

THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN CONFLICT IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT

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In March 1996 a meeting of Georgian and Abkhaz intellectuals was organized in Moscow. In the ensuing common declaration several ideas were put forward, with which I would fully agree:

"It is of no use to accuse one another, trying to find out who actually started the violence (...) Dialogue should be sought instead."

"Prior to discussing the issue of the future legal status of Abkhazia, it is necessary to develop a system of social and political guarantees that can secure peace in Abkhazia and a just settlement of the conflict."

"It is necessary to secure the return of all refugees to Abkhazia."

Unfortunately, mutual accusations and the abuse of tendentiously selected historic factography to prove a particular viewpoint still remain typical of the Abkhazian-Georgian dialogue. The reader of this volume may judge if its contributors have succeeded in escaping this form of unproductive polemics.

I. The Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict from a Comparative Regional Perspective

The post-cold war world, with its numerous conflicts emerging against the background of competing globalization and de-globalization trends, is confronted with the problem of how to reduce intra-regional confrontation and promote a co-operative model. It is therefore necessary to develop precise definitions, criteria and indicators for determining the nature, role and influence of the main factors contributing both to conflicts and to effective co-operation.

Widespread inter-ethnic confrontation and conflict are relatively new phenomena in the former Soviet Union. Governments are experiencing difficulty in maintaining the forms of co-existence that were customary in the Soviet past and in designing strategies to facilitate co-existence and co-operation. There is no guarantee that the political support and commitment needed to formulate and follow a sustainable strategy will be forthcoming. In a situation in which the national and international institutions that should take responsibility for co-ordinating the regional co-operation process are not working

properly, or are even absent, it is essential to build partnerships, devise flexible strategies and build a consensus around co-operation priorities.

Since the end of the 1980s, ethno-territorial conflicts have become the most noticeable aspect of the new political reality in the Caucasus, ruining stability, development prospects and even elementary economic self-sufficiency. There are five zones where wars and mass violence have erupted in the region during this period: Karabakh, Tskhinvali (South Ossetia), Abkhazia, Ossetia-Ingushetia and Chechnya.

The high concentration of conflicts in the Caucasus is often ascribed to the Russian secret service, to military or political forces fomenting antagonism, or to the particular cultures of the peoples inhabiting this region, supposedly characterized by intolerance and aggressiveness. All three explanations are unsatisfactory. The inability of ethnic groups to coexist should be seen as the result of failed institutional regulations rather than inborn qualities or geopolitical factors. This does not mean that an analysis of the roots of conflict in the Caucasus should overlook the role of external manipulation (the "hidden hand" factor) or its relation to (specific) internal "spontaneous" players in the region. It is not easy to determine to what extent an analysis of the conflicts may show them to be due to primarily intrinsic, spontaneous causes or, on the contrary, the result of deliberate external decisions, in particular in a situation where there is no empirical data on the genesis of the conflicts. It is also of the utmost importance to identify the real interests of the opposing population groups, interests which differ both from the declared goals and from the particular interests of the political élites. Nor should the specific nature of the Caucasian context be either underestimated or overestimated, in particular Caucasian cultural traditions and the geostrategic importance of the region. Some aspects of the Caucasian context, which are worth considering separately, are presented below:

1. Territorial factor, boundaries and geography

All conflicts, as they involve an attempt to change the political status of a particular territory, are essentially territorial in nature. All Caucasian conflicts are - in more up-to-date terminology - sovereignty conflicts. The sacred value ascribed to territory and homeland can be observed world-wide, but has particular consequences in the Caucasus, with its extremely diversified population, its vague notion of ethnic rights on a particular territory, and the persistence of the Soviet legacy (including the legacy of arbitrarily drawn borders, of forced migrations and of the myth of the titular nation). In such circumstances, conflicts on boundaries and territories tend to be rather explosive.

The availability of an external border and access to other states or areas populated by ethnically proximate people, or having an outlet to the sea, is of the utmost importance to the Caucasian peoples. It was no coincidence that one of the most sensitive aspects of the Karabakh problem was the absence of any such external border (hence the claim on the Lachin corridor). Likewise, it was significant that the Confederation of the Caucasian Peoples[i] chose Sukhumi as its capital, due to its seaside location. Russia too perceives an outlet to the sea as a very sensitive issue, especially since the dramatic shrinking of its Black Sea coastline. In so far as all the conflicts in the Caucasus are, in one way or

another, linked to the traumatic loss of imperial power by Russia, this Russian perception has great importance for the region as a whole.

2. Russia and the question of external manipulation

Many analysts, especially those from the region itself, tend to ascribe all problems and deficiencies in the policies of Caucasian governments and movements to the “Russian factor”. A critique of this position does not mean that this factor should be underestimated. Russia is indeed actively involved in all the conflicts here, not only through its peace-keepers or paratroopers, but also through the arms trade (it sells weaponry to all sides in a conflict, though it is selective as to quality and quantity), through manipulative activities involving economic levers, or through the activities of its military and intelligence services. As Olivier Roy writes: "In the early 1990s Moscow had actively encouraged conflicts in the Caucasus while presenting itself as an honest broker between the combatants."^[ii] As a rule, Russian policies are inconsistent and contradictory, but they possess incomparably greater resources than any of the local forces. All conflicts in the Caucasus are connected with the presence of Russian troops, whether these are actively participating (Chechnya, Abkhazia), performing the role of peace-keepers (Ossetia, Abkhazia), or acting as trainers and advisors (Karabakh). Greater sympathy among the Russian military and political establishments for one of the fighting sides is apparent in each of these conflicts (the retreat from Chechnya and the absence of peace-keepers in Karabakh constitute exceptions in this respect).

The North Caucasians well remember the 1991 visit by the Russian President Boris Yeltsin to the region, when he promised the Ingush assistance in returning of the Prigorodny district, and when, in a second speech, he promised the Ossetians to defend them against Ingush ambitions. Not only did the very creation of the Ingush republic (without even delimiting its borders) contravene the Russian Constitution, but it was seemingly designed specifically by one of the interest groups in power to be a source of permanent tension, although hardly beneficial to Russian national interests. Such a prevalence of short-term group or individual interests over long-term strategic interests, although not unfamiliar elsewhere, dominates the political scene in the post-Soviet world. In the case of Russia, this contradiction is even more complicated by post-imperial nostalgia. Another specific illustration of Russian inconsistencies and contradictory policies was the arrest, in the early stages of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, of the leader of the Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus, Musa Shanibov, a former professor of Scientific Communism - allegedly for organizing military and terrorist activities on Georgian territory. The attempt to repress the Confederation turned this little-known local politician into a popular regional figure; there were certain signs (such as the clumsy way in which he was arrested and then released) that these consequences were calculated in advance, even if counter-productive to other policies.

On the one hand, the Chechen war demonstrated the possibility of successful opposition to the Russian state machinery, and hence served as an example to radical separatists; on the other, however, it demonstrated the readiness of the Russian State to deploy immense resources to suppress such separatist movements by force. In the consciousness of the

Caucasian people, Chechnya pointed to the real anti-Caucasian aggressors, and shifted previously anti-Georgian sentiments northwards. At the same time, many Georgian politicians hoped that the Chechen war would lead to a change in the Russian attitude towards the Abkhazian problem. But Russia's unwillingness or inability to resolve the Abkhaz conflict betrayed these hopes.

