse the OSCE of applying ethnic criteria, but there is clearly an unbalanced and extremely politicised approach, even in relation to economic issues and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. Such a strategy, as time has shown, played into the hands of those forces which were interested in resuming the conflict and undermined the image of international organisations as a whole.

Military strategy was a direct consequence of the social and political components of this strategy. The Russian peacekeepers, President Kokoity and his security services, even the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of South Ossetia, the Committee for State Security (KGB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) – none of these can take the credit for the defence of Tskhinval in the first two days of the war in August 2008. In fact, Tskhinval held out thanks to the resilience and belief in the justice of their cause of the ordinary citizens of South Ossetia.

There is a proposition that I often like to put forward and invite the audience or my interlocutor to refute. It goes as follows. International organisations have invested far more funds in the development of civil society and implementation of peacebuilding projects in Abkhazia than in South Ossetia. And let's take the case of Russian business. As we know, international investment is miniscule compared with the Russian money that has poured into Abkhazia and South Ossetia. So Russia has saved money by waging a short war on a territory where there was no investment – correct? This may be cynical but there is some logic to it. That is the first point.

Secondly, recognition by Russia, Nicaragua and Venezuela has given substantial support for South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence; they have become part of the global community.

Thirdly, on 8th August 2008, war broke out in South Ossetia, leading to hundreds of victims and thousands of refugees. In Abkhazia, all of this happened without virtually any bloodshed. When I say that I see a direct link between my first and third postulates, many experts from various international organisations – who are supposedly engaged in conflict prevention and resolution, support for civil society institutions, human rights and human security issues – smile, but cannot offer any explanation to the contrary.

In a word, the funds invested by the international community in peacebuilding and the development of democratic institutions have “paid off” and bloodshed has been avoided in many respects thanks to them. This is also true of the Caucasus Forum project, where the ratio of funds and efforts invested in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is at the same level as the same indicators within the international organisations as a whole. However, International Alert's support for the Caucasus Forum has been invaluable since it has got people talking about the South Ossetian problem.

One example of this occurred at a conference organised in 2007 by the influential Paris-based Institute for Security Studies. Salome Zurabishvili, a former head of the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who had then joined the opposition, was invited to give the keynote speech on security issues in the Caucasus. Just 10 percent of her speech was devoted to the South Ossetia problem, with the constant refrain that a change in the government of South Ossetia would also be the path to peace, more precisely

reincorporation within Georgia. Jostling my way past the crowd of people trying to talk to Zurabishvili, I asked her the question: ‘But did you ask me – considered by the South Ossetian authorities to be in opposition and an enemy of the Kokoity regime – what I think about the prospect of South Ossetia joining Georgia?’ My question went unanswered. I later put the same question to Zurabishvili once again, but this time in Vienna after the August war, when I was already a citizen of the Republic of South Ossetia recognised by Russia. Her response, as then, was the same condescending smile and nothing more.

Just one small British NGO – International Alert – dwarfed by organisations such as the OSCE and the EU, had in 2003 sounded the alarm and tried to do as much as it could to change the situation. International Alert seemed to understand the simple truth that this was an area of vulnerability. You cannot simply produce a ranking of conflict situations and then use it to focus on this or that region. If you take a more holistic view of the Caucasus and see it as a single region with the same problem, the same players on the political scene, a simple conclusion emerges: to be productive and have an impact across the Caucasus, which is so homogeneous in so many respects, you need to create a corresponding structure – that is, an NGO network – as an important actor in the field of peacebuilding.

However, such a network will only work if all its components are at largely the same level of development, with the same aims and dynamics. Otherwise, the network will stall and cease to function.

You need to create a social environment in which peacebuilding initiatives can be implemented across all regions, regardless of their political status. This, it seems to me, was at the heart of International Alert’s approach to the creation of the Caucasus Forum and its operational strategy on conflict transformation in the Caucasus.

The experience gained in Abkhazia of confidence building between the Georgians and the Abkhaz, and assistance in the development of civil society institutions, made it all the easier to bring civil society institutions in South Ossetia up to the levels achieved in Abkhazia in the early 2000s. The green shoots that were already showing within South Ossetian civil society itself made it all the easier to transplant this experience. Projects were set up giving citizens a platform from which to articulate their feelings about events in the republic, and consolidating the various layers of civil society – these included initiatives such as the NGO Resource Centre and the Civil Society Club. It also made sense to international organisations to use the organisational techniques worked out in Abkhazia in South Ossetia as well. Unfortunately, this did not happen. The Caucasus Forum and International Alert got bogged down in the details of selecting the main partner and the opportunity was missed.

7. From conflict transformation to transforming the Forum

One example from the successful project “Business and Conflict” confirms this. The project organisers clearly identified partners in South Ossetia. As part of a project in South Ossetia, a fully-fledged Business Centre was set up. This centre has become a nucleus for the development of civil society, despite the horrifying socio-political conditions. Without the South Ossetian Business Centre, it would have been difficult to implement a range of civil society initiatives – such as the independent newspaper *21st Century*, the South Ossetian Citizens’ Forum, and numerous campaigns and one-off actions, seminars and roundtable meetings.

As regards the Business and Conflict project, its potential should have been in demand, in my view. After all, this project itself adopted much of the Caucasus Forum’s experience.

My conclusions stem from the situation on the ground and are relatively straightforward.

- Firstly, peacebuilding activities must continue.
- Secondly, it is necessary to restore old links and use those existing ones. One of the few peacebuilding processes that really worked in the Caucasus was the aforementioned CBDN. Moreover, the Caucasus Forum delegates continue to maintain contact and collaborate in a number of different areas and projects, despite the time that has passed and the complexity of the situation. Many continue to be engaged in activities related to peacebuilding, in some cases within governmental structures.
- Thirdly, new participants must be drawn in. New players have arrived on the civil society scene. For example, after the events of August 2008, a new elite appeared in South Ossetia – namely, combatants who are actively engaged in politics, who set up NGOs and political parties, and who are already represented in the South Ossetian parliament.

Work is required at various levels to ensure that all of these initiatives run successfully – within South Ossetian society, within an Ossetian-Georgian framework and on a pan-Caucasian level.

PART 5

Economy and Mediation

CHAPTER 12

Economy and Conflict in the South Caucasus

The Caucasus Business and Development Network

Diana Klein and Oskari Pentikainen

1. Introduction

The Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN) is a tremendously inspiring group, comprising a combination of business people, civil society activists and academics, all working towards peace in the region. CBDN has a shared vision of an economically connected and cooperating, peaceful Caucasus. It promotes peacebuilding in the South Caucasus through supporting various formats of regional economic cooperation across the region. CBDN's fervour has been contagious for those accompanying the initiative – both for International Alert and other colleagues in the field. This article describes the initiative from the perspective of an international team of people who helped to set up and accompany the initiative, and later the network. Hence, it is a subjective reflection from an international organisation's perspective rather than a commonly agreed analysis with our partners. The initiative's success can be measured in many ways. One indicator is that the process can be described from memory. Virtually no background documents were used to prepare this document, except for the methodological part. This means that the legacy of this process is strong enough to be remembered.

Although the South Caucasus initiative was started, facilitated and led by International Alert, one cannot predict and plan how to set up “a group of enthusiastic, active and creative people, who will do everything in their power and beyond to build peace”. From the outset, our thinking was not confined to a one-off or fixed-term project and we did have a longer-term view. But how the initiative evolved was defined by the process itself rather than a “master plan” of some sort. One can only have an approach, lay foundations, work hard and then trust in the process. There are ways to support and shape the process in such a way that the conditions for a group like CBDN are created and maintained. International Alert has undeniably shaped this process and always weighed in on the decision making in order to create these conditions.

This article is an attempt to document this process from a mediation perspective, in order to allow others to learn from successes and mistakes. Recognising that there is no single experience transferable across conflicts, we believe that experiences shared can enrich people's “repertoires of ideas” and bases for comparison. This is particularly the case in contexts where the solutions to the conflict seem futile and new creative ideas scarce.

2. How the project came about

International Alert has been working in the Caucasus since the late 1990s. Alert is organised according to thematic departments (Economy and Peacebuilding, Security, Gender, etc.) or regional departments (Eurasia, South-East Asia, West Africa, Great Lakes, etc.). Both the Eurasia programme as well as the Economy and Peacebuilding team (at that time, Business and Conflict) were present in the Caucasus. The Eurasia programme was engaged in a

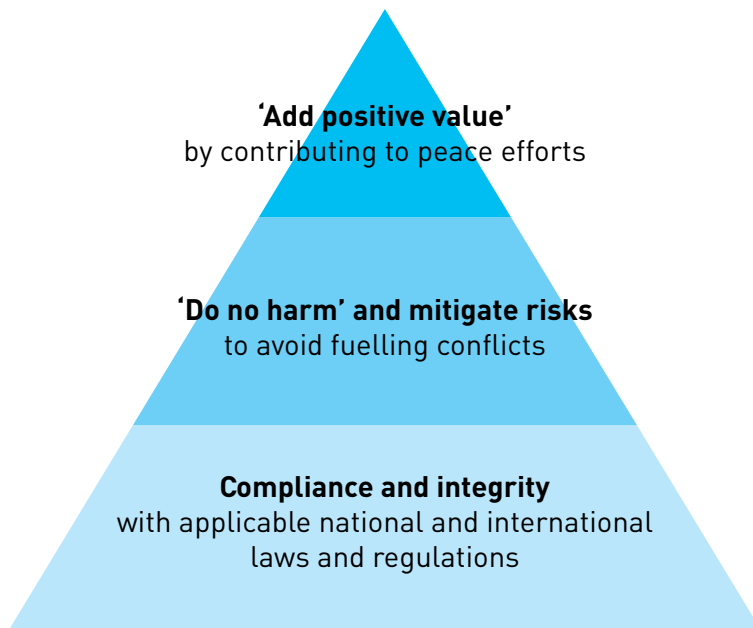
number of projects – such as the Caucasus Forum and confidence building between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. The Business and Conflict programme was mainly looking at the role of oil in Azerbaijan, as well as in the wider region. This thematic engagement led to an interest in the economy and conflict nexus and the subsequent creation of CBDN.

This chapter will outline the background to the project from a content, process and context perspective.

Content

International Alert has been working on the role of the private sector in peacebuilding since the 1990s. Our flagship publication *The Business of Peace* is still relevant today, detailing the various ways in which the private sector can be engaged in peacebuilding. This encompasses, for example, complying with rules and regulations, mitigating both risks and impacts of the conflict, and creating positive value in the society.¹

Figure 1: Role of private sector in conflict/peace (adapted from *The Business of Peace*)



¹ You can download a copy of *The Business of Peace* at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/business-peace>. For more information about Alert's work on Economy and Peacebuilding, see http://www.international-alert.org/peace_and_economy/index.php.

Given that the extractive industry (oil, mining and gas) has had the most significant negative footprint on conflict, it has also been the primary target audience of our work and the reason for our entry into the Caucasus. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, being negotiated and built at that time (from 1999 onwards), raised many questions, a lot of attention from Western media and significant opposition to the project, both in the region as well as in Europe.² The routing of the pipeline was altered in order to avoid Armenia and in particular Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, there were growing concerns regarding the potential negative impact of the pipeline on the conflict on a regional level, as well as on the national levels (such as lack of transparency of revenue management) and local levels (mainly in relation to land issues). The growing concerns regarding the potential negative impact of the BTC pipeline on the conflicts in the region – as well as an open invitation from local civil society organisations in Azerbaijan and Georgia – were sufficient ground for our entry. During the next few years, we tried to engage with BP and other major oil companies in the BTC consortium, along with the Azerbaijani government and of course the local civil society. This engagement is beyond the scope of this paper,³ but our expertise in the role of the private sector in conflict and peace, and the Alert experience in other conflict contexts, contributed to many people raising the issue with us and eliciting new ideas.

A political economy analysis was seen as necessary. With this came the realisation that presenting any new ideas as “purely economic” would open a rare window of opportunity for trying a new and innovative approach, as well as introducing private sector actors into the business of peace. The latter seemed to be the most significant opportunity, since once the private sector is given a role, more people will have a vested interest in peace. Moreover, other cases have shown that if the private sector is mobilised for peace, it can indeed support politicians in their efforts, as well as bring along other segments of society.

Process

Our experience and engagement in the region did, however, provide Alert with two important preconditions relevant for further work: presence in the region and credibility.

The first precondition should not be underestimated when designing mediation interventions: a continuous presence allows for a better, more comprehensive analysis and development of relationships, which both in turn contribute to potentially more accessible funding. In this particular case, we had a “multiple” presence in the region. The Business and Conflict team was engaging in Azerbaijan on oil-related issues. Meanwhile, the Eurasia department was running projects across the region, both the North and South Caucasus, with mainly civil society organisations. This allowed for a wider analysis,

² For example, Banca Intesa (Italy) pulled out of financing the project.

³ See *Oil and the Search for Peace in the South Caucasus: The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Oil Pipeline*. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/publications/pub.php?p=23>.

based on consultations and information from a broad range of stakeholders. This in turn contributed to a better identification of the problem and better project design.

Credibility is often conflated with legitimacy. Alert recognises that the primary role in building peace is that of the people affected by the conflict. Alert sees its role as a supporter, facilitator, catalyst and mediator. Our legitimacy comes from our values and from an “invitation” – whether direct or indirect – from people who believe that we have a role to play and that they need our support. Along with the primacy of people, other values guiding Alert’s work include impartiality, accountability, confidentiality, independence and partnerships.⁴ Credibility needs to be established over a longer period and is just as dependent on the organisation itself as it is on personalities engaged in the mediation process. An important part of the equation is naturally whether, and to what extent, the organisation is perceived to live up to its values. Whether our intentions have translated into practice is for others to evaluate. Organisational traits also play an important role. As the process went further, we became increasingly aware of the importance of retaining adaptability and responsiveness to the changing context and needs. We were also aware of the importance of working towards establishing links between micro and macro levels, and of the need to find a balance and flexible formats to engage with different population groups across the divides (both recognised and non-recognised). Facilitators and mediators can gain credibility from professional knowledge, experience and professional conduct.

While engaging with people on the ground, many questioned our sole focus on oil in relation to conflict. This was not because people did not believe in the importance of the oil issue, but because they believed that more pertinent issues also deserved the attention and support of an international organisation with limited resources. In fact, the links between other economic issues and conflict were not addressed at all.

Hence, our focus was slowly shifting towards the wider nexus between economy and conflict in the region, rather than just oil and conflict. The original intent was to conduct research into the topic, before designing an “intervention” in the South Caucasus. Given the already above-stated value that people affected by the conflict are the best placed to address it, we decided to embark on a research project on the link between economy and conflict, conducted by a group of local researchers.

Context

As mentioned, our engagement and content expertise led us to broaden our focus to research the economy and conflict nexus. The main reasons why this link seemed important to so many of our stakeholders were due to the following features of the conflict context in the region.

⁴ See International Alert’s *Code of Conduct* at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/code-conduct>.

- All four conflicts in the region⁵ were, at the time, protracted conflicts with low levels of violence. However, there was also little prospect for resolution and people were running out of ideas. The “traditional” ways of conflict resolution were perceived as not contributing to overcoming the impasse and there was an eagerness to explore new approaches. It is beyond the scope of this report to assess the effectiveness and the impact of political peace processes, citizen diplomacy projects and grassroots peacebuilding efforts. However, the authors feel that none of these have been sufficiently tried and tested in the region in order for them to be fully exploited. The geopolitically imposed status quo and the disempowerment of all peoples in the region gave the impression that people are not in control of their own fate and that no matter how hard they try, their efforts are in vain. Hence, a “fresh” approach was welcomed.
- Regarding the nature of the region’s economies, this only became clear once the research was completed. Nevertheless, the regional dimension of the economies of the individual states and entities was too strong to ignore. The region has always been economically interconnected and the recent wars have had a hugely negative impact on the economies. The severed economic links and the prospect of reconnection not only resonated with the business community due to potential profits; it also alluded to the possibility that these business links could become proxies for other links and relationships.

3. The Economy and Conflict project

As mentioned above, the initial years of the Economy and Conflict process were designed and structured around a research project. The main reason for this was, once again, the need for a thorough analysis of the problem (in this case the nexus between economy and conflict), as well as the primacy of local stakeholders. We wanted local researchers to investigate and discuss what the problem was and then, together with us, come up with a way to address it. The “not-so-hidden” agenda was to use the opportunity of having a team of researchers from across the conflict divide to build relationships within the group and to build a group of people who could together advocate for peace from a professional perspective. This group of people could also use their different identities to leverage some influence over the political decision-making processes shaping the conflicts.

⁵ This project has had a regional focus from the outset, defining the South Caucasus as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, as well as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The model

It would be presumptuous to claim that the Economy and Conflict project designers came up with the regional template only based on their own analysis and the need as well as uniqueness. As is true in war, but also in peace, the “next battle” is planned according to the last one. On this occasion, the initiative referred back to another International Alert regional template – namely, the Caucasus Forum of NGOs. This forum was also a regional collection of like-minded people, although from both the South and North Caucasus. The important distinction between the two initiatives was that the Economy and Conflict research project did not only unite people whose aspirations and views were pro-peace; it also saw the importance of involving people who were experienced in doing research on the subject of the economy or people who had been engaging with the business community on the subject. The secondary criterion was a willingness to work together with other researchers from all of the South Caucasus. The combination of both criteria proved to be actually more difficult than originally envisaged and the selection of partners reflected this difficulty.

A second distinction was the “informality” of the relationship within the group. We had seen the Caucasus Forum struggle through designing statutes – a process which took endless days of negotiating over semantics and grammar. We realised that we could not get involved in such a process, as neither we nor the participants had the time, interest or patience for such activities. Therefore, we steered the group towards a loose and informal network. We will examine further these two hugely important issues – that is, steering a process and the network – later on in this chapter.

The third difference was that the Economy and Conflict project did not cross the Caucasus mountains and never managed to incorporate a Russian dimension.⁶ The North Caucasus was left out deliberately at the beginning for the simple reason that it would make the project too big, unmanageable and expensive (we struggled to fund research and research trips), although we had the vision to expand in the future.

The fourth and perhaps most interesting difference is the set-up. Although not originally envisaged, CBDN runs “Business Centres”⁷ in each of the seven entities (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, as well as Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia). Among other reasons, the decision to set up these centres was influenced by the experience of the Caucasus Forum. The latter forum was never properly rooted; it had a roving head office and representatives in each of the regions, but no anchors.

⁶ CBDN still lacks a structured approach to engaging Russia, although it has some experience in engaging the Russian business community on an ad hoc basis.

⁷ The term “Business Centre” is a commonly accepted term by CBDN partners to describe their offices. In each of the entities, they look different: in some places, they are exclusively CBDN offices; in other places, they operate on the basis of an existing organisation, while elsewhere it is just a person with a computer.

We feared that if CBDN was also to be a “floating network” with a virtual centre, it would not be real and therefore too fragile. The Business Centres helped to root CBDN in the region.

The people

As mentioned previously, we had two criteria for choosing researchers. The outcome was different to what we had planned, and the selection process turned out to be a combination of objectively set criteria and intuition. The need to eliminate subjective criteria from the selection process was agreed upon in an attempt to avoid corruption and ensure transparency in the process, but perhaps even more so as a Western concept. Our intention was to hire researchers, but because we had a long-term vision in our minds, with hindsight, our requirements were probably too high and unrealistic. Alert has been notorious for its demands on people in terms of skills and knowledge – both internally and externally. Our terms of reference for partners and researchers were no less specific. We set out in the region to look for experts on the economy and experts on conflict, who were willing to work with the “enemy”, able to influence opinions locally and on a political level, not too expensive, a self-starter, etc. Later, the criteria and approach for engaging new people evolved. At the time (2002–2003), we were a team of about five people each going to a different corner of the Caucasus to recruit a researcher. Perhaps not surprisingly, our first choices refused due to political or other reasons. We ended up with teams of people from some of the places and individuals from others, but eventually we put together a group of capable, good natured individuals, who set out on their task to deliver a piece of research in 2003.

In contrast, international mediators of processes between official political actors – or “Track I” mediation initiatives – do not enjoy the freedom of being able to choose their mediation “subjects”. The holder of a political post or the man/woman with the gun is the mediation subject in such instances. Nonetheless, the selection is always difficult and in hindsight there was a great degree of subjectivity in the way we selected participants.

Not all of the original researchers are still part of the network. The network underwent a great transformation and from the original group of people, only a few remained while the rest were replaced by others. However, the fluidity of this group (due to the flexible set-up) allowed people to leave and join. This was an important lesson learnt from the Caucasus Forum experience. One of the challenges which the Caucasus Forum faced was its rather rigid structure and fixed membership basis. As mentioned above, the original research group was transformed into a loose network. The experience of the Caucasus Forum showed us, among other things, that we should not get locked into relationships with individuals as an international institution and that we could not lock other people into rigid relationships either. Networking is more of an informal bond – a network is not an organisation; the rules are less rigid and the relationships more fluid.

The topic

As mentioned, the engagement in the South Caucasus was in real need of an analysis that would reveal new engagement plains and sectors. There was a claim and a sense that the economies of the region could benefit from peace, as well as a claim that prospects for peace could be improved upon through economies. However, apart from shorter academic pieces or sporadic research on some subjects, no systematic research had been carried out to this end. In addition, all the initiatives excluded the three non-recognised entities of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and rarely ever included Turkey. Given that part of International Alert's approach is to work with everyone, we were certainly not going to exclude groups of people who had been party to the conflicts, who had been directly affected by the conflict, or who had the potential to either escalate or de-escalate the conflict, let alone whole entities with strong and defined identities – that is, the “other side” of the conflict.

We therefore decided to define the topic loosely as the interrelationship between economy and conflict. Our aim was not to get the researchers to agree on each other's work, but rather to see things in a new light, although still keeping their own perspective. So, while they did provide feedback that was fed into the editing process, the authors certainly did disagree with each other.

It was more important for us to see what would emerge out of this initiative as a process of engagement, rather than to conduct rigorous socio-economic research and advocate for the result. The results were only as good as the follow-up. The research itself was a convening tool – it allowed people to get together in a semi-academic setting and to start talking to each other, which is what they did.

4. The follow-up

The Moscow Conference – March 2004

In March 2004, before the publication of *From War Economies to Peace Economies*,⁸ we called a conference on the subject in Moscow. At that point, Moscow was still the most feasible option for Caucasians and Westerners to travel to and meet. Our aim was to develop a good understanding of where we should go with this process. Our stakeholders could largely be divided into three main categories – civil society, the business community and the government. The international community was another “set of brains” around the table and we needed experienced people.

8 P. Champaign, D. Klein and N. Mirimanova (Eds.) (2004). *From War Economies to Peace Economies in the South Caucasus*. London: International Alert and Economy and Conflict Research Group (ECRG). Available at <http://www.caucasusbusiness.net/publications/war-economies-peace-economies-south-caucasus>.

We tasked the researchers with bringing one politician, one business person and one NGO representative to the conference.

Although the Azerbaijani researchers could not get a politician, since the Azerbaijanis refused to meet with the Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in a regional setting, it was the first regional meeting involving all the entities, states, enemies and friends since the wars of the Caucasus in the 1990s.

Spirits were high at the conference, since people were glad of the opportunity to attend. However, expectations were low, probably due to the years of stagnation in resolving the conflicts, as well as the suspicious views of some of anything that is initiated by civil society.

However, the event proved to be a milestone, since it granted us a unique opportunity to generate recommendations based on a consultation with all major stakeholders across the region. While it is difficult to say if there was a single transformative moment between the people at the event, it brought the group of researchers together to form the Economy and Conflict Research Group of the South Caucasus (ECRG). Having a joint task of presenting the research findings together and being responsible for one publication, albeit with different viewpoints, really empowered people for joint action.

Consultations

The main recommendation that was followed up after this event was to consult small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). There was an overwhelming agreement that business people as our main constituency would be the best placed to shape our strategy and analysis. In addition, two important pieces of advice emerged: large business is too politicised and therefore best to be avoided, at least initially; and micro-business is too powerless to initiate any change. While small traders and other micro-business owners have been the most heavily affected by the conflicts, if we want the private sector to have a role in peacebuilding and we want business people to act as agents of change, then we need to concentrate on the middle layer. SMEs were thought to be less politicised and sufficiently embedded in their communities (as opposed to the more “remote” large business owners), yet still able to shape and influence opinions locally as individuals, and on a political level as a group.

As a result, we set out to consult SME representatives in each of the seven entities with the help of the ECRG. These consultations centred around the issue of business and conflict – that is, trying to find those conflict elements that prevent the private sector from going about its business, but also potentially trying to define a role for the private sector in peace. Although the meetings did not exactly achieve this immediate objective, they did highlight some important issues.

The first issue was the great sentiment that emerged in the Caucasian business community when recalling the past and doing business in the past, notwithstanding the communist regime with all its restrictions on private sector activities at that time.

The second issue concerned identity. Business people, when confronted with the prospect of doing business with “the enemy”, manage to put their identity as a business person before their national identity and to rationalise their engagement. In fact, the business relationships created in multinational/transit/cross-border markets (such as Sadakhlo or Ergneti) often functioned on trust, since these markets were informal and loans and credits were not institutionalised. Business people rated these relationships highly and attributed a very high value to trust as a factor in doing business. Hence, building and strengthening trust was identified as one of the central components of our strategy, although in operational terms it meant supporting any cross-conflict business conduct where the creation and maintenance of such trust is possible.

The third issue was corruption – an issue that was overwhelmingly common to all meetings, which were conducted roughly at the same time by different ECRG members with the support of Alert staff. At each meeting, business people came to a point where they no longer wanted to speak about conflict, but wanted to speak about corruption. From their perspective, this was the main obstacle to doing business in the region, not the conflicts, although they could see a connection between the two.

This in fact initiated a “spin-off” from the Economy and Conflict Research project – a research that culminated in the publication *Corruption and Conflict in the South Caucasus*.⁹

At this point, we were around 15–18 months into the process, with a solid analysis published in a book format, rounds of consultations completed and, importantly, a clear role defined for Alert. The role of Alert had changed throughout the process and the flexibility of us not sticking to a traditional approach of a strictly defined mandate helped the process to grow and develop and influenced the nature of the process, since we ourselves were signalling that it is okay to be flexible and adjustable.

A traditional mediation role is no longer relevant in the current world of diplomacy, let alone citizens’ diplomacy, which this project is an example of. We (the Alert team) have been facilitators, mediators, shuttle mediators,¹⁰ funders, fundraisers, administrators, messengers, etc. – but most of all, we have been lucky. We had a group of great people, a new niche, an agenda defined by primary stakeholders and some level of funding.

9 N. Mirimanova and D. Klein [2006]. *Corruption and Conflict in the South Caucasus*. London: International Alert and Economy and Conflict Research Group. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/corruption-and-conflict-south-caucasus>.

10 Also frequently referred to as “shuttle-bus mediators” due to the amount of time some of us spent in a “marshrutka” [the Russian term for a shuttle bus].

The Trabzon regional meeting – December 2004

Our interest in the business community and our efforts to give SMEs a voice contributed to our growing credibility, which we used to bring a group of business people from across the region to Trabzon in north-eastern Turkey in December 2004. In addition to the Caucasians, we also invited two business people from Sri Lanka – a Tamil and a Sinhala representative of the Business for Peace Alliance (BPA)¹¹ – who came to share their experience with their fellow business people and found great similarities between the conflicts.

It was at this meeting that our agenda and expectations from the process began to change somewhat, since our primary stakeholders – SME owners – began to demand a primary stake in the process. We had assumed that business people would be interested in peacebuilding through regional economic cooperation (as defined at this meeting), but we had overlooked the fact that regional economic cooperation needs to be encouraged, supported and facilitated. We had also underestimated the real meaning of economic cooperation, or just played it down since business and trade were not our main area of expertise. Trade linkages and potential business opportunities were motivating business people towards a collaborative approach with us and with each other, and there was an expectation that we would create those opportunities. A notable exception was the Azerbaijani business people, whose government was vehemently opposing any ties involving Armenians, in particular economic connections, since the rationale back then was that Azerbaijan had too few “sticks” against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. According to this rationale, at the very least, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh should remain isolated from the rest of the region until economic necessity forced them to begin to negotiate with Azerbaijan. Leaving Armenians out of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey (AGT) pipelines and boycotting Armenian business was one of the ways in which the Azerbaijani government expressed its continued frustration, together with the hope that if sufficient pressure was exerted from multiple sides, Armenians would be brought to the negotiation table with a “real” offer.

This opposition was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the complexity of relations, and demonstrated the kind of pressure that the Azerbaijani business people had to resist when engaging in this initiative. People did not risk their reputations, political capital, even their freedom because they saw the prospect of a quick profit. Nor did they think that International Alert was a supreme mediator, capable of bringing peace to the region. Among the group, there was a shared sense of responsibility of everyone doing their bit for peace. There was most certainly a long-term vision, and the Azerbaijani business people were happy to tag along with the process, positioning themselves for a potential future after a peace agreement. Moreover, there was a great deal of nostalgia.

¹¹ For more information, see <http://www.bpa-srilanka.com/>.

There are many benefits and disadvantages for a mediator as an outsider to a conflict, which are beyond the scope of this paper. The one relevant advantage, in our case almost a luxury, was the regional perspective. Coupled with our strong field presence, as mentioned above, and our focus on SME business owners, we got to see and hear how people think about each other from every different conflict angle. The similarities were staggering.¹² The one similarity in particular that we decided to hang a lot of hope on was the sentiment expressed. If asked about the “other”, people often hurled abuse towards their enemies. This was understandable because the conflicts had not been addressed, and there were a lot of grievances, displacement and painful memories from the wars, etc. However, if asked about the relationship before the war with the same “enemy”, people’s eyes lit up and they had many good things to say. It is true that many of the positives and negatives were stereotypical, but then again, people generalise and cut corners all the time, not only in the Caucasus. Therefore, if people became nostalgic and began to recall “the good old times” with genuine sincerity, we were there to encourage it.

The Trabzon meeting was significant from another point of view. Alert assumed an additional role as the stakeholders realised that Alert could be a great advocacy platform – and we jumped at this opportunity.

Breakfast in Paris, lunch in Brussels, dinner in London

We had many advocacy targets: local governments, the international community, donors, etc. Therefore, we decided to address the international community in Europe, while trying to reach out to as many audiences as we could at one time.

The ECRG had now changed. It had morphed into a body representing certain interests of the business community in the Caucasus, based on a relationship created with many business people through an almost two-year long consultation process. This was not envisaged in the original plan, but then again, the process was flexible. This and the advocacy component were new issues added to the ECRG’s remit, as well as to Alert’s role.

Although we were happy to act as an advocacy platform, our principle of people leading the strategy was still valid. As a result, we brought the ECRG over to London first to develop a joint advocacy message, which was then relayed to audiences such as the UK government, the European Union, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and other international actors. Our assumption was that if people from the region came to Europe to relay messages that were agreed on by seven different conflict parties, someone would listen. We ran three seminars – in Paris, Brussels and London. The Paris seminar and the Brussels seminar were held on consecutive days,

¹² See, for instance, the mirror perceptions of corruption in the *Corruption and Conflict in the South Caucasus* research.

after which we returned straight to London. This prompted one of the ECRG members to remark on the amazing possibility of being able to have ‘breakfast in Paris, lunch in Brussels and dinner in London’ – which seemed unbelievable to people from a place where the internal barriers are so high and transport so difficult.

The biggest success of this advocacy tour was the impact on the EU. In hindsight, we have been very lucky, since one needs three things in order to run a successful advocacy campaign with the EU: the right people, at the right time and a policy in making. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which was being drafted at the time, drew on our *War Economies to Peace Economies* publication. We also succeeded in directing the attention of the EU to the economic dimensions of conflict and most certainly to the economic dimensions of peace.

5. From theory to practice

By early 2005, there was a strong sense of being “on to something” and of having discovered a new insight into the inter-linkages between economy and conflict – in particular, the positive role that business could play in peacebuilding processes. While there were varying ideas of the next “stage” and what it should look like, there was general agreement that it should be a “practical application” of the evolving hypothesis, involving the establishment of a “mechanism” or network to deliver it.

In March 2005, we had a meeting in St Petersburg, during which the ECRG and Alert transformed the initiative into CBDN. While the ideas varied greatly on what the network should actually do, the overall mission was to engage business communities in initiatives that contribute to conflict reduction in the region.

The strands of work were elaborated before our next November 2005 meeting in Moscow, which engaged South Caucasian Diaspora business people based in Moscow. These strands ranged from internal outreach and services to business, along with informational work, advocacy and joint initiatives. Some four to five years later, when we look back, these strands are still very valid. However, the actual work that we do could not look more different – in fact, the very meaning of these “words” has changed significantly for us. While in 2005–2006, the words were more “talk” with little resonance in reality and with the work being isolated in individual societies, in the subsequent years these words turned into something more “tangible” and into a more coherent whole. “Business communities” became real people from real sectors. “Information work” was transformed into knowledge on real obstacles and possibilities, as well as engaging the media. “Advocacy” was transformed into real input into policy documents. “Joint initiatives” moved on from us talking about them to real cross-divide production lines, or common brands, etc.

The process had been good up until this point. It had found a niche and introduced some new thinking into peacebuilding and conflict resolution discourses. We were being heard by the international community, donors were excited and the future financial support seemed to be in place. Therefore, the future seemed bright – except it wasn't. While the process was reaching a pinnacle, the exact opposite happened on the funding front. Iraq and Afghanistan were eating into much of the donor money. Moreover, our big plans, if not shelved, became more of a topic for academic discussion than implementation. This period underlined one significant weakness in the process: we relied on a single donor for a regional initiative. But at the same time, there were few other donors funding such a regional format (three recognised entities, three non-recognised entities plus Turkey). Later, we started fundraising for different components and entities separately. However, core funding for such a regional process remains crucial for its continuation.

If we look back now (spring 2010) not only have the conflict dynamics gone through a rollercoaster ride in the region, but something similar has happened to the dynamics of the Economy and Conflict initiative. There have been many ups and downs both for external (context related) and internal (the process, etc.) reasons. Consequently, following all the hype in the previous two years, there was a roughly one-and-a-half year slump in the process (from about early 2005 to mid-2006). While this was mainly due to lack of funds, it was also exacerbated by the expectations the process had created. As a result, some people started having doubts whether the process would survive.

We had one or two meetings a year, but there was little “meat on the bone” and little means to create it. Money was scarce and the mood was changing. The concept and plans were suspended, and we worked hard to keep partnerships, hopes and some momentum alive.

Mediation and peacebuilding processes are often complex and rarely straightforward. Compounded by a lack of finances, this creates a challenge that calls for creativity. We explored various “cheaper” avenues for promoting dialogue and cooperation – mainly in the virtual world of the Internet, such as through electronic trade, forming contacts through the Internet, etc. However, this raised obvious infrastructural challenges due to the fact that some of the places had very low, if any, internet connection, while the “culture of the Internet” was far from becoming part of the mainstream way of life. This taught us and confirmed that few things can replace real human contact and meeting face-to-face – especially when working with business communities in conflict contexts.

There was also another, more important, realisation about the process. Even if we did not have funding to take the work forward in the way we wanted, we had certainly committed ourselves to the process and partnerships. Leaving the process at this point was not an option for Alert and would certainly have had implications beyond our credibility in this process. Nonetheless, continuing that commitment and keeping some

momentum and the relationships alive with little financial sources or prospects for more funding was not easy either. However, in the long term, the commitment both by the partners and Alert, in the face of adversity, started paying off. While some people had doubts and some drifted away, others joined and some stayed.

Then, the situation changed in the spring of 2006, with the arrival of some new funding. However, it took us some time to gain speed and once we did, the direction was probably not all that clear. Looking back, we accept that this was almost unavoidable, given that there was no ready-made guidebook or previous examples on engaging business in peacebuilding in the South Caucasus. The subsequent work, while based on previous analysis and research, was largely a case of “learning by doing”. It was the “tactics” or the “how” part that we struggled with most – that is, how to steer and accompany a process that is not only becoming increasingly dynamic, but that is also starting to develop a life of its own. However, before going further with the story of CBDN and describing what happened next, it is worth revisiting the theoretical framework deriving from our analysis and the assumptions that we made together with our partners.

6. Analysis and conceptual basis

“Regional economic cooperation is good for peace” – and other assumptions

The research and analysis carried out during the first phase of the project laid the conceptual foundations and helped to formulate the theoretical framework for the project. Some of this has changed or has been fine-tuned during the course of the project. But the basic assumptions of the “substance”, “format” and “who” behind the work have largely remained valid.

Firstly, throughout the conflicts “economic interactions” across the divides never ceased. Armenian, Turkish, Georgian, South Ossetian, Abkhaz and Azerbaijani business communities¹³ have engaged with each other in various forms.

While in some cases, these interactions have been large-scale and well organised (e.g. Armenian-Turkish relations), in other cases they have been predominantly a coping mechanism (e.g. the Ergneti and Sadakhlo markets, cross-Ingur/i, etc.) but nevertheless substantial in scale. For example, the Sadakhlo market in Georgia had a strong class dimension to these relations, which were grounded in the needs of the poorer segments of the society. These relations have been considered a phenomenon driven by needs –

¹³ The term “business community” is used in a loose sense here to include individuals and groups who engage in trade and economic relations, no matter how small the scale.

mostly in licit goods but taking place in the sphere of the “shadow economy”. These relations have often been unpopular in political circles and also in wider societies (apart from the primary stakeholders or those directly impacted by the political, economic and physical obstacles created by the conflict divides). However, the volume and scale of these relations were substantial, and the entrepreneurs engaged were not a marginal group in their societies. This created a rather precarious and complex situation between needs in the society, on the one hand, and the shadow economy dimension, on the other, which made the mechanisms politically very vulnerable. Even if, for example, the Ergneti market in South Ossetia should not be considered an intentional peacebuilding mechanism, it nevertheless served as a place for people to interact on common interests – business and trade. Its closure in 2004 underlined its political unsustainability and vulnerability, but also certainly contributed to a deterioration in prospects for South Ossetian-Georgian dialogue, because of its huge socio-economic importance for South Ossetia. Hence, the South Ossetian ECRG partners had ominously predicted in their research that closure of the market would escalate the conflict.¹⁴

Together with the partners, we went on to conclude that economy and business provide a common interest across divides on which to engage. Although cooperation is already happening, the way it functions and is framed is not conflict sensitive and is not contributing to conflict reduction. Often, the shadow economy aspect of these relations has a negative impact on conflict dynamics – for example, the lack of regulation and transparency, being prone to corruption and rent-seeking. At the same time, the lack of mutually acceptable legal or regulatory frameworks forces these interactions into the sphere of the shadow economy, which also feeds into publicly perceived unpopularity of these relations. To turn these challenges into opportunities, together with our partners, we argued for the creation of positive examples of transparent and mutually beneficial cooperation that could bring tangible benefit to people. We saw that businesses could serve as permanent, economic-based, confidence-building mechanisms, and concluded on the importance of creating legal frameworks. This would challenge and contribute towards a change in attitudes regarding the unpopularity of the concept of cooperation.

In due course, when CBDN’s work gathered pace, we often debated the ever-present see-saw paradigm of business development versus peacebuilding with regard to our initiatives. For example, we questioned whether we were doing “economic or political projects”. We asked if we should be creating jobs and generating tangible benefits to people – or if we should be creating more “political brands” and changing people’s attitudes. We came to accept this as one of our ongoing dilemmas and concluded that the balance between the two aspects tips according to the context.

14 P. Champaign, D. Klein and N. Mirimanova (Eds.) (2004). *From War Economies to Peace Economies in the South Caucasus*. London: International Alert and Economy and Conflict Research Group (ECRG), p. 239.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the regional format of the ECRG and later CBDN became one of the cornerstones of the initiative. As the process progressed, we began to better understand the regional economic rationale and interconnectedness, and how the conflicts and closed borders have regional implications beyond the conflict parties, etc. The economy also seemed to offer an alternative to circumvent the “political asymmetry” between the conflict parties in the region. It could provide a way to escape the diametrically opposed political positions and to focus on a common interest instead. Consequently, CBDN started to see mutually beneficial and transparent regional economic cooperation as a positive force for peace.¹⁵ This became one of the core assumptions behind CBDN’s work. The regional format was also seen as an invaluable safety-net for the network for political reasons. Given the combination of political fragmentation in the South Caucasus and the confrontational political configurations as well as protracted status quo, any shock (internal or external) reverberates across the region. On the other hand, a regional format, coupled with a flexible network, makes a good shock-absorption mechanism. When we started applying our theory in practice, the regional format came to our support while framing the work in individual societies. At the same time, it provided a “softer” format to initially bring people across the divide together. Later, it was the regional format that helped us in different ways to pull through – whether this related to tasks such as getting a tractor to South Ossetia, bringing together tea producers or tourism sectors from Baku, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, or organising an annual South Caucasian Women’s Economic Forum.¹⁶

A third consideration is how SME businesses and entrepreneurs form a natural “peace constituency”, especially those who live in conflict zones or in the border regions. They are often the ones who lose out the most due to the conflicts and who do not have the political leverage or connections of big business. Not only do they lack the leverage, but their “voice” remains unheard by the central decision-making core. We came to see SMEs as a more politically independent category in the private sector, able to resist malignant nationalism and more often pragmatic minded – almost by default forming a natural constituency opposing war, closed borders and instability. Communities living adjacent to conflict divides or borders also frequently have past or existing relations with the other side, often sharing the same environment (ecological, security, etc.). This can provide very context specific opportunities. For example, the identical highland pastures of the Shirak-Javakheti-Kars regions¹⁷ provided an opportunity for a joint Caucasian cheese brand. Elsewhere, common pest problems causing damage to agriculture on both sides of the Ingur/i River¹⁸ posed the same problem for both sides. There was also a sense that people in the border regions live in the “real world” with “real problems” as opposed to the centre, where people often have more opportunities and do not see the problems in conflict areas and border regions through a politicised conflict lens.

15 See the section on “Link between business and peace in the South Caucasus” later on in this chapter.

16 See the section on “Regional versus bilateral dilemma” later on in this chapter.

17 Bordering regions of Armenia, Georgia and Turkey respectively.

18 The dividing line between Abkhaz and Georgian controlled territory.

At the same time, SME-level cooperation that aims to improve people's livelihoods can be perceived as less political and not a means of challenging or strengthening political positions. We saw it as a good tool for building confidence.

Articulating the intuitive

The peacebuilding sector is not famed for its ability to articulate its work, the change it is seeking or the impact it has achieved. The Economy and Conflict project is no exception. The prospects in this case have not been improved by the “dual mandate” of business development and peacebuilding. Sometimes, the project has been criticised for either being too “business orientated”, or for “messing up business with NGOs” and “peacebuilding”. Some donors have asked us to quantify the jobs we have created, or how economically sustainable our initiatives have been. At the same time, some businesses have been wary of politicising business by addressing the conflicts. CBDN's mission was not to address one or the other, but both, and to marry the two. While there was a large degree of “intuitive feeling” about being on the “right track”, we probably did not articulate “what that track was” and “where it was leading to” as well as we should have.

Over time, CBDN came to formulate a common vision for a Caucasus that is economically connected and cooperating within a common economic space. This was a starting point for articulating CBDN's work. When this initiative involved more words than action, it was often met with a smile implying that this was simply “another naïve and idealistic NGO initiative”. When we started working on the intermediary steps between the existing reality and our vision – through various bilateral and regional cooperation initiatives – the “grandiose concept” of regional cooperation not only started to resonate as being less hollow, but also validated and strengthened CBDN's own sense of vision. It may still have remained naïve and idealistic in the eyes of many, but then change is rarely initiated by the conservative or conformist thinker.

We were always consciously steering CBDN and the ECRG away from political debates and positions, as well as issues of (non-)recognition or any political-territorial solutions. Instead, we sought to frame the initiative as de-politicised, interest-based dialogue. Once this thinking was internalised, it became an underlying part of CBDN's work. There was always clarity about “not aiming to solve any conflicts” but rather seeking “to create conditions”. Peace, on the other hand, was not understood as a “political agreement” or the “absence of war”. Rather, it was a qualitative state of existence, where conflicts are managed without violence, people are engaged in processes of social change that improve the quality of their lives, and their aspirations to cooperate or choose where to live are not hindered.

Gradually, with the help of concrete initiatives, the link between business and peace was being better understood and articulated within CBDN (see the Textbox on the next page). To what extent this link was understood by others is of course another question.

