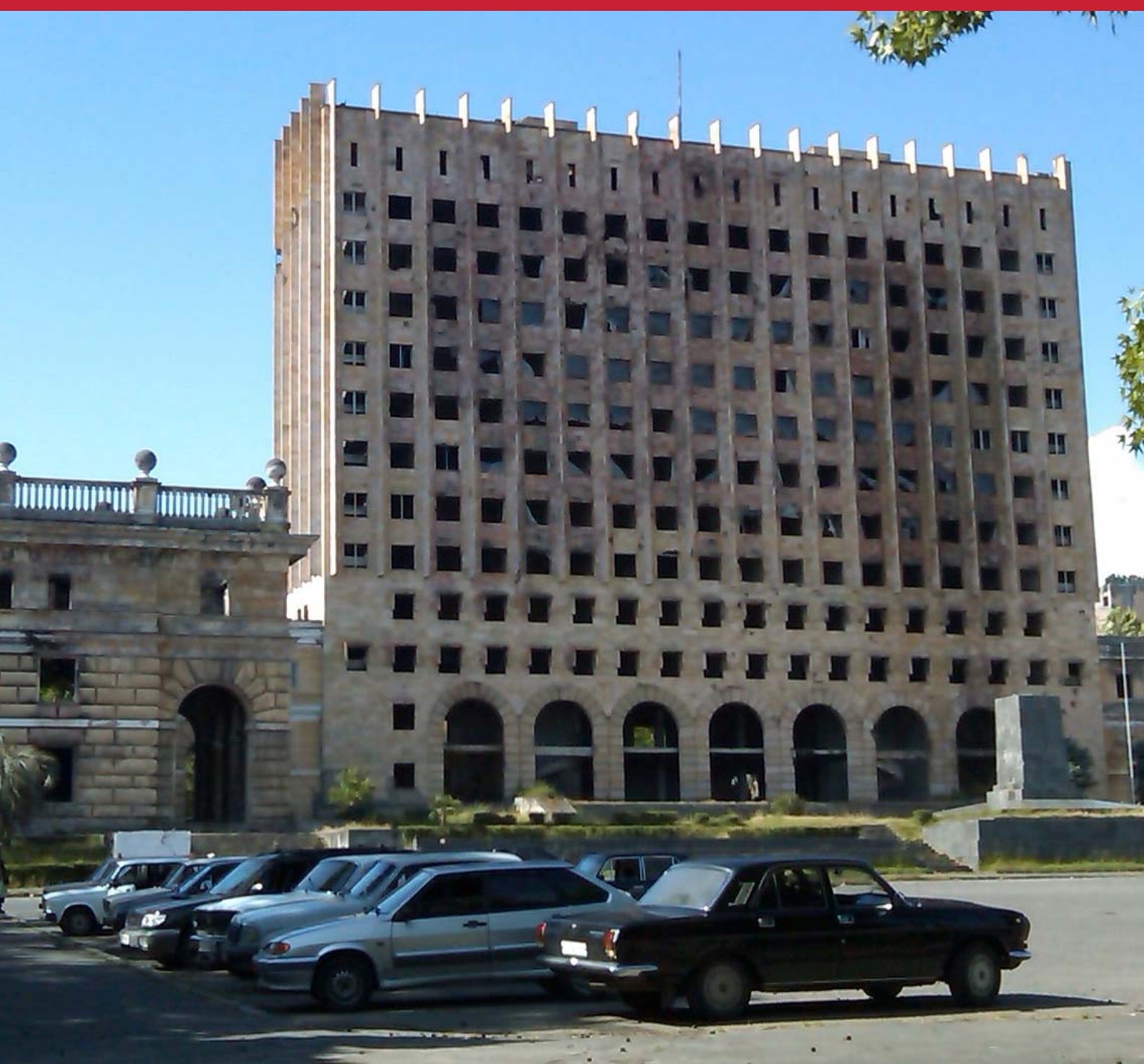


# The EU and Civil Society in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict

MICROCON Policy Working Paper 15

Nicu Popescu

June 2010



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Correct citation: Popescu, N. 2010. *The EU and Civil Society in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*. MICROCON Policy Working Paper 15, Brighton: MICROCON.

First published in 2010

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ISBN 978 1 85864 934 X

Cover photo: The building of the former Supreme Council of Abkhazia. © Nicu Popescu.

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## **The EU and Civil Society in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict**

**Nicu Popescu<sup>1</sup>**

### **MICROCON Policy Working Paper 15**

**Abstract:** This paper deals with the role of the EU in supporting civil society in the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. It analyses the patterns of development of civil society actors that played a direct or indirect role in the development of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In the case of Georgia the paper focuses on NGOs representing the interests of internally displaced persons and civil society players involved in promoting dialogue with the Abkhaz. In the case of Abkhazia, the paper focuses on the development of Abkhaz civil society, the relative strength of which is a mini-phenomenon in itself, as well as the Abkhaz approaches to dialogue with Georgia. The paper then outlines the main EU activities vis-à-vis the civil society actors on both sides of the conflict. The paper concludes that in the absence of strong EU political engagement in conflict-resolution, EU assistance to civil society could not prevent the re-escalation of the conflict and the radicalisation of the Abkhaz and Georgian societies. However EU assistance to civil society contributed to the (parallel and separate) strengthening of civil society on both sides of the conflict lines, which can be considered an achievement in itself, however modest.

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## **1. The conflict**

Abkhazia is a region on the Black Sea that de facto seceded from Georgia after a war in 1992-1993. Abkhazia's territory is some 8700 km<sup>2</sup>, and it borders Russia. Before the war, Abkhazia was an autonomous republic within Soviet Georgia, with a population of approximately 500.000 people; some 45% were Georgians, 17% Abkhaz, and the rest predominantly Armenians and Russians. Abkhazians are part of the North Caucasian Adyghean ethnic group that comprises Adyghs, Cherkessians and Kabardins.

As the Soviet Union was disintegrating in early 90s and Georgia was moving towards independence, the Abkhaz (and the South Ossetians) tried to secede from Georgia and first remain part of the USSR, but when Soviet Union disintegrated, they sought to stay independent. In parallel to that Georgia was engaged in a civil war between the supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze. In this violent and tense environment the Georgians sought to regain military control of Abkhazia by launching a military operation in August 1992. After a brutal war that lasted until September 1993 the Abkhaz (with the help of North Caucasian volunteers and some Russian militaries) managed to regain control of the entire territory of the region.

The conflict in Abkhazia claimed more than 10.000 lives between September 1992 and September 1993 with atrocities on both sides. The Abkhaz have won the war militarily and expelled not only the Georgian troops but also most of the Georgian population (numbering almost one-half of the pre-war population) in what amounted to ethnic cleansing. Since then, some 50.000 Georgian (of the Mingrelian sub-ethnic group) have been allowed to return to the Gali region in the South of Abkhazia that was predominantly Georgian (Popescu 2006b). Outbursts of violence and some guerrilla actions persisted in Abkhazia well after these agreements, especially in the Georgian-inhabited Gali region.