The Russian policy towards one or other of the ethnic groups is also a very important factor. With the exception of the Chechens, who were themselves involved in a war with Russia, all the parties involved in the Caucasian conflicts tried to solicit Russia's support, usually appealing to that country as an arbiter. Such an appeal aimed to enforce their own position in the conflict or in its settlement. Political support to Russia or to the Russian government, in the form of electoral support (for instance in North Ossetia and Ingushetia) or in the form of military bases (for instance from the Georgian side in the Abkhazian conflict), are offered in exchange for a favourable attitude from the arbiter. Such political calculations by the local élites reflect their lack of confidence in their own power. By appealing to an external arbiter they are showing their lack of any sense of responsibility for the conflicts in which they are involved. Their appeal for Russian support also shows that they overestimate Russia's potential to solve the conflicts in the Caucasus. Russia is still perceived as an external arbiter, a father-figure, whose force is decisive in the final outcome of this game. Although it could initially have played a decisive role in these conflicts, it now seems, however, to be not only unwilling but also unable to resolve them.

3. Demographic balance

All the conflicts are characterized by radical demographic changes in the period before the eruption of the conflict (peaceful migration, forced deportations under Stalin) and during the conflict itself (refugees, ethnic cleansing). These demographic changes lead to perceptions of a threat and an acute sense of insecurity. An ethnic group - or its élites - may fear that a weakening of its demographic position could, in the long run, radically alter the balance of power and the redistribution of available resources to its disadvantage. Such perceptions, even if they are not confirmed by the use of force by the party whose increasing demographic potential is feared, may lead to "preventive action" and hence to violent conflict.

Demography is an important, sometimes even a decisive, issue in the effort by the traditional political élites to preserve their privileged position by increasing the "weight" of their respective ethnic group. The case of the Western Caucasian peoples - who experienced severe demographic losses after the end of the great Caucasian War in 1864, when Muslims from the Caucasus were either expelled by force or voluntarily emigrated to Turkey - is notable in this respect. The Abkhazian leadership, for instance, is attempting to attract members of their own diaspora in Turkey and the Middle East to return and repopulate the country.

4. Patterns in argumentation on territorial claims and popular myths

The Soviet heritage - including the loose definition of the borders between federal units, the arbitrary attribution of territorial and political status to the so-called titular [sic] nations and the Stalinist ideological tradition on the nationality question (definition of "nationality", hierarchical distinction between "people" and "ethnos", etc.) - is present in all the conflicts. Symbolic acts and statements as well as all sorts of national myths are inflated in the first stage of the conflicts, while the present stage is characterized by the gradually diminishing significance of these symbolic acts, statements and myths. All parties in the conflict had and have a pragmatic - some may even say cynical - approach to universal democratic norms and international law, appealing to those norms and provisions that they find useful for themselves and ignoring others. Double standards are commonplace. As Tim Potier stated recently: "The government and people of Georgia should not be blamed for 'claiming' what international law says is rightfully If the Abkhaz were in their position, they would be doing exactly the same." [iii]

The demand for exclusive rights to a specific territory by one ethnic group or another is often linked to the demand for "autochthonous" status, while only "guest" status is attributed to other groups. Such claims are generally based on an arbitrary use of historical facts. Some Georgian scholars have argued, for instance, that the Abkhazians came to Abkhazia from the North Caucasian mountains only recently. This, it is argued, is proved by the lack of an Abkhazian word for "sea". The Abkhazian scientists in turn have selected other arguments from the scant historical information available to argue that, on the contrary, it is the Georgians who should be regarded as newcomers to a region that was part of the Abkhazian Kingdom in the Middle Ages. In the same vein, Armenians claim historical rights to Karabakh, although most sources show that the Caucasian Albanians inhabited the region. Azeri sources claim that most of the Armenians in this region are descendants of the Armenian migrants from Iran and Turkey who came to Karabakh during the 19th century, after the Russian military victories. The Azeris claim to be the descendants and heirs of the Christian Albanian population, and thus the real autochthonous inhabitants of Karabakh.

Some political claims are easier to substantiate with historical facts than others. Thus it is easily proved that there were next to no Ossetians among the population of Tskhinvali until the 1920s, or that the Ingush actually did inhabit the right bank of the Terek river before their forced deportation to Central Asia at the end of the second world war, when the territory was offered to the Ossetians (supposedly more loyal to the Soviet regime). In cases like these, the opposing party may indeed find it difficult to substantiate its political claims using historical material. The legitimacy of the whole argument based on the difference between autochthonous and immigrant peoples may also be rejected by such a party, which then tries to legitimize its political claims by a relatively more recent historic past, for example, along the following lines: "Those who are currently occupying a territory should have all the rights to it" - as in the case of the Magyars who settled in Hungary some centuries ago, or the Turks, who have occupied Constantinople since the 15th century. In both types of legitimization, history is manipulated for political reasons.

The impact of such historical arguments on the public consciousness of all the ethnic groups living in the Caucasus is a strong a strong factor in the generation of conflicts.

A vaguely defined right to self-determination is the main argument in all the disputes mentioned above, with the sole exception of the Ingush-Ossetian conflict. In the case of Abkhazia, this right conflicts with the democratic principle of majority rule, but in South Ossetia, where the Ossetians constitute a majority, it does not. This is yet another demonstration of the instrumental use of historical, demographic and legal arguments in various conflicts.

5. Different levels of ethnic identity and religion

Different levels may be distinguished in the ethnic self-identification of the Caucasian peoples. The Ingush and the Chechens consider that they have very distinct identities, but at the same time they stress their ethnic affinity (their languages belong to the Vainakh, or Nakh, group). They also regard themselves as Caucasians, and are ready in some cases to prove this latter identity by political or even military action. Likewise, the Abkhazians and the Circassians set great store by their ethnic proximity, as well as their Caucasian identity. The barbaric neologism currently popular in Russia, "a person of Caucasian nationality" - which reflects the general repressive, anti-Caucasian mood in that country - effectively strengthens this common identity.

Peoples who speak Turkic and Indo-European languages also have to define their place within the framework of this common Caucasian identity. Not only peoples like the above-mentioned Circassians, but also Balkars, Ossetians and Kumyks should be taken into account. These, however, are far less active in the pan-Caucasian integration processes (e.g. in the Confederation of Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus).

Another feature peculiar to the conflicts mentioned above is that they all take place between groups belonging to markedly different linguistic families (Slavic Russians/Kartvelian Georgians/Iranian Ossetians/Turkic Azeris/Vainakh Ingush and Chechens, Abkhazians of the Adygho-Abkhaz group, and Armenians). Linguistically related ethnic groups support each other, as in the case of the Ingush and Chechens, or the Abkhaz and Adyghs. This is one of the reasons why ethnogenetic theories and myths play a much greater role in the Caucasus, while the religious factor is secondary, contrary to places like the former Yugoslavia where the ethnic conflicts take place between groups that are closely related linguistically but are denominationally distinct.

The role of the religious factor in the Caucasian conflicts is commonly overestimated. Although in some cases (e.g. Chechnya, with its strong Islamic networks) religion may play a significant role, local political élites generally display a rather pragmatic manipulative attitude towards it. After his return to Georgia, Shevardnadze lost no time in getting baptized - by the more Orthodox name of Giorgi. The Abkhaz president Ardzinba promised to build a mosque in order to placate the religious feelings of his more devoted Muslim Abkhazian compatriots in Turkey. The population, meanwhile, has to a great extent lost its initial interest in religious ceremonies, revived after perestroika. Religious symbols may, however, become more powerful during a prolonged military action

against opponents of a different religious creed. This happened in Chechnya, where there is a still significant Sufi tradition and where the historical memory of the 19th century jihad against the Russians is still very much alive. Now many Chechens support the introduction of shariat principles into penitentiary practice, though they may often be unable to demonstrate a basic knowledge of its fundamental principles.