Link between business and peace in the South Caucasus

- ✓ In the absence of political resolutions to the conflicts, **business offers a common interest** across the region for dialogue, cooperation and an alternative way of promoting peacebuilding in the region.
- ✓ There is a strong economic case for **regional cooperation** and for regional solutions to regional challenges (e.g. interrupted markets, conflicts). The definition “regional” should be genuinely inclusive, involving different conflict parties.
- ✓ Business projects that are for **mutual benefit** and require **genuine partnership** – where neither conflict party dictates or unilaterally profits from the other – are good for peace and building confidence. They can help to restore trust and humanity in the relationships between the opposing sides.
- ✓ Business initiatives that are **legal, transparent and beneficial** for people across conflict divides in the South Caucasus are a **legitimate** and respected force in the economic sector and in peacebuilding.
- ✓ It is important to create **positive examples of cooperation** (concrete business initiatives, common regional food brands, etc.) as precedents for further cooperation and to help change people’s attitudes.
- ✓ **Regional platforms and “institutionalisation”** of cooperation are important in promoting regional economic cooperation (e.g. the Caucasian Tea Producers’ Association, the Women’s Economic Forum) and are the next level up from creating positive examples.
- ✓ Intra-region “**mobility**” and “**interaction**” (through exhibitions, business fairs, business trips, etc.) are very important in combating negative stereotypes and a “siege mentality”. They act as a counter measure to closed borders and isolation. This allows for increased cross-learning between the different conflict contexts. In turn, it promotes the exchange of ideas and combats the feeling of “isolated and disconnected efforts”.
- ✓ Negative social consequences of protracted conflicts can be alleviated through practical assistance for the **development of the private sector in border regions, conflict zones and among small and medium-sized businesses**.
- ✓ CBDN demonstrates that holding different and even polar positions on the core conflict issues is not an impediment to **genuine and effective cooperation** between entrepreneurs from the opposing sides.

7. Trusting the process

In the spring of 2006, our prayers were answered with the arrival of new funding. It was probably not just prayers but hard convincing, which was also needed to secure funding. The initial pitch to secure a grant was met with much scepticism. Our message of “CBDN as a mechanism to deliver a common vision” was received with some doubts and disbelief. Eventually, however, it won the donor’s support. We had learned to trust the process with our CBDN partners. Perhaps this was also part of the donor’s reasoning. With the funding, CBDN’s Business Centres¹⁹ or offices each got their own budgets and the network was ready to become operational.

Between 2005 and 2006, we had established CBDN as a virtual network and engaged in some cross-learning with the Cyprus context and the Greenline regulations in particular. We had also engaged with Moscow-based Diaspora business communities to explore a role they could play. In the region, we started reaching out to business communities in individual societies through roundtable meetings and seminars, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of their needs and identify possible opportunities. We started creating an electronic database of SMEs willing to cooperate and putting together economic news digests from the different entities in the region. We also looked into potential economic “peace spoilers” in the region but decided to focus on our primary stakeholders – SMEs. All in all, we were more engaged in “talking about cooperation” rather than actually “doing” it. Moreover, the Internet, as mentioned above, was not a substitute for the “real thing”.

In March 2007, there was an indication of the initiative gaining momentum. CBDN’s Turkish and Armenian partners had jointly fundraised and organised a bilateral Kars Business Forum, with additional participants from Baku, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian Diaspora and Georgian business communities. Despite certain difficulties – including pressure on local business people not to participate – the forum was a success. The atmosphere was very positive and many new ideas emerged out of the process (including work with the tourism sector and Caucasian Cheese – see below). It was CBDN’s first concrete cross-divide initiative.

This was followed by a milestone initiative that became known (among CBDN members at least) as “*Tur-de-Kavkaz*”. Due to Alert’s conservative budgeting and exchange rate fluctuations, we realised that we had some extra money that was not budgeted for. We had often talked about the importance of information exchange and forming contacts. It was time to stop talking and start action. After some thinking and swift planning, we organised a business tour with South Ossetian, Abkhaz and Georgian business people and CBDN partners to Baku, Yerevan, Gyumri and Stepanakert/Khankendi.

¹⁹ The term “business centre” was a commonly accepted term to avoid unnecessary politicisation.

While not everyone could go to all of the places, the tour proved to be exactly what was needed. The tour involved visiting business structures, exhibitions, companies, chambers of commerce, etc., as well as peacebuilding organisations. Learning from each other's problems and context brought about new ideas and a fresh perspective. It was an eye-opening experience. Later, we came to realise that many of our initiatives dated back to this tour. During the tour, we discussed the joint problem of Fall Webworm, a pest that is destroying crops across the River Ingur/i, and came up with a joint Abkhaz-Georgian concept on how to combat it. Another idea that emerged was to promote a business women's cooperation in the South Caucasus through organising an annual economic forum in Abkhazia. CBDN's tea sector work was also born out of this initiative.

The lesson for us was that cross-divide visits to third places can serve not only as inspirational events, but can also strengthen the standing and messages of partners in the hosting societies. It also underlined the importance of and need for providing opportunities to business communities, especially from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, to be exposed to other processes and contexts in the South Caucasus. Maybe the greatest lesson learnt from Alert's perspective was that the issue is not so much the ideas or lack of them – but rather if you can “trust the process”. After this, it is about providing opportunities to formulate and follow up on these ideas – especially in terms of having financial resources. We could not say exactly what the outcome of this initiative would be, but partly followed our assumptions about the importance of fostering cross-learning and promoting mobility, and partly followed a strong “gut feeling” that this was the right thing to do. While we later fine-tuned our tactics and focus, this initiative became a model and an inspiration for much of the future work. We eventually came to accept that if a critical mass of interested people comes together, ideas are guaranteed. Often, some of these ideas initially come across as being somewhat far-fetched – possibly due to their rather unconventional characteristics for a peacebuilding process.

8. Steering the process

Evolving methodology and model

As the process proceeded, we came to realise that its design and some approaches should be adapted. One example was our observation in relation to finances. Parity was always one of our guiding principles and Alert divided all of the available funds equally among the seven different entities – regardless of whether it was the South Ossetian or Turkish partners. However, we came to realise that unconstructive principles should not take priority over pragmatism. What we had done was divide the whole amount between seven. This structure was not conducive to promoting joint, let alone regional, initiatives, and clearly there was tension between our remit and the mechanism to deliver it. In our CBDN planning meeting in July 2007, this issue was discussed and everyone agreed to

“surrender” one third of their budgets to a common CBDN fund that would finance common initiatives – bilateral and regional. This was a milestone for the process and CBDN in particular. Naturally, it meant that there would now be discrepancies in the absolute budgets of individual CBDN offices. At the same time, partners started seeing differences in each other’s work. Some worked full time on CBDN, some less and others came to have different roles. One person was a “doer”, the other a “visionary”, the third an “implementer”, the fourth a “leader”, and some had all these characteristics together. Alert had probably seen these differences in the past, but as work evolved they became more prominent to all. CBDN partners came to see these differences as well as accepting them as complementary rather than a weakness. This was very important to allow for differences to evolve in the work and in CBDN. If there was a will in the network to let this happen, there should be a way to manage it from Alert’s perspective. CBDN’s default position started shifting more towards bilateral and regional work, as opposed to single community work.

By the summer of 2007, we had made another important decision. For the first time, we would start our planning meetings in the region. This had been in our minds since the very start of the process but was never raised in earnest. In the earlier stages, when the process was equally about building trust and confidence between the participants, as well as working on joint analysis of and approaches to addressing the conflicts, it was Alert’s view that this would be a counterproductive step to push for. If we were to have a meeting in the region, it could be perceived as favouritism, an indication of partiality, or the meetings could become politicised. However, if the CBDN partners were to agree to it, then it would be a different matter of course.

The arguments for having planning meetings in the region were that it would be cheaper, that we could use the local context for additional meetings and that we could meet more often. The mere fact that we discussed this seriously was an indicator of how CBDN had risen to a new level. The downside of the idea, besides the politics and sensitivities, was that one or two Business Centres would be excluded from each meeting.²⁰ However, in the first such meeting in July 2007, we did manage to meet in the region with the participation of the whole network. The fact that everyone agreed to this principle was a testament to the trust within CBDN and in the process. Everyone knew that their time would come – both in terms of missing a meeting but also in terms of their interests being heard and met. In one such meeting in Yerevan, in the absence of the Azerbaijani colleagues, the other CBDN colleagues knowing the interests of their absent colleagues, agreed to organise and fund a regional Caucasian Tea Producers’ Congress in Baku the following year. Our long-term commitment was starting to pay off. In the absence of predictability and continuity in the region, the process had managed to create a space, however small.

²⁰ For example, the Azerbaijani partners could not go to Armenia and vice versa, or the Georgians to South Ossetia or Abkhazia, etc.

For the participants, this provided something which the political context did not – that is, a sense of continuity and the possibility to plan for the longer term.

We started using the word “*konkretika*” often when referring to concrete initiatives promoting cooperation and initiatives that brought tangible benefits to beneficiaries (as opposed to talking about it). As mentioned earlier, regional economic cooperation needs to be supported and encouraged. We realised that the best, and maybe only, way to engage with new sectors and business communities was not just to talk about it but to do it through *konkretika*.

The process was developing a new dynamic. The quantity of work was calling for a more flexible model of working. At the same time, the momentum in the process was starting to challenge the rather religiously held principle of parity – that is, where everyone was engaged usually in the same initiative as a common front, or where everyone was consulted on everything. The existing *modus operandi*, with all of its (perceived or real) fairness and impartiality, was no longer a match for the new dynamics. How that parity worked in practice, CBDN partners are obviously better positioned to comment on. For the Alert team, this was not only a fundamental principle but also one of the biggest challenges to apply in practice. There were now many initiatives coming up; opportunities in different contexts called for different types of engagement, different types of resources, etc. Around the time of restructuring the financial mechanisms of the project, we started to recognise the need for revisiting the actual model according to which CBDN was working.

Our answer came to be known as the “flexible approach” (or “*гибкий подход*”). This involved CBDN setting political positions aside, circumventing “unconstructive principality” and occasionally applying certain “constructive ambiguity”. It entailed rising above such issues as terminology, etc., without undermining anyone’s position. We started allowing the process increased flexibility to determine where to engage more and where to engage differently. This approach placed a greater value on the substance of work (often concrete action, promoting regional cooperation in different formats), its aims, aspirations and having an impact than on unnecessary formalities or fixed formats – even though this sometimes came with a “price” (e.g. non-participation of one or more entities). This allowed us to facilitate deeper engagement in certain contexts – for example, using concrete initiative in bilateral formats – without leaving others in the margins of obscurity or without a role. The approach probably had its “roots” in the emphasis on informality in the project when it first started. This “flexible approach” answered, at least partly, the dilemma of facilitating different types of cooperation between different sides in the network – for example, bilateral South Ossetian-Georgian or Georgian-Abkhaz initiatives compared with regional processes engaging Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Turkey – without undermining the overall network.

Obviously, Alert being the third-party mediator was treading on a thin line here. The danger was that we could be perceived as favouring one entity or conflict context over another, whether by partners or others. However, we felt that the process was both mature and strong enough to take it. Moreover, not allowing for greater flexibility would mean holding back a dynamic process. The initiative was not about favouritism or some getting more than others; it was about recognising and accepting different types of engagement and, as a result, making the whole network stronger.

By late 2007, we were in the process of setting up concrete bilateral initiatives that ranged from a joint agricultural machinery lending scheme in South Ossetia and a joint pest control initiative in Zugdidi, Gal'i and Ochamchira, to developing a mini-production line in Gal'i for fruit juice and developing a joint Ossetian-Georgian honey production scheme. On the regional level, we were involved in: working with the tourism sector in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey; promoting tea sector cooperation across the region; and bringing together cheese producers from Armenia, Georgia and Turkey with a view to creating a joint cheese brand. The latter was followed by a regional cheese exhibition in Gyumri, Armenia, which boasted participation and the showcasing of cheese from across the region – including Azerbaijan.

Many CBDN partners were working on several initiatives simultaneously. Each initiative or strand of work, even in normal conditions, would be a handful. However, it is difficult to put in words the amount of effort involved in working across the conflict divide, dealing with political sensitivities, conducting back-and-forth negotiations, re-designing and re-planning. We were faced with numerous logistical and political problems, such as: how to take agricultural equipment from Turkey to Abkhazia for joint work; how to take a tractor across the South Ossetian conflict divide; or how to bring cheese from South Ossetia to Gyumri for a cheese exhibition – or not to mention the Azerbaijani cheese and partners. Many different questions arose, such as: whether we should describe and frame our work as “parallel” or “joint” work when going public; the extent to which we should highlight the peacebuilding side of things when engaging new business communities; or whether we should encourage participation of officials in our events and, if yes, how we should do it. Questions arose over what the reaction of the authorities or the public would be; over how much we should publicise the work; and over how we would frame CBDN in a newspaper article so that it wouldn't cause a backlash. We also faced dilemmas such as how to counter criticisms from the agricultural ministry's officials who claimed that providing agricultural machinery to farmers was ‘against the ministry's interests’.

These challenges not only arose in cross-conflict contexts but also in relation to other entities. Such challenges included, for example: taking sacks of tea from Tbilisi to Baku to a tea congress; taking wine from Azerbaijan to Tbilisi for a wine producers' workshop; or taking ice-cream from Armenia to an exhibition in Georgia. All of these challenges

involved various obstacles, formal and informal. CBDN's responses were equally formal and informal – guided by our principle of joint planning and agreement, coupled with a highly “flexible approach”, humour and above all patience. At the same time, CBDN started taking note of many of these problems and bringing them up with policymakers.

In short, the work was progressing rapidly and, as time progressed, our understanding and knowledge of the context improved, as did our ability to navigate in this context.

Evolving roles

At the same time, the relationships and roles of CBDN partners and Alert colleagues were also evolving. If in the beginning Alert was bringing people together, facilitating dialogue and leading the process, now the concept of partnership was changing. It may have been a case that we were now actually becoming partners in a more genuine sense. CBDN started increasingly taking the lead on different initiatives – both in the design and implementation. Independent fundraising for and by CBDN was starting to take place, often with help from Alert or with a support letter. Donors had often questioned our thinking on sustainability. For them, sustainability was often assumed to be something in between creating profit-making businesses and engaging businesses as funders. We understood sustainability as a broader concept – both politically and financially – with CBDN having the capacity to continue working on an increasingly independent level.

Planning and negotiations for cross-divide initiatives did not always require the same level of participation from Alert as before. Alert was always there – but instead of “mediating”, engaging in “shuttle-diplomacy”, discussing all the details with everyone, or coordinating and administrating all the work, Alert was in some cases becoming just another “set of brains”. Or, in some instances, it played the role of “devil's advocate”, testing the CBDN partners' thinking. A sense of shared purpose – and perhaps more genuine and equal partnership – was developing between CBDN and Alert. This changed the nature of Alert's traditional role from being a type of catalyst and facilitator to being more of an actor.

Neutrality is an academic concept and arguably no one working with conflicts is neutral in the pure sense of the word. By definition, peacebuilding work is political; nonetheless, it should avoid the trap of becoming politicised. Impartiality and integrity, however, are among Alert's core values, as is not having any political positions or views on the conflicts. In this instance, given the increasing volume of action-orientated work, we also found ourselves closer to taking positions on “issues”. In the world of peacebuilding and Track II mediation, the word “position” is something of an anathema. Most of us in Alert have traditionally been very cautious, if not paranoid, about expressing any views on most things, let alone having positions on issues. Yet, our work was now calling for changes such as the opening of the Kars-Gyumri border between Turkey and Armenia,

cross-divide economic cooperation, and raising the issue of corruption at the borders. Our take was that if our CBDN partners and the business communities they represented could agree and formulate joint messages, or have common positions on issues, then we should not stand in the way – on the contrary, we should support them.

9. The litmus test

In July 2008, CBDN had its strategic planning meeting in Pitsunda, Abkhazia. This meeting was spent largely reflecting on the rather hectic year – the mood was high and the future looked bright. One of the challenges was coping with the volume of initiatives and preventing burnout. Some partners and Alert team members started feeling the effects of the lengthy process and hectic couple of years. The Pitsunda meeting was shortly followed by the ambitious first Caucasian Tea Congress in late July in Baku, Azerbaijan. With the tea sector coming together for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it marked a milestone for the sector and also for CBDN's endeavours in promoting sectoral cooperation. By pulling off an international event with the participation of key Azerbaijani, Georgian, Russian, South Ossetian and Abkhaz tea experts, producers and businesses, along with representatives of the establishment from Georgia and Azerbaijan, CBDN's confidence was increasing. For us, it was also another indicator of the success of the “flexible approach” in practice and the positive interplay between bilateral and regional processes, as well as how different Business Centres had different roles and strengths.²¹

During the summer of 2008, tensions were rising around South Ossetia and while there were very worrying signs, a sense of disbelief is probably the best way to describe the mood when the war started in August. Back in May 2006 at the Kiev meeting, CBDN had spent a day planning for best-case and worst-case scenarios. Conclusions from our notes, which we later revisited, stated the following: ‘Worst-case scenario = war. The main aim is the survival of CBDN and keeping communication channels open.’ The network on its own was more important than the sum of its Business Centres. The network was the most valued thing we had. These were lessons from the 2004 fighting over Ergneti and the 2006 Kodori crisis.²²

After open hostilities broke out in August 2008, Alert project staff and CBDN colleagues turned into around-the-clock call centres. The greatest worry was our colleagues in South

21 In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict context, one could not do any concrete cross-divide work. But engaging with the business community in regional processes was possible. While South Ossetian and Abkhaz herbal and tea producers did take part in the Baku Congress – in the next Congress in November 2009 in Tbilisi, we had herbal producers from Yerevan, Gyumri and Stepanakert/Khankendi.

22 In July 2006, Georgian forces established control over the Kodori Gorge, which, until then, was governed by a local militia precariously under Tbilisi control. It was the only part of Abkhazia that was not under the Sukhumi authorities' control.

Ossetia, especially as communication was sporadic at best. Messages were being relayed back and forth. Once there was news of our colleagues, it was immediately passed on to everyone in CBDN. Often, CBDN partners' information was more accurate than news agencies' reports, which often recycled "news" from others. Some partners were injured, some traumatised, some both. Properties had been damaged, but fortunately all of our colleagues survived. Our network funds were diverted to humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of the new wave of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and to recreate living conditions for those in need or needing medical assistance. Naturally, this was not strictly speaking in line with our donor contracts, but then neither was the war. Apart from the immediate humanitarian considerations, together with our partners we saw our activities as an effort to create conditions for continuing the work in the future. The response was also guided by a sense of responsibility to our partners, considering that, for all these years, they had been the ones sticking their necks out for the process. In all the horror, CBDN came together. Eventually, our CBDN colleagues came to see August 2008 as a macabre litmus test for its sustainability and *raison d'être*.

In September 2008, after the traditional 40-day mourning period had passed, CBDN had its first meeting in Istanbul, Turkey. Prior to the meeting, everyone had pledged to continue working in the new context. We did not know what to expect and it was a very different meeting. It was one of the few occasions when the meeting allowed individuals to talk about politics and positions. This was in stark contrast to the project staff's strict de-politicisation agenda. However, the point was not to shift our approach, but to have a safe space for people to let some steam off and express emotions. It was maybe the only meeting in this process where emotions and positions challenged reason and interests. We applied the "active listening" methodology, where the usual interruptions were not allowed and everyone could speak, whatever that meant. Comments and questions were reduced to clarifications rather than challenges. While everyone had their "truth", the conclusion was that given that we work with conflicts, 'our work is now needed even more'. It is one of the ironies of peacebuilding that when mediation and dialogue are most sorely needed, it is also the most difficult time to do it. That certainly rang true with us.

In the spring of 2009, CBDN came to London and Brussels for a planning meeting, along with seminars and meetings with the international community and donors. In May, CBDN organised a Baku Business Summit, bringing together partners and business people from South Ossetia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. It was the first event that was solely organised by CBDN without Alert participation. This was followed in October by the Second Caucasian Tea Congress in Tbilisi, attended by over 50 producers and experts from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia. There were experts also from Sri Lanka and the UK who came at their own expense, indicating how seriously the process was being perceived by others. One of the main decisions was to include producers from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in the Caucasian Tea Producers' Association and to have CBDN as its implementing and coordinating body. This was followed by a public Caucasian Tea

Festival, which attracted great public participation. Among the highlights were speeches on regional cooperation by three MPs from Tbilisi, Baku and Yerevan. In September, CBDN partners from the three recognised countries participated in the Krynica Economic Forum in Poland,²³ raising awareness of economic approaches to peacebuilding and of the CBDN initiative. In November, the Third South Caucasus Women's Economic Forum took place, involving cross-divide participation from Cyprus with a view to cross-learning.

The dreadful events of August 2008 had marked a fundamental change in the conflict dynamics. Nonetheless, the dynamics in the process, relationships and model of working remained resilient.

10. Track II mediation dilemmas

The Economy and Conflict project has had its fair share of challenges and problems, like any other mediation process or peacebuilding initiative. How these challenges and problems are framed not only indicates one's understanding of them, but also defines some parameters for response. If you have a problem, you tend to look for solutions. If you have a challenge, you may want to look into turning it into an opportunity or managing it. When you have a conflict and an ongoing Track II process, then you certainly have many challenges and problems, but also a plethora of "dilemmas". A dilemma is often understood as a state of uncertainty while facing unsatisfactory options. Many "challenges" in Track II processes can also be seen as protracted dilemmas where a choice is not expected to be made, but the existence of a dilemma is managed by attempting to find a suitable balance.

Below are some dilemmas that the Economy and Conflict project and CBDN have encountered, along with some approaches that have been applied.

"Usual suspects" versus engaging new people dilemma

Many Track II initiatives aim towards building larger peace constituencies and engaging or reaching out to a new, increasing number of people – both in terms of "partners" and "beneficiaries". While this is certainly not a precondition for Track II initiatives,²⁴ it is often the case. At the same time, there is the issue of working with the "usual suspects" or the same people, which is something that Track II initiatives are often criticised for. In this process, we have grappled a great deal with having a vanguard of key partners who

²³ Krynica Economic Forum, also dubbed as the "Davos of Eastern Europe", is an annual forum in Poland focusing on political, economic and societal issues. It brings together around 2,000 policymakers, business people, civil society and media actors from dozens of countries. While the organisers limit participants to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the CBDN partners had a mandate from the network to represent the whole network as opposed to just these countries.

²⁴ The actual format of Track II or dialogue initiatives can be exclusive. But while this can apply to the actual process, often their outcomes are expected to be taken forward (e.g. for public consumption, input to Track I, or both).

have taken the process forward on the one hand, but on the other hand, without falling into the trap of just working with the “usual suspects” or same people. At present, the majority of key CBDN partners are not the original members of the ECRG research process. However, there are individuals who have been engaged for the long term. There is an argument that organisations do not bring change, but people do. The possibilities also vary greatly depending on the location. There has been a natural turnover of people over the years – some left for work or personal reasons, others because of the pressure, while some just drifted away.

New people joined CBDN – some of whom were identified by Alert, some of whom were brought in by CBDN partners. Engaging new people as “partners” was not always easy, especially if the third party (Alert) initiated it. Sometimes, the new people did not fit into the “clique” of existing partners in a particular place and were vehemently opposed. On other occasions, the reasons were financial or political. These have been difficult calls to make, and despite using objective criteria, much has boiled down to judgement. When CBDN partners identified and brought in new people, often there was a great sense of responsibility to introduce people who were open-minded, constructive and who could deliver. For us, this was an indicator of the evolving corporate identity and sense of responsibility for the network.

With the increased momentum, at times our approach was to “let the work select the people” (“who is the most suitable?”). For example, if you are serious about engaging with the tea sector, then you need to have real professionals on board both in terms of partners and beneficiaries in order to take the work forward.²⁵ The model of the network also plays a key part – in this case, a loose, evolving and fluid entity that has very few fixed statuses or structures and little hierarchy. As a result, it has been easier for people to engage or disengage. At the same time, not having a formal structure or fixed statuses underlines the importance of third-party engagement to oversee that rules are being followed and fingers kept on the pulse – or to intervene when needed.

In terms of engaging new constituencies, this project has been fortunate in terms of its “niche” – there are few “usual suspects” among SMEs, but many are willing to take part in the process and this whole area remains untouched from a mediation or peacebuilding point of view.

Regional versus bilateral dilemma

Regional initiatives and formats are often criticised for not being able to delve as “deeply” into issues and individual societies as, perhaps, bilateral processes can. Donors are sceptical

²⁵ There is the counter argument of “who chose the tea sector?” See the section on the next page on “Whose process is it, who should lead and when?”

because such initiatives are perceived as costly and they have concerns about being spread too thinly. At the same time, bilateral initiatives may be criticised for not being the optimum format for addressing issues of regional importance and concern. As argued above, the regional approach has been a fundamental aspect of the CBDN initiative for many reasons. The process has gone through various stages of dynamics: from doing everything together in a regional format (e.g. the original research), to most of the work being done in individual societies (2005–2007), to a plethora of bilateral, multilateral and regional processes (2007 onwards). At present, the regional versus bilateral juxtaposition is probably no longer a dilemma, but rather a strength. CBDN partners certainly see it as the latter and consider that the process has reached a stage where it can foster a positive interplay between the two. We have come to understand and adopt the concept of “regional” as a flexible format that can entail various combinations of participation, rather than viewing it as a rigid, full-on regional approach engaging everyone.

Business development versus peacebuilding dilemma

At our July 2009 CBDN planning meeting in Turkey, we had a lengthy debate about our “Caucasian Cheese” and “Caucasian Tea” brands – and whether they primarily constitute “political” or “economic” brands. This is the fundamental question that lies at the heart of the Economy and Conflict project, which has sought to marry the two as well as grapple with how to actually do this. Usually the discussion arrives at the same conclusion: 1) it is about the context, about which will have the bigger impact; and 2) it is equally fine to have more of a focus on the business side as it is on the peacebuilding side. The key issue is to be clear about the purpose. When we were planning our joint Caucasian Cheese initiative between Armenian and Turkish cheese brands, we aimed for both objectives: that is, a sustainable business and a positive example of cooperation that would work as an advocacy tool. But while the production worked to varying degrees in different countries, we came to conclude that the bigger value was in the ripple effect that such “cheese diplomacy” created, as reflected by an article in *The Economist* and other media. Equally, a joint stonecutting workshop in Tkvarcheli, Abkhazia or an agricultural machinery scheme in South Ossetia were more about supporting joint initiatives and improving livelihoods – which was something that gave CBDN and its partners credibility, demonstrating that they can deliver beyond words.

Whose process is it, who should lead and when?

When international NGOs (INGOs) are writing proposals, much use is made of words such as “local ownership”, “locally led peacebuilding initiatives” and so forth. Occasionally, after the resulting implementation, INGOs are criticised for imposing their agendas and living up to previous pledges, or for failing to root the work in the societies; sometimes donors criticise them for “not being sustainable”. Another layer of complexity as well as asymmetry in the relationships is often caused by the fact that

the INGO is not only a partner, but also often the de facto donor. As the saying goes, ‘the one who pays, calls the tune’. This is sometimes true when it comes to defining some wider parameters – but often those wider parameters (thinking, ideas, etc.) come from the partners and discussions with them. Throughout the process, the question of “ownership” and “who is leading and when” has been intimately linked to the evolving process and roles. We have tried to be true to our approach of promoting “locally led peacebuilding initiatives”. However, CBDN are better positioned to say how it has worked. In the beginning, Alert led the process, provided all the funding and to a large extent defined the wider parameters of the exercise. While the previous projects (e.g. the Caucasus Forum) and partners certainly contributed to the thinking – the initiative itself was very much led by International Alert.

For Alert’s project team, the concept of promoting and nurturing locally led peacebuilding initiatives has been one of the guiding principles in trying to find the right balance regarding our accompaniment. Interestingly, our role has sometimes been challenged internally at Alert in terms of our profile and visibility in the work – or lack thereof. The project staff have applied an approach whereby Alert will have a more visible role on occasions when this is called for – for example, for clear political reasons, to engage with the international community, etc. However, Alert visibility should not be a goal in its own right. Enhancing CBDN’s credibility and sustainability should be the priority. The project has sometimes also been criticised for not getting enough direction from Alert’s side or for not having the “Alert mark” on it. But for the project team, “Alert’s mark” has meant fostering locally led initiatives, which has, in turn, meant sometimes applying a light-touch approach as well as constantly adapting our roles to the evolving dynamics in the process.

There was also the pragmatic consideration of devolving competencies that were held more tightly before by Alert. At some point, “devolving” the responsibility to lead became the only way to cope with the workload and maintain the dynamic of the process. Had this not happened, Alert would probably have begun to hinder the process. Some of the decisions that have derived from this “devolution” have not been the ones that Alert would have made – but nor should they be.

CBDN partners have also become partners in fundraising, with several successes under their belt. Sometimes, Alert’s role has involved writing support letters; on other occasions, it has provided an institutional home for grant applications, as Alert is a registered entity while CBDN is not.

How decisions are made as a network is also interesting: the optimal approach is for everyone to engage and arrive at a decision through discussion. However, this does not always happen. We have created certain criteria – for example, for sectoral cooperation (i.e. the more entities that can be engaged the better) – to help us steer the decision-making process.

Equally, Alert sometimes proposes how to strike a balance from its position of “seeing the bigger picture” (e.g. in relation to funding, or the context in the region). We have aimed to play a role in maintaining balance, parity and fairness – especially when it comes to distributing resources.

Nonetheless, in terms of deciding which activities the CBDN fund should be used to finance, this has often proved contentious and sometimes subject to heated debates. The contexts in which concrete bilateral initiatives have been possible were South Ossetia/Georgia, Georgia/Abkhazia and Turkey/Armenia.

Sometimes, our intentions of having an open discussion and debate about resources have backfired, resulting in a difficult and exhausting decision-making process. On other occasions, there has been an explicit invitation to Alert from partners to make decisions without opening it up for debate. Sometimes, Alert has unilaterally applied positive discrimination in terms of funding initiatives – for example, in the South Ossetian conflict context – because of the lack of international attention and limited possibilities there. Often, other sources of funding have been available – for instance, for the Turkish-Armenian work – and CBDN partners have fundraised independently. On other occasions, Alert has acted independently to generate funds – for example, through a focused funding proposal.

It is unlikely that CBDN would continue to exist in its current form without Alert. Given that CBDN works with four conflicts, a third-party involvement is invaluable for facilitation, coordination, intellectual support and steering strategy development. Such involvement adds value through cross-learning with other conflict contexts where Alert works, through fundraising and so on. At the same time, we try to keep our “fingers on the pulse” so that we know when to lead, to be led, to accompany, to let the process lead, or to let go. Alert also (unfortunately) remains the only organisation that can visit all of the places and hence help others to understand the context and nuances on the other side. Both the partners and Alert have come to think of the work as “theirs” and “common”. When there is no need for Alert or the “invitation” expires, it will be time for it to “hold the project increasingly lightly” and maybe eventually to even let go.

Informality versus formality dilemma

In the past, we have had countless discussions on whether CBDN should register or not. The pros are obvious: registration would allow CBDN the ability to fundraise, create an institutional basis for sustainability, formalise its existence, give it access to other partnerships, etc. On the other hand, the counterarguments were that formalisation could undermine flexibility, possibly impose ulterior dynamics or motivations for participation, shift the focus to negotiating formalities rather than on the actual work, and place a huge administrative burden with possible political repercussions (starting with the legal addresses of the different offices across the region).

As a result, we always arrived at the conclusion not to formalise the network. Informal does not mean ineffective. In some cases, a flexible network can adapt and respond much better than a rigid, formal network can. In an informal network, the relative importance of shared values, vision and trust can arguably be higher than in a formal one. Positive peer-reviewing and a shared vision can often be a better motivator than more formalised forms of accountability. However, there is also the argument that informal networks rarely survive without third-party involvement, or without someone overseeing the process and acting as a referee, mediator, fundraiser or coordinator. This is even more the case in relation to work with conflicts – hence, the decision to maintain continued Alert engagement.

Publicity versus discretion dilemma

Given the nature of the work, the combination of mediation activities and publicity need to be thought through very carefully. Media coverage can hamper attempts to create a safe space, or make participants vulnerable to negative attention or even attacks; it can also cause reputational damage and undermine processes. Nonetheless, in order to combat negative stereotypes and change attitudes, it is difficult to achieve this without the participation of the mass media.

During the early phases of CBDN, and especially when we started carrying out the first tangible initiatives, we were very wary of getting too much media coverage. There was a sense that it would be better to keep a low profile until we know if the process would work – rather than become too public and undermine the project. After a while, when we had gained some support among SMEs and other constituencies, our self-confidence began to grow and CBDN started engaging more with the media. We first agreed certain “party lines” so that none of the media would undermine another’s work by using certain terminology or misrepresent the essence of the work in a way that could cause trouble. We eventually reached a point where we realised that information about our work in the public domain can also provide a certain level of protection, or at least prevent accusations of us being too secretive or not transparent. Of course, mistakes were made and agreed “party lines” did not always hold up. But then again, we had to contend with more than a dozen “spokespersons” for CBDN, each living in their own challenging contexts. In 2008–2009, we reached a point where we started actively thinking about our media and publicity strategy. This process is still a work-in-progress, although there has been an increasing amount of coverage. For some events (especially regional ones), we try to get as much media coverage as possible.

11. Assessing the impact

On one occasion, we had a hypothetical discussion among CBDN partners and the Alert team that if the initiative ceased to exist in its current form, would it have been worth all the effort, risk and money? The answer was yes. This did not mean that the work was finished – on the contrary, there is probably more work than ever before. Obviously, there was a large degree of partiality involved given the sample of respondents. But at the same time, it was an indicator of the process having achieved and created something.

Part of the above answer was to do with the process itself. It has created cross-divide relationships that have endured the ups and downs of conflict dynamics and that, despite their opposing political positions, have found ways to create cooperation and dialogue across the divides. Even if the “project” did cease, much would remain: relationships, processes, some initiatives and thinking. The answer was also about having created an inclusive network with a shared identity based on shared values and a vision of a more peaceful Caucasus – a network that is inspiring others by their example.

The network has piloted a model for cooperation and demonstrated that economic cooperation can provide a common interest, proving that cooperation is possible. Just as the Caucasian tea initiative has now been tested in Sri Lanka, the model of economic approaches in peacebuilding has also inspired work in other conflict contexts.

In 2009, for the third year in a row, CBDN was invited to the Krynica Economic Forum in Poland. For us, this was recognition of the network and of having something meaningful to say in the international arena. Diversification of CBDN’s funding base and partners’ own fundraising is seen as an indicator of support for its vision and trust to deliver among donors.

Quantifying its impact on changing attitudes is naturally more difficult, but we like to think that we have made a contribution. The most obvious examples are from the people directly engaged in the work. A lot of the events, business tours or exhibitions have been life-changing experiences for many. Hundreds of business people and experts have participated in different initiatives and events. While not all have become active protagonists for cooperation, many have maintained links with our support networks.

The attitudes of CBDN partners have certainly changed in many cases. Partners who found it difficult to talk to people from the “other side” have either turned into the main protagonists promoting cooperation, or their views and perceptions of the “other side” have changed dramatically. In some cases, people’s livelihoods have improved through concrete bilateral business initiatives; in other cases, challenges they are facing have been addressed – for example, a lack of agricultural machinery or the need for joint pest control action.

Working towards “institutionalising regional economic cooperation” through the creation of associations and platforms has established mechanisms that go beyond CBDN. While the Caucasian Tea Producers’ Association, whose creation was facilitated by CBDN, would doubtfully go forward or even survive without CBDN’s support, a process has been started nevertheless and many relationships have been formed. The Pitsunda South Caucasian Women’s Economic Forum is another platform, bringing business women together across the region. Caucasian food brands (CBDN’s Caucasus Tea, Caucasus Cheese and Caucasian Bouquet, which is still in the making) may not become great commercial successes; however, their very existence is indicative of an interest and willingness to cooperate across the region. The impact of these brands and concepts is not limited to a seminar room or a conference hall – but continues “working”, generating discussion and challenging people’s thinking even on their own and without someone accompanying them. CBDN has increasingly developed its own profile and reputation in the region. Furthermore, while its profile is still very limited in the mainstream societies, CBDN has often come across people who have heard of our work through the media.²⁶

We also like to think that we have played an instrumental role in introducing economic dimensions to the conflict resolution agenda in the South Caucasus. The fact that this process pioneered economic approaches in the region that have now been adopted by increasing numbers of civil society actors, inter-governmental organisations, as well as national authorities is seen as an indicator of this. While our advocacy efforts have possibly been more successful with international actors (especially the EU), some headway has also been made at the national level. During the first half of 2009, CBDN partners met with the presidents of five different entities in various working circumstances.²⁷ CBDN has also had success in lobbying through a parliamentary working group on tea sector development, and our recommendations have ended in bilateral governmental trade agreements. Moreover, CBDN partners have visibly contributed towards national strategy formulation – especially in Georgia, where economic approaches were discounted from the conflict agenda when this process started.

12. Lessons learnt

The Economy and Conflict project would have achieved little had it not been for the partners. We have been very fortunate to have come across, selected or been introduced to such an inspirational group of individuals. The fact that they have come from a variety of backgrounds (professional, sectoral, gender, personal, geographic, etc.) has certainly

²⁶ While CBDN never before visited Ankara, in November 2009 we organised a joint Armenian-Turkish advocacy trip to meet with politicians, NGOs, embassies, etc. We were positively surprised by how many had heard of the Caucasian Cheese brand and other work. Similar examples are numerous.

²⁷ The five entities refer to Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Abkhazia. In Baku, it was interestingly CBDN’s Yerevan partner who met with President Aliiev. When he was presented with CBDN’s leaflet, President Aliiev replied: ‘Yes, I think I have heard of you.’

contributed to the group dynamics. The **diversity of the partner base** has arguably strengthened the process, by providing different perspectives and ways of working. At the same time, it has opened up the criteria for including new people as opposed to, say, limiting participation to more traditional NGO partners. Flexible design and the concept of informality have also helped us to ensure that the process is not held hostage by fixed relationships. Trusting the process to define the work – and letting the work define the partners – has also helped us to have a relatively healthy turnover of partners.

Fortunately, there have not been too many troublesome experiences when the wrong people have been engaged. Some “issues” have arisen but the lack of formal positions, flexible design and strong group dynamics have created an almost natural selection process. Having “the right partners or people” has proved crucial in many ways. Some are visionary thinkers, others inspire and engage people in the regions; some have a business background, others are academics or more accustomed to the “corridors of power”. Often, it is the same individuals who can work on these different levels – winning the trust of people in the regions and also working on the political level. This has been a crucial aspect of the work – being able to connect with different vertical levels.

Nevertheless, we have had some less positive experiences on a couple of occasions by not playing a bigger role in choosing partners. One example was a bilateral initiative where the participants of one side were largely self-selected, with one or two exceptions. Consequently, the dynamics and fixed interests that one group held had a negative impact on the process. The differences in vision were too great to reconcile. Eventually, the process came to an end due to a lack of funding. In hindsight, we concluded that we had been too eager to accept a grant from a donor for an idea that implied participation of specified individuals and their ideas. While there were no sinister intentions on anyone’s part, it is still the mediator’s (i.e. Alert’s) responsibility to ensure that no one is misled and that everyone is fully aware what participation entails.

We have learned the value of **trusting the process**. This may sound clichéd, but it has proven to be true so many times. Sometimes, it has been about having trust in a meeting to deliver the way forward, despite not being obvious at the outset. On other occasions, it has been about the actual process and trusting our CBDN partners’ judgement and vision for the future.

This project has become a strong advocate of **regional formats** in the South Caucasus. Regional work does not need to always mean a full regional format – but flexible formats as well as the interplay between bi- and multilateral formats. The economic inter-linkages and rationale are all too obvious to ignore – but so is the context in the region. Most changes in one corner of the region reverberate across the region and it is difficult to address one context separately from the regional context. At the same time, a regional format allows cross-learning and can offer mutual support between partners.

Mobility in the region and visits can be crucial in terms of learning and developing ideas, but also for supporting colleagues in doing difficult work. Cross-divide visits – for example, a joint visit by business people from Baku, Gyumri, Yerevan and Nagorno-Karabakh to Abkhazia – can be instrumental in demonstrating challenges and opportunities in other contexts, as well as putting one's own work into a wider context.

Regarding the **importance of de-politicising the process**, since the start we have been very conscious of framing and steering the process as a de-politicised one. This approach has retained its importance and prominence throughout the years. Both CBDN partners and the accompanying Alert team have come to see this as one of the core values and strengths of the process. This does not mean giving up on trying to change the context – on the contrary. Since the beginning, there has been clarity about the purpose of the process – that is, creating conditions for peace rather than focusing on political settlements or resolving conflicts. Therefore, we have consistently talked about creating conditions and focusing on common interests, rather than concentrating on political positions or directly discussing the conflicts.

While the economy can be perceived as a less politicised topic by nature, Alert still probably played a major part in the beginning by setting the tone and consistently steering the process. Once the participants accepted this as a fundamental basis for the process and also for participation in it, it was enough for Alert facilitators to refer to this principle in order to stop discussions that risked politicising the atmosphere. As a result, while no partner has necessarily abandoned or changed their political positions on the conflicts (nor did we ever aim for this), they have come to accept the differences. This has in turn allowed the partners to collectively set their political views aside, or in some ways allowed them to raise themselves and the network above political positions. Interestingly, when CBDN colleagues are now engaging new people in the work, they have also assumed an active role in promoting and safeguarding the de-politicised nature of the work.

In terms of changing roles, it is fine for **roles to evolve**. One should not hold on religiously to certain fixed roles, functions or responsibilities – rather, what works or makes sense should be the guiding principle. Our roles have certainly evolved a great deal during the years. While in the beginning, Alert was leading and initiating, now new initiatives are mostly initiated and led by CBDN partners. However, this does not mean that Alert's commitment to the process has changed. In a conflict context where there is little predictability or scope for continuity, such processes and **long-term commitment** not only help to create a space and atmosphere for visionary and long-term thinking; they can also provide a sense of continuity, or even normality. Therefore, any third-party intervention should always be conscious of the possible implications of their actions, and one should not become engaged light-heartedly but responsibly. There have been ups and downs in funding (the slump of 2005–2006) and conflict contexts (e.g. Ergneti in 2004, Kodori in 2006, August 2008), but we never thought seriously of ending the project.

Part of the excitement and dynamics of the process has certainly come from “*konkretika*” and implementing pragmatic and tangible initiatives that have real benefits. Peacebuilding work is sometimes criticised for having too many talk-shops or for being too out-of-touch in its approach and not addressing tangible issues. This certainly happens internally in Alert at least. Many of CBDN’s initiatives are not only about creating positive examples or creating livelihoods, but equally about the credibility of the process. One can only go so many times to a deprived region in the zone of conflict and hold roundtables or “talk” about economic cooperation without losing credibility. When you “do it” in practice and deliver something, this also brings support and credibility. The same applies to business forums, festivals, etc. Business in the South Caucasus is not in a position to support such work, and often SMEs do not have the means to travel or participate. Creating opportunities for professional groups and sectors to take part in such activities equally earns you credibility and enhances your standing as a credible actor. This gives the partners a sense of achievement and encouragement, as well as giving the process an additional boost for further development.

The “**marathon mentality**” is another often-used term in our Alert team – working for peace requires the mentality and stamina of a marathon runner. There are rarely quick fixes to protracted conflicts. Track II processes are usually incremental and often the true impact is not fully visible in the short or even medium term. Often the work is about contributing, promoting, changing attitudes or supporting a change process – rather than fixing a problem, or coming up with clear-cut solutions or delivering a “decisive blow”. The elusive nature of the work, together with the ambiguity and unpredictability of the conflict context, can be a cause of burnout or high stress levels. Some have drawn comparisons between our line of work and social work in terms of the danger of internalising the issues you work with, and the need for peer support to deal with the substance of the work, or deal with partner relations and stress. Throughout the process, we have discussed the challenges internally in the project team in an organic and open manner. This has been instrumental in maintaining a “marathon mentality”, especially when faced with process and context-related lows. But this is something that organisations like Alert should probably be more aware of and address, beyond the current individual ad hoc responses.

Given the long-term commitment and intensity of the work, the Alert team and CBDN have forged very close relations. On the one hand, this is a good basis for such work as there is a need for much understanding and trust. On the other hand, it has been very challenging not to let these relationships affect one’s judgement, or not to be perceived as having closer relations with some and not others, although this has been inevitable in some cases. Keeping the professional and private separate can be challenging. In some ways, the process has become personalised both at the Alert end and in relation to certain personalities within CBDN. While, in hindsight, this has been rather inevitable and in many ways a good thing – it is also important to be conscious not to let personalities prevail over the process and its needs.

We have learned two key lessons in terms of dealing with “**emergencies**”: first, we include the worst-case scenario in our strategic planning. It might not be possible to predict what the worst-case scenario will be – but it is possible to identify the priorities and most important aspects of our work to safeguard. In our case, that was keeping our network alive and communication channels open. In August 2008, for example, a substantial sum was spent on telephone calls during and after the open hostilities. Afterwards, everyone and especially those most affected appreciated the support they received from their peers and colleagues. Had the network not come together in such a way, the war would probably have weakened its very core, instead of strengthening it in a strange way. This was probably due to the strong relationships and a collective sense of responsibility. A second key lesson in relation to emergencies is having a quick response to situations when help is most needed – be it moral or material support. This can make a big difference in the short, medium and long term.

When tensions have been building up in any of the conflict contexts, we often say that if we wait until the situation is fine to organise a meeting or an event, we would be waiting forever, and then our work would no longer be needed. Therefore, when there has been an escalation in tensions, we have always continued to work as normally as possible. As a result, the events in August 2008 did take most of us by surprise because we viewed it as just another escalation in tensions, among others.

Finally, interventions should be **designed flexibly** so that they can accommodate the changing context. Often, this boils down to finances. If you have to budget all your resources at the beginning of the year, this will leave you with little room to adapt. Each event or meeting usually produces a great many ideas. Without resources to follow them up, the energy stimulated by events frequently loses momentum. Often while ideas are guaranteed, donors do not give funds for prospective follow-up unless specified. Sometimes, additional fundraising is required, but often a great deal of the momentum can be maintained with the availability of bridging funding. Therefore, it may be better not to do a brainstorming/planning session if there is no plan or resources for follow-up.

13. Conclusion

This article was written nearly two years ago, and with hindsight, it is interesting to review the reflections of two years past. CBDN continues to thrive, initiating new regional brands, new concrete business projects, and some of its regional networking initiatives have become tradition, such as regional tea festivals. The initiative has undertaken new action research with regards to regulating cross-Ingur/i economic relations in the

Georgian-Abkhaz context.²⁸ CBDN has further strengthened its international profile, having its own panel at the Krynica Economic Forum, and has started to reach out to bigger business to promote its message of regional economic cooperation. Furthermore, economic approaches to confidence building across conflict divides appear to have become ever more popular with certain donors and in particular with the Georgian government, which included an economic component in its 2010 “Engagement Strategy”.

However, unfortunately we have seen some limitations in the take up of the holistic CBDN philosophy. Some donors have over-emphasised the visible aspects of “*konkretika*” without the additional processual and advocacy aspects; or they have specific geographical priorities, which preclude a regional approach. Both of these make funding for maintaining the network a challenge, and reduce flexibility as usually funding is provided in small sums for very specific activities directly to local actors. This has made it harder to meet the demand for constant innovation which such catalytic initiatives as CBDN thrive on, as often the innovative ideas spring out of the regional meetings, the joint study visits, or regional exhibitions, and by drawing in new individuals through breaking into new business sectors, all of which requires investment and substantial legwork.

It is also interesting to reflect on the paradox of CBDN as catalyst. If CBDN’s role is to innovate, to make contacts and to bring the vision to an ever widening circle of business communities, as well as to assist them in promoting regional economic cooperation, it stands to reason that at some point some action is required by the different authorities in the region to facilitate such cooperation. Recognising this, CBDN has tried to strengthen its advocacy approach. Yet while, for example, the inclusion of economic approaches in the Georgian government’s strategy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be a positive move, in reality it has posed a serious challenge for our attempts to “depoliticise” economic cooperation, as the Georgian strategy has been perceived by the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians as little more than a public relations exercise.

The CBDN initiative has come full circle. In order to tide over a “quiet” funding period, and to look for new inspiration, International Alert is initiating a new regional research project, looking at regional economic cooperation and peacebuilding – in some ways, replicating the original experience of the ECRG which gave rise to CBDN and the rich plethora of initiatives described in this article. Who knows what this article will read like in another five years’ time?

28 See *Regulating Trans-Inguri Economic Relations: Views from Two Banks*, which looks at economic and political gains as well as losses if relations were to be regulated. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/regulating-trans-inguri-economic-relations>. See also *Prospects for the Regulation of Trans-Inguri Economic Relations: Stakeholder Analysis*, which analyses the views of business communities on the issue of regulating the relations, and assesses the inter-linkages between the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict transformation process, the invigoration of the political process and the regulation. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/prospects-regulation-trans-inguri-economic-relations>.

CHAPTER 13

Economy and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Mediation – from Theory to Practice

Aghavni Karakhanyan

1. An old parable

Let me begin this description of my experience of peacebuilding with an old parable. There once was a poor devout man, his old blind mother and his barren wife. After 12 years of hearing the poor man praying for his family's sufferings to be eased, God finally took pity on him and said he would grant him the one thing he truly desired. The poor man went home to discuss the matter with his mother and his wife. They could not agree on a single wish. His mother wanted her sight back; his wife wanted a son to care for her in her old age and, if possible, to bring the family riches and prosperity. But when the poor man's mother heard what her daughter-in-law had wished for, she became very angry. An argument flared up, which turned into a fight. The two women caught hold of each other, scratching and tearing each other's hair out. The poor man ran out of the house to avoid witnessing this unpleasant scene. He did not know what to do next. He went to a wise man and told him about his dilemma. 'What am I to do?', he asked. 'How can I go on? My mother wants her eyesight, my wife wants a son, and I, I would like a bit of money to feed them. What shall I ask God for? Whose needs come first?' The wise man thought for a moment, then he answered: 'You must not choose for any one of your family alone, but for the good of all. Say: "Oh Lord, I ask nothing for myself; my wife asks nothing for herself; but my mother is blind, and her desire is, before she dies, to see her grandson drinking milk and eating rice from a golden bowl."'”¹

This parable illustrates one of the key elements of true mediation and peacebuilding: the objective is not about reconciling the sides but about finding modes of co-existence that make reconciliation possible, with which all sides in the conflict can feel comfortable.

2. My experiences in peacebuilding

I first got involved in peacebuilding at a theoretical level. That was in 1998, when I was awarded a grant for a research project on a comparative analysis of the role of mediators in the peacebuilding process in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Northern Ireland conflicts. The grant was awarded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

To study the political processes in the two conflicts – so far apart geographically and with such different causes and dynamics, as well as very different outcomes – I immersed myself in a welter of detailed factual and theoretical materials. I visited a number of think tanks in London and talked with the leading lights of global conflict studies. Many of the people I met back then are still my colleagues and partners in the “peacebuilding club” to this day.

¹ A folk tale from Trinidad, quoted in writings from the Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center.

The academic world is not exactly overflowing with theoretical studies and models of conflict or recommendations on conflict resolution. Comparative studies in this field are rare and studies linking such diverse conflicts as these even rarer. Even so, my research, although original, could still draw on a fairly long line of broadly conceptual theoretical works on conflict resolution and mediation.

A major finding from my research was in relation to the link between mediation and peacebuilding, or rather my conclusion that the two were not necessarily linked. In other words, I concluded that mediation does not always involve peacebuilding, nor does every form of mediation involve peacebuilding. I should add, however, that mediation almost by definition is generally considered to have peace as its strategic objective and to involve negotiating by peaceful means.

A long time ago, in my student days, my tutor gave me a book on the subject I had chosen for my dissertation and said: ‘Read this and find out how *not* to write.’ That experience still colours my view of peacebuilding. I realised what peacebuilding is and what mediation is not – that the one does not at all signify the other.

This is shown by the political peacebuilding process around the conflicts I examined in Nagorno-Karabakh and Northern Ireland. Although there were undeniably peaceful methods of looking for solutions, the actions of international organisations (the OSCE Minsk Group, the UN, etc.) or of individuals (mainly the leaders of large states) are attached to specific political objectives and play out *realpolitik*. The political mediation process used to resolve conflicts is not an abstract mechanism but reflects and follows on from actions by specific governments. In the same way, its success or failure depend on the extent to which these governments are engaged in the peacebuilding process, on their political will and on their political choices. Mediation initiatives do not spring from high-minded intentions to avert a direct threat to the vital interests of the conflicting countries, to defend their economic interests or territorial integrity. Rather, they emanate from a simple assessment of whether an escalation of the current situation might damage the interests of the potential mediator.

I began to understand the meaning of peacebuilding: not as something that exists in some kind of abstract world per se, but as a world with very concrete stakeholders, a real world for real people. However, the world of politics is light years away from the world of traders, business people and ordinary citizens. Politicians see the world in terms of their position and status within it. For ordinary people, their world revolves around their ability to work and live, move around freely, invest money, produce goods, engage in trade, study, be protected and feel secure.

The Business and Conflict project, initiated by International Alert, opened up an opportunity for me to work on a completely different plane, within different parameters.

In this context, peacebuilding is deemed of huge practical importance in the real world, as its success is judged in terms of real human beings and their needs, security and wellbeing. The project, in other words, aims to build peace by engaging the real stakeholders in the conflict, the people who stand to win or lose by it.

The project also attracted my attention because it was aimed at using economic aspects of conflict resolution to promote peacebuilding, using a format tried and tested by Alert in earlier projects.² This format involved all stakeholders in the political processes in the region, including recognised republics and unrecognised entities. As the project progressed, it became clear that this approach was an important and lasting contribution to mediation methodology, along with a number of other key methods and forms of peacebuilding. The advantage of this approach is that, without ignoring conflicting interests, it focuses on economic advantage as a driver of good relations between countries, neighbours and the conflicting sides. It channels the peacebuilding process in a more positive and constructive direction, encouraging the conflicting sides to see each other as potential economic partners and shifting them out of the debris of failed historical and political discussions based on incompatible and irreconcilable positions.

I think this experience will be of use even to such well-respected international facilitators in political processes on conflict resolution as the UN, the OSCE and the Minsk Group.

3. Unique approach of International Alert

When International Alert started its mediation and peacebuilding activities in the South Caucasus, it did so against the background of long and mostly unsuccessful attempts at political solutions to the conflicts. Given the duration of these conflicts, it is hardly surprising that the public in these countries have clearly lost faith in the ability of their “professional” diplomats and politicians to settle them. Indeed, the public has become increasingly cynical about peacebuilding following a series of failed initiatives to resolve the conflicts that have produced no visible results.

Alert instead adopted a less conventional route, designing its activities around real results from transparent and immediately understandable initiatives based on the economic components of the relations between the conflicting sides. Many international organisations tend to view the South Caucasus as a single whole, particularly in an economic context, despite the region’s fragmentation following more than 20 years of conflict, closed borders, withdrawal of diplomatic relations and periodic military confrontations. Alert, on the other hand, started its work by actively trying to restore the

² See, for example, the experience of the Caucasus Forum described in this book.

regional links which had been destroyed by the conflict. It sought to change the business environment and, as a long-term goal, to create a unified regional economic space.

This is admittedly no easy task in a region where opportunities for contact between business people and even ordinary citizens are limited; where regional collaboration continues to remain at a low level – even between those states (Armenia-Georgia, Georgia-Azerbaijan) that are not in direct conflict with one another; and where relations are bogged down in political difficulties, with businesses facing serious military and economic risks. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are particularly affected, since unlike big business they cannot penetrate the barriers that grew between states and some areas in the region over a long period of regional disintegration. Major regional strategic communication projects – such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and others – have had no impact on the development of collaboration in the region and have had no knock-on effects for the SME sector.

4. Mediation as a process

Motives for participation

Alert's activities and its Business and Conflict initiative differed from most projects and research studies on conflict resolution, which tended to have either extremely concrete or very general objectives. Alert's activities, on the other hand, involved a kind of synthesis of both private and general-conceptual solutions.

Given my professional interest in regional security, collaboration and conflict resolution issues in the South Caucasus, and my knowledge of mediation, I was only too keen to participate in the project. The conceptual framework of Alert's Economy and Conflict project would give me an ideal opportunity to apply my existing theoretical experience of mediation and to achieve my professional ambitions through practical work as a mediator. Working on the project with Alert transformed me from a "theoretician on mediation" into a peace and mediation practitioner.

"Mediation" even played a part in my initial involvement in the project. I joined the project following the "mediation" of a person from the "other" side of the conflict, an Azerbaijani colleague and partner who did not participate in the project himself.

Project design and participants

The project was launched in September 2002, when Alert began working with researchers from the South Caucasus on the links between the economy and conflict. It was during this period that the project concept and design was formulated.

The design of the project reflected the overall political and economic context of the South Caucasus. As mentioned, it was based on the principle of involving all regional entities, regardless of whether they were “recognised” or “non-recognised”,³ with partners from Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Turkey. Russia was briefly represented but left the project later. The group discussed whether Iran should also participate; however, this remained an aspiration during the project due to the sensitivity of its relations with the West.

The regional design of the project was unique and, as time went on, it proved to be both a pragmatic and conceptual advantage, despite having some vulnerabilities as well as strengths. The main advantage was that it provided a certain level of protection and security for those participants who face criticism and attacks from some sectors back home, where their interaction with the “enemy” side is seen at the very least as a “betrayal” of the country. This is very important since the participants’ personal security was on the line as well as the future and outcome of the entire project.

The regional format offers far more opportunities for conflict transformation than a bilateral format, as well as corresponding to the concept of an economically integrated region. Everyone engaged in the project has the opportunity to participate in the process of creating a truly unified region. However, the regional design does involve some extra financial costs. Compared with a number of bilateral projects, the regional design is uneconomical in terms of the costs of supporting its activities. Other concerns over the regional format are that its excessive “comfortableness” might discourage people from engaging in bilateral work between the conflicting sides.

I would like to emphasise one clear advantage that the regional format has from a mediation perspective. By engaging representatives from virtually all conflicts in the region and from all sides of the conflict, the project increases the number of mediation models available to participants, since they are not only dealing with “their” conflict but also with that of the neighbouring conflict with which they do not have a problem. This means that there is more common ground between them. Moreover, the object of the mediation is not only the immediate representatives of the conflicting sides of one conflict, but of several different conflicts. As you familiarise yourself with other people’s conflict situation and work together, your “obsession” with yourself and your own problem subsides and claims that your case is special and unique recede. You start to have a fresh perspective on your own and others’ conflicts. This means that, in the end, each side of a conflict has experience of mediating in a number of formats, with Alert acting as the mediator between them all. At least that is my experience – an insider’s view of the regional project format.

3 Two of the former “non-recognised” entities – South Ossetia and Abkhazia – are today “partially recognised”, since, following the August 2008 war, Russia and a number of other countries recognised their independence.

Processes within the project also affected how it took shape. Following numerous meetings and discussions between representatives of Alert and its partners, the South Caucasus Economy and Conflict Research Group (ECRG) was set up, consisting of 16 representatives from all the countries participating in the project. The ECRG's purpose was to study the links between the economy and conflicts in the region, and the opportunities to achieve their peaceful resolution by using the potential of economic collaboration.

It was not an easy task and it took some time to form the group. Although its members were motivated by the same ultimate goal – peace – their relationship was still dominated by conflict and the status of “recognised” and “non-recognised”. Their memories were still fresh of military action, hostility, death, losses, closed borders, blockades, embargoes and isolation, reinforcing and sustaining their feeling of self-sufficiency and independence. The business of survival which reinforced their separate identity and their link to “their own people” strengthened even more their feeling of difference from “the others”. In this context, any intervention from outside to establish links between the “conflicting” sides was likely to be rejected. Alert could not help but be aware of this. But even so and perhaps even because of this, the project was given the go-ahead.

At the very start of the work, one of our Azerbaijani colleagues withdrew from the project. The reason was the usual one – that the project design was unacceptable as it involved joint work with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. It was his choice. We also “lost” some people as the project rolled out. Some did not like the design, others found that the barracking back home was simply too much, while others left to join more financially rewarding projects.

There were no difficulties over Turkish participation in the project, even though it was also a “conflict” partner for the Armenian side. Our Turkish colleagues, particularly further down the line in the project, turned out to be far freer to choose whether or not to participate and had no prejudices, complexes or political restrictions. The situation was somewhat paradoxical. Despite the complexities of the political conflict between two countries – blockaded borders, no diplomatic relations, the burden of the past and the two sides’ irreconcilable differences over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – the Armenian-Turkish aspect of the project was, and is perhaps, its most promising in terms of development prospects.

While their politicians consistently refuse to establish diplomatic relations, and despite all the difficulties and risks they face, companies and business people in Turkey and Armenia are very keen to collaborate and have set up several business routes and financed numerous projects. The traditional image of the enemy has not stopped business, entrepreneurs and traders from Turkey and Armenia from setting up and identifying opportunities for a number of different projects. The Armenian and Turkish business people themselves tell us this, particularly emphasising that they trust one another more than business people in their own countries.

For example, some representatives of the Antalya Chamber of Commerce have their own business in Armenia, specifically in Gyumri – a network of shops called “*Prestizh*”.⁴ There is also a number of Turkish-Armenian joint ventures operating in both Armenia and Turkey. Moreover, not only are Turkish business people operating in Armenia, there are cases of Turkish capital being invested in the Armenian economy; there is even some evidence that this is on the increase.⁵ One of these joint ventures is the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC).

Despite everything – the lack of formal relations between the countries, the closed border – these business relations are stable and resilient enough to remain in place.

In effect, Alert’s project aimed to support the growth of this type of interaction between the two sides, which it saw as a key factor in restoring trust and human relations, breaking down stereotypes and supporting the movement towards [economic] integration.

Despite the “ebb and flow” of old participants leaving and new ones arriving, the group formed and gelled. The toughest, most motivated “godfathers” of peacebuilding remained. These were people who had worked as mediators for many years and not just with Alert, who were not looking for a sinecure but who worked on the project out of conviction and because of their commitment to peacebuilding. They became the core or the heart of the project. Apart from the project’s achievements on a purely professional level, other no less valuable, indeed perhaps even more valuable, successes were the development of warm and friendly human relations, fellowship, support, understanding and team spirit. All of the project participants believed in what they were doing and contributed their time, energy, contacts and resources to their work and joint measures.

The unscheduled meeting of participants in Istanbul in September 2008 – held just after the events in August of that year – was, I think, crucial for the development of the project. It brought together some people who, until very recently, had quite literally been on different sides of the firing line. Moreover, the others all had their own very distinct positions and assessments of what had just happened.

This meeting became a landmark in the development of the project. We had to identify the causes and consequences of what had just happened, to position ourselves in the new situation and to assess our peacebuilding activity in the context of the war that

⁴ According to various estimates, the annual volume of Armenian-Turkish trade is around US\$ 250–300 million, despite the closure of the borders between the two countries. Moreover, according to Armenia’s balance of trade figures, Turkey is the fourth or fifth largest partner in its external trade, and is recognised as a major trading partner of Armenia. According to Turkish sources, these figures vary from US\$ 70–150 million. According to figures provided by the US embassy in Armenia, Turkey is the seventh largest trading partner with Armenia. See: Burcu Gültekin (2002). *The Stakes of the Opening of Turkish-Armenian Border*, Istanbul: TABDC, p.10.

⁵ According to figures from the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Industry and Trade, there are around 20 companies with shared Armenian-Turkish capital.

had just broken out. We had to decide whether we were willing to continue with our work, whether this was justified and whether we had the potential to do so. The conclusion that the group came to was unanimous: the project had to continue its work, despite what had happened and indeed because the war had started. Before the events in August, it had seemed as if ‘things couldn’t get any worse’. It now turned out that they could. In such conditions, there is an even greater need for peacebuilding initiatives, since without constant action to prevent the situation from deteriorating, it might deteriorate even further. It was precisely during “hot” phases of the conflict that we had to continue our work.

This also corroborated our view that, given that we were unable (and were not attempting) to prevent war directly (which could only be done at the level of “high politics”), we should concentrate on achieving another crucial peacebuilding objective that was within our power: maintaining links and contacts, despite the lack of peace, keeping the project design as it was and keeping the relations built up within and outside it.

Role of International Alert and the participants

International Alert deserves great credit for setting up the group. Its work as facilitator was based on the principle of respect and tolerance towards all sides of the conflicts. This made it possible to work with all sides in a spirit of trust and open-mindedness. Without Alert, there would have been no project. Alert’s financial and organisational assistance, advice, protection and support created the opportunity for communication, meetings and discussions between the project participants across the conflict, establishing a dialogue and creating a safe and neutral platform for their activity. Although projects initiated by the participants were originally funded solely by Alert, as time went on the project participants began to share obligations and responsibility with it, and started to carry out their own fundraising for their activities and projects. Later on, once the project had got off the ground, Alert’s role as external facilitator was no longer necessary as it was able to resolve issues locally itself.

When selecting its team, Alert focused particularly on “moderately influential people” – people who had some influence over their societies (and to some extent the authorities) but, at the same time, who were able to maintain the necessary freedom and independence and who participated in the project in a purely private capacity.

Each potential project member was shown Alert’s overall objective and its mission statement as an international peacebuilding organisation – promoting confidence-building measures between the conflicting sides in the South Caucasus with an emphasis on the economic parameters of these relations. As Alert’s partners in the region, our task was to interpret this statement and find forms, methodologies and ways of setting up these measures. Over the seven years that the project lasted, we had full ownership of

all the ideas and initiatives we proposed; we implemented projects to establish economic dialogue in the region, took decisions on a collegiate basis, and identified the priorities for regional and bilateral projects, budgets, etc.

We also developed a work plan for the project, with Alert's support: regular twice-yearly meetings on "neutral ground" accessible to all participants, bearing in mind all the difficulties of moving around and communicating in the fractured conflict region.

There were plenary meetings of the group in Moscow in May and September 2003. A number of additional non-plenary meetings were also held around the same time, involving Abkhaz and Georgian researchers in Moscow along with South Ossetian and Georgian researchers in Tbilisi. Between meetings, we kept in touch and exchanged information by email. Over time, genuine friendships and permanent contacts evolved between partners from opposing sides.

By providing time for meetings and discussions, this stage of the project allowed participants to explore the potential for mutual understanding, to challenge and understand one another's positions. They began to recognise that conflicts could be approached and interpreted in a number of ways and also that it was vital to establish partnerships in the region. This realisation became the basis for establishing a dialogue and for the evolution of a team spirit and trust within the group, which was crucial if the work was to continue. It allowed and helped participants to talk openly about the most sensitive issues.

The project did not set out to achieve consensus between the individual members who formed the ECRG on the links between economics and conflict and what those links imply about possible solutions. The situation was too complex for such an ambitious goal, as each researcher had their own life experience and career, their own "traditional" views and positions on the conflict, their own specific experience as a peacebuilder and their own motivation for taking part in the project. We therefore adhered to a formulation that everyone could accept: we are not the ones who resolve the conflict or open the borders; that is not our task. What we can do is to create an atmosphere in which this becomes possible.

Differences over the interpretations of terms and concepts used in the research were overcome, acceptable variants were agreed and a set of research questions was identified. Equipped with a conceptual framework, using international experience and a range of research methods (interviews, field studies, analysis of official sources, etc.), we began a multilateral SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of the economic processes in the region. This led to a number of interesting findings and conclusions. These were published in 2004 as a collection of articles – entitled *From War*

*Economies to Peace Economies in the South Caucasus*⁶ – in both Russian and English. The publication was the result of two years of work by the ECRG and had a wide-ranging impact in the region and in the international expert community.

The role of the research group as a lightning rod for change grew. It began to encompass mediation, establishing dialogue, facilitating discussion and dissemination, and promoting the research concepts and findings. At the end of 2004, book launches were held on site in the region and at the start of 2005, the whole ECRG team went on a book launch tour in Europe (London, Paris and Brussels). This was dictated by the need to disseminate the findings of this local research to a wider public and to groups that could influence political decisions. At the same time, it sought to engage external actors in the search for a solution to some of the problems identified and to implement future practical initiatives. The research met with approval from European experts, who acknowledged that when drawing up the EU strategy for the countries of the South Caucasus, they had been guided by our collection as “an economic Bible”.

The ECRG now turned its attention to ways of using the accumulated peacebuilding expertise of its own members outside the group, extending influential groups within their own societies and beyond. The aim was to involve the private sector and the international community (investors, donors and other organisations) in the preparation of a platform for practical peacebuilding activities.

As work on transforming relations between the regional entities progressed, the project itself was also transformed.

Transition from theory to practice

The findings of the research and evaluations of business in the region carried out by the ECRG showed that economic contacts between the different sides continued virtually throughout the “hot” and “frozen” phases of the conflict – albeit at low levels and blown out of all proportion. The findings also showed that the economy and business have a positive role to play in establishing peace and that people engaged in business, above all SMEs, have enormous potential for peacebuilding. The research identified an interesting pattern connecting SMEs and politics: as they constitute the most vulnerable sector of the economy during conflict, SMEs are more interested in peace than anyone else. However, for all their vulnerability, they are far less connected to politics than big business. There is a simple reason for this mismatch: for a SME, business is a matter of survival. Irrespective of the political situation and regardless of whether the borders are

⁶ P. Champain, D. Klein and N. Mirimanova (Eds.) [2004]. *From War Economies to Peace Economies in the South Caucasus*. London: International Alert and Economy and Conflict Research Group. Available at <http://www.caucasusbusiness.net/publications/war-economies-peace-economies-south-caucasus>.

open or not, people need to work, go about their business, engage in trade, production, transport, etc. In short, they need to work in order to survive.

At the same time, the research found that there were other groups of business people who stood to gain economically from an escalation in the conflict during the period of “no war and no peace”.

This dilemma – along with the finding that economic integration in the South Caucasus is impossible without long-term, transparent and multilateral links between the conflicting sides – opened up a new field of practical activity for mediators and peacebuilders.

The objective need to convert ideas into practical action transformed the project and led to a transition from the theoretical phase to a practical one, to the building of dialogue at another level. Quite naturally, questions arose. How could this be done? How could theoretical research findings be converted into practical action to develop economic links between representatives of SMEs in conflict zones across the whole region? What mechanism could be used to implement specific business projects? We did manage to find a mechanism, a practical tool. We used it to initiate and create in May 2005 the Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN), represented in the field by Regional Business Centres (RBCs).

The project continued to work on a regional basis and used the CBDN framework to focus its activities on using the peacebuilding potential of people who wanted to do business, regardless of the vagaries of the political environment, closed borders or blockades caused by the conflicts. CBDN provides a platform for dialogue, meetings and the exchange of information between representatives of the business community and anyone interested in economic development. It organises and attends a range of exhibitions, fairs and business tours within and outside the region. This includes publicising the project and its activities at the annual International Economic Forum in Krynica (Poland). It has also held major regional (network) events over the last three years – such as the Kars Regional Business Forum, the Regional Caucasian Cheese Exhibition, the South Caucasian Businesswomen’s Forum held annually, work on the creation of a single Caucasian brand for a number of food and drink products (tea, wine), and the development of a proposal for the creation of joint ventures between Turkey and Armenia. A number of business forums have also been held in Moscow, Trabzon and Istanbul, attended by entrepreneurs from across the region.

The unofficial title of “Tour de Kavkaz” was given to the joint visits in 2007 by representatives of CBDN and entrepreneurs from Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with the meetings organised with representatives of business, business associations and the authorities in Baku, Yerevan, Gyumri and Nagorno-Karabakh. This was the first time in the history of economic relations in the region that it was visited by a group of

entrepreneurs in this particular format. The outcomes of the tour were new cross-border joint economic initiatives, investment proposals and increased knowledge of economic trends in the region.

Training courses were held, while public awareness events and various types of research and analyses of the economic situation in the region continue to be conducted. We are also planning to conduct research into the prospects of creating special economic zones between Georgia and Abkhazia.

As well as network projects, RBCs – each with their own programme of joint action aimed at restoring economic and political relations – work with local business communities, entrepreneurs, and a range of local, national and international actors as well as the authorities. Each RBC has a different scale of activities and projects. These include: organising a small home-based family business producing fruit juice in Abkhazia and involving refugees; joint Abkhaz-Georgian efforts to combat the Fall Webworm (*hyphantria cunea*), a pest that causes major damage to crops; and assistance by our Georgian colleagues in providing a tractor for farmers from South Ossetia.

The Armenian RBC, like its Georgian counterpart, has two offices – one in Gyumri and one in Yerevan. This promotes business links between the centre and the regions, which suffer from a lack of resources and information. The Gyumri office is also directly responsible for measures aimed at implementing joint Armenian-Turkish business projects, establishing dialogue between Turkey and Armenia, and the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border.

These activities allow the CBDN network to widen participation in the project and engage more people in dialogue. This in turn helps to “bring together” isolated and disconnected business sectors in the region, promote economic collaboration and break down stereotypical views of peacebuilding as an activity for a select “elite club of peacebuilding activists”.

The CBDN network combines implementation of its peacebuilding mission with activities on developing entrepreneurship, cross-border collaboration, establishing new business relations, and providing support and assistance to specific business projects. The network encourages any economic initiatives that have the potential to generate positive changes in the conflict. The network’s plans for future activities include creating joint ventures, lobbying for the development of new models of collaboration between the conflicting sides, formalising existing economic relations between the region’s business communities, and lobbying for the free movement of goods and people at governmental and international levels.

The network has huge resources in the form of existing business structures (chambers of commerce, business and manufacturers’ associations, various international and national

structures acting in the interests of establishing peace, etc.). However, it also faces serious obstacles. These include the political environment, scarce resources and donors' reluctance to support the project because of its format.

5. Mediation: conceptual development

At a conceptual level, the project framework was built around issues we identified, as well as issues of a more general theoretical and practical interest in relation to war and conflict economies. This was the first peacebuilding initiative in the South Caucasus that set itself the objective of examining the link between the economy and conflict in the region. It sought to learn how conflicts might be resolved through a better understanding of the current economic dynamics.

This approach had not been taken by any organisation or initiative before. Our ambitious goal for the Economy and Conflict project was to fill this gap, to find our niche, to break the cycle and to establish a route to peace via the economy and business. This goal was based on a vision of economic collaboration as an important element in the building of confidence and peace in the region. Earlier economic analyses of the region had focused mainly on oil. The ECRG embarked on a different route, using different research frameworks, analysing how local economic structures supported or resolved conflicts by identifying the intersections and links between the economy and conflicts. This was essentially the first attempt to study the role of small and medium-sized business in a conflict situation.

Given that the topic and issue was selected by Alert, the project activities and indeed the entire conceptual bent of the project was towards mediation. At the same time, Alert was aware that its role as mediator would be caught between two camps with two diametrically opposed approaches, each with their own logic. One camp sees economic collaboration as a perfectly valid mechanism for resolving political problems between conflicting sides; the other rules out the possibility of any economic contacts and links with the “enemy” until there is a political solution. By this logic, all economic links or collaboration with the “enemy” will only play into its hands, reinforcing its claims to independence. This view held by our Azerbaijani colleagues was bolstered by another argument based on the position adopted by the official authorities: ‘Give us examples, precedents, where conflicting countries have promoted economic links, traded and collaborated with each another.’ Moreover, at one of our teleconferences with Baku, when I launched a discussion on the role of economic collaboration in finding ways to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the response at the other end of the line was: ‘What kind of collaboration can there be, what are you talking about. We simply don’t trust you.’

This demonstrates just how relevant and vital one of the main aims of the Economy and Conflict project is – that of restoring trust between the conflicting sides. Even if a

political solution is found for the conflicts, peace and good neighbourly relations will not be possible without a foundation of trust between people.

The ECRG had thought along these lines from the outset. However, as our work progressed and we discussed the concept of “economic peacebuilding” in more depth, we identified common issues, approaches and findings which formed the basis for all later research and practical work.

We (the Armenian participants) did not try to change our Azerbaijani colleagues’ minds, so to speak, about the prehistory of the conflict. We agreed to focus on the most neutral approaches (even though this led to us being criticised back home for using certain terms and interpretations of the political context and origins of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict). Along with the rest of the participants, including the Armenians, I understood only too well the constraints on our Azerbaijani colleagues and the very strict limitations on what they were permitted to say. At times, they could not avoid parroting political slogans. It was easy to see that it was extremely difficult for them to work with the “other” side in the conflict. They had to adopt a cautious approach and their participation in the project involved risks professionally, for their family and even for their lives.

Mediation and peacebuilding are very sensitive tasks, which balance on a knife edge between peace and conflict. As soon as you deal with one source of disagreement, another one rises to the surface. The group was constantly having to deal with the clash between the two conceptual camps – the economic approach based on collaboration and the political approach based on confrontation and isolation. This was particularly evident in the context of Armenian-Turkish relations. Whereas the business communities (on both sides) were willingly and actively lobbying for a change in the situation and the unblocking of the borders, and individual Turkish business people were willing to invest money in the economy of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, the political elite refused to budge.

The conceptual underpinning of the project was the thesis that: developing the economies of countries in the region would help to meet the people’s basic needs; economic and political processes can and should complement one another; and political and economic advances in any one of the states in the region (including non-recognised ones) would bring benefits to all of its neighbours.⁷

Political developments in the region over the last few years have clearly demonstrated the folly of pursuing the opposite approach. Such an approach rejects any form of economic support which might “give succour” to the “non-recognised” entities. It refuses to allow their economy to grow, since any steps towards economic collaboration are seen as

⁷ A notable example in this context is Northern Ireland, where the economic development of the North made it an attractive partner for the South.

being against the national interests of the recognised states, threatening their territorial integrity. Moreover, any formal collaboration would strengthen the economy of the “non-recognised”, giving them less reason to retain the old borders. This approach sees the enemy’s bankruptcy as an attractive proposition.

Conversely, the law of economic efficiency states that the complete collapse of the economy will not benefit anyone. Furthermore, given that the “non-recognised” economies may well participate in any future integration processes within the region, destroying their economies could significantly increase the cost of the integration process for all the other countries. This approach also involves other costs. As our research showed, low levels of economic development are closely correlated with the risk of armed conflict. For example, action taken to suppress criminal (black market) activities at the Ergneti market on the South Ossetia-Georgia border led to the closure of the market. This prompted some people who had lost their jobs to join new military formations, thus increasing the militarisation of society. At the same time, it resulted in an escalation in tension, which later led to a flare-up in the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia.⁸

The policy of economic “disengagement” – whereby the recognised republics ignore the existence of “non-recognised” entities and consider them to be an integral part of their own territory – increases the alienation of the “non-recognised” entities. This ultimately drives them into the arms of other more “interested” patrons.⁹

Of course, economic approaches cannot settle all conflict issues and relations with one wave of a magic wand. Business and economic links cannot secure a political settlement. But they can resolve many problems in this sphere and support the talks. Another reason for engaging with this policy is that economic actors are often also political actors.

By studying, on the one hand, the economic levers that could be used to transform conflicts and, on the other hand, the economic forces that could act as obstacles to the peacebuilding process, the group acted as a regional mediator. It did not aim to explicitly champion its own activities and economic model in contrast to other, more confrontational economic projects taking place in the region and clearly aimed at isolating individual states. Instead, the group decided to identify ways of influencing the representatives of the regional and international business community, as well as those involved in talks at official and unofficial levels. It sought to lobby political elites on the needs of the small business sector and convince them of the need for and importance of establishing economic relations without political preconditions.

8 See P. Champaign, D. Klein and N. Mirimanova (Eds.) (2004). *From War Economies to Peace Economies in the South Caucasus*. London: International Alert and Economy and Conflict Research Group.

9 The expert community has voiced the opinion that “support” by Georgia for the lack of economic development of South Ossetia and Abkhazia could lead to these territories becoming de facto attached in economic terms to Russia.

Our “know-how”

We attempted to overcome these and many other stereotypes and entrenched positions that get in the way of peacebuilding and the development of business activity in the region. International Alert and the project participants worked together to create a completely new method for discussion and action within the project. The method was based on theoretical and practical steps relating to peace.

The project participants developed their own expertise in peacebuilding. In conceptual terms, the project aimed to replace the inertia of a zero-sum game, whereby one side can only make gains at the expense of the other. It sought a shift away from “beggar my neighbour” policies towards the “win-win” situation commonly used in conflict theory.

Terms, expressions, definitions and the whole conceptual apparatus underlying our peacebuilding activities were checked for “conflict sensitivity” (the term itself is an invention of the project participants).

Network members agreed to comply with the principle of “do no harm” – do no harm to existing links, to what is already in place and to what has already been achieved; do no harm to yourself, colleagues, people and the whole process. Any decision must not harm the project and the individual people working on it.

One of the innovations developed by CBDN was the “flexible approach” method. This approach ensured that none of the aims and objectives of the whole project or its individual activities were abandoned halfway, changed or rejected. The method involved thorough planning and the development of backup plans, which were an essential part of the work given the rapidly changing environment.

The “flexible approach” took the long view and occasionally required noisy public relations campaigns and promotions during the peacebuilding project. At some stages, this approach required quieter work “behind the scenes”.

Flexible approaches and an ability to adapt to changes in the turbulent conditions were necessitated by the current circumstances, such as the rapid and unpredictable changes in the region. They were also necessary owing to the major and sometimes momentous events that had occurred throughout the project in the political landscape of the various republics or the entire region – for instance, the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia, the August 2008 war, the Armenian-Turkish “football diplomacy”, the stagnation and stalling of the political process on conflict resolution, changes in the political geography of the region, the appearance on the map of two new, now partially-recognised states and two new closed borders, new oil and gas routes, and much more. This principle allowed us to navigate through a complex environment and even recruit new people to the peacebuilding process.

This approach also involved the decision to hold project meetings within the region instead of in third countries, as had previously been the case. The new decision did cause some difficulties associated with the shifting and crossing of borders and the need to ensure that the project covered the whole region. However, everyone agreed that regional problems should be resolved within the region. Apart from anything else, this regional “link-up” would help the project to save on costs, which was an important consideration since its existence was wholly dependent on external funds liable to be suspended by donors at the first sign of a crisis.

Although as a peacebuilding project, *Economy and Conflict* is strictly apolitical, it is highly significant in the wider socio-political context. Grounded in activities that have a practical economic focus, our work is nevertheless targeted at social and political change (advocacy). Over the lifetime of the project, many of its participants have established good working relations with politicians, officials, SMEs and international institutions working in the region, as well as with NGOs, which are more responsive and prepared to collaborate. Some of us have supported the dialogue process within our own societies by sitting on parliamentary committees covering various conflict-related issues, public chambers, expert advisory councils and other bodies.

As we continue our work in this area, we intend to use any means available to put economic relations on the table during political talks. This can cover such topics as: creating a legal basis for economic collaboration between bodies on the conflicting sides while there is still no political resolution of the conflict; prioritising this objective, given that it is more acceptable than the status of conflict territories; lobbying for private sector engagement in the talks process at all levels and for the inclusion of the models of economic relations proposed by CBDN on the agenda of the talks processes.

The economic aspects of peacebuilding could, in fact, become pivotal in setting up an effective political dialogue and public dialogue both between and within the different societies.

Unlike the political economy of war, characterised by a growth in weapons, closed borders, embargoes and disrupted communications, the concept of a “political economy of peace” in the South Caucasus, as developed within our project, is not targeted directly at transforming conflict as such. It is dependent on serious preparation work aimed at social and political change, the transformation of institutions, rules, behaviour, approaches and assessments of the economic component of conflicts in the region. The aim is to create an environment in which the political peace process can be effective by recruiting representatives of SMEs trusted within their societies and by applying economic levers.

At present, each CBDN centre is working for social and political change in a number of ways – in particular, by directly engaging local entrepreneurs in regional measures

and business projects aimed at eradicating prejudice and by restoring people-to-people relations via specific business initiatives. This process takes place directly between the participants as well as with the assistance of mediators.

We are confident that our work is bringing about change as a result of the feedback we receive from our societies, new project participants and the public. Economic models of peaceful interaction between the sides, along with specific recommendations and ideas proposed by project participants, are being adopted in official talks. They are even being included in contracts which are signed, although for the moment unimplemented. Examples include the proposals by the Armenian researchers regarding the possibility of creating a South Caucasus Energy Network and a South Caucasus Railway Network; or proposals regarding the need to open the Armenian-Turkish section of the Gyumri-Kars railway and the Abkhaz section of the railway. Such proposals have become part of the discourse of the Armenian-Turkish “rapprochement”, which has unfolded over the last two years. In October 2009, Yerevan and Ankara signed two Protocols – the “Protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations” and the “Protocol on the development of bilateral relations”. An agreement has also been signed on the sale of electrical power by Armenia to Turkey. Talks are being held on the opening of the Armenian-Turkish section of the Gyumri-Kars railway and the unblocking of the Armenian-Turkish border. At the same time, active discussions are being held on one of the theses of our research – that the opening of the border could positively affect the course of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Of course, it is regrettable that the political process has stalled, that the ratification process for the Protocols has been suspended and that major economic projects are largely a matter for the very distant future. What is important, however, is that all of these issues are on the table and an integral part of the political discourse on conflict relations between the countries in the region – a development which we ascribe at least in part to our activities.

6. Conclusion

International Alert has been working for a long time in the South Caucasus based on its mandate as a non-governmental facilitator of dialogue processes between representatives of conflicting communities. Despite understanding and accepting all of the challenges associated with peacebuilding, especially in the South Caucasus, Alert nevertheless launched a process of civil dialogue within the Economy and Conflict project. The civil process is far from simple, at times ambiguous, and replete with contradictions and predictable (or not so predictable) obstacles, as well as unexpected twists and turns. The process is always made difficult by the political context, direct or indirect opposition from official structures, their biased and negative attitudes, the pressure on project participants, and changes in the situation (whether positive or negative) in the official talks process.

In fact, constant, abrupt changes in the political context make it hard to judge and measure the impact, practical significance and effectiveness of this type of project on society, as there are no generally accepted criteria or indicators for evaluating the degree of their impact. This is made all the more difficult since no society has a coherent view of peace or even peacebuilding. Some participants in the political process will always interpret this as a call for a compromise, concessions and even the surrender of their own positions.

There is also the question of for whom and on whose terms we are trying to bring about this peace. If it is peace for market traders and business people, then we need to find a slot for them in the peace process so they can influence those engaged in talks at the official and unofficial levels. They constitute the link in the chain that can connect the elites looking for a political settlement with entrepreneurs who have a more pragmatic, economic approach. People-to-people diplomacy, combining the efforts of the private sector and the international community, using existing economic links, and drawing up new economic strategies for conflict transformation in the region – these and other interventions are used to change the situation.

It is now clear that the project has had an impact on how conflict is perceived by the participants, and through them on certain sections of their societies. As a peacebuilding initiative, all of the project's efforts were directed at increasing the number of people opposed to resolving the conflict by force, augmenting their influence and building up trust between the sides. From a peacebuilding perspective, with CBDN the project has both an impact in the short term and the long term. Residents of border districts are now involved in the (admittedly small-scale) economic projects initiated under the project. The establishment of links between Armenian, Turkish, Georgian and Azerbaijani entrepreneurs producing cheese, wine, tea and other products,¹⁰ and the setting up of business relations between them, are evidence of increased trust between the conflicting sides. There is a greater awareness of their mutual dependence and ultimately an increase in the number of “peace advocates”.

Ordinary people with personal and business links in the region are committed to peace. This is in stark contrast to some political entities in the region, which reject links with other countries in the very same region, act only on the basis of how they are perceived by their international partners and are inclined to take dangerous decisions about resolving conflicts by violent means.

¹⁰ These projects include: the production of cheese by cheesemakers from Armenia, Turkey and Georgia using a standard technology and sold under a standard “Caucasus cheese” brand name; the sale of teas (leaf and herbal) produced in the countries participating in the project, with standard packaging under the brand name “Caucasus tea”; wine production under the brand name “Caucasus Bouquet”, etc.

The project and its activities are in fact aimed at protecting, supporting and widening the human rights of people who live in conflict zones. This refers not only to their right to life but also to freedom of movement, freedom to communicate, freedom to run their own businesses, which in turn create new jobs, and their right to work, which enables them not only to feed themselves but to be active members of society. Thus, our activities within the project have helped, albeit indirectly, to secure the physical and material security of the region's inhabitants.

Finally, but no less importantly, our activities within the projects have created the preconditions for the restoration and development of links that had been lost in the region – not only economic links, but also links between people. This in turn must have a positive impact on the development of political relations. In our opinion, the theoretical findings in our publications, complemented by the practical business projects and economic as well as other relations established in the region by CBDN over many years, have certainly had an impact on the positive changes in Armenian-Turkish relations seen over the last two years.

All mediation processes require a third party to combine impartiality with a commitment to a positive change in the conflict situation. The partners from International Alert managed to achieve this complex task. Because they listened to us and treated us as colleagues – respecting our views on the identification of priorities, on how realistic we thought the initiatives were, on what costs and benefits they involved – we had “ownership” of the project. This energised the whole process and gave it a resilience that was the main reason why it lasted so long. At the very start of the journey, we would never have dreamed that the initiative would last so long and be so productive. In fact, my previous experience of participating in short-term “one-year projects”, which no one (not even the participants in these projects) remembered after the final report was sent off to the donor, meant that I was originally pessimistic about this project.

The most complex element of mediation projects is being a mediator, reaching consensus with partners from different sides in a conflict, developing common approaches and agreement. As I have outlined, true mediation and peacebuilding is not about reconciling conflicting sides, but about searching for forms and modes of co-existence that make reconciliation possible, with which all sides in the conflict can feel comfortable. Do you remember the opening parable of the poor man?