For a decade and a half, Georgia and Abkhazia have become profoundly isolated from each other. As a rule Abkhaz do not travel to Georgia and Georgians do not travel to

Abkhazia (with the exception of some Gali Georgians).<sup>2</sup> Abkhazia is also depopulated. There are approximately 200.000 people today in Abkhazia, compared to some 550.000 before the war (International Crisis Group 2006).

Conflict settlement efforts have been sporadic, ineffective and have not led to any positive results. A Russian-led peacekeeping under the supervision of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) had a role in maintaining peace in the 1990s, but later became part of the problem due to its very biased nature (Popescu 2006a). Political talks between Georgia and Abkhazia have been pursued as part of a UN-led Geneva process as well as the Russia-sponsored Sochi-process. However, these have led to few results. In fact the security and political situation has been gradually deteriorating, until it reached its lowest point during the Georgian-Russian war that started in South Ossetia in August 2009. After the war, Russia (and Nicaragua) recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Abkhazia is deeply connected to Russia. Already before the August 2008 war, Russian peacekeepers were serving as de facto border guards of Abkhazia, some over 70% of the local population (excluding most of the Gali Georgians) received Russian passports, the Russian rouble was the local currency, while the region received military assistance and financial support from Russia, including pensions and direct budgetary transfers.

## **2. Georgian Civil Society and the Conflict**

Secessionist conflicts after the dissolution of the Soviet Union proved a huge shock for Georgia's efforts to establish itself as a state. The break-up of the Soviet Union also meant the violent breakup of Georgia as a result the two secessionist wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia also had to face an influx of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), particularly from Abkhazia. Throughout most of the 90s Georgia politics in Georgia was marked by a very corrupt, authoritarian and at the same time dysfunctional

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper separate references to "Abkhazia" and "Georgia" aims at describing two separate political realities, and does not aim at discussing legal aspects related to the status of Abkhazia.

government. Against the background of an extremely weak state, civil society emerged as a relatively strong actor. This stemmed from the fact that the life-or-death nature of politics, related to the existence of two secessionist conflicts, society became very politicised (Marchetti and Tocci, 2009). Strong external support for civil society and the weak nature of the state allowed for the emergence of the one of the most vibrant civil society scenes in the post-soviet space.

In November 2003 Shevardnadze's government was ousted through peaceful street protests led by Mikheil Saakashvili that became known as the Rose Revolution. The revolution was strongly supported by most civil society organisation. Saakashvili himself was strongly involved and relied on a network of CSOs. Almost overnight, many civil society activists became key government figures. After Saakashvili became president in January 2004 he launched a process of sweeping reforms in Georgia that brought tangible benefits such as greater prosperity, more foreign investments, decreased corruption and better governance. However, all too many civil society leaders were very closely connected to the Saakashvili administration and either went into government or became staunch supporters of the government. This clearly weakened the potential of civil society to check the government. Moreover, despite an initial impulse for democratisation, towards 2007-2008 politics became increasingly centralised. This led to an even greater weakening of the civil society as well. As a 2008 USAID report claimed: "Georgia's civil society has grown weaker in its ability to serve as a check and stabilizing influence on the state. Civil society organizations' overall visibility and political influence continue to diminish. While the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has the highest levels of public confidence in society, played a significant mediating role in disputes between the government and opposition parties during the political crisis, the NGO community largely failed to get involved in public discourse on substantive political issues." (USAID 2008) In addition civil society became increasingly polarised between those considered pro- and anti-government.

While the vagaries of Georgian civil society are worth a serious discussion, this paper will only focus on those aspects of civil society development which directly or indirectly

relate to Georgia's conflict with Abkhazia. In relation to the conflict civil societies in Georgia and Abkhazia are clearly asymmetrical. Despite the fact that the presence of the conflict in Abkhazia has been very important for Georgia's development as a state, Georgia's economic and political life has increasingly moved away from a strong interrelation with the presence of the unsolved conflict. As a recognised state and geographically larger entity many political, economic and economic processes in Georgia acquired logic of their own, which has not been the case for Abkhazia. Being small, unrecognised and isolated – almost everything in the secessionist entity has been defined to a much greater extent by the unsolved conflict. While the nature of the unsolved conflict clearly constituted the central theme defining Abkhaz politics, economics and civil society development, this has not been the case for Georgia. As a result of that Georgian civil society had a much greater range of activities and interests than Abkhaz civil society did. This also created a seeming asymmetry between the levels of EU engagement with civil society in Georgia and Abkhazia. While the EU is much more engaged in supporting civil society in Georgia than it is in Abkhazia, if one focuses only on aspects related to conflict resolution then the EU is a relatively bigger actor in Abkhazia than it is in Georgia. This is the case because the absolute majority of Georgian civil society groups are not dealing with conflict settlement issues, while a majority of Abkhaz groups are in this or that way involved in conflict related issues. Thus, the relative importance of the conflict is more reduced for Georgian civil society groups than it is for Abkhaz groups.

Given such a context, when it comes to discussing civil society in Georgia this paper mainly focuses on its role in pursuing second-track political dialogue with the Abkhaz on possible ways to overcome the conflict and tackling a whole set of activities focused on the alleviation of suffering and representation of the interests of IDPs.

### **2.1. Grassroots activities: dealing with refugees**

A first set of first-order issues was related to tackling the problem of IDPs. Some 240.000 people left Abkhazia after the 1992-93 war (though many left to Russia, and some 50.000

partly returned to the Gali region of Abkhazia while retaining their formal status as IDPs in Georgia to receive financial assistance). A decade and a half after the conflict, some 44% still live in temporary settlements (Kharashvili, undated).<sup>3</sup> International organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Danish Refugee Council, the Norwegian Refugee Council, UNHCR, Kvinna till Kvinna (Sweden) and many others have provided some assistance.<sup>4</sup>

For years IDPs have been housed in hotels, hospitals and kinder-gardens across the country, including in central Tbilisi (Hotel Iveria) and the main sea resort town of Batumi providing a constant reminder of, what Georgia called, ethnic cleaning of Georgians from Abkhazia.<sup>5</sup> This clearly had a radicalising effect on both societal and government attitudes towards Abkhazia. The Abkhaz were seen not just the victors of a secessionist war, but also the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing against Georgians. Thus the issue of IDPs raised both moral and practical challenges for the Georgian society.

Despite such a high number of refugees they have not managed to become an effectively organised civil force seeking to solve its problems related to housing, jobs, let alone return to Abkhazia. IDPs are geographically dispersed across Georgia limiting possibilities for a broader effort to articulate interests. Some have solved their housing problems, while others have not. In addition, they could channel some of their requests through a so-called “Abkhaz government in exile”.