6. Economic factors

The economic interests of Russian and Caucasian states and the volume of resources that they are ready to deploy in order to achieve particular political goals need to be assessed in detail. Among these are the economic interests and resources of various élites and groups - such as the arms and drug dealers, oil companies and multinationals - that have to be taken into account, together with the economic significance of decisions taken by the state administration. All these factors imply significant capital flows. The war in Chechnya has enriched some of the military, while the resources allocated to the rehabilitation of the economy have fed those economic players who were able to control this decision politically. Pipeline policies and the future redistribution of the oil-generated profits is a dominant factor in the Russian policies in Karabakh and Chechnya, and may play an increasingly important role in the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict. Russia seems to be persisting in its manipulation of ethno-territorial conflicts in order to secure its strategic economic (oil) interests.

7. The time perspective, concepts of the future and the basic interests of the population

None of the opposing sides has any feasible, realistic proposal, which may be considered a sound basis for conflict settlement, to offer the other side. Russia has no compromise to offer either, and until recently seemed not to be interested in sustainable settlements. In most cases a conflict is seen as a zero-sum game, in which the perception of both the possible negative consequences of certain factors or events for the interests of each party (in particular as regards the demographic balance between different populations on the disputed territory, or the overall balance of power), as well as possible positive consequences for the interests of the opposing party in the conflict, are largely exaggerated.

A population's safety, prosperity and participation in governance could be described as its basic needs. This is quite a simple definition. It is, however, not easy to discuss the means of securing such basic needs. So in the case of Georgian refugees from Abkhazia, for instance, it is evident that there is no rapid solution leading to their return - to northern Abkhazia in particular - that would give them sufficient security guarantees and at the same time ensure democratic governance in Abkhazia. Only a more complex, stage by stage process can lead to a compromise acceptable to both sides. As in many other cases of conflict between "formal" democracy and "ethnic" demography, the only possible solution - albeit a slow one - involves a basic democratization process accompanied by very cautious demographic policies, linked to complete procedural transparency and an ongoing process of negotiation.

II - New trend in Georgia's political orientation

The failure of the assassination attempt on Eduard Shevardnadze in 1995 led to new geopolitical initiatives and trends in the Caucasus. Igor Giorgadze, the Georgian State Security Minister and son of the leader of the Communist party - the main rival of Shevardnadze's Union of Citizens - escaped to Moscow on a Russian military plane, after having been accused of masterminding the assassination attempt. Shevardnadze exploited to the full this opportunity to get rid of the strongmen dominating the political scene. He scored a clear-cut political victory over all his rivals. But even more important was the reorientation of the country towards the West rather than towards Russia.

Despite the Russian military bases in Georgia, the presence of Russian border guards at the Georgian border with Turkey and Russian peace-keepers in the two zones of conflict (Tskhinvali and Abkhazia), this reorientation of foreign policy became evident at the end of 1996. It was encouraged by Russian failures in Chechnya and the change in Western attitudes to the region. The latter were caused not only by the immensely important factor of Caspian oil, but also by the general shift in Western priorities after the partial resolution of the Bosnian crisis and the general disappointment in Russia's democratization process, revealed most explicitly by the acceleration of the NATO enlargement to the East.

The doubling of Western investments in the Georgian economy during the last two months of 1996 reflected the emergence of a new situation. The rising power of the West in the region - at least in the minds of the Georgian people - contrasts with the waning power of Russia. Russia is tempted to use the CIS in order to re-establish its control over former Soviet republics, but it avoids too strong an integration, fearing an influx of non-Slavic people into Russia - fears heightened by the lower birth rate among the Slavic population than among Muslim minorities. Nevertheless, it is confronted by catastrophically diminishing resources and organizational abilities. Georgian public opinion perceives Russian policies - in particular the policy of "divide and rule" - as being a serious threat to the country's security. The potential economic or strategic benefit of any Georgian-Russian co-operation is seen as far less important than this type of threat.

Although the visit by the NATO Secretary-General, Solana, to the southern states of the CIS sparked a harsh reaction from some Moscow politicians, it may to an extent be considered merely symbolic - in line with the still prevailing tendency to substitute demonstrative actions for real policies towards the NIS. It may also be seen as an expression of the change in balance of the forces involved in the region. In his speech delivered on 11 February 1997, in Tbilisi, Mr Solana stressed the new role of Georgia and the Caucasus:

"My visit today should be understood as a sign of the value that we at NATO attach to our relationship with Georgia. We want to continue and deepen that relationship. Indeed, the opportunities for co-operation with NATO are almost endless. On NATO's side, we

would enthusiastically welcome the growing involvement of Georgia across the whole range of our co-operation programmes. Georgia's geographical position may be far from Brussels, but its concerns and interests are far from remote. The Caucasus is an important region for Europe, and there is great social and economic potential to be realized, once underlying security issues have been resolved peacefully and in accordance with OSCE values and commitments. Europe cannot be fully secure, or realize its own full potential, if the Caucasus countries are left out of the European security equation."[iv]

The emergence of close co-operation between Ukraine and Azerbaijan, believed to be brokered by Shevardnadze, indicates that forms of integration of CIS countries that are not Moscow-centred have some chance of success. This alliance, with implicit Turkish participation, is a distinct alternative to the traditional CIS process of regionalism which failed to go beyond declamatory policies or to substantiate Russia's aspiration to be a superpower. The issues at stake in Azeri-Georgian-Ukrainian co-operation are obvious: a way of counterbalancing Russia's dominance, in particular in relation to the energy and economic security of the participating states.

An activation of Turkish-Georgian relations followed this process. On 28 February 1997, a delegation of Turkish Mejlis visited Georgia. The head of the delegation, Mr. Hatinoglu, stressed Turkey's interest in facilitating the peaceful settlement of the Abkhazian problem, categorically supporting Georgia's territorial integrity and emphasising Turkey's desire to oppose the Russian scenario there. President Shevardnadze expressed his agreement with the Turkish viewpoint: "I think it is time for more active Turkish participation in the settlement of the Abkhaz conflict and other conflicts in the Caucasian region". He also stressed the importance of the new railway linking Turkey with Georgia.[v]

On 15 March, Georgian Defence Minister Nadibaidze was sent by Shevardnadze on a personal assignment to the Ingush capital Nazran. This was one of the steps in implementing the "Peaceful Caucasus Initiative", promoted by Shevardnadze since the 1996 meeting with Yeltsin and other Caucasian leaders in Kislovodsk. In Nazran, Nadibaidze met the Ingush President Aushev and the Chechen leader Maskhadov. Nadibaidze reported that both North-Caucasian leaders had supported the Peaceful Caucasus Initiative and had expressed their readiness for more active co-operation. They had both allegedly agreed that Abkhazia should remain part of Georgia, and acknowledged that the Chechen participation in the Georgian-Abkhaz war had been a mistake, Dudaev's mistake. Aushev and Maskhadov called the deployment of Russian border troops on the border between Georgia and the North Caucasus superfluous, while Nadibaidze stated that Georgia was opposed to the deployment of Russian troops on the Georgian side of their common border.[vi]

