

**GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT,
RETHINKING APPROACHES TO CONFLICT
RESOLUTION AND NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ITS
TRANSFORMATION**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

"EMPOWERING WOMEN TO DEVELOP NEW APPROACHES RELATED TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION"

Since January 15, 2017 the fund "Sukhumi" has started working on a new project aimed at empowering women on both sides of the conflict to enhance their role in society and influence the process of conflict transformation and building a sustainable Peace.

Project activities will be implemented in Western Georgia.

The necessity of the project is argued by the fact that, according to common practice, in official structures on both sides of the conflict men dominate, whereas women can be successful in the "third sector". The potential and experience of women are also used in public diplomacy in a small dose.

According to the project, in order to achieve lasting peace it is very important to work with young people, especially with girls who are open to dialogue, who are able to seek and find compromise solutions for solving the most pressing problems. A significant part of the project is to increase knowledge on conflict transformation and women's participation in building peace.

The target groups of the project are young women who will gain the necessary skills to participate in peacekeeping activities; Representatives of official structures involved in the process of settling the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict; Civil society, representatives of state bodies, which are considered as supporters in achieving the main goal of the project.

As a result of the project, a safe platform will be created to discuss humanitarian problems between women activists of civil society of the conflicting parties; The role of women in decision-making on the peaceful settlement of the conflict will be enhanced; research will be conducted and proposals and recommendations will be developed for presentation to the public, analytical brochure will be published; a positive public opinion will be formed on the need for women to participate in decision-making, including building sustainable peace and promoting human security; The society will disseminate information about the successful experience of "women's diplomacy". This will be a step forward in the way of a positive transformation of conflicts and the building of a lasting peace.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years into the unresolved Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which has been characterised by ambivalence of relationships and actions of the conflicting sides, we are facing the reality of a paralysed process that has no tangible outcomes. Stagnation of the political dialogue has led to further estrangement and distrust between the sides, has reaffirmed the scepticism of the Georgian population in official peace negotiations that have proved uncompromising and unproductive and has moved prospects of resolution of this protracted conflict further into the future.

Official negotiations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, that followed the suspension of hostilities in Abkhazia (in 1992-1993) resulting in thousands of casualties from both sides and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians from their homes, can be described as an inconsistent process often at a deadlock due to escalated tensions and broken agreements. Mutual distrust of the sides and polar difference in their positions on the issue of status also hampered any attempts to resolve the conflict.

2008 August War between Russia and Georgia has radically changed the state of affairs in the conflict by shifting an ethno-political conflict between Georgian and Abkhaz sides to an international level and defining Russia as a key side in the conflict. Russia's open participation in military operations against Georgia on the side of South Ossetia and consequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia left no doubts of its geopolitical interests and desire to maintain its influence in the region directed against Georgia's growing pro-Western orientation. It is worth mentioning that such large-scale geostrategic rivalry has completely overshadowed the existence of a conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians. Abkhazia came to be viewed as Russia's instrument and satellite. However, ignoring the conflict and disregarding confrontations and grievances between the two nations creates obstacles for any dialogue, for building trust between the sides and thus postpones the possibility of conflict resolution. Moreover, infringing on the dignity of a conflicting side, ignoring their needs and interests, refusing to grant Abkhazia "parity of esteem", which need to be considered for the success of any negotiations aimed at problem-solving, only widens the chasm and inspires distrust in the process pushing Abkhazia further under the influence of Russia as its sole protector and benefactor.

It is also noteworthy that the Ukrainian crisis and consequent tension between Russia and Europe have strengthened the feeling that the key to resolution of current conflicts lies in the choice and affiliation of the sides with strategic and political interests of one or another state rather than in the efforts of building up dialogue with the opposing side.¹ Conflict resolution implies recognizing the existence of problems on the one hand and direct communication, discussion and interaction with a side of the conflict. Although Russia's role and interests in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict should not be underestimated, focusing exclusively on the geopolitical level and ignoring the existing strife between Georgians and Abkhazians certainly does nothing to improve relationship between the sides or restore mutual trust. Moreover, it plays a counterproductive role in the positive transformation of the conflict.

An additional significant factor that hampers the process of conflict resolution is incompatibility of Georgian and Abkhaz positions on the issue of political status. At present the only platform for direct dialogue with the Abkhaz side is offered by Geneva talks dedicated to the issues of stability and security mediated by EU, UN and OSCE and involving delegations of Georgia, Russia, the USA and representatives of *de facto* and *de jure* authorities of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. Discussion of any issues, whether political or humanitarian, invariably hits a brick wall of incompatible positions concerning the status of Abkhazia, which leaves no space for reaching an agreement and delays finding solutions to existing problems beyond foreseeable future.

With official diplomacy failing to bring about tangible outcomes, public diplomacy remains a comparatively free space for conducting an open constructive dialogue, developing new ideas, carrying out specific actions aimed at positive transformation of the protracted conflict and potentially having a positive effect on political decisions.

Consequently, it is crucial to revise current approaches to conflict management, rethink and reassess past and present policies in peacekeeping activities as well as positions of the sides, discuss openly the factors that present obstacles to constructive dialogue and the peacebuilding process, redirect efforts to neutralizing existing barriers. New forms of interaction at political and social levels need to be found, efforts should be directed towards initiating new decisive actions primarily focused on human rights

1 Tabib Huseynov (2014), Transitional intervention strategies for conflict transformation in the South Caucasus, *Caucasus Survey*, 2:1-2, 130, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2014.11417305>

protection and solution of humanitarian, social and economic problems, which would contribute to ensuring dignified life for population of Abkhazia as well as whole Georgia.²

This article first and foremost aims to analyse the key factors that represent obstacles to peacebuilding activities and conflict transformation emphasizing roles of all parties involved in the process as well as the impact of these factors on the prospects of peacebuilding. In addition, the article will make specific proposals for overcoming the existing crisis, starting a more effective peacebuilding process and creating more beneficial conditions for transforming Georgian-Abkhaz conflict while taking into consideration the current political context.

The views expressed in this article are based on the personal opinion of the author but also incorporate opinions of experts on Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and representatives of civil society including NGOs, women leaders (young as well as older generations) expressed during meetings and training sessions organized by Fund “Sukhumi”.

2 Mentioning “Georgia” and “Abkhaia” on a stand-alone basis should not be considered as author’s recognition of Abkhazia as independent unit.