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<sup>3</sup> For individual stories of IDPs see IDPvoices.org, <http://www.idpvoices.org/>

<sup>4</sup> This paper does not and cannot aim at listing all the donors, NGOs and projects that have offered assistance to those affected by the conflict. As a rule the paper lists in the text some examples to give an idea on the type of activities and organizations that have been involved. However, a mention of at least some of the donors that also provided assistance or supported projects for the IDPs in Georgia would include the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst e.V. (Germany), foundation HAELLA (the Netherlands), UN Women Fund UNIFEM, "Conciliation Resources" (United Kingdom), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg, UNHCR, UNV, "Canadian Feed the Children" (Canada), Berghof Foundation (Germany) etc.

<sup>5</sup> Under the Saakashvili administration many IDPs have been re-housed while many of the hotels occupied by them, including Hotel Iveria, were offered to investors for redevelopment.



Some civil society organisation emerged in the IDP community. Among the most active ones could mention the IDP Women Association<sup>6</sup> led by Julia Kharashvili or the Sukhumi Fund led by Alla Gamakharia. Such NGOs have both channelling assistance to IDPs as well as acting as lobbying outfits for the interests of the IDPs. These associations have pushed for example for the adoption of government strategies on the IDPs and have worked closely with the government on the issue of IDPs.<sup>7</sup> Julia Kharashvili even became an advisor to the Minister for Refugees and Accommodation.

## **2.2. Mid-level activities: political dialogue with Abkhazia**

In addition to civil society groups that worked on the IDPs, a parallel track of NGOs engaged in a more political dialogue with Abkhazia emerged. As the official talks on conflict-resolution between Georgia and Abkhazia took place in the Geneva process, with time there has been a number of unofficial frameworks of dialogue aimed at the reconciliation of Georgians and Abkhaz. While most international donors focused primarily on humanitarian aspects of the crisis and steered clear of political issues, over the years a number of initiatives created avenues for political interaction between the Abkhaz and the Georgians. A number of projects created regular opportunities for meetings between Georgian and Abkhaz civil society representatives. These included a project run by Bruno Coppieters from the Free University of Brussels-VUB (Coppieters et al 1999), the so-called “Schlaining Process” that led to over twenty meetings between 2000 and 2007 (initially organised by the Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management<sup>8</sup> and later by Conciliation Resources, London), a series of meetings facilitated by Paula Garb from the University of California Irvine (in cooperation at various stages with the Heinrich Boll Foundation and Conciliation Resources) that resulted in a whole series of publications tackling various aspects of the conflict<sup>9</sup> and

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<sup>6</sup> IDP Women Association of Georgia, <http://www.idpwa.org.ge/>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Tbilisi, 9 June 2009.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.berghof-center.org/> and the website of Conciliation Resources <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/caucasus/schlaining.php>

<sup>9</sup> University of California-Irvine, Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, Publications From Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue Conferences, <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~cpb/projpubs.htm>

recently launched confidence-building initiative supported by the European Commission and run by the Toledo International Centre for Peace (Toledo Centre 2009). While such international NGOs are not part of the civil society in the conflict zones, they have provided crucial platforms for interaction between civil society groups in the region without which one cannot fully understand the interaction and development of civil society in Georgia and Abkhazia.

Such initiatives have not always been coordinated, but they proved synergetic in many ways. In all there have been on average three to five meetings a year between a selected group of Abkhaz and Georgian civil society representatives in the last decade. Many of these meetings resulted in joint written reports addressing various issues of conflict resolution. With time a network of Abkhaz and Georgian civil society representatives emerged. They met regularly and enjoyed some levels of mutual trust and understanding. Among the most active participants of these dialogues from the Georgian side were prominent civil society actors such as Paata Zakareishvili or Archil Gegeshidze, though many experts and government officials have been involved in these track two diplomacy efforts.

Overtime however, the nature and context of these meetings changed quite drastically. Until 2003-2004 these meetings complemented a process of official dialogue between Abkhazia and Georgia mediated by the UN (and Russia at times). But the context changed after the November 2003 Rose Revolution. The new government led by Mikheil Saakashvili engaged in a rapid process of transforming Georgia from a nearly failed state into a better functioning entity. Re-establishing territorial integrity became a key objective of the new administration. After the Georgian government re-established control on the semi-secessionist region of Ajaria in May 2004, it immediately sought to re-establish control of the secessionist South Ossetia through coercion and pressure on many of the criminal networks involved in smuggling in the region. These efforts led to growing distrust of the Georgian government by South Ossetians and Abkhaz who feared that Georgia will try to re-establish control over the secessionist regions.

Saakashvili's "impatient government" wanted quick results and became disillusioned with various "talking shops" and meetings.<sup>10</sup> Formal and informal dialogues between the Georgian government and Abkhazia were disrupted. The Schlaining process came to a halt (Zakareishvili 2008). As one Georgian civil society representative explained: "The government wanted everything at once: accession to NATO, good relations with Russia, and reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia There was little patience for dialogue and long-term rebuilding of trust."<sup>11</sup> The Georgian government wanted actions, not talks, to drive the conflict resolution process. But this only increased the mutual mistrust between Georgia and Abkhazia.

### **2.3. Media and the Church**

In addition to the dialogue between civil society representatives other channels for conflict reconciliation have also been explored. For example the London-based Conciliation Resources funded a series of documentaries directed by Mamuka Kuparadze at Studio Re, a Georgian outfit. These movies confronted Abkhaz and Georgian views of the conflict, but also sought to depict the daily life of people affected by the conflict in the Gali region, the IDPs community and in Abkhazia as an attempt to "humanise" the image of the "other" across the dividing line of the conflict.<sup>12</sup> In 2009 the same movie director presented a movie on the August 2008 war. But as one Georgian civil society representative explained: "the film was quite critical of the Georgian government. This reflected a process of self-reflection in the Georgian society on their approach to the Abkhaz conflict. But many in Abkhazia perceived the movie as providing more of Georgia's aggressive intents and instead of promoting dialogue actually reinforced Abkhaz fears".<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps even more problematic has been dialogue through the church. After the war the Abkhaz church separated itself unilaterally from the Georgian church. The Georgian

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Tbilisi, 2 June 2009

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Tbilisi, 1 June 2009

<sup>12</sup> The documentaries can be downloaded here <http://studiore.org/?cat=4>

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Tbilisi, 2 June 2009.

patriarch Ilya II expressed a wish to visit Abkhazia but was rebuked by the Abkhaz church because such a visit would imply that Abkhazia is still part of Georgia (Georgia Times 2009). And in April 2009 the last Georgian priest (servicing the large Georgian community in Gali) was expelled from Abkhazia (Forum, 2008). The church clearly was not a channel to promote conflict reconciliation.

