

# The Failure of Track Two Diplomacy in the Georgian-Abkhazian Peace Process

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## Abstract

Since the 1960s a large number of academics and former career diplomats have come up with the idea of holding informal workshops for relevant representatives of civil society from both sides of a conflict. Their activities started to be known as Track Two Diplomacy. The purpose of this kind of meetings was to set up an alternative space for the official peace process, which was until then negotiated only by political representatives of the both conflict parties. The need for a greater involvement of civil society and local NGOs, which should contribute to conflict transformation, received a new impetus in the period after the collapse of the bipolar world, which has brought a new wave of armed conflicts in the Caucasus. Although in both Abkhazia and Georgia, there is a flourishing civil society and EU countries and many European NGOs strongly support peacebuilding activities in Abkhazia, conflict transformation in this frozen conflict is not a step closer to resolution than it was seventeen years ago, when the peace process in Abkhazia began. This text will analyze the reasons for the failure of a track two diplomacy in the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process. This analysis is based on the data collected from journal articles and studies on conflict transformation published by western CSOs, such as Berghof Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, International Alert or Conciliation Resources. To assess the work of track two diplomacy, I rely on reports from the workshops, which were produced by the organizations or scholars involved in them and expert interviews with the civil society activists done in Abkhazia in October 2009.

**Key words:** Georgia, diplomacy, NGO, Abkhazia, conflict

## Conflict in Abkhazia, de facto statehood and its consequences

Abkhazia is a small republic on the eastern coast of Black Sea. The disputes between Abkhazians and Georgians grew into an armed conflict at the beginning of the 1990s. The result was 15 000 dead people, a population decrease from the original 525 000 to today's 214 000 inhabitants,<sup>41</sup> more than 300 000 refugees and a completely destroyed infrastructure. Abkhazians took control over the whole territory of historical Abkhazia, declared sovereignty and independence from Georgia. Officially, the war ended in the so-called Moscow ceasefire agreement in April 1994. Although signed seventeen years ago, the two key questions, without which no lasting peace can take place, have not yet been solved. The first question is

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<sup>41</sup> The last widely accepted official census took place in Abkhazia in 1989, when the region was inhabited by 525 000 people. Postwar estimates vary from source to source. The Abkhazian population census in 2003 reported that Abkhazia's population comprises 214 000 people. Some scientists and staff of the UN, however, consider this data slightly overestimated.

the political status of Abkhazia, the second question is the conditions for the return of refugees. Economic vulnerability is to a great extent connected with the prolongation of de facto statehood.<sup>42</sup>

De facto statehood implies zero foreign direct investments and the absence of loans from international financial institutions and banks residing in countries that do not recognize such a de facto state. The de facto states' export opportunities are also restricted; however, this regulation can be partially evaded by the distribution through a commercial broker from a country that recognized such a de facto state or has a border with it. In the case of Abkhazia, goods as tangerines, kiwis and nuts are flowing to the European market from Russia, since there are no foreign business companies or non-profit organizations residing in de facto states.<sup>43</sup> In this respect the only exception are humanitarian organizations. Other organizations from a country that does not recognize the de facto state must have permission to operate in such a region from the parent state from which the de facto state struggles to separate. Transport is another complication as it is impeded by obstacles on the borders with the parent state and also by other countries' reluctance to open borders with an unrecognized country. Travelling for the citizens of such region is also very difficult. If the citizens do not own a passport of another state, travelling across the borders of their territory is impossible. There is relatively substantial wall of isolation separating citizens of a de facto state from the rest of the world. This fact can be reflected to a considerable extent in a lower economic level of each de facto state in comparison with its parent country. Most de facto states (except Taiwan) have lower GDP per capita as compared with their parent countries.