PART I: KEY FACTORS HAMPERING PEACEBUILDING AND POSITIVE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONFLICT

1.1. Clash of Incompatible Statuses

Incompatibility of positions on the issue of Abkhazia's political status is one of the key factors that hamper reaching any agreements, whether political or humanitarian, between Georgians and Abkhazians. Any proposals connected with resolving Georgian-Abkhaz conflict whatever the suggested benefits, including widest possible authority, serious guarantees of political self-government or solution of humanitarian issues, if they contained reference to territorial integrity or emphasized Georgia's aspiration to reintegrating Abkhazia into Georgia, were met with firm refusal from the side of Sukhumi.

Several important initiatives can be identified that had potential for getting the conflict resolution process off the ground, changing the course of events and involving the sides in constructive cooperation aimed at development and improvement of people's lives in both communities and bringing reconciliation closer. However, incompatibility of positions on the status of Abkhazia became an obstacle to dialogue and to reaching agreement on all these occasions.

Initially, federal model was suggested during negotiations as the main model of state system for Georgia and following lengthy discussions this was reflected in the Protocol on Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution of 1995. The Protocol declared the agreement of the sides "to live in a unitary federative state within the borders of the former Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia" and provided clear delimitation of authority between the federal and Abkhazian governments. The signature of the Abkhaz side was soon withdrawn due to a political scandal in the Parliament of Abkhazia refusing to return Abkhazia within Georgia's jurisdiction.³

Similar lack of success befell the second attempt of suggesting federal models of Abkhazia and Georgia in the second version of the Protocol on

3 V. Kolbaia, I. Haindrava, N. Sardjveladze, E. Chomakhidze and A. Gegeshidze (2009). 'Garantii po nevozobnovleniyu boevikh deistvij: opaseniya v kontekste gruzino-abkhazskikh vzaimootnoshenij' [Guarantees on non-resumption of hostilities: fears in the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz relations]. Tblisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies., pp. 10, 80.

Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution of 1997 which referred to the consent of the sides “... to live in a united federal state within the borders of the former Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia of December 21, 1991” when Georgia refused to discuss any models that envisaged existence of equal “united states”⁴.

Vyacheslav Chirikba’s recommendations concerning the state model combining federal and confederal principles failed to receive adequate attention either⁵.

Clash on status incompatibility did not leave a chance for success to a constructive dialogue on peace project – “Basic Principles for the Division of Competencies between Tbilisi and Sukhumi” also known as “Boden Plan”⁶, proposed in 2002 by Dieter Boden, UN special representative for Abkhazia. “Boden Plan” consisting of eight articles envisages formation of “sovereign Abkhazia” within the united federal state of Georgia. The document did not propose any ready-made solutions for the conflict in Abkhazia, but it represented an interesting platform for starting a constructive dialogue in order to identify specific measures for peaceful resolution of the conflict. This plan was rejected by both Georgia and Abkhazia as any references placing Abkhazia “within Georgia” were unacceptable for Sukhumi while mention of “Abkhazia’s sovereignty” even within Georgia was perceived by Tbilisi as a threat to the country’s territorial integrity.

The issue of status impeded not only official initiatives, but also ones put forward by representatives of civil society. For instance, in the middle of 2004 a group of independent experts designed a concept for possible future status of Abkhazia entitled “Concept on the Special Status of Abkhazia in the Georgian State”. The concept was presented to the public and authorities in Georgia and Abkhazia. The document promoted the ideas that can be considered as more elaborate than any presented in the past. It envisaged formation of an asymmetrical federation in which Abkhazia as “one of the historical founding subjects” of the Georgian state would

4 Ibid, pp, 10, 83

5 Viacheslav Chirikba, Georgia and Abkhazia: Proposals to Constitutional Models, 1999, p. 388, available in Russian at http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/order-books/federal_r/17chirikba.pdf

6 Bruno Coppieters, “Europeanization and Conflict Resolution: Case Studies from the European Periphery”, Chapter 5: Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict, 2005, pp. 207-209, available in Russian http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/orderbooks/ecr/ecr_197-236.pdf

be a “sovereign state entity” with the right of withdrawal.⁷ After heated debates this proposal failed to become a basic document to be discussed by Georgian and Abkhaz politicians as any mention of Abkhazia’s “sovereignty” presented unacceptable prospects for Georgia.

Since the events of 2008, which significantly changed the state of affairs for the conflicting sides, negotiations have been conducted in two formats but this time between Georgia and Russia.

One format – Geneva negotiations (also known as Geneva Discussions) started in October 2008 in accordance with the ceasefire agreement of August 12 and have been conducted under the aegis of EU, OSCE and UN. Official Geneva dialogue, which involves representatives of Tbilisi, Moscow, Washington, Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, covers only a limited range of issues of security, return of Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and humanitarian needs of conflict-affected population. Even after nine years and 42 rounds of discussions it is impossible to identify practically any positive shifts or tangible results.

The second format – is the so called “Abashidze-Karasin Prague meetings” where Zurab Abashidze, Prime Minister’s Special Representative for Russian Relations and Gregory Karasin, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, discuss the issues connected with trade, economic, humanitarian and cultural aspects of bilateral relations.

At present, it is clear that both formats are doomed to failure as any serious issue concerning Abkhazia hinges on the question of status. For instance, the main stumbling block for political dialogue in Geneva discussions is reaching an agreement on non-use of force which in its turn is hampered by the issue of political status. In 2010 Georgia made a unilateral pledge of non-use of force⁸, confirmed in the Association Agreement between Georgia and European Union, but it refused to sign an agreement with unrecognized Abkhazia not considering it a sovereign state and a side in the conflict and demanded that the agreement be signed by Russia, who it viewed as the key+, side of the conflict. Russia, on its part refused to sign this document not recognizing itself as a side in the conflict. Besides, any topics connected with restoring

7 Celine Frances, «Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)», 2010, p. 211, available at <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/pdf-files/Conflict%20Resolution%20and%20Status%20Publication%20version%202011.pdf>

8 *Civil.ge*, "Georgia Makes 'Unilateral Pledge' of Non-Use of Force", 23 November 2010. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22880>.

economic relations with Abkhazia or facilitating travel, on the demand of Moscow and Sukhumi need to be dealt with through agreements between Georgia and Abkhazia as independent states. Consequently, status-related issues block solution of a number of problems as concluding any agreements with Abkhazia is perceived by Georgia as a step towards legitimizing international legal status of Abkhazia. Thus, the protracted Georgian-Abkhaz conflict represents a “clash of incompatible desired statuses”⁹, which leads the whole process to a deadlock leaving no chances for constructive dialogue and solution of burning issues facing the conflict-affected population.

