

SUMMARY: The last several years have seen a deterioration in the situation, a growing tension level in the conflict zone and an increased danger of renewed conflict in Abkhazia. At stake is not only Abkhazia or Georgia, but the rules of the game in European security.

There are several reasons for this state of affairs and lack of meaningful progress. This policy brief attempts to lay out the reasons why the current approach has failed, why a new beginning is both needed and possible, and presents some elements of a new strategy.

Internationalizing the Georgia-Abkhazia Conflict Resolution Process: Why a Greater European Role is Needed

by **Ron Asmus**, Executive Director of the Brussels' Office, The German Marshall Fund of the United States; **Svante E. Cornell**, Research Director, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS (Washington) and Institute for Security and Development Policy (Stockholm); **Antje Herrberg**, Co-founder, European Forum for International Mediation and Dialogue (MediatEur), Crisis Management Initiative; **Nicu Popescu**, Research Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations*

The last several years have seen a deterioration in the situation, a growing tension level in the conflict zone and an increased danger of renewed conflict in Abkhazia. At stake is not only Abkhazia or Georgia, but the rules of the game in European security. Part of the problem is that a functioning and credible international format for negotiations and peacekeeping has failed to emerge. In reality, the so-called “frozen conflict” in Abkhazia is not frozen at all but very much alive. The current status quo is increasingly unstable and dangerous and will continue to be so until credible conflict resolution mechanisms are set in place.

There are several reasons for this state of affairs and lack of meaningful progress that is discussed below. At the same time, there may also be new opportunities to rethink and create a new strategy based on a new format and an authentic peace process that could create new conditions for reconciliation and peace. This policy

brief attempts to lay out the reasons why the current approach has failed, why a new beginning is both needed and possible, and presents some elements of a new strategy.

Why the current format is failing

The current approach to resolving the Abkhaz-Georgia conflict has failed. There are several reasons for this. One is Russia's dual role as a party to the conflict and ostensible facilitator of negotiations and peacekeeper. This renders the current international format for a resolution to the conflict ineffective for the implementation of a possible peace process. While Russian peacekeepers had contributed to the stabilization of the region more than a decade ago, their role is no longer viewed positively by outside observers, including Georgia. Russian policies in recent years and months have increasingly put into question Russia's impartiality and role as sole peacekeeper and as the facilitator of party negotiations.

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This has been acknowledged by the so-called “Group of Friends,” in which France, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom have expressed concern.

There are additional reasons why the current format has failed. Diplomatically, this format has failed to yield meaningful results. Any dialogue between the parties has been sporadic or intermittent at best, and far from structured and systematic. The human consequences of the conflict, especially the return of internally displaced persons inside the conflict zone have yet to be addressed, let alone reversed in any meaningful way. Economically, the Abkhaz and others remaining in Abkhazia have seen their situation stagnate, as they have fallen behind in terms of their overall development, even if some stabilization has occurred recently. This one-time Soviet tourist paradise has not been rehabilitated in socio-economic terms, lagging behind the rest of the South Caucasus, where high growth rates have recently been the norm. With the exception of its ties to Russia, Abkhaz society is largely cut off from the outside world. As the stalemate persists, important economic forces continue to exploit and benefit. These forces have become an additional mitigating factor against positive change. Ultimately it is those people displaced by conflict and still residing inside the conflict zone that now carry the burden and pay the cost of a non-existent peace process.

There is an urgent need for an internationalized framework in which a true, multi-faceted and genuine peace process can develop that could respond to the Abkhaz and Georgian peoples’ genuine interests beyond geopolitical or status aspirations. Such a peace process requires contributions and endorsement from various actors within the international community. The growing tensions and the inappropriateness of the current format requires a reframing of the issues at hand and a restructuring of the negotiations alongside a vision of providing a suitable implementation strategy that will allow those commitments resulting from a peace process to be monitored and evaluated. The current situation can be summed up in the following way:

- Since the 1994 Moscow agreement that put an end to armed hostilities in the conflict, little progress has been made toward a political solution.
- The 1994 agreement enshrined Russia’s domination of the negotiations for a political solution, while the peacekeeping force deployed in the conflict under the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) umbrella has been exclusively Russian. As a result, no internationalized mechanism for peacekeeping or negotiations exists.
- The only international mechanism in the conflict is the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary General on Georgia, which is composed of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and Russia as facilitator. The “Friends” format has provided a forum for intermittent meetings between the sides but had a very limited mandate, staying far from shaping a format for a multi-faceted peace process.
- Due to the fact that peacekeeping and negotiation formats are vestiges of the early 1990s, when Europe’s role in the region was limited, very few steps have been undertaken by the international community toward a constructive role in conflict resolution.
- There is no active and vibrant peace process in the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict. Dialogue between the parties on both the political and societal levels is sporadic at best and at times non-existent, providing for the growing isolation of Abkhazia and perpetuating strongly negative mutual perceptions between the conflicting parties, often as a result of misinformation. There is no serious, institutionalized and regular dialogue on key issues such as confidence-building measures, economic relations, or the return of internally displaced persons.
- Events in recent years have led to rapid changes of the status quo on the ground, which pose grave dangers to regional security. Georgia’s rapid development has improved its political and military standing, whereas its relations with Russia have deteriorated. Meanwhile, Abkhazia has been moving from a status of de facto independence toward the status of de facto Russian region. Moscow has stepped up its direct relations with the Abkhazian de facto authorities in a series of moves generally understood as aiming at the annexation of Abkhazia to the Russian Federation. These moves, coupled with a growing Russian military presence on the ground, significantly increase the risk of military confrontation inside the conflict zone.
- Russia’s policies have led to growing concerns both in Georgia and internationally about the country’s impartiality in the conflict, and a growing consensus that it needs to be considered as a party to the conflict rather than facilitator.
- While recognizing Russia’s necessary role in the peace process, it is also clear that the existing format for negotiation and peacekeeping has not been instrumental in bringing forward a resolution to the conflict, and that

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the current process needs to be reframed and restructured to respond to the needs of the two parties directly involved (Georgia and Abkhazia) while constructively involving Russia.

Why there is a new opportunity

While little has changed in the dialogue between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, a lot has changed outside and around the conflict. These changes can provide the setting for a new strategy that draws much more heavily on the West. To resolve the conflict, such a strategy would support international engagement to transform the existing format and dynamics. The goal must be to create a different political balance that restores lost credibility and balances a Russian role that has long ceased to be neutral. This should also be reflected in a different composition of peacekeeping forces on the ground with a new mandate. It should also be backed up by a new approach to create a genuine peace process and dialogue. While it is positive that the sides issue unilateral peace plans, these do not lead to meaningful dialogue or confidence-building, let alone real progress in ameliorating the consequences of the conflict on the ground. The existing conflict settlement format is dysfunctional and reflects the political context of 14 years ago, when the cease-fire was reached. At that time, the West was not itself prepared to do anything on the ground to stop the conflict or contribute to a peacekeeping force. It was also the early romantic years in Russia's dealings with the West when relations were much more optimistic. The West supported Russia under President Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev to take the lead in ending this conflict and in peacekeeping, as it was believed then that Moscow could play a neutral and constructive role.

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Not only did many—if not all—of those assumptions turn out to be flawed, but the external world has changed dramatically in ways that make these agreements anachronistic. This is one reason why the Georgian Parliament has passed resolutions calling for the mandate for the CIS peacekeepers to be cancelled, and the government indicated its intention to that effect. While the West has

cautioned against such a step, it is important to recall that the West was a partner to the creation of a format that today is part of the problem. And what the West helped to create, it now has a responsibility to help transform into a more effective and neutral process.

Having a more neutral format for negotiations and peacekeeping is not some abstract concern, but one that has very real operational implications. For example, Georgian willingness to accede to the demand for a renunciation of force agreement—a central Abkhaz demand and one that is key for a peace process to take root—only becomes feasible if both sides have a minimum amount of trust and confidence in the peacekeeping mission—its mandate, leadership, and forces. This is one very specific example of how a shift in mandate could help create better conditions for durable peace on the ground. The key changes that necessitate such a transformation are as follows:

- Moscow has long taken sides in this conflict through its involvement, and indeed its growing dominance, inside Abkhazia. It can no longer be considered an arbiter or neutral actor, and its role is incompatible with mediation. Perpetuating a friction makes it unconstructive.
- Thus far, Western countries have considered the Russian presence ineffective but the lesser of alternative evils, given their reluctance to be involved in the issue directly. Russia's presence has been sanctioned by extending the UN mandate, which allows and supports that presence. The time has come to rethink that approach. Instead of facilitating peace, the current peacekeeping arrangement has become anachronistic and is actually impeding peace.
- At the same time, Russia has its own interest in not seeing this crisis get out of control. As we approach the Olympics scheduled to take place in Sochi in 2014, Russia's need to see stability in the region increases the likelihood of the conflict reaching a resolution.
- The European Union has become a riparian Black Sea power with two member states on the western edge of the Black Sea. The Abkhazia conflict zone is thereby a direct neighbor to the European Union. A leading European role in the conflict resolution process is therefore both indispensable and natural.
- The European Union today not only has the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), but also a growing and broad set of tools and instruments that allow it to play

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a more constructive and useful role as a civilian crisis manager than it was 14 years ago. Case in point, the ongoing deliberations on ENP enhancement for the countries of the Black Sea region.

- The United States has significantly stepped up its engagement both in Georgia and in the region as a whole and is prepared to play a direct political role in the resolution of this conflict. As a result, a common transatlantic approach is possible today in a way that was not present in the early 1990s.
- Georgia today is a very different and much more attractive country. Following the Rose Revolution, the Georgian government has embraced a different concept of citizenship based on citizenship as opposed to ethnicity. It is prepared to go much further than any previous Georgian government in working toward peace. This provides greater potential room and openness to find solutions that are agreeable to both parties.
- For the Abkhaz, Russia has become a less attractive and more unpredictable partner. Abkhaz and Russian interests are not congruent and there is a clear sense of disappointment and concern with Russian policies among the Abkhaz people. Today the fear of Georgia may still trump the fear of Russia, especially as Russia's assertiveness (compared to Europe's unwillingness to engage) provides little alternative for Abkhazia. But Abkhaz leaders know that Moscow may not be the answer to their own aspirations.
- The events of 2008 have indicated to Abkhazia that Russia seeks to incorporate them, not empower them. That could change the calculus of the Abkhaz leadership, but only in case of credible Western engagement.
- On the substance level, there should be a common understanding that the reversal of the isolation of Abkhazia from Georgia and from the outside world, in particular impediments to linkages of a political, economic, and humanitarian nature across the cease-fire line, is beneficial to both parties.
- The restoration and development of economic linkages across the cease-fire line are a key element in this. This also includes the economic rehabilitation of the conflict zone, including both the territory of Abkhazia and the areas on the Georgian-controlled side of the cease-fire line.
- Within this framework, formats need to be found to expand dialogue and confidence-building between Georgian and Abkhaz societies.
- This needs to be supported by ensuring basic physical and human security for citizens of the conflict zone and easy access for citizens and visitors in exchanges between the parties.
- A process for the return of all internally displaced persons to their homes in the conflict zone and addressing the issue of their property rights are an essential element of the peace process. This could take place in conjunction with an agreement on the non-resumption of hostilities in the conflict under international guarantees.
- Transitional justice issues such as a truth commission and steps for the growth of mutual respect and eventual societal reconciliation should be an integral part of the peace process.

Missing elements in the peace process to be addressed; What needs to be done?

A multi-faceted peace process in the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict should include the following elements, for which a format for dialogue is presently absent. The elements are provided in a rough order of likely chronological sequencing.

- On the process level, parties with the support of facilitator(s) should create a sequential, step-by-step process implementing the individual elements of the peace process and the sequencing and inter-relationship of its various components, with modalities for a dialogue between Abkhaz and Georgian leaders being at the center of the process.

A Georgian-Abkhaz peace process would consist of identifying solutions to the most pressing issues of those citizens within the conflict zone and prioritizing additional thematic areas of common concern, which within a set timeframe will culminate into a peace agreement. For this to happen, all parties have to be open and constructive.

What could a new international format look like?

It is proposed that the present international framework for conflict resolution and peacekeeping be amended and restructured to allow for transformative changes and peacebuilding to take place. Given Europe's growing role and responsibility in the region, it makes sense for Europe and European organizations to play a greater role in this effort. That would imply a leading role for the European

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Union in the process. The European Union, however, does not include two powers whose participation in the long term will be central to sustainable peace in the South Caucasus: the United States and Russia. For that purpose, an EU presence in Abkhazia should be complemented with an organization that allows for the participation of these two powers. Such an organization should have the experience in dealing with conflict situations, and should have compatible and complementary capacities. That organization should take a joint lead with the European Union in facilitating the peace process. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN) are both reasonable candidates for this role.

- A 2+2 format is thereby created, composed of the two conflicting parties, Georgia and Abkhazia, as well as the two facilitating organizations, the European Union and the OSCE/UN.
- This format provides for a lead taken by regional organizations institutionally, providing the opportunity for the two organizations to call for the support of their respective member states within their specific institutional competencies. This format allows for Russia, the United States, and Turkey—three powers with important interests in the region—to influence the peace process through the OSCE or UN. Meanwhile, it is foreseen that European states, which are accepted by the conflicting parties as more disinterested, take a lead in the development and management of the peace process.
- It is proposed that the European Union create a position of co-facilitator of the Georgia-Abkhazia peace process to be absorbed by or associated with the office of the Special Representative for the South Caucasus (EUSR). The EUSR could function as EU facilitator.
- It is proposed that the OSCE/UN create a position of co-facilitator of the Georgia-Abkhazia peace process.
- The facilitators will assist in the design of the peace process and secure the support of parties to engage in the process. The facilitators support parties to find common approaches to satisfy interests and provide process and independent expert advice through mediation support on technical issues and individual items of the peace process.
- Following the agreement to a new structure and sequence of a peace process, the co-facilitators will oversee and monitor the implementation of each sequential step.
- Facilitators will endeavor to provide measures to protect the process from disturbances. This could, as agreed by the parties, consist of the creation of a jointly trained police force to ensure security of the ground during the peace process.
- The international community, in particular European nations, will need to provide substantial funding for the peace process, not least for the support of the reconstruction of Abkhazia, and for the return of internally displaced persons and refugees. A donor conference at a specific juncture in the peace process should be held to address these needs. Indeed, the political will to mobilize its resources is one of its key assets and crucial to the leverage it can bring to the peace process.

What role for civil society?

The present negotiation format has failed to include and respond to the needs of civil society. Years of isolation and political rhetoric have created enemy images on both sides that are not conducive to reconciliation. The real concerns of civil society in Abkhazia have not yet surfaced in the political debate surrounding the conflict. The presence of a vibrant civil society in Abkhazia presents a real indicator of a genuine peace process.

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While both local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are active in Abkhazia, they have thus far not been a key part or partner in any attempt to build a dialogue or build confidence as part of an authentic peace process. While a solution to the conflict belongs ultimately to governments, both Georgian and Abkhaz NGOs can play an important role in diffusing

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tension and changing stereotypes. Past experience, especially in the Balkans, have shown that NGOs can play a critical role in making a peace process sustainable, especially when it comes to deconstructing enemy images which have developed on both sides due to years of isolation and political rhetoric. The presence of a vibrant civil society in Abkhazia can be a real indicator of and contributing factor to a genuine peace process.

Western governments should support the efforts of international NGOs to build capacity for local civil society, and to act as bridge builders. Ways need to be found to capitalize on existing efforts and move societies toward reconciliation. The goal must be to make local NGOs agents of peace and positive change. Architects of a peace process should be sure to include and empower the civil society community by giving them an opportunity to voice and formulate needs and interests. The international community can play a critical role in three ways to help empower local NGOs and strengthening civic capacities, on both sides of the conflict, with the goal of local ownership.

- The European Union, the United States, and private foundations need to provide flexible and accessible grants through the creation of an umbrella fund in order to support local initiatives to build civic capacity, create dialogue, and build confidence. Capacity building also means to allow networking on the local, regional, and international level across thematic aspects (i.e. environment, social, human rights, media etc.).
- Allow for a multi-track and inclusive approach that encourages dialogue across the Georgian-Abkhaz divide on common issues. Diffusing tension and changing stereotypes will take time and a lot of effort. Trust will need to be rebuilt. This can be accomplished at the grassroots level for sustainable peace.
- In this way, local NGOs can become agents of peace and positive change. It is important that both Georgians and Abkhazians have exposure to European and international economic and democratic systems to allow for a greater horizon when defining their points of reference and aspirations. The international community would do well in encouraging and funding links and exchanges between European and Georgian-Abkhazian NGOs and activists.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan American public policy and grant-making institution dedicated to promoting greater cooperation and understanding between the United States and Europe. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working on transatlantic issues, by convening leaders to discuss the most pressing transatlantic themes, and by examining ways in which transatlantic cooperation can address a variety of global policy challenges. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Bratislava, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest. For more information, visit www.gmfus.org.