

**THE VALUE OF DIALOGUE IN THE
GEORGIAN-SOUTH OSSETIAN CONTEXT**

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THE VALUE OF DIALOGUE IN THE GEORGIAN-SOUTH OSSETIAN CONTEXT

Dedicated to the loving memory of Dina Alborova

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COMMENTS FROM THE EDITORS

As the editors of this volume, we find it bittersweet to see it finally come together.

We started our work on this project in December 2019 when the world was a completely different place. Little did we know then that we would very soon be confined within the boundaries of our countries, hometowns, and apartments. We met to consider Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue in February 2020 in Yerevan, just as the first COVID cases were being reported in Armenia. The pandemic that swept the world in early 2020, changed the way we live and communicate. Forced separation and distancing between people became the norm as everyone tried to redefine the meaning of social interaction while maintaining the sense of safety and security. Possible dangers and negative consequences of this separation and distancing, exacerbated by the global healthcare issue that was not fully understood at its earlier stages, were immediately recognized by us and our peacebuilder colleagues in the region. We've recognized the need to establish and maintain constant communication with each other, and support each other emotionally, psychologically, and professionally in this new reality. We created a virtual space where we not only worked on moving forward the work on this project, but we also helped each other to process a wide range of other issues, find comfort in the similar experience of each other and maintain a sense of normalcy in this new world.

Yet, this success is bittersweet. Despite having maintained our strong engagement across the Georgian-South Ossetian divide and completed this publication, it is with feelings of deep sorrow and heavy hearts that we write this introduction. We started the journey that led to this publication with Dina Alborova. In July of 2021, we lost our dear friend Dina to COVID-19. We have completed the publication without Dina, knowing she would have wanted to see the publication finalized and celebrate with us. Dina was an amazing person! She had endless energy. She always worked to make life better even in difficult circumstances. She dedicated her entire life to building bridges between people, educating young generations, and demonstrating that war and conflict won't wipe away our humanity. Her contribution to this and many other projects in the region is invaluable and her passing leaves a gaping hole in the South Ossetian society and the regional peacebuilding and expert community. Each of us, editors and individual authors of this volume, highly valued Dina's professional and personal approach to peacebuilding, her realistic and pragmatic analysis of the situation, her never fading belief that peace is possible no matter how hard it might be to achieve. We dedicate this volume to the memory of our dear friend and colleague Dina Alborova and we hope that the reader will see and understand the value in dialogue as it was seen and valued by Dina.

In this collection, we've gathered articles that present a wide range of approaches to considering the value of dialogue. The articles also present diverse views on how dialogue fits into the social, political, and economic fabric of each of the societies and what roles it has played at different stages of the conflict. Some of our contributors present views that highlight the important

aspects of Ossetian narratives and social-political discourse, other authors highlight Georgian views and motivations around the value of dialogue. We also bring outside voices of experts, practitioners, and scholars who, although outsiders to the region, have been engaged in the region for a long time and bring their professional lens to the assessment of the value of dialogue.

Archil Gegeshidze's "The doomed fate of dialogue in the Georgian-South Ossetian settlement: Is there a way out?" considers the role and place of dialogue at different stages of Georgian-South Ossetian conflict and highlights episodes where dialogue was the most effective. Gegeshidze invites us to consider what goal we can set for the Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue in the current stage to be able to move past the stalemate effectively. Similar to Gegeshidze's article, Dina Albrova in her article "Mechanisms of resolving the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict and new challenges for dialogue: Georgian-South Ossetian context" presents a detailed analysis of formal and informal dialogue platforms that existed at different periods of the conflict and emphasizes the contemporary internal and external challenges within South Ossetia which affect the implementation of dialogue engagement. In her concluding thoughts, Albrova emphasizes the changing dynamics in the region, especially after the second Karabakh war, and stresses the even higher need for sustained dialogue between Georgian and South Ossetian societies.

Ivane Abramashvili presents yet another angle of analyzing the historical development of official and unofficial dialogue processes in the Georgian-South Ossetian context in his article "Why should the Georgian state not be afraid of Georgian-South Ossetian informal relations?" The author describes the uneven and sometimes contradictory path towards peace engagement of official policies developed by different Georgian governments, emphasizing the negative consequences of the 2008 August war. He also stresses that often the gaps left behind by inconsistent and insufficient official peace policies are addressed by various informal dialogue processes. The author concludes that more eager participation or stronger support to unofficial processes on the part of the Georgian official representatives will emphasize the seriousness of their intent to rebuild trust and positive relationships with the South Ossetian side.

An interesting economic and development dimension of the value of dialogue is discussed in Giorgi Kanashvili's article "Why is dialogue a big "No" for Tskhinvali?: An economic-financial dimension of the question." The author discusses previous forms of formal and informal economic cooperation between parties and presents the experiences of another conflict context where economic cooperation was used as a rapprochement mechanism. The article also draws attention to the Russian economic-financial patronage to South Ossetia as one of the factors that prevent a more meaningful Georgian-South Ossetian engagement within the economic-financial dimension. The author suggests that engagement in different bilateral projects will improve the social and economic standing of South Ossetia, however, the de facto leadership (and Moscow) are very careful of such rapprochement.

Two separate articles of long-time colleagues Lira Kozaeva and Paata Zakareishvili present different perspectives on how informal dialogue pro-

cesses help support the official peace engagement. Lira Kozaeva details her years-long personal experience as a human rights and peacebuilding activist in the article "The role of dialogue in peacebuilding and human rights work," where she highlights all the small but tangible achievements that were possible due to systematic engagement in the unofficial dialogue process. Her colleague Paata Zakareishvili presents his reflections on the years of his work as Georgia's State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality in his article "What happens when politics and civic dialogue cooperate: A story of one exchange." He details some aspects of his work and how they were supported and informed by key informal dialogue processes in the Georgian-South Ossetian context. The author concludes that utilization of all channels of communication and engagement only enhances the overall peace process and allows for real and tangible results to develop.

Lana Parastaeva and Natia Chankvetadze engage in the discussion of conflict and trauma narratives in South Ossetian and Georgian societies respectively. Parastaeva in her article "The role of media in organizing a dialogue between conflict parties: The modern aspect of Georgian-South Ossetian conflict" draws attention to the lack of common language between the Georgian and Ossetian sides for the development of constructive dialogue. She discusses the role of modern media, including social media, and how different narratives are being disseminated through various information streams. Natia Chankvetadze in her article "The monopoly of victimhood: The role of trauma narratives in the Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue" discusses how conflict-affected societies often develop victimhood narratives that are framed as exclusive completely disregarding the human suffering of the other side. Chankvetadze suggests that through intergroup dialogue it is possible to help conflict parties break away from this exclusive conceptualization of victimhood and move towards acknowledging the trauma and victimhood of the other side as well.