1.2. Conflict Internationalization – from non-recognition to rejection

August war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 brought a radical change to the state of affairs in the conflict by shifting an ethno-political conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia into an inter-state conflict between Georgia and Russia. Russia’s open participation in military operations against Georgia in 2008 and consequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia led to positioning Russia as a main side of the conflict and turned Georgian-Abkhaz conflict into a geopolitical rivalry with Russia.¹⁰ On the one hand, internationalisation of the conflict removed any doubts of Russia’s geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus emphasizing its key role in escalation of the conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians aimed against Georgia’s pro-Western orientation and helping to maintain control in the region. On the other hand, neglecting the fact of existence of a conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia and deep-rooted grievances between these nations increases the distance between the sides and postpones any prospects of conflict resolution. The tendency of viewing Abkhazia as a “pawn” on the board of large-scale international politics does not allow to fully understand the complexity and diversity of the issues involved in the relationship between Georgians and Abkhazians and causes to miss

9 Celine Frances, «Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)», 2010, p. 20. Available at <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/pdf-files/Conflict%20Resolution%20and%20Status%20Publication%20version%202011.pdf>

10 Gia Nodia, “The August War of 2008: The Main Consequences for Georgia and its Conflict.” (2012), page 29

opportunities for looking deeper into the fears and needs of the people making up these communities.¹¹

Interestingly, after August War, when political dialogue was practically suspended and no positive developments were expected, the government of Georgia refocused its approach from the issues of status to restoration of trust and establishing better relations between the communities. Georgia's new approach was presented in 2010 in the form of "The State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation". This was practically the first all-encompassing document covering a wide range of issues related to re-establishing contacts between the societies through inter-community projects in practically every sphere of life of conflict-affected population. These include giving Abkhaz and South Ossetian population access to health care and benefits available in Georgia, rehabilitation of transportation links, possibility of travelling abroad using specially issued travel documents, promotion of trade relations through creating adequate legal and financial conditions, promoting protection of basic human rights, cultural heritage, language and identity of Abkhaz nation, etc.¹² Also, a special plan was designed for implementing actions envisaged by the strategy. For example, Georgia offered to produce neutral identity cards and passports that would allow the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to travel around the world, benefit from the services available in Georgia. However, the attitude to "neutral passports" was rather negative in Abkhazia, primarily because majority of its population already has Russian passports, which they use to travel visa-free to Russian Federation, study, work and receive medical services there, also travel abroad on general terms.¹³ Moreover, Abkhazians and Ossetians reject "neutral passports" because they cannot accept the idea of "integration with Europe through Georgia".

11 John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal, 'Inside Abkhazia: A Survey of Opinions in a De-Facto State' (2013), available at <http://www.colorado.edu/ibs/intdev/johnno/pub/InsideAbkhazia.pdf>

12 Civil.ge, "State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation. 2010, available at http://www.civil.ge/files/files/strategy_ru.pdf

13 Newcaucasus.com, "*there is no problem traveling abroad for those who received Russian passports outside of Abkhazia (i.e. any place in Russia)*", Two Views on neutral passports for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, (Два взгляда на нейтральные паспорта для Абхазии и Южной Осетии), 17.07.2011, available at <http://newcaucasus.com/society/13029-dva-vzglyada-na-neytralnyie-pasporta-d.html>

In contrast, cooperation in the field of health care is one of the most effective mechanisms for involving people into and promoting interaction between Georgian and Abkhaz communities. Population of Abkhazia, deprived of possibility to receive quality health care in Abkhazia and having no access to health services in Russia due to unaffordable prices, visits Georgia to receive medical treatment more and more frequently.

According to official data during 2014-2016 4 426 people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia received fully free treatment in Georgia through referral program. 2 693 of these were holders of Abkhaz passports and 1733 – Ossetian passports.¹⁴ During this period the government of Georgia allocated GEL 16 500 000 (approximately USD 6 880 000) for health care of the population of Abkhazia. It should also be mentioned that these figures do not include people who received medical services with financial support of international organizations and personal initiatives (relatives, friends from Georgia), which is allegedly twice the official number.

Although the Strategy and Action Plan aimed to avoid touching upon the issue of status, the Preamble of the Strategy clearly emphasizes Georgia's firm commitment to achieve full de-occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to re-integrate these territories and the population into the unified Georgian constitutional space. The Strategy also pays a lot of attention to Russia's role in the conflicts and its geopolitical interests in the region, while Abkhazia and South Ossetia are viewed from the angle of Russian occupation and are not recognized as sides in the conflict. This rhetoric resulted in a strong antagonism and rejection of the strategy on the part of Abkhaz authorities and it was met with a flat refusal to consider proposals presented there. The document was perceived as "soft bribery"¹⁵ and it was said in response that "Abkhazia is not planning to return to Georgia and it is not an occupied territory".¹⁶

14 The report of Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, the State Minister of Reconciliation and Civil Equality in the meeting with representatives of National Platform, dedicated to the issues of "policy on reconciliation and restoration of the trust", 30 December, Tbilisi, 2016

15 Civil.ge, "Sokhumi Slams Tbilisi's Strategy Paper", February 3, 2010, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21944>

16 ApsnyPress, "*Abkhazia is not going to return within Georgia. It is not occupied territory and state strategy prepared by Temur Iakobashvili (state minister of Georgia for reintegration) is not for us,*" said de-facto prime-minister of Abkhazia Sergei Shamba", June 24, 2010, Available at <http://www.apsny-press.info/news/sergey-shamba-abkhaziya-ne-sobiraetsya-vozvrashchatsya-v-sostav-gruzii-ne-yavlyaetsya-okkupirovannoy/>

Thus, it is obvious that in spite of promising and positive proposals aimed at building trust and improving relations with the Abkhaz side as well as solutions to a number of problems facing the Abkhaz society, the Strategy could not become acceptable for Sukhumi primarily because of the declared goal of “reintegrating Abkhazia into Georgia” and also, due to inconsistency of the document itself. On the one hand, the Strategy aims to restore trust and broken links with Abkhazia, on the other the rhetoric of the document refutes existence of a conflict with Abkhazia, does not recognize it as a side and views it only as Russia’s puppet blindly obedient to its will. Georgia’s position in refusing to recognize Abkhazia as a side in the conflict and refuting its interests in the conflict as well as inability of the sides to start a status-neutral dialogue will continue to hamper any proposals whatever their importance and topicality for both communities.