Overall the role of civil society in conflict settlement in Abkhazia has been relatively limited. The agenda of civil society cooperation and activities has been driven predominantly by political realities. Outside some specific actions or initiatives aimed at promoting conflict resolution, the broader media discourse on the Abkhaz conflict has been largely detrimental to conflict resolution. As the political leadership of Georgia adopted a hawkish discourse of branding the Abkhaz as a criminal regime at the behest of Russian geopolitical interests, such discourses relatively quickly became dominant in the media thereby enlarging the psychological gap between Georgians and Abkhaz. Clearly the presence of a large numbers of refugees from Abkhazia in Georgia also provided a constant reminder of the ethnic cleansing perpetrated by the Abkhaz in early 90s. The few specific and rather narrow projects aimed at promoting greater understanding between the Georgians and the Abkhaz were clearly against the tide and had a rather limited impact on conflict reconciliation at large.

### **3. Abkhaz Civil Society and the Conflict**

Few post-soviet societies can boast the presence of a vibrant and influential civil society. But given Abkhazia's tiny size, relative poverty, geographic isolation, and the state of and unsolved secessionist conflicts, its level of political pluralism is surprisingly high (also in comparison with other post-Soviet secessionist entities such as Transnistria and South Ossetia). Wolleh argues that civil society plays a more important role in Abkhazian debates on the conflict than they do for the Georgian government (Wolleh 2006:54). Abkhazia has a set of respected, influential and active NGOs which have credibility both inside and outside Abkhazia. Among the most prominent NGOs are the Centre for

Humanitarian Programs, the Association of Women of Abkhazia, Rehabilitation Centre “Inva-Sodeistvie”, Sukhum Media Club, the Union of Businesswomen, the Fund of Civil Initiatives and a few others.

In recent years these NGOs have been involved in a very varied set of activities such as post-war psychological and physical rehabilitation of victims, looking for disappeared persons, regular meetings with Georgian NGOs and sometimes officials, writing policy papers together with Georgians, promoting Abkhaz views of the conflict with Georgia, but also working on aspects of internal governance in Abkhazia on issues such as election monitoring, media-freedom, human security, fighting domestic violence, promoting gender equality, or access to information.

### **3.1. The “Abkhaz phenomenon”**

As the Soviet Union was crumbling and various nations moved towards asserting their national rights (mainly against the Russian metropoly), the Abkhaz national movement – that evolved into the Popular Forum Aidgylara - was directed against Georgia (Regnum.ru 2008). Many of those who later became active civil society activists in Abkhazia began their public careers in the Abkhaz national movement. This provided relatively strong roots and a strong credibility credit for many Abkhaz civil society leaders and organisations.

In the post war situation there have been roughly four stages in the development of civil society, depending on the main focus in the activities of civil society groups. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Abkhaz civil society groups mainly engaged in humanitarian grass-roots activities: post-war physical and psychological rehabilitation of victims, primarily children, women and invalids. Numerous international organisations have been involved in the post-conflict rehabilitation efforts (on both sides of the conflict line): the International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN Volunteer, Quakers, Amnesty International, Boll Foundation, as well as some private philanthropists.

As the immediate consequences of the rescinded, starting with 1997-1998 civil society groups became increasingly involved in issues of political dialogue with Georgia organised by a number of international mediators mentioned above (the most systematic efforts being the “Schlaining process” and the dialogue led by the University of California Irvine). Such meetings focused on discussing possible ways out of the conflict and frameworks to solve the conflict. Some meetings between Abkhaz organisations and Georgian IDPs also took place. As one Abkhaz civil society representative involved in these meetings explained: “When we first met with Georgian refugees from Abkhazia they thought we will hug and will remember together the good old days in pre-war Abkhazia. But we didn’t. We told them that no one wants them back here and the old Abkhazia is gone. It will never return. The meeting was very tough.”<sup>14</sup>

Such dialogue with Georgia was not uncontroversial in Abkhazia. Mutual hatred was so high that even meeting Georgians was considered controversial. Abkhaz NGOs had to justify their participation in such framework dialogues with Georgia by arguing that Abkhazia should promote its views both in Georgia and abroad. At the same times, when it comes to the conflict with Georgia, all Abkhaz civil society representatives present a united front in discussions. In many ways Abkhaz NGOs acted de facto as ambassadors at large promoting the Abkhaz view of the conflict, and even if there are some internal differences they are virtually never exposed, particularly abroad. (Georgian civil society is much more at ease displaying divergent perspectives on the conflict or contentious political issues).

A third stage come after 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia. The Georgian administration became disillusioned and dismissive of conflict settlement talks (see above). At the same time in late 2004 Abkhazia faced presidential elections that pitched Raul Khajimba - the designated successor of the first de facto president of Abkhazia Vladislav Ardzinba - against Sergei Bagapsh, the leader of the opposition. The election saw heavy-handed Russian involvement in favour of Khajimba and numerous irregularities. The campaign

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 5 June 2009.

irregularities led to serious post-electoral crisis that almost degenerated into a civil war in December 2004. The crisis was solved peacefully, but society became very polarised.

In the context of the electoral campaign and societal polarisation in Abkhazia, local NGOs have increasingly focused their activities on local political issues. This was facilitated by the fact that the new government led by Sergei Bagapsh was much more favourable to civil society and political pluralism than the previous authorities. Since 2007 Batal Kobakhia, a civil society activist was also elected to the parliament and became chair of the Human Rights Committee. Over the years, and often with the support of the European Commission (see below) Abkhaz NGOs, such as the Centre for Humanitarian Programs or the Association of Women of Abkhazia, have worked on projects such as promoting access to information (Akaba 2007; CHP 2009), promoting the concept of human security (CHP 2008), the defence of human rights and freedoms in courts (Ghezerdava and Shakryl 2008), and promotion of Abkhaz language (Chirikba 2009).

This trend of NGOs becoming increasingly interested in internal political issues became even more accentuated after the August 2008 war which led to the recognition of Abkhazia by Russia (and Nicaragua). After that attitudes to Georgia hardened. From the perspective of many Abkhaz the conflict has been solved: Abkhazia was recognised by Russia and thus became a state, not a secessionist region. It also signed a treaty whereby Russian troops would protect the Abkhaz-Georgian border and station troops in Abkhazia. In such a context Georgia was not perceived as a security problem anymore, therefore why should one engage with Georgia? As an Abkhaz official put it: “There is nothing to discuss or decide with Georgia. Everyone in Georgia – including the most moderate of moderates – is against our independence. I don’t want to talk to them.”<sup>15</sup> In such a context, the new focus of most civil society groups is even more internally oriented. As a civil society activist explains: “For us the main question now is what kind of state do we want to build? We need to focus on democratisation. That is why our

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 4 June 2009.

efforts will be directed at promoting administrative reform, judicial reform and protection of property rights”.<sup>16</sup>

### **3.2. Future uncertain?**

Abkhaz civil society might be relatively strong by regional standards, but its future development is far from assured. It has a number of internal strengths. As local activists argue civil society emerged naturally as a response to the post war humanitarian needs, and was not externally induced. From its early stages it started with grass-roots activities and was needs-driven, not donor-driven, like in many other post-soviet societies. This proved to be a source of strength, internal sustainability and societal support for the Abkhaz NGOs. As a civil society representative explains “our roots now in the West, but here in the national-liberation movement”.<sup>17</sup> But the context was also conducive to that: the secessionist authorities were extremely weak and primarily focused on building up military defence against the Georgians, while civil society played a certain role in assuming some functions of rehabilitating and organising a post-war society. Civil society did not face the danger of being under the pressure of a strong government as many post-soviet states did. After Bagapsh’s coming into power in 2004, the authorities also had a rather tolerant attitude towards NGOs activity.

There is a certain danger that civil society might have reached a plateau. But some of the strengths of civil society can turn into its weakness. The credibility of civil society at large is based on the credibility a handful of leaders who established themselves before, during and immediately after the war in early 90s. Such a model of civil society development is not sustainable. There are only a few young activists. One civil society representative is quite pessimistic about the future: “The youth today are much more interested in doing careers in the government or business, but almost no youngsters go into NGOs”. In addition, “Abkhaz civil society” is mainly a Sukhumi-based phenomenon, as in other towns there is little civil society life. As one NGO activist says:

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 5 June 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 4 June 2009.



“Civil society used to be more influential. Before - it used to fight for recognition and was less involved in internal politics. But now there is a certain lack of mission. We are trying to try to reinvent ourselves.”<sup>18</sup>

### **3.3. The other civil society**

In addition to the NGOs understood in a classical Western sense, Abkhazia has two other types of civil society organisations without the understanding of which we cannot understand the full picture of civic organisation in the region. One are local “social” or “socio-political organisations” (“obshestvennye” or “obshestvenno-politicheskie organizatsii”) and the other are Russian supported organisations. Even the terminology can be revealing. Western-funded democracy promoting organisation that resemble their counterparts in other transition countries adopt the name of NGOs (NPO – in Russian), while more conservative, introvert organisation adopt the name of social-political organisations.

Some of these organisations such as the associations of veterans “Ahiatsa” or “Aruaa” (“The warriors”) criticise the NGOs for taking part in dialogue with the Georgians, for being financed by the West and being too pro-Western.<sup>19</sup> Some of their leaders claim that “Abkhazia does not need western democracy. No one gives these NGOs money without a political agenda”.<sup>20</sup> There have also been attacks in local newspapers such as “Forum” against Western-funded NGOs and some young Abkhazians (including from the government) who participated in meetings with Georgians.

The perceived clash between ‘non-governmental organisations’ and ‘socio-political organisations’ has not lead to the de-legitimisation of the EU-supported NGOs for a number of reasons. To begin with the NGOs themselves have mainly emerged as grassroots organisations with significant credibility in society. Moreover, the government

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 5 June 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews with civil society activists, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 4-7 June 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia 4 June 2009.

itself has been relatively open to cooperation with NGOs which clearly empowered them in domestic debates. Finally, many of the civil society organisations, including unions of veterans, over time became less and less active. They did not benefit from external support for their development, and many of their activist joined political battles and became increasingly politicised.

### **3.4. Russian-supported NGOs**

Russia finances a branch of the Eurasian Studies Institute (other branches are in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and South Ossetia). The institute was created in Abkhazia on the basis of a previous Russian-supported organisation called the Caucasus Institute of Democracy.<sup>21</sup> Its director Sokrat Jinjolia was a former speaker of the Abkhaz parliament. The institute spent most of its time on humanitarian assistance projects such as providing schoolbooks or computers to schools or assistance to elderly people.

The Russian Community of Abkhazia also enjoyed Russian support and was relatively institutionalised. Its chair, Aleksandr Stranichkin, was also deputy-chair of the Abkhaz de facto government. The Russian Community and Eurasian Studies Institute also implemented some projects together such as the construction of an asylum for old people in Sukhumi.

Russia also tried to initiate a process of dialogue between Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Maxim Shevchenko – a Russian journalist and member of the Public Chamber (“Obshchetvennaya Palata”) tried to initiate such a dialogue in mid 2009.

Such Russian supported initiatives belong to realm of GONGOs, or government supported NGOs, as they enjoyed close connection and support of the Russian government. As one observer put it: “Russia’s problem is that it always works with governments only... Such organisations often follow the Russian foreign policy goals.

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<sup>21</sup> See <http://ea-studies.ru/>

They can never criticise Russia, while EU-funded NGOs criticise often the EU. This makes them more credible.”<sup>22</sup>

In any case, with time given Russia’s increasing military, political, economic and cultural presence in Abkhazia, Russia might play a bigger role in shaping civil society developments as well. This can be done directly through support for Russian-sponsored organisation, but also by shaping the views and the context in which civil society operate. Given the fact that Russian TV dominates Abkhaz public opinion, anti-Western propaganda definitely creates a context where NGOs are mistrusted by segments of the population. Some Abkhaz civil society representatives also claim that “you can’t make Abkhazia an oasis of democracy if we become entirely integrated with Russia”, and fear that without greater support “sooner or later Abkhazia could become more like Russia”.

#### **4. EU and Abkhazia: Engagement without Recognition**

Throughout the 90s the EU hesitated to play any substantial role in the South Caucasus. The region was too far, too messy and EU foreign policy capabilities too shallow for the EU to have an impact. Around 2003-2004 things began to shift as the EU started to take a closer interest in the region which resulted in the appointment of an EU Special representative for the South Caucasus and the inclusion of the region into the European neighborhood policy (Popescu 2007). In 2006 the EU and Georgia also signed an Action Plan on cooperation, which envisaged among other things cooperation on the resolution of Georgia’s conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The EU has largely avoided tackling high-politics issues related to the conflict, such as seeking to change or contribute to peacekeeping arrangements or tabling political proposals for the resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU primarily focused on providing economic assistance in order to further the conflict settlement process (EU-Georgia Action Plan 2006). This was facilitated by the fact that unlike other donors such as the US, or Russia were seen as too partisan by at least one of

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 4 June 2009.

the sides of the conflict. The EU was seen as being more neutral and thus acceptable to both sides of the conflict.<sup>23</sup> Still, in some ways the EU has been trying to buy itself influence and shift the conflict settlement context through incremental, socio-economic initiatives. Its motto could be defined as “engagement without recognition.”

EU assistance predates the ENP and the signing of the Action Plan. The first EU funding to people affected by the conflicts dates back to 1997.<sup>24</sup> Its efforts became more systematic after the inclusion of the South Caucasus into the ENP. Substantial funding was offered to the rehabilitation of the conflict Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zones, primarily in Zugdidi region in West Georgia and the Gali region in Abkhazia (Popescu 2007). In 2004-2005 EU financial assistance in the region started to increase substantially with the European Commission funding a set of projects on income generating activities, refugee relief and food security programs in Abkhazia and the IDPs living in Georgia under its ECHO Humanitarian aid program. However this paper will only focus on EU support for civil society activities which were just part of EU’s funding efforts in the conflict zone.

Since 2006 the EU became the biggest international donor to Abkhazia (if one leaves aside the Russian support for the region) through the launch of launch of the so-called Decentralized Cooperation Programs that also targeted people outside the immediate conflict zone. The programs, listed in the box below, aimed were aimed at economic rehabilitation and support for civil society.

Box 1: EU supported projects in the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict.

- Danish Refugee council - Economic rehabilitation in Western Abkhazia (€ 97,000, 12 months)
- Accion Contra El Hambre - Community-based income generation programme in Gudauta District - West Abkhazia(€99,940, 12 months)
- World Vision Business and management skills for Abkhazia (€ 100,000, 24

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with civil society activists in Sukhumi and Tbilisi, 1-9 June 2009.

<sup>24</sup> European Commission Delegation to Georgia, Overview OF EC Assistance in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, <http://www.delgeo.ec.europa.eu/en/programmes/rehabilitation.html>

- months)
- Association of Women in Abkhazia Cooperation of civil society with local authorities in the sphere of human rights and rights of women (€ 50,000, 24 months)
  - Union of Business Women of Abkhazia Tools of support of development of women business -. Creation of business-incubators (€49,695, 24 months)
  - Article 19 International Centre Against Censorship Building Capacity for Good Municipal Governance in Abkhazia with a focus on freedom of information and womens issues in Sukhum, Gudauta and Tkvarchal districts(€97,000, 24 months)
  - Sukhum Media Club Cooperation of civil society with local authorities in the sphere of human rights and rights of women (€35,197, 24 months)
  - Centre for Humanitarian Programmes Stimulating Cooperation between Civil Society and Local Government and Self-Government Structures for Effective Problem Solving on a Local Level (€99,734, 24 months)
  - Civic Society Development Centre Strengthening of a civil society, development of opportunities for Abkhazian NGO in the field of Human rights (€45,821, 36 months)
  - Sukhum Youth House Youth Initiative for the Future (€89, 997, 36 months)
  - Association Inva-Sodeistvie - All different All equal (€95, 625, 24 months)

In parallel to civil-society support in Abkhazia, from 2006/2007 the EU also offered support to the IDPs community in Georgia through a series of projects aiming at capacity building of NGOs representing IDPs, promotion of a social and policy dialogue on IDP issues between civil society and the government, and support for the integration of IDPs into the society (Popescu 2007).

Finally, the EU also supported a process of dialogue between the Georgians and the Abkhaz through a number of initiatives which included support to two London-based NGOs International Alert and Conciliation Resources that included a series of joint confidence building activities with Georgian and Abkhaz civic society leaders, and study

visits to Northern Ireland as well as a series of meetings between the conflict sides. The German foundation Heinrich Boll and Conciliation Resources also supported the Abkhaz-Georgian dialogue organized by University of California Irvine.

The EU thus focused on three sets of activities: supporting civil society in Abkhazia, supporting NGOs representing the IDPs in Georgia and promoting dialogue between the conflict sides. All these projects have been implemented through very stormy political waters. As the EU was increasing its potential involvement in the conflict zones, so did the temperature around conflicts that were once falsely claimed to be “frozen”. Georgian-Russian relations were hitting new lows every few months. Even before Saakashvili came into power in early 2004 Russia accelerated its engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia through the granting of passports and economic assistance. The Georgian government was increasingly investing into its military capabilities, accelerating efforts to join NATO, and expressing confidence in a return of Abkhazia and South Ossetia under Georgian control. Gradually Russian-Georgian tensions escalated into full scale military blockades, shoot-outs, military brinkmanship and increased radicalization of Georgian and Abkhaz societies that culminated in the August 2008 war. Both Russia/Abkhazia and Georgia engaged in a classic security dilemma where each side interpreted the intentions of the other as potentially aggressive and responded to that through more mobilization rhetoric and militarization, leading to even more mutual distrust and deterioration of security.

In this context it has been very difficult for the EU projects to counter the prevailing political and geopolitical trends in Russian-Georgian relations, as well as internal processes in the Georgian and Abkhaz societies. When military security became a first order issue, political dialogue between civil societies could hardly alter the structural conditions of the conflict. Still the dialogue had a number of positive effects. First, such dialogue allowed the dismantlement of at least some stereotypes about the other side among some public opinion makers. This was a clear mid-level impact of EU actions. As a Georgian civil society representative explained: “These dialogues created a strong nucleus of people who communicate with each other. If there will be a political process

leading to a deal, this group of people will be key in re-building bridges among the two societies.”<sup>25</sup> Second, such links across the dividing line could have played some (very limited) conflict prevention role. When tensions around the conflict escalated, and the authorities on both sides engaged in propaganda, civil society on both sides could exchange information directly and often question official positions. Such dialogue was strengthening a better informed civil society in internal debates. Finally, in the absence of any contact between the Abkhaz and Georgian societies at large, contact in itself has been a goal (Wolleh 2006:27). Overall, the EU and other European foundations have tended to use their funding support to strengthen moderate voices on both sides of the dividing line.

As official conflict-settlement dialogue between Georgia and Abkhazia was aborted, Abkhazia gradually plunged into a mass hysteria fearing a Georgian military invasion, the Georgian government interpreted increasing Russian support for the secessionist regions as a move towards their irreversible integration into Russia, and engaged in a military build-up at the borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Abkhaz-Georgian civil dialogue became increasingly isolated from their societies at large. The Georgian government refused to send their representatives to such dialogues, while societies became increasingly through government-inspired media-driven process of discursive radicalization in both Georgia and Abkhazia (and partly Russia). Against this background Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue became more important than ever before, but also less effective than ever before. A set of meetings involving a couple dozen people from both sides could hardly outweigh the dominant discourses of the authorities and the media on both sides of the conflict line.

With time dialogue also became a process involving a limited number of people. In Abkhazia – except for a few select civil society activists, few wanted to talk to the Georgians at all. In Georgia some government and civil society also considered there is nothing to talk about with the Abkhaz. On both sides, no one had the muscle to reach out to the more radical (and perhaps dominant) sections of society. Thus Georgian-Abkhaz civil society dialogue could not really act as a transmission belts for the rest of the society

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with a civil society activist in Tbilisi, 9 June 2009.

which was much more influenced by the governments and the media. As one Abkhaz civil society activist put it: “What can you change with such meetings? We want recognition, they want us inside Georgia. That’s unbridgeable.”<sup>26</sup> Such dialogue was going against the tide. While it could possibly slow down the tide a bit, it certainly could not reverse it.

A somehow parallel process were attempts to bring together youth from Georgia and Abkhazia to discuss contentious issues. Such meetings have been less systematic than the political dialogue. However for those few Abkhaz and Georgians who could travel to such meetings in the United States, United Kingdom or other EU states, this was a significant experience of getting to know both their counterparts, and not least importantly the world at large. More problematic though was the fact that in Abkhazia some of these youth were attacked in the media for “talking” to the Georgians.<sup>27</sup> This also limited the “spillover” effect of such meetings. As an Abkhaz civil society representative explains: “All youth grew up closed and isolated here. Those who return from trips abroad often close in themselves. They cannot say something that is not acceptable to the society at large as it is very difficult to have a discussion outside stereotypes.”<sup>28</sup>

## **5. The impact and effectiveness of EU funding**

An assessment of the impact and effectiveness of EU funding to civil society on both sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is likely to be centred around two key questions. A first question is whether EU assistance has contributed to civil society development as such (impact) on each of the sides of the conflict line taken separately. And a second question is whether EU assistance to civil society in the conflict zones contributed to the transformation of the context in ways which could be conducive to conflict settlement (effectiveness). In other words the question is what have been the effects of EU funding and how they promoted EU’s states or implicit aims.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 5 June 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews with officials and civil society activists, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, March 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 4 June 2009.



To begin with, EU funding has been crucial in developing civil society on both sides of the conflict zones, but particularly in Abkhazia where few other sources of funding have been available and civil society was always less spoiled with international attention. EU assistance clearly empowered a specific set of NGOs that have been more open in outlook against more radical organisations such as former combatant groups for example. In the opinion of local civil society activists a huge advantage of EU funding was that it is often long-term, up to 3 years, while most other donors implement projects of three, six or twelve months.<sup>29</sup> Such longer term funding allowed for both more sustainable projects, and helped NGOs to build their capacity to operate. However, civil society activists complained that EU procedures are hugely bureaucratic and slow.<sup>30</sup>

As for the effectiveness of EU funding in bridging the two conflict sides it had more mixed results. In the absence of a strong and determined EU political engagement, EU support for civil society alone could not prevent, let alone push back, the radicalisation of both Georgian and Abkhaz societies. EU assistance helped strengthen more moderate voices on both sides of the dividing conflict line within their own internal contexts, but the effects of that were minimal. In both Georgian and Abkhaz societies, moderates remained in minority.

However, EU assistance was very important for the development of civil society per se. If one accepts that supporting civil society and political pluralism is a value in itself, then EU funding has been quite effective. The side effect of this though, was that the EU implicitly and perhaps unwillingly supported the development of the civil society of a de facto independent state. Without EU and other international support, Abkhazia would have remained separated from Georgia, but would have probably had a less developed civil society.

### **5.1. Constraints on EU civil-society support**

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Sukhumi, Abkhazia, 4 June 2009

<sup>30</sup> Interviews with civil society activists, Sukhumi, 4-5 June 2009.

Part of the problem with EU assistance to the conflict regions was that it often was an uphill struggle for the EU. Political sensitivities prevented or hugely complicated the EU from disbursing its money. Just to outline one example. Language and toponymy plays a hypertrophied role in the Abkhaz Georgian conflict. Whole arguments are developed around the fact whether one writes “Sukhumi” or “Gali” (in Georgian) as opposed to “Sukhum” or “Gal” (in Abkhaz). The symbolic battles become even more convoluted when it comes to the naming the region. Questions such as should one write “Abkhazia, Georgia” through a coma to underline that Abkhazia is de jure part of Georgia arise? Should one use the term “Georgian-Abkhaz” conflict implying equality between a recognised state and a secessionist region? Abkhaz react against any suggestions that Abkhazia is part of Georgia, and Georgian react against any mention of Abkhazia that does not stipulate that it is a “region”, “conflict zone” or part of Georgia. EU funding in the region could not avoid falling into the stormy waters of toponymical battles.

As a rule Abkhaz NGOs did not want to participate in calls for application where they were treated as Georgian NGOs, or the region was mentioned as “Abkhazia, Georgia”. However the Georgian government was also lukewarm of EU funding projects in the region, particularly if they do not mention that Abkhazia is part of Georgia. After the August 2008 war things got even more complicated. Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia raised the bar of what is politically acceptable for Abkhazians and what is not. The Abkhaz authorities, for example, became extremely reluctant to receive in Sukhumi the ambassadors to EU countries “to Georgia” (EU member-states embassies have often been a source of assistance). In this context Abkhaz civil society also became reluctant to accept assistance from EU embassies in Tbilisi, as well as EU money offered to Abkhazia from budget lines promised to Georgia. In the words of civil society activist in Abkhazia “after recognition it became more difficult to get funding. We don’t accept the same conditions as before. We don’t want to accept money that are offered to Georgia.” This went hand in hand with a worsening of perceptions of the EU among the Abkhaz publics and authorities after the EU came out strongly in favour of Georgian territorial integrity after August 2008 and even put pressure on Belarus not to recognise Abkhazia and South

Ossetia. Thus Abkhaz NGOs have been playing an increasingly difficult balancing act between the Abkhaz public and debates at large and their support from the EU.

Thus the EU was all too often caught in between competing symbolic pressures. Many of these contradictions took months to conciliate through carefully crafted linguistic compromises. The European Commission delegation in Tbilisi (and its head Per Eklund as well as project manager Maria van Ruiten) have often been at the forefront of these efforts. But such efforts have been extremely difficult and personality driven. It is not clear whether in the absence of such strong personal determination and commitment EU funding in the region would have continued. A glimpse of the role of personalities is given by a comparison of the active involvement the European Commission delegation in Tbilisi with the very limited role its counterpart Chisinau, Moldova which plays a much more modest role in conflict resolution issues in Transnistria.

## **5.2. The EU's engagement with civil society: testing the hypotheses**

Looking at the findings on EU engagement in civil society support through the three hypotheses advanced in the theoretical framework one identifies the following patterns:

*The Liberal hypothesis:* The liberal hypothesis would posit that EU assistance strengthened the influence of mid-range society on the top-level, while maintaining their anchorage in the society at large and the grassroots. When it comes to assessing the impact of EU assistance on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the EU has definitely had a key role in empowering mid-range civil society actors in Abkhazia. At the same time these civil society organisations themselves started as grassroots movements and have maintained their links to the grassroots. They have also been careful not to distance themselves too much from either government or society at large in Abkhazia in order not to be seen as co-opted by the EU. When faced with accepting EU conditions that were symbolically challenging Abkhazia's separation from Georgia, these NGOs preferred not to receive funding from the EU, rather than compromise in any way their internal

credibility in Abkhazia. Despite receiving funding from the EU, they have also been openly and vocally critical of EU policies in the region (especially EU's insistence on recognising Georgia's territorial integrity), which provided them with the necessary credibility to defend themselves from internal accusation of being sell-outs to the EU. Such behaviour on behalf of Abkhaz NGOs stemmed from the fact that in the very politicised, isolated and small public space of Abkhazia this was the only possible survival strategy for the NGOs.