The next important event with strong internal implications for Georgian foreign policy was the meeting of the CIS leaders in Moscow, on 28 March. Georgia was seeking progress with the deadlocked Abkhazian problem, and hoped to achieve several goals, among them the redeployment of Russian peace-keepers in an extended security zone in the Gali region, which would facilitate the return of some 100,000 Georgian refugees to

this district. Such a return would significantly relieve the domestic political and economic strain of the refugee question. In Moscow, the Georgian side received symbolic support for its perception of the conflict, which was expressed in the Resolution of the Council of Heads of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Moscow, 28 March 1997) on the Development of the Conflict Resolution Process in Abkhazia, Georgia:

"The Council of the Commonwealth of Independent States, recalling the Declaration of the Lisbon summit of the Heads of the OSCE member states (December 1996) that condemns 'ethnic cleansing, resulting in the mass extermination and forcible expulsion of the predominantly Georgian population of Abkhazia', as well as 'actions hindering the return of refugees and displaced persons', condemned in its turn 'the position of the Abkhazian side, hindering the reaching of agreements on the political settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, and the return, in safety and dignity, of refugees and displaced persons to the places of their permanent residence...'"[vii]

In a sense, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict has been one of the most powerful of the factors that mobilized opposition among Georgians to dependence on Russia. Especially in the long term, it has had a decisive influence on the determination of foreign policy priorities. Russia seems to have lost substantial political resources through this conflict by reinforcing an anti-Russian attitude in public opinion and among the political establishment in Georgia. At the same time, Georgia's pro-Western orientation may lead to exaggerated expectations of Western support - the West may very well sacrifice the interests of small nations for the sake of stability in the Eurasian heartland. The Georgian government was particularly concerned about the possibility that Russia's consent to the eastward expansion of NATO would be obtained in exchange for American agreement to Russian influence in the Caucasus.

The Abkhazians, who were used for a long time as Russia's strongest lever of influence on Georgia, also seem more and more reluctant to be used in this way by Moscow. The Abkhazian and Georgian sides are already trying to start negotiating with each other without mediators. It is astonishing to observe how, already, the first meetings between the leaders of the two sides have been able to change the post-war stereotypes and enemy images among their respective populations, who have suddenly discovered that reality has other colours besides just black and white. Georgians were surprised to hear rational - if unacceptable - arguments from Ardzinba and other Abkhaz representatives, after several years of an exclusively negative perception of the Abkhaz leadership.

III - Conflict in Abkhazia: Specific dimensions

The Abkazian population has suffered great losses in the last two centuries as a result of deportation and the artificial in-migration of other ethnic groups to its homeland. At the same time, the Soviet legacy included ingenious arrangements for maintaining the

disproportionately large share of leadership offices held by the Abkhaz community. This legacy contributed to the conflagration and determined the form it would take. Specific factors which had a decisive influence on the outbreak of the war include the North Caucasian diaspora in the Near East, different evaluations of the legal aspects of the conflict (such as the right to self-determination versus the territorial integrity principle), the perception by both parties to the conflict of the righteousness of their actions, the role of regional and international organizations, the role of Cossacks in the conflict and the importance of the Russian language in Abkhazia.

1. Post-conflict attitudes and lack of information

The general atmosphere in Abkhazia still bears a number of immediate post-war characteristics. The population expects war to break out anew sooner or later, and consequently much discussion and public discourse concerns the prospect of the renewal of military operations. This keeps the population militarily mobilized and constitutes the strongest obstacle to constructive, development-oriented thinking, as well as to the building of civil society. In most parts of Georgia, however, the issue of Abkhazia shifted long ago to the periphery of political discussions. In spite of state propaganda, and the continual attempts by the political groups representing, or claiming to represent, the refugees (Internally Displaced Persons - IDPs) from Abkhazia, the problems of day-to-day survival or business interests preoccupy the general public far more than the prospect of war in Abkhazia. Apart from a few militants, mostly among the IDPs, the population would rather support a peaceful solution to the Abkhazian problem, although for the majority any solution that involved losing Abkhazia would be unacceptable.

2. Legal status

Most debates today revolve around the legal status of Abkhazia within/vis-à-vis Georgia. I doubt whether it is possible - or even very important - to resolve the question of political status in the short term. Problems other than status have to be resolved in order to reduce tension. But both sides' concerns and interests in the discussion on political status have to be properly analysed if there is to be a productive dialogue. The Abkhaz are concerned with how they will maintain control and who will guarantee their security after they have become a minority again, which will happen if the IDPs are allowed to return and take part in the political process through democratic procedures. The Abkhaz, who have won the war and - for the first time in a century - now have a favourable demographic percentage, have great difficulty in facing such prospects.

The Abkhaz side insists on equal (confederative) status with Georgia, which is unacceptable to Tbilisi. In February 1996 the Abkhaz proposed to set up a federal union with Georgia. According to Anri Jergenja, the Abkhaz "President's" special envoy, these proposals contained "elements of both a federation and a confederation". The new arrangement would include common national borders, joint activities in specific spheres and the possibility of setting up joint authorities. According to the protocol, each of the two equal sides would keep its constitution and relations between them would be regulated by a special treaty which, with the agreement of both sides, could have the

force of constitutional law. Both sides would co-ordinate their foreign policies and foreign economic relations, the operation of border and customs services, power engineering, transport and communications, the environment and the guaranteeing of human and civic rights and freedoms, as well as the rights of ethnic minorities. The protocol implied that, by mutual agreement, Georgia and Abkhazia could increase the number of "co-ordinated policies".[viii]

“President” Ardzinba noted that the new structure would not amount to a "classical type of federation". One should bear in mind that the Abkhaz side regards the above proposals as a compromise. According to Vladislav Ardzinba (and this is also maintained by many experts), the vast majority of the current population of Abkhazia would, in virtually every circumstance, seek closer relations with Russia than with Georgia, and Abkhazia would ideally prefer to join a Russian Federation than any Georgian equivalent.

During his inauguration speech as Georgian President (26 November 1995), Eduard Shevardnadze declared:

"We have always stated, and we are stating now, that time has determined that Georgia's state structure be shaped on a federal basis. Abkhazia will be a subject of the federation in Georgia with broad political status. It will have its own constitution, which will have to be in conformity with the constitution of a single united state. The Republic of Abkhazia will have its own parliament, supreme court, anthem, state emblem and other features of a state".[ix]

In 1997, notwithstanding the more active position adopted by the UN with regard to the resolution of the conflict, the Georgian-Abkhazian negotiations reached a deadlock, despite the fact that any further delay is detrimental to all parties. The absence of a clearly formulated and widely supported strategy for the resolution of ethno-territorial conflicts is still a problem. The general unwillingness to decentralize power in Georgia proper, as well as an extremely cautious attitude towards the repatriation of the Meskhetians (Meskhetian Turks), are causing increased suspicion among the negotiating partners as to the sincerity of the liberal and federalist statements made by the Georgian government, and have led to accusations of a double standard.

Among the various options for the future status of Abkhazia that are being discussed - whether it should join Russia, Georgia or a Caucasian Confederation, or stay totally independent - for the time being there does not seem to be any alternative to finding some sort of compromise with the Tbilisi government, even if other options would be preferable to the vast majority of ethnic Abkhaz. There are unfortunately no signs that both sides are actually looking for specific arrangements in a constructive way (contrary to all their rhetoric about doing so). Russia's attitude reduces still further the chances of finding this kind of solution: its post-war policy on Chechnya demonstrates that it is ready to deploy its still formidable resources to maintain control over the North Caucasus, and it still seems to believe that a compromise that is mutually acceptable to the Georgians and the Abkhaz would not be beneficial for Russian control over the

region. Russia is, however, unlikely to decide to incorporate Abkhazia formally, while it may be ready to assist it in maintaining its de facto independence for quite a long time.

For the Abkhaz, the issue of status used to be a pretext for blocking negotiations and thereby preventing the return of the IDPs/refugees, which could have endangered the demographic balance that emerged after the war. For the Georgians, the negotiation process was only a means of demonstrating their good intentions and readiness to solve the conflict on internationally favoured terms, while there was no real will to seek a compromise. Despite their rhetoric, neither side really wanted to get to the heart of the matter and solve the problem of legal status, preferring - if no explicit gain was possible immediately - to wait until better bargaining positions were secured.

The only alternatives to a compromise between Tbilisi and Sukhumi are either military action, which would be detrimental to all and seems to be less probable, except perhaps on a limited scale (e.g. in Gali or the Kodori valley), or a further stalling of the negotiations - "neither peace nor war". This last scenario seemed to be the one preferred by all parties for several years, but it has now ceased to be so, in so far as both governments are beginning to lose control over the situation - a clear trend in 1997.

Moreover, the deadlock in the negotiations is becoming more and more damaging to both parties. Finally, it could be argued that the opinion quoted in the document presented at the beginning of this chapter - that the final determination of the legal status should not be a precondition for any other progress in the peace process - makes a good deal of sense. Postponing such a solution until a time when the sides have a better basis for mutual understanding, designing provisional status on the basis of functional needs and approaches, and proceeding in the meantime with other important issues, is a viewpoint I would fully support.

3. Georgian refugees/IDPs and the Gali region

The Abkhaz side uses two main arguments to counter the Georgian demand for the refugees to return soon to Abkhazia. According to the Sochi protocols of April 1994,^[x] any Georgians who took part in military action should be prohibited from returning - economic difficulties and the risk of spontaneous violence are used as a second argument against their return. Neither of these arguments is convincing. The first is incompatible with any respected legal tradition: of course, war criminals should be prosecuted notwithstanding their ethnic origin, but to instigate proceedings against all those who have carried weapons is a very different matter. It is not only unfair, as people should not be prosecuted for taking one side or another in a civil war, it is also technically impossible to have independent legal bodies check the behaviour of the entire Georgian population during the war. The argument that the economic situation is unfavourable is not a very strong one either: technical and financial terms can be agreed by both parties in order to make the return of the IDPs possible. Neither of the two arguments can be invoked in relation to the return of refugees to the Gali region, which has a homogeneous Georgian population and where the return of IDPs is already an irreversible process. According to various estimates, the number of Georgians in Gali is about as high as the

number of Abkhaz in Abkhazia (the latter number continues to decrease, creating a further imbalance).

Although the Gali region has been owned alternately over the centuries by Megrelian/Georgian and Abkhazian feudal lords, it has had almost no Abkhazian population in the 20th century. Whatever arguments the Abkhaz use regarding the Georgian presence in their homeland, there is no historical or other legitimization for discriminatory policies towards the Georgian population in this region. Nor would such policies receive any support from Abkhazia's North Caucasian allies. Abkhaz officials will therefore have great difficulty in coping with any eruptions of violence in Gali.

The possibility of returning the Gali region to Georgian control, in exchange for peace and an acceptable political status, was discussed among the Abkhaz leadership. The opportunity for such an exchange has been lost, however, as the Georgian government no longer has to negotiate the future of Gali on the same terms as before - it just needs to wait for a more opportune moment. An attempt to create a separate Megrel nationality (out of a linguistically distinct Georgian sub-ethnic group) as a strategic alternative, which is proposed and strongly supported by a British scholar, George Hewitt, and is being implemented in practice by the Abkhaz leadership, has come too late, as the majority of the IDPs (predominantly Megrelians) have strengthened their Georgian identity after their exodus from Abkhazia.

Specific measures concerning the Georgian IDPs and people who went missing during the war could promote dialogue between Georgians and Abkhaz. A moratorium on changing the property rights of the IDPs and refugees from Abkhazia - which would in fact mean unilaterally depriving them of their property left behind in Abkhazia, until the achievement of a final solution or a special agreement - could be reciprocated on the Georgian side by long-term commitments regarding the economic development of Abkhazia. The mutual exchange of data concerning the persons reported missing during the war, as well as further collaboration in searching for them, is another area that is important for confidence-building.

4. Demographic balance

Demographic relations that may benefit one side or the other is a major concern of both parties, but especially the Abkhaz. No progress achieved on the question of political status would be of much value to the Abkhaz if the pre-war demographic balance were restored. Hence most discussions on political issues, even if they are not explicitly linked to demography, have a demographic dimension that should not be underestimated in efforts to understand the motives of both parties.

The demographic position of the Abkhaz community has been progressively weakened, since the 1860s, through an immigration flow of Georgians (mainly of the Megrelian sub-ethnos), Russians and Armenians. Abkhazians felt particularly threatened by the massive immigration of Georgians that started in the 1930s, leading the proportion of Abkhazians in the total population to decline to 17 or 18 % per cent by the 1980s, when their number

was about the same as that of both the Russian and Armenian communities in Abkhazia, and less than half that of the Georgians (approximately 46%).

The importance of this issue needs to be recognized in the negotiation process if real progress is to be achieved. The Abkhaz had hoped to win time after the war by slowing down the negotiations and postponing a final solution, in order to establish their position on the international scene and change the demographic balance in their favour by a massive repatriation of the diaspora Abkhaz. Their hope that these objectives would be achieved, thereby strengthening their negotiating position, has waned since then.

According to E. Wesselink, the repatriation of Abkhazians from abroad should not be expected in the near future:

"The repatriation movement never gained momentum. The number of returnees are counted in hundreds rather than in thousands. A number of delegations visited the North Caucasus around 1990 to study the prospects for repatriation programmes. The visitors were disappointed at the low standard of living in the North Caucasus. Another problem was the fact that the Abkhaz in Abkhazia appeared to be Christians and that the other North West Caucasians showed no real interest in religious teachings." [xi]

or is there any sign of international recognition for the Abkhazian State, and even leading Chechen politicians have withdrawn their support from the Abkhazian case. [xii] But even more important is the fact that the permanent threat and dire economic prospects are worsening rather than improving the ethno-demographic balance of the Abkhaz. They are emigrating, thereby voting with their feet against current policies. Already there seem to be more Georgians and Armenians than Abkhaz in Abkhazia, and this trend may not change if the approach based on playing for time continues.

While the importance of the ethno-demographic issue is at present an obstacle to reconciliation, it seems likely that it may eventually turn into a powerful stimulus in the search of compromise. One can imagine Georgians accepting or even encouraging the repatriation of diaspora Abkhaz in exchange for the gradual return of refugees, and thus a certain demographic balance could be negotiated and secured. Even if a significant repatriation process would require political stability and economic revival, the process of repatriation could start on more than a symbolic scale. But only compromises between Abkhaz and Georgians can promote such a process, and Tbilisi should be aware of this asset in the negotiations. At present, however, the Georgian political establishment is strongly opposed to the idea of Abkhazian repatriation.

5. The Abkhazian language and cultural security

Cultural insecurity, or a national community's fear of losing its ethnic and cultural identity, is a vitally important factor in the Abkhaz attitude towards reconciliation prospects. The Abkhaz traditionally tend to lean more than the Georgians towards the Russian culture and language, and at the same time they stress their ethnic proximity to the North Caucasian groups of Adyghs and Circassians. These cultural attitudes conflict with those of the Georgians, who have a strong pro-Western bent. Such a cultural clash

between the Abkhazians and Georgians was potentially exacerbated by the displacement of the strongly Russified Georgian (mostly Megrelian) population of Abkhazia to the more explicitly Georgian cultural environment.

The majority of Abkhazians, in particular the Christian population in the southern part of the region, are culturally very close to the neighbouring Megrelians, to the extent that until recently there were no clear borderlines of ethnic self-identification. Some members of a family might, for instance, consider themselves as being Georgian, while others in the same family regard themselves as Abkhaz. Pragmatic considerations play a role here. Georgians and Abkhaz share many family names. Paradoxically, some very patriotic people on both sides have the same family name. These facts generate additional mutual suspicion and lead to accusations of assimilatory policies.

Georgians, formerly the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia, generally accept the Abkhazians' right to have their language recognized as a state language. Unlike in the past (in Gamsakhurdia's time particularly, this was not always the dominant opinion), now they also acknowledge that the Abkhazians are an "autochthonous" population, a status they do not ascribe to other ethnic groups in Abkhazia, such as Russians or Armenians. At the same time, Georgians believe that they themselves have the same right to be considered an autochthonous population there, a claim that is based on various historical arguments, such as the dominance of Georgian inscriptions on Abkhazian monasteries and other historic monuments. The Abkhaz are unwilling to accept such arguments, fearing that the re-establishment of the Georgian majority and culture in Abkhazia, without strong guarantees, could endanger the very survival of their own culture and the fate of the nation itself. The Abkhaz perceive the Russian cultural milieu as less dangerous for their own cultural survival, owing to the diversity and size of the Russian cultural arena. Many joint initiatives could be taken in the cultural field shared by Georgians and Abkhaz, to begin with, for instance, the recreation of the historic Abkhaz archives burnt in Sukhumi during the war, by providing copies of relevant documents and other materials; the restoration of libraries; co-operation in the field of education, for example in preparing text-books in the Abkhazian language, etc. Great caution, however, would be needed here on the Georgian side, due to the ever-present suspicion of Georgian cultural expansionism.

6. Armenians in Abkhazia

The Armenian population, which already dominated some districts before the war, is at present considered by some experts to constitute the largest community in Abkhazia. They are, however, strongly under-represented on government bodies. In the past, they generally expressed their solidarity with the Abkhazians in their struggle for secession. Some Armenians from Armenia and Karabakh took part in military action on the Abkhazian side, while the majority of the few Armenians fighting on the Georgian side during the war came from other regions of Georgia. While the Armenian government in Yerevan explicitly states its neutrality in the conflict, favouring the search for a peaceful solution, and declares its support for Georgia's territorial integrity, there used to be great sympathy for the Abkhaz case among the Armenian population and nationalist political

circles in Armenia proper. According to Michael Ochs,[xiii] Levon Ter-Petrosyan was considered, after the 1995 parliamentary and 1996 presidential elections, as a democrat, a legitimate president, and more generally "a rational guy with whom you can talk and with whom you can compromise, not a nationalist". Tbilisi was unhappy about Ter-Petrosyan's weakened position, and worried about political instability in Armenia.

In June 1997, during an official visit by the Armenian president to Georgia, Ter-Petrosyan and Shevardnadze went together to Akhalkalaki, where the Armenian president declared that the last thing Armenia needed was to have problems with Georgia regarding Akhalkalaki, which has a large Armenian minority.[xiv] This concern is not shared by the Dashnaks (an opposition nationalist party in Armenia), who have territorial claims against Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. From the Georgian perspective, a weakening of Ter-Petrosyan's position in Armenia would reduce his leverage on the militant, nationalist Armenian groupings.

7. Relations with North Caucasians/Adyghs

The Abkhaz strive for closer relations with the North Caucasians, and particularly the Adyghs (including the Circassians and Kabardinians), who belong to the same linguistic group as the Abkhaz, unlike most of the other North Caucasian ethnic groups. Nevertheless, since the co-ordinated resistance to Russian conquest during the Great Caucasian War of the 19th century - in which the battle between the Russians and Abkhazians constituted the final episode - Abkhazians have developed a strong sense of a common fate and identity with the Northern Caucasus, further strengthened by their cooperative relationship with the descendants of Mohajirs (belonging to different North-Caucasian ethnic groups) in the Near East and Turkey, and also by their later attempts to join this fragile North Caucasian unity after the February Revolution of 1917. During perestroika, there was a new attempt at such a union with the creation of the Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus. This Confederation's first conference took place in August 1989 in Sukhumi, regarded as the future capital of the new union. The various nationalities represented in the Confederation have no fear of being dominated by any one group - a confidence which feels very different from what they experienced throughout their history with Russia or Georgia. This explains the attractiveness of the idea of creating a multiethnic union of Caucasians, even if such a union could be considered romantic and will certainly not be easy to achieve. The Abkhaz scholar Gueorgui Otyrba has formulated this perception as follows:[xv]

"The history and the destiny of Abkhazia are closely connected with those of all the peoples of the North Caucasus. Today they share a common history of suffering and oppression, of deportations and cultural destruction, and of fighting powerful enemies. They also share a determination to protect themselves against a repetition of history. They have seized the opportunity created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and by Russia's and Georgia's relative weakness, to assert their rights and bring about a situation that can provide better guarantees for their survival in the future."

The Abkhaz will therefore strive - even if this is not at the moment explicitly expressed during the negotiations - for the creation of open borders to the North Caucasus, and in particular for unhindered cultural and economic exchange with the Adyghs. For the Georgians, transparent borders are still a sensitive issue, however, as are its borders with North Ossetia, Chechnya and Daghestan. In all these cases the Georgian government has to cope with the consequences of having national minorities of the same ethnic group inhabiting both sides of a state border.

In conceiving the future of the Caucasus, Georgians stress their central - both advantageous and dangerous - position in the region and would like to secure a central role in regional politics. Georgia's relations with most of its northern neighbours have improved significantly since the end of the Chechen war, culminating in the official visit by the Chechen president, Maskhadov, to Georgia in autumn 1997. The Georgian leadership hopes that the Western Caucasian mountain peoples will follow the example of the Chechens, who have earned considerable respect in the region, and thus ensure more neutrality in the event of renewed conflict.

8. The Russian presence and Russian border

The Russians control their border with Abkhazia, its coastal zone and have military bases there. Russia is also the exclusive provider of peace-keeping forces, acting formally under the aegis of the CIS. It exercises significant control over the external and internal policies of the Sukhumi government. The economic blockade imposed by Russia under Georgian political pressure conforms to the traditional pattern of Russian politics: its aim is to weaken all the parties in conflict so that it can effectively continue to play the role of arbiter in the dispute.

Russia's policies in Abkhazia, as elsewhere in the Caucasus and in the "Near Abroad" regions, are in keeping with a "post-imperialist" value system, as described by Pavel Baev:[xvi]

"The most distinctive feature of Russia's policies towards the other fourteen states which emerged from the rubble of the USSR is inconsistency often bordering on incomprehensibility. (...) What makes the political complexities even more striking is the quite broad consensus among Russia's political élites on the main policy goals in the so-called 'Near Abroad'. This consensus had already emerged by late 1993 and survived all the turbulent election campaigns. (...) To my mind, if a definition of Russian policy is needed or indeed possible, it is rather 'post-imperialist'; this notion refers to a declining power which tries to compensate for inevitable retreats by some new engagements, feels the need to protect compatriots left 'out there' but desperately lacks the resources to do so, and attempts to prevent spill-over from various violent conflicts while being itself a major source of instability."

From the Abkhazian perspective, the Russian presence, notwithstanding all its vacillations, constitutes the only guarantee against a catastrophic renewal of the military operation, and against the risk of losing the gains from their previous victory. This

enables the Russians to manipulate Abkhazian concerns to their own advantage, but the Abkhaz cannot fully rely on Russian support, which may be withdrawn as soon as the stakes change. The Georgians, while blaming the Russian presence for prolonging the stalemate in the conflict, nevertheless expect that the Russians will sooner or later take their side.

9. Economic development

There is a low level of market economy in Abkhazia, with most food grown for domestic consumption. Many inhabitants possess some land which is enough for their subsistence. Those who are employed in the public sector and who have not been paid for months have been given plots of land instead of wages by the government. There is some small trade, for instance between Gali and Sukhumi. Due to the CIS blockade, the import of goods - some Turkish ships travel to Sukhumi - barely meets the population's needs.

Major export items are tangerines and other citrus fruit. The export of the surplus production of between 60,000 and 100,000 tons of citrus fruit to Russia is extremely difficult because of the semi-closure, by Russian officials, of the railway and road linking Abkhazia with Russia, while domestic industry lacks the capacity to process the crop into juice or concentrate. Other exports are nuts and scrap metal. The road system is very bad and there are few cars, though there is some public transport in the bigger towns. There is also some traffic between Gali and Zugdidi (on the Georgian side) - this has to be registered with the Gali authorities, where tax must be paid; there are also several unofficial (easier and cheaper) crossing points on the Georgian/Abkhaz border. Electric energy is more regular in Abkhazia than in most parts of Georgia, thanks to the power supply from the Inguri dam and from Russia. Widespread economic hardship, however, is driving more and more emigrants out of the region.

In the meantime, the Georgian economy is reviving and is even arousing increasing interest among potential investors, even though the current situation should not be seen through rosy-tinted glasses. Co-operation on the economic rehabilitation and development of Abkhazia could, in the event of a lasting consensus between the two opposing sides, succeed in attracting significant international resources, as is currently happening in Tskhinvali. This could prove to be the best means for combining the interests of both sides and fostering mutual understanding.

The areas of technical co-operation that serve the interests of both sides can easily be defined as soon as a framework for such discussion is created with the assistance of the UN and OSCE missions, and these may represent the best arena for the most important and difficult endeavour - building confidence between the former adversaries.

10. Physical security of citizens and the possibility of a new wave of violence

Despite the current negotiations, the possibility of new outbursts of violence remains. The Georgian and Abkhaz governments, as well as the mediators, now have to define what their reaction would be in such a situation. Although there is much discussion of the

possibility of a new war, no preventive action is being taken. It is far from clear how atrocities and violent actions against the civilian population would be prevented. A discussion needs to be started on how to design mechanisms for humanitarian intervention and on the types of intervention that would be helpful in de-escalating the conflict, in order to reduce casualties and other negative consequences for the peace process.

IV - Prospects

The strong interdependence of the conflicts in the region is another very important factor to be taken into account when designing peace initiatives for Abkhazia. A future settlement may change the balance of forces in the Caucasus region. Hence a holistic approach to the region's problems, one which takes into account its specific cultural and political features, is critical for drafting effective regional policies.

It is interesting to notice that while the governments often refer to the Israeli-Palestinian experience, the NGO community and those involved in the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue pay relatively little attention to the fruitful ideas that have been put forward in the Middle East conflict. This concerns not only the infamous "land for peace" principle, applied by Israel in its relations with its Arab neighbours after the military victories over the latter and its occupation of part of their territories, but also other initiatives, such as the Oslo Declaration, signed initially by the - officially non-engaged - Palestinian and Jewish partisans of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, which proposes certain steps for achieving this. Private initiatives may start attracting public opinion to positive ideas, for instance the collection of signatures in support of peace (with a third/Western party doing the collecting). Other lessons to be learnt include the vital importance of a proper (especially temporal) co-ordination of initiatives.[xvii]

By the second half of 1997, the Sukhumi and Tbilisi governments seemed to be more open to real compromises. The obstacles are, however, great. One of the factors is external: Moscow's unwillingness to lose this very effective lever of control over Georgian policies, and its paradoxical desire to maintain such control notwithstanding great economic losses due to the blockade of transport and communications travelling from Russia to Turkey and passing through Abkhazian territory, as well as the other benefits of having a peaceful, prosperous neighbour in the south.

Even more important is the unwillingness of the Abkhazians to risk a restoration of the status quo ante bellum, i.e., to return to a situation in which they would be a minority, unable to preserve the monopoly of power in a democratic scenario of development, regardless of the legal status they would acquire within the framework of Georgia. One of the scenarios being discussed at present is a territorial division of Abkhazia into a number of districts, in each of which either the Abkhazians or the Georgians would establish their political control. The Abkhazian government could not make such a decision, based on the "peace for territory" principle, without strong popular support. Detailed scenarios for such a process are lacking. The parties have defined no priorities or negotiable elements that could constitute a basis for a mutually acceptable compromise, and no creative

approaches are being adopted in the search for such a compromise. This is partly due to the governments' lack of political will to achieve real results, and also partly to particular group interests linked to the suspended situation of "no war - no peace". Both governments are hostages to their own declarations and promises. Great courage and political inspiration are needed to break down stereotypes and secure popular support for innovative approaches. It is vitally necessary to develop a series of detailed scenarios that would be acceptable to each side, and then work on the gradual convergence of at least some of them - this may lead to the realization that the differences in viewpoint between the former adversaries are not as great as they previously appeared to be. The majority of these differences are, contrary to popular belief, not mutually exclusive - rather, they are symbolic or terminological in nature, and could be overcome if due effort were made.

As the two conflicting parties have different priorities - for instance concerning their legal status or the return of refugees - it is quite difficult to solve individual problems when they are negotiated as part of a whole package. Hence, one of the ways of proceeding with resolving the conflict is to try to narrow the focus temporarily, breaking down the problem into a list of individual issues which are closely linked to one another, certainly, but which may nevertheless be handled and discussed separately. Only after considering these issues and coming to some agreements, or at least reaching an understanding of one another's viewpoints, will it be possible to discuss the whole package again, in an integrated form.

Time is working against the interests of the Abkhazians, but this does not mean that either the Georgians or Russians would benefit from a further postponement of a peace settlement. Russia has actually lost - and is continuing to lose - a great deal, having been cut off from her southern transportation routes, alienated Georgia and forfeited important levers of influence in the region. But Georgia too is a loser in this zero-sum game. Apart from the human suffering caused by a prolonged conflict, fewer and fewer Georgians may be inclined to return to Abkhazia, while the uncertain future of the IDPs is posing enormous problems for the weak Georgian State. At the same time, Georgia is losing the considerable economic benefits it would enjoy with an integrated economy and a north-south transportation route.

