

SEMINAR ON

## THE EU AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN GEORGIA

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### **Conflict resolution in Abkhazia: Where do we stand?**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

First, I would like to thank the European Institute for Security Studies, and Sabine Fischer in particular, for organizing this meeting and for inviting me to present my assessment of the situation surrounding the Abkhaz conflict. The Heinrich Böll Foundation has been actively involved in the efforts to transform that conflict and establish trust between the two sides for four years now. So I am pleased to have this opportunity to sum up the situation to date candidly and without too much diplomatic circumspection.

Examining the question as it has been posed, "Conflict Resolution in Abkhazia – where do we stand?" I would like to offer you a selection of themes for discussion. To do so, I will use the methodology adopted by Bruno Coppetiers and others, and divide the term *conflict resolution* up into a set of component elements. These elements all interact and are thus linked with one another, but they do imply different interim goals and timeframes.

I will refer to the following four elements: *conflict prevention*, *conflict management*, *conflict transformation* and *conflict settlement*.

I)

With your permission, I will take a short-cut here and discuss conflict prevention and conflict management together. Those terms describe the attempt to prevent incompatibility of positions from escalating into open violence, and the attempt to influence the conflicting parties to make concessions in important security issues through international mediation. Where do we stand with this today? Without invoking the spectre of military conflict too dramatically, I will venture to say that with respect to conflict prevention, we have been in a highly critical situation since the summer of 2006:

- Conditions at the two focal points of possible or actual escalation are bad: there would seem to be no end in sight for the second Kodori crisis, which began with

Georgian military action against the warlord Kvitsiani in 2006. The Abkhaz side appears unwilling to accept the establishment of the Abkhaz government-in-exile in the region now called "Upper Abkhazia". Meanwhile, the Georgian side itself has fed speculation that the aim of the Kodori action was not simply to drive out a warlord, but that it was also intended to create a strategic bridgehead for retaking Abkhazia militarily. The serious incident in the mountains over Tkvarcheli on September 20<sup>th</sup>, resulting in two deaths, made clear just how critical the situation is.

- Tension remains high in the Gali district: According to UNOMIG, overall security in the area has improved over the last 2 years, but the population of Gali is still being held hostage to conflicting interests. While the Abkhaz side has taken a few significant steps towards integrating the Gali Georgians politically and economically, on the whole, Abkhazia continues to harbour major reservations about those "unreliable elements", and no one could claim that the Gali Georgians enjoy equal status. The Georgian side wants at all costs to prevent the Gali population from being integrated into Abkhazia, and to prevent the de-facto government from extending its control further – which explains the numerous disruptive actions that occurred during the Abkhaz parliamentary elections, the threats against residents of Gali who planned to vote, the youth camp by the Inguri, etc. It seems almost superfluous to point out that neither party to the conflict sees the Georgian/Abkhaz overlap in the Gali Region as an opportunity to develop Georgian/Abkhaz cooperation, instead viewing it solely as an object for tactical manoeuvring in the struggle with the opponent.
- The instruments associated with conflict prevention are themselves in a crisis situation. This applies to the Russian CIS peacekeeping force, whose mandate has been fundamentally called into question by the Georgian side – with no genuine alternative in sight thus far that would be acceptable to both parties. It applies to UNOMIG too, though – the Georgian side has repeatedly cast doubt on its mandate as well, due to what they refer to as its "ineffectiveness". UN-directed forms of dialogue are also bogged down: the coordination meetings on security, refugees and economic cooperation have not been held since Kodori in 2006 and the framework known as the Geneva process is making practically no progress.

## II)

I will turn now to conflict transformation, which is understood as the attempt to make the incompatible positions of the parties more compatible.

It seems to me that the potential for conflict transformation is far less negligible than it would appear at first glance:

- Since 1996, members of the political and social elites of both sides have met on several occasions (such as the Schlaining process and the Aspects conference series).

There have been many critical articles published in Russian, airing a range of issues, from the origins of the conflict to the return of refugees. Few or no distinct taboos have been associated with those forms of dialogue.

- Many personal acquaintanceships have been set up; many relationships from earlier times have been maintained.
- There is a fair amount of support in Georgia for a policy of compromise and reconciliation; among IDPs, in particular, one can find many supporters of a negotiated peace with Abkhazia.
- Interest in closer alignment with the EU and integration in European structures has been emphasized on both sides – though more so in Georgia and less so in Abkhazia – this is a prospect that would ultimately bring the two sides together.

Nonetheless, in the reality of the past years we have been confronted chiefly with setbacks in the field of conflict transformation:

The level of estrangement between the societies has risen; anyone visiting Georgia and Abkhazia can sense this stark polarity.

There has been no critical confrontation with the past and no coming to terms with the positions that led to the military conflict; any more than there has been any honest examination of war crimes. Neither side has taken a critical look at its own role in escalating the conflict.

Both sides see themselves as being purely victims in the conflict: in Georgia, as the victims of Russian provocation and of a brutal expulsion policy; in Abkhazia, as the victims of permanent aggression on the part of Georgia and of a planned campaign of destruction.

In Georgia, responsibility for the conflict and, thus, potential for its resolution are ascribed solely to Russia; people are looking very impatiently for rapid progress in conflict settlement, i.e. staking out political territory at Russia's expense in the international arena and on tactical successes domestically (Upper Abkhazia). In that context, no one seems concerned by the fact that this is not the way to go about generating credibility for Georgia among the Abkhaz, who represent the partner essential to a peaceful settlement of the conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The Saakashvili government treats independent initiatives for dialogue that have been initiated by civil society with something that ranges from suspicion to open rejection. It is interested in participating only in projects that are clearly under the political control of the Georgian side.

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*(By way of explanation for this behaviour, I will say that the discussion of the possible independence of Kosovo triggered a great deal of nervousness on the Georgian side and there is a fear there that any admission of legitimacy for the Abkhaz side might cause the Kosovo scenario to be set in motion.)*

For its turn, the Abkhaz side rejects all forums for contact or offers of dialogue and integration that are under Georgian control or are conditional on their renouncing their claim to independence.

In Abkhazia, it is believed that there is no need, or perhaps even no possibility, to pose key questions relating to the legitimacy of the structure of the state (e.g. refugees or the status of non-Abkhazian population groups) as long as

- § Russia continues to provide political protection
- § Georgia continues to appear as the aggressor, just waiting for an opportunity to re-establish the pre-war status quo
- § A state of war exists

This also provides a way of avoiding the question of how realistic the prospects of preserving Abkhaz culture, language and independence actually are, while under the protection of Russia.

### III)

Where we are with respect to the third element of conflict resolution that I want to examine: conflict settlement?

I would contend that the status issue is the only one of the elements of conflict resolution mentioned here in which the Georgian side is genuinely interested. The aim of Georgian policy at both the international and domestic level is that of changing the status quo, to its own advantage, as soon as possible. Although that might be considered a legitimate aim, one does have to wonder whether there is any possibility for genuine progress in conflict settlement given the neglect of conflict prevention and conflict transformation. Status resolution, as such, has become intractable. What we are seeing instead is the stabilization of the status quo: the de-facto independence of Abkhazia, limited by its very great dependence on Russia in military and economic affairs as well as its relatively high level of dependence in political issues.

The situation at the international level also remains relatively unchanged – to sketch it out roughly:

- § The political West formulates statements of solidarity towards Georgia, emphasizing the principle of territorial integrity. At the same time though, there is no willingness

on the part of Western countries to support Georgia in the attempt to force a resolution of the conflict through political and/or military escalation.

- § Duplicitous behaviour on the part of Russia: in principle, Russia also adheres to the principle of territorial integrity, but at the same time it stresses that no solution that goes against the political will of the Abkhaz is acceptable. In addition, there is overt speculation about a possible unilateral recognition of Abkhazia in response to a unilateral recognition of the independence of Kosovo.
- § A certain stir is being generated by Georgia's efforts to join NATO, which are strongly supported by the USA: either NATO will delay acceptance of Georgia as a member until the secession conflicts have been resolved and relationships with Russia have relaxed accordingly –which would entail postponing Georgian entry indefinitely and mean that Russia would retain leverage against Georgian entry into NATO in the form of its crucial influence in the secession regions;
- § or Georgia will be able to join NATO even with the secession conflicts unresolved: with respect to Abkhazia, this would make the Inguri into a de-facto external NATO border. That might entail an improvement of management of the conflict; the security situation would probably improve; while at the same time the divide would take on more depth, both politically and militarily. (*Russia's attitude might also grow less flexible, in its desire to retain Abkhazia as a "buffer" between NATO and the Olympic Games site Sotschi.*)

Thus there are no short-term successes in sight in terms of conflict settlement. In view of that, international efforts should focus primarily on conflict transformation, i.e. transforming incompatible positions of the parties, injecting new impulses to stimulate change.

#### IV)

With your permission, in conclusion I will mention a few aspects that address the question "where do we go from here?" rather than that of "where we stand". If the parties really want to make progress on the path to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, all of them will have to rethink and to transform their approaches:

Georgia will have to show that it genuinely can act as a reliable and trustworthy partner for the Abkhaz in their efforts to secure their physical, cultural and political existence. Instead of insisting on the immediate return of refugees, it should submit offers of cooperation, lift economic sanctions and demonstrate reliability and consistency by ensuring that its deeds correspond with its words over a long period of time.

Abkhazia needs to show that it is not establishing the same kind of ethnocentric system that it was struggling against, according to its own understanding of the conflict with Georgia. The Abkhaz should work on ensuring that their plans for demographic security are

compatible with the rule of law in a modern multiethnic state. Will they succeed in genuinely integrating the residents of Gali? Are they making constructive proposals for a gradual return of those of the Georgian refugees who wish to return?

Russia needs to demonstrate that it really will only become militarily active if the maintenance of the ceasefire or the immediate security interests of one party to the conflict are in jeopardy. It needs to accept that it cannot use Abkhazia to delay or prevent Georgia from adopting a Western orientation or, specifically, from joining NATO and should instead open its door to European/Russian cooperation on security issues.

Finally, the EU should demonstrate that it really is in a position to make offers of cooperation to the people of Georgia and Abkhazia that would increase their security and their opportunities for development if they cooperate. It must not look the other way when it comes to manipulation, escalation attempts or human rights violations on either side. And it should promote democratic reform on both sides of the Inguri and, praise those examples of reform that do occur.

Ladies and Gentlemen, You may assess yourself how close or how far we are from peaceful compromise in the Abkhazian conflict according to how theoretic or even idealistic those last remarks sound to your ears.

Walter Kaufmann