### **Theoretical starting point of "track two diplomacy" in peace process**

In the context of the growing number of armed conflicts, since 1960s many academics, career diplomats and representatives of the emerging NGO sector<sup>44</sup> have spoken about the need of informal workshops, which should run parallel with the official peace process controlled by leaders of conflicting parties. For these initiatives Davidson and Montville (1981) started to use the term "track two diplomacy". From their point of view "track one diplomacy" is a technique of a state action carried out by professional diplomats, governmental representatives, international organizations or adversarial leaders who act in the capacity of their representative government. Reimann (2005) adds that official representatives of conflict parties cannot be only political leaders, but also military or religious leaders, who are trying to solve the conflict towards sustainable peace. To sum up, track one or official diplomacy refers to a technique of state action carried out by professional diplomats, governmental representatives, international organizations or adversarial leaders who act in the capacity of their representative government. On the other hand track two diplomacy can be defined as "initiatives parallel to the official diplomatic negotiations, carried out by private facilitators in the form of informal problem-solving workshops" (Azar and Burton 1986). Another definition of track two diplomacy is a decade younger and comes from Galtung who emphasizes the role of civil society in the conflict transformation process. In his words, successful conflict transformation needs to look underneath the surface to address the real causes of the violent outbreaks, which are hidden in the cultural and structural violence. And

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<sup>42</sup> De facto state is capable of performing sovereign legislative, executive and judicial power over its territory, it strives for independence, but lacks international recognition or it is recognized only by few other states. Among such states with full inner sovereignty that are on a long-term basis struggling for recognition of their independence (in terms of years) we may include Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Northern Cyprus, Somaliland and Taiwan.

<sup>43</sup> Author interview with the Abkhazian freelance journalist, Sukhumi, October 10<sup>th</sup> 2009

<sup>44</sup> For example Edward Azar, John Burton, Leonard Carr Doob, Ronald Fisher, Johan Galtung, Herbert Kelman, John Paul Lederach, Joseph Montville, Harold Saunders and others.

this is not possible without the involvement of informal diplomacy carried out by active civil society (Galtung 1996).

Mikhelidze and Pirozzi (2008) argue that civil society organizations (CSOs) have access to parties directly involved in the conflict and thus potentially the ability to bring parties to a dialogue. They can also encourage the local population to engage in a long-term process of reconciliation. That is how a civil society can be an important force in the changing of a social climate within societies affected by a conflict, especially in situations when the highest political representatives of conflicting parties are not willing or able to retreat from their demands.

In the case of a persistent or frozen conflict, the role of CSOs should lie in an effort to create open and democratic communication channels which should diminish the gap between society and state leadership. The importance of civil society in creating democratic and open communication channels can be designated as vertical permeability between top leadership, internal peacebuilding CSOs and the society (Lederach 1997: 39). This vertical permeability represents uninstitutionalized ties within one society. But for conflict transformation is equally important, if not even more important the relationship to those on the "other side". From this need of confidence building between the conflict parties, the concept of peace building was born. Peace building in post-conflict reconstruction requires an influential civil society in the vertical direction and properly connected non-profit organizations that are active across the ceasefire line. Under this approach long-term peacebuilding process involves direct or mediated interaction between the parties to prepare positions to negotiate agreements on important topics on the political level (Darby and MacGinty 2000: 8).

The concept of peacebuilding includes a wide range of activities across the society levels (from decision-makers to the grassroots level). At the lowest level, an education for peace, reconstruction programs or public awareness about the protection of human rights and democratic values can be considered as peacebuilding activities. At the middle level there is an attempt of peacebuilding to support democratic culture, education, political organizations, training in conflict transformation and organizing reconciliation workshops. At the highest level, major non-profit organizations can organize meetings with members of parliament or government and recommend steps to implement peacebuilding policies into national strategic framework.

The main task of peacebuilding is to achieve positive peace and a stable social equilibrium in which new conflicts will not escalate into armed conflicts. Although peacebuilding is often supported by foreign funds, in order to be successful it must grow from local society. Peace talks are indeed in most cases carried out at the political level. However, up to now track one diplomacy did not achieve tangible results in conflict transformation of de facto states. So if the way leading to a long-lasting peace through top-down processes was not found, conflict transformation has to be attempted by a bottom-up process. In this sense, the involvement of local civil society in peacebuilding becomes of crucial importance in conflict transformation.

