

Why Peaceful Conflict Resolution Matters

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Based on its internationally respected sovereignty and territorial integrity, Georgia has a conflict resolution policy that rests upon **peace, pragmatism and reconciliation**. Georgia's European integration as a process and the EU as an actor can be a part of the solution. Considering Russia's continuing breaches of international norms and attempts to keep conflicts alive, the task is very challenging. Nonetheless, a sustainable peaceful resolution of conflicts is within reach if the proper measures are taken.

It is no coincidence that five out of the six countries in the European Union's Eastern Partnership have unresolved conflicts involving Russia. Trouble is stirred up by Russia in an attempt to exert pressure and influence over its "area of privileged interest". "Privileged", in the Russian political lexicon, translates as "exclusive". Conflicts are mounted when and where Russia considers its influence to be challenged, particularly when the challenge manifests as a result of a European and EuroAtlantic attempt at integration.

Unresolved conflicts, however, are not used merely to knock the development of individual countries off course, but to challenge regional and wider European security, both in terms of geography and fundamental values. In fact none of the stakeholders concerned, apart from Moscow, has an interest in unresolved conflicts. This is not in the interest of Georgia, its numerous communities of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from its two Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or of those people who live in or near these territories. Moreover, it can also be argued that unresolved conflicts are against Russia's own interest, as



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An EUMM monitor points toward Tskhinvali, the regional capital of South Ossetia and across the Russian-guarded boundary line.

Moscow would benefit from a stable, peaceful and developed neighbourhood in the long run. Yet this is not the view of current Kremlin leadership.

While Russia persists with its old strategy of “divide and rule”, the alternative costs for all affected are high. All lose the potential gains of sustainable peace, stability and co-operation in terms of social-economic development, welfare, infrastructure and quality of life.

Dramatic impact

In addition, the security risks continuously breed tension. In Georgia, barbed wire fences, entrenchments and other fortifications have been periodically installed around occupied territories since 2009. These objectionable constructions straddle a perimeter of over 60 kilometres and offer no real strategic importance for the occupying forces, yet they threaten to provoke tension and heat up confrontation locally and on a wider scale.

The humanitarian impact on the ground is also dramatic. Barbed wires mar the lives of hundreds of families living on both sides of the artificial divide, split villages and households and deprive around a thousand farmers access to their land. People living on the other side of the divide are no less affected. For instance, Russian FSB guards who control the occupation line detained twice as many people attempting to reach the rest of Georgia from the Tskhinvali Region than vice versa in 2014. Human rights are widely ignored within the occupied territories,

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particularly in the areas where ethnic Georgians still reside, such as Gali in Abkhazia and Akhalkalaki in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. These populations often face pressure and restrictions on documents, education in their native language and freedom of movement. Hundreds of thousands of other Georgians still cannot return to their homes.

Meanwhile, the Abkhaz and Ossetians face high risks as well. Even if the conflicts remain unresolved, they are not frozen. Russia is active in pulling the strings and is steadily marching from occupation to de facto annexation of Georgia's territories in the absence of any international actor on the ground. As the Russian grip becomes tighter those critical of Moscow are becoming more vocal in both occupied regions, especially in Abkhaz circles. Paradoxically, they are losing what they allegedly fought for – their identity – in the ongoing process of intense Russification.

Based on its internationally respected sovereignty and territorial integrity, Georgia has a conflict resolution policy that rests upon peace, pragmatism and reconciliation. Yet, it is a challenging task considering Russia's ongoing breaches of international norms and attempts to keep the conflicts unresolved. The government, which came to power in October 2012, inherited a heavily stalled peace process. Links between Georgians and Abkhazians and Georgians and Ossetians were deeply compromised in the absence of direct communication. All previous peace formats had collapsed in the aftermath of the August 2008 war. The international presence was squeezed out, including the UN (UNOMIG) from Abkhazia and OSCE from Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. The Russian "peacekeepers" had quickly transformed themselves into regular army divisions. The Russian military build-up and installations in both territories have been substantially increased, with the capacity to intrude far beyond Georgia's two small regions.

International norms and commitments continue to be breached by Russia, including the EU-brokered ceasefire agreement of August 2008. The unilateral Russian "recognition" of these territories was the next illegal step. The EU Monitoring

Mission (EUMM) set up in autumn 2008 to fulfil its mandate on both sides of the dividing lines is still barred from access to the Russian-controlled area.

Dialogue and reconciliation

The only vehicle for talks has been the Geneva International Discussions (GID) set up in 2008 between Russia and Georgia as parties to the conflict, under the co-chairmanship of the EU, the UN and OSCE and with participation of the United States (participants from Sokhumi and Tskhinvali [respectively of Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions] also attend). Despite heavy politicisation, the GID remains an important platform for Georgia-Russia discussions with its objectives of tackling critical security and humanitarian challenges on the ground related to the non-use of force, international security arrangements, the return of the displaced, and other acute humanitarian problems. The Georgian government is also trying to normalise relations with Russia in certain bilateral areas, even though these efforts have clear limitations as long as Russia continues to occupy Georgia's territories. Georgia's prime minister has a special representative who regularly meets the Russian deputy foreign minister to discuss concrete bilateral humanitarian, economic and social issues with implications for many Georgians. This format is also intended to mitigate the risks that may result from Russian strategies in the region and to symbolise a message that Georgia's path is not directed against anyone, Russia included.