With some “fancy footwork” required to combine mediation and the activities of CBDN, the project managed to create a situation where the conflicting sides were treated as equals and thus felt comfortable. This was achieved irrespective of whether they were “recognised” or “non-recognised” and despite their mutually exclusive positions on the political and territorial resolution of the conflicts. This, I would say, was the project's greatest achievement. Each side felt its position was supported by the project, whether

it was a position of “independence” or “territorial integrity”. This allowed for relations to be established where “non-recognised” entities could work as equal partners with the “recognised”, based on respect and equality at a personal and professional level, at the same time introducing new styles and modes of dialogue.

Another objective of the project was to ensure that a “balance” was kept between business and peacebuilding activities. Some people wanted to see more practical business initiatives. But the project is more about peace than business. All of the project activities – from business initiatives involving the different sides in the conflict zones to meetings, discussions and fact-finding trips – are not purely business decisions targeted at generating profits, but are included because they relate to peacebuilding. Business people are certainly not peacebuilding volunteers. Their decision to launch partnerships and business relations with colleagues on the “enemy side” – a decision which involves huge risks and participation in meetings and business initiatives with the opposite side, however low-level – are subject to close scrutiny by the authorities and society as well as accusations of betrayal. This has prevented CBDN, which is designed to guarantee participants security and protection against criticism and threats, from implementing more ambitious projects. It is all the more significant therefore that so many representatives of business participate in our activities. By so doing, they are choosing a difficult path, which might ultimately lead to a new form of peaceful relations: thus, it is certainly more about peacebuilding than business.

The path from a war economy to a peace economy is, in any case, some way off. However, we are optimistic that sooner or later economic pragmatism will gain the upper hand in relations between the countries of the South Caucasus. When this eventually happens, relations between neighbours in the region will be guided by the realisation that trading and SMEs, not international oil projects, are among the main sources of livelihood for the region’s population – regardless of the status of the territory in which they live or their nationality. In the future too, the main source of development for countries in the region will be a common regional market and joint ventures at entrepreneurial level, rather than oil from the Caspian Sea or elsewhere. The objective is not “peace in exchange for economic wellbeing” but “peace and economic wellbeing for the sake of prosperity in the region”.

The great Rousseau once wrote that: ‘peoples who have no other choice than to trade or fight are doomed to remain weak. They depend on their neighbours and are hostages to circumstances, and their future is very uncertain.’

I started this chapter with a parable from Trinidad and would like to finish with an example from China: the Chinese word for “crisis” is composed of elements that signify both “danger” and “opportunity”. Although it clearly has an inherent danger of direct confrontation, a crisis (or conflict) also contains within it the very opportunities that will help us to avoid or overcome the conflict, if not prevent it. All we have to do is to make use of this opportunity.

PART 6

Media and Mediation

CHAPTER 14

Media and Mediation in the Caucasus: Some Reflections

Thomas de Waal

1. The media – a “weapon” in conflict

It is an interesting challenge to be asked to write an article on “media and mediation” in the South Caucasus. In English, the two words share the same root and have the common idea of being the person in the middle, the bridge between two different sides. But of course the goal is different. Conveying truthful information and negotiating peace between conflicting parties are two different activities that sometimes pursue the same aim, but often do not.

It is no secret that the media is a weapon that is used to inflame conflicts. For example, we know how radio was used during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 to encourage mass killing. The radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RLTM) called the Tutsi minority “cockroaches” and incited murder and rape. In the late Soviet Caucasus, where the electronic media was controlled from Moscow, newspapers were the main organs of hatred. In Georgia, ironically, the newspaper of the literary intelligentsia, *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, was used by Georgia’s former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia to preach a message of intolerance against Georgia’s minorities that contributed to conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹ After the fall of the Soviet Union, new post-Soviet governments in the South Caucasus also used radio and television as instruments of conflict propaganda. I have heard Azerbaijan’s ANS television referred to as the “party of war” for the way it begins its news broadcasts with reports from the Karabakh ceasefire line, suggesting that peace there is temporary.

2. Foreign simplification, local bias

If the media inside the region is guilty of generally exacerbating conflict, the sin of the international media is apathy. For the Western news editor, the Caucasus can be summed up in the word “complexity” and usually appears to be a place too remote and difficult to engage easily the interest of the Western consumer of news. In 1992 and 1993, the wars in Abkhazia and Karabakh attracted less coverage for the simple reason that the editors decided to devote their resources to a complex conflict closer to home – that is, the conflict in Bosnia. When dealing with a conflict of this complexity – including the one in Bosnia – another tactic is to treat it as a source of dramatic entertainment without any political content, using eye-witness reports from your own correspondent from the frontline. In reports of this nature, the correspondent becomes the key player in the drama, reporting to the people back home about his or her dangerous adventures in a foreign conflict zone.

¹ See Stuart Kaufman’s excellent book *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Cornell University Press, 2001) for a good analysis of the Gamsakhurdia period and the media.

When the Western media did choose to report on Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh, they simplified the reports by attempting to explain it in terms that uninformed readers and viewers could understand. In this way, the initial phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute was written about by (Moscow-based) Western correspondents as being “Gorbachev’s headache”. Western coverage of the conflict in Abkhazia tended to focus on the one name that Western readers could recognise, that of Eduard Shevardnadze (“the man who ended the Cold War”), such that it became not so much the war in Abkhazia as “Shevardnadze’s war”. Jon Steele, a British cameraman with the television company ITN, tells how he and his crew were pulled out of besieged Sukhum/i in September 1993, as soon as they had secured an interview with the Georgian leader: “Remember, we are only interested in Shevardnadze. It’s a war nobody cares about”, said a voice from London.² If it was difficult to generate international media interest in the actual war in Abkhazia or Karabakh, then it has been even harder to get coverage of the post-conflict situation where there is little drama, few casualties and almost no conspicuous “news events”. I have struggled to get articles published in British newspapers even about significant events such as the Key West talks on the future of Karabakh in 2001.

By contrast, these conflicts are of course at the top of the news agenda in the local media. Yet, the quantity of coverage is not matched by sophistication. The more professional journalists face problems in getting access to information on the other side and in expressing controversial opinions on such a sensitive topic. For less thoughtful journalists, writing about the disputes becomes a game of “patriotic competition” in which they try to score points off the other side in the conflict or international mediators. The former American co-chairman of the Minsk Group, Matt Bryza, decided early on to be much more open and friendly with the Armenian and Azerbaijani media than his predecessors had, but by the end of his tenure he probably regretted that decision. Journalists on both sides enjoyed quoting him selectively to give the impression that he was at any given moment being “pro-Armenian” or “pro-Azerbaijani”. There were frequent agency reports saying that ‘Bryza refutes a statement’ apparently made by him. Perhaps Bryza’s own rather impetuous style was partly at fault, and poor translation certainly played a part in this. Notwithstanding this, the local media certainly used his openness not as an opportunity to explore the peace process more thoughtfully, but to try to accuse the American mediator of inconsistency.

3. Saying no to “peace journalism”

This was the context in which I began working in this field in the South Caucasus in 2002 for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), a media development organisation that works in conflict regions around the world. After several visits to the

2 J. Steele, ‘Shooting in the Dark’, *Guardian Weekend Magazine*, 10th August 2002.

region, and discussion with colleagues working in the media development field, I drew two broad conclusions about what our priorities should be. The first lesson I learned in London from my colleagues who had done a lot of work in the Balkans was that it is counterproductive to talk about “peace journalism” or “human rights journalism”. Instead, media professionals argued persuasively, there was only good or bad journalism. Good journalists should report truthfully and responsibly on any situation, whether it be the scene of a bloody massacre or the birthday party of a five-year-old. They should use good sources, balance and restrained language, giving all sides an opportunity to give their view, while trying hardest to give a voice to those who are blameless victims. That means giving a voice to people and organisations who/that may be advocating war and whose views you might personally find distasteful, but who represent significant sections of society. A journalist entrusted to engage in “peace journalism” and only report on the work of the peacemakers risks falling into the temptation of suppressing facts in order to support a peace process and is in danger of becoming a propagandist for peace akin to the Soviet “peace activists” of the 1970s and 1980s. There was a growing consensus on this conclusion, which was evident at the big gathering of Caucasian journalists convened by International Alert in Istanbul.

4. The limits of training journalists

The second conclusion that I learned on the ground in the South Caucasus was that there was a lot of media training for journalists, but that much of it was in danger of becoming an end in itself. Often, the whole design of the training course was at fault. Even if he or she has 30 years of experience, a veteran journalist from an American newspaper can seem like they are from another planet to local journalists in the Caucasus. I saw one such journalist, with no Russian, trying to “train” journalists from the newspaper *Nuzhnaya Gazetza* in Abkhazia. His years of experience were simply not relevant to the situation they were facing in trying to work as reporters in Abkhazia. I myself showed journalists in Abkhazia a film of the famous BBC interviewer Jeremy Paxman, who live on air asked the former home secretary (interior minister) Michael Howard the same question 12 times, because Howard would not answer it directly. It was great entertainment for the Abkhaz journalists but again not very useful: in Abkhazia, they would not have had the opportunity to do such an important interview live and if they had tried to pursue such an aggressive line of questioning, they would have risked being thrown out of the studio, or worse.

Often, the failure of the training seminars was that they existed in too much of a bubble. In other words, editors released their journalists for a day or two of “training” delivered by some veteran Western journalist or media trainer. The journalists had an interesting time, made friends, did some useful exercises, but when they returned to their place of work they were given no opportunity by their editors to change their work practices or work differently; they simply carried on producing the same kind of material as

before. The culture of media training in the South Caucasus was so widespread that an additional danger presented itself: those who had the time and inclination to attend training seminars could move from one to the next, earning a per diem (*sutochnaya*) and ending up doing less professional journalism as a result.

These problems led different NGOs to different solutions. The Caucasus Media Institute in Yerevan and the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) in Tbilisi set up year-long educational programmes for journalists where they could do all the training over a longer period. Others decided that you needed to start at the level of the editors and form a new publication. The success of the Georgian newspaper *24 Hours* was, at least for a while, one result of this strategy. At IWPR, we decided that we wanted to adopt a “conveyor belt” approach to media development in the Caucasus. We wanted to train journalists, but it was even more important to also ask them to deliver a finished product, in the form of actual newspaper articles, at the other end of the process. Because IWPR produced weekly reports from the Caucasus, published on our website, distributed by email and republished in local newspapers, this was a visible achievement for trainee journalists. However, another technical problem presented itself: if you publish only three or four articles per week from an entire region, this gives very limited opportunities for journalists to get published. Besides, our Caucasus Reporting Service was targeted in the first instance at international readers and many articles required substantial editing to raise them to an appropriate standard. We therefore decided that we should work on creating new products – newspapers and newspaper supplements – which would be a real testing ground for our trainee journalists. This initiative would enable them to put into practice what they were learning in training seminars and would also reach readers in the region directly. That was the rationale for a series of projects working with local newspapers in Azerbaijan and Armenia and for the setting up of entirely new newspapers in Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli in Georgia.

5. *Panorama* – a joint effort by Georgian and Abkhaz journalists

We also applied the same practice to our work across the conflicts of the Caucasus. It is one thing to have meetings between Georgians and Abkhaz, where opinions can be exchanged and ideas discussed. It is quite another matter to work together on the same product, where you are required to sign off on the same words. That is precisely what we did when we started publishing the first newspaper produced by both Georgian and Abkhaz journalists – *Panorama*. When I say “we”, I include myself only in a very notional way: the real work was done through the hard work and inspiration of Margarita Akhvlediani in Tbilisi (whose brainchild the project was) and Inal Khashig in Sukhum/i. As a third editor resident in London, I provided the most symbolic third point in the triangle, happy to see my two colleagues on the ground successfully manage any differences between them.

The practical problems were immense. Despite repeated efforts on our part, we could not secure permission for the journalists to meet on Georgian or Abkhaz territory. Specifically, the Abkhaz authorities were reluctant to host a large number of Georgians on their territory or to give permission for their own journalists to travel en masse to Georgia. As a result, the journalists met in Sochi, Moscow, Yerevan, Odessa and Istanbul. Two editions of the newspaper were printed simultaneously, in Georgian in Tbilisi and in Russian in Sochi. The Abkhaz edition of the paper was printed on Russian territory across the border from Abkhazia, because it was hard to register the newspaper formally inside Abkhazia, again because of political sensitivities. The practical coordination was a massive headache and the distance between the two editorial teams inevitably caused arguments, which could not be easily resolved over bad telephone lines. Terminological issues were also very difficult as always. We ended up referring to the capital of Abkhazia as “Sukhum” in articles from Abkhazia and “Sukhumi” in articles from Georgia, but of course many people were not happy. Readers were simply not used to seeing this alternative spelling in a newspaper in front of them.

With goodwill on both sides, however, these problems were overcome. A more difficult issue is that in order to flourish, a newspaper should have an identity; it should establish a relationship with its readers like a trusted friend. *Panorama* of course was serving at least two sets of readers, who were divided by conflict. Each side wanted something very different from the paper. This created “creative tension” but also a number of problems. It was important for our Abkhaz colleagues that the paper should be a “Caucasian newspaper”, rather than an Abkhaz-Georgian newspaper. Experience has shown that Abkhaz and Ossetians are often wary of bilateral projects with Georgians which they see as having a covert agenda of pushing them back into Georgia. They were keen to publish IWPR articles from the North Caucasus and to widen the Caucasus-wide features of the newspaper; conversely, they were less interested in the articles from the Georgian towns of Kutaisi or Telavi. For the Georgians, by contrast, the most important feature of *Panorama* was the bridge it built to Abkhazia and the opportunity it provided to receive information from there. The most enthusiastic readers of the paper came from among the tens of thousands of internally displaced people who had fled or been expelled from Abkhazia in 1993 and now lived in western Georgia. They snapped up each new edition with alacrity and copies were passed around from person to person. In Abkhazia, the newspaper was initially sold in public and had a visible profile. However, as the political situation with Tbilisi began to get more difficult, the newspaper began to disappear from view. It was distributed by hand rather than sold in kiosks. A long while before the last edition of *Panorama* came out in January 2008, an Abkhaz civil society activist asked, ‘What happened to *Panorama*?’ Put simply, the answer was that there was no public demand for a newspaper strongly associated with Georgia. Circulation of the newspaper in Abkhazia never reached above a few hundred.

Nonetheless, the overall impact of the newspaper was certainly very positive. It provided regular and objective reports from the other side of the conflict divide to anyone who

was interested in reading them. It set up a forum for Georgians and Abkhaz to interact and collaborate with each other in a practical and professional manner. It broke taboos about collaborative projects between Abkhaz and Georgians, which many people had told us was impossible. In that sense, while it did not have a “mediating” role in a political sense, it was an important tool of communication and normalisation across the conflict divide. Had there been a better political climate in which negotiations were making progress and a normalisation of relations was proceeding on other fronts, it could have laid the foundation for a much bigger project. The fact that politicians apparently paid little attention to the newspaper was, in my view, more a sign of their own limitations than those of the newspaper itself.

6. Conclusions

To me, the most positive conclusion from my work on media development in the Caucasus is that there are courageous individuals who are not afraid to reach out across closed frontiers and ceasefire lines to their colleagues. The spirit of freedom and individuality is alive and well among many people in the region. However, this quickly leads me to the most negative conclusion, which is that the overall political context is still heavily biased against this kind of professional and objective journalism. Governments have no interest in a strong independent media. Across the region, ordinary people continue to get most of their information from television news, which is tightly controlled by the government and is little better than propaganda. During the August 2008 war over South Ossetia, there was no evidence that the mainstream Georgian media had learned anything from years of support from Western aid programmes. In fact, after it was over, surveys discovered that, owing to this reporting, a large section of the population believed that Georgia had actually won the conflict with Russia. In this way, as in many undemocratic societies, the media had become not so much a “fourth estate” as an arm of the state, reinforcing comfortable myths rather than challenging misleading facts and stereotypes.

Conflicts can bring out very primitive reflexes in people. Even some journalists with whom we have worked for years and expended large amounts of money and resources on still express very hardline views on the Caucasian conflicts. In early 2009, one Armenian journalist, whose articles I had edited over several years, published an extremely bad and tendentious article criticising my paper on the Karabakh conflict, *The Karabakh Trap*, and even suggesting that I was in the pay of BP. I had problems convincing experienced Georgian colleagues to print an eye-witness report by an Ossetian in the first days of the August 2008 war. In the latter case, I do not think this reluctance was so much an expression of nationalist sentiment as a feeling of trauma – they were in the middle of a war and felt that negative publicity about what their own side had done would make their position worse – but the overall outcome was the same.

Of course, it would be much too easy for me – a citizen of Great Britain, whose last civil war ended in 1642 – to criticise the choices that Georgian or Abkhaz or Armenian journalists make when reporting on the conflicts that continue to afflict their small countries. It is very difficult to swim against the current, even if you want to. Journalism does not exist in a vacuum and is extremely sensitive to the changing political situation around it. In that sense, we were lucky to get our IWPR Caucasian projects underway in 2002 and 2003, during a relatively calm time in the region, when it was possible to make some quiet progress. But for projects such as these to have a bigger effect, a far greater political change is needed in society, something which ordinary journalists can do very little about.

Economics is also a much overlooked factor in the development of an independent media. During the *perestroika* era, Soviet citizens read newspapers in much larger numbers than in Western countries. Then their circulations collapsed. This suggests that a large literate population might be ready to read newspapers again. The fact that they do not is largely due to economic reasons. People ask themselves why they spend money on a newspaper when they could spend it on something else. Besides, poor distribution and poor quality photographs mean that many newspapers in the Caucasus still resemble the publications of the 1980s, while television and the Internet offer much more attractive alternatives if you can gain access to them. In that sense, supporting a good independent print media which can rival the government-controlled electronic media is largely about supporting a new newspaper distribution system and helping a new advertising market. Several Western NGO projects have started to address this problem but at the same time came up against another problem – that financial support for some newspapers by Western donors “distorts” the market by giving some newspapers an unfair competitive advantage over others.

I firmly believe that progress has been made in the field of media development in the South Caucasus over the past 10 years, but it has been on the level of individuals and small groups. There is now a strong constituency of professional journalists who want to practise their profession and use the media to do its job of reporting accurately and holding people to account. This observation probably reflects a general trend. These individuals have the capacity to lead a wider transformation – a “Europeanisation” of the region – if they are given the political and economic support to do so. This will help the media and it will help mediation. At the moment, however, we are still stuck in winter waiting for the spring.

CHAPTER 15

Mediation: From the Word 'Media'?

Karine Ohanyan

1. Introduction

‘In the beginning was the Word...’ Right back to biblical times, conflicts could be sparked off by a single careless word, sometimes to be settled by the right word at the right time. Words came to be seen as having an almost supernatural force, sharper than the sword and better than any medicine.

Of course, words will always have a special significance for journalists. However, the untranslatable significance of words has also come to be recognised in conflict regions – often regions where propaganda and journalism are indistinguishable, and where words are recruited to service this or that army.

From the moment the Karabakh conflict started in 1988, the Armenian and Azerbaijani press competed with one another to win over domestic and international opinion through political slogans, propaganda and “single-source” journalism. This continued for a long time, about 10 years. But could we really have expected anything else? Freed from the restrictions of their Soviet past, the Armenian and Azerbaijani media were forced to reinvent themselves while simultaneously learning the tricks of the trade – all during a military conflict. Journalists, like all citizens in conflict countries, were expected to become part of a huge army, whether its job was at the front or at the back. It was practically inconceivable that Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists would ever be able to work together on the same project.

However, the war came to an end and peacetime gradually asserted itself, even for journalists. I remember my first conflict training course after the war when, as a relatively inexperienced journalist from Karabakh, I met representatives from the Azerbaijani media. In those days, training for young journalists from the Caucasus was being organised by an organisation called International Alert, which I had not heard of before (incidentally it was after these training sessions that the journalist network was set up, many of whose members went on to become actively involved with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)¹). That was in 2002 and it had been 14 years since I had spoken to anyone from Azerbaijan. I felt it was impossible to communicate let alone collaborate with them. Nevertheless, as in any conflict, sooner or later communication does start, chipping away at your fears and prejudices and eventually leading to a transformed, more balanced view of your counterparts.

As conflict theory teaches, communication really does change your outlook, the way you see yourself and others. It makes you want to be heard and understood, to be able to listen and at least try to understand one another. At that first training session on “Conflict theory and journalism”, I met a number of Azerbaijani journalists and our paths later crossed several times in all sorts of projects connected with professional journalism. This gave us

1 For more information, see the IWPR website at <http://iwpr.net/>.

opportunities to verify this or that fact from the “opposite” side or to find out more details on this or that from primary sources. We started to form a bond based on a shared desire for first-hand information and for the verification of statements that our own press was making about the enemy country. This led gradually to what I consider to be one of the key elements for mediation – a willingness to enter into dialogue and a burgeoning, personal trust in individuals “from the other side”.

2. Not bad for a first attempt

At this point, I was asked by IWPR to write a joint article with the Azerbaijani journalist Zarema Velikhanova (whom I already knew from a number of meetings). The article was to be an investigation into people who had disappeared during the Karabakh conflict. That was in 2004. Our editorial board wanted to publish the article to mark the 10th anniversary of the ceasefire in the Karabakh conflict zone. I remember the long hours Zarema and I spent on this article, which as far as I know was the first joint Armenian-Azerbaijani article to be written after the war. By that time, I had come to know Zarema very well – except for the Karabakh conflict, we shared the same views on most things. I also knew the *de facto* mediator (although I had barely heard of the term then) at the time – the editor of the Caucasian service of IWPR, Thomas (Tom) de Waal. I cannot really say why we were invited to write this joint article, although by that time we were both fairly experienced journalists; we had both attended a number of training sessions and knew how to write for a Western audience. Perhaps most importantly, we were communicating with each other over the Internet. This allowed us to discuss directly various items of information, to share them and to verify diverging stories.

The system we used to write this article could almost be a case study from a mediation handbook. After the preliminary agreement, Zarema and I were invited to an IWPR training session on investigative journalism, which was conducted on neutral territory, in the beautiful city of Tbilisi. Alongside the main training, a separate programme was designed for us. Working in a small group with mediators from IWPR, we drew up a plan for the article on missing people: whom to interview, what official bodies to visit, the main questions to ask, key topics to concentrate on, etc. The meeting also gave us an opportunity to meet and talk to other mediators – specialists on missing persons such as the famous Georgian human rights defender and political scientist Paata Zakareishvili. In this way, by combining our efforts, working jointly and respecting the creative interests of each person, a framework was developed for the joint article. However, it took a long time to write the article.

Each of us was aiming to write a story with the “opposite” ending. We wrote to one another, made copies for Tom, got involved in new issues and went back to the interviews. So much material, so many case studies and testimonies were gathered that

when we came to write the article, Zarema and I felt it was impossible to create the text. Every detail was important. Each of us had our own version of the truth and each of us seemed to want “this little bit” to be included in the article. In the end, we each sent our own version of the article to the editor, Tom de Waal, who picked out common material, making cuts here, additions there, editing and gathering everything into one single piece. It was this version of the already completed article – entitled ‘Karabakh’s missing persons – are they dead or alive?’ – that Zarema and I received for comments, corrections and amendments. Of course, each of us did have corrections to make to the article which we sent at the very last minute to Tom.

After all this time, I cannot unfortunately remember exactly what problems arose when discussing the article, but questions of one type or another certainly did come up later on. Nevertheless, these difficulties were gradually settled through collaboration, with the help of the mediators themselves; we also made compromises ourselves. As a result of our negotiations, the editor Tom added the following paragraph at the end of the article – ‘Editorial note: This material is the result of the collaboration of two journalists representing opposing sides in the Karabakh conflict. The terminology it uses to refer to various aspects of the conflict was selected in London. It aims to be neutral and may not necessarily reflect the terms used by the authors themselves.’

This led to one of the difficulties that, although essentially resolved, subsequently flared up time and again, demanding new approaches and ideas.

3. ‘Choose your terminology!’

One of the main difficulties facing Karabakh journalists when writing articles for IWPR was the problem of terminology. When authors from Karabakh wrote articles, they naturally talked about what was happening in their “country” – even if it is not recognised as such – using the terminology that they found acceptable and familiar. Thus, terms such as “the Minister of Finance of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (NKR)” or “the President of the NKR” were automatically used by a journalist in their article – until it was edited by the mediator, in this case IWPR. This was the first “hurdle”.

Azerbaijani journalists also expressed dissatisfaction with a number of terms appearing in articles written by Armenian journalists. Journalists from Karabakh were in turn opposed to editorial text being added to every article such as: ‘Karabakh is not an internationally recognised state’; ‘Karabakh is subject to a territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan’; ‘the Armenians in Karabakh consider that...’, etc. For journalists living in Nagorno-Karabakh and writing material from there, such terminology did not appear at all neutral. For example, we did not view Karabakh as being in any way subject to a territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

To an Armenian, this distorts the entire nature of the Karabakh conflict. We tried to explain to the editor Tom de Waal that we see this as a conflict between Karabakh and the Azerbaijani authorities and that such a formulation is not only a misrepresentation of the conflict, but is entirely misleading for a Western audience. Moreover, no journalist from Karabakh will write in an article, for instance about national minorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, that 'Karabakh is an unrecognised territory subject to a dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan' or even that 'Karabakh is not internationally recognised'.

When the first disagreements arose over these editorial changes to Armenian documents, IWPR, acting here as a mediator between Armenian and Azerbaijani readers, suggested that in all "sensitive" documents on Karabakh, the editors should write a note at the end saying that 'the terminology used is that of the IWPR editorial board and not the authors'. This text went some way towards reducing the "nationalist whims" of the journalists, although there were also some journalists who refused to write materials precisely because of this. For example, the journalist Anait Danielyan insisted:

'I live in the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and that is where I am writing from. Some people might not recognise this country. I do. Why should I reject my own familiar terminology, terminology that I consider to be correct? And ultimately the IWPR editorial board always has the option of adding a note at the end to the effect that "the terminology used is that of the authors and the editors are not responsible for it", particularly since the material remains the authors' own property and is not a collaboration.'

However, some Armenian writers did agree to a limited compromise on the terminology issue with the IWPR editorial board. Sometimes, the opportunity to provide information direct from the region to an international publishing house subject to conditions of strict neutrality may override concerns about terminology, making a compromise worthwhile. We eventually managed to develop formulations with the IWPR editorial board which are now accepted by Armenians and Azerbaijanis alike and which are actually informative about Nagorno-Karabakh. For example, in my most recent articles I have started to use the following wording: 'Nagorno-Karabakh remains unrecognised after more than 15 years – a region which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, unilaterally announced its independence from Azerbaijan and which has become a cause of conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.' This suggestion conveys the factual nature of the existing situation, although even this terminology will not of course please everyone. Readers in the Karabakh and in Armenia have often responded negatively to such statements published by Armenian writers in IWPR.

4. 'IWPR is watching you...'

This was the headline on one very well-known Armenian forum (I will not give the reference to avoid giving the site extra publicity), which generated heated discussions about whether Armenian authors writing for IWPR were corrupt. Here is a further quote from the forum:

'Is it absolutely essential in all articles, in all discussions to emphasise that the republic is not recognised by the international community? ... Is the author developing a complex? Is he too ashamed to say out loud that whatever people might say, the NKR is a viable republic? I sometimes think that this is a special condition imposed from outside by Azerbaijani sponsors on our journalists via their headquarters in Europe, part of a total psychological attack on the Karabakh people's minds, even in articles on relatively mundane topics. They drum it into their heads that no one recognises them, they are going nowhere, they should surrender to the Azerbaijanis. On the whole, the article is brilliant but this single little line is, I repeat, an attack on the minds of Karabakh readers. It (...) is unrelenting psychological warfare aimed at poisoning the public's mind.' The topic was developed by another blogger: 'Damn it, how many times do we have to tell you that IWPR, Eurasia.net, etc. are not media outlets, although they masquerade as such. They are simply tools of various lobbying groups – you might even say cyber warfare.'

Here too, terminology is not the only subject for complaint from the Armenian audience. In response to surveys, many IWPR readers in Karabakh have also raised concerns about IWPR's "artificial" even-handedness ("parity") in selecting materials and facts. From a mediation perspective, maintaining balance, selecting neutral terms, even-handedness and the wish not to offend either party are all perfectly understandable and explicable. However, readers and even journalistic colleagues are not always happy to adopt this approach. For example, in her article 'Parity – even in favour of war?', the journalist Marina Grigoryan writes as follows:

'Just over a year ago, the British Institute for War and Peace Reporting asked me to prepare an article about the murder of an Armenian officer in Budapest. I will not bore the reader with a description of the long arguments with the institute's representatives, who tried (even in what one would have thought was a clear case) to avoid reporting truths known to everyone in order, God forbid, to avoid unintentionally "offending" the Azerbaijani side. Suffice it to say that it took a long time to defend the use of the phrase "the slaughter of the Armenians at Sumgait", with the Georgian translator rather patronisingly insisting on using the version "the clash at Sumgait" in order to "avoid unnecessarily inflaming passions".

The London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting has been working in countries in our region for some time now and its stated aim is to provide an objective version of events in the Karabakh conflict regions. However, its compulsion to maintain an even-handed approach come what may permeates the articles published on the institute's site. Of course, we understand that a British organisation cannot really avoid this. But these constant attempts to spread the blame evenly between all sides sometimes takes on absurd proportions ... Even-handed reporting of the events in the region is not the sole domain of the British Institute for War and Peace Reporting. The damage caused by this sanctimonious approach would be a topic for a separate article. Clearly, we are dealing here with a carefully elaborated concept that masquerades as peace building but is based on lies. Does such a hypocritical stance work in favour of peace or incite hatred and excesses on the Azerbaijani side? Clearly, the latter is the case.'

I suppose these are the key questions in relation to IWPR's mediation work generally: is IWPR working for peace or for war in our region? Was it worthwhile for this organisation to enter this difficult region and attempt to work here? And do all Armenians actually think that 'we do not need this kind of mediation'? The answer, luckily for us, is no – and here is why.

5. 'I was counted too'

One of the major difficulties in reporting on the Karabakh conflict has always been the fact that the voices of the victims (i.e. the people of Karabakh, in my view) were not heard from the very start of the conflict. The Soviet media originally told the world that what was happening in Karabakh was due to "machinations by individual extremists and nationalists". Later, propaganda was broadcast from Azerbaijan and Armenia which was essentially political and negative, rather than a source of information – all the more since it had little connection with Karabakh itself.

The war and the immediate post-war period left the people living in Karabakh isolated in terms of information. Because of the non-recognition of Karabakh, practically all international bodies and organisations – including information services – refused to "collaborate" directly with Karabakh, preferring to obtain information from the recognised countries, Armenia and Azerbaijan. This in turn led to the creation of a number of myths and another vicious circle caused by an information vacuum, mistrust and hostility in the conflict regions. The Armenian and Azerbaijani media machines on each side continued to construct an image of the enemy that was very far from impartial and objective and that sometimes degenerated into sheer invective. This remained the case until a number of international organisations finally decided to "open up" to the Karabakh and obtain information directly from the journalists who live there.

For example, IWPR started to invite journalists from Karabakh to its training events. Apart from starting to learn the Western style of presenting information, and the non-Soviet journalistic principles of presenting facts and reporting events from the perspective of all sides, they were also given the opportunity to communicate face-to-face with their Azerbaijani colleagues. Of course, communication did not always go smoothly and it took some time before some journalists were able to talk to one another, even on professional topics. However, gradually and thanks also to the professional process of mediation, they were able not just to have a conversation, but even to discuss limited collaboration. Even so, we eventually realised that professional journalism can act as a bridge, initially just for being heard. Later on, if not for understanding, journalism can at least help to create awareness that the “other side” has another point of view quite different from your own and is entitled to exist. This stage was perhaps relatively unconscious but it was followed by the first inklings of trust in what the journalists “from the other side” were writing. This provided an opportunity for collaboration in general: writing joint Armenian-Azerbaijani articles, verifying each other’s information, reprinting articles in the conflict countries’ media, joint journalist assignments to other regions, etc.

The ability to talk and be listened to opened up new ways of perceiving and understanding the conflict for Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Now that journalists had the opportunity to obtain “first-hand information”, the way the conflict was perceived had changed: the myths created by propaganda disappeared and the knowledge vacuum about what was happening “over there” began to be filled. Trust started to emerge, because journalists did not only talk about the good things in their countries but were also able to describe the negative things they saw around them in their writing. This made it possible for IWPR to launch a pan-Caucasus network of journalists, which more than 50 media representatives from all over the Caucasus joined. The mission of the network was to build up links between journalists from across the Caucasus, share information and promote collaboration regardless of borders and divisions in the Caucasus. The fact that the journalists ensured that the materials were balanced and pluralistic is a significant achievement, even if only virtual, on the path to lasting peace and dialogue, in the post-conflict period and in the period “between war and peace”.

6. “Washing your dirty linen in public”

But is media dialogue of this type actually needed by enemy countries? Do Armenians and Azerbaijanis approve of collaboration projects, even in areas such as professional journalism? I cannot speak for Azerbaijan, but the attitude of the Armenian audience has been for the most part entirely neutral, with a few responding positively to professional collaboration between journalists – although usually with a proviso such as ‘let them work together on projects and write articles together, but they shouldn’t wash our dirty linen in public’. In conditions of unresolved conflict, any journalist writing about their

country's problems for external audiences rather than the internal market face the risk of being branded a "traitor" (particularly in this case if their materials are being read in Azerbaijan or are distributed through very popular websites). However accurate the information might be, a large number of the people surveyed felt one should not "wash dirty linen in public" – particularly unilaterally.

For example, discussions held in the Karabakh media on potential collaboration between Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists covered topics such as whether there can indeed be a concept such as "peace journalism" or "professional journalism"; whether there can be balanced reporting of the various sides to an event without the author peddling their own opinion; whether all points of view can be published, etc. All sorts of views were voiced. Some argued: 'you are collaborating too closely with the Azerbaijanis and this means that the proportion of their militarist rhetoric is growing and growing in the Azerbaijani press. What use is this collaboration for us?' Others pointed out: 'How can we speak about the Azerbaijanis if we don't communicate with them? Maybe the press is just a channel for propaganda, but do ordinary journalists always work like that? Just look at how many journalists are being held in Azerbaijani prisons.' But the most widely-held opinion was as follows: 'There is no need to tell the whole world about our problems – at the moment we are not at war or at peace and any bad news will be used by the enemy against us.' I well recall having a discussion along these lines with the head of one of the Karabakh media organisations, who opened a window in his office and pointed to the mountains nearby, remarking: 'Look, the Azerbaijanis are just over those mountains and the war really has not finished, even if we are not actually being bombed at the moment. So is it worth journalists telling their "enemy" the whole truth?'

7. Journalism versus citizenship

The following questions arise again and again for virtually every article: should we write the whole truth if the opposite side is also going to read it; will you be correctly understood by the society in which you are living; where is the dividing line between professional probity and your patriotism as a citizen? These questions, I am sure, torment both our own and the Azerbaijani journalists as they work together on different but still essentially peace journalism projects. However, while journalists' internal censor may gnaw at their civic conscience, their professional pride and IWPR's work style itself force them to gather all the facts and testimonies, talk to all sources and provide the reader with all the information, referring to all the parties affected. Of course, this approach is not always popular with the conflicting societies. Nonetheless, professional journalists usually have a response to the various charges laid against them. This response must always be the material, the article itself. Journalists can always take the article and point to its objectivity, the tautness of its arguments; as long as the article really is based on facts, it will be hard for anyone to attack the writer. As they say, 'you cannot argue with

the truth'. The best argument against people who advocate “not washing dirty linen in public” is that it is better not to keep dirty linen in the house: if you do not wash it yourself, it will contaminate the whole house.

Of course, Armenian society has finally begun to understand and wake up to the fact that, in the age of the Internet and satellite link-ups, it is impossible to clamp down on information and indeed truth in general. This realisation has led to a surge in support for “journalists without borders” in the Armenian media environment: there is a growing number of journalists who are really indifferent as to whether their articles are read “on the opposite side” or whether they are writing together with Azerbaijanis. It is true that, so far, the Caucasian media still only has a few journalists who think this way, but a new slogan has been coined to express their professional attitude to journalism: ‘professional journalism is the best way to express your role as citizen.’

8. The importance of punctuation

One comma can change the meaning of an entire headline. A single word can turn a journalist into a patriot or a traitor. Armenian society, for the most part, is not terribly familiar with IWPR projects as a whole. Only a narrow circle of journalists is involved in projects such as the Pan-Caucasus Network of Journalists, journalist missions, joint articles, etc. Slightly more people are involved in the project “Karabakh conversations” – a discussion to which experts and representatives of political, third-sector and journalist groups are invited. Many more people simply visit the IWPR website or are on their mailing list, or indeed read the materials reprinted from IWPR in local media outlets. For example, there are certain newspapers in Armenia and in Karabakh that regularly reprint articles by Armenian and Azerbaijani authors which enable “face-to-face” dialogue, even if it is only virtual or metaphorical.

To my mind, however, “Karabakh conversations” has developed into one of the most interesting IWPR projects. It involves seminars and discussions held in Yerevan, Stepanakert and Baku to which experts are invited to give their own perspective on regional processes and their own analysis of the problems in Karabakh. They discuss prospects for the development of political processes around the Karabakh conflict, as well as their impact on regional security and public perception of countries with internal conflicts. Typical comments include: ‘Why is a British NGO hosting discussions here?’, ‘They are all spies.’ But the most important thing about these discussions is that representatives from all parts of society can familiarise themselves with specific external views of Karabakh’s problems. They themselves can express what they think and how they perceive the current situation in the Karabakh conflict and, incidentally, find out that similar projects are being held in parallel in all regions in conflict. The project provides a global perspective and reminds us that however far apart we feel, we are in fact closely linked.

Coming back to the aforementioned headline, it is still worth talking about the risks associated with IWPR projects in the region. I am not about to judge how things are proceeding between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but in Karabakh there is a certain resistance to and lack of understanding of IWPR projects. Karabakh itself, despite the fact that it has for many years been directly involved in conflict, today appears somewhat detached from what is happening all around it. International organisations seldom bother working in Karabakh today because of its non-recognised status. Moreover, the few international NGOs that are willing to work there often receive an unexpected rebuff from the people of Karabakh, who are starting to perceive a hidden meaning and subtext behind the fact that a particular organisation wants to work in Karabakh – ‘they are after something’.

This is leading to a dead-end: instead of welcoming the opportunity to say something to the international community, the people of Karabakh are in a sense digging themselves into a hole and hiding, at the same time cursing the world for its failure to understand them and feeling angry at being ignored.

Given this attitude to IWPR projects, it is worth highlighting the risks associated with participating in them. There are always a few people who will brand an Armenian journalist as a “traitor to national interests” or as a “collaborator with the British intelligence services” – as indeed has often happened throughout our collaboration within IWPR. At the same time, of course, we understood that all sides in the project would face such risks. For example, Azerbaijanis might be castigated for “collaborating with separatists”. IWPR itself is in a difficult position: in Azerbaijan, they have been accused of “capitulating” on Karabakh, while the Armenians have accused them of “artificial objectivity, neutrality and false even-handedness”. But as the saying goes, ‘who dares wins’. Moreover, such risks are reduced at certain stages: when high-ranking political leaders talk of the need for dialogue; when any high-profile peacebuilding campaigns are conducted in the region, reminding everyone that despite the difference over “nationality”, we are all human beings. Unfortunately, however, in periods of internal political upheaval in the conflict countries, ultra-nationalistic and militaristic declarations return, and peacebuilding projects are once again under threat.

However, everyone who has at one point or another been part of a project involving collaboration between journalists will at some stage have thought about the risks of these projects. They would always weigh up the question of which is more important: providing information to the world and being open and accessible to it; or burying your head in the sand and remaining content in your own little world.

When the Armenians started the movement for the unification of Karabakh and Armenia in 1988, they were ready to talk to the world and present their version of the truth. Today, many Armenians consider that the issue is settled – ‘we won the war which we did not want, and constructed a de facto state separate from Azerbaijan, so why do

we need to talk anymore with people who not only refuse to talk to us, but who also continue to threaten us?’ For their part, the Azerbaijan authorities do not wish to talk to the representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh, since they consider that any dialogue would constitute recognition. Meanwhile, the mediators have reached a dead-end: even though this is clearly a region prone to conflict, the opposite sides refuse to talk or listen to one another, even if mediators are involved in the process. The opposite sides are caught in the trap of their own propaganda and are not willing to acknowledge any development or progress by the other side. Even worse, they close their ears, take out their megaphone and refuse to listen to other people’s arguments. In this situation, mediators are forced not only to try to act as mediator in dialogue and collaboration, but also to explain their mission and the need for the mission itself. Few people in conflict regions will understand the purpose of mutual collaboration projects. Few will accept that conflict can only be resolved by talking to each other. Moreover, few people can probably imagine living in a world where there are no “lines of division” or buffer zones. How can we bring our societies to an understanding that the same people live on both sides? How can we achieve a situation where journalists cease to be soldiers in this or that army and start acting as objective observers?

9. The concept of “opposites”

The following story illustrates the concept of “opposites”. Two people were close friends in Moscow for many years. Then 1988 came and the Karabakh conflict started. One friend asked the other: ‘listen, we’ve been friends for so many years but I’ve never even asked you – are you Armenian or Azerbaijani?’ His friend replies that he is Armenian and asks, ‘What about you?’ The other friend replies, ‘I’m the opposite’.

The idea of “opposites” has become deeply rooted in our psychology. I can even remember rejecting a suggestion by one of my colleagues that we write a joint article. In response, he asked: ‘Why not? Is it because I am Azerbaijani?’ I thought to myself, it is true; relations are often strained or even dishonest with colleagues “from the other side”, sometimes even when we are collaborating on the same project. Of course, this attitude has its own subjective and objective causes, but sometimes you realise that if you perceive another person as an enemy, they will also start to perceive you in the same way – and vice versa.

Projects involving journalistic collaboration really do open up many closed doors into countries, people, possibilities and the future. Despite all the difficulties involved in working together – the failure to understand, the disputes, the risks involved – these will still give you, in my view, invaluable experience both for your mind and your heart.

Can we say that journalistic collaboration – for example within IWPR – leads to rapprochement between Armenian and Azerbaijani societies? Does it lead to peace, reconciliation and mutual understanding? It is difficult to say. Even professional mediators are unlikely to set themselves such ambitious goals, particularly in the short term. However, it is undoubtedly the case that these projects increase our knowledge about each other and make the distance between us seem smaller. Of course, the process is still moving forward and we are all learning. The Armenians and Azerbaijanis alike are still learning to see each other's concerns and to understand the motives of the "opposite" side. Our mediators are also learning – to see the two sides' fears and concerns and to understand how to continue their work. This is essential because, despite everything, this sometimes thankless task still opens doors and brings in some much-needed fresh air.

At one of IWPR's training sessions, we were taught never to end an article with vague words such as 'only time will tell'. However, I do think that time really will tell how necessary these first efforts at collaboration were. These efforts may not have replaced warmongering and militarism in our societies; but, after all, if we look at the present situation from a historical perspective, we have gone through some 15 years since the armed conflict, which is still not a very long time for a transformation in historical terms.

So, what can we do to ensure that ambitious goals produce ambitious results? One objective should be to widen the circle of people, the number of articles, the number of journalist missions to each other's countries, opening the floodgates of information. A second objective should be to look out for mediators and generate enthusiasm among everyone around you for the idea of mediation. The more mediators and mediation projects there are in all conflict zones, the more able the mediators will be to bring about real change in conflict societies. At the same time, as the years go by, societies themselves are transformed and mediators adapt to them, becoming flexible on entrenched positions and their stereotypes. Perhaps the time has already come to suggest to mediators that they widen their activity: for example, initiating joint media on the ground with local journalists, teaching them and at the same time accepting their experience of the conflict.

I do not think that there is, as yet, any prospect of creating an Armenian-Azerbaijani shared and unbiased media organisation. However, combining media and mediation organisations (for example an IWPR Karabakh, IWPR Armenia and IWPR Azerbaijan) could, I think, be the basis for a second stage – the creation of a regional media organisation already accustomed to working objectively and honestly. Whatever we might say today about the difficulties concerning how collaboration projects are perceived in our conflict countries, it is still worth repeating to all mediators and active participants in mediation projects that this is truly great work that, even if not visible today, will certainly bear fruit in the future. It is also important to note that evidence is starting to emerge of people in our countries who do not always perceive everyone as "opposites".

CHAPTER 16

The Institute for War and Peace Reporting: Media and Peacebuilding

Shahin Rzayev

1. About the author

When I introduce myself to other delegates at conferences and forums, I often start by saying that ‘I was an electromechanical engineer in a past life’. I graduated from the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy and worked for six years as a teacher at the faculty of industrial automation in my home country. I would never have imagined therefore that I would end up working as a journalist or on conflict resolution. As with many people of my generation, my life changed abruptly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the start of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. At that time, a teacher’s salary did not even cover the most basic needs and I had to “moonlight”, i.e. find extra jobs to make ends meet. One of these extra jobs involved managing the digital version of *Istiglal* (“Independence”), the newspaper of the Social Democratic Party. The paper was edited by Zardusht Alizade, now a famous political scientist and human rights defender. It was Zardusht who suggested that I try writing articles for the newspaper. I started by writing about problems in the education sector and then, with a group of like-minded people, started to issue a youth supplement called *Tekamyul* (“Evolution”). This drew me into human rights activities; I started attending conferences, including some international ones, and worked my way up (or down, if you like) to the post of administrator/manager at the British Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR).

I mention this to warn readers that I do not think, and have never thought, of myself as a professional “conflictologist” (peace practitioner) or even as a journalist. So I would ask readers not to view this article as a piece of academic research into mediation and conflict resolution. I would just like to share some of the experiences I have encountered over a long period of direct involvement in a number of peacebuilding projects from 1991 to 2010.

2. First peacebuilding efforts

The first peacebuilding initiative I was involved in took place in the summer of 1994, just over a month after the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. Around 10 or so young activists from the Azerbaijan division of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly walked across the mined section of the Azerbaijan-Armenian border in the Kazakh district and met their Armenian counterparts on Armenian territory in the Idzhevansk district. At that time, it was far easier to arrange meetings of this kind than today. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the central governments in both countries, but particularly in Azerbaijan following the coup in June 1993, had much more important things on their mind than pressuring NGOs. Quite the reverse in fact: they were keen to use any means at their disposal to reinforce their legitimacy. Secondly, there were hardly any people foolhardy enough to take such a dangerous step at that time.

The most important thing for me personally were the trips by Azerbaijani journalists to Armenia (1997) and Nagorno-Karabakh (1998), which were made within projects funded by the Swiss organisation Cimera. These were the first visits by Azerbaijani journalists “across the frontline” since the ceasefire agreement. We did not encounter any problems when we talked about professional issues, but there was some tension when we discussed the conflict itself. At times, this even led to official protests: one day, for example, the Azerbaijan delegation left the conference hall in protest at the presence on the desk of symbols of the non-recognised Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. To prevent excesses of this kind, before every meeting the heads of the delegations, supported by the Swiss facilitators, had to go through a painstaking process of clarifying the most minor details. They even had to go so far as to compile a list of unacceptable contentious words (aggressor, separatist, genocide, nomads, etc.) and a precise nomenclature for geographical terms (Artsakh/Karabakh, Basarkechar/Vardenis, Gökçe/Sevan, Stepanakert/Khankendi, etc.).

Strange as it may seem, in the 1990s we had far more opportunities to communicate freely with ordinary people on the streets and to choose our own routes (accompanied, of course, by colleagues, but without security personnel). The same applied to Armenian journalists visiting Baku, Azerbaijan’s capital city. One example is the story of how my friend and colleague Mark Grigoryan (today a journalist with the Russian service of the BBC in London) visited Baku and talked to local residents accompanied only by me. Mark went into a souvenir shop and asked the assistant: ‘Aren’t you surprised that I, an Armenian, have come to Baku?’ She replied: ‘If your intentions are good, you are welcome.’ We had a similar experience in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. When a *shawarma* seller (sells Arabic sandwich-like wraps) realised we were from Azerbaijan, he refused point-blank to take any money since he himself had been born in Baku. Of course, I do not want to idealise the situation – there were also opposing examples where we encountered hostility. But I do not want to dwell too much on those here.

These joint visits were also welcomed at the highest levels. In Yerevan, we were received by Robert Kocharyan (then prime minister and later president of Armenia) and our Armenian colleagues were received by Heydar Aliyev (then president of Azerbaijan). He once expressed his attitude to these “journalistic exchanges” saying: ‘The fact that journalists have undertaken these exchanges serves our strategic goal. I see this not as a meeting between journalists but as a link in the chain of actions which we have to implement in order to establish peace in the Caucasus.’¹

Things began to change after Aliyev’s death in 2003. The new President – his son Ilham Aliyev – stated publicly that he was not interested in so-called “people-to-people diplomacy”. The number of visits fell sharply and even when people did go, their every step was controlled by the host country’s security personnel “for security purposes”.

¹ Taken from an article that appeared in the newspaper *Bakinskiy Rabochiy*, 3rd June 1999.

It was during these visits that I joined the informal pan-Caucasus peacebuilding network that we referred to affectionately as “the get-together” (*tusovka*). I also participated in the Caucasus Forum, in International Alert’s youth training projects and finally started working with IWPR, which I describe in more detail below.

3. Nature and objectives of IWPR projects in Azerbaijan

IWPR has been working in Azerbaijan for over a decade now, managing purely journalism-related projects as well as projects with a peacebuilding slant. I am not particularly fond of the term “peacebuilding journalism”, as real journalism will always be objective and impartial, which in my view already covers most of what peacebuilding is about. If a journalist starts carrying out orders to provide propaganda and publish facts selectively, they are no longer a real journalist but an agitator, which is another profession entirely.

IWPR’s projects in the Caucasus focus on three main areas: a) training local journalists; b) publishing articles, various newspapers and supplements, including cross-border publications; and c) journalistic missions to neighbouring countries.

Training

The ultimate purpose of our training sessions is to teach local journalists, in particular young journalists, how to write articles that meet international standards. Over more than a decade, in Azerbaijan alone, we have held more than a hundred of these training events. These have included multilateral events attended by representatives from the different regions in the Caucasus and including representatives of the “non-recognised regions”. Local journalists attending these events did not always accept the guidelines of the international trainers, even the most seasoned journalists. For example, one young journalist from the Azerbaijani newspaper *Zerkalo* (“Mirror”), defending his writing style, once made the following comparison: ‘Foreign trainers remind me of the man lost in the desert with one jug of water. They would rather drink all the water at once and see what happens. But we take tiny sips to make our supplies last the whole journey.’ He was objecting to the international practice of concentrating the entire essence of an article in the first few paragraphs, in contrast to the Soviet school of journalism which preferred to save the “point” of the article to the end. However, the journalists themselves later acknowledged that they had learnt a great deal from these training sessions. One former training participant, Idrak Abbasov from the newspaper *Ayna* who now holds the award “Best reporter in Azerbaijan”, remarked as follows: ‘Since attending your training session, I routinely check and recheck all my facts thoroughly and I always try to maintain a balance even at the expense of efficiency.’

IWPR is currently running the project “Neighbours”, in which young journalists from Azerbaijan and Armenia attend joint training sessions. These sessions are later used as the basis for parallel articles on a topic of equal interest to the youth audience in both countries (such as problems finding work, education, leisure activities, etc.). This project involves young (no older than 25 years of age) Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists working together on common issues. On the basis of their work together, supplements consisting of about 8–10 articles are prepared and published simultaneously in the Armenian and Azerbaijani press. The main idea behind the project is to attempt to overcome the image of “the enemy” in the minds of young, talented journalists – the easiest way to do this is through shared collective work.

Articles and print supplements

The main product from our work is articles written by journalists who have gone through our training sessions. The articles are published on IWPR’s website² and in special supplements placed inside popular local newspapers (such as *Zerkalo*, *Obozrevatel* and *Alma*). The purpose of publishing these supplements is to provide a platform in the popular capital city editions for young people from both sides of the conflict to write on current topics according to international standards.

We currently publish supplements under the youth project “Neighbours”. Since the project started, seven supplements have been published, each four pages long, in the Baku newspapers *Alma* (“Apple”) and *Aina* (“Mirror”), and in the Yerevan newspaper *168 chasov* (“168 hours”). Each supplement deals with one issue, such as social problems, education, the environment or tourism. There are plans to have reports in the future on more “sensitive” topics, such as national minorities, freedom of speech and conflict resolution.

Cross-border projects

The main feature that distinguishes our work from comparable projects is our cross-border articles and investigative journalism. IWPR is currently the only organisation in the Caucasus to have conducted joint investigations of this type for print and electronic media. Our partners from *Internews* do the same for electronic media.

Our website statistics show that these joint cross-border articles are the most popular with readers. We have written Armenian-Azerbaijani, Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Armenian, Georgian-Azerbaijani and multilateral articles. The most popular were the joint articles during the August 2008 war, when Georgian and Ossetian authors, despite the drama of the situation, were able to get together and write an objective feature on the events.

² See <http://www.iwpr.net>.

Other topics for joint articles include the problems of national minorities, shared environmental problems, disputes over architectural monuments and problems with energy.

I would like to use one example to show how these joint articles are compiled. The most recent example of collaboration was an article on the violation of the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh. A journalist from Nagorno-Karabakh, Karine Ohanyan, wrote a feature directly from the site where the events occurred; another journalist from Baku, Sabukhi Mammedli, wrote his piece after collecting comments from Azerbaijani politicians and officials; and I, as the editor, with the consent of Seda Muradyan, my colleague in Yerevan, combined it all into one article. I then sent a working version out to all the journalists involved in producing the articles and also to an editor in Yerevan. They inserted their comments and corrections and, subsequently, the agreed version of the article was sent off to London to the chief editor of IWPR's Caucasus service.

However, joint work has not always gone as smoothly as it did on this occasion. There have been times when one of the authors, or sometimes even two, have categorically rejected a paragraph or sentence and have threatened to refuse to publish their name under the version suggested by the editor. In these cases, we had to conduct what almost amounted to diplomatic negotiations on Skype or MSN and search for compromises, sometimes with the involvement of the London editor. In the majority of cases, we have managed to reach a compromise. I remember a number of occasions, however, when it was decided to divide one joint article into two separate ones, one from each side, since the authors could not come to a unified position. On such occasions, we usually also published a third, neutral article written by the London editor or, in the Azerbaijani-Armenian case, by the Tbilisi editor.

Journalistic missions

The next area of our work is the so-called “missions”. When significant events occur, IWPR gives partner media organisations from neighbouring countries and regions the opportunity to send their journalists to the epicentre of the events and to prepare a report directly from the site where the event occurred. Significant events may be elections, natural disasters or military incidents. The missions can also occasionally not be linked to any event, but simply relate to a topic such as “religious extremism in Azerbaijan” or “national minorities in Georgia”. Generally, these missions are staffed by more experienced journalists who do not need to be trained in journalistic practice, although training in peace theory and the topic of that specific mission is provided.

4. Selection methods for project participants

We do not have one standard method specially developed to select participants for training sessions and missions. When selecting, we rely on our experience and recommendations from friends and acquaintances, along with representatives from our partner NGOs with experience of working on similar projects. During the selection of participants for the journalist missions, we also consider the candidate's previous articles.

If selection is being conducted on an “open call” basis, in the majority of cases the number of applicants will exceed the number of vacancies; in such cases, we will have a discussion with the shortlisted candidates. The discussions are usually attended by the office administrator and one of our more experienced contributors, as well as me.

By way of an example, we can look more closely at the selection process used for participants in the “Neighbours” youth project. A call was sent out by email to all media organisations and partner NGOs and it was also published on the social network Facebook, where many young journalists and bloggers are represented. Young journalists under 25 years of age were invited to participate. We took the deliberate decision that young journalists would be the ones mainly implementing this project. This is largely because most young people, unlike middle-aged and older people, have not yet come entirely under the influence of rigid stereotypes. They are still interested in working out for themselves what people are telling them or trying to foist on them.

Of course, knowledge of one or two foreign languages, particularly Russian or English, was required. There was a very stringent check on tolerance, since for the majority of the young people this would be the first time they had left Azerbaijan and they would immediately find themselves in a group with representatives of the opposite side in the conflict. We check for tolerance by asking participants to tell us how they see the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem and the role of journalists in reporting the conflict. We then ask whether they could work in the same group with their Armenian counterparts and how they would behave if an unexpected conflict situation were to arise. If the candidates' answers satisfy the reviewers, we then arrange a one-day training session on conflict theory for those undergoing selection and invite an experienced expert from our partner NGOs (the Institute for Peace and Democracy, the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, the Azerbaijan Human Rights Centre, etc.). During the training, the expert also assesses the candidates' capacities and based on all the evaluations, the director of the office (in other words me) makes the final decision on the composition of the group.

The first training session was attended by five journalists. During later training, this core was retained, although there was some rotation of members. I am pleased to say that no “emergency” situations occurred between the young journalists from Azerbaijan and Armenia. Any differences were purely creative, despite the fact that at the very first

training session, the young people were separated from the supervisors (my colleague Seda Muradyan and I) and talked almost until morning about the most diverse topics, including some “highly explosive” ones. Luckily, however, the open discussion did not make further collaboration more difficult – in fact, it actually helped it. I think this was also helped by us selecting the right participants and by the training the group received beforehand from the trainers and facilitators. We do not have any special secrets or exclusive expertise; we simply talked to the group and told them about our past experiences, giving examples and advice.

Factors accounting for the project’s success included: the mutual trust established between the group supervisors (this trust was the result of many years of joint collaboration) and directly between the participants; support from the donors; and the professionalism of the trainers and facilitators. But I would say that, without doubt, the most important factor contributing to the success of the project was the participants’ burning desire to obtain new knowledge and skills and their openness to working in an international environment.

5. Problems, risks and concerns

The main problem facing our projects is the, as yet, unresolved conflicts. We are not able to move freely around the whole region. Nor are we able to contact our Armenian colleagues by telephone; the main means of communication is the Internet. The absence of a telephone link between our countries occasionally delays verification of various facts when preparing joint materials.

The language barrier is also a problem. Middle-aged and older journalists speak Russian fluently, but younger people sometimes find it difficult to communicate. For example, two girls in our group speak English better than Russian. But this is not the main problem: participants sometimes start a conversation in one language, then switch imperceptibly to another, if necessary asking for certain words to be translated directly from their native language.

The project and the supplements we publish are received in different ways by the public in Azerbaijan. Firstly, in Azerbaijan any attempt to arrange contact with our Armenian colleagues is fiercely condemned by the government and zealous patriots. We, the older generation of peacebuilding journalists, are no strangers to this type of pressure. However, this time we had quite young people with us and we had no right to risk their reputations. Consequently, we more than once talked to their families and to editors of the newspapers where they worked, trying to reduce the negative reaction which might theoretically arise in relation to these youngsters. We also informed the local authorities of our project to prevent them accusing us later of covert collaboration with the “enemy”.

Before each measure, we sent out press releases to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to the Socio-Political Department of the Presidential Office. We also occasionally asked for an audience and personally informed interested ministry officials of our projects. Of course, we were also protected through the British embassy, which oversees most of our projects, but fortunately their assistance and protection were never required.

There were naturally some negative articles and accusations against us – not from the authorities, which we had feared, but from the nationalists, via the opposition newspaper *Yeni Müsavat*. These articles made claims something along the lines that some people were selling out the mother country's interests for money and that we were publishing articles jointly with the Armenians. We did not think it was necessary to respond to such foolishness, following the Persian proverb 'silence is the best response to a fool'.

Some articles published in the local press met with threats and insults. For example, in 2005 I published an article in the newspaper *Realny Azerbaijan*, entitled "Devaluation of heroism". In the article, I criticised the idealisation of an Azerbaijani officer who killed his Armenian colleague while training in Budapest. After this, a programme on what was at the time the main mouthpiece for those advocating war – the private TV company ANS – showed me shaking hands with the President of Armenia and accused me and other NGO people of lacking in patriotism. I responded to this with another article in which I once again repeated my position. Other well-known and authoritative journalists then spoke out defending me. Moreover, when the officer in question was sentenced, some of the former critics acknowledged that the company had been mistaken in glorifying what was a criminal act.

6. Results, expectations and prospects

Despite all the external and internal difficulties we encountered, we consider that our youth project was a success. The results achieved by the project participants, in fact, even exceeded our expectations. The outcomes were quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative outcomes were six supplements of four pages each published over 16 months. A total of 54 articles were published in these supplements, of which 29 were Azerbaijani and 25 Armenian. In Armenia, these figures were a little different, as more Armenian articles were published there since sometimes there was not enough space in the supplements to print all the articles written. These articles were read by readers of the newspaper *Alma*, which has a circulation of 5,000 readers and many visitors to its internet site.

However, far more important for us were the qualitative outcomes. Our journalists learned not only how to write according to international journalistic standards, but also established relations of trust with their colleagues from Armenia. These relations are

extremely important when working on joint articles, which incidentally have already appeared and been published on the IWPR website. We hope that whatever fate befalls our participants, they will not lose the skills and contacts they have obtained during our project – consequently, this will be our crucial contribution to peacebuilding in the region.

In terms of the future, we are planning to extend our work to the sphere of so-called “new” or “social” journalism. This term refers to informational and analytical blogs on a number of online social networks. Due to the restrictions on freedom of speech in the electronic and print media, the Internet is becoming more and more important every year. The younger generation in particular is increasingly favouring the Internet. Communication between internet users from a number of countries and regions on opposite sides of conflicts has not yet been studied adequately. There have not yet been any peacebuilding projects targeting the “blogosphere”, but this is not surprising since this sector is the youngest and most rapidly growing one. The main problem facing this area is a lack of professionalism. Therefore, we think it would be worthwhile to run a series of training sessions for selected bloggers and to create a peacebuilding network in the area of “new media”. This would be a logical progression from our work and an interesting way of “passing the baton” on to the younger generation.

PART 7

Gender and Mediation

CHAPTER 17

The Peacebuilding Experience of the Caucasus Women's League

Natella Akaba

1. Early beginnings

The idea of creating a “Caucasus Forum” – a loose network of civil society leaders from the Caucasus regions – originally emerged at a meeting within the project “Confidence building between Georgian and Abkhaz societies”, managed by the British NGO International Alert. The idea sparked off a lively and promising series of meetings attended by journalists, young people, former combatants and women. The networking format provided an atmosphere of mutual understanding where any issues could be discussed, despite occasional awkward moments.

At the same time, a “women’s movement” was run within the same project, coordinated on the Georgian side by Marina Pagava and on the Abkhaz side by me. A recurring topic of these women’s meetings was whether there was a specific “woman-oriented approach” or whether women had “their own response” to all the new challenges. This gave the coordinators the idea of developing the women’s movement into a separate organisation independent of the project. During periods of armed conflict, women face a complex situation where they are often left to bear the burden of caring for their family on their own. However, the cessation of hostilities and the post-war recovery period can present them with a unique opportunity to improve their situation and build a new society on the basis of gender equality. Many countries undergo radical changes in government in post-war periods. If the reforms are truly democratic, a key component will be the replacement of policies that discriminate against women with policies that promote gender equality. It is an opportunity that simply should not be missed.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the armed conflicts which had ravaged a number of regions across the Caucasus “froze”, many women in the Caucasus were galvanised into action. There seemed to be a genuine opportunity to build a just and humane peace. Without wishing to overstate the case, I would suggest that women are in general more sensitive than men to issues of inequality and injustice. I would certainly argue that peace agreements would stand a much better chance of bringing about a lasting, just peace if they were designed by women. Far from being seen purely as victims of the conflict, I would suggest that women deserve to be recognised for who they are: a valuable resource that can be used to build peace.

This was the thinking behind the launch of a dialogue between Abkhaz and Georgian women, supported by International Alert. The first meeting was held in Sochi. As we talked over our impressions following that meeting, Marina Pagava and I felt it would be a good idea to cast our net wider by inviting women from other regions of the Caucasus. We were of course heavily influenced by the example of the recently established Caucasus Forum. I was personally also influenced by a lecture given by the distinguished Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung when he visited the South Caucasus. In his lecture, he spoke very interestingly about the role of women in the demilitarisation of their

countries and about micro-construction projects in the South Caucasus. He floated the idea of a Women's Parliament of the South Caucasus composed of women leaders from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Although, to my mind, there were six entities rather than three in the South Caucasus, the basic idea seemed very promising, especially if it could extend across the whole Caucasus region.

The Caucasus Forum (Forum), like Alert itself, responded positively to our proposal to organise a meeting of women leaders of civil society from the different regions of the Caucasus. Marina and I were asked to organise a meeting of the Forum in Sochi, since this would be the most convenient location for all delegates. As we started to prepare, the first question that inevitably arose was who to invite. Along with colleagues from the Forum, Marina and I started chasing up women activists from Caucasian NGOs whom we either knew or had come across at conferences or training sessions. Some were only too pleased to accept the invitation. Others said they were too busy but nominated colleagues to represent them.

2. Creation of the Women's League

On 10th September 2001, all 19 women from various parts of the Caucasus and also from Moscow, as well as the Alert coordinator from London, met in a conference hall at a sanatorium in Adler, Sochi. Discussions were held in a very warm atmosphere and addressed issues such as the need for a pan-Caucasus women's organisation, the form such an organisation might take and the message it would want to give to the Caucasus and the international community. The women were enthusiastic and respectful of each other's views. These constructive discussions continued into the second day. Then, as we separated for a short break, we suddenly saw the scenes of the terrorist attack on New York on our television screen – it was 11th September. We all went back to the conference hall shocked by what we had seen. Ideas started to flow thick and fast. We felt that what had just happened in the US simply confirmed the need for us to act. We tried to predict what impact these events might have on the Caucasus. On 13th September, the delegates unanimously passed the Declaration of the Caucasus Women's League (the League), announcing the launch of the new network. We agreed to try to extend the network to cover the whole region by making contact with women's organisations in the republics of the North Caucasus and some parts of Southern Russia which were not represented at the Sochi meeting (e.g. the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia). All the other regions of the Caucasus were represented at the Sochi meeting.

So, on 14th September, after the official photograph, we went our separate ways full of ideas and plans to take home with us. There was a huge range of ideas, some of which were very ambitious: to create a Caucasus Women's Parliament; to establish a

pan-Caucasus women's journal (or even television channel); and to call on all leaders of the Caucasus to institute a "Pan-Caucasus Day without War", when a complete ceasefire would be enforced throughout the zones of military action. In response to a proposal from one of our delegates, who was being persecuted in her home country for her activities in defending human rights, it was decided that the League would issue public statements in support of its activists in critical situations.

3. Challenges and successes of the League

Today, we might view some of these plans with a certain amount of scepticism, given that it was such a complicated period for the Caucasus (though it has long been a complex area). The already difficult situation was further complicated by numerous other factors, including: the continuing military action in Chechnya; the rise in militarism and aggression across the Caucasus; the permanent instability in the Gal district on the border in Abkhazia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone; the situation in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia; and the Ossetia-Ingush conflict.

The sudden closure of borders between countries in the Caucasus and the blockades in place in a number of regions, along with the poor communications (the Internet was not as accessible then as it is now) all made the situation extremely complex. Face-to-face contact between citizens in the different countries of the Caucasus became impossible. The weaknesses and divisions within civil society, combined with the excesses of the various security forces, made it extremely difficult to implement the nascent League's ambitious plans. However, at the time, we really felt that women would somehow be able to rise above official politics and national prejudices, beyond dividing lines and enmities, to formulate their own, women-oriented interests and objectives. This, we felt, would lead to peace in the Caucasus and a victory for justice. Our rather romantic enthusiasm combined with our unwillingness to compromise may well have contributed to the League's downfall. But we did genuinely want to change the lives of the people of the Caucasus for the better.

At the second meeting, held in Sochi on 4th–9th March 2002, the League started to focus more clearly on organisational development issues. The organisational structure was approved, consisting of a Coordination Council made up of 11 representatives from the various regions of the Caucasus, an Executive Secretary (to be appointed later) and delegates. The latter were defined as anyone who had attended at least one event organised by the League, since we wanted to emphasise the fact that the League was a loose network that any organisation could join. Two petitions were also approved at that meeting. One was directed to the Secretary General of the United Nations (at the time Kofi Annan). It called on the UN to demonstrate its support for the League's peacebuilding initiatives and to help promote women's interests in the Caucasus. The second petition was directed at the presidents of Russia and the countries of the South

Caucasus, as well as leaders of the North Caucasus republics and regions, and leading global and regional organisations (UN, OSCE, etc.). The League activists demanded a halt to hostilities in Chechnya and also proposed that 1st June (International Children's Day) be renamed International Day Without War. It proposed that a ceasefire be declared in all zones of military action on that day to give children all over the planet at least one day of peace and calm. I am sorry to say that we had no response to either letter. This deafening silence from those we considered our friends was incredibly disempowering. We should of course have written back demanding a response to the petitions. Instead, we simply gave up.

However, there were victories too. We managed to protect one of our coordinators from a certain South Caucasus country when her office was subjected to an attack, clearly orchestrated at a senior level. The attack was made by a group of so-called patriots who accused our colleague of betraying the national interests simply by participating in a peacebuilding project. The rest of the League's coordinators acted swiftly, compiling a letter to the head of state, collecting signatures via email and sending it to the country's presidential administration. In the letter, we protested against the persecution of our colleague and asked for her to be given protection. Similar letters were sent to female parliamentary delegates in the same country. All the campaigns against this woman subsequently stopped.

However, we did all tend to overestimate our own capabilities and to be overly optimistic about the prospects for a rapid resolution of the conflicts, and the chances of collaborating with the authorities in our countries as well as the bureaucracies of the global and regional institutions. For some reason, we thought at the outset that the international organisations would leap at the chance of working with the League, given that it was the only women's network uniting women from both the "recognised" and "unrecognised" states in the South Caucasus, as well as entities in the Russian Federation. The League's unique position, we thought, had to be a huge incentive for the serious players involved in conflict resolution and promoting democracy in the Caucasus to provide active support for our efforts. However, we did not receive any particular response from them, nor were there any results from our subsequent meetings with the EU, the OSCE and UN officials. When we did finally manage to obtain an audience with them, they would listen politely to our proposals and initiatives for peacebuilding and confidence building, promise to examine them and then promptly disappear. It was only Alert and later the Heinrich Böll Foundation that took an interest in our initiatives and supported them.

4. Joint workshop for peace

Meanwhile, instability in the Caucasus persisted and the sides in the conflict adopted increasingly radicalised positions. We started to think about ways of making the politicians listen to the voices of women from civil society. In the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict,

an urgent priority at the time was to urge the political leaders to sign an agreement on the non-resumption of hostilities. This document had been on the table at the official negotiations for several years, but negotiators had been sidetracked by endless discussions on preconditions. We thought that if women from civil society from both sides of the conflict approached the politicians through a common platform and common calls to action, it would be difficult for the officials to continue to claim, as they had been doing, that their societies were unwilling to make compromises. We knew that politicians would never generally invite women to attend the official negotiations, since only officials were permitted at the negotiating table. If there were no women officials, they would say ‘there is nothing we can do about that’. To get around this, the representatives of civil society from Georgia and Abkhazia approached the heads of the official delegations at the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations with a proposal for a joint workshop. It was designed to look as if we, the women, had invited them to our own event. All this would have been impossible without the support of Alert. An important point is that the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone, Heidi Tagliavini, and her deputy Roza Otunbayeva (it is striking that both are women) welcomed this idea in every way possible. They even promised to send their own representative to the workshop, although they later backed out for some reason.

The workshop was therefore seen as an event hosted by the Caucasus Women’s League, even though it dealt with the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Since it would not have been realistic to expect all the conflicts in the Caucasus to be covered at a single meeting, this first meeting was to focus on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In fact, the meeting coincided with a flurry of diplomatic activity between the Georgian and Abkhaz governments. From the League, Larisa Sotieva from Vladikavkaz was invited to attend with observer status. Marina and I were worried up to the last minute that the Abkhaz and Georgian officials might suddenly withdraw for any number of reasons, either because they were forbidden to attend by their superiors or diverted by more important matters. In any event, the workshop did take place and was conducted with the full moral support and resources of Alert within the project “Confidence building between the Georgian and Abkhaz societies”. The workshop was held on 24th–25th July 2003 in the small town of Farnham near London. Marina and I, along with the Alert coordinators, developed the agenda in advance. After agonising over the workshop title and how to avoid politically sensitive topics, we finally decided on the following title: “Caucasus Women’s League workshop on official negotiations and civil diplomacy: collaboration in the name of peace.” To avoid conflicts, we did not list delegates’ official titles and agreed that all officials would be attending in a purely private capacity. It would otherwise have been difficult to avoid disputes over terminology, which all too often is a bone of contention. Two agenda items were agreed: 1) the situation in the Gal district of Abkhazia, notoriously one of the most sensitive and problematic points in Abkhaz-Georgian relations; and 2) the need to sign the agreement on the non-resumption of hostilities.

The head of the Association of Women of the Gal district, Tina Ketsbaya, was invited to attend. She was given every opportunity to present her view of the district's most acute problems and how to resolve them. Other NGO activists from Georgia and Abkhazia also took part in the discussion. The heads of both official delegations to the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations at the time, Sergei Shamba and Malkhaz Kakabadze (then Georgia's envoy for special assignments), and the two other Abkhaz and Georgian officials behaved very democratically, speaking to the representatives of civil society as equals. The workshop was also attended by British experts acting as observers, along with staff from the UK Foreign Office and researchers.

The first day focused on what civil society in Abkhazia and Georgia could do, in particular the women's NGOs, to support the peace process. Discussions covered the most pressing day-to-day problems facing Georgian returnees to the Gal district. The delegates agreed that civil society could make a serious contribution to the resolution of these problems and noted some specific actions that could be taken, such as: providing textbooks for the district's schools; conducting teacher training; organising children's leisure activities (opening a children's library, sports clubs, etc.); and repairing and providing equipment for the municipal hospital. It was also noted that sending professionals to the Gal district police (militia) and upgrading the equipment available to law enforcement bodies would help in the fight against local criminals and criminals coming into district from the cross-border regions. All these measures would help to resolve the day-to-day problems facing the returnees and thus enhance human security.

It became even clearer from the Farnham workshop that women are naturally inclined to pay more attention to "detail" (in fact, the main aspects affecting people's day-to-day life). Clearly, if diplomats at all levels had listened to women's voices, they would have realised that the peace process has to start with renovating schools and hospitals, fixing water pipes, equipping the police and everything that directly affects people's quality of life, meeting their basic needs and allowing them to live in peace.

During the discussions, the Abkhaz delegates also touched on the problem of international guarantees of the non-resumption of hostilities. They insisted that without such guarantees, it is impossible to talk about confidence-building measures which are an essential component of peaceful conflict resolution. This view was also supported by the representatives of Georgian civil society. They agreed that long-term peace is possible only if the two societies overcome their mutual antagonism and mistrust. This would certainly be facilitated by the creation of reliable international mechanisms for the non-resumption of war. During the discussions, the Georgian and Abkhaz delegates submitted a proposal to Alert for the organisation of an international conference on security guarantees. It was decided to start recruiting international experts in this field to attend such a conference and to start the preparatory work.

After this meeting, the women from the League were full of optimism. We were convinced that civil society activists could work with officials from the conflicting parties to develop entirely new approaches and make decisions which more closely reflected the real needs and interests of ordinary citizens. However, we were prevented from going on to establish lasting contacts with the officials and converting these outline plans into specific, realistic actions. A few months after the Farnham workshop, the so-called “Rose Revolution” took place in Georgia and a whole new set of people came to power. Although the new Georgian leaders had come to power amidst democratic slogans, their attitude to civil society initiatives can only be described as frosty. Relations between Sukhum and Tbilisi also worsened, which did not help peacebuilding activities.

5. Mobile Group project

Another successful initiative was the “Mobile Group” project – an idea which originated at one of the League meetings. The Heinrich Böll Foundation office for the South Caucasus liked the idea and agreed to fund the project. It focused on forming mobile groups for exchange visits between League activists across the regions of the Caucasus. The idea was to advocate women’s interests, and demonstrate support for and strengthen the authority of the League members. The League’s Coordination Council took a long time to decide on the composition of the groups and the itineraries for the visits. The first (and unfortunately the last) mobile group visited Tskhinval in South Ossetia in September 2003. The members of the group met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the speaker of the South Ossetian parliament. Our women gave an interview recorded on state television; this was followed by a trip to a remote mountain village, a meeting with local women and finally a visit to a resettlement centre for Ossetian refugees from Georgia. One of the underlying aims was to demonstrate solidarity with the women of South Ossetia and the League coordinator personally. When the members of the mobile group met the officials, they tried to put across to them the importance of women’s participation in decision making and spoke about the Farnham workshop. The officials were visibly impressed.

The League’s South Ossetia coordinator, Anna Chochieva, made all the preliminary arrangements and our visit was meticulously planned. We stayed in the family homes of ordinary Tskhinval residents; this gave us a much better understanding of their problems and the bitter experiences of armed conflict. I would like to emphasise in particular that our group included a Georgian woman.

We found the experience of the mobile group very interesting and we started to plan the next trip. However, to our great disappointment, the Heinrich Böll Foundation refused to continue funding the project and generally seemed to lose interest in the League. The Foundation’s representative could not see any specific results from the mobile group project.

We felt that it would have been difficult to expect any specific results in such a short time frame. This was a great disappointment and marked the beginning of the end for the League.

6. Lessons for the future

So, why did the Caucasus Women's League come to an end so quickly?

A key factor was that not all members of the League's Coordination Council felt the same degree of responsibility for the network. Membership of the Coordination Council was free and some aspects may have appeared unfair to some people. Most members of the council were happy to participate in the actions and generate ideas, but did not make any effort to take shared ideas and plans forward. I think they assumed this was the task of the two coordinators, me and Marina, since we had been behind the creation of the League. Most likely, we simply failed to convince the other women that we, metaphorically speaking, were not the "controlling shareholders" in the League.

Another factor was perhaps our failure to impose precise selection criteria for membership of the Coordinating Council. The League was well down on the list of priorities for our colleagues, since they were all working in their own NGOs. They were not particularly keen on, or simply did not have the time for, getting involved in routine work such as writing project proposals and finding donors. You could say that the League's "Achilles' heel" was the failure to recruit committed regional coordinators.

This lack of commitment may also have been due to the fact that the League failed to attract the interest of serious donors and stakeholders. Officials from international organisations may well have seen it as an Abkhaz-Georgian initiative rather than one covering the whole of the Caucasus, since it was the Georgian and Abkhaz coordinators who were most active in promoting the League projects. Donors may also have been put off by the high costs of running pan-Caucasus projects and the difficulties of managing and monitoring them.

The general political situation was not conducive to pan-Caucasus collaboration. In 2001, armed bands of North Caucasians led by Gelayev tried to invade Abkhazia from Georgia. In 2004, the "young democrats" who had come to power in Georgia following the Rose Revolution made an unsuccessful attempt to return South Ossetia by force. In other armed conflict zones, tensions rose and positions became increasingly radicalised. With the North Caucasus in turmoil, the influence of radical Islam grew. This alarmed Russia, whose security forces began to view the activities of Western foundations and institutes as dangerous. In this context, the costs of "people-to-people" diplomacy and exchange visits between representatives of the conflicting parties increased. Meanwhile, attempts by civil society activists to continue collaborating with the authorities failed.

Finally, just as the birth of the League was bound up in many ways with the launch of the Caucasus Forum, the decline of the Forum also played a role in disbanding it. Fatigue and pessimism set in as instability continued. At the same time, the ubiquitous rise of authoritarianism undermined the strength and influence of civil society across the region. But the League's basic idea of women's solidarity and joint peacebuilding in the Caucasus was very positive. We hope that one day others will take up where we left off.

CHAPTER 18

The Caucasus Women's League: Five Years On

Marina Pagava

*'We cannot do great things.
We can only do small things with great love.'*

Mother Teresa

1. Background

The armed conflicts of the early 1990s led to an upheaval in traditional gender relations. Women in the Caucasus were forced to re-evaluate their own distinctive role and needs. The challenges of surviving in complex post-conflict situations, often in resettlement centres, saw women mobilising their capacities to adapt, innovate and find pragmatic solutions. Once they had developed successful personal survival strategies, many women turned to more ambitious plans in the social and public sector. Women's NGOs started to appear in the Caucasus. Although their activities varied widely, they were united by one idea – a desire to participate in and influence public life.

By the late 1990s, the topic of women and gender had become a priority for international organisations. The Beijing Conference (1995), the Hague Appeal for Peace (1999) and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) drew the attention of global public opinion and governments to the special needs of women and girls in armed conflict and post-conflict processes. In particular, it urged them to ensure the 'increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts' (UNSC Resolution 1325).¹

The international community acknowledged the special needs of women and girls, as well as the specific opportunities for women in post-conflict peacebuilding and in building bridges of trust between the conflicting sides. International developments thus mirrored processes occurring in the Caucasus, as political and social disasters jolted women out of their familiar frameworks and onto the informal stage through NGOs.

This also coincided with attempts to set up a Georgian-Abkhaz civil dialogue process. With organisational support and facilitation provided by International Alert, the first joint meeting of Georgian and Abkhaz NGOs was held in the summer of 1996 in Moscow. This was followed by a number of meetings on the Caucasus, including a women's meeting in Sochi in 1998.

In 1999, the Association of Women of Abkhazia (an Abkhaz NGO) held a women's conference in Pitsunda, Abkhazia. Luitgard Hammerer, who was working for Alert at the time, and I were among those invited to attend. Travelling to Abkhazia six years after the war was a new experience and one that had a huge impact on me; of course, I shared my impressions with many people when I was back in Tbilisi. In subsequent discussions with Anna Tsvinaria-Abramishvili² on how we might be able to help the peace process,

¹ Full text of the Resolution is available at http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf [36Kb PDF].

² Anna Tsvinaria-Abramishvili (1933–2008) was Deputy Director of the Centre for Cultural Relations "Caucasian House" (Director – Naira Gelashvili) and head of the NGO Foundation of Solidarity of the Caucasian Peoples. Reference is made here and throughout the article to people by the titles and positions they held at the time.

the idea of inviting women from Abkhazia to Tbilisi regularly came up. With her usual wise, no-nonsense approach Anna simply said, 'Okay, let's do it'. That is how the idea of organising a conference of Caucasus women came about.

Things then moved very fast. A campaign was being run at the time – entitled “Women Building Peace: From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table” – launched by Alert and with the participation of a number of international organisations.³ Its aim was to set up information exchanges between women's groups from conflict regions at the “grassroots” level. At the same time, it would advocate the needs and messages of women's peacebuilding initiatives at the international level. I was honoured to be chosen as the contact person in Georgia for Alert's Women's Programme. The values behind the campaign – women's participation at all levels of decision making and in peacebuilding – closely reflected our own values. Therefore, we did not have any problem with adopting the global campaign at our own regional level.

The Open Society Georgia Foundation also supported a conference on “Women of South Caucasus Participating in Peacebuilding”.⁴ The conference was organised by the Foundation of Solidarity of the Caucasian Peoples, “Help Yourself”,⁵ Caucasian House and the Caucasus Forum,⁶ whose office was then in Tbilisi and whose executive secretary was Alan Parastaev, a representative of South Ossetian civil society. Conference delegates were selected from these organisations' contacts, with the Caucasus Forum, a network with coordinators in most regions of the Caucasus, playing a major role.

The success of the conference was determined not only by the excellent preparation, motivation and commitment of the delegates. It was even more so attributed to the special atmosphere, spirit of mutual understanding and focus on unity. As one of the delegates remarked: 'Earlier I felt sidelined. Politicians were not concerned about me and meanwhile the war thundered on. I don't want that to be repeated.' These words reveal why women were so keen to come together. The delegates came from an unusually wide range of backgrounds: there were six people from Sukhumi (many of whom were there for the first time since the war), five from Tskhinvali, women from Stepanakert, Yerevan, Baku, Grozny, Makhachkala, Novocherkassk and Moscow, as well as two people from Alert.

Against the background of these international and regional processes, it seemed a very good time to launch a Caucasus women's network.

3 See mandate of campaign at <http://www.womenaction.org/global/peacebuilding.html>.

4 See details of conference (in Russian only) at <http://www.owl.ru/win/womplus/2002/events.htm>.

5 An NGO for persons displaced from Abkhazia.

6 A peacebuilding network of a number of NGOs from the North and South Caucasus and Southern Russia. See Chapters 9-11 of this volume.

The emotional but pragmatic call made at the conference for NGOs to come together might easily have been forgotten once delegates returned to their daily routines. A few months later, however, an Alert project called “Confidence building between Georgian and Abkhaz societies with the participation of the Caucasus Forum” was launched. The initiative included a women’s section and focused particularly on the creation of a network of women from the Caucasus network. The women’s section was not starting from scratch: human resources had already been mobilised and the details of the conference were already planned.

2. Development of the Women’s League

The women’s/gender section within the project was administered by two coordinators – one Georgian (Marina Pagava⁷) and one Abkhaz (Natella Akaba⁸), with Alert providing facilitation at all stages of the project process. Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan⁹ was responsible for overall project coordination, and the women’s section was facilitated by Dessy Roussanova¹⁰ and Magdalena Frichova.¹¹ Looking back after so many years, I think Alert’s policy of interacting with regional partners was extremely effective. The project provided a framework and the overall objectives, but the specific contents were left to the regional partners. This approach demonstrated respect for the partners’ life experience, professionalism and detailed local knowledge. It also acted as a stimulus for them to take on responsibilities and work creatively. The project framework objectives were as follows: to set up a Caucasus Women’s Peacebuilding Network; to enable women from conflicting sides to interact; and to work within women’s own societies. Key values were combating negative stereotypes, making contacts, and fostering trust, partnership and collaboration.

The League project included a number of activities: “large meetings”; workshops (with a limited number of delegates); working visits to Sukhumi with Alert partners; and constant internet communication between the League coordinators and with Alert.

In September 2001, at the first meeting of the women’s section, it was decided to create the Caucasus Women’s League (the League). The delegates present at the meeting, as well as a few others, went on to attend the Tbilisi conference. As mentioned earlier, most of the conference delegates had been recommended by the Caucasus Forum.

⁷ League coordinator and, from 2003, Executive Secretary of the League NGO “Help Yourself”.

⁸ League coordinator, NGO “Association of Women of Abkhazia”.

⁹ Eurasia Programme Manager at International Alert.

¹⁰ Eurasia Project Coordinator at International Alert.

¹¹ Eurasia Programme Officer at International Alert.

Similarities between the League and the Caucasus Forum

The League's genesis and development followed a similar path to that of the Forum. As the project title emphasises, the Caucasus Forum was a participant in the project. Both networks had the same international partner (Alert) and many of the League coordinators were also Forum coordinators, or belonged to organisations that had joined the Forum. This had its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were that the League was following in the footsteps of the Forum, which gave it a sense of confidence and direction. The League was also organised in a similar way to the Forum, with delegates, coordinators, a coordinating council and an executive secretary. The Forum's experience was used when discussing what was needed to make the network successful, such as definitions, rights, functions and responsibilities. The League dealt calmly and quietly with detailed questions that the Forum had only resolved following heated, seemingly endless and sometimes acrimonious debates, with every resolution hailed as a victory. Although this certainly saved time and speeded up the process, it also prevented the League from analysing the Forum's experience. Looking back, the League's attitude that "the Forum knows best" seems rather naïve to say the least.

The individuals who acted as coordinators across both networks played an important role in this process. Since the Forum had been created several years before, coordinators had seen participation in it as an opportunity to express themselves. I think now that they simply valued being part of this unique structure, the Forum. But neither the coordinators nor Alert conducted any analysis of how effective their participation in the network had been, although both the Forum and the League did discuss procedures for replacing coordinators. It is important to remember that while there was perhaps nothing wrong with the League adopting the Forum's organisational structure, defining your aims and deciding on your own identity is not something you can simply borrow from elsewhere.

Defining its identity

Coming back to the first meeting, the Declaration of the League was approved, stating: 'We, representatives of women from different parts of the Caucasus, have come together to work towards establishing lasting peace and stability on our territory ... It is time for women to cease being silent victims or detached witnesses of violence and destruction. We are convinced that women must play a more active part in defining the future of our countries and the region as a whole.'

These were sincere and good ideas. However, the delegates had little or no idea of what this would mean in practice or even how they could work together. We also used the term "peace" to embrace much more than simply the absence of war, so that the League's interests as expressed at the first meeting covered virtually all social sectors and

groups – education, health, participation in negotiations, civil society, disadvantaged groups, children, adolescents, young people, forgotten regions, ecology, etc.

At that first meeting, we did not define our priorities, although we understood perfectly well the need to be realistic. But even then, two principles emerged which were to govern the network in the future. Firstly, all proposals had to come “under the umbrella” of human rights and women’s rights; secondly, the League was to concentrate on women’s participation in preventing and managing conflicts and peacebuilding in the Caucasus. All delegates from the Caucasus were unconditionally committed to this. Delegates who did not come from the Caucasus were openly sceptical of the second aim at that first meeting and in subsequent meetings, where the feasibility of women’s participation in conflict resolution was discussed. I myself think that this attitude arose from the fact that our professional colleagues had not experienced war directly and were more at home with programmes dealing with leadership, rights, domestic violence and campaigns to involve women in local government structures.

Following the first meeting, the League began a detailed and, at times, painful process of identifying what its core identity and activities should be.

The second meeting of the League, held in March 2002, was divided into two parts, with the first part held over the first three days. It covered the topics of security in the Caucasus from a women’s perspective, Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council, and “policy” and “advocacy”. These sessions were run by the Head of Alert’s Women’s Programme, Ancil Adrian-Paul. (Mention should also be made here of the important role this programme played in supporting the coordinators of the women’s section and in including Georgian and Abkhaz women’s voices in international discussions on the role of women from conflict areas.) The next two days were devoted to organisational issues: strategy, structure, membership, communications, and rapid responses to rises in tension and ideas for projects.

The second meeting was noteworthy in that it was attended by around 10 female delegates from the South Caucasus. These delegates were sent, following consultation with the coordinators and Alert, by the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which had recently opened an office in Tbilisi. UNIFEM’s programme shared the aims of the women’s section but was restricted to the South Caucasus. Because of this, and aware of Alert’s experience of working in conflict areas, it had approached the League and Alert with a proposal that they collaborate and pool resources. The Abkhaz coordinator opposed this, arguing, as far as I remember, that since UNIFEM was based in Tbilisi, this might not go down well in Abkhazia.

I could understand this argument: I always knew that the success of the project and the standing of its coordinators depended on how the project was perceived by the widest

possible range of political and public opinion in our societies. However, I did not feel this argument applied in this case, since UNIFEM had sent women from Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the meeting and the Fund had already announced that it intended to open an office in Sukhumi. Despite this, I agreed to reject the offer. Looking back, I wonder why we took this decision on behalf of the League rather than tabling the proposal for discussion by all the coordinators. In hindsight, I wonder why we did not hold more detailed negotiations with the Fund to clarify its attitude to the unrecognised regions. In fact, UNIFEM did open an office in Sukhumi shortly afterwards and worked with women's organisations from Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. What was stopping us from talking to Alert and asking what its attitude was? And why did Alert's representatives at the meeting refrain from commenting? Were they simply maintaining a soft facilitation approach? (Alert had to work hard later to reinstate good relations with UNIFEM). Why did I agree even though I thought the proposal looked attractive?

This example illustrates my own reluctance to be firm, preferring to avoid disagreements, but also the League's lack of institutional maturity at that stage. I can recall other examples: poor decision making, avoidance of painful issues, and heavy-handed, authoritarian approaches by certain individuals at variance with the stated parity of the coordinators. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to condemn the League for its institutional immaturity. We were intoxicated by the network and our emotional commitment to it. Another reason was the organisational development process which really needed more time and more frequent meetings. The League lasted for just over three years, during which time it was financially dependent on the Alert project (apart from two initiatives I refer to below). Moreover, for the first two years, the project was allowed to organise just one League meeting a year.

One unexpected difficulty came about because the League was developed as part of a Georgian-Abkhaz confidence-building project. For most of the project, the coordinators of the women's/gender section also acted as regional coordinators. This dual role focused responsibility on these coordinators, who formed a dynamic subgroup driving the process forward and maintaining communication between the formal meetings. This was of crucial importance in creating a living, "breathing" network. But at the same time, it led to an artificial distinction between them and the other coordinators, sometimes giving them more rights within the project.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, the then Eurasia Programme Manager at Alert, was always kept informed of the process through well-organised communication and frequent trips to the region, although he did not attend meetings personally until a workshop in Moscow, where the League's third meeting was planned. There was a packed agenda for the meeting and we all felt the workshop was extremely important. Gevorg facilitated the workshop. I remember his surprise when he said, 'It's all going so quietly and smoothly'. It is true that the atmosphere at most of the League's meetings was like this, certainly in

comparison with the Forum meetings (to which I was sometimes invited). We thought at the time it was an advantage, signalling good mutual understanding. I am not sure this was always the case. Now it is clear that the League's discussions tended to avoid criticisms or passion. Perhaps this is because the coordinators, for reasons mentioned above, tended to defer to the women's section coordinators. Another factor might be the trauma resulting from armed conflict which continues to affect the professional and family life of people from the Caucasus. Perhaps too, women were exhausted by the attempt to prove to themselves and the outside world that they could work "quietly and smoothly" even in a "cross-border" network.

A new lease of life

The year 2003 marked the renaissance of the Caucasus Women's League and the Georgian-Abkhaz project. The League held its third meeting in Moscow, a workshop in Tbilisi, a mobile group in Tskhinvali and met with the official negotiators.

The third meeting of the League was attended by the Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, Roza Otunbayeva, who in her speech on the official Georgian-Abkhaz process noted that: 'I consider the Georgia-Abkhaz conflict not as "frozen" but as "warm", since an unceasing civil dialogue has been warming the thin layer of ice all these years.' We took these words to be a recognition of the efforts of civil society and its international partners.

At this meeting, the League defined its mission and strategic priorities. We realised what the League was, what it could do, and how it could do it. Using a metaphor taken from one of our colleagues, 'the League sailed out of the sea of problems, carrying with it the people it was able and willing to work with'.

The coordinators developed a systematic, logical vision of the League and framed its mission, goals and strategies. The rather dry formulations of the project represent the culmination of a process lasting almost two years in which all items of secondary importance were discarded and ideas were crystallised. They are formulated as follows.

- Mission – to strengthen the women's movement in the Caucasus and women's participation in decision making.
- Goals – women's participation in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding in the Caucasus; defending women's rights and lobbying for women's participation at all levels of decision making; the development and strengthening of civil society institutions in all countries of the Caucasus; and forming a pan-Caucasus civil space.

- Strategic directions – conflict transformation; strengthening of women; and inter-regional collaboration.

Creating an organisational identity is not a simple process for any organisation, but least of all for a Caucasus network. Although all delegates are representatives of civil society and share democratic values, they are also representatives of their own societies, which have suffered bloody conflict, loss and trauma, and where official propaganda is based on an exaggerated image of “the enemy” and “victimhood”. This meant that time was needed to create a living Caucasus network, during which items of secondary importance were discarded and the main ideas were crystallised. Human and financial resources as well as international partners were also needed.

It was also important for all players to adopt a perspective based on “lateral thinking”. Our experience was that this is something that develops with time, provided that it is perceived as just and even-handed, including all the actors’ basic needs regardless of geography and the political status of their countries (north/south, centre/region, recognised/unrecognised). The fact that the Forum and League projects were supported by mixed teams of facilitators was also important in reinforcing a spirit of collaboration and equality in the networks.

The time comes in all endeavours of this kind when there is a need to develop internal rules and formal procedures. Once detailed procedures are in place, a network becomes sustainable, with the right balance being struck between a business-like approach and an emotional commitment. For example, following the Mobile Group’s visit to Tskhinvali (a project I refer to below), many League coordinators wanted to invite it to their region. We then developed “Guidelines on Running a Mobile Group”, which laid down detailed rules.

Experiences and lessons learnt

Despite all these factors, however, the Caucasus network remained vulnerable and exposed. Individuals united by a common idea despite having personal motivations (personal and organisational advancement, success, recognition, increased security, etc.) expect the network to provide support and protection when the authorities make difficulties for them.

The network was also affected by social and political contexts, with the obligations these confer on members. By joining the network and rising above national considerations, people gradually shook off restrictive stereotypes – but they remained rooted in the national interests of their particular side of the conflict. The network depended to a large extent on its players abiding by ethical standards, complying with concepts such as honesty, partnership and loyalty to the network’s principles.

International partners are influential players in the networking process. They are needed for fundraising for expensive network projects and act as unbiased mediators, both providing stability and moving forward sensitive processes. Faced with all these factors and risks, creating a sustainable, living network – while at the same time meeting the conditions referred to above – is possible if the idealism of the participants/network is harnessed. At the same time, a pragmatic approach that does not lose sight of routine work needs to be maintained.

The League's experience has also taught us that a network should not initiate projects before it has agreed an answer to the basic questions of what it is, what it can do and how it can do it.

Indeed, the one project the League implemented before it found an answer to these questions failed. This was the project entitled "A review of the position of women in the Caucasus". The project attempted to trace how the position of women had been transformed over 10 years (from 1992 to 2002) in 10 regions of the Caucasus and Southern Russia. The reports were duly compiled using a standard questionnaire on the basis of existing materials (statistics, reports). However, no further action was taken: a planned comparative analysis and gender assessment were not completed and the report was not published. Interest in the project therefore waned. In hindsight, the project was beyond the League's capacities at that stage of development. The target audience had not been identified and the reports were not even discussed within the network.

Projects implemented by the League after it had agreed its identity and main objectives fell under the network's strategies and opportunities, thus contributing to peacebuilding and the League's development.

3. The Farnham meeting

In 2003, the Caucasus Women's League, with support from Alert, met with political negotiators, the Minister for Special Situations, Malkhaz Kakabadze, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Shamba, in the British village of Farnham. The background to the meeting was very favourable. The Georgian-Abkhaz projects of Alert, Conciliation Resources and the University of California, Irvine (UCI) were proceeding successfully. The local state media were not only well informed of the civil process, but were also expressing interest and approval. The issue was of increasing interest to Georgian media, resulting in interviews, critical articles, civil society comments at periods of increased tension, and talk shows which were being broadcast on TV on Georgian-Abkhaz issues. This dialogue made leaders of civil society feel their work was justified and important.

The Farnham meeting was preceded by painstaking preparation. The underlying aim was not to organise a meeting "for the sake of a meeting", but to propose a specific message

on collaboration, pooling resources from formal and informal processes in order to resolve problems and represent the interests of both sides. Eventually, a mutually acceptable agenda was found for the meeting, covering security guarantees in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and security issues in the Gali district. The list of participants was agreed on the basis of the “1+1 and 1+2” principle: each minister would bring another politician of their choice to the meeting, while the coordinators would invite two persons of their choice from civil society. Thus, the Abkhaz side was represented at Farnham by Sergei Shamba, Beslan Butba,¹² Natella Akaba, Irina Adleyba¹³ and Tina Ketsbaya.¹⁴ At the same time, the Georgian side was represented by Malkhaz Kakabadze, Zaal Gogsadze,¹⁵ Marina Pagava, Paata Zakareishvili¹⁶ and Lela Gaprindashvili.¹⁷ Larisa Sotieva¹⁸ was invited to attend as an expert on the Gali district. The meeting was facilitated by Martin Honeywell.¹⁹ The first day was to be “formal” and the second day “informal”. It was an excellent meeting, open and businesslike, well-run and pleasant to attend. The format was interesting and promising. The representatives of Georgian and Abkhaz civil society shared a common message and position in terms of their intentions to participate and intervene. The Farnham meeting was attended by the same range of participants, both politicians and representatives of civil society from both sides, as the Schlaining Process,²⁰ but with an entirely different purpose. The Schlaining Process provided stakeholders with a platform for informal communication, where their opinions and openness to suggestions were tentatively explored and identified. It was therefore a closed process with everyone attending in a personal capacity.

The Farnham meeting was intended to initiate a process of collaboration between the official and unofficial processes on specific questions of interest to each side. For example, when discussing the possibility of cooperation in the Gali district on education, medicine and youth programmes, the parties also discussed organising conferences and learning from the international experience of security guarantees. Farnham was planned as an open process. Although the planned follow-up did not materialise, it did focus the women's section on human security.

4. Identifying new approaches and overcoming obstacles

Shortly afterwards, we conducted a study into how people on different sides of the conflict viewed security issues using a standard questionnaire. This study revealed new

12 Then a member of the Abkhaz parliament.

13 From the NGO “Association of Women of Abkhazia”.

14 From an NGO from the Gali district.

15 Head of Department at the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

16 From the NGO the Centre for Development and Cooperation. Leader of informal Georgian-Abkhaz diplomatic efforts.

17 League coordinator, NGO “Women's Initiative on Equal Rights”.

18 League coordinator, NGO “Caucasus Refugee Council”.

19 Deputy Director of International Alert.

20 See Chapter 3 of this volume.

information on how security was perceived by refugees from Abkhazia. In the words of one of the participants in the Zugdidi focus group, ‘my security depends on the extent to which people on the other side feel safe’.

At the Georgia-Abkhaz meeting in Istanbul in 2005, it was decided to change the framework of Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue and to replace confidence-building measures with human security. When, in 2006, the Georgian government announced the start of work on its Strategy on Integration of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the Caucasus Dialogue Foundation²¹ carried out a large study into the attitude of IDPs from Abkhazia to integration from the perspective of human security. Thus, the League’s meeting with the politicians influenced the development of the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue as a whole.

The League’s approach, which we called “working with the authorities”, was based on our keen awareness of the need to identify ways of interacting with them. Ensuring interaction between the official and unofficial peace processes helps each side not only to understand the other’s messages/approaches. It also creates a better understanding of their motivations, fears and perceived risks. In the best case scenario, interaction with the authorities gives civil society a chance to influence them.

At Farnham, the League was able to demonstrate its attitude to “male politics” and its own non-radical, soft approach based on participation, political intervention and interaction with the government.

Perhaps surprisingly, the women from the League did not refer to themselves as feminists, although the conception of the League – based on the idea of strengthening women, gender equality and women’s role in the decision-making process – was essentially feminist in nature. This may have been because of their negative perception of extreme forms of feminism that denigrates and discriminates against men, which is incompatible with the nature and outlook of Caucasus women. The League aimed to develop its own “female identity” by identifying the special needs and opportunities facing Caucasus women. For example, since they are not associated with military action, women can travel relatively freely across the dividing lines in the Caucasus. They also have the advantage of being able to influence men, children and young people within the family and the wider community.

During the process of defining its mission and improving understanding of its objectives, the League’s coordinators became increasingly specific. We formulated our mission as ‘working as a League, sowing the seed of the League within our societies’. In other words, we sought to work within our societies and transfer to them all the new ideas we got from the network – a new outlook, personal contacts, knowledge and new ways of doing things.

21 The Georgian partner in the project “Confidence building between Georgian and Abkhaz societies with the participation of the Caucasus Forum”.

The relationship between the regional network and the national level was another issue. The network gives people opportunities for personal and professional growth, increases opportunities available to their local organisations, and attracts the interest of other donors working in the region. However, when these individuals or organisations participate in the network over a long period, they can lose touch with their national NGO community. It is not a question of a lack of information – the League always publicised its work wherever possible. Put simply, it is very difficult to be interested in or confident about certain areas of NGO work unless you are directly involved in them, including “civil diplomacy” and networking. They appear rather remote to national NGOs that have not had a taste of these processes and they are content simply to become passive members of the network. We were also aware of this problem at the time and included a special category of membership – delegates who had attended at least one meeting, who had occasionally taken part in the network’s advocacy activities.

I think another risk was that network coordinators who gave their time and efforts lost some of their expert knowledge of local problems. They lost contact and started feeling guilty for neglecting their local organisations.

The League regularly discussed opportunities for the regional network to interact with the national level in great detail. We increasingly used words like “synchronising”, “parallel”, “unified” “shared” or “region-specific”.

This “wish list” became a “big project” at a workshop called “A League Strategy – for the League” (Tbilisi, June 2003), which was supported by the South Caucasus office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.²² This was the first case of independent fundraising by the League. The idea behind the project was that it would be implemented at national level while remaining a League project. To achieve this, the project had to be conceptually, structurally and methodologically consistent. Implementation had to be synchronised while reflecting the specifics of each region. In addition, the project was to be given a “Caucasian” perspective through the use of mixed teams of trainers and facilitators from a number of regions. Walter Kaufman²³ talked openly of his intention to continue collaboration with the League.

However, the aforementioned project idea was not developed into an application, for a number of reasons. The project idea needed to be developed and completed by the League as a whole, but we were unable to organise this. The South Caucasus office of the Böll Foundation was only able to support South Caucasus initiatives but not North Caucasus ones. We felt it was unethical to run a large League project without the participation of the North Caucasus, both in terms of the League’s purpose and in terms of our colleagues.

²² The Böll Foundation is part of the “Green” movement. It is particularly interested in women’s equality of participation in politics and public life.

²³ The then manager of the South Caucasus office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Another factor was the League's heavy workload at the time. There were three activities held in June, July and September: the Tbilisi workshop, the meeting with politicians and the Mobile Group in Tskhinvali. Of all the obstacles, I think the most serious was the "north-south" issue. Apart from funding, another problem was the different levels of freedom and development of civil society between the North and South Caucasus. This led to a difference in needs and opportunities for implementing a single project. Even today, this obstacle appears to be insurmountable. The League first prepared two project applications – one for the North and one for the South – and submitted a combined application to the Moscow office of the Böll Foundation.

This was a good example of the League's inability to adopt a flexible approach when it was clearly needed, as well as the lack of any procedures for making changes to its mandate. In this case, the League missed an opportunity to implement a large project, since the Böll Foundation was very keen to work with us. We can also draw another conclusion from this example. A clear distinction should be made between the opportunities presented by a pan-Caucasus and a South Caucasus network. Although the idea of a pan-Caucasus network is very attractive, under present circumstances it can only work effectively in the areas of cultural exchange and education, and in all "politically neutral" projects relating to communication, making contacts and bringing the peoples of the Caucasus closer together. This approach may in fact be adopted by any future pan-Caucasus networks and may even be a necessary starting point. We have the example of the EU's youth programmes. I do not think levels of alienation are as high between the countries of the EU as in the Caucasus. Nevertheless, they still have integration programmes aimed at developing person-to-person links to achieve mutual recognition and rapprochement between countries. The South Caucasus situation, until recently, provided more opportunities for monitoring and advocacy. However, over the past few years, there has been a marked tendency towards restricting freedoms and placing pressure on civil society in the South Caucasus. This might threaten the work of the network and the security of its delegates. In any case, setting up a network requires painstaking collective reflection that takes into account the complex and ever-changing context of the Caucasus.

Returning to the Tbilisi workshop, this was perhaps the strongest meeting in terms of publicity. The League's women gave interviews to a range of print, TV and radio media. We met Nino Burjanadze, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Minister Malkhaz Kakabadze, the British Ambassador and international organisations.

The League was constantly looking for a way of working that would combine a unique, partly virtual format with a focus on specific practical activities. Anna Chochieva's²⁴ project – "The Mobile Group of the Caucasus Women's League to South Ossetia" – provided such a balance. This project was the first case of independent fundraising by the League.

24 League coordinator, Women's social movement "Made Arm".

The project, supported by the Böll Foundation, met all the League's strategic objectives. Five women – Ayshat Magomedova,²⁵ Valentina Cherevatenko,²⁶ Irina Grigoryan,²⁷ Natella Akaba and Lela Gaprindashvili – visited their colleague Anna Chochieva. The idea was to share experiences and to see, listen, feel and understand. Meetings at all levels – with women from the former mining settlement of Kvaisa, where inhabitants now struggle to survive in unbearably difficult post-Soviet conditions, with journalists and NGOs, with ministers and members of parliament, and also stays with Tskhinvali families – all helped the participants of the mobile group to see life of the South Ossetian society from inside with its problems, pain and hope.

Projects such as this are best suited to fulfil the purpose of a Caucasus network that is to create a single civic space – and, I would add, a specific Caucasus identity. During the League's best times, I would say to myself: 'I am a woman from the Caucasus. Peace must start with this.'

All this would have been impossible without International Alert and all the League's delegates, even if they only attended a meeting once. We must also thank the Caucasus Women's League coordinators: Natella Akaba (Abkhazia), Gayane Armaganova²⁸ (Armenia), Fatima Bzhasso²⁹ (Adygeya), Lela Gaprindashvili (Georgia), Zeinab Gashaeva³⁰ (Chechnya), Irina Grigoryan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Ayshat Magomedova (Daghestan), Larisa Sotieva (North Ossetia), Zalikha Tagirova³¹ (Azerbaijan), Valentina Cherevatenko (Novocherkassk) and Anna Chochieva (South Ossetia).

5. Conclusion

The League earlier carried out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. It was striking when I was preparing this article and looked through my old records that the analysis contained three to four times more strengths and opportunities than weaknesses and threats. The risks we identified back then did act as a brake on Caucasus initiatives: regional instability; sudden changes in the political situation; conflict of interests, etc.

Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that the strengths and opportunities are still there and have increased as a result of sometimes bitter experience. This is a strong argument in favour of creating new Caucasus associations. I look forward to the day when a bright light finally shines on the Caucasus and unites it in a new spiritual vision.

²⁵ League coordinator, NGO "League for the Protection of Mothers and Children".

²⁶ League coordinator, NGO "Women of Don".

²⁷ League coordinator, NGO "Institute of Public Diplomacy".

²⁸ League coordinator, NGO "Association of Women with Higher Education".

²⁹ League coordinator, NGO "Union of Women of the Republic of Adygeya".

³⁰ League coordinator, NGO "Echo of War".

³¹ League coordinator, NGO "Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan".

PART 8

Cultural and Academic Mediation

CHAPTER 19

Georgia-Abkhazia: Historiography and Conflict

Experience of Teaching History as a Form of Mediation

George Anchabadze

1. Introduction

As any student of ethnic territorial conflicts will agree, history forms an important component in all of them. In the ideological struggle, each side will frequently appeal to history, raising issues of direct relevance to the causes of the disputes, but also issues with only a remote connection. The first casualty of all this is, of course, historical truth, which becomes hostage to political objectives in the propaganda war.

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which has been simmering in latent form for many years, is no exception. As the situation in Abkhazia deteriorated, attempts began to be made to reassess established views on the history and origins of the Abkhaz people, the nature of historic Georgian-Abkhaz links, etc. Of particular relevance here was the emergence in the mid-20th century of the so-called “Ingorokva theory”. Its author, the Georgian historian and philologist Pavle Ingorokva, published a work claiming, with no evidential support, that the Abkhaz people had arrived relatively late to the present-day territory of Abkhazia (from the 17th century onwards). Prior to this, it had allegedly been settled exclusively by the Georgian population. Ingorokva’s thesis rejected practically the entire body of historical evidence on Abkhazia, built up over years by leading Georgian historians such as David Javakhishvili, Simon Janashia and others.

Ingorokva’s position was still being fundamentally critiqued in the 1950s by Georgian and Abkhaz scholars (Nikolai Berdzenishvili, Ketevan Lomtadze, Zurab Anchabadze, Khukhut Bgashba and others), and no Georgian historian spoke out in its defence.¹ However, it enjoyed some popularity among a few Georgian intellectuals, particularly non-specialists in history and philology. Indeed, it may well have been the publication of Ingorokva’s book that first made history a bone of contention in Georgian-Abkhaz relations. There are certainly clear indications that historiography played a role in the mass protests staged by the Abkhaz in 1956, 1967 and 1978.

2. Competing historical views of Abkhaz history

As mentioned above, in the late 1950s and early 1960s Georgian historiographers dismissed out of hand Ingorokva’s views on the ethnic aspects of population shifts in feudal Abkhazia – although the thesis of the migration of the Abkhaz-Adyghees from the North Caucasus stuck. A version of it developed according to which the ancient Abkhaz, although linguistically little different from the modern Abkhaz people, in political and cultural terms formed an organic part of feudal Georgia.

¹ It is perhaps appropriate here to quote Professor N. Yu. Lomouri, who writes on this topic: ‘Georgian historians rejected Ingorokva’s views, not because they felt under any external pressure, but because it was impossible to support him from the point of view of historical objectivity.’ (S. Kaukhchishvili [1996]. *N. Yu. Lomouri*, Tbilisi, p. 60, in Georgian.) One might also note that Ingorokva’s “theory” is not shared by a single historian outside of Georgia.

The author of this concept, Nikoloz Berdzenishvili, a member of the Academy of Sciences, argued cogently for his view of the position and role of the medieval Abkhaz in the Georgian feudal world. In particular, he emphasised that the Abkhaz had participated in the construction of Georgian statehood to a much greater extent than any of the Georgian tribes. In Berdzenishvili's view, Georgia's chronic decline in the 13th to 15th centuries created conditions in which mountain tribes from the North Caucasus migrated to Abkhazia in a series of waves from the 13th to the 17th and 18th centuries. Since the tribes that had migrated to Abkhazia were little different ethnically from most of the local population, they were easily assimilated. It should however be noted that, in the scholar's view, the relatively immature socio-political institutions, economic practices and religious beliefs brought by the mountain tribes led to the cultural degradation of Abkhazia and its breakaway from the more advanced Georgian feudal Christian culture.

While sharing Berdzenishvili's view of the nature of Georgian-Abkhaz relations during the feudal age, it is difficult for us to agree with the second part of his thesis. In this case, he explains the cultural state of late-medieval Abkhazia in terms of the mass immigration of mountain populations. We believe this view contains a number of unproven and contentious propositions.² Berdzenishvili bases his argument on analogies drawn from other parts of Georgia, whereas in fact, circumstances were different in Abkhazia. Indeed, his thesis of mass migrations from the North Caucasus is not supported in written sources. The prevailing direction of population shifts in 13th to 18th century Abkhazia was clearly from the South to the North – that is, from Abkhazia to the North Caucasus – as reflected in a wide range of historical (including written) sources. This migration marked the start of a settlement by ethnic Abkhaz communities [lit. “of ethnic commonality”] on the Northern slopes of the Caucasus mountain chain which later formed the autonomous Abazian people.

The socio-economic and cultural decline of Abkhazia after the 13th to 15th centuries therefore occurred for exactly the same reasons (with a few local exceptions) as the decline of feudal Georgia. There is thus no reason to explain the situation that developed in Abkhazia in terms of widespread immigration of tribal elements from the North Caucasus.

* * *

The ethnic conflict that surfaced in Abkhazia in 1989 was closely mirrored by positions adopted by Georgian historiographers. In Tbilisi, the leaders of the nationalist movement – former dissidents – started the ball rolling by resurrecting Ingorokva's “theory”.

² For more details, see: G. Anchabadze [2000]. ‘A study of questions of ethnic history of Abkhaz in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict’ in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, 2, Irvine: University of California. Available in Russian at http://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub. Republished in G. Anchabadze [2006]. *Questions of Georgian-Abkhaz Relations*, Part 1, Tbilisi.

After this, a series of professional historians (most of whom had not previously worked on the history of Abkhazia) also began to look around for facts to justify this discredited concept.

Two lines of enquiry began to emerge as Georgian historians reviewed Abkhazia's past: the first of these was entirely based on Ingorokva's legacy, with its supporters viewing the "modern" Abkhaz as late arrivals in present-day Abkhazia. The other camp recognised two autochthonous ethnic groups on Abkhaz soil – the Georgians and the Abkhaz. This position is mainly based on the propositions advanced earlier by the academician Berdzenishvili. However, one difference is that his present-day followers write of the historical prevalence of Kartvelian ethnic elements on the territory of Abkhazia (which Berdzenishvili did not) and look for evidence of the migration of Abkhaz-Adyghe groupings from the North Caucasus. These authors see the history and culture of Abkhazia entirely from the perspective of Georgian stereotypes. Moreover, any differences from current Georgian reality are explained away as recent North Caucasian influences. Finally, a large number of "amateurs" also jumped on the bandwagon, non-professionals reconstructing history in accordance with their own ideas and preconceptions. All of this led to a huge range of opinion and the radicalisation of approaches to the contentious issue of the ethnic and political history of Abkhazia, although from an academic perspective the issue is not so much complex as politicised and nationalist.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the position of Abkhaz historians on works by Georgian scholars could be described as defensive. However, it was also a tough, uncompromising and to some extent challenging position. The Abkhaz focused particularly on the historical period from roughly 1880 to 1953, when there were large-scale migrations to Abkhazia of the inhabitants of nearby districts of Western Georgia (a point usually glossed over by Georgian writers). As a result of this migration, which was in part spontaneous and in part organised by the authorities, Georgians became the largest ethnic group on the territory of Abkhazia. Abkhaz scholars published many archive documents demonstrating the organised nature of the migration. The lands settled by the Georgians had at some time previously been inhabited by Abkhaz, who were forced into Turkey by Tsarist Russia's policy of conquest and colonialism. At the same time, by focusing attention on the migration of Georgians to Abkhazia from the end of the 19th century onwards, Abkhaz authors ignored the fact that, in the Middle Ages, the Georgian Mingrelians inhabited a significant portion of what is now Eastern Abkhazia. The Abkhaz version of history, it must be said, was dominated by its desire to employ all possible means to detach itself from the history of Georgia.

The ensuing ideological confrontation resulted from a clash of two national projects, which took centre stage following the rapid collapse of the USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Georgians, who were preparing themselves for independence, were attempting to retain (and increase as far as possible) their control over the whole territory

of the Soviet republic, with scant regard for the rights of the autonomous groupings. On the other hand, the Abkhaz, who constituted less than 18 percent of the population of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Abkhaz ASSR), were afraid of losing political positions. This had already occurred in 1938–1953, when local power in Abkhazia was entirely in the hands of party functionaries dispatched from Tbilisi. Both sides supported their political claims with historical arguments that, in the end, came down to the question of who owned the land. The clear assumption was that the original settlers must have some kind of special entitlement to the land.

Propaganda wars

The propaganda war formed the “image of the enemy” and was a significant factor in preparing the population mentally for violent conflict. The process was so bound up with history that third countries occasionally referred to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as the “innovation of historians and philologists” – although clashes of these kinds are always the result of socio-economic and political factors (in addition of course to the subjective factor represented by the desire of some individuals to demonstrate their patriotic ardour).

The benefits of this policy in terms of keeping the peace are questionable, to put it mildly. By attempting to prove its historic right to Abkhazia using any means available, Georgian propaganda lowered the standing of Georgians in the eyes of the Abkhaz and was a source of irritation even to pro-Georgia individuals. At the same time, numerous historical facts pointing to the close ties between Georgians and Abkhaz over the centuries were ignored. Unfounded attempts sought to demonstrate that the “foreign” nature of the Abkhaz people “cut them off” from their shared historical past with the Georgians. This dismissed their involvement in the culture of the “golden age” of feudal Georgia, whose rulers called themselves “Emperors of the Abkhaz and Kartvelians”.³ Logically, the Georgian side should in fact have used these historical facts in their propaganda rather than getting bogged down in absurd territorial disputes.

With the cessation of military action in 1993, the propaganda war continued with its earlier force. The German author Rudolf Sulzmann in his work *Propaganda as a Weapon of War* highlights: ‘...the effect of propaganda continues well after the wars end and cannot be stopped as simply as, let us say, the firing of cannons or aerial bombing. Propaganda acts like an explosive charge fitted with a number of remote detonators which mean it can explode many years, sometimes even decades later, creating a breeding ground for countless grievances which prevent relations between nations from being normalised.’

3 For more details, see: G. Anchabadze [2001]. ‘The Georgian-Abkhaz state: Historical tradition and outlook’ in *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, 5, Irvine: University of California. Republished in G. Anchabadze [2006]. *Questions of Georgian-Abkhaz Relations*, Part 1, Tbilisi.

These words apply in full to the “historic aspect” of propaganda wars. For example, in post-war Abkhaz historiography, some authors – advocates of a reappraisal of traditional historical views – declared that the Georgian Empire of the 11th to 13th centuries was an Abkhaz state. One author rails against his colleagues “beyond the Inguri river”, going so far as to state that ‘... the unified Georgian state, unknown to a single medieval source’ is an invention of Georgian historians. To say the least, this strange statement illustrates better than anything else the author’s knowledge of the sources of the history of Georgia.

For their part, modern Georgian historiographers continue to devote a lot of effort to proving that Kartvelian ethnic elements spread throughout Abkhazia in ancient times. They deny the existence of any feudal-era Abkhaz national ethos and, from this, conclude that ethnic Abkhaz never formed a state of their own. They also deny that the Abkhaz had any cultural or artistic artefacts (arguing that *all* historical architectural monuments on the territory of Abkhazia were created by the forebears of the Georgians). At the same time, they reject the Abkhaz’s leading role in the creation of the Abkhaz Empire and their contribution to the history of a unified Georgian state. In short, everything that the Abkhaz consider to be milestone events in their history is disputed. This makes for uncomfortable reading and while these are perhaps admissible topics for careful academic disquisitions, materials such as these are constantly being published in the media and presented as the only correct point of view. Given that Abkhazia since 1993 has not had access to Georgian media, the main target audience for these messages is the Georgian public. Presented in an unambiguous and accessible way, these views enjoy widespread public acceptance. Moreover, combined with the statements of Ingorokva and his followers, they plant distorted views of the Abkhaz and their history in the mass consciousness.

One example of this error is a collective letter published in the newspaper *24 Saati* that is astonishing, to put it mildly, for its torrent of inaccuracies. In particular, it contains the following information: ‘... the historical Abkhaz were Georgians and modern Abkhaz are descendants of North Caucasian *apsua* nomads [from “apsua”, the name the Abkhaz give to themselves – G.A.], who migrated to the southern slopes of the Caucasus in the 17th to 18th centuries. Written records from Tsarist Russia show that in this part of Georgia, there were only around 20 *apsua* households and the main inhabitants of the Gudauta-Sukhumi shoreline were previously Missimians (Svans), with Egers (Mingrelians) to the south.’⁴

This document of course cannot lay any claim to modern historiography. It is rather a document of its time, an example of how invented historical constructions enter the mass consciousness. However, what is particularly striking is the list of signatories – comprising 52 professors from Tbilisi State University, the Georgian Technical University and the Tbilisi Medical University.

4 See *24 Saati*, 24th January 2005, No. 15.

Respect for historical truth

One wonders who benefits from all this? Is it really in Georgia's interests that its citizens are kept in the dark? Error is not a source of moral strength and erroneous views cannot mobilise society to resolve positive tasks. They do, however, prevent decisions from being taken on a well-founded basis when the authorities are seriously considering mutually acceptable ways of resolving the problem.

What is to be done in these circumstances? One opinion (shared particularly by non-historians) is that we should avoid history and refrain from writing or referring to historical themes. However, I do not think that this is the way forward. Running away from history cannot achieve anything useful, particularly since making it a taboo will not stop authors who are prepared to rewrite history to suit geopolitical objectives. Resolving conflict is the ultimate goal of peacebuilding and this requires respect for historical truth. It cannot be suppressed or manipulated and purely academic questions should be distinguished from political and ideological ones.

I therefore believe that, in the current climate, the best approach is to dampen down the rhetoric, decouple academic thinking from prejudices and present historically accurate information (which was incidentally accepted by most Georgian and Abkhaz scholars until recently) to a wide audience interested in history.

3. My first experience of mediation

I first witnessed the clash of competing historical ideas in 1984. This related to the publication of the first textbook on Abkhaz history under the authorship of Zurab Anchabadze (my father), Georgi Dzidzariya and Arvelod Kuprava.⁵ The book was opposed by a number of Georgian and Abkhaz historians alike. The criticisms were prompted by a number of Georgian scholars, who requested that the relevant authorities review the basic positions set out in the book as it was being prepared for print. This in turn prompted a group of Abkhaz scholars to make a similar request, although their complaints about the textbook were diametrically opposed to those of their Tbilisi colleagues. This dual-pronged attack might well have led to the book being banned, if it had not been for the efforts of the then Georgian Minister of Education, David Chkhikvishvili, responsible for the publishing of textbooks, to extricate himself from the situation. A special combined (Georgian-Abkhaz) editorial college was set up, headed by the academician Andrei Apakidze to look into the contested topics. Since the main comments from both sides, although mutually exclusive, related to the period prior to the 19th century, on which my father, who had passed away shortly before the events

5 Z.V. Anchabadze, G.A. Dzidzariya and A.Eh. Kuprava [1986]. *A History of Abkhazia*. Sukhumi: Alashara.

described, had written, I was co-opted onto the editorial college. At the time, I was working as a junior researcher at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Georgian Academy of Science.

I ended up doing much of the groundwork needed for the formal review – although the book would probably never have been published without the support of the other members of the editorial college (primarily Mr Apakidze) and the benign influence of the then President of the Georgian Academy of Science, Evgenii Kharadze. Over a period of two years, I took the manuscript of the textbook back and forth between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, defending the author's version. During this time, I would polemicise like an Abkhaz with the Georgian scholars and like a Georgian with the Abkhaz scholars. I defended the position of Zurab Anchabadze not because I was his son or it was a necessary compromise, the “golden mean” between two extremes, but because as a specialist I believed in its basis in historical fact.

After numerous meetings and stormy public debates – carried out under the watchful eye of the Party apparatus, which was worried that history might once again emerge as a catalyst for mass agitation in Abkhazia – the textbook was finally published. All of its fundamental arguments were retained in full. Furthermore, following its publication, the book was not subjected to any further criticism. I then realised that it is far easier to contest an unpublished manuscript than a book that has already been published.

Over these two years, and to my great regret, I realised that the alienation between certain Georgian and Abkhaz intellectual circles had gone too far. This was engendering mutual distrust and suspicion, occasionally prompting the wrong response. Communicating and working with both sides in circumstances that could be described as a latent ethnic conflict taught me much about seeking mutually acceptable resolutions of contentious issues that might give rise to conflict.

4. Open conflict breaks out

In 1985, the USSR leadership launched the process of *perestroika*, which was to lead to the demise of the Soviet state. During this period in Georgia, as in a series of other republics, mass social and political movements emerged seeking to resolve national issues and later on to achieve political independence. I shared the fundamental aspirations of the Georgian national movement. However, I also saw that the Georgians had to stretch out the hand of friendship to the Abkhaz people if they were to work together to overcome the unfortunate legacy of the previous era. I saw my own role in the national movement as providing as much assistance as I could to promote Georgian-Abkhaz rapprochement. I knew that this process would only succeed if it was supported by both sides, and a great deal of preparatory and explanatory work would be needed to start it.

In Sukhumi, I would talk to representatives of Abkhaz youth and the intelligentsia about the nature of the Georgian movement, which at the outset was not really anti-Abkhaz. Back in Tbilisi, I would speak at the meetings of the national movement caucuses and explain who the Abkhaz people were and what language they spoke, talk about key moments in history, talk in detail about the *muhajir* period (when huge numbers of Abkhaz were deported to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century) and its consequences, and tell them of the discrimination against the Abkhaz in the 1940s and early 1950s.

All of this was news to most listeners, and they listened carefully and asked questions. Many came up to me afterwards and asked me to give talks at their schools or workplace. Of course, some of those present objected to what I was saying, but lacking the necessary knowledge they could not dispute it and restricted themselves to heckling and grumbling in the background. The others present usually asked them to be quiet. A small squabble did develop on one occasion between me and Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who later became president of Georgia. At that time, Gamsakhurdia's star was rising in the national movement and he was not averse to a spot of demagoguery. Citing Ingorokva, he declared that the Abkhaz were Adyghe and that if they wanted self-determination, they should do this in the North Caucasus. Soon after our clash, Gamsakhurdia called on an audience at a political rally not to trust me.

This was in March 1989. A few days later, in the Abkhaz village of Lykhny, a large gathering organised by the Abkhaz popular forum "Aydgylara" announced its demand for Abkhazia to be given the status of a Union Republic. This declaration, which revealed the Abkhaz people's wish to secede from Georgia, caused an explosion of indignation in Georgian society. The national movement's attitude to the Abkhaz, which on the whole had previously been one of indifference, changed abruptly for the worse. It issued a statement demanding that Abkhazia's autonomy be revoked and accusations were made that insulted the national honour of the Abkhaz people. It was at this point that the myth backed by Ingorokva's ideas began to be revived.

The Georgian authorities supported this, fanning the flames through the state-controlled media. However, interested parties within Georgia took another view. They called on the government to calm down the Georgian population, establish a wide-ranging dialogue with the Abkhaz, and show them that they were well disposed towards them and were ready to work together to resolve the most urgent problems. At a meeting with Djumber Patiashvili, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, held roughly six days after the events in Lykhny, I set out my views and drew up a plan of action. This plan, along with other points, proposed that original Abkhaz place names be restored without delay (this issue was of extreme concern to the Abkhaz) and that efforts be made to increase public awareness of the views of major Georgian historians from the first half and middle of the 20th century. Most notably, I.A. Javakhishvili, S.N. Janashia and N.A. Berdzenishvili had written that Abkhaz tribes had

resided on that territory since ancient times and noted the significant role played by the Abkhaz in Georgian history.⁶ They heard me out, but nothing was done. The authorities were clearly worried about taking unpopular steps or were themselves infected by the popular mood.

The ensuing months were a period of extreme radicalisation in public opinion, which in some cases bordered on psychosis. The “enemy image” rapidly took hold of the minds of ordinary Georgians and Abkhaz. In these circumstances, I openly disseminated my ideas and views on Abkhaz-Georgian relations in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, as well as establishing links with the Abkhaz national movement. I was the sole representative of Georgian political organisations to openly attend Abkhaz rallies and the only Georgian admitted to the headquarters of the Abkhaz Popular Forum – Aydgylara.

5. Historical publishing and teaching endeavours

Although by the early 1990s I was already a professional historian, a PhD and author of a series of academic articles and monographs, I still refrained from print publications on the topic of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, guided by the principle of ecological validity. I only began to write around 1991, starting not by evaluating current events but by cataloguing historical facts. At that time, the Abkhaz were often being accused in the Georgian media of wanting to become “Russified” and to become an instrument of Russia’s anti-Georgian policy. My hope was that publishing information about the Abkhaz struggle for liberation in the 19th century would dispel these errors in at least some minds and help unbiased readers to understand the truth. This was the background to my article ‘The Abkhaz chronicle of the 19th century (The history of the consolidation of Russian rule in Abkhazia)’.⁷ This was followed by articles in the first volume of the encyclopaedia *Georgia* on the Abkhaz insurrections in the 1820s and 1840s. Later, in the well-known series *Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, published under the auspices of the University of California (Irvine), I published historical articles that for the first time related directly to the motives behind the current conflict. My books and articles were disseminated in Georgia and in Abkhazia; they can be found on the shelves of the main libraries in both places.

Along with the publication of my works, I made a number of appearances on television and radio, spoke in front of a live audience and gave newspaper interviews. Many of these appearances dealt again with historical issues. The Georgian media and the public

6 For more details, see: G. Anchabadze [1999]. ‘Attempts to neutralise the Georgia-Abkhaz conflict using “people-to-people” diplomacy (based on personal experience)’ in *The Role of Informal Diplomacy in the Peacebuilding Process*. Irvine: University of California. Republished in G. Anchabadze [2006]. *Questions of Georgian-Abkhaz Relations*, Part 1, Tbilisi.

7 See the newspaper *Svobodnaya Gruzija*, 2nd, 3rd, 6th August 1991 (Nos. 141, 142, 143). Republished in G. Anchabadze [2006]. *Questions of Georgian-Abkhaz Relations*, Part 1, Tbilisi.

as a whole were particularly interested in questions such as: the origins of the Abkhaz people; whether they were the autochthonous people in the region; the history of the Abkhaz empire and the Abkhaz imperial dynasty; the revival of Abkhaz Catholicism; the history of the province of Samurzakano (South Abkhazia) and the Samurzakanians, the bearers of shared Abkhaz-Georgian (Mingrelian) traditions. Some of these interviews were subsequently published in my book *Issues of Georgian-Abkhaz Relations*, published in 2006 with the support of the British NGO International Alert.

I became fully aware of the strained attitude of the Georgian public to the Abkhaz in the late 1990s. During this time, regular meetings of so-called “informal diplomacy” were set up between representatives of civil society, with the assistance of international organisations. I was actively involved in this movement over a considerable period of time; I recall that, at the outset, until the future partners had got to know one another, there was a kind of invisible wall separating them. This feeling of constraint was particularly evident among the Georgians, many of whom were seeing Abkhaz for the first time and knew little of their culture and history. But during breaks and in the evenings, there were always some people who were willing to talk to me about the history and culture of Abkhazia. Sometimes, they would carry on these discussions until two or three o’clock at night, only to pick up the next day where they had left off the night before. However, it was only like this at the initial meetings. After the Georgians had established relations with their Abkhaz partners, their initial general interest in the history of Abkhazia gradually abated.

I would like to dwell particularly on my experience of working as a university lecturer. From 1984–1992, I worked part time at the Abkhaz State University (ASU). During the Soviet era, there were three sections within the university: the Abkhaz, the Georgian and the Russian. I introduced new courses to the curriculum: “The historical geography of Abkhazia” and “A military history of Georgia”, which had not previously been taught anywhere else. After the start of military action, my work at ASU naturally stopped. However, when I was in Abkhazia in 1999 with a group of representatives of civil society, I was given an exclusive invitation to resume my lectureship at the university at a time convenient for me. I thought it over and agreed, and until 2010 I regularly came to Abkhazia on short lecture tours (1–2 weeks), usually in the spring and autumn. I reinstated the teaching of “The historical geography of Abkhazia” at ASU. I also gave general courses on “Abkhazia and the war in the Caucasus” and “The history of the Ottoman Empire”.

Since I was (and still am) also teaching at university level in Tbilisi, I gained experience in teaching history on both sides of the political divide simultaneously. The history of the Abkhaz and Georgian peoples is closely intertwined. It was therefore quite natural that I would occasionally be telling the students the same things. I also had extra-mural meetings with groups of Georgian and Abkhaz young people.

I remember, for example, meetings at the Sukhumi Youth House and at the Zurab Achba Centre “World without Violence” (this centre holds a particular personal significance for me since Zurab was a true blood brother).

I had many meetings with young Georgians in Tbilisi: they included young people engaged in the Georgian-Abkhaz youth dialogue and representatives of youth organisations of political parties, as well as students at a number of universities and educational institutions. The young Georgians were genuinely interested in Abkhazia, its history and culture. They always asked without fail whether the modern Abkhaz were really incomers to Abkhazia or the autochthonous people. The Abkhaz youth were not so interested in the history of Georgia and their questions were, for the most part, limited to the history of Abkhazia. But generally, I presented the same narrative to both sides, talking about the history of Abkhazia, aspects of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, etc.

My impression based on the experience of these lectures and discussions is that there is virtually no topic that cannot be touched on in conversations with young people, if you know your material well and expound it in an unbiased manner. This also depends of course on the relationship between the audience and the lecturer, their faith in his/her competence and knowledge. I do not recall one occasion from those years when anyone from my youth audiences openly cast doubt on what I was saying, although for many of them this may well have been the first time that they had heard these views. On the whole, young people are more open to and tolerant of unconventional opinions. It is difficult to say whether this is a characteristic of their age or whether it is simply because the modern generation has grown up in a different atmosphere of ideas and politics.

I would like to close by saying a little about the Georgian history textbook. Textbooks on the history of Georgia published in the 1990s to the early 2000s, in contrast to the textbooks from the Soviet era, show unmistakable evidence of Ingorokva's theses. However, this has almost entirely disappeared in the textbooks published under the new curriculum (which took effect from 2005). This is not the result of any change in the approach of modern Georgian historiographers to this issue, as is clearly shown for example by the work of a large group of authors – entitled *Essays from the History of Georgia, Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present* (Tbilisi, 2007) – which is written in the spirit of Ingorokva's theory. Instead, it is the result of the position adopted by the National Centre for Curricula and Evaluation attached to the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science. In keeping with Council of Europe recommendations, the centre punctiliously states that issues that might introduce tension into relations between nations should be avoided when compiling new textbooks.

I took part in writing the Year 9 textbook for the history of Georgia (first edition 2008). This book was a team effort, with the authorial team collaborating closely with the publishers Logos Press. The textbook covers events from the distant past up to the present.⁸ It even includes such recent events (at the time of publication) as the political crisis and the dispersal of an opposition rally in November 2007, along with the presidential elections in January 2008. During the work on the textbook, the question arose of how to present the facts of the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war. Passing over this question in silence or restricting ourselves to the official reason for the incursion of troops into Abkhazia (the defence of transport routes) – as the authors of other modern Georgian textbooks do – would be wrong. The consequences of the war are the subject of lively debate in Georgian society to this day. Young students are confronted on a daily basis by reminders of those events in television and radio broadcasts and newspapers. They are therefore entitled to know (at least in outline) how it all happened. On the other hand, materials inciting hatred and discord between nations are not permissible in a school textbook. One must refrain from presenting one's personal view and merely convey the plain facts, supporting the narrative with the relevant documentary sources. The material must be presented in a neutral tone and in simple language. This applies particularly to topics that are open to differing interpretations.

I suggested to the publisher Lasha Beraya that he use my study *The History of Georgia* (2005). My suggestion was accepted and, as a result, the basic facts from the most painful event in the history of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, the war of 1992–1993, were presented for the first time in the pages of a school textbook. I should mention that initially there were attempts to criticise some of the propositions in the textbook, including the chapter in which the events of the Abkhaz war were described. However, these attempts were short lived. Once the textbooks were distributed in schools, there were no more complaints. Our textbook has now been used for two years – not only in schools with Georgian as the language of instruction, but also in schools using Russian, Armenian and Azeri (the Ministry of Education and Science organises the translation and publication of textbooks into the relevant languages).

The following Annex reproduces the relevant extracts from the chapter 'The Third Republic of Georgia (from 1991 to the present)' in the Class 9 textbook, The History of Georgia (Logos Press, 2008).

8 G. Anchabadze, G. Gamkrelidze, Z. Kiknadze, M. Surguladze and D. Shvelidze, with assistance from L. Beraya and Ye. Sumbatavili (2008). *The History of Georgia, Class 9, Recommended by the National Centre for Curricula and Evaluation*, Tbilisi: Logos Press.

Annex

Georgia in 1992–2003

The State Council and the Abkhaz question: The State Council was unable to secure peace in Georgia after coming to power. In 1993, there was further instability in the Samegrelo region, which was a stronghold of the supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia (the former president himself disappeared to Chechnya, from where he called for mass civil disobedience). Moreover, crude attempts by the authorities to use violence to restore order backfired. But the most serious mistake by the State Council, the consequences of which remain one of the main problems facing Georgia to this day, was the decision to send troops into Abkhazia in August 1992.

Government troops sent into Abkhazia: After the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia, the State Council rejected the Abkhaz proposal to create a federated Georgia with Abkhazia forming a federal unit. Against a background of civil resistance across the country, a “legal war” began between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. This removed much of Georgia’s jurisdiction over the formally autonomous republic. International recognition of the Georgian state’s independence strengthened the view of circles close to the State Council that a show of force against the “separatists” would be the most direct means of restoring Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia. This decision to use violent means to engineer a shift away from autonomy to central control was prompted by Russia’s transfer to Georgia, in the summer of 1992, of a large consignment of weapons (including tanks and other heavy technology). This step may have been a deliberate ploy on the part of Russia to draw Georgia into armed conflict and as a means of maintaining its own influence over the former Soviet republic.

On 14th August 1992, government troops (not the regular army, since at this point no such body in fact existed in Georgia; instead, a police squad was sent to Abkhazia, comprising a different militarised formation which had gained combat experience during the civil war and the Georgian-Ossetian conflict) crossed the administrative border with Abkhazia and entered the capital of the autonomous republic, the city of Sukhumi. At the same time, in the far North-Western corner of the country, close to the town of Gagra, an amphibious assault was launched, which cut off the road and rail communications linking Abkhazia and Russia. The State Council announced that this was intended as a means of protecting the main railway line, which passed through the territory of Abkhazia. However, the actions of the combat troops who burst into Sukhumi bore little resemblance to the actions that might be expected of soldiers defending transport communications. One of their first acts in the city was to remove the Abkhaz flag, which was not recognised in Tbilisi, from Government House, replacing it with the Georgian flag. The Abkhaz section of the leadership of the autonomous republic, which had moved to the city of Gudauta (the capital of a district densely populated by ethnic Abkhaz) called for civil disobedience.

The Abkhaz had clearly anticipated these events. They created a security infrastructure (although they did not have sufficient weaponry) and made contact with national movements from the North Caucasus which at the time had significant influence in the southern part of the Russian Federation. The leaders of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (formed in Sukhumi in 1991) issued an ultimatum to the Georgian authorities to withdraw their troops, threatening that unless they did so, they would send volunteers to the areas occupied by the military. Shevardnadze went along with this game plan, announcing that self-defence units, which had begun to be set up throughout Georgia in response to the confederation's ultimatum, had already enlisted over 30,000 men. The war machine had started and Georgia was drawn into an armed conflict that was to last more than a year.

The heavily outnumbered Abkhaz (according to the 1989 census, there were 96,000 ethnic Abkhaz living in Georgia, of whom 94,000 were living in the autonomous republic) received significant moral and practical support from the ethnically and culturally related peoples of the North Caucasus (Kabardinians, Adyghes, Circassians, Chechens, Abazians, etc.), as well as the Abkhaz-Circassian diaspora in the Middle East. In the autumn of 1992 alone, between 4,000 and 7,000 militants from the Mountain Confederation arrived in Abkhazia. A large number of individuals of Slav nationality also fought on the Abkhaz side, mainly from Cossack paramilitary organisations. These assorted forces had different motivations for participating in the Georgian-Abkhaz war, but their participation tipped the scales in favour of the Abkhaz. Despite this, it should be noted that ethnic Abkhaz bore the brunt of the fighting in the war with the Georgians. Abkhaz units formed the core of the forces fighting against the Georgians.

In October 1992, the Abkhaz took Gagra and restored the link between Russia and Gudauta. After this, the only parts of Abkhazia still controlled by the troops of the State Council were areas in which the majority of the population were ethnic Georgians. The Georgians' main stronghold in Abkhazia was the city of Sukhumi. On 11th October 1992, parliamentary elections were held in Georgia which conferred legitimacy on the de facto powers in the country. Eduard Shevardnadze was elected speaker of the parliament and shortly afterwards head of state. Gamsakhurdia and his supporters, who at that time were in Chechnya, did not recognise the October elections as legal. The forces supporting the former president in Samegrelo again began to act openly. This all made it difficult for Georgia to conduct the war with Abkhazia, particularly since the Georgian public was confused about the nature of the war and whom they were fighting: sometimes it seemed to be Abkhaz separatists, sometimes Russia and sometimes Islamic fundamentalists. Following the loss of Gagra, the Georgian army – or more precisely a variety of different units cobbled together – went on the defensive.

The battle for Sukhumi: In the first half of 1993, a number of Abkhaz attacks on Sukhumi were fought off. However, strategically important heights on the approaches to the city were lost to the Abkhaz. This led on 27th July 1993 to the signing of a ceasefire agreement in Sochi, brokered by Russia. The agreement stipulated that the conflict zone would be demilitarised and arrangements would be made to reinstate the lawful authorities in Abkhazia. The Russian forces located in Abkhazia were required to observe strict neutrality. To ensure order in the region, a multinational militia would be set up from the indigenous people of Abkhazia, as well as domestic armed forces to be staffed by an Abkhaz regiment and a Georgian detachment. Any other Georgian formations, along with divisions of Abkhazia's allies, had to quit Abkhaz territory within 10 days of the ceasefire. The Georgian side proceeded to remove its heavy weapons from Sukhumi, in which it had previously had a military advantage over the Abkhaz. However, the withdrawal of forces was delayed since many of the Georgian groupings located in Abkhazia at the time consisted of local residents, and disarming or withdrawing them from the region would clearly not be a simple matter. The Abkhaz took this as a violation of the agreement, and on 16th September they unexpectedly renewed their attack on Sukhumi.

The heavy fighting for Sukhumi continued for 12 days. The Georgians were forced to abandon the city (on 27th September 1993). The only Abkhaz territory that Tbilisi managed to retain under its control was a virtually inaccessible gorge in the upper sections of the Kodori River. A large part of the Georgian population in Abkhazia left Abkhazia, along with the army (245,000 people). Many of these people are currently refugees in their own country, or many have gone abroad (mainly to Russia) and are living there as refugees.

The war, which lasted a whole year, caused a great deal of damage to beautiful Abkhazia. Thousands of people died. Criticism developed throughout Georgia. In these circumstances, Gamsakhurdia made an attempt to return to power, coming back to his native country in September and heading up military formations set up by his supporters. The former president attempted to advance on Tbilisi from Samegrelo. However, he was defeated and died on 30th December 1993 in circumstances that remain unclear.

CHAPTER 20

Dialogue through Culture – or Cultural Dialogue

Batal Kobakhia

1. Background

In the autumn of 2000, the book *The Caucasus. In Defence of the Future* was published under the auspices of the OSCE. The book was a collection of works by 26 authors from the various republics and regions of the Caucasus – writers, intellectuals, journalists, academics and figures from the literary world. Its editors, Heidi Tagliavini and Freimut Duve,¹ took the view that ‘everyone’s voice should be heard’. As a result, the collection contained an array of genres including articles, essays, short stories, memoirs and personal reflections. The Caucasus Forum² had already been thinking of publishing its own book by writers from the South Caucasus, focusing on short works of literature, novellas and short stories. The main difference was that our collection was an initiative by representatives of civil society in the South Caucasus. In any event, it took another three years to prepare and publish the book – entitled *Time to Live*. But both books filled a gap in the cultural dialogue between the peoples of the Caucasus – a gap which had been suspended over decades of conflicts and war.

After discussing the idea with representatives of the Caucasus Forum, the editors set to work, believing that the human and financial resources required would be negligible. In fact, the final product only took shape after three years of hard work and lengthy discussions across the regions of the Caucasus.

Our starting point was that the emotional impact of political journalism cannot compare with works of literature that pulsate with the real-life pain experienced by people caught up in war. All wars are different, but there are similarities, as is shown for example in the screenplay written by Azerbaijani director Yaver Rzayev for his film *Sary Gyalim* (*The Yellow Bride*). It was written 25 years ago and was originally set in the last century. Its heroes were originally a German and a Russian in the Second World War. In the film based on this screenplay and released in 1999, these heroes became an Armenian and an Azerbaijani and the setting shifted from the wide vistas of the Second World War to the mountains of Karabakh. Since the dominant feature of all wars is the suffering of the people, changing the heroes’ ethnicity and the setting made no difference to the screenplay’s anti-war message. Ordinary people and societies are always the victims of conflicts. We did not want to see any more people die and realised we had to do something to make the world a better place, to convince people there is no alternative to peace. Some sort of action was needed. We chose to use literature. The aim of our project was not to identify the causes of the conflicts and how to resolve them; we left this to the politicians and diplomats. Our main aim was to reflect how people felt as they looked back on their experiences of war.

¹ At the time, Heidi Tagliavini was Personal Representative to the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the Caucasus. Freimut Duve was the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

² See Part 4 of this volume.

2. Purpose of the book

The need for this type of book was recognised by the representatives of many regional civil society organisations and international organisations at that period of “neither war nor peace”. This period saw a rash of books analysing the conflicts in the Caucasus and collaborative guides to working with conflicts. Civil society organisations from the Caucasus were also starting to participate actively in a range of networking programmes extending across the whole of the Caucasus, and even the former Soviet Union. At the time, the Caucasus Forum of NGOs had been in existence for over three years, the Caucasus Women’s League was gaining strength, the Caucasus Network to promote independent living for disabled persons had been formed, and a journalist network and many other networking projects were in operation.

Some publications presented a unilateral view of the conflict, but there were others reflecting the views of both sides. There were also publications taking a multilateral approach. I particularly remember the uproar in Tbilisi when a collection of poems by Abkhaz poets was published in Georgian. The book was published by Zurab Shengeliya, the director of the Georgian-Abkhaz Institute. The project was considered unfortunate in both Georgia and Abkhazia. It was far from the confidence-building measures required for peace. It and other subsequent publications were produced by the Georgian side without any discussion with the Abkhaz about the idea or the need for it. The memories were still fresh in the minds of the Abkhaz people of the burning of the Abkhaz archives and libraries, and the destruction of sources relating to Abkhazia’s history during the armed period (1992–1993) of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In this context, any post-war attempts to publish books in Georgia in the Abkhaz language were unlikely to be seen in Abkhazia as a humanitarian act.

In our case, the unique idea of producing the first collection of works of literature by representatives of the regions of the Caucasus involved in ethnic conflicts came from within the Caucasus Forum itself. We decided to concentrate on the South Caucasus for reasons of scale.

The collection would bring together works by writers from the conflict regions of the South Caucasus. The writers would share their pain, the pain of their people and promote the idea of a world without wars and violence. The view of the authors of the project, which was fully shared by the Coordinating Council of the Caucasus Forum, was that it would constitute a unique dialogue between the literatures of the peoples of the South Caucasus. In its final published form, the book contained short works (novellas and short stories) by 18 authors from across the South Caucasus, a region encompassing five literatures – Abkhaz, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Georgian and Ossetian – which have been forcibly torn apart over the past 10 years.

3. The process

Before starting work on the collection itself, we spent a long time building up a team of people who would be responsible for designing and publishing the collection. The editorial board consisted of the project's authors: the Abkhaz historian and political scientist Batal Kobakhia; the writer Guram Odisharia (born in Sukhum but now living in Tbilisi); Rachel Clogg, an English philologist working on Russian literature and particularly the works of Fazil Iskander, and an employee at the international NGO Conciliation Resources (London); and Magdalena Frichova, a Czech journalist who at the time was working at International Alert (London). The Abkhaz writer Daur Nachkebia was one of the principal editors.

It had been our original intention to hold a public competition for designers and artists from all regions of the Caucasus to select an illustrator for the book once all the stories were collected, as we felt the layout of the book would be very important. In the end, however, this was not possible due to communication problems and a shortage of resources and time. As a result, we appointed Levars Butba from Sukhum and Lado Pochkhua from Tbilisi to work on the graphic design of the book. Most of the funding was provided by the British NGO International Alert. The Caucasus Forum also did some direct fundraising, with the authors of the project persuading the Caucasus Office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation to fund the final stage – the book's publication.

Before we began the process of identifying short stories for inclusion in the publication, a series of meetings of the editorial board were held with representatives of the Forum. Ground rules for the project were agreed. These included an agreement that coordinators and editors from every region of the Caucasus – Baku, Yerevan, Stepanakert, Sukhum, Tbilisi and Tskhinval – would be represented in the project. Although a number of books based on war reporting, short stories and war poems were being published across the South Caucasus at this time, these were publications in the national languages aimed at coming to terms with the past and directed at their own communities. We, on the other hand, were looking for short stories that, whatever their specific national focus, would fit into a single collection that would be read across all regions of the Caucasus. A key consideration in this was that the language used should be “conflict sensitive”. Although authors were talking of their own suffering and trying to convey the drama of the events from the perspective of their own society, they were to avoid offending others. After all, readers from the opposite side in the conflict would naturally consider that the pain and shattering events they themselves had experienced have the same emotional intensity as those experienced by the other side. Publishing these stories in a single collection would make them the property not only of their own communities, but of all people living in the South Caucasus and indeed other regions of the world.

The people who put the book together had worked for six to seven years in networks and had worked together, so they trusted and understood one another well. The book was originally intended to be published in Russian, which remains accessible for most people in every region. Later on, if there proved to be a demand for the book, it was intended to translate it into English and the national languages of the South Caucasus. This did not happen, however, due to the international donors' lack of interest in this type of cross-cultural project and the stagnation and virtual closure of the Caucasus Forum.

Almost all the stories had in fact already been published in their original languages in their own communities. They were published in Russian for the first time in our collection. While preparing the collection, we had some discussions on the possibility of publishing it with the Moscow civil society organisation Peace of the Caucasus (*Mir Kavkaza*), which published works of literature, as well as other publishers. However, the organisers felt that it was important that the book be published under the auspices of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs as well as in one of the regions of the Caucasus. After much deliberation, we decided to publish the book in Maikop. Given the fragile nature of peace in the South Caucasus, we knew that publishing a collection in one of the regions of the South Caucasus would be “conflict sensitive” for the other regions. We chose Maikop deliberately as a sort of “symbolic bridge” between the South and North Caucasus. In the future, we hoped to publish a sequel to include works by writers from the whole of the extensive Caucasus region.

To find our future authors, we went on a series of trips around the South Caucasus. Everywhere we went, we met journalists, writers and representatives of publishing companies to discuss our idea for the book. Although the initial response to our idea varied, its peacebuilding message was gradually accepted. When selecting the works, we did not only consider their artistic merit. We were looking for war stories that were compelling but that did not contain a call to arms, incite readers to aggression and violence, or contain political analyses of events or ethnic stereotypes which other people would find offensive. We wanted our publication to convey a clear, emotional picture of the dramatic and tragic events and suffering that had occurred in all regions of the South Caucasus.

It was very important that the authors understood and shared the peacebuilding values inherent in the publication process and agreed in principle to revise their texts if needed to include more “conflict sensitive” language. But in fact we did not have to make use of this. The texts submitted by the authors, for all their emotional charge, were entirely correct in their assessments of the sides in the conflict. The selection process followed a simple rule: for example, the Armenian coordinator read the Azerbaijani stories and shared his impressions, while the Azerbaijani coordinator shared his impressions on the Armenian stories; similarly, the Abkhaz coordinators read the Georgian stories and the Georgians carefully examined the works from Abkhazia and Ossetia.

It was the unanimous view of the editorial board that the final version of the book had to be approved by all of the editors and partners in the project. We also had to decide whether to give priority to artistic merit or “conflict sensitive” language. In the end, we all agreed that “conflict sensitivity”, although important, should not detract from artistic merit. I think the results bear this out.

When the collection was complete, we had planned to hold book launches in all the regions. The South Caucasus office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation organised book launches in all six regions of the South Caucasus. However, lack of funds meant we were unable to invite all of the book’s authors. Moreover, the launches, while interesting, were not as representative as originally intended.

People in many regions of the Caucasus have fond memories of the Soviet-era journal *Druzhba Narodov* (*Friendship of People*), which published literature from the peoples of the USSR. We often heard writers complaining that their colleagues were now very familiar with Russian and Western literature, but knew nothing at all of writers from the Caucasus because communications had been broken and links lost.

There is no point in publishing books in their native language in regions where they will not be understood. Translations are needed but have not been forthcoming. Any translations which are published in Moscow only reach the regions in the most haphazard and irregular manner. What we were doing here was nothing new – we were simply trying to resurrect an old tradition, shorn of the ideology that lasted barely 70 years. It would have been impossible to publish a journal like *Druzhba Narodov* in a region still grieving over the tragedies of military conflict. What was needed instead were books like ours, as envisaged by Heidi Tagliavini, attuned to our vulnerabilities and sensitivities.

We thought that publishing a collection of stories about the wars in the Caucasus would free us to debate the issues that divide so many people. The aim was to bring readers together and help the different societies towards a better understanding of each other’s problems. We also thought it would prepare the ground for a new idea, the publication of a “Caucasus Almanac”, to which authors from all regions of the Caucasus could contribute. This publication would not only be about the war but also about traditions, culture, the life of their peoples and the shared values that unite them.

Although the collection *Time to Live* has been published, the Caucasus Almanac has yet to see the light of day.

In an attempt to give a flavour of the process of identifying suitable stories for the collection *Time to Live*, I have reproduced below some travel notes that I made during my trips around the regions of the South Caucasus. They give some idea of the subtleties involved in peacebuilding trips of this type.

4. Travel notes

Direct from Baku

The city

The last time I was in Baku was 16 years ago, long before the events that devastated the Caucasus. Coming to Baku now, I am surprised to feel as if I am returning to a city I knew well. We arrived in that hot offshore wind that makes you forget that you are beside the sea. In fact, the temperature of 45–47 degrees Celsius made it almost impossible to think or feel anything. Strung out by the heat, we took a boat trip on the Caspian Sea to breathe some fresh air like back home. But all scents or humidity were swept away by the wind. Even the water below us looked like cellophane, like in the famous finale of Fellini's film *And the Ship Sails On*.

Baku is clean and beautiful, and in a hospitable holiday mood. The embankment, filled with well-dressed people relaxing, reminded me of Sukhum's embankment in its golden era. Used to the pleasant fresh air, I found the pervasive smell of oil mildly annoying. But the residents are delighted: 'that's the smell of stability and our future wellbeing', they said. Baku is making valiant attempts to retain the original character of the city centre, but virtually everywhere rather pompous office buildings are being constructed for various corporations and Western companies, drawn by its oil. Despite some attempts to reflect traditional styles, most are in a purely modern idiom. But the real old town is just a stone's throw away, with its narrow alleyways barely touched by the midday sun and almost no greenery. By day, you see a few local people going about their business as well as the odd disappointed tourist coming here in search of "the real Baku".

The people

The people in Baku are immensely welcoming and warmly emotional as they give tearful, hugely circumstantial answers to our questions. By the time they have finished, we have almost forgotten the question. As they themselves say, the people in Baku are very law-abiding, and in Azerbaijan it is easy to bring about order. They are only too happy to obey the traffic police, the militia and the authorities. This impresses me; I feel completely safe. The politeness and *joie de vivre* of the service personnel is overwhelming, as is their desire to satisfy their customers. But by the end of the visit, I have had enough and just want to be left alone. In spite of the heat, there are lots of people on the streets – perhaps not surprisingly, given that the majority of the population of Azerbaijan seems to live in Baku. It feels as though everyone in this city is on holiday.

Language

Times change: we had to use an interpreter to talk to many of the people we met within the project. Older people, who we had expected would remember their Russian from Soviet times, understood us – but even they had difficulty speaking Russian. Guram Odisharia and I agreed that this is the natural attitude of many people from the post-Soviet republics, but it can create problems locally. I have also come across many people who are unwilling to speak Russian in Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Central Asia. We were told that people living in Baku tend to use Russian as a language of communication, although outside the capital it was less common. Baku now has many refugees from Karabakh, particularly from rural areas, and you often hear people speaking Azerbaijani. But Russian is still understood, and for many people it is even the only language they understand. But you will also hear English and Arabic; there are lots of foreigners on the streets. There is a cosmopolitan feel to the city that we unfortunately lack back home.

Eating and drinking

Baklava [a type of sweet pastry] is very tasty and cheap: we tried about 30 varieties and ate and ate. I was even thinking of bringing some back with me but decided not to – I had eaten enough to last me a year. The restaurants are enormous: one was big enough to house the whole of Abkhazia but was still full. The first time I went, I thought there had been some terrible accident, with groups of people dashing about. They turned out to be the waiters. The restaurant is huge, lots of people want to come and relax; the seats are few and far between, the wages are low – so much for service. But what I liked was that people drank very little: lots of shashlik [type of kebab], vegetables, fruit, beer, some kind of light alcoholic beverage, but no drunken orgies. And everything is washed down with sugary tea.

The heat forced many Baku citizens to leave the city for their *dacha* [second homes]; cultural events are over for the season. Before we came, we were told the city would be almost empty. The people we needed to see would not be there. Oh well, I decided, let's just go and see. We'll find some interesting people to talk to. Like anywhere, not everyone from Baku will be on holiday in their *dacha*. And we turned out to be right. The people we needed to see were there.

Even practically empty, the city looks huge to me. The only thing that helps us cope with the heat is the beer, which is served here cold and not warm as in our establishments, and in ice-cold mugs. We have to admit, the local beer is in no way inferior to our own Sukhum variety, or Czech beer for that matter. The beer is like a breath of fresh air – a new sensation.

Reactions to our project

Baku, like every capital in the Caucasus, is full of writers. But even they complain that barely anyone reads the national literature. They are cautiously interested when they hear of the purpose of our visit. They cannot get their heads around it to start with. Why would an Abkhaz who had been involved in the war and a writer from Georgia come together? After talking a little about conflicts and their roots, wars and history, they returned, looking at our exhausted and patiently waiting faces, to the purpose of our visit. They asked about relations between our peoples. The answer – the same as everywhere – made them smile sadly. There is so much to do. They returned to the purpose of the book, saying that practically every piece of writing these days is a documentary or a work of reference. There are virtually no works of fiction dealing with the last conflict. There is no demand. And in fact they do not feel that the war is over. There are still so many unhealed wounds. There are still so many open wounds. But almost everyone we meet – writers, journalists, critics, publishers, academics, representatives of NGOs and political parties, hotel staff, the taxi drivers without whom it is impossible to move around the city in such heat, casual acquaintances met over a glass of beer – they all start to take a lively interest in the purpose of our visit. In spite of everything, many of them do not think we are over-optimistic. We find writers who already have suitable stories, and others start to think of topics and that they might perhaps give it a go.

People repeatedly tell us about a film about the war in Karabakh by an Azeri film director. Our plans do not include the cinema, but Guram and I still decide to watch the film at the author's house. He kindly gives his consent. His name is Yaver Rzayev – a name to remember.

Sary Gyalim (The Yellow Bride)

We go to meet Yaver Rzayev at his home. It is just two rooms, but comfortable. Right away, you feel that a creative person lives there. He is dark and short. He offers us some tea. We tell him why we have come to Baku and why we have come to see him. 'Yes of course we are collecting stories, but we have heard so much about your film that we couldn't pass up this opportunity of watching it.' He immediately becomes enthusiastic, saying how remarkable the timing is: he himself has been thinking of releasing a film of shorts by directors from different nationalities in the Caucasus and so he can understand why we want to publish our book. In fact, his film has the same purpose. We speak for a long time in measured tones about life, what it is like now, about poetry and literature. I forget that he is from Baku. I feel as if we are in the Amra Café (in Sukhum), except that we are drinking tea rather than coffee, with all the time in the world. It is so cosy, I'm not sure I still want to see the film. Perhaps it would spoil this feeling that we are old friends. But he doesn't read my thoughts and puts the video on.

We watch a film about the war with the strange title *Sary Gyalim*. It means “the yellow bride” or “the bride in yellow”. It is the title of an Azerbaijani folk song from Karabakh. There is also an Armenian version called *Sary Akhchik* with the same tune; even the words are the same although in a different language. It has always been a bone of contention between them; now the bone of contention is different, and much more serious.

Yaver’s film deals with the war in Karabakh and the simple song in the title is about a wedding. He simultaneously interprets the Azerbaijani dialogue for us. Sometimes the film is in Russian but it always has English subtitles. It takes me a while to realise it is fictional. ‘How did you dare film these dialogues?’ I ask. He responds: ‘But it’s a fictional film. And they’re actors.’ We watch for a long time. We barely hear Yaver’s translation. We fall silent. He explains some symbols as we watch. He warns us that the film is full of symbols. But we don’t need to understand the symbols to watch the film. I feel as though I have already seen it all. I have seen these commanders, these weapons, the camp, the hero, a village artist from an Azeri village with eyes shining expectantly at the thought of taking part in a holy war; a flurry of activity; shots. When the film is over, we are unable to speak. I fall back, feeling as if I have just come out of the Abkhaz village Shroma in 1993. But he is waiting. He is the first to speak. Not once does the film glamourise the shooting. The very sound of shots is unpleasant. He himself thinks the time has come for philosophers rather than politicians, for historians and religious activists. Religion, not dogma; we need to hear the voice of all religions.

The film was awarded a prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 2000. It also received the prize for the best screenplay at the VIII Open Festival of Countries from the Former Soviet Union and the Baltics. In fact, he wrote the screenplay for the film about 25 years earlier when he was still studying at the Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. I am amazed: ‘but back then surely no one could have predicted there would be a war in Karabakh?’ He smiles. He was expecting this question. Back then, the screenplay was about two soldiers, a Russian and a German, who crossed from one side to another at the front during the war. Now the story was about two Dostoevskian “idiots”, an Armenian and an Azerbaijani, who destroy the conventions of war by refusing to behave as expected and by seeing events differently, by actively refusing to intervene. Back then, he did not receive funding. But a few years ago, he was invited to make a film in Azerbaijan. He took the old screenplay and changed the nationalities and names of the heroes as well as the setting and time of the action. He left the rest as it was. And indeed later on, he gives us both screenplays – one set during the Second World War and one during the war in Karabakh. They are virtually identical. Just the time and place are different. We no longer feel this conflict is unique. The plot is as simple as the song in the title. The Armenian refuses to shoot an Azerbaijani prisoner and is later taken prisoner by the Azerbaijanis. The Azerbaijani he saved refuses to shoot him. What next? Escape? And they escape. That is virtually the entire plot. Only the “bride in yellow”, who appears to one of the heroes in his dreams, helps them escape to safety from the

Armenian and Azerbaijani commanders who unite forces to find and punish them. But they have nowhere to go. The screenplay and the actual finale of the film are significantly different. In the screenplay, the heroes both die. But when he was making the film, Yaver could not bring himself to kill them. In the finale, it is not clear whether the heroes die together with their vision in yellow or not. ‘The viewers can make up their own minds. I couldn’t kill them. They might still be alive.’

During the filming, there was a sign recalled Yaver: ‘As they were coming to the end, an elegant flock of swans suddenly appeared in the sky. Everyone felt sad. It seemed like a sign of the kind of film we were making. But the silence was suddenly broken by a burst of automatic gunfire. The flock was startled, wheeled around and we saw one swan drop from the sky. Suddenly another swan flew away from the flock as it swept up and it fell and smashed to the ground at our feet. The flock was stunned for a moment, then got back in formation and continued its journey, leaving behind just two swans covered in blood to show that something terrible had happened.’ Yaver quickly ran up to the crowd of soldiers who were acting in the film sequences along with the actors in military uniform: ‘Who fired that shot?’ No one replied. Suddenly one of them, an actor who knew nothing about war, said he had been given the automatic rifle and he had wanted to have a shot. No one said anything, amazed by the cruel absurdity of the situation. Yaver tore the rifle from him and asked him to leave the filming area. Later on, he cuts the scenes in which he acted. He says: ‘It’s really symbolic – even in real life, when we are making a war film where there is no place for glamourising shooting, one of us shoots and destroys an entire life just like that.’

We watch the film in Baku on the small screen. It has not yet been released in widescreen format. Yaver is sure that the time is not yet right for the film to be shown either in his native country, or in Armenia or other parts of the Caucasus, where the wars are not yet over. I am sure he is right, but I’d like to feel he isn’t. I’d like to show it in Armenia, Abkhazia and throughout the Caucasus. Later on, there were showings on the small screen in Yerevan, Stepanakert, Sukhum and Tbilisi – at the festival and on television.

Trip to Yerevan

In recent years, I have often had to visit Yerevan. Every time, I am struck by how much it has changed. When in 1996 we went there for the first time, taking some women who had suffered during the war on a rehabilitation mission, the city still seemed not to have recovered from the Karabakh conflict – each evening at twilight it was plunged into darkness. But with each visit, it became brighter and warmer. So this time, I am expecting change and am not particularly surprised to see that it is indeed much more pleasant. There is life everywhere: the centre now has neon lighting and people are strolling around without a care in the world until late at night; a mass of new cafés, restaurants and expensive shops have appeared.

But this time, we have come to meet writers and representatives of the intelligentsia to discuss the idea of publishing a book about the war. This is unusual for me. Whereas in the past I have met mainly doctors and people engaged in the psychological rehabilitation of victims of conflict, which coloured my view of Armenia, now I have to look at Armenia in a completely different light. And I like it.

The journalist Alvard, who abandoned all her philological work during the Karabakh conflict to report on events from the frontline, introduces me to many interesting writers.

Grant Matevosyan

I am expecting all the time to meet the master of Armenian literature, Grant Matevosyan. In the city, they tell me he is rather ill and rarely sees visitors. So when Anahit Bayandur, who translated his prose works, tells us Grant is expecting us that evening, I am very excited. In the evening, as we stumble up the dark stairwell looking for the master's apartment, Anahit suddenly tells me: 'Grant has filled my life with light.' And indeed, light seems to radiate from Grant, as it sometimes does when you are in the presence of children or very old people. Our conversation is very simple and warm. We talk about life today, about the new generation of writers. When he hears exactly why we have come, he remarks sceptically that he likes the idea of the book but personally does not believe it can bring any benefit to this world. 'It won't change anything. It won't lead to anything', says the master. Then, returning to our discussion about literature, he again radiates light. He remarks that today literature is divided into 'a documentary style, which we got from the Americans and Europeans, and chamber style, and neither one will win'. He himself remains an advocate of chamber literature. Occasionally, he remembers that I am sitting next to him and asks what is happening in Abkhazia. I recall that Fazil Iskander has finally come to Abkhazia. He replies that many modern writers became geniuses because they were able to live far from their native land and could concentrate on their creative writing. He is silent for a moment and suddenly says harshly: 'I feel like taking a gun and going onto the street.' He does not like the present and what is happening today. For a while, the writer's son was with us. It is clear that they have a tender and warm relationship. He has made video recordings of some of his father's monologues and they were quite recently shown on television. The monologues had an enormous impact on everyone who saw them, and now Anahit is preparing them for publication in Russian. Everyone is surprised at the vigour with which Grant speaks to us, despite his poor health. He gets us to promise that when we come back from Karabakh, we will come and see him again. Unfortunately, we did not manage to do this. As we leave down the same dark staircase, it seems brighter. I am accompanied by the light of a genius which Anahit told me about as we arrived.

Levon Khechoyan

Levon Khechoyan is a writer from the country – a folk writer, as everyone calls him, and very engaging. He lives and works in the small town of Razdan, but even that is too large for him. He loves the countryside but is forced to live in the city. He rarely comes to Yerevan and only when he has to, but comes this time when he hears about us. He has a pure, delighted look, the like of which I have only seen in Abkhazia in Givi Smyr. Levon is a provincial in the best sense of the word. Recently, when he was awarded a state prize following a competition, he did not go. He did not want to receive it from the hands of government representatives. He had said: ‘There’s no point in entering the competition, it’s all arranged beforehand.’ But in fact his story was awarded first prize. He remarks sadly and gently about modern writers: ‘We need fiery writers at the moment.’ I recall Iskander and his “modern rhetoric”.

Ovik Eranyan

Ovik Eranyan is a young writer writing about the Karabakh war. His very first words are chilling: ‘Why can’t art reflect war? Because it is not over – in people’s minds, their subconscious. It is impossible to write a novel today. It is impossible because you can’t have a normal ending. The reader still expects an answer. The novel is a full stop; a story, an essay are perhaps a comma. I can’t write about the war anymore. Now...’ He gives me a book of short stories. Then he summarises the plot of another unpublished short story. It is based on a real event. Two friends, an Armenian and an Azerbaijani, were fighting in Afghanistan. The Armenian saved the life of his Azerbaijani friend. They meet again by chance in the Karabakh war. They are both radio operators and recognise each other’s voice on the radio. They start to talk about the war and life, recalling the past. They both call for weapons to be laid down and for a way out of the war. The story ends with a radio and TV announcement that some terrible battles have been fought and that there are casualties on the Azerbaijani side, with almost all dying. There are no casualties on the other side. Everyone goes wild. Just one person, the Armenian, knows what has happened. He is the only one not rejoicing. He knows his friend is dead. He stops fighting. When I ask Ovik to give us the story for it to be printed in our book, he refuses; he wants it to appear first in Armenian and in Armenia. The public in Armenia misunderstand him: ‘They say, “what, we fought for nothing?”’ Friends say that I am wrong. But I think you can retain your humanity, even in the midst of war.’

I tell him about Yaver Rzayev. He is interested. Unfortunately we meet later on and he misses the screenings of the film that Guram and I had arranged in Yerevan. He tells me: ‘No, there aren’t any films of that kind in Armenia. Not yet. There have been some attempts but none worked out. We will do it. The Americans have used film to express one person’s suffering in relation to war. *Apocalypse Now* is the latest in this series.

I am sick of hearing about people's experiences of extreme situations. But I haven't yet said everything I want to about war.'

He suddenly asks out of the blue: 'Have you been to "Poplavok" – the café on the island?' I respond: 'Of course, who hasn't, especially tourists. It's very fashionable.'

Ovik tells me: 'It may be fashionable for you, but it's where I spent my youth. I lived out my life there. But "Poplavok" isn't the same now. And Yerevan is not my city any longer. I feel I am losing my native land. We grew up there. Today's intelligentsia was formed there over a cup of coffee. It was open to everyone. What conversations we had there. What ideas started out there. What joy, love, friendship developed among the steaming cups of coffee. But we are losing it now. These days there are two people who sit to the left and right of the door, deciding who they are going to bawl out. In the evenings, they play the latest jazz for people to flaunt themselves half-naked. It's a farce. Capitalism has even penetrated into our private lives. But I never thought "Poplavok" would give in. There isn't and will never be anywhere else where dreams can be born.'

I can barely understand what he is talking about. His abrupt, passionate shift from literature and modern politics to a café on an island amazes me. I can barely hear him. I feel a lump in my throat. What are we talking about? Has he understood how painful it is for me to hear him say there will 'never be anywhere else'? I tell him I understand: 'Poplavok is the equivalent of our own Amra.' He says he is sorry. He has been to Abkhazia but does not know the "Amra". The past unites us. "Amra" and the "Poplavok" are synonymous. I think about the Amra. Who did the Amra sell out to? After my discussion with Ovik, I try to understand what is happening. I go to the Poplavok but I see new friends in the café. Who are these two guys bawling out the customers? There are sculptures at the entrance. I am told that they were put there recently. They seem to be whispering about something, leaning suggestively towards one another. Over a year ago, the current president of Armenia was sitting in the café with Charles Aznavour. The president's old buddy, a regular customer of the Poplavok, greeted him as he went past: 'Hi Robik.' The bodyguards didn't like that. They took him to one side and beat him to death in the toilet. The bodyguard was later put in prison. Everyone was in shock. Soon after that, a jazz festival was held there. When it was in full flow, the former Poplavok customers came to the café and in silence dropped a wreath into the small lake in which the Poplavok stands. That is how they said goodbye to their dreams. That is how they expressed their protest. I recalled Yaver Rzayev writing the *Sary Gyalim* screenplay 25 years ago. There are so many equivalences – the World War and the war in Karabakh, the "Poplavok" and the "Amra". When I found one more denizen of the Amra, I realised I had to leave. I haven't been to the Amra for 10 years. And I will never go back to the Poplavok, that fashionable location in the centre of Yerevan.

A worthwhile trip

Our week in Yerevan was coming to an end. We had held many meetings. People were not always delighted to meet us; some found our idea was unrealistic. But in the end, almost all those we had spoken to brought us their stories. After one meeting with a group of writers, one of them, who had witnessed first hand the events in Karabakh, asked sceptically: 'War through the eyes of a writer? But I write through the eyes of an Armenian.' Next day, he took me to one side and said that he had hardly been able to say anything the day before because he was amazed that a Georgian and an Abkhaz were inviting him to take part in a project of this type. But then he thought it over and realised that he liked the atmosphere in which all this was happening. He handed over his stories. I didn't know whether they would go into the collection, but at that moment they were the ones I was most delighted to receive.

En route to Stepanakert

I have wanted to visit Karabakh for many years. But every time we tried, we had to change plans at the last minute. The road to Stepanakert, as everyone told me, is difficult and unsafe; there is no real prospect of getting there unless you are accompanied. But I thought going there would help me to get to grips with a lot of things that were happening in Abkhazia: a new perspective would not hurt.

Karabakh rarely comes up in conversations in Yerevan these days. Although the conflict is not over, people in Armenia do not feel the threat of war as I do. Everyone is immersed in their own affairs, the internal problems and the future. So, they talk about Karabakh more out of politeness than any need. This makes me want to go there even more.

Finally, after surviving the scorching week in Yerevan, Guram Odisharia and I are getting ready to go. When we are still in Yerevan, the representative of the Caucasus Forum sets up a meeting with a journalist. She is apparently very familiar with the local writers, and in particular those writing about the war, since she had reported on the conflict in Karabakh at all its stages. I expect to see a stereotypically hard-nosed, brash woman, perhaps with a cigarette between her teeth. When we are met by a woman with an attractive, friendly smile on her face, with the name Alvard that I have never heard before, I confess I am a little disappointed. What can she possibly know about war? And had she really been there? I am secretly convinced she must have filed reports based on TV broadcasts without leaving her cosy office in Yerevan. As she discusses the trip schedule over a cup of coffee, with an air of calm assurance, we discover she is a philologist teaching classical languages at university, in a seminary, who occasionally writes articles for various newspapers. During the war in Karabakh, she abandoned everything and reported continuously on events from the frontline. We later heard that she had been enormously popular, was widely published in Armenian and Russian, and

knew personally the combatants, field commanders, journalists, representatives of the authorities in Armenia and Karabakh, the key players in particular. We were hooked. After spending the evening looking through her old newspaper cuttings with features, articles and sketches, I realised they were outstandingly objective and represented a genuine attempt to understand and convey what people from both sides were feeling, although this is barely possible at times of intense military confrontation. And so we set off on our journey with Alvard.

Our trip to Stepanakert started with the Ararat Valley, at the section running directly along the Armenian border with Turkey. Right next to it is one of Armenia's most sacred sites – the Khor Virap Monastery. According to legend, this is where Tiridates the Great [king of Armenia] imprisoned Gregory the Illuminator [patron saint of Armenian Apostolic Church] in a pit in the 3rd century AD. The king was given ass's ears as a punishment from on high. According to the legend, Gregory the Illuminator was kept alive by the queen, who brought him bread and water and shared his faith. For whatever reason – whether the king himself converted to Christianity, whether he was convinced by his daughter who had accepted Christianity which gave her the strength to persuade her father to release him, whether he feared a family split, or whether he simply wanted to get rid of those uncomfortable ears – he released the martyr and converted to Christianity. Armenia adopted Christianity as its state religion. In the 5th century AD, a monastery was built on a hill next to the pit where Gregory the Illuminator had spent such a long time alone for his faith. Turkish territory starts right next to it; their defences are clearly visible from the hill, along with an excellent view of Mount Ararat, the national symbol of Armenia and the Armenians from which they have been cut off for almost a century. Next to this historic and sacred site are the remains of an ancient cemetery with gravestones engraved with crosses and intricate geometric patterns. In the Armenian Christian culture, images of saints are not permitted and so their monasteries and gravestones are adorned with a distinctive mix of traditional and Christian symbols.

The route takes us past a series of monasteries. Above the road, on a huge cliff – high up in the mountains, almost touching the sky – towers the Church of Areni. The church buildings date from the late middle ages but the Armenians still refer to it as “*Norovank*” (“new church”), since it was built on the ruins of ancient churches from the 4th century AD. The church is unique within Armenia in having an image of the face of Christ.

But the most striking feature of Karabakh today is its roads. Wide, perfectly situated, its roads wind through the mountains and advance into the interior. The ochre colour so characteristic of Armenian mountain landscape paintings gradually gives way to a riotous greenery. If it weren't for the highways themselves, so strikingly different from our own impassable roads, you might think you were still travelling through the mountains of Abkhazia, a feeling that persists even when you reach Karabakh itself.