### **Track two diplomacy in Abkhazia**

Abkhazia is an example that without a political settlement, transformation of the conflict via "track one diplomacy" is in an impasse. Potential for conflict transformation thus can be seen in building up a civil society, which should try to democratize the society and try to find a bridge leading to reconciliation with the other side of the conflict through peacebuilding projects. Civil society in Abkhazia underwent an interesting development which could be divided into three basic stages: (1) the formation of civil society (1991-1997), (2) the involvement in policy dialogue (1998-2005), (3) the concentration on domestic issues (since 2006).

At the time of disintegration of the USSR, movements supporting national rights were created in all the republics of the union. While such movements elsewhere have been mainly anti-Russian, in Abkhazia, the People's Forum Aidgylara profiled against Georgia. Many of today's prominent civil society activists began their career in the Abkhazian public space in Aidgylara. After the war, strong anti-Georgian feeling within Abkhazian society gave credibility to civil society activists. As a result, even non-profit sector in Abkhazia was very anti-Georgian.

During the war and the years after, Abkhazian CSOs engaged mainly in humanitarian activities. The most common form was post-conflict reconstruction and psychosocial stabilization of victims' families, women, orphans and invalids. Civil society in Abkhazia did not emerge by external pressure from the donor community, as in many other former Soviet republics, but emerged naturally as a response to a war and postwar humanitarian needs. This remains a source of strength, internal sustainability and wider support for the civil society in Abkhazia.

On the issue of political dialogue with Georgia, the civil society started to engage in 1998, when the so called Schlaining process began. The name is derived from the Austrian city of Schlaining, where the meetings between the Abkhazian and Georgian civil society representatives took place. The purpose of these meetings was aimed at finding possible ways for conflict transformation. Between 1998 and 2004, there were more than twenty meetings of Georgian and Abkhazian civil society representatives. The organization of such meetings was initially started by Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, later the role of the organizer was taken by Conciliation Resources. A series of meetings were also organized by Paula Garb from the University of California Irvine in collaboration with Heinrich Böll Stiftung. From the beginning negotiations resulted in joint written reports about the possibilities of solving various contentious points of the conflict, and gradually it led to a network of cooperating non-profit sector representatives who met regularly and tried to build up mutual trust and understanding.

One of the organizers of these meetings, Oliver Wolleh, says that in case of Abkhazia, the civil society sector played more important role in debates about the transformation of the conflict than in Georgia (Wolleh 2006, 54). Due to the high degree of hatred towards Georgians in the Abkhazian society, even participation of Abkhazians in meetings with Georgians was considered as quite controversial. Abkhazian CSOs had to justify their participation in the dialogue with Georgia, arguing that they are acquainting the Georgian society with the Abkhazian official view. In many respects, the CSOs acted as ambassadors informing the world about the opinion of the Abkhazian government.<sup>45</sup>

The situation has changed dramatically since 2006, when the peace process at the official level stalled. Abkhazian officials see the problem in the growing pressure for restoration of territorial integrity from the Georgian regime. Saakashvili's government wanted quick results, not meetings with only plain talks. This view is not based only on the Abkhazian side, but it is also confirmed by the Georgian side. 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. The Georgian government wanted actions, not talks, to drive the conflict resolution process. But this only increased the mutual mistrust between Georgia and Abkhazia" (Popescu 2010: 9).

Since that time, the CSOs in Abkhazia have increasingly focused on local political and social issues. This trend was facilitated by the fact that in 2005, when Sergei Bagapsh was

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<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with an Abkhazian independent journalist and participant of the Schlaining process. In Sukhumi, October 9<sup>th</sup> 2009.

elected to the post of President of Abkhazia, gradual process of democratization began. This approach was reflected in the government which started to support civil society and political pluralism much more than the previous Abkhazian government. But cooperation on peacebuilding projects with the Georgian side wilted. Since 2006, not a single project that would lead to cooperation between Abkhazian and Georgian CSOs was supported from domestic sources.<sup>46</sup> The government's priority became the support of CSOs in their activities focused on the integration of physically or mentally disabled into the society and development activities for the youth. This trend, when non-governmental organizations have been increasingly concerned about domestic issues, was further highlighted after the August war, which led to Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia.

