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Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme

Georgian-Abkhazian Relations: An Inside Perspective

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This meeting was organised in cooperation with International Alert

16 December 2011

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Archil Gegeshidze:

Irreconcilable differences remain between Georgia and Russia/Abkhazia over Abkhazia's legal status and the stationing of Russian forces there. This is corroborated by public opinion polls in Georgia. The only security mechanism is the ceasefire agreement of 2008 between presidents Medvedev and Sarkozy. This agreement is violated by Russia as it refuses to comply with the troops withdrawal obligation. Generally, Georgia's security is very fragile and unsustainable. Security is reliant on good will and external factors, rather than on legally-binding guarantees. Paradoxically, relations between Washington/Brussels and Russia are, ultimately, more important for Georgia's security than relations between Tbilisi and Washington/Brussels. The post-war status quo is unacceptable for Georgia. Ultimately, it should not be acceptable for Abkhazia either. The presence of Russian troops may be seen as a guarantee of Abkhazia's security, but the security situation along the administrative border with Georgia is unsustainable.

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation remains an irritant for Russia; Russia's objective is to make Georgia ineligible for EU and NATO membership. After the 2008 war Abkhazia has embarked on building a self-sustainable and westernized state. In the new circumstances Georgia is the most discontented party, and the status quo obstructs her own democratic development.

In the meantime, the objectives of the stakeholders conflict are either unclear or counterproductive. The West could be a real game changer, but the EU needs to come up with a visionary policy, well-coordinated with the US, to avoid being manipulated by other stakeholders. Unless there is an EU policy in place, the other parties are unlikely to change their position. The EU should aim at conflict mitigation and transformation and should take a lead in engaging with Tbilisi and Sukhum/i.¹ The West should open up to Abkhazia and promote de-isolation as a tool for conflict transformation. This opening up should be conditioned on Abkhazia's willingness to stimulate people-to-people contacts with Georgia on grassroots level. On their part, EU countries should try to influence the Georgian mindset from isolation towards engagement in their wider relations with Georgia.

Arda Inal-Ipa:

There is a shortage of objective information about Abkhazia in the EU as the western community uses Georgian sources, which are part of the country's effective PR machine. Unlike other unrecognized regions, Abkhazia has never had an opportunity to speak in front of an international audience; Abkhazian leaders have repeatedly been refused visas and thus have not been able to put forward their visions and ideas at international fora. Abkhazia has been sentenced to isolation and sanctions without an opportunity to defend itself. In 1996 sanctions were imposed and only finally lifted by Russia in 2008, yet Russia was also helping Abkhazia financially before then. Since 2008 contact with Europe is more difficult. Western input would be appreciated as Abkhazia is trying to build a democratic society.

The news of the European policy of engagement without recognition was met initially with hope. Our Georgian colleagues from civil society have also considered this policy important for conflict transformation. However, various fora and cultural exchanges have been undermined because of visa issues. The policy has been put aside by the EU countries and has become a part of the Georgian policy of engagement with the so called 'occupied territories'. The Georgian idea that there is no conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia has started taking root in the EU. The vision of Abkhazia as "an occupied territory" does not correspond to reality. The Russian troops are seen in Abkhazia as guarantors of security. The government of Abkhazia is not a puppet regime; several Abkhazian-Russian commissions were established to discuss bilateral issues. There is an Abkhazian point of view which often diverges from that of Russia. Nevertheless, Russia remains an important and useful neighbour. The EU's misleading signals are making Abkhazians suspicious of European intentions. Abkhazians would like to think that the EU's goal is not replicating the Georgian political agenda but is focused on the restoration of peace and stability in the Caucasus. De-isolation would help this goal. Abkhazia does not want to be a phantom Cold War frontier between the West and Russia.

Questions and discussion:

A participant asked how the more hard-line points of view in the respective communities could be handled. The issue of "occupation" should be

¹ The spelling of place names is contentious. The compromise spelling of Sukhum/i and Gal/i is used throughout this document.

decoupled from the issue of trust building between Georgians and Abkhazians. The demand for 'de-occupation' from Georgia/ Washington/ Brussels is about Russia withdrawing troops from Abkhazia [and South Ossetia], while trust building is about transforming Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. To achieve the latter, discussions about Abkhazia's status should be postponed. Instead, talks should try and reach an agreement on politically less sensitive issues such as trans-border trade, movement of people across the administrative border, the restitution of the IDP property, etc. If Europe does not provide for opening up Abkhazia towards both West and Georgia, there is no prospect for Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue. It is the task of civil society to bring big topics such as IDPs into the focus of public discussion. However, it is very difficult, because the hardliners' nationalist rhetoric appeals to emotions and it is therefore difficult to compete with. Nevertheless, good relations with Georgia as a neighbouring country are in the interest of all forces in Abkhazian society.