After a few hours, winding our way through the mountain roads, we arrive at the present frontier with Karabakh. Our journey is accompanied by strange music coming from Dzhivan Gasparyan's *duduk* – the Armenian national instrument. We reach Lachin, the strip of land joining Armenia to Karabakh. Before the start of military action, there were virtually no Armenians here. A site of great strategic importance for the people of Karabakh, the Lachin corridor is one of the perennial stumbling blocks in negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Returning it would mean the closure of its lifeline with Armenia. Today, restoration work in Lachin is virtually complete. All the houses have been rebuilt. But they are now occupied by Armenians. A church recently erected by the Armenian diaspora dominates the skyline.

In fact, it is the diaspora, and not the governments of Karabakh and Armenia, that is providing most of the funds for the restoration of the infrastructure destroyed by the war. It is also funding a number of socio-economic rehabilitation programmes. Every kilometre of the road in Karabakh is marked with posts commemorating foreign compatriots who have donated funds for the restoration of that particular section. You read every name for a while before you get used to it. Everyone can now automatically remember the names of the first compatriots who decided to donate (without wanting to sound critical, I'd like to point out here to any members of the Abkhaz diaspora in nearby or far-off countries who might be considering investing in Abkhazia, how selective and capricious collective memory is). There are a lot of them. The authorities provide many incentives for the Armenian diaspora to sponsor works. They also monitor the legality of the contributions, the extent of their influence and the popularity among the populace. They try to ensure an even-handed approach – moderation in all things.

Stepanakert

There are not so many people living in Karabakh today. The forced resettlement of the Azerbaijani population due to the conflict left around 140,000 people in Karabakh. There are virtually no signs visible of destruction from military action. Almost everything has been restored. There are of course no signs in Stepanakert either, although the city was also subjected to shooting and bombardments. Virtually everything has been restored, although there is still a housing shortage. Actually, we do see one unrestored building near the city hall, still standing as a reminder of the destruction. It is surrounded by a concrete wall decorated with whimsical colour pictures, either the work of children or perhaps local artists in a primitive style. The city is clean and tidy. And the centre, which only takes half an hour to go around, is all illuminated with Chinese lanterns. It has everything you expect from a capital city: its own television station, theatre, cinema, discotheques, private hotels, the Internet, well-dressed citizens talking business on their mobile phones, and innumerable cafés and restaurants which all look exactly the same. Around 60,000 people live in Stepanakert. Unlike in Armenia, you hear Russian being spoken everywhere – good Russian.

Today, this is starting to be a problem. Before the conflict, as well as Azerbaijani schools, Nagorno-Karabakh also had some Russian schools where Armenian was taught as an optional subject. So, virtually all the Armenians went to the Russian schools. There are many Armenian refugees from Baku living in the city, but they are more comfortable speaking Russian – with a faint but clearly audible accent, quite different from the one you hear in Armenia. Since the introduction of a law declaring Armenian as the national language, many are virtually cut off from some areas of life. There is only one Russian school specialising in business education. It is very popular, despite the limited funds available to ordinary people. Many people think the school provides a good level of education. This has even given rise to a human rights organisation supporting the Russian-speaking population, although it mainly defends the rights of Armenians and the very small numbers of representatives from ethnic minorities.

Television

The local television channels in Karabakh, unlike ours, respond quickly to events. They are also more tolerant of, or even interested in, representatives of NGOs. We had barely managed to unpack our things in the small private hotel before being told we were urgently expected on television. And although the television was only on air for a short time, we were given unrestricted access to the airwaves. In fact, other local news was shelved for the day as we were interviewed on peacebuilding, people's diplomacy and the development of civil society. The next day, many people recognised us and came up to us on the street to congratulate us. The local channel in Karabakh is watched as closely as Abkhaz television back home. And sometimes people are just as scathing about the quality of the TV programmes. I, of course, was interested in how television operates. Today, they extend the normal state-funded one hour to two hours. There are not many employees, 85 people in total. Of course, there is a sponsor here too; this time it is some Armenian from Argentina. Everyone is waiting for the launch of the Public Council provided for under new legislation; this will be staffed by representatives from the government and non-governmental sector. There are also two commercial channels but these turn out merely to relay Western and Russian news channels. The national channel broadcasts programmes in the Armenian language only – albeit with exceptions made, as in our case, for interviews recorded with visitors. The radio broadcasts in three languages: Armenian, Russian and Azerbaijani. According to the director, no topics are off limits on television and the authorities allow people to say anything on air. But even so, he had earlier left television due to friction with the authorities and had only come back quite recently.

Press Club

At the Stepanakert Press Club – an independent information centre – we agree to meet writers and journalists. Almost all are men in military uniform. Virtually all of them

took part in the war and reported on it at various stages. They look rather forbidding. We start explaining the purpose of our visit. We don't expect any comments and suggest they watch Yaver Rzayev's film about the war in Karabakh. They had been expecting this. Clearly, they had already heard of it from our friends. No translation was needed, as many local residents speak Azerbaijani. Just occasionally, I had to help them with a few dialogues. When the film ends, no one seems in a hurry to speak. They ask how the screening went in Baku. We explain that the film is being shown in small screen format for the moment. Later, one of the journalists present at the meeting announced in the press that the film was banned in Azerbaijan, which was not correct.

I ask for their opinion. They are silent for some time and finally make a few tentative remarks about universal human values. The events in the film, in particular the coming together of the enemy commanders, are difficult to accept. Someone says the film does not present all aspects of the war, and that the heroes metaphorically unite on behalf of a cause, which is not in the film. We remember we are speaking to people who participated directly in the war and do not hurry them. But there are no angry outbursts; they talk about the ethics of war and the ethics of peace, saying that this film is an attempt to present a European perspective on universal values that are not tied to local realities. Gradually, they start to reminisce about real events during the war and acknowledge that the author was at least trying to be objective.

They emphasise that the immorality of politics is in many cases the cause of conflicts. The friendship between the film's two poor wretches escaping to a mythical freedom is explained by them by the fact that there is no hatred or superiority between people in the film. I reflect that people who have firsthand experience of war generally tend to be more tolerant and reject war itself. With the film as a framework for the discussion, we compare experiences, agreeing that although the sides in the conflict had different aims and there are moral arguments on both sides, there are still ethical boundaries in war which both sides often exceeded for all their traditional values.

Meeting with officials

At the start of our meeting with Aleksandr Grigoryan, Head of the Information Department under the Presidency of Nagorno-Karabakh, he states resoundingly that 'we believe that the creation of a civil society is essential if our state is to gain recognition'. I am surprised, as I had been intending to say more or less the same myself at the start of this discussion with the government official. Once my companion remarks that this process is fairly complex and that the national mentality must also be considered, I recover my composure. We are then treated to a brief treatise on the history of the transformation of this mentality which, in the opinion of Grigoryan, was already in train during the Soviet era, when people thought that the state and the authorities merely talked about civil society but did not meet its needs and prevented it from developing.

In Karabakh, the state has responsibility for the war and so it is difficult for it also to ‘bear responsibility for the people too’, although this situation, he notes, should not affect the development of civil society. We speak for a long time – or rather we listen to him, as he lists the problems facing an unrecognised state and the need to develop democratic institutions which will bring about international recognition. One example he gives is the positive assessment by independent observers of the recent elections, which he says were considered to be fair by the population itself. I do not contest this and refrain from commenting that many of the people we managed to talk to said they were not yet convinced of this and that fair elections are difficult to achieve (they of course were basing this on their own experience).

I ask about the problems facing the development of civil society in Karabakh, and how the return of soldiers to peacetime life is going. Grigoryan replies that in Karabakh, as in other post-conflict and conflict regions, there is a confrontation between civil society and the military authorities (whom he refers to as “criminals”). In Grigoryan’s words, when some of the military decided to “privatise victory” to become a self-serving elite controlling the country by virtue of their part in the war, this led to a crisis of power and the act of terrorism on 22nd March 2000. The military structure collapsed like a “house of cards”. Karabakh then chose a civilised route to statehood, which, Grigoryan hopes, will not be dominated by personalities but by democratic values. He notes that we need an effective system of authority, laws, parliament and guaranteed freedom of speech. The conversation then takes on a slightly surrealist tone. I lose all sense of whom I am talking to and where I am. I can barely concentrate on the idea that the authorities must not interfere in the operation of the television channels or newspapers, even if they criticise the government; that we should not be surprised that there are people who think differently; that NGO representatives themselves are more aware of this than others and in fact are the engine behind the democratisation process. I remember hearing something very similar on Russian TV channels as the Civic Forum was being set up during the interminable conflict and civilian deaths in Chechnya; or during discussions on the importance of developing democratic values after the tragic events of 11th September in the US and the force deployed to realise these values, for example in Afghanistan. I remember that dalliances with democratisation and freedom of speech cease as swiftly as they begin if the government and some of its citizens fail to grasp how easy it is to declare democracy, but how difficult it is to stay true to its fundamental principles. As I listen, I think how positive it is when this official – a man whose job it is to control information which is crucial for a variety of freedoms to be achieved – says ‘people must not be stopped from thinking; we should listen to them’. Perhaps it is still only a game at the moment, but eventually it will become normal behaviour, because today there are people in Karabakh imprisoned for their political convictions.

In Yerevan, I met the journalist from Karabakh, Vagram Agadzhanian, who had been under investigation and was later expelled from the country for critical materials causing, as

Grigoryan expressed it, only ‘unavoidable problems in personal relationships’. Agadzhanian, who today works in Yerevan, is also facing ongoing problems. He has the reputation of being the most scandalous journalist in Armenia and Karabakh, a reputation which he seems to be rather proud of; he certainly seems to be a person who enjoys life. But when we meet over a brief dinner, I am already regretting saying too much and too openly. He catches you out with questions slipped in slyly, pleasantly and rapidly. Despite the repressions, he is currently working successfully for the newspaper *Iravunk* (*True*), which is printed in the US and Germany.

I left Karabakh with the realisation that, despite all the local differences, there are many similarities between us. We too are trying to institute freedom of speech, despite the establishment and controls imposed from on high. Even some of our leaders are starting to realise that a strong civil society will function as a support for a democratic state – even if it might not be to everyone’s taste. There are still attempts to control freedom of thought and freedom of speech here and there, but everyone understands that this cannot last. Of course, there are problems, but there is also a growing understanding that the authoritarian approach to running the country has long since outlived its usefulness. Developing democratic institutions, although not to everyone’s taste either, can lift a country out of a crisis connected with war and its development, but most importantly can bring about a new age of state recognition.

Karabakh was the last stage in our search for authors writing about the war. The editorial board has almost completed its selection and we are entering the new stage of preparing for the publication of the book. We all hope that it will find a wide readership and contribute to the development of a pan-Caucasus arena in which there is no place for wars and violence. But this is still in the future.

A little humour – or how to avoid taking sides

When we were in Baku selecting war stories by Azerbaijani writers for the collection *Time to Live*, we decided to go to a nearby bar for a beer as it was a hot day (over 40 degrees). We looked in, did not like the look of it and left immediately. But the barman came after us and tried to persuade us to come in. We talk. He discovers where we are from. He is amazed: an Abkhaz and a Georgian together, preparing a book about peace. He asks where we live. ‘Tbilisi’, my colleague replies. ‘I’m from Sukhum’, I join in reluctantly. A warm exchange ensues. Our new friend goes into raptures about how beautiful Tbilisi is; my colleague responds in the same vein about Baku. This goes on for some time. They start comparing the two cities and agree that Tbilisi and Baku are very similar. They repeat this a few more times. The August sun is beating down. I am tired. I exclaim: ‘Of course your cities are similar. They were both built by Armenians.’ A deathly silence hangs in the air, every bit as intense as the August heat. The barman does not respond to my last remark but invites us to come to the bar that evening.

When we get back to the hotel, have a shower and cool down, my colleague phones me and asks whether we should go. I ask him, 'have you gone off the idea?' 'Yes', he replies. I joke: 'I think the barman might have gone off the idea too. He might not take that throwaway remark of mine about who actually built a certain two great cities in the Caucasus so calmly tonight.' We don't go. But, in fact, the barman seems to have taken our joke in the right spirit. This was confirmed during our next trip to Yerevan and Karabakh a month later. The purpose was the same: to meet writers. At our very first meeting, the group of writers and intellectuals smilingly ask me whether we had really made those comments about urban construction in Baku. I look at them and boldly answer: 'Yes, but I have a question for you. Why didn't you build yourselves a city like those? There's nothing to look at here, it's all pink tufa blackened over time.' I see some eyes flashing but then suddenly they all burst out laughing. The people in Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert were happy with my jokey comment brought about by a scorching hot August sun. Although I thought they all had reason to take offence, I was wrong. Or rather I knew that they should not take offence. What I was really saying was that I think you have to fight for the right to be yourself and then people will take you in the right spirit. So, that is the story of how we came to produce our small collection of stories about the wars and conflicts in the South Caucasus, which, to judge by everything, are still far from resolved.

CHAPTER 21

Understanding and Defending what it Means to be Human

Guram Odisharia

1. Background

Nine years ago, a novella of mine appeared in one of Abkhazia's independent newspapers. I believe that I was one of the first Georgian writers to be read by the Abkhaz following the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. I treasure this fact, as I come from Sukhumi.

At a meeting held to promote “people's diplomacy”, a friend from my student days remarked: ‘Don't forget that you are also a writer from Sukhumi.’

I shall always remember this and am proud that I am also considered the “docker” of Sukhumi's literature – a part of this wonderful, friendly city where I was born, and where there is so much love but unfortunately also much suffering. Before the novella was printed, I also translated and published some short works by Abkhaz writers in Georgian journals and newspapers, most but not all dealing with the war. I wanted Georgians to know of the problems and pain that the Abkhaz people were experiencing, as well as their hopes.

In fact, because it was impossible to communicate as a result of the war, I had to print them without the knowledge of the Abkhaz writers. However, I consoled myself with the thought that I had also been published without my consent. I think this was one of those times when copyright infringements were to be welcomed.

At one of the meetings run by the international NGO International Alert – as part of the project “Confidence building between Georgian and Abkhaz societies with the participation of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs” – I had a long discussion with Batal Kobakhia, who is very well known in Abkhazia, about books on the war. We talked about their strengths and weaknesses in general, and about the objective and subjective, humane and aggressive nature of these works. Eventually, the general idea was born of publishing a book of works relating to the war. The war was a topic of lively discussion in another part of the project working with ex-combatants, and the publication was written into the strategy of this part of the project. The goal we set ourselves was to present a picture of the war through the writers' works.

We were participating in the Caucasus Forum and shared its values, believing that discussions by representatives of civil society on urgent problems and the many conferences would contribute towards the process of managing relations in the Caucasus. At the same time, we understood that these discussions and conferences were not sufficient on their own.

These meetings are often not well publicised, and reports do not have the wide readership enjoyed by works of literature. We thought that by involving writers in the dialogue and publishing a book, we could increase public understanding of the situation.

2. Putting the book together

We started by collecting works from Abkhaz and Georgian writers, and then writers from Ossetia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The South Caucasus is home to five literatures: Abkhaz, Ossetian, Armenian, Azeri and Georgian. The original plan was that the project would cover the whole of the Caucasus, but it soon became clear that this was unrealistic, so we decided to prepare and publish a book of writers from the South Caucasus. We have, unfortunately, three conflicts in the region: the Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Ossetian and Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts. The societies of the South Caucasus live, as it were, with their backs to one another. This has lasted for more than two decades.

The peaceful purpose of the book – the inclusion of representatives of the different regions – would, we thought, give readers an insight into the difficulties from the perspective of all the different peoples living in the South Caucasus. Therefore, it would include perspectives from opposite sides in the conflicts. Publishing the book could become an example for new peaceful civic initiatives and further the pan-Caucasus dialogue as an alternative to violence.

We introduced the idea to our friends and colleagues from International Alert. They liked it and agreed to support us. The Abkhaz writer Daur Nachkebia was invited to take part as joint editor.

To make sure we obtained the right works for the book, and also to get to know the authors, we had to travel to Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert. Later, we recruited editors from each region and started to work on the book with them.

Batal Kobakhia and I started with Baku, Azerbaijan's capital city, where we were accompanied by the journalist Shahin Rzayev. A month or so later, we went to Yerevan, Armenia's capital, where we spent five days before leaving for Stepanakert in Nagorno-Karabakh. At meetings with Azeri and Armenian writers, journalists and NGO representatives, we spoke in detail about the project. Initially, almost all of them were surprised to see two representatives of opposing sides in the conflict. However, once they understood the purpose behind publishing a book of stories by writers from the South Caucasus, they began to help us find materials. They introduced us to writers whose works they thought might be suitable for inclusion in the book and they themselves told us some very interesting stories. For example, we met Elchin Huseynbeyli who later introduced us to the works of Fahri Ugurlu and Rafiq Tagi.

In Yerevan, we were accompanied by the journalist Alvard Barkhudaryan, and in Stepanakert by Gegam Bagdasaryan. They introduced us to the Armenian writers Levon Khechoyan, Ara Nazaretyan, Hovannes Eranyan, Vardges Ovyen, Susanna Arutyunyan and Mikael Abadzhanel, some of whose works we were already familiar with.

Everywhere we went, we arranged meetings with NGO representatives if possible. At one of these meetings, Arzu Abdullaeva told us of the Azeri film director Yaver Rzayev. Later, we met him and visited his apartment in Baku on Kiev Street. He showed us his film *Yellow Bride*, which impressed us very much. The film tells the striking story of an Armenian peasant and an Azeri artist during the Karabakh conflict.

We showed Yaver's film in Yerevan and Stepanakert. No one there knew that the film had existed. The film was very popular with Armenian audiences, who took copies, and I understand it was shown regularly.

At this point, I would like to mention that the project launched some new initiatives. For example, at my suggestion, Yaver's film was shown twice in Tbilisi by the prominent cinema critic Gogi Gvakharia on the TV programmes *Psycho* and *Red Zone*. As a result, the film is very well known to Georgian viewers. Therefore, by looking for special stories, we ended up finding a special film too.

The process of finding materials, editing stories and publishing the book actually turned into a real peacebuilding exercise. We agreed every step, every decision and virtually every paragraph with each other, phoning often and communicating over the Internet as well as meeting face-to-face.

I went on my own to South Ossetia, visited battle sites and the famous Secondary School No. 5 in Tskhinvali where the dead (including children) were buried in the playground during the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. I prayed with Ossetians in the church of St George. Once again, I realised that peace proceeds at a snail's pace while war rages like a wild animal.

As well as the writers from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Ossetia whom I mentioned earlier, the collection of works by writers from the South Caucasus included stories by Abkhaz authors – Aleksei Gogua, Fazil Iskander and Daur Nachkebia himself. Authors from Georgia included Beso Khvedelidze, Shalva Bakuradze, Kakha Chaboshvili and me. Ossetian literature was represented by Kosta Dzugaev and Inal Pliev.

One of our meetings was held with the great Abkhaz artist, Levars Butba, now deceased, and the Georgian artist Lado Pochkhua, who designed the layout together. They consulted for a week and soon afterwards sent us the illustrations that are included in the book.

Purpose of the book

Unlike literary collections published by a single side in the conflict, we were preparing a joint publication by writers from across the South Caucasus. The fundamental concept of the publication was therefore quite different. It was designed to be a joint work of representatives of the literatures of the combatant sides in the conflict.

Therefore, it required constant exchanges of views and consultations, where we always aimed to resolve issues by agreement. After working together for a year, we had a very interesting collection of stories ready for publication.

Before the collection was sent off for printing, the project authors, editors and members of the editorial board arranged one more large meeting where we spent three days going through all of the subtleties and areas of disagreement. We agreed all of the texts – including the introduction and brief biographies of the authors – using as far as possible language that was “conflict sensitive”. It was decided to publish the book on neutral territory and Maikop (Adygeya) was chosen.

Once the book was published, distribution became a serious problem. In 2004, the Georgian-Ossetian conflict flared up again with dozens of victims on both sides. Some of the copies remained in Vladikavkaz (from where the books were to be sent to South Ossetia for distribution throughout the whole of the South Caucasus). Later on, with the help of UN officials and the personal support of the UN Head of Mission in Georgia, Heidi Tagliavini, the problem was sorted out.

The Introduction to the book says:

‘This book is a collection of novellas and short stories by 18 authors from the South Caucasus, a region that encompasses five literatures: Abkhaz, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Georgian and Ossetian. Over the past decade of wars and conflicts, these literatures have been wrenched apart and former connections have been ripped up.

This book attempts through the medium of art to convey the emotional context in which people live their lives today. The original aim was to include writers from across the Caucasus, but we decided to restrict it to the South Caucasus at this stage. The aim of the project was to present in one edition short stories by writers from the conflict regions of the South Caucasus. All the stories presented here have already been published in their original language. Here they are brought together in one book in a Russian translation for the first time. The book will become a unique dialogue between writers. In it they share their pain and the pain of their peoples. Its message is one of peace and an end to war and violence.

We believe that this book will unite all writers and help the different societies in the Caucasus towards a better understanding of the difficulties each other faces.’¹

All the project coordinators were involved in choosing the title of the book – *Time to Live*. This title by Elchin Huseynbeyli was voted the best of many suggestions.

¹ *Vremya Zhit [Time to Live]*, Maikop: GURIPP Adygeya, 2003, p. 5.

3. Successes and publicity

Work on the book by all those involved – those with the original idea of publishing the book, the editors, the editorial board and donors – has become an example for others. While preparing the collection, we gained interesting and useful experience in communicating, overcoming obstacles, coming to agreements, resolving difficulties, etc.

Successful book launches were held in Baku, Yerevan, Sukhumi, Tbilisi and Stepanakert. They were widely reported in the press and the book received many reviews. In the South Caucasus, the book is often recalled to this day. For example, the book was discussed at length on a television arts programme in June 2008 by prominent Georgian critics. Unfortunately, because of the resumption of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, there was no book launch in South Ossetia.

Because of this book, for the first time in 20 years, Azerbaijanis and Armenians are reading works by each other. Ossetians, Abkhaz and Georgians have also become interested in what “the others” as well as their own are writing about. The writers from the Caucasus published in this book have also gained a wider audience, with the pooling of their readerships – some 5,800 copies of the book have been published.

The publication also demonstrates the significant role that literature, art and culture have to play in managing conflicts. It was not just another project known to only a few dozen people. *Time to Live* has had a wide readership and is read to this day.

Perhaps not all of the stories included in the book are of the highest artistic merit, but that is not really the point. What is important is that each contribution is accessible to people on any side of the conflict since it deals with a humanity rising above war and cruelty. This is very important for people worn out by seemingly endless conflict who have lost their faith and hope. Since the book was published in Russian, some of the stories have been translated – for example into Georgian (the stories by Fazil Iskander and Daur Nachkebia were published in the journal *Arili*; the collection of short stories *Khidi* and the works of Levon Khechoyan and Elchin Huseynbeyli were published in the journal *Tsiskari*).

Many of the stories in this book have been translated into and published in other languages across a number of journals and collections. Since most of the stories in *Time to Live* were written and previously published in their original languages, we translated them all into Russian. The exceptions are the story by Kosta Dzugaev and the novella by Shalva Bakuradze, which were written specially for this collection.

The Moscow journal *Druzhba Narodov*² (a journal that was very popular in the USSR and which is now published and distributed across the former USSR and other countries) writes of this book:

‘Everything is connected; if we ignore science and culture, we unleash the mob and barbarism rears its ugly head.

One side gains the upper hand in cross-border conflicts over territory only for another to pack its bags, become an exile and an outcast. Some suffer today; others will take their revenge tomorrow. Human beings suffer throughout.

Time to Live is the title of a book on whose pages we meet writers from Abkhazia, Georgia, Armenia, South Ossetia and Azerbaijan. It is a challenging, polemical book with an eloquent call to live, not to die, to use stones to build rather than throw at one another. To come together rather than getting bogged down in dispute. To attempt to listen to one another again and, if not to feel part of a shared community, then at least to share responsibility for the future.

The book has had no critical acclaim. No article, no reviews – in fact, a resounding silence. This is symptomatic too. If a scandal were to erupt, it would smack of modish artistic provocation, become a potential Booker candidate, and the debates would begin.

The texts brought together under this one edition are clearly of varying quality and genre. Psychological novellas, subtle grotesqueries, almost Biblical symbols jostle along with what are virtually journalistic features. And there are clumsinesses of style, misprints ... But taken as a whole, this book is not just a collection but an event. The authors and editors have produced a work that is not biased in favour of one side or the other but aims to interpret what has actually happened to society, to people, to all of us. This takes courage, civic responsibility and resolve. This is literature as it is meant to be: a means of understanding and defending what it means to be human.³

When the author of this article in *Druzhba Narodov* writes that the book ‘had no critical acclaim, no articles, no reviews – a resounding silence’, he is referring to the absence of international acclaim (the article refers twice to the Booker Prize and the translation of the book into European languages). Unfortunately, it was beyond the capacities of the project participants to publicise the book on a global level.

² The literary journal *Druzhba Narodov* [Friendship of People], No. 11, Moscow, 2005.

³ Leonid Terakopyan, ‘Naveki vmeste. Ili navysegda vroz?’: Zametki na polyakh knigi rasskazov pisatelei Yuzhnogo Kavkaza, *Vremya Zhit* [‘Forever together. Or forever apart?’: Notes in the margins of the book of short stories by writers of the South Caucasus, *Time to Live*]. Available in Russian at <http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhba/2005/11/te13.html>.

However, across the South Caucasus, dozens of articles have been written about this book in Armenian, Azeri, Abkhaz and Georgian. There have been several TV programmes about *Time to Live* on a number of local channels across the South Caucasus. I believe there have also been attempts to translate the book into European languages: the Heinrich Böll Foundation wanted to translate and publish a shorter version of the book in German, but was unable to do so.

4. Focus on mediation and peacebuilding

The project lasted a year and involved up to 20 people. Because of the project's specific focus, all of its participants (even those unfamiliar with the term “mediation”) became mediators to some extent. All of our work on the preparation and publication of the collection was transformed, one might say, into a peacebuilding process, since we had to contact a very wide range of people well beyond the original project remit.

While working on the book within the project “Building trust between Georgian and Abkhaz societies with the participation of the Caucasus Forum of NGOs”, we often met in cities across the Caucasus. We were also in constant contact by telephone and Internet with International Alert staff and Forum members, with whom we coordinated all of our actions and provided progress reports. The fact that International Alert and the Forum coordinators from the South and North Caucasus participated in the discussion helped to achieve a balance. I also consider this to be a process of active mediation.

We adhered to shared values in our work and pursued a number of common goals, which can be summarised as follows:

- furthering the process of reconciliation between the peoples of the Caucasus;
- humanising relations;
- furthering a pan-Caucasus dialogue as an alternative to violence;
- introducing contemporary works by writers from the Caucasus;
- furthering a regular dialogue in the Caucasus;
- promoting Caucasian diplomacy, tolerance and cultural traditions;
- breaking down the image of the “enemy”;
- understanding the concerns of the other side.

From my own observations, the people we met and worked with were tired of political tension, wars, refusals to come to any understanding, isolation and uncertainty. They were pleased to collaborate and understood the significance of this project. We all wanted true peace and harmony, genuinely human relations.

5. Dealing with negative reactions

While working on *Time to Live*, the authors often gave interviews to the South Caucasus media. Thanks to the transparency of our activities, our attempts to explain the initiative correctly and publicise it at all levels, and also our partners' experience, we managed to overcome obstacles that might have prevented us from completing the collection.

There was just one occasion when the head of one of the Azerbaijani NGOs (I will not mention him by name) did not like the fact that I – a writer from Georgia – was visiting Karabakh. However, we exchanged letters and once I explained the purpose of our project and the situation, it did not go any further. I would like to quote from the letter this person distributed among Georgian NGOs:

'I was furious to read in the Arminfo Press Agency notices from 2nd September 2002 that a Georgian writer and member of the association "Caucasus Dialogue", Guram Odisharia, visited Stepanakert to meet writers from Karabakh writing about the war, etc. (report attached).

As an Azeri born in the Republic of Georgia, I am well aware of the current political situation in Georgia, which is surrounded on four sides by Ossetia, Abkhazia, Ajaria and Akhaltsikhe district. But I don't understand – do the Georgians want a fifth, Borchalinsk-style problem?

You would have to be blind not to see a Russian-Armenian hand behind all these events, something which is impossible to deny in Akhaltsikhe district.

Even so, friendship between a Georgian writer and renegades from Stepanakert, who have been conducting a separatist campaign against the republic's lawful authorities, is, to say the least, hard to understand. After all, this is the same policy as that followed by both Abkhaz and Ossetian separatists. Did he not stop to reflect how Georgian society would react if a prominent Azerbaijani were to visit Abkhazia or Ossetia without the knowledge of the Georgian central authorities, in order to promote the publication of a book by local military writers, which will doubtless extol the valour of the rebel grouping in their struggle against the lawful authorities?

This is in fact precisely what Mr Odisharia, who is referred to as a "Georgian writer", has done.

I think that Georgian literary society will judge this action by Mr Odisharia on its merits and Georgian public actors will not put up with it tarnishing, as it does, the historic friendship between the Georgian and Azerbaijani peoples.'

I would like to quote an extract from my letter of response, which I also distributed among Georgian NGOs:

'Dear... ... We want to publish a book on the war and against war, on mutual understanding – against stereotypes, and for respect for one another, against hate, for justice, peace and how people on opposing sides saved each other's life.

It must be a book of peace!

When war begins, societies become hostages. When war begins, mankind becomes ugly ('All bullets in a war hit a mother's heart' – Kaisyn Kuliev). Peoples start to become weary.

We all come from exhausted societies that live more in the past than in the future...

We, writers of the South Caucasus, have been isolated from one another for over 15 years; we do not meet each other, our work is not translated and sometimes is not even published.

For this reason, I and people who share these ideas have started to look for works which can be read everywhere and particularly in regions in conflict with each other. We are looking for the very best that has been created over the last 15 years of the five South Caucasus literatures – Abkhaz, Ossetian, Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian.

Good writers do not belong only to their own society: everyone should know about their works. I think this book will go a little way towards lightening our shared burden and will bring the innocent suffering people together. We have no right to do anything else. If we do not act, future generations will condemn us.

I am happy to say that we have found creative artists and other people from a range of professions whose existence gives us reason for hope.

I am again convinced that we – the people of the Caucasus – must, alone and together, heal our wounds, find a formula that will rescue us, whose coding is lost in our peoples.

We must resolve old problems with a new vision and new creative thinking!

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the present situation, I and my friends often travel around the Caucasus: Nalchik, Minvody (1998, 2000), Baku and Yerevan (2000, 2001), Tskhinvali (2002) ... My last trip to Baku was this year (25th July to 2nd August). Then it was Yerevan, then Stepanakert (at the end of August).

None of these trips was political in nature. We (conflict experts, psychologists, sociologists, writers, etc.) represent non-governmental organisations. We are “people’s diplomats” and peacebuilders.

War burst into our life like a wild beast, but peace proceeds at a snail’s pace. The bloodshed weighs heavily on us, the process of rapprochement is very complex...

I am proud to have many friends across the whole of the Caucasus. The days I spent in Azerbaijan are unforgettable, meeting with Azerbaijani writers, my old friends. I saw a depressing picture of life in tented cities. Some of my friends are refugees from Karabakh, from Fizulin and Agdam districts.

You may be interested to know that I myself am a refugee. I was born in Sukhumi and lived there until the war ended. I am very pleased that my works are also read in Abkhazia.

I welcome dialogue and new contacts. I appeal to everyone to meet, talk, understand one another and be understood ... (There are many kinds of meetings: meetings between peacebuilders are quite different from meetings between politicians)...

I applaud all those who can demonstrate that they are employing their best efforts, skills or talents to build trust between Abkhaz and Georgian societies. I don’t care what nationality they are; the important thing is that they act from the heart, with wisdom – and achieve results.

I also applaud the fact that my friends from Azerbaijan travel to Abkhazia. Indeed, I sometimes pick them up and see them off. That’s perfectly normal. It’s also perfectly normal that some of them have also been to Karabakh.

I am amazed that sometimes we – people living in conflict zones – encourage senior officials to meet but do not accept visits by colleagues, neighbours or friends...

20th September 2002

I should add that, unfortunately, I sometimes had to explain the purpose of our project in a similar way in Georgia too. Moreover, I was sometimes the victim of harassment – for example, the management of the Abkhaz Supreme Council in Exile did not allow its television channel (Abkhazia Television) to report on my work as a writer and peacebuilder. There were other instances of harassment.

6. Wider significance of book and new initiatives

I think the aims of the project were achieved. The book *Time to Live* was well publicised. Some of the stories in the book, as I mentioned earlier, were translated and published in other languages of the Caucasus without our involvement (this was not planned within the project). In addition, the book was discussed in universities, literary associations and NGOs (this was also not planned by us).

In Georgia, the book was discussed in The Caucasian House, Tbilisi State University, the NGO *Novoye Videnie* (New Vision), etc. Articles about the book were written in the Georgian newspapers *24 saati*, *Abkhazsky Meridian*, *Rezonansi*, *Kavkazsky Aktsent*, *Shansi*, *Dilis Gazeti*, *7 Dge*, *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* and *Aliya*, among others. The book launch was reported by all the Georgian agencies.

In Azerbaijan, reviews of *Time to Live* were printed in *Azadlyg*, *Yeni Müsavat*, *525-aya Gazeta*, *Vyshka*, *Ayna*, *Adalyat*, *Khalg Dzhebekhsi*, *Baky-kheber* and *Olaylar*, among others. In addition, the book launch was reported by the Turan and APA agencies.

In Armenia, the book launch was reported in *Armenpress*, *Noyan Tapan* and *Armeninfo*. Reviews of the book were printed in up to 10 newspapers. The same applied to Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Many radio stations in the South Caucasus reported the publication of the collection *Time to Live*. The BBC, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe referred to the book launch in their radio programmes. The book took on a life of its own, with its stories reaching tens of thousands of people.

All of this helped to broadcast the idea of peaceful coexistence of the peoples of the Caucasus. It helped to disseminate a culture of peace and international communication, activating peaceful dialogue by “people’s diplomacy” and the creative potential of the South Caucasus.

Publishing the book became an example for new peaceful civic initiatives. In Georgia, *Time to Live* was followed by collections of stories by the writers of the South Caucasus – although they were compiled at the initiative of the Georgian side (the project was also implemented by someone from the Georgian side alone).

After the book was published, we wrote a project application for publication of a literary almanac for South Caucasus writers. However, we were unable to persuade the donors that the project was worthwhile. In the almanac, we planned to print prose and poetry by South Caucasus authors, literary reviews, articles about the stage, cinema and art, and much more. The almanac project allowed us to use as yet untapped resources in communicating with disunited, isolated societies.

In 2004–2005, I submitted a project application for the publication of a South Caucasus almanac to a number of international foundations and embassies operating in Georgia. We only had a response from the Open Society–Georgia Foundation, which was prepared to partly fund the publication of the almanac. However, other international organisations (by which I mean international organisations operating in the South Caucasus) did not support the idea.

We also submitted an application for the almanac project to International Alert, but there were clearly not enough funds to support this here either.

At one of the larger meetings, we created the Association of Writers of the South Caucasus but were unable to go any further with it. We also failed to create a “mobile” group of writers from the South Caucasus. This group would, if required, have travelled in emergencies to regions, conducted an onsite investigation into the situation and provided objective information to the wider public. This failure was due to our group’s inertia; we simply waited for funding and hoped that the work on the almanac would bring us together and so did not prepare any other project applications. I hope that, in the future, we will still manage to start publishing the almanac and to further our association. This will require additional efforts and will take some time.

For me personally, working on the book was an unforgettable experience. The path that we have followed has shown us that we must continue our efforts, start the publication of a periodical almanac and kick-start the activities of the Association of Writers of the South Caucasus. Otherwise, *Time to Live* will remain the only project of this type. Unfortunately, for most international organisations operating in the South Caucasus, support for cross-border projects involving culture, literature and art are not priority areas for their work. As we already have a certain amount of experience, however, we continue to hope that we will be able to renew our collaboration with more success in the future.

Additional observations

While working on the project, I kept notes which I later included in my book *The Planet of Alienation*.⁴ I would like to quote some of these notes here. I think they complete the picture of our activities at that time.

I

Batal and I are showing a film in Yerevan – called *Yellow Bride* – by the Azeri director Yaver Rzayev. It's also about the war. After the screening, I meet a radio correspondent who tells me the following story: 'My aunt used to live in Azerbaijan. After the war in Karabakh, she became a refugee and now lives here in Yerevan. Her 15-year-old son died in Azerbaijan and is buried there. One day, my aunt travelled secretly to Azerbaijan to see her son's grave. Initially, the Armenian border guards would not let her through as they were concerned for her safety, as were the Azerbaijan guards, but my aunt managed to convince them both that she had to see her son's grave as he had appeared to her in a dream and asked her. The soldiers respected the wishes of a woman in mourning and let her through.

First of all, she went to her house where some Azeri refugees from Armenia were living. She told them she was not interested in the house and had come to see her son's grave. My aunt stayed with them for four days and visited the grave every day. The Azeris shared their own sufferings with her and on the fifth day, they accompanied her to the border. Now they are looking after my cousin's grave.'

II

We were told in Baku: 'Before the war started, an Armenian from Karabakh bought a carpenter's lathe from an Azeri. The Armenian agreed to pay for the lathe in the Autumn when he sold his fruit. But the war started soon afterwards and the Azeri had to leave Karabakh. He is now living in Azerbaijan in a "compact settlement centre" for refugees. Ten years after the war ended, a Baku native came to see him, gave him \$500 and said: "Before the start of the war in Karabakh, you sold a lathe; I met its owner in Moscow and he asked me to convey his greetings and give you this money."'

III

A participant in the Karabakh war tells me: 'During yet another battle, we took up a fortified position in a house. Amongst the books and exercise books strewn across the floor, my attention was drawn to one exercise book and I leafed through it.

⁴ G. Odisharia [2007]. *Planeta Otchuzhdeniya [Planet of Alienation]*. Tbilisi: Caucasian House.

A pupil from year eight had written an essay on “Friendship between the peoples of the USSR”. He got an A, and I read the essay and cried.’

IV

We were told in Baku how a famous Azeri surgeon from Karabakh carried out an operation on an Armenian without charge in Moscow. When the Armenian returned home, he went with his friend to Karabakh, found the house of the Azeri surgeon, laid a table outside and drank a toast of the local vodka, “Tutovka”, to the surgeon’s health. All of this was recorded on video and they sent the recording to the surgeon in Moscow. Apparently, the Armenian gave an unusual toast, but unfortunately they couldn’t show me the tape. Someone had taken it to Baku as so many people wanted to see it.

V

The classic Azeri author, Dzhilil Mamedkulizade, has written a play called *Kyamancha* (a “kyamancha” is a stringed musical instrument). The play deals with the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict at the start of the 20th century. In the play, a detachment of Azerbaijani fighters, many of whom have lost family and loved ones in the war, take prisoner an old Armenian musician, a grand master of the kyamancha, in the Karabakh mountains. The old man had been playing his instrument at a wedding. The members of the detachment want to shoot him but one of the fighters says: ‘Let him play us something before he dies.’ The plaintive sounds of the kyamancha ring out across the whole forest like someone weeping.

The commander of the detachment, a brave and fearless man, listens to the musician with tears in his eyes and his soldiers also listen in silence. Then the commander tells the old man: ‘Stop playing – your music awakens memories of when we lived in peace ... Take your kyamancha and go, or I might kill you and myself.’

The old man leaves.

All of us, everyone in the Caucasus, share one culture, but are we still part of this culture today?

VI

It is midday in Tskhinvali. We are sitting in the restaurant Eldorado (for some reason, it reminds me of the famous Paradise Lost restaurant in Tbilisi). Kosta is telling a story. ‘On the first morning of the armed conflict between the Georgians and Ossetians, Tskhinval awoke to the sound of automatic gunfire. One merry (I don’t want to say

“crazy”) guy, Vovochka,⁵ notorious throughout Tskhinval, goes up to the Ossetians and swears at them: “What are you doing, why are you shooting? Why did you wake up the whole city? Why are you bothering everyone? Why have you blocked the road? Take the barricades down now, cars and people have to use this road...” They spend half an hour explaining that it was the Georgians who came to fight and they built the barricades; they started the shooting and the Ossetians are just defending themselves etc.

After half an hour he decides to teach the Georgians a lesson, he picks his way through the barricades and walks towards them. The Ossetians shout to the Georgians: “Don’t shoot lads, he’s crazy!” The Georgians reply: “You’re the ones who are crazy if you fight us.”

But the shooting stops. He picks his way through the barricades and no one sees him for two-and-a-half hours.

“Did they kill him?” the Ossetians ask each other. After two-and-a-half hours, Vovochka leaves the Georgian’s barricades and returns, reeling, to the Ossetians. He is drunk. The Georgians have been giving him wine. He informs the inhabitants of Tskhinval that he has come to an agreement with the Georgians. “They’ve stopped shooting, we’ve drunk a toast to that.”

The Ossetians laugh. The Georgians laugh too, but Vovochka doesn’t laugh. The important thing was that while he was fulfilling his “peacebuilding mission”, not a single shot was fired by either side. No one could stop the war but he could – for nearly three hours.’

Vovochka has since died. Lord, bless his kind soul.

VII

I am watching television. At the peacekeepers’ crossing point near the Tskhinvali-Gori zone, a car was detained containing a highly sophisticated “Fagot” (“bassoon”) anti-tank weapon.

Detaining cars in conflict zones is a common occurrence but I am struck by the name of the weapon. The bassoon is a lovely wind instrument. The instrument was created in the middle ages and is an integral component of any serious orchestra. And here is a new type of bassoon – a powerful lethal weapon that can pierce armour up to 80 millimetres thick.

What secret, sadistic love lies behind the poetical names given to these weapons of destruction: the automatic mortar “*Vasilyok*” (the Russian name for the beautiful wild blue cornflower); the mortar “Nona” – a beautiful woman’s name, which can also mean the ninth note in the musical scale or a nine-line poem; “Edelweiss”, “Mimosa”,

⁵ Vovochka is the name of the character who figures in a range of (mostly salacious) Soviet-era “jokes”.

“Acacia” are all mortars like Nona. Or there is the famous hand grenade “Limonka”, the Russian diminutive form of lemon.

The world’s armies are well stocked with “Bananas”, “Oranges”, “Magnolias”, “Rain”, “Little Breeze” (“*Veterok*”).

I have seen people blown up by Cornflowers, Acacias, Mimosas, Edelweiss. That is why I hate the weapons that so easily fall into the hands of crazy, depraved people. Their actions remind us how far away we are from a civilised world and what outcasts we are. Unhappy the country in which a bullet is valued above a kind word and hatred above love.

VIII

My Ossetian friend tells me how a sniper has shot several holes in her long cotton dress. This was in Tskhinvali during the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.

‘I don’t think he was trying to kill me’, she says. ‘I’m sure he was joking and wanted to flirt with me.’

It’s hard to imagine someone being skilled enough to do that, but it’s even harder to imagine someone being so ignorant as to try and flirt with an attractive woman in this way.

IX

In Baku, an Azerbaijani cinema director tells me and Batal: ‘When the war started in Karabakh, two villages suddenly became particularly dangerous. In one of the villages, the majority of the inhabitants were Armenians and in the other Azeris. Because of the geographical layout of the villages and concern for their lives, the Azeris and the Armenians decided to swap houses; one day they did in fact exchange houses and villages using cars and trucks, tractors and carts to transport all their worldly goods. They had nothing to do with politicians and the military, and so they just went ahead and swapped. However, something unpredictable happened: the dogs and cats were disoriented – the houses they had grown up in were in one village but their owners were in another. They wandered between the villages for a good six months. At night, the dogs guarded their former homes and by day they stayed with their owners. The cats behaved in the same way.’

As I listen to the director, I think: someone should make a film or a video recording of what war has done to them – wandering across hills and plains in the mornings and evenings from one village to the other, meeting on the way, not touching one another.

This film would be the most faithful description of the war.

Since the mid-1990s, international and local civil society actors have been engaged in a wide range of different initiatives aimed at transforming the conflicts in the South Caucasus. A number of these initiatives are described in this book, selected to demonstrate the diversity of peacebuilding work undertaken by civil society, including work with politicians, economic actors, women, media, academia and cultural figures, to name a few.

This book brings together the perspectives and reflections of both Western facilitators of these initiatives and local participants from opposing sides of the conflicts. It offers an insider's view of the vision and drive behind different processes, how they evolved over time, the participants' motivations, and the authors' own subjective assessment of success and failure.

The book specifically profiles initiatives implemented by UK organisations International Alert, Conciliation Resources and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, as well as the US University of California, Irvine (UCI). It is aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at the professional peacebuilding community of practice. We hope that it will help to inform and stimulate discussion about different civil society initiatives that aim to build peace in the South Caucasus region.

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