One potential area for economic co-operation may be the prospect of transforming the Gali district into a free economic zone which would be put provisionally under an international security regime.[xviii] This would create a safe buffer area, preventing open military action, but it could also serve as a pilot initiative for further balanced economic co-operation. Gali is important in this respect not only because of its border location or because of its Georgian population, but also thanks to its high economic - particularly agricultural - potential. It is worth noting that, even in the current strained situation, Gali is to a certain extent already performing the role of a clearing-house and exchange market for the two sides.

I am, of course, fully aware that no concrete settlement can be reached by individuals from the two communities that are not representing their respective governments, but their proposals can contribute to a spirit of compromise, which is essential to the

negotiation process. If we are able to find common ground in at least some areas, this could serve as a starting point for broader discussions. I am quite sure that almost all of the contradictions discussed are resolvable, if innovative thinking is applied, and if we try to look at the problems through the eyes of other side as well. The existing problems have to be correlated to the real, basic needs and interests of both peoples, as distinct from populist slogans and wrongly perceived interests that only lead to further confrontation. It does seem that if the intellectuals of both sides, supported by international experts and mediators, were able to formulate at least a few concrete ideas in the form of a set of declarations, this could be instrumental in establishing a co-operative approach to conflict resolution, and would help all the sides involved to see the conflict and its consequences through other eyes, instead of just their own.

A helpful instrument in proceeding further with the peace and negotiation processes could be the creation of a mixed discussion forum constituted by respected individuals from both sides. These would receive a mandate from their respective leaderships to discuss the possible terms of the conflict settlement, and would regularly inform their leaderships about progress, but would not have the authority to sign any documents or make decisions. Such a forum, moderated by international experts and assisted by the authority of organizations such as the UN or OSCE, could perform several important functions: generating and testing new ideas in a non-restrictive environment; maintaining a two-way exchange of information between the governments; working as an informal negotiating body, and as a public advocate of a peaceful solution.

V - CONCLUSIONS

While it is important to speculate about how and when the solution to the Abkhazian conflict will be found, it may be of more immediate value to pose the question of where alternative ideas and influences that could shape the future solution will come from. In broad terms, one can identify three such sources: first, political and social currents within Abkhazia/Georgia, second, Russia, including the peoples of the Northern Caucasus, and third, international institutions.

Both sides have been labouring under the illusion that time is on their side. Both are now losing, however, as a result of the deadlock in the conflict, and experiencing major economic, demographic and political losses. There can be no winners in the game they are currently playing. In the first few years after the war, the Abkhaz could hope that time would bring international recognition and the repatriation of the Abkhaz from the diaspora, but this seems less probable now. Even the support of the North Caucasians, which played an important role during the war, is not assured at present, especially that of the Vainakh peoples. In its turn, if the Georgian government too hoped to use time to strengthen its military forces decisively, secure Russian support for its case and see the impoverishment and weakening of the Sukhumi government, they must be disappointed, as there are no signs of such trends. Indeed, in the immediate post-war period the conflict helped Georgia to distance itself from Russian dominance, and develop an independent approach in its state-building. Today, when Russian strength is waning, and the Georgian

State has already begun to overcome most of the difficulties besetting it at the start of independence, priorities need to be changed.

The present situation cannot continue indefinitely. Pressures on the conflicting parties, both from without and from within, are mounting, while the leaderships (who until recently demonstrated a manifest lack of will to resolve the conflict) now seem to be becoming more flexible and open to compromise. There are several possible alternative solutions - the people of Abkhazia and Georgia will decide which of them shall prevail.

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Footnotes

[i] The Confederation of Caucasian Peoples (initially the Confederation of Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus) is a loose association of national movements which claim to represent most of the North-Caucasian nations. It was created just before the break-up of the Soviet Union and was actively involved in all the conflicts apart from Karabakh. It has been dominated by the Abkhaz, the Adyghs and the Chechens.

[ii] Olivier Roy, 'Crude manoeuvres', *Index on Censorship*, 4, 1997, p. 148

[iii] Tim Potier, The constitutional future of the post-Soviet Caucasian autonomous republics, Briefing Paper, on Internet: <tpot@premier.co.uk >

[iv] Human Development Report: Georgia 1997, UNDP, Tbilisi, 1997, p. 30.

[v] "Rezonansi" newspaper, 4 March 1997; Electronic Bulletin of the US Embassy in Georgia "Recent political Developments in Georgia", #5, 14 March 1997 ([HTTP://WWW.SANET.GE/USIS/USISTBL.HTML](http://www.sanet.ge/usis/usistbl.html)).

[vi] ITARTASS of 15 March, "Akhali Taoba" newspaper of 17 March, "Rezonansi" newspaper of 17 March 1997.

[vii] "Sakartvelos Respublika" of 29 March 1997; Electronic Bulletin of the US Embassy in Georgia "Recent Political Developments in Georgia", #7, 11 April 1997.

[viii] Potier, Tim, *Opus cit.*

[ix] *Ibid.*

[x] "On 4 April 1994, an agreement on the refugee question was signed in Moscow in the presence of Boutros Boutros Ghali, the UN Secretary-General, Andrey Kozyrev, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, and various Western ambassadors. The Moscow agreement set up a quadripartite commission with representatives of Russia and the UN, as well as Georgia and Abkhazia, to supervise the return of refugees; this began work in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi at the end of April 1994..." Jonathan Aves, *Georgia: From Chaos to Stability*, RIIA, London, 1996, p. 31.

[xi] Wesselink, Egbert, The North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey, WRITENET, May 1996, [pp. 17-18]. 'Re-emigration to Abkhazia had started in 1989 and continued until the Russian blockade of Abkhazia in 1993 (...) Most people who did re-emigrate were young men, who planned to create a basis for existence before marrying or having their family coming over. When the war came, they either joined the Abkhazian army or returned to Turkey (...) According to Abkhazian sources, an estimated 150 ethnic North Caucasians came from Turkey in 1992 to fight in Abkhazia. Three-quarters of them were believed to be of Abkhaz descent.

"The Abkhazian authorities acknowledged that [during the war] they had received significant financial assistance from the Abkhaz diaspora, in addition to an unspecified number of essentially free-lance fighters. Even though the hope of returning is still very much alive, only a small group of highly motivated individuals have actually taken the step of settling in Abkhazia. The members of the diaspora are generally too well integrated into Turkish society to make a massive return movement possible."

Boutroue, Joel and Stephen F. Jones, *Prospect for the Return of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees to Abkhazia*, UNHCR, May 1997.

[xii] There are also some other Caucasian leaders who have withdrawn their support from Abkhazia. So, remarkably, this trend has been noticed in North Ossetia, and even more unexpectedly, in South Ossetia:

"In Georgia's pre-independence and early independence period South Ossetia maintained close links with Abkhazia but these ties have gradually weakened...", Jonathan Aves, *Opus cit.*, p. 35.

[xiii] *The Caucasus and the Caspian: 1996 Seminar Series*, vol. II, F. Hill (ed.), Harvard University, J.F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, 1996, Presentation by Michael Ochs, p. 77.

[xiv] *Ibid.*

[xv] Otyrba, Gueorgui, *War in Abkhazia: The Regional Significance of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict*, in: *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New Independent States of Eurasia*, (ed.) Roman Szporluk, Armonk, NY, Sharpe, 1994, p. 287.

[xvi] Baev, Pavel, *Russia's Policies in the Caucasus*, RIIA, London, 1997, p. 47.

[xvii] I thank Edie Kaufmann of the University of Jerusalem for these suggestions.