The situation in Gal/i shows how vulnerable ordinary people are to conflict. According to one participant, since 2008, the conditions in Gal/i have worsened as the official status of Georgians in Abkhazia remains unresolved. Restriction of movement across the conflict divide affects Georgian farmers and they have to find alternative ways of subsistence. Another participant agreed that it is important to make sure the rights of citizens in Gal/i are not infringed upon. It has recently become easier for the Georgians living in Abkhazia to become Abkhazian citizens. The European community could do a lot to help de-isolate the communities in the region. Also, international mechanisms for registering the tens of thousands of returnees to the Gal/i district should be introduced.

Abkhazia's past application to the UN for neutral passports was refused and for a while the Abkhaz could not travel until Russia started issuing passports. Now there have been proposals from the Georgian side that the Russian passports being used by Abkhaz citizens should be replaced by a neutral Georgian document, but such a document would not be considered neutral by Abkhazians, so it is evident that citizens of Abkhazia will not apply for these documents. The issue of travel documents stems from Georgia's stance on the legal status of Abkhazia. This is one of the issues where non-recognition and engagement should be decoupled. The EU could help with practical arrangements to assist Abkhazians to travel.

In answer to a question on whether public opinion in Georgia acts as a constraint on those willing to make compromises, and what are the Georgian people's priorities, one participant answered that the basic attributes of

Georgian identity - language, homeland, religion – have not changed during Saakashvili's presidency. They cannot change in the short term. Unemployment and living standards are more important for the Georgian voters than the situation in Abkhazia, but that does not mean that the conflict has been forgotten. On the contrary, the conflict is one of the most discussed issues in the media. Opinion polls show that this generation of Georgians would choose territorial integrity over EU integration, and there is an aggressive reaction in Georgia whenever Abkhazia is mentioned in the international context, even on such occasions as when second hand buses were donated to Abkhazia.

In response to a question on the role of civil society, participants acknowledged that civil society has limited potential in bringing about a (political) resolution of the conflict. Especially since 2008, the conflict has involved multiple actors – Georgia, Abkhazia, Russia and the West. The political failures have been so profound that one cannot blame civil society. It should, nevertheless, continue its activities. One task of civil society should be to influence politicians to find ways of signing an agreement on the non-use of force. The understanding across the civil societies in Abkhazia and Georgia is better than the understanding between Georgian civil society and the Georgian authorities. Certain internal problems need to be solved by Georgians through internal Georgian-Georgian dialogue. The Georgian government has created a virtual reality, claiming that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are occupied territories and that Russia is the only problem for Georgia. However, civil society in Georgia recognises that there is a conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia.

Georgian-Turkish relations are friendly, the only serious issue being the illegal movement of cargo ships from Turkey to Abkhazia. There are no official relations between Abkhazia and Turkey but the late Sergei Bagapsh's visit to Turkey in April 2011 showed that Turkey has a special relationship with Abkhazia. There are also no high hopes for an immigration of Turkish citizens of Abkhazian origin into Abkhazia while the conflict remains unresolved, sanctions lifted and the economy more developed. But the flow of immigrants is likely to increase because Russia recognises Abkhazian passports, for which Turkish citizens of Abkhazian origin are also eligible. However, there are natural limits to such movement - loss of language, different religion, poverty and the absence of business opportunities in Abkhazia. Russia is also likely to obstruct such movement should numbers reach a critical point.

Russia's entry into the WTO (and the monitoring agreement between Russia and Georgia which removed Georgia's objections to Russia's entry) is a

positive step but it is unlikely to have a significant impact on the conflict. There were some concerns in Abkhazia about the agreement, because Abkhazia was not party to it. But if the talks move to discussing some of the detail of implementation of the agreement, concerning movement of goods across the Abkhazian border, perhaps Abkhazia could become involved. This could have a positive impact on the Georgian-Abkhazian relations.

Final words emphasised again the importance of de-coupling the concepts of non-recognition and engagement, including not restricting use of travel documents, and the need for continued dialogue and innovative approaches. Both the EU and UK can continue to have a role in this respect.