The personal testimonies of several representatives of the Abkhazian CSOs indicate that since that time there is almost no real effort for cooperation with the Georgian CSOs. A member of the Abkhazian parliament added to this topic: "From the perspective of many Abkhazians the conflict was resolved. In the context of safeguards guaranteed by Russia, real danger of Georgian aggression passed. And since even the most moderate Georgians disagree with the independence of Abkhazia, it makes no sense to devote time and energy to joint seminars on conflict transformation. Therefore at the moment, the effort of Abkhazian civil society is focused on domestic issues, such as administrative reform, media law, judicial reform and protection of property rights. These topics are very important in building a democratic state based on a respect to human rights."<sup>47</sup>

Abkhazian independent media, such as "Chegemskaya Pravda", "Grazhdanske Obshestvo" or "Studio Re", have very limited possibility for positive effect on conflict transformation. According to the interview with a freelance journalist of Chegemskaya Pravda, only a few Abkhazians read Georgian newspapers. The cooperation between journalists from Abkhazia and Georgia is very small and even that minimum that exists is not published in Abkhazia because of fear from social condemnation. In the prevailing social discourse, the cooperation with Georgians still bears a mark of betrayal. In Abkhazian media, Georgia is depicted as an aggressive regime, trying to achieve unification by force. Therefore, articles advocating the need for reconciliation initiatives with the Georgian side do not appear in Abkhazian newspapers.<sup>48</sup> The Georgian media dominated discourse is marking the regime in Abkhazia as a criminal entity used by Russians to fulfill their geopolitical interests. These stereotypes have become fairly established and the media are thus rather widening the psychological gap between Abkhazians and Georgians, than playing a reconciliation role.

Perhaps even more problematic is the dialogue through the Church. After the war, the Abkhazian Church unilaterally broke away from the Georgian Orthodox Church and a dialogue and common activities have completely ceased. If the Abkhazian Church cooperated with the Georgian Church, it would demonstrate that Abkhazia is still part of Georgia. Disputes escalated in 2009, when the last Georgian priest had to leave Abkhazia. The Georgian Patriarch Ilya II, who repeatedly asked for the opportunity to visit Abkhazia did not gain admission. In September 2009 Vissarion Applia, the head of the Abkhazian Eparchy of Sukhumi, asked Moscow and Tbilisi for approval of autocephality of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Ilya II from Tbilisi and Moscow Katholikos Kirill disapproved the request, so unilateral declaration of Abkhazian Orthodox Church came later that year. The New Abkhazian president, Alexander Ankvab, said he strongly supported the independence of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church, and other solutions are unthinkable (von Twickel 2011). It is obvious that in the case of Abkhazia, the Church is not a possible channel for reconciliation and restoring trust between the parties.

<sup>46</sup> Author's interview with an Abkhazian civil society activist in Sukhumi, October 8<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Author's interview with a member of Abkhazian parliament. Sukhumi, October 8<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Author's interview with an Abkhazian freelance journalist. Sukhumi, October 11<sup>th</sup> 2009.

## Conclusion

After a stalled peace process on the level of track one diplomacy, there is a visible dead end also in the unofficial peace process on the level of track two diplomacy. The impact of civil society in Abkhazia in the area of conflict transformation is very limited. When the de facto statehood of Abkhazia was stabilized and population began to view the conflict as resolved, the already limited activity of CSOs in conflict transformation over the line of ceasefire eroded. In Abkhazia a new strategy has been recently developed. Various authors call it 'democratization for recognition' strategy (Broers 2005, Popescu 2006, Caspersen 2008). The point is that leaders of de facto states are convinced, that if their entity undergoes democratization, it will receive legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, and that recognition of external sovereignty is only a matter of time. This strategy is clearly reflected in the activities of local CSOs. They are starting to focus more and more on domestic issues connected with democracy. Under this orientation the CSOs in Abkhazia are able to meet the vertical dimension of peacebuilding, but they are an inadequate tool for the needs of a horizontal peacebuilding process. It shows that the positive impact of civil society on conflict transformation in Abkhazia is considerably limited. That does not mean that the involvement of civil society in conflict transformation does not make sense, rather it says that in the case of Abkhazia, civil society activities can currently only complement, not substitute properly designed political strategy for a gradual conflict transformation.

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