As for Georgia the liberal hypothesis is less substantiated when it comes to conflict related issues. Georgia's civil society scene has been much larger than that of Abkhazia. Substantial EU funding went into support for civil society on issues which were not related to conflict resolution such as democratisation, implementation of the EU-Georgia action plan, promoting rule of law etc. But if one zooms in to apply the liberal paradigm only to EU funding for conflict-related activities one finds very limited support for this hypothesis. Mid-range civil society organisations have been clearly divided between anti- and pro-government organisations, and this more than anything else defined their connectedness to the top-level. In such a context the EU funding did not lead to the empowerment of the peace-building civil society organisations. However, EU funding for refugee grassroots organisations have helped them organise and articulate better some of their demands which allowed them to maximise their impact on the government.

*The leftist critique:* An attempt to test the leftist critique of the liberal hypothesis would claim that EU assistance could be detrimental for conflict settlement. This hypothesis is largely not supported by the record of EU engagement in Abkhazia. While the EU is clearly biased in support of liberal, more professional, English-speaking, urban NGOs such an approach in behalf of the EU was deliberate. The EU sought to strengthen liberal voices in Abkhazia. At the same time this did not lead to the co-option of local NGOs since they remain dependant on the local context, and they retained strong links to both the top level and the grassroots. There have been internal pressures on the NGOs that sought to delegitimise EU-supported NGOs by branding them as foreign stooges, and this has been largely used in domestic political battles between various factions. However,

local NGOs remained strongly embedded in the local context since this was their only way to survive as societal groups. Despite a balancing act between the external actors and the internal context, the internal connectedness of Abkhaz NGOs to the top and grassroots level was more important than their links to the international levels (and donors).

As for Georgian NGOs the leftist critique has some value. As the EU also tried to empower more moderate voices, many of the Georgian liberal civil society groups involved in second-track diplomacy with the Abkhaz have maintained, rather than became, their distance from the mainstream and much more hawkish governmental and media discourse on Abkhazia.

*Realist critique:* The realist critique provides perhaps the most potent check on the liberal paradigm. A realist interpretation would suggest that EU engagement with civil society in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has had little relevance for conflict settlement patterns. Against the tide of major geopolitical shocks emerging from Georgia's secessionist conflicts - Georgia-Russian military tensions for a number of year in the run up to the August 2008 war, EU-Russian diplomatic tensions due to Georgia and Tbilisi' attempts to join NATO – EU engagement with civil society in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict zone had close to no influence. The conflict has been driven by top-level actors, primarily the governments of Georgia, Russia as well as the Abkhaz authorities, while the influence or lack of it of external actors such as the US or the EU was channelled through diplomatic efforts at a political level. When it comes the assessing the influence of the EU, in the absence of a strongly interventionist EU diplomacy on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, EU's low-level assistance to civil society had almost no influence on conflict settlement patterns in the short-term at least. It might yield some results in the longer term, but this has not been the case yet.

Overall, EU engagement with civil society often became an excuse for failure to act at top-political level by pressurising Georgia, Russia and the Abkhaz to avoid the escalation of the conflict. EU member states have been divided on how and whether to proceed with

top-level political engagement in order to advance the settlement in Georgia's secessionist conflicts. This made EU institutions opt for civil society engagement as a substitute (not a supplement) to proper conflict-management efforts. However, such an approach not only failed to advance conflict resolution, but it even failed to prevent a drastic deterioration of the realities in the conflict zone.

Even EU's strategy of empowering moderate and liberal voices in civil society has yielded limited result when confronted with stark political choices in times of crisis. When the Georgian government launched an attack on South Ossetia on 8 August 2008 which triggered a five-day war with Russia, extremely few voices in Georgia came out in the early hours of the conflict against the use of military means to solve a secessionist conflict. Similarly, when during the 2008 August war the Abkhaz authorities moved in to expel Georgian troops and inhabitants from the Kodori Gorge – a zone in upper Abkhazia controlled by Georgia – no one in Abkhazia condemned the launch of a unilateral initiation of military action by Abkhazia against Georgia (Tagliavini Report 2009). Thus, by all measures EU engagement with civil society failed to both alter the course of the conflict, and even significantly empower moderates in the civil society across the dividing lines in times of a crisis such as the Russian-Georgia war in 2008.

## **Conclusions**

In the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, civil society on both sides of the conflict line has been preoccupied with two sets of issues: alleviating the consequences of the conflict for ordinary people and supporting some kind of political dialogue between the conflict sides. On both sides of the conflict line the EU has also been extensively involved in offering humanitarian assistance and economic rehabilitation. But when it came to supporting civil society, it also focused on the two sets of priorities outlined above.

In the case of Georgia it means supporting the existence of IDPs – both by trying to alleviate their humanitarian sufferings, but also helping them channel their interests and demands through organised civil society groups. In the case of Abkhazia, support to civil society took the form of capacity building assistance and projects generally aimed at strengthening the role of NGOs.

More politically sensitive has been the support for dialogue between Georgians and Abkhazians. Against the background of an unsolved conflict, physical isolation between Georgia and Abkhazia, the intermittence of official conflict settlement mechanisms, one of the few frameworks where Abkhaz and Georgians could discuss political issues have been provided by a number of US and European non-governmental actors. These dialogues have allowed the maintenance of some dialogue between the two sides of the conflict. However the effects of such dialogues have been very limited, owing to the increasing antagonism between the Georgian and Abkhaz (as well as Russian and South Ossetian) authorities. Against the background of geopolitical tensions, that degenerated into the August 2008 war, civil society dialogue could not prevent or drastically alter the course of political developments promoted or followed by the governments.

In the absence of a clear cut political EU involvement in conflict resolution, EU assistance to civil society might have had limited effect on the promotion of conflict resolution. However, it was an important factor in strengthening (independently from each other) the civil societies of Georgia and particularly Abkhazia (where there are few other donors). As an objective in itself this was a goal worth pursuing.

Overall, the explanatory value of a realist assessment of EU engagement with civil society in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has most pertinence, though elements of the liberal hypothesis have also been partly confirmed. Thus a preliminary conclusion is that civil society development has been of secondary (rather than no importance) to the conflict settlement patterns. However, without stronger political engagement at the top-level, whatever progress could be achieved through civil society engagement could be easily and quickly reversed by a deterioration of the conflict environment driven by top-

level decisions. This is not to say that civil society engagement has no effectiveness, but rather that in order to be effective civil society engagement can only complement, not substitute, properly designed political strategies to advance conflict settlement.



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