Anna Parastaeva and Maria Kumaritova focus on the internal aspects of South Ossetian society and highlight the role of civic dialogue in the development of the Ossetian social and political landscape. In her article "Establishment of internal public consensus as to the first step towards the process of peaceful resolution of Georgian-South Ossetian conflict" Kulumbegova points the weakness of the civil society sector in South Ossetia and lack of consensus towards the future development of Georgian-South Ossetian relations. She emphasizes the need for internal dialogue between the government and civil society as a way to catalyze a larger peace process within the Georgian-South Ossetian context. A very interesting philosophical analysis is developed by Maria Kumaritova in her article "Social-philosophical approach to the analysis of the value of dialogue for the peaceful future." The author showcases how dialogue can be/is used by the South Ossetian society to answer the three philosophical questions posed by Immanuel Kant "What can I know?" "What should I know," and "What I can hope for." The author concludes that the question "What I can hope for" is the most difficult in the context of building a peaceful future, however, dialogue helps to guide the society in the search for an answer to this question as well.

Finally, the collection is concluded with the presentation of international views on the value of the Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue. Russian expert Sergey Utkin analyzes Russia's role in the process in the article "Opportunities in the stalemate: Russia's role in the Georgian-South Ossetian context." Juliet Schofield and Larissa Sotieva from Independent Peace Associates (Indie Peace) in their article "The importance of dialogue processes in conflict contexts: The experience of Pan-Caucasian processes" discuss the advantages of civic dialogue processes and present recommendations on how to establish a balance between realistic and heightened expectations from such informal processes. Finally, Susan Allen, Paula Garb, and Margarita Tadevosyan reflect on their decades-long practitioner experience in the South Caucasus in the article "The value of dialogue: Views of Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue from US university-based facilitators." The authors emphasize the local roles and relationships built between them as an important cornerstone for advancing the dialogue process.

This is a unique collection of articles that presents a diverse and enriching view on the value of dialogue in the Georgian-South Ossetian context. Our contributing authors remind us that there are many ways of assessing and viewing input that informal dialogue processes bring to the peace process. The editors have not interfered in the content of any of the articles or altered the views presented or terminology employed. While we editors may disagree with authors and with each other about many issues, we agree that we respect each other's rights to hold different perspectives and utilize different terminology. We present this collection of articles in the spirit of continuing dialogue; on these pages, dialogue takes the form of exchange of written analysis.

Susan Allen, Nino Kalandarishvili, Margarita Tadevosyan¹

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THE DOOMED FATE OF DIALOGUE IN THE GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN SETTLEMENT: IS THERE A WAY OUT?

Archil Gegeshidze¹

Factors of the value of dialogue in Georgian-Ossetian relations

For almost three decades of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, dialogue in one form or another has been present between the official Tbilisi and Tskhinvali.² During different phases of the conflict, however, the forms and goals of the dialogue changed. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of these efforts was also different as the success depended not only on the essence (including the degree of ambition) of the task, but also on the general context at that time. In parallel, there was dialogue at the civil society level, in the framework of which experts, journalists, and other professional groups from both sides discussed issues related to confidence-building. The success or failure of this format of dialogue, albeit to a lesser extent, was also influenced by the general context, which in turn, was largely determined by the nature of political relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. Below we will consider the most important periods of the Georgian-Ossetian confrontation, which allow to evaluate how the three factors - *the phase of the conflict*, *the essence of the goal of the dialogue*, and the *general context* - determine the effectiveness, i.e. the value of dialogue.

The value of dialogue at different stages of the conflict

Escalation period: 1989-1991

Description of the situation: The collapse of the Soviet Union and establishment of Georgia's independence took place against the backdrop of emerging nationalist sentiments in society, including the autonomous entities. The growth of radical nationalism gave rise to an acute ideological, political, and legal confrontation between the central authorities of Georgia, on the one hand, and the leaders of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, coupled with the newly emerged separatist movement Ademom Nykhaz, on the other. The reason for the conflict was Tbilisi's attempt, after the restoration of independence, to proclaim Georgia a unitary state, excluding the existence of autonomies as part of the country.³ Unfortunately, the confrontation quickly escalated, partly due to the information war that aggravated the situation every day, and that the parties themselves did not show a desire for dialogue. Meanwhile, the weakened Soviet leadership in Moscow, in the spirit of the

¹ Archil Gegeshidze is the executive director of the Levan Mikeladze Foundation.

² In this article, the term *dialogue* is used in its broadest sense, implying all forms of peaceful interaction of the parties to the conflict such as discussion of the problem; consideration and development of a solution to the problem; parallel expert research; joint operation of a facility; professional consultation; humanitarian aid; political negotiation process; trade (including illegal); joint business, etc. Depending on the significance of achieved result for both parties as a result of their interaction, one can judge the *value* of the dialogue in each specific case of a conflict situation.

³ Lekov, Ruslan - Georgian-South Ossetian Dialogue: the Problem of Compromise, 01/17/2013, Regional Dialogue, Caucasian House Analytical Portal, <http://regional-dialogue.com/ru/грузино-югоосетинский-диалог-пробле/>

well-known “divide and rule” policy, either through inaction or inadequate attempts to “curb” the escalation, actually contributed to the aggravation of the situation. Against the background of the events of April 9, 1989, the Soviet leadership was rightfully suspected of imperial ambitions and, therefore, its hostile intentions in relation to Georgia’s aspirations for independence. Meanwhile, the Georgian authorities, headed by the chairman of the Georgian parliament Z. Gamsakhurdia, pinned certain hopes on Boris Yeltsin, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, who was in opposition to the Soviet nomenclatura. On March 23, 1991, a meeting of the two leaders took place in the village of Kazbegi, during which the Russians voiced firm support for the position of the Georgian authorities on the status of South Ossetia. In particular, the abolition of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region was recognized as legitimate, and South Ossetia itself was mentioned in the minutes of the meeting as a former autonomy.⁴ In fact though, Yeltsin was more motivated by the desire to end the bloodshed that was already underway than by the fate of the South Ossetian autonomy.⁵

Meanwhile, the actual dual power in Moscow, as well as the events around the “August putsch,” brought the collapse of the USSR closer. The looming uncertainty prevented Moscow from influencing the course of events in South Ossetia. In turn, the aggravating internal political situation in Georgia, which later led to a civil war and the overthrowing of Gamsakhurdia, did not contribute to a decrease in the tension on the Georgian-Ossetian front. Against the backdrop of the already disintegrated Soviet Union, on January 19, 1992, a referendum was held in South Ossetia on the issue of state independence and/or reunification with Russia. A significant part of the population, including almost all ethnic Georgians, boycotted the referendum. For its part, the Military Council, which came to power after the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia, annulled almost all decisions made by the previous government, but did not change its position on the autonomy of South Ossetia. Meanwhile, military clashes continued in the region. Previously, in December 1991, when units of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs left South Ossetia, most of their weapons were transferred to the South Ossetian militia.⁶ Subsequently, already under the auspices of the Russian Federation, other cases of the supply of weapons, including heavy ones, were documented. Most independent observers saw this as a political bias of Russia in favor of South Ossetia, although some believed that the actions of the Russian side should be explained more by the presence of independent generals in the General Staff of the Russian Federation than by some sinister plan to destabilize Georgia.⁷ One thing is clear - the accumulation of weapons in the theater of hostilities affected the further escalation of the confrontation. Nevertheless, by the beginning of June, Georgian detachments came close to Tskhinvali, which created a real threat of the cap-