While taking an overarching approach towards a solution to the Russian-Georgian conflict, the government is also ready to engage in direct dialogue with Abkhazians and Ossetians. This offer has been on the table since 2013 despite the cautious response from the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides thus far. Some channels of communication have been carved out, yet still modestly. Reconciliation is a key notion in the peace policies of Georgia. The title of the state minister's office which deals with conflict resolution issues was changed from "reintegration" to "reconciliation" in January 2014 to emphasise the vision of how reintegration goals are to be achieved. This policy is about people, not just territories.

The government has dismissed confrontational rhetoric and taken constructive unilateral steps to build confidence and address the humanitarian and social needs

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of the populations in its two regions. Georgia continues to provide services such as free healthcare to an increasing number of residents of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in line with its engagement strategy. Opportunities for education in the rest of Georgia are increasing. For example, students may enter Georgian universities through a single exam in Abkhazian or Ossetian languages.

The Georgian government is also addressing the needs of people living near the dividing line. A special inter-agency commission was set up in October 2013 to assist with inhabitants' basic needs and work towards social and economic development of these regions. Unfortunately, limitations on access make the outreach to the two occupied territories virtually impossible at the moment. Nonetheless, the government's social and economic development strategy and its action plan envisage benefits in the future for the people living on the other side of the divide as well. Both regions are isolated or, to put it more accurately, self-isolated. More so, the Tskhinvali region increasingly resembles a modern-day ghetto or an extended military base of Russia. The region is economically depressed and virtually depopulated with nearly 80 per cent fewer inhabitants than in the early 1990s, before the conflict. Abkhazia's population has been more than halved, with the majority of its ethnic Georgian population living in exile.

Georgia seeks more momentum to the peace process. Despite complexity, peace resources are available and time is of the essence. Time lost means opportunities missed for peaceful conflict resolution.

An offer of a future

A special working group chaired by the prime minister was set up in June 2015 to examine the issues of conflict resolution and explore concrete initiatives on how to invigorate the peacemaking process, find creative solutions and use the existing space for as much flexibly as possible before the longer term concrete political models for conflict resolutions are crafted. In its efforts to implement such a policy, Georgia counts on the support of its partners, including international organisations, the US, neighbouring countries, and, most importantly, the EU as a key player on the ground. Both the EU as an actor and European integration as a process are of crucial importance and can be a part of the solution.

Europe is the choice for the model of development made long ago by the Georgian society, including the IDP communities from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. For the vast majority of Georgians, Europe equals freedom, respect for human rights, democracy, development, prosperity, peace and stability. And this is a future we offer to the residents of the both occupied regions, including


the Abkhaz and Ossetians. This is their only alternative to ever increasing Russian domination. More so, there is a clear, expressed interest towards the EU both in local societies, especially in Abkhazia. Hence, the EU is not only the most concerned, but is also the best placed party to play a central role in a peaceful conflict resolution, given its widely championed soft powers.

Firstly, there is the EU's unwavering respect for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty as well as valuable support in neutralising potential threats and provocations on the road to our deepening integration. Secondly, the EU's continued efforts and leadership in formats which are already in place, such as GID and the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), are vital for attaining the important original aims in these frameworks. Thirdly, the EU's engagement on the ground is also encouraged by the Georgian government, particularly in light of our co-operation within the Association Agreement framework. To this end, it is critically important to promote an understanding of what the EU and its Eastern Partnership policy represent (counter to Russia-sponsored efforts to propagate pseudo-western negative stereotypes and address the areas where Georgia has limited possibilities to engage, such as human rights protection or other actions of humanitarian importance). Fourthly, fostering people-to-people contacts becomes even more important, given the high potential of face-to-face interaction for reconciliation between conflict-split communities. Georgia greatly appreciates the support of the EU and other partners, particularly for confidence-building efforts and bridging between conflict-split societies. And finally, and most importantly, the country-wide deliverables of EU-Georgia co-operation are the best incentives for the peace process. This is to demonstrate that the European choice and the efforts on that way actually deliver. Together with the independent endeavours of the Georgian government, the EU's tangible and timely reciprocity will help generate the power of attraction of a European Georgia as opposed to the only other option Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia face: that of being de facto annexed and Russified.

As a part of its reconciliation policy, the Georgian government is ready to share the benefits and opportunities stemming from its EU integration agenda with the populations across the divide. These benefits include better education, quality healthcare, business and trade opportunities and improved access to scientific, energy or environmental initiatives. Importantly, this also concerns mobility and travel, namely Georgia's prospects for a visa-free future with the EU whereby every

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holder of a Georgian passport could travel freely across Europe. Notably, apart from tangible and measurable deliverables, the European path also brings values and standards regarding respect for individual freedoms as well as protection of the identity and diversity of different groups and communities. Combined, these are the crucial elements of our common European future in a common state, and our task is to communicate this credibly across the dividing lines.

Georgia's ever-closer relations with the EU offer new opportunities and strengths to be utilised for the ultimate goal of a peaceful conflict resolution. After all, Europe, where Georgia belongs, has its own valuable experience of building not only a successful project of welfare and prosperity, but also a project of peace and celebrated diversity. 

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