1.3. Isolation or Wide-Open Door to Russia

The issue of Abkhazia’s isolation has remained topical ever since the end of Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, but its forms and manifestations have been changing in accordance with the political situation.

Sanctions against Abkhazia first entered into force in accordance with UN Resolution 876 of 1993, which condemned “ethnic cleansing” of Georgians occurring in Abkhazia as violation of international humanitarian law. The Resolution called on “all States to prevent the provision from their territories or by persons under their jurisdiction of all assistance, other than humanitarian assistance, to the Abkhaz side and in particular to prevent the supply of any weapons and munitions”.¹⁷ In 1994-1995 in the period of Russian-Chechen conflict, Russia, concerned about separatist challenges, closed its Abkhazian boarder along the Psou River in an attempt to prevent Abkhazia’s participation in hostilities in Chechnya. In 1996 the Council of CIS Heads of States (except for Belarus and Turkmenistan) adopted a resolution “On the Means of Achieving Conflict Resolution in Abkhazia, Georgia”, which imposed trade, economic, financial, transportation and military sanctions on Abkhazia effectively cutting it off the outside world. The first paragraph of the Resolution condemns “*destructive position of the Abkhaz side setting obstacles to achieving mutually acceptable agreements on political settlement of the conflict, secure dignified return of the refugees and IDPs to places of their permanent residence*”.

17 UNSC Resolution #876 (1993, available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N93/566/50/PDF/N9356650.pdf?OpenElement>

Paragraph six asserts that members of CIS will have no economic, financial and transport links with Abkhaz authorities without the consent of the Georgian government (Council of CIS Heads of States 1996).

In a special Presidential decree of January 31, 1996 the government of Georgia declared *"The seaport of Sukhumi, port sites and the marine area and the sector of the State border between Georgia and the Russian Federation within the territory of Abkhazia, Georgia, shall be closed to all forms of international shipments, with the exception of consignments of humanitarian aid shipped in accordance with this Decree"*.¹⁸

The airport was closed for international flights and railway only functioned inside Abkhazia. Sea ports were closed for passenger boats and Abkhazian boats could not leave port to import food products from Turkey. Travel outside Abkhazia was limited. Men between the ages of 16 and 60 were prohibited from crossing the border to the Russian side across the Psou River. Postal services were also blocked. From 1997 Russia tightened the blockade of Abkhazia and cut it off international telephone communication. Turkey's reaction to the CIS call for economic sanctions against Abkhazia was also positive and they expressed support for the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity by cancelling direct passage between the ports of Trabzon and Sukhumi in 1996. Abkhaz population received partial relief through informal trade and economic relations with Turkey as well a clandestine seasonal trade in tangerines and hazelnuts along the officially closed border and zone of separation.

Despite isolation and heavy social and economic conditions there were no significant positive shifts towards reaching agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia in this period. International experts remarked that "trade restrictions caused much hardship in Abkhazia but instead of forcing the Abkhaz to make concessions, they simply generated a siege mentality that lowers the tendency for compromise".¹⁹

After Georgia declared its pro-Western orientation and desire for integration into the European Union and NATO starting from 1999 Russia's political orientation changed considerably, which was reflected in easing

18 **Burcu Gultekin Punsmann, Zaal Anjaparidze, Sos Avetisyan, Izida Chania, Vadim Romashov, Rashad Shirinov "REVIEW OF ISOLATION Policies Within and AROUND the SOUTH CAUCASUS" available at (in Russian)** <http://caucasusedition.net/ru/аналитические-статьи/обзор-политики-изоляции-внутри-и-вокр/>

19 Jonathan Cohen, "Economic Aspects", Accord, Conciliation Resources, 1999

sanctions against Abkhazia. At first simplified regulations were introduced for crossing the border on the Psou River, prohibition for men of military age to cross the border was lifted, the citizens of the CIS countries were authorized to enter Abkhazia and local population started getting Russian passports. Abkhazian ports opened for international ships and Abkhazian resorts started to receive Russian tourists, which practically ended Abkhazia's isolation from the Russian side.

Soon after the war of 2008 the Russian Federation recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in September and concluded the treaty "On Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" signed in November 2014, thus not only increasing financial and social support of Abkhazia, but also confirming its involvement in the policy of security for Abkhazia. These documents allowed Russia to increase its influence in Abkhazia and distanced Abkhazia even more from Georgia. In response to Abkhazia's recognition and increased Russian influence, in 2009 Georgia passed the law "On Occupied Territories" prohibiting any economic relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia without written consent of the Georgian government. In addition, the law vests all the international organizations operating in Abkhazia with responsibility of coordinating any actions of the Georgian side.

Isolation failed to lead to any qualitative changes for Georgia. On the contrary, it increased estrangement and distrust between the opposing communities, creating 'survivor' mentality in the Abkhaz society. Isolation helped fix the image of Georgia as enemy that cut off Abkhazia's contacts with the outside world and destined it for hardships. This not only further complicated relationships between the two communities, but also brought any chances of reconciliation of the two peoples to naught. In the conditions of partial recognition and increasing military and economic presence of Russia in the region, Abkhazians see no threat from the Georgian side and refuse to view it as the source of desired development. Any suggestions of the Georgian side are received with suspicion and rejected as demonstrated by the example of "The State Strategy on Occupied Territories", which, although containing a number of constructive ideas and proposals for the benefit of both communities, was perceived as an "instruction on what should not be done".²⁰

20 Civil.ge, "Sokhumi Slams Tbilisi's Strategy on Occupied Territories" ("Сухуми критикует Стратегию Тбилиси по оккупированным территориям", available at (in Russian) <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=20363&search=%F1%F2%F0%E0%F2%E5%E3%E8>

An attempt of the European Union to direct Abkhazia's eyes away from Russia and reduce the clearly-manifested influence of the northern neighbour on this region resulted in adoption of the "Policy of Non-Recognition and Engagement" in 2009. The policy that aimed at development of economic relations and cooperation between people envisaged creation of an alternative foreign-policy agenda to counterbalance dominant pro-Russian discourse and de-isolation of non-recognized territories from the outside world. Diversification of contacts and economic relations with European countries could in longer term play a significant role in the positive transformation of the conflict and peaceful conflict resolution.

According to Peter Semneby, the EU Special Representative of for the South Caucasus and the principal author of the above-mentioned policy, it is focused on creating opportunities for economic relations, small business development, rehabilitation of transport links including renewal of railway communication, providing free movement across the Enguri River, student exchange, health care and assistance for IDPs.²¹

Despite the interest in this approach of both Georgia and Abkhazia²², it was never fully set in motion. "Engagement" for EU was mostly reduced to supporting comparatively small-scale projects in public diplomacy and post-conflict rehabilitation. It is noteworthy that interesting Georgian-Abkhaz initiatives and projects were implemented with the support of EU programme "Confidence Building and Early Response Mechanisms" (COBERM), which funded projects aiming to improve and restore contacts and dialogue between people, promote the culture of tolerance, empowerment of women and youth for peace-building, responding to security issues, empowering civil society, etc. In the period of 2012-2016,

21 ApsnyPress, «Peter Semneby called the meetings with Abkhazian Authorities as "Substantial and Fruitful", 14.07.2010, available at (in Russian) <http://www.pro-abkhazia.eu/News-R-Yul2010.html>; Civil.ge, "EU Diplomat: Less Tensions, More Substance in Run Up to Elections", 15.05.10 available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22302>

22 New Continent (Новый Континент), *"In July 2010 commenting on the position of Peter Semneby backed by Brussels Sergey Bagapsh stated that the government of the republic "at this stage understands EU's stance in terms of non-recognition and engagement with European processes and community"; "we have to be treated as a republic recognized by Russia and a number of non-European states. We do not demand recognition, appreciating the situation we are open for a dialogue, but we need to move forward, so that there are positive developments"*. available at <http://www.kontinent.org/article.php?aid=4c4e06bd5b740>

135 confidence-building projects were supported with the funding of EUR 9 million.²³

In spite of all this, at present it would be difficult to identify any tangible results of weakening Russian influence on Abkhazia and strengthening its economic links with Europe.

On the one hand, this is caused by the fact that implementation of any programs, whether a student exchange or any economic activity, is linked with sanctioning and approval of the Georgian side in accordance with the "Law on Occupied Territories". Sanctioning engagement of Europe with breakaway regions is a sensitive issue for Georgia as it evokes fear that international community's engagement with Abkhazia may lead to the so called "creeping recognition" i.e. it will allow this territory to acquire characteristics of state sovereignty opening the road to de jure recognition.²⁴ Passing the law on occupied territories that sets forth the rules of operation for international organizations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and also approving the strategy of Georgia in relation to occupied territories has significantly limited the possibilities for implementing independent European initiatives. On the other hand, Abkhazia interested in active co-operation with EU treats this policy with suspicion as, according to a widespread opinion in the Abkhazian community, "linking international assistance to Abkhazia with conflict resolution deprives the European strategy of neutrality ... which has restrictive nature for Abkhazia". Thus, in some circles in Abkhazia the strategy is viewed as an instrument for "drawing Abkhazia into Georgia".²⁵ Besides, Russia's considerable economic and military presence in Abkhazia remains an important factor and forces it to develop their contacts with European partners and foundations while watching Moscow's reaction and trying to avoid undue irritation.

23 Nana Macharashvili, Ekaterine Basilaia, Nikoloz Samkharadze, «Assessing the EU's conflict prevention and peacebuilding interventions in Georgia», Ivane Javakhishvili State University, pp. 37-38 available at http://www.woscap.eu/documents/131298403/131299900/D3.4_Case+Study+Report+Ukraine_PU.pdf/de6f7a64-17d6-4b89-b902-7f0b3284edff; COBERM, A Joint EU-UNDP initiatives, available at <http://www.coberm.net/uploads/other/0/340.pdf>

24 Thomas de Waal, "Enhancing the EU's Engagement With Separatist Territories" («ЕС и сепаратистские территории: как улучшить взаимодействие»), 12.04.2017, available at (in Russian) <http://carnegie.ru/2017/04/12/ru-pub-68650>

25 Liana Kvarchelia, «Policy of "Non-recognition" – Neutrality or Polarisation», 21.03.13, available at http://apsny.ru/analytics/?ID=2615&PAGEN_1=53

Despite all these factors, Abkhazia's interest and motivation for more active involvement and cooperation with European institutions are evident²⁶. Europe, on its part, has a lot to offer to Abkhazia – education, movement, economic cooperation, development of democratic institutions and human rights. However, at the moment there is lack of sufficiently flexible proactive policy and will of the sides that would ensure implementation of these projects. At present Europe needs to design innovative approaches to creating conditions for closer and more active involvement of Abkhazia, while Georgia and Abkhazia need to take more decisive steps towards cooperation with each other and European institutions.

1.4. Gali District – “Achilles Heel” or a Huge Resource for Cooperation

Gali district has been one of the most special and vulnerable areas of Abkhazia since the Georgian-Abkhaz confrontation. The area, densely populated with Georgians (mainly ethnic Megrelians) forms a dividing line separating Abkhazia and Georgia with the Enguri River. According to official data current population of Gali consists of 47 000 Georgians, 5 000 of whom constantly move between Gali and Zugdidi.²⁷ These are the people who, in spite of the outcomes of the conflict, repeated expulsions and oppression made the decision to return to their homes and continue living on their own land. Nevertheless, living conditions in Abkhazia doom them to a life of fear and deprivation of their rights.

It should be noted that after August events Georgians in Gali district felt even more unprotected and isolated. Soon after presidential elections in Abkhazia in 2015, majority of Gali population, who had largely predetermined election results in favour of Sergey Bagapsh²⁸, was deprived of Abkhaz citizenship because of having Georgian citizenship alongside with the Abkhazian one. The Georgian issue became politicised leading to activating the law “On the Status of a Foreign Citizen” adopted in 2013

26 Wikileaks, “Abkhazia: The Need for Confidence Building”, 12.12.2015, 18 (C), 21 (C), available at <https://wikileaks.ga.wordpress.com/2005/12/12/05tbilisi3226-abkhazia-the-need-for-confidence-building/>

27 Freedom House, Freedom in the world, Abkhazia, 2015, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/abkhazia>

28 Candidate nominated to counterbalance Russian influence

which states that persons having citizenship of Georgia cannot simultaneously be citizens of Abkhazia. This law allows Gali population to have “residence permit”, but it limits political rights of the Georgian part of the population and that means they are deprived of the right to vote at local as well as parliamentary and presidential elections.

Aside from political rights, without passports Gali population suffer from violations of their rights of education and employment. No birth certificates are issued for children whose parents do not have Abkhaz passports. Consequently, children with no documents are not admitted to schools and kindergartens. Lack of Abkhaz passports also prevents people from getting jobs in public service. Thus, in Gali district there are practically no local inhabitants working in local administration, even if they have adequate qualifications and professional skills.²⁹

From September 2011, Georgian schools in the whole of Gali district were abolished and Russian became the language of schooling, which deprived the population knowing only Georgian of the right to receive education in their native language. Ethnic Georgians without passports are also limited in their access to Sukhumi State University³⁰. These conditions have forced families where children do not speak Russian to split up and mothers with children have had to move to Zugdidi or other towns and villages on Georgian territory in order to receive quality education that would be accessible for the children. Many in Georgia view this situation as “cultural genocide” and attempt of “Russification” of the Georgian population living in Gali.³¹

In February 2017, the resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Abkhazia came into effect, which closed the remaining two checkpoints on the unrecognized border between Georgia and Abkhazia thus leaving the only entry point on the Enguri Bridge. Closing the checkpoints put Georgian

29 Accent, Diana Museliani, “Population of Gali District – The time comes when Georgian side will be ashamed of it” («Жители Гальского района - Настанет время, когда грузинской стороне будет очень стыдно за это...», 07.04.2016, available <http://accent.com.ge/ru/news/details/12005-Жители-Гальского-района--Настанет-время-когда-грузинской-стороне-будет-очень-стыдно-за-это...>

30 Freedom House, Freedom in the world, Abkhazia, 2016, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/abkhazia>

31 Ekaterine Gamakharia, «Women’s participation in Geneva talks: Problems, Achievements, Prospects», Cultural-Humanitarian Fund “Sukhumi” 2015, p. 22

population face to face with new problems connected with limited access to basic services and needs of the population, such as education, health care, as well as economic activities, and social events including weddings and funerals, putting restraints on family relations along the dividing line. Limited access to health care services is of particular significance. Closing the checkpoints has led to increased distance to the only existing entry point and every additional hour in these circumstances can be critical.

Education for children from Gali has become less accessible as they travel more than 60 additional kilometers to cross the dividing line in order to go to schools where they can receive education in their native language. Consequently, closure of the checkpoints was perceived by Gali population as an attempt to distance them from their links on the other side of the Enguri River as much as possible.³²

This situation drew attention of the UN Secretary General whose report to the General Assembly in May 2016 urged officials to revise their decision and avoid closure of checkpoints. He claimed that the issue of freedom of movement across the administrative border has security, humanitarian and human rights dimensions and is of utmost importance for the local population.³³

Due to the existing situation Gali population (especially inhabitants of the lower zone) remain the most vulnerable of Abkhazia's population. Crime, restricted movement and lack of adequate attention from Abkhaz authorities and militia intensifies feelings of insecurity among the inhabitants.³⁴

Alongside with the lack of attention from the authorities, Gali population complains about insufficient attention from non-governmental sector and international organizations. They claim that international organiza-

32 Russian BBC, "Unrecognized Boarder: population of Gali fear of isolation" (Непризнанная граница: жители абхазского Гали опасаются изоляции), January 27, 2016, available at (in Russian) <http://www.bbc.com/russian/features-38770628>

33 Apsny.ge, "The UN concerned about Abkhaz authorities decision to close the crossing points along Enguri" (ООН выражает обеспокоенность решением режима в Абхазии закрыть пункты пропуска на Ингури), 26.01.2017, available at (in Russian) <http://www.apsny.ge/2017/conf/1485480001.php>

34 Institute of Democracy и Saferworld, "Security for all – Challenge for Eastern Abkhazia" ("Безопасность для всех – задача, которую предстоит решить в Восточной Абхазии"), 2013, pp. 10-13, available at file:///C:/Users/Acer/Downloads/Security-for-all-Russian-version.pdf

tions mostly cooperate with Sukhumi organizations neglecting the needs of Gali population.³⁵

Paradoxically, Abkhazia and Abkhaz society burdened with historical memories, having experienced the hardships of exile during muhajir period, bitterness of banning Abkhazian schooling in soviet times and still blaming Georgia for inaction and complicity in this injustice, today condemns Georgian population in Gali to even worse fate, deprivation and lawlessness than ever experienced by themselves. Violation of the rights of Georgian population residing on the current territory of Abkhazia and lack of attention to their problems increases isolation of Gali population, which leads to escalation of tension, deepening of distrust and confrontation between ethnic groups.

If forms of interaction of the sides can be found, Gali district with its vast agricultural resources has potential for contributing to economic and social development of both societies and promoting the process of positive transformation of the conflict. However, at the moment it faces isolation and vague future prospects. Besides, Georgians living in Gali have rich experience in coexisting with Abkhazians before and after the conflict and they could play a vital positive role in reconciliation and restoration of trust in the society split by conflict. This could become a huge resource for engagement and cooperation of the conflict sides aimed at creating conditions for development and empowerment of the society in Abkhazia as well as Georgia as a whole.

35 Accent, "Population of Gali District – The time comes when Georgian side will be ashamed of it" «Жители Гальского района - Настанет время, когда грузинской стороне будет очень стыдно за это...», 07.04.2016 <http://accent.com.ge/ru/news/details/12005-Жители-Гальского-района--Настанет-время-когда-грузинской-стороне-будет-очень-стыдно-за-это...>

PART II: WAY FORWARD

2.1. The Importance of “Status-Neutral” Approach

Present-day situation clearly demonstrates that *mentioning final aims* – “territorial integrity”, “independence” and “de-occupation” of break-away territories, brings discussion of any issues to a deadlock, even ones that are of vital importance and in the best interests of both communities. Consequently, it is crucial that Georgia revise the strategy of interaction with Abkhazia using *“status-neutral” rhetoric*, focusing on the importance of building trust, communication with Abkhaz community and solving problems that hamper normal life and development of Georgian as well as Abkhaz population. In the same way that one cannot begin construction of a house from its roof, final status cannot serve as the starting point for discussions of the conflict in Abkhazia. The sides have to leave traditional approaches aside, accept that the final outcome will depend on the foundation laid in advance and start laying bricks with a primary goal of building peace and meeting the needs of the population. This approach requires that conflict resolution is viewed as «long, incremental and orderly processes, which may have open-ended results»³⁶. It would be advisable for the sides to reach an agreement on the ways and stages of positive transformation of the conflict rather than debate and negotiate final outcomes. Protracted ineffectual negotiations, unsolved problems create feelings of hopelessness, nihilism and increasing distrust to political processes. This in turn promotes aggression and carries the risk of destabilization in the region.

Status-neutral approach is the most realistic and constructive way to achieving progress in interaction with the Abkhaz side and tackling a number of existing humanitarian and economic problems. Even in the presence of fundamentally different positions on the final status, it is possible to start a dialogue and even more importantly, take specific steps. It is essential that Georgia and Abkhazia agree that they disagree on the topic of Abkhazia’s final status and start employing an approach that is neutral to status. This approach does not mean that Georgia will not continue its

36 Tabib Huseynov (2014), Transitional intervention strategies for conflict transformation in the South Caucasus, Caucasus Survey, 2:1-2, 130, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2014.11417305>

policy of non-recognition or Sukhumi will stop striving for “independence”. It will only mean that the sides “agree to disagree” on the status issue³⁷. Confrontations connected with the issue of status should not affect restoration and improvement of relationships between people. Moreover, relationships can only be improved through close cooperation. Specific actions, such as creating guarantees for the freedom of movement between the areas split by the conflict, interaction in the field of trade, education, health care, environment protection, rehabilitation of crucial infrastructure, carried out on the basis of status-neutral approaches will help create a sustainable environment for peaceful development and positive transformation of the conflict.

The sides need to realize that it is the status-neutral approach that should become the starting point for building political dialogue with each other, but it is crucial that this principle is shared by both sides. Accepting and applying status-neutral approach by the Georgian side alone will yield no results. Moreover, it might even become counterproductive.

2.2. Non-Recognition of Sovereignty but Recognition of Conflict in Abkhazia

Ignoring Abkhazia as a conflict side and lack of a direct dialogue with the Abkhaz side also has a destructive impact on the search for ways of conflict resolution. We need to admit that building peace and restoring trust between Georgian and Abkhazian communities will be impossible if the conflict in Abkhazia is imputed to Russia alone and grievances and interests of the Abkhaz side are ignored or denied. Conflicts with Abkhazia and Russia need to be differentiated and negotiations with both these sides have to be conducted separately. In order to end the standstill in the protracted and ineffective process of conflict resolution, attention needs to be redirected towards intra-state rather than inter-state dynamics of the conflict. Making ethnic dimension and interests inside the society the focus of the dialogue will allow to direct attention to the community inside Abkhazia rather than players in broader political games.

37 Sergi Kapanadze, “Georgia and Russia: in Search of Ways for Normalization, “Let’s Agree to Disagree! Positive Aspects of Status-Neutral Relations between Georgia and Russia” («Согласны, что не можем прийти к Соглашению! Позитивные аспекты статус-нейтральных отношений между Россией и Грузией») Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies., 2014, pp. 81-82, available at (in Russian) <http://gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/Russian-1958.pdf>

Time has come to reorient ourselves from intensive geo-political focus to restoring and improving inter-community dialogue and direct interaction. Even though people in the community cannot directly affect external policy, they can certainly influence existing stereotypes and relations in their own community.

2.3. Abkhazia's Active Engagement and Cooperation with European Institutions

It is obvious that the European Union is one of the key international institutions with a potential to bring the dynamics of positive transformation to this protracted conflict. Firstly, this is based on Abkhazia's positive attitude to Europe and the interest displayed by Abkhaz authorities to cooperate with European institutions. Besides, the European Union is an organization with experience of dealing with issues of ethnic and territorial nature within its borders and also possessing specific instruments and resources for handling similar issues outside its borders. Thus, existing circumstances make it clear that the EU could become an alternative to dominant pro-Russian orientation clearing the way for new approaches to transforming the conflict in Abkhazia.

Even though European policy of "non-recognition and engagement" failed to transform into an effective policy and was never implemented to its desired scope, it is important to recognize the potential and capacity of this strategy and add neutral apolitical content to its goals and objectives. It is crucial to appreciate the importance of starting a constructive dialogue between the representatives of the EU, Georgia and Abkhazia on the issues of "engagement" while distancing themselves from the topic of status and avoiding the discussion of final aims of conflict resolution. Specific actions have to be planned for dealing with obstacles to human rights protection and ensuring life of dignity for the population of Abkhazia. This implies ensuring freedom of movement for all inhabitants of Abkhazia regardless of their ethnicity, their security, development programs, health care, economic cooperation, education and student exchange, etc. This will not only help build trust between the communities, but it will also create more solid guarantees for peace and security in the region. Closer cooperation of the EU and other countries with Abkhazia will also promote supremacy of law and democratic governance, which will in turn lead to transparency and accountability of institutions responsible for protecting

human rights of their people including rights and freedoms of ethnic Georgians.³⁸

Policy of isolation pursued by Tbilisi for many years has proved to be counterproductive making Abkhazia fully dependent on Russia. At present opening Europe for Abkhazia seems to be the most effective mechanism for Georgia in order to weaken Russian influence there and create conditions for cooperation with Abkhazia. Only through integration into the European space do Georgia and Abkhazia have a chance of building relations independently from Russian influence, which could become a premise for successful engagement and cooperation. This will lead to increased trust between the two communities and will increase the chances of full-scale conflict resolution meeting the interests of both sides.

2.4. Gali - Platform for Cooperation and Development

It is noteworthy that in the last 25 years of post-war development Abkhaz as well as Georgian political leaders have failed to formulate a consistent policy and design a clear strategy in relation to Gali population. The only area where Abkhaz authorities allowed the Georgian population to return currently receives no attention whatsoever from either Abkhaz or Georgian authorities (in the case of Georgian government this is due to restricted access to the district). Inhabitants of this district are practically isolated and suffer from discrimination of a number of their civil and political rights.

Georgians living in Gali district having long experience of coexistence with Abkhazians both before and after the conflict could play an important positive role in restoring trust between the communities split by the conflict and contribute to building peace in Abkhazia. This could prove a huge resource for engagement and cooperation between Georgians and Abkhazians.

Gali district is also rich in agricultural resources and if adequate forms of interaction of the sides are found, it can contribute significantly to economic and social development of both Abkhazia and Georgia.

A whole system of measures is required to ensure sustainable development of Gali district. First of all, effective mechanisms need to be designed to ensure protection of human rights and life of dignity for Geor-

38 Tabib Huseynov (2014) Transitional intervention strategies for conflict transformation in the South Caucasus, *Caucasus Survey*, 2:1-2, 130-141, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2014.11417305>

gians without discrimination and fear of oppression. Moreover, a variety of economic, social and infrastructural projects needs to be developed.

Abkhaz authorities should accept the fact that Gali population, in spite of their close links with Georgia due to family ties with residents of Zugdidi and other district of Georgia, as well as benefits and support granted by the Georgian government, has chosen to live in Abkhazia in the face of hardships and privations and they view themselves as part of Abkhaz community. Creating obstacles for movement for the purpose of restricting or breaking ties with Georgia, alongside with discrimination and policy of isolation for the population of this district have a negative effect on the life of Gali inhabitants. Even more importantly, this carries risks of destabilization and increasing tension in the whole of Abkhazia. It also sets Georgian population from across the Enguri River against Abkhaz society thus hampering the processes of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Greater integration and trust between the communities as well as life of dignity for Georgians in Gali requires designing practical mechanisms for interethnic dialogue in Abkhazia and ensuring regular communication of Gali population with local authorities as well as international players. Such mechanisms will help overcome isolation of Georgian population within Abkhazia, will allow them to communicate more actively concerning their problems in the area of human rights and suggest specific solutions and measures.

Furthermore, in order to overcome heightened concern for safety, Gali population needs to have closer contact with representatives of law-enforcement agencies through more regular patrolling of high-risk areas or planning regular meetings with locals and introducing effective mechanisms of filing complaints and responding to them. It is also necessary to simplify the process of issuing Abkhaz passports for Georgians living in Gali to ensure their increased employment in local government bodies and law-enforcement agencies. This will create beneficial conditions for increasing the feeling of security and involvement in the local population.

Solving the problem with Gali will mean that Abkhazia passes an important test on its way to introducing democratic European standards for the life of a person and society based on respect for human rights, freedom from discrimination and justice. In addition, developing a new strategy on Gali district based on the status-neutral consensus between Georgian and Abkhaz authorities and with active support and cooperation from European institutions will improve Abkhazia's engagement with the EU and will eventually help secure peace in Abkhazia.

2.5. Active Work in the Field of Public Diplomacy and Increasing Women's Role

Official negotiations have yielded no tangible results in the process of conflict resolution and peace-building so far due to contradictory positions and inflexible approaches of officials from both sides. In these circumstances, public initiatives present a relatively free format for open and constructive dialogue, elaboration of new ideas, implementation of specific actions aimed at positive transformation of the protracted conflict.

Informal character of public diplomacy is of particular value as it is directed at restoring contacts between individuals separated by conflict and gives an opportunity to take steps towards dealing with specific concerns of the community.

In spite of the crucial role that public diplomacy could potentially play in the positive transformation of the conflict, it has its limitations. Unfortunately, public initiatives in many ways depend on the support of international organizations, which is not always long-term unlike, for instance, official negotiations. Frequently, pilot projects receiving initial support from international organizations are left without funding at a later stage. So, many interesting and valuable initiatives and actions requiring development are suspended. In addition, public diplomacy is not always successful in distancing itself from political discourse and maintaining neutral balanced approach,³⁹ undermining society's trust in its value.

It is important to involve non-governmental sector in both Georgia and Abkhazia in open depoliticized discussions on the issues of past and future approaches to building peace and security. The more civil activists distance themselves from political topics and communicate focusing their attention on human rights and humanitarian issues, the more productive their cooperation and joint work will be in solving specific problems facing people. It certainly does not mean that political issues should be excluded from public discussions. However, civil society discussions should avoid using political arguments as a pretext for avoiding concrete actions aimed at human rights protection and dealing with society's major concerns.

Another aspect that has to be emphasized is the importance of involving women in peace-building process. While women are practically excluded from official negotiations, they have leading positions in the area

39 Iskra Kirova, Public diplomacy and conflict resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, CPD Perspective on Public Diplomacy, Paper #7, 2012, pages 62-63, available at <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/useruploads/u35361/2012%20Paper%207.pdf>

of public diplomacy and post-conflict peace-building. Through learning to understand and accept one another's deep feelings and fears, building trust and developing skills for peaceful interaction women try to lay the foundation to long-term, stable and peaceful future. It is essential to engage and empower women's groups and support women's initiatives in the process of building peace and restoring trust. Women on both sides have rich and diverse experience of joint work and have travelled a long and difficult path to establishing face-to-face communication with each other. So, they can make a considerable investment of ideas in the process of conflict transformation. Women are more inclined to step aside from political issues and focus on social and humanitarian problems concerning the population in the conflict zone, such as: health care, education, providing livelihood, relations between communities, i.e. issues that need to be examined and tackled for achieving sustainable peace.⁴⁰

40 Ekaterine Gamakharia, «Women's participation in Geneva talks: Problems, Achievements, Prospects», Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" 2015, p. 22

CONCLUSION

The present analysis confirms that peaceful conflict resolution in Abkhazia requires coordinated, step-by-step, open and daring approach. Constructive peace-building process depends on Abkhazia and Georgia recognizing and accepting difference of their opinions and agreeing that any issues, however complex or burning, will only be solved by peaceful means.

The only way forward lies through realization that it is necessary to put aside final political aims and focus on human rights protection and help for people who have found themselves in difficult circumstances due to the current situation. Even slightest progress in the protracted and ineffectual process of conflict resolution requires political will, genuine participation and a lot of courage from both sides. The sides need to accept that peace process could have any outcomes from reintegration to independence and this final decision should be preceded by gradual and consistent actions dealing with specific concerns of conflict-affected population.

Experience shows that communities on both sides are first and foremost interested in creating conditions for harmonious development, prosperity, peace and security. Long experience of the peace process has accumulated numerous lessons that can be learnt from past failures and successes. A key factor is readiness of all sides and participants, including officials, representatives of civil society and international organizations to realize and accept that at the moment there is no going back and it is impossible to maintain status quo indefinitely. Daring constructive actions are needed to break this vicious circle, end the deadlock and through a "temporary agreement" (*modus vivendi*) designed with due consideration to existing reality and changed political context attempt to create conditions for the development and peaceful life of Georgian as well as Abkhaz societies.

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