⁴ Archive “Yeltsin Center”, see: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/9581/>

⁵ “Boris Yeltsin - the first and last visit to Georgia of the first president of the Russian Federation”, Sputnik, 12.10.2016, see: <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/reviews/20161012/233479420/Boris-Elcin-pervyi-i-poslednij-vizit-v-Gruziju-pervogo-prezidenta-RF.html>

⁶ Dennis Sammut, Nikola Cvetkovski – Confidence-Building Matters: The Georgia-Ossetia Conflict, VERTIC, March 1996, p.13

⁷ Dennis Sammut, Nikola Cvetkovski, Ibid.

ture of the city. Under pressure from the Russian leadership, however, Eduard Shevardnadze, who headed the State Council since March 1992, agreed to a ceasefire.

On June 24, 1992 armed clashes ended with the signing by Yeltsin and Shevardnadze of the Sochi agreement on the principles of the conflict settlement. On July 14, a ceasefire was enacted and the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF), consisting of three battalions - Russian, Georgian and South Ossetian, was introduced into the conflict zone. The Sochi agreement provided for the creation of a body for the settlement of the conflict — the Joint Control Commission (JCC). An OSCE Observer Mission was deployed in Tskhinvali. The first phase of the escalation, including its tipping point of open military confrontation, was over.

Analysis: The ceasefire marked the end of the fratricidal war, which can be considered the main result that determines the value of dialogue in this phase of the conflict. Despite the fact that the escalation phase on both sides claimed about a thousand lives,⁸ it was relatively short-lived and generally not cruel - it lasted only 3 years and did not completely antagonize the Georgians and Ossetians. However, the decisive factor contributing to the achievement of the ceasefire was the general context against which the confrontation took place. First, the change of power in Georgia should be noted. While, the new authorities did not cancel the decision to abolish the South Ossetian autonomy, they were not radical nationalists and were more receptive to calls for dialogue. Second, the “changing of the guard” in the Kremlin and the personality of Boris Yeltsin⁹ played an important role in the acceptance by the conflicting parties of Russia as a mediator and facilitator. At the same time, it is important to note the following: due to the fact that Russia’s primary interest was in restoring stability on its southern borders, the goal of the peacekeeping process led by it was to end the bloodshed¹⁰ - as it turned out, the task was quite rational and feasible. Russia as the strongest actor among the four,¹¹ achieved synergy between the parties and, as a result, the multilateral dialogue (the negotiation process preceding the Sochi agreement) was crowned with success. If the Soviet government was in the place of Yeltsin’s Russia acting as the “boss” in the region, the processes could have gone in a different, more unfavorable direction.

⁸ The first war resulted in the deaths of about 1000 people, 100 people were missing, many houses and infrastructure were destroyed, and thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) appeared. Georgia: How to Avoid War in South Ossetia?, ICG-Europe Report No. 159, 26 November 2004, p. 5

⁹ The personality of Yeltsin was an authority both for Gamsakhurdia and for Shevardnadze and his colleagues in the State Council. No one asked the South Ossetian leaders. They acted with an eye on Galazov, the leader of North Ossetia, who supported Yeltsin’s mediation also because, in turn, he counted on the support of the President of the Russian Federation in the escalating conflict with Ingushetia.

¹⁰ At that time, Georgia was not yet hatching plans to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures, or build an energy corridor bypassing Russian territory and/or withdraw Russian military bases, which could have prompted the Kremlin to use the “frozen” conflict as a lever of pressure on Georgia.

¹¹ This refers to the federal authorities of Russia, the Georgian side, the South Ossetian side and the North Ossetian side.

De-escalation period: 1992-2003

Description of the situation: By signing the Sochi agreement, the situation around the conflict began to stabilize. The process gradually began to move into the area of political settlement. By the end of 1994, the JCC, previously focused on ensuring the maintenance of the ceasefire, was reorganized into a permanent body to address the political, peacekeeping, economic, humanitarian, and other aspects of the conflict. The OSCE Mission also actively joined the process. For its part, the Russian leadership pursued, if not completely neutral, but certainly less interventionist policy than before. A favorable ground was created for the Georgian-Ossetian interaction. During 1995, for the first time since the beginning of the de-escalation period, contacts began to be established between the Georgian and South Ossetian sides.

After the functions of the JCC were re-profiled, it noticeably intensified its activities. In the period from 1995 to 2003, 13 official meetings were held under its auspices. The agenda included such important issues as the supply of natural gas to the conflict zone and financing of construction work, reducing the number of checkpoints in settlements in the conflict zone, etc.

The revitalization of the negotiation process within the JCC has created a favorable background for the establishment of working relations between Shevardnadze and the leader of South Ossetia, Chibirov. In a short period of time, they met three times in Vladikavkaz in 1996, in Java in 1997, and in Borjomi in 1998. The meetings were generally held in a constructive spirit. In particular, at the Java meeting, the parties agreed to establish a direct telephone connection, which indicates the high level of trust in their personal relations.

According to the mandate, the OSCE Mission was multifunctional. The most difficult and responsible function was the search for ways of a comprehensive political solution to the conflict. This area of work has become especially active since 1994, when the situation in the conflict zone stabilized and the appropriate conditions were created for peacekeeping work. However, in order to do something in the Caucasus, the OSCE relied on Russia's willingness to support the Organization, as well as other heavyweights within the OSCE, or perhaps on their support in the confrontation with Moscow in the absence of support from the latter.¹²

In September 1994, the Mission provided the parties with the first draft of a plan for the future status of South Ossetia. The draft was prepared by European experts of international law and implied a detailed delineation of powers and granting South Ossetia the maximum possible degree of (political) autonomy within the Georgian state. During the working process, the text of the draft was intensively discussed with the parties to the conflict and their comments were taken into account as much as possible. Despite the fact that the project received approval from the US, the EU, and Russia, as well as the Georgian side, the South Ossetian side, after a long discussion of document in the "parliament" in the presence of the Head of the OSCE Mission, failed to approve it in the end.

¹² Hansjorg Eiff, *The OSCE Mission to Georgia and the Status of South Ossetia*, In: IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2008, Baden-Baden 2009*, p. 36.

In 1995, the OSCE was left on the sidelines. Russia had decided to undertake peacekeeping on its own. Outside the JCC and without notifying the OSCE, it went on to develop its own version of the settlement. The developed plan centered on the decision of the status of federalization of Georgia. The status of North Ossetia within the Russian Federation was taken as a model. Some observers explained Moscow's enthusiasm by the flank restrictions on conventional weapons under the CFE Treaty, which put Russia in need for a national quota for Georgia to legalize the presence of an excess amount of weapons in the Caucasus, including in the territory of Georgia in the form of four military bases.¹³ The assignment to Georgia was supposed to be formalized by an appropriate treaty, allowing Russia to keep the bases for 25 years. The document was initialed on March 25, 1995.¹⁴ Soon after that, on May 4, 1995, the "Agreement on the Georgian-Ossetian Settlement" was signed granting South Ossetia full state power in its territory but within the boundaries of the federal Georgian state. An important feature of the Moscow plan was that Russia was the guarantor of the Agreement. As a result, the South Ossetians nevertheless rejected the Russian plan. Interestingly, in Georgia itself, the "deal" proposed by Moscow did not find strong support. Many did not approve of the transition to the federal structure of the country, motivating it with Georgia's very diverse ethnic composition of the population to build a functional federal state. It is no coincidence that the Constitution on August 24, 1995, instead of federalization assumed the division of the country into nine administrative regions and two autonomous republics - Abkhaz and Adjara. Under the new constitution, South Ossetia remained part of Shida Kartli, one of the nine provinces.

The next negotiations took place in early 1996, again at the initiative of Russia, but in a new format: a group of political experts external to the JCC, but within the JCC format, with the OSCE as the fifth participant. The process gradually gained momentum. After Chibirov was elected the "president" of South Ossetia in November 1996, the above mentioned meetings with Shevardnadze followed. The established relationship of trust between the two leaders predetermined the constructiveness of the negotiation process. And after the resumption of movement between Georgia and South Ossetia along the road, a very interesting process began at the level of ordinary people - Georgians and Ossetians. The description of the situation presented below was borrowed from Mshvidobadze, Nizharadze and Khutsishvili:¹⁵ South Ossetia, whose economy was in a state of collapse, created a thriving business of smuggling goods through the Roki tunnel, which connects South and North Ossetia. A transport corridor was formed between Russia and Georgia, which became vital for the self-proclaimed republic, especially since Russia stopped direct subsidies to the region. About half of the working-age popula-

¹³ Hansjorg Eiff, *op.cit.*, p.40

¹⁴ The treaty was never ratified by the Georgian parliament. The reason is Russia's failure to fulfill the obligations prescribed by the Treaty to assist Georgia in restoring territorial unity and modernizing the armed forces.

¹⁵ R. Mshvidobadze, G. Nizharadze, G. Khutsishvili - Conflict potential in Georgian society, in the book: "The Caucasian Land: Burden of Conflict and Time of Change", (ed. L. Harutyunyan), 2007, pp. 176-179

tion of South Ossetia was directly or indirectly associated with the transit of goods, mainly contraband. A large number of Georgians also participated in the smuggling business, mainly from the adjacent Gori region. The main place of “transactions” was the market in the Georgian village of Ergneti, on the de facto border with South Ossetia, which quickly expanded and became famous throughout the region. From a legal and economic point of view, the Ergneti market caused serious damage to the Georgian economy, but the situation was different from the interethnic relations’ vantage point. There was no ethnic division of functions among the traders in the market, nor was there a division of trade zones. The conflict was not discussed often. Representatives of both ethnic groups, linked by common economic activities, developed a joint collective view of the conflict, the essence of which was that, “the conflict was a mistake and should be consigned to oblivion.”

In the meantime, the OSCE Mission continued to facilitate the peace-keeping process, including through the JCC, and in March 1997 initiated a series of meetings of the group of experts representing both sides of the conflict. The meetings became a forum for constructive dialogue with a long-term goal of developing a document containing joint principles and a roadmap for resolving the conflict. As a result, the so-called “Interim document” was developed, which was supposed to be approved by the parties to the conflict. This is exactly what happened - in 1999, with the mediation of the OSCE, Shevardnadze and Chibirov signed a joint (interim) document, which, being initialed on July 14, 2000 in the Viennese suburb of Baden, was named the Baden Document. Providing the status of extended autonomy for South Ossetia within Georgia, the Baden document, “On the foundations of political and legal relations between the parties in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict” opened the way for a peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. The Baden Document marked the culmination of the confidence-building process between the two parties and simultaneously a political verdict for Chibirov. For the Russian leadership, this path of evolution of Georgian-Russian relations was absolutely unacceptable.¹⁶ Unlike 1992, by the end of the decade, Georgia’s foreign policy priorities had already made it as the most pro-Western country in the CIS.¹⁷ Therefore, a comprehensive settlement of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was no longer included in the Kremlin’s plans. In this context, Russia’s manipulative capabilities as a “mediator” in the conflict were seen as a lever of pressure on Georgia (and South Ossetia). There were all the signs that Russia was going to “freeze” the conflict.

The Kremlin began to methodically change its policy towards Georgia.¹⁸ Russia’s influence in the conflict zone began to grow especially with

¹⁶ A. Illarionov - How the war was prepared, *Novaya Gazeta*, June 24, 2009.

¹⁷ In addition to the fact that Georgia had begun to declare its desire to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic structures, it achieved the withdrawal of Russian border guards from the Georgian-Turkish border and a decision at the OSCE summit on the withdrawal of four Russian military bases left over from Soviet times. Having terminated its membership in the CSTO, Georgia joined the WTO and the Council of Europe. It had become an important transit link in the energy corridor being built together with Azerbaijan, bypassing the territory of Russia. However, one of the landmark and sensitive decisions of Georgia for the Kremlin was the refusal to offer its territory and airspace for attacks from the south on Chechen militias in the North Caucasus.

the appearance of Putin on his way to the pinnacle of power in Russia. This could not help but affect the general atmosphere of the negotiation process: The effectiveness of the settlement process within the JCC and the group of experts had significantly decreased and the situation in the conflict zone itself has also worsened. One of the immediate reasons for the failure to continue the process after the adoption of the Baden Document, was Tbilisi’s requirement to involve an additional guarantor besides Russia. Russia was categorically against, and rejected this demand. Not showing a desire to compromise, South Ossetia, for its part, also rejected the document. Thus, the Baden Document did not manage to bring the proposed agreement on a comprehensive settlement of the conflict and turned out to be another false start.

After the openly rigged parliamentary elections in Georgia in November 2003, there was a change of power. In the events that became known as the “Rose Revolution,” Russia played a constructive role, hoping that after Shevardnadze it would be easier to get along with the new authorities in Tbilisi on strategic issues. Despite a certain constructivism of the Kremlin in relations with the new authorities of Georgia, its policy on the Georgian-Ossetian conflict did not change. The situation was heading to another impasse. The only positive light was the established peaceful and friendly relations between Georgians and Ossetians involved and interested in the functioning of the Ergneti market. Since the economic profit was being distributed and became a source of well-being for tens of thousands of Georgians and Ossetians throughout the conflict zone and adjacent regions of Georgia, the general disposition of Georgians and Ossetians towards mutual reconciliation became visible.

Analysis: The 12-year lull in the conflict zone is itself a noteworthy result of dialogue. A prolonged peaceful period, as a phase of the conflict, made it possible for an intensive peace process to emerge and develop, with the participation of both the Georgian and South Ossetian parties (represented by top officials, parliamentarians, and experts) as well as mediators and facilitators in the form of authoritative international organizations (OSCE, European Union), including the federal government of Russia, North Ossetia and, equally important, ordinary people in the conflict zone and from the adjacent regions of Georgia. The peace process was a series of attempts to develop, through a process of dialogue, a mutually acceptable document on a comprehensive political settlement. Unfortunately, none of these attempts was crowned with success, although at some point with the case of the Baden Document, there was hope that there was only one step left to the historical result. There are two main reasons why the aforementioned attempts were unsuccessful: First, the task (goal) - a comprehensive settlement - was not

¹⁸ Russia unilaterally lifted the ban on crossing the Abkhazian section of the Russian-Georgian border for men of conscription age, introduced by a joint decision of the CIS presidents on January 19, 1996. Despite vigorous protests from the Georgian side, Russia withdrew from the CIS agreement that abolished visas within the Commonwealth, and in December 2000 introduced a visa regime for citizens of Georgia. At the same time, the Russian authorities introduced a simplified visa regime for residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In late 2001, a pro-Russian candidate, Eduard Kokoity, was elected president of South Ossetia. The following year, Russia began issuing Russian passports to residents of South Ossetia.

adequate to the political context in which it was posed. It turned out to be so ambitious that each time the immediate parties to the conflict, together and/or separately, lacked the last bit of willingness to compromise. The nature of the conflict, nevertheless, separated the parties to the extent that their political positions turned out to be difficult to reconcile. Secondly, mediation/facilitation efforts by the OSCE and Russia were not coordinated either within the JCC or outside its framework. It is obvious that Russia was striving for sole leadership and did not perceive the OSCE as an equal partner. However, the decisive factor in the “failure” of mediation/facilitation was the change in Russia’s policy on the conflict due to the cooling of bilateral relations with Georgia. Nevertheless, the “failed peace process” managed to produce an extremely important result in the form of transformed relations between Georgians and Ossetians on the ground. Even though, in the absence of legal political institutions, the local population had to engage in illegal economic relations, the phenomenon of the Ergneti market became an important defense mechanism protecting from the past.¹⁹ People were actually reconciled believing that, “the conflict was a mistake and should be consigned to oblivion.” In this sense, dialogue, despite its ups and downs and political unsuccessfulness, had acquired an unintended but very important value.

Re-escalation period: 2004-2008

Description of the situation:

Phase one

In May 2004, the new Georgian authorities, under the slogan of combating smuggling, launched a major operation in South Ossetia and neighboring regions. As a result of the operation, the roads used to import smuggled goods through South Ossetia and the Ergneti market were blown up. The market was closed soon after. Its closure not only affected the interests of corrupt officials, but also deprived the livelihood of ordinary people, whose survival depended on petty smuggling.

The anti-smuggling operation dramatically worsened the security situation. There were accumulations of armed people in the region, checkpoints were opened. As the situation in the conflict area deteriorated, the conflict prevention mechanisms, including the JCC and the JPKF, ceased to function. The three peacekeeping battalions no longer operated together. Soon there were reports about the supply of Russian weapons to the South Ossetian side through the Roki tunnel.²⁰ Shootings began. People died, hundreds of houses were destroyed. On August 18, the JCC co-chairs and Georgian Prime Minister Zhvania signed a ceasefire agreement and Georgia began to withdraw its troops.

The events of the summer of 2004 reversed a twelve-year trust-building process. The remilitarization of the conflict zone led to an increase in

¹⁹ R. Mshvidobadze, G. Nizharadze, G. Khutsishvili, op.cit., P. 181

²⁰ On June 2-6, Russia handed over to Tskhinvali 70 T-72 tanks, 20 Grad multiple rocket launchers, and more than 200 Igla portable anti-aircraft missile systems. Anatoly Barankevich, a colonel of the Russian army, who had combat experience in the Afghan and Chechen conflicts, was appointed as the Minister of Defense of South Ossetia. (A. Illarionov, op.cit.)

interethnic hostility between Georgians and Ossetians; contacts at the level of non-governmental organizations and small business practically ceased. Georgian-Ossetian relations were practically limited to extremely tense communication in the framework of JCC and the exchange of official statements on the killings and abductions of people, hostage-taking, the closure of the Transcaucasian highway, and the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone. The Georgian-Ossetian conflict “froze.”

Second phase

Starting in the summer of 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili began to make harsh statements, accusing Russia of inciting the separatist aspirations of the South Ossetian authorities, violations of the sea and air space of Georgia, intelligence activities on the territory of the Georgian autonomies, and unfriendly actions towards Georgian citizens in terms of the visa regime, etc. In the winter of 2005, the Georgian government demanded an early withdrawal of Russian military bases from Akhalkalaki and Batumi. In response, Rospotrebnadzor (The Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing) banned the import of Georgian wine and mineral water into Russia, and a little later a transport blockade of Georgia was announced - air, land, sea and postal services were stopped. A few days earlier, Georgian police arrested four Russian officers on espionage charges. In retaliation, Russia began the mass expulsion of persons of Georgian nationality from Moscow and other cities in a form that clearly infringed upon human rights, claiming that the actions taken were a response to the anti-Russian course of the Saakashvili government.²¹

The next round of tensions in Georgian-Russian relations, naturally, did not contribute to the negotiation process. After the failure of the police operation in the summer of 2004 and marking time in the subsequent negotiation process, the Saakashvili government decided to pursue a different path. To establish control over the separatist region, Saakashvili appointed Dmitry Sanakoev, an active participant in the 1991-1992 Georgian-Ossetian war, as the head of a specially created Temporary Administrative Territorial Unit on the territory of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region. Georgia had allocated approximately \$7 million from its state budget to help Sanakoev’s administration implement a number of economic and social projects aimed at winning the hearts and minds of South Ossetians. But the main task for Tbilisi was to convince the world that its protégé could play the role of an influential participant in the conflict settlement process. Time has shown, however, that instead of facilitating the negotiation process, the Provisional Administration, on the contrary, contributed to the tension of the general atmosphere.

Alongside these events, the process of the sovereignization of Kosovo was underway. After Western states, ignoring Putin’s call, recognized

²¹ On March 26, 2007, Georgia filed a complaint against Russia with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In July 2014, the court ruled on several articles of the European Convention, finding violations in Russia’s actions. In 2019, the Grand Chamber of the ECHR additionally ruled that Russia should pay compensation to Georgia in the amount of 10 million euros.

Kosovo's independence in February 2008, a dangerous precedent was set. The precedent was dangerous because for the first time the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts became hostages not only of the problematic relations between Georgia and Russia, but also of the confrontation between the West and Russia. The Kosovo precedent became a pretext for both aggression against Georgia with its pro-Western foreign policy, and for retaliation against the West for yet another humiliating disregard of Russia's geopolitical interests.

The last straw for Russia was the decision of the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit on Georgia, on the inevitable membership in the alliance. Even though at the summit the issue of granting Georgia an Action Plan for NATO membership did not pass, the Russian leadership was concerned that neither the economic embargo of Georgia, nor the sluggishly fluid process of negotiations were helping to keep the alliance from expanding into the post-Soviet space, took the decision summit as the last chance to prevent an unwanted prospect. The President of Russia instructed the government to provide substantive support to Russian citizens living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²² As Vladimir Putin later admitted, Russia had long been preparing a detailed plan for a military operation against Georgia.²³ Apparently, Russia was guided by this plan when providing "substantive assistance."

The situation in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict began to escalate sharply in late July through early August. Active hostilities began on the night of August 8, when Georgia subjected the capital of South Ossetia to massive shelling, after which it attempted to establish control over South Ossetia. On the afternoon of August 8, the Russian president announced the start of a "peace enforcement operation" in the conflict zone. Contrary to the calculations of the Saakashvili government²⁴ significant Russian forces were brought into the region and aviation was involved. Within a few days, Russian troops, together with South Ossetian armed formations, drove Georgian troops out of South Ossetia, temporarily occupying several regions of Georgia adjacent to the conflict zones. Through the course of the war and based on its outcome, Russia changed its status in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict - the Russian Federation had turned from a peacekeeper into a conflict party.

On August 12, with the active mediation of the French President in

²² For this purpose, the Russian government was instructed to interact with the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including the organization of cooperation in trade, economic, social, scientific, and technical fields, in the field of information, culture and education, including with the involvement of Russian regions. A list of documents recognized in Russia, issued to individuals by the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was established. The legal capacity of legal entities registered in accordance with the legislation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which is considered as the personal law of such legal entities, was recognized. Federal executive bodies were instructed to cooperate with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the framework of legal assistance in civil, family and criminal cases. The territorial bodies of the Russian Foreign Ministry in the Krasnodar Krai and North Ossetia were instructed, if necessary, to carry out certain consular functions in the interests of permanent residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

²³ "Putin's statement on the plan of operation in South Ossetia did not surprise Georgia," InoTV, August 9, 2012. See: <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2012-08-09/Zayavlenie-Putina-o-plane-operacii>.

²⁴ "We Didn't Prepare for Such Development - Deputy Minister of Defense of Georgia," Civil.ge, 22 August 2008.

the Council of Europe, a plan for a peaceful settlement of the conflict was signed.²⁵ The five-day war had significant geopolitical, economic, and other consequences. For example, on August 26, Russia officially recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. The JCC ceased to exist formally. On September 2, Georgia broke off diplomatic relations with Russia. OSCE Mission withdrew from the region.²⁶ The Georgian-Ossetian "frozen" conflict had acquired a pronounced Georgian-Russian dimension.

Analysis: The 4-year re-escalation period caused irreparable damage to the peace process. First and foremost, the Georgian-Ossetian relations, which during the previous peace period managed to transform to such an extent that the Georgians and Ossetians were imbued with conciliatory sentiments, suffered significantly. As a result of the return to military confrontation, the most valuable thing was lost - peace and restored trust between the two communities. Secondly, the peacekeeping institutions (OSCE, JCC, JPKF, etc.) significantly weakened: during the first phase of the escalation, events developed so rapidly that the peacekeeping institutions (OSCE, JCC, JPKF, etc.), with their attempts to pacify the situation, did not keep up with the pace of growing tension; in the second phase, the JCC and the JPKF degraded to such an extent that they could no longer fulfill the functions prescribed by the mandate and, most importantly, discredited themselves before the parties to the conflict. Even as occasional peace initiatives were created, the settlement of the conflict as a goal of peacekeeping quickly receded into the background and the only task of the mediators became preventing the bloodshed. All this happened against the background of rapidly deteriorating relations, on the one hand, between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, and on the other, between Tbilisi and Moscow. The latter circumstance was especially actualized in the second phase of the re-escalation, when Tbilisi began to openly expose Russia as a biased mediator and demanded a reform of the JCC by enlarging it through an invitation of the US and the EU to join its ranks. In parallel, Georgia was making leaps and bounds along the path of rapprochement with NATO, which especially irritated the Kremlin. All these factors were augmented with such developments as Kosovo's sovereignty, which turned the Georgian-Ossetian (and Georgian-Abkhazian) conflict into a hostage in the confrontation between Russia and the West. Against this backdrop of saber rattling and diplomatic battles, the voice of civil society was barely audible. An example is the appeal of Georgian civil society representatives to President Saakashvili, who were instructed to take certain steps to implement the government's peace initiative.²⁷ Ignoring this document was just one example in a huge mosaic of equally important mistakes or undesirable coincidences of circumstances that led to the two dangerous episodes of the armed conflict - the events of 2004

²⁵ The plan included six points: 1. No recourse to use violence between the protagonists. 2. Permanent cessation of hostilities. 3. The granting of free access to humanitarian aid. 4. The return of Georgian armed forces to their usual quarters. 5. Russian armed forces to withdraw to the positions held before hostilities began. 6. Creation of international guarantees to ensure stability and security in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

²⁶ In the zone of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the UN Observer Mission in Georgia ceased its activities.

²⁷ Ivlian Haindrava, Civil Society and Peacekeeping Process, in: "The Georgian-Ossetian Conflict: In Search of Peace," Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2011, pp. 27-43

and 2008.

These events put an end to everything positive that was achieved in the previous period. Moreover, the consequences of the August War largely predetermined the futility of the subsequent period of the conflict. It can be stated that in this segment of the Georgian-Ossetian confrontation, the dialogue, regardless of the level and format, could not produce results, and therefore its practical value was minimal.

Stagnation period: 2008-2020

Description of the situation: After the end of hostilities in 2008, the confrontation between the parties acquired a predominantly political and diplomatic character, largely moving into the sphere of international politics. The nature and structure of the confrontation has changed radically - instead of bilateral confrontation, it has become trilateral. In this triangle, Moscow and Tskhinvali formally act as separate parties, but display absolutely unified positions. At the same time, Russia, made the decision to play with open cards, and encouraged and fully controlled the policy of dissociating South Ossetia from Georgia.

At the Geneva International Discussions, on the one hand, Russia and the representatives of South Ossetia and, on the other hand, Georgia tried to secure their "red lines," which was the main reason for the low efficiency of the platform. At the time of this writing, 50 rounds of discussions have been held and no significant results have yet been achieved in bringing the positions of the opposing sides closer.

The situation around the conflict remains tense. This is due to several reasons: Russia and South Ossetia on the one hand, and Georgia on the other, accuse each other of crimes and ethnic cleansing. In 2008, the Georgian government filed lawsuits against Russia with the United Nations International Court of Justice (UNIC) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In 2018, Georgia filed a lawsuit against Russia at the ECHR for the third time. This time in connection with the violent death of Archil Tatumashvili and David Basharuli in South Ossetia.²⁸ Georgia asked the court to find Russia responsible for numerous violations of the European Convention on Human Rights, including the right to life, the prohibition of torture, and the right to liberty and security.

Another factor aggravating the general context, as well as an instrument of pressure on Georgia, is the policy of the so-called "borderization." As part of this policy, engineering work is carried out to establish a barbed wire fence along the so-called "demarcation lines." More than 53 kilometers of the perimeter of the administrative border with South Ossetia are delineated by this barbed wire. The erection by the Tskhinvali authorities of a physical wall between South Ossetia and Georgia proper, together with the systematic and unpredictable closure of the crossing points as punitive measures, provoked an increase in incidents in the form of illegal detentions when trying to cross

²⁸ The lawsuit also concerns the previously committed murder of Georgian citizen Gigi Otkhordia by the Abkhaz border guard on the dividing line.

the dividing line, in both directions.

The biggest prisoner exchange since the 2008 war was a rare and pleasant exception to the dominating trend. On March 10, 2016, at the Inguri Bridge, four South Ossetian residents sentenced to life imprisonment in Georgian prisons were exchanged for 12 Georgian citizens, who, in turn, were convicted at different times by the Abkhaz and South Ossetian courts.

The shocking development of events in 2008 needed reflection, and here an important role was assigned to the civil dialogue between Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. As a result, discussion platforms such as Limehouse Discussion Platform (Georgian-Abkhazian), Istanbul process (Georgian-Russian), etc. appeared. One of the examples of the Georgian-Ossetian dialogue platform is the Point of View project, created under the auspices of George Mason University. Since 2016, the University and its partners continued their engagement within the framework of another project. Over the past 12 years, within the framework of the University's projects, a series of dialogue meetings of different formats have been convened.²⁹ As a result, joint research and collections of articles, eyewitness accounts, etc. were published. In addition to the results noted above, the dialogue was justified through its ability to preserve old contacts and facilitate the establishment of new ones through the communication of project participants. This helped to build interpersonal trust. Even though not significantly, nevertheless, the general alienation was delayed.

Meanwhile, the ever-increasing influence of Russia on political and social life in South Ossetia and the latter's pronounced desire for self-isolation from Georgia and the rest of the world left an imprint on the relations between the civil societies of the parties to the conflict. Here, too, a significant decrease in intensity was observed.

Analysis: The post-war 12 years were marked by a new "freeze" of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, but in a modified state. If in previous periods Russia played the role of mediator and facilitator, although not always objective, but became one of the parties to the conflict, it then represented the main barrier in restoring the relations between Georgians and Ossetians.³⁰ Add to this the fact that through Russian efforts, the UN and OSCE peacekeeping missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were respectively terminated. As a result, both conflicts in Georgia, unlike other unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space, have lost the peace process. No proposals, projects, initiatives for the settlement of relations are proposed and, accordingly, are not discussed. In other words, the settlement as a goal of a possible negotiation or discussion process disappeared since Russia and South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) believe that the conflict is over and, therefore, there is nothing to be settled. All that is to be discussed is the maintenance of stability along the dividing

²⁹ S. Allen, Related Initiatives: From Point of View to Action, The World News, November 1, 2010.

³⁰ I. Khaindrava, Transformation. On the role of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts in Georgian-Russian relations, in the book: "In Search of Ways to Normalize Russian-Georgian Relations", Rondeli Foundation - Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2017, p. 35.

line and the notorious agreement on the non-use of force. In the meantime, Tskhinvali's desire for maximum separation from Tbilisi and the ever-growing irredentist nationalism in South Ossetia make the already fading civil dialogue meaningless. At the same time, South Ossetia is only one step away from "voluntary unification" with Russia (*read*: annexation by Russia). In this situation, Tbilisi can only, "recognize the new realities and build good-neighborly relations with South Ossetia (and Abkhazia)." Meanwhile, the only existing political platform - the Geneva International Discussions - designed to achieve unswerving compliance with the ceasefire agreement of August 12, 2008 and monitor overall stability in the region, stacked as many as 50 rounds of discussions, but alas, without visible results. The reason is simple - the opposing sides are trying to use the platform to defend their political interests, acting within the zero-sum game mentality. In other words, the goal that the parties to the conflict set for their participation in this dialogue platform is obviously unattainable. Therefore, there is no need to talk about even the slightest value of this kind of dialogue. This is the whole essence of the current political impasse.

Main conclusions

Dialogue played a specific role in Georgian-Ossetian relations. In general, this role was positive, but could not bring a breakthrough result. Depending on the period and the cumulative impact of factors, both internal and external, the dialogue either registered relative success or was unsuccessful. Below are the main factors that influenced the peacebuilding process and ultimately determined the value of dialogue at different stages of the conflict.

At all stages (phases) of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, the factor of the *general context* has always played a role in the success or failure of the goals of the peacebuilding process. Moreover, each time this factor was decisive. Among the elements of the context, the role of Russia should be highlighted. The policy pursued by Russia was not clear enough not to create mistrust. Moscow's repeated statements of support for Georgia's territorial integrity have been undermined by measures such as the mass distribution of Russian passports to Ossetians. Russia's national interests, to keep the events in the region under control, were too pronounced to allow Russia to play the role of the only mediator and the only guarantor, as it would like. The OSCE, mainly represented by its Mission, had to adapt to the monopolist player, and in these cases the results were achieved faster. At the same time, the goal of "joint" mediation could be the highest, up to a comprehensive settlement. An example is the Baden Document and the associated process. When the OSCE acted alone, Russia easily destroyed its peacebuilding initiative. The OSCE's approach has been described as, "a systematic policy of indecisive measures, that is, decisions that are essentially adequate, but the implementation of which did not enjoy strong support."³¹ On the example of the conflict in South Ossetia, it became clear how important it is for an insti-

³¹ Hansjorg Eiff, *op.cit.*, p.42-43.

tutionally strong organization to carry out truly multilateral, neutral activities, effectively supported by interested states and without interference from separate national interests. Unlike the OSCE, Russia always achieved its goal if it acted purposefully. The Sochi agreement of 1992 is the most striking example of this.

An important component of the context was the lack of strong political will on the part of the parties to the conflict. Throughout the confrontation, including during periods of active peacebuilding, neither the Georgian nor the South Ossetian sides showed a strong desire to reach a compromise. For example, Tbilisi never presented a well-defined view on the status and borders of South Ossetia as part of Georgia and couldn't persuade its opponent in the seriousness of its frequent assurances about granting South Ossetia the maximum possible degree of autonomy within Georgia. The way Tbilisi treated South Ossetia when drafting the 1995 Constitution, did not contribute to the Ossetians' conviction that Georgia's promise to grant the greatest degree of self-government was genuine. For its part, the most distasteful factor for South Ossetia has always been irredentist sentiments and the desire to unite with North Ossetia within the framework of the Russian Federation. On the South Ossetian side, the lack of willingness to compromise could only be changed through Russian influence. From today's point of view, the period of de-escalation (1992-2003) is a time of missed opportunities, when the Georgian and South Ossetian sides lacked the wisdom of *carpe diem*, especially in the late 90s, when the settlement of the conflict was still not categorically unacceptable for Russia. The importance of a leader's personality should be noted here. Working and trusting relations between the high representatives of the parties to the conflict have played an important but, unfortunately, not a decisive role in the peacebuilding process. The interpersonal relations of Shevardnadze and Zhvania with the leaders of South Ossetia, and in particular with Chibirov, introduced a positive twist in the dynamics of the negotiation process. The same can be said about the relations between Shevardnadze and Yeltsin.

Another important component of the context was the availability of resources for reconciliation between ethnic Georgians and Ossetians. The example of the Ergneti market showed that, despite the armed conflict, the Georgians and Ossetians did not completely break off all ties at that time. Bound by common economic interests, they developed a joint platform for a "business" dialogue, where past grievances were discarded and the hope of re-establishing the former brotherly relations emerged. However, after the events of 2008, the degree of political and economic independence of South Ossetia from Georgia sharply increased, and socio-cultural alienation surfaced between Georgians and Ossetians. In the paradigm of conflict settlement, there are practically no "common" (subject to discussion) topics left. From the point of view of South Ossetia (at the suggestion of Russia) "the conflict is over" and all that remains is to agree on ways to build good-neighborly relations. In such conditions the resources for reconciliation are diminishing with each new generation.

Through almost the entire history of the Georgian-South Ossetian

confrontation, regardless of the phase of the conflict, the goal of interaction between the parties was to determine the status of South Ossetia and develop comprehensive settlement. Unfortunately, the dynamics of the context did not allow for this goal to be realized. Every time the confrontation escalated to a hot phase, the bar dropped and all efforts (negotiations, diplomatic pressure, etc.) were applied to achieve a ceasefire. In establishing peace, third parties, including Russia, made every effort and the result was achieved. In this case, the context made it possible to achieve the goal and, accordingly, the dialogue had value.

In the phases of the escalation of the conflict (1991-1992 and 2004-2008), peacebuilding efforts (confidence building) brought certain results, but could not prevent an armed conflict. After escalation into a hot phase, the dialogue took the form of crisis management, in which the parties involved, primarily the mediators, acted selflessly and made every effort. Examples are the actions of Russian President Boris Yeltsin in 1992 and French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008.

Is there a way out?

After the 2008 war resulted in an international legal mishap and South Ossetia, recognized by Russia, considers the status issue closed, the dialogue with the usual focus on a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict lost its meaning. If Russia does not change and does not become constructive, this conflict is destined to non-resolution. However, such prospect does not loom on the horizon. The most valuable thing that can and should be reinvigorated in this situation is mutual trust and friendly human relations between Georgians and Ossetians. By the end of the 1990s, after a bloody confrontation, it was still possible to restore Georgian-Ossetian relations. The context, including Russian factor, was different then. After 2008, circumstances changed significantly. The changed context, in turn, introduced adjustments to the goal setting of the peace process. Now the goal can only be the transformation of the conflict, not its resolution. Consequently, the dialogue between the parties should be developed outside of the paradigm of a comprehensive settlement of the conflict. In other words, in the foreseeable future, the subject of dialogue can only be the improvement of relations and mutual understanding on politically non-sensitive topics, and not the search for a political formula for resolving the conflict. The transformation of the conflict should become a new paradigm of interaction between the parties, and only in this case it will be possible to establish an effective mechanism of dialogue. Otherwise, at the official level, the dialogue will not be able to go beyond the Geneva discussions, and at the level of civil society, the process of “marking time” will continue.

MECHANISMS FOR RESOLVING THE GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN CONFLICT AND NEW CHALLENGES FOR DIALOGUE: GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN CONTEXT

*Dina Alborova*¹

Introduction

In the modern era of globalization, high technologies and the presence of huge information flows that affect not only the political, but also the everyday life of people, and the topic of the value of dialogue in post-conflict settlement becomes relevant for the analysis and determination of its place and role in the life of society. Discussion and analysis of this topic is also important to identify challenges that affect the process and dynamics of the dialogue.

Official dialogue platforms

After the war and the beginning of the process of recognizing the independence of South Ossetia in August 2008, qualitatively new processes started to unfold not only at the local, but also at the regional level. The negotiation platform (Joint Control Commission) for the settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, created under the terms of the Sochi agreements of 1992,² ceased to exist in 2008 and was replaced by the Geneva Discussions. The provisions of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) for the settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict were adopted on October 31, 1994 in Moscow in accordance with the Agreement on the principles of the settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict of June 24, 1992. This was to ensure control over the ceasefire, the withdrawal of armed formations, and the dissolution of the self-defense forces and the maintenance of the security regime in the conflict zone. The tasks of the JCC included: maintaining peace and preventing the resumption of hostilities; coordination of joint activities of the parties to stabilize the situation, political settlement of the conflict and economic recovery of the affected areas; the return and settlement of refugees and internally displaced persons; and organization of control over the observance of human rights and national minorities in the conflict zone. The JCC was a permanent functioning body of the four parties (South Ossetia, Georgia, Russia, North Ossetia) involved in the settlement of the conflict. The OSCE Mission to Georgia also participated in the work of the JCC. The JCC was responsible for coordinating the activities of the peacekeeping forces and observers designated by the sides. All decisions were consensus based. The JCC was supposed to cease its activities after comprehensive settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict was reached.³

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² Agreement on the principles of settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict // Electronic fund of legal and normative-technical documentation. <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/1902246>

³ Provisions on the Joint Control Commission for the settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. October 1994, Moscow. // Russian peacemaker. <http://www.peacekeeper.ru/ru/?-module=pages&action=view&id=86>

In early September 2008, Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili announced Georgia's withdrawal from the JCC and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia. In addition, the minister said that Georgia unilaterally withdrew from the agreement, "On the principles of the settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict" of June 24, 1992, and therefore, all protocols and agreements adopted within the framework of the JCC lose their legal force. With this, Georgia terminated the peacekeeping operation in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.

The political space left open after the collapse of the Joint Control Commission was filled with a new official dialogue platform - the Geneva International Discussions.

The Geneva discussions, unlike the JCC, is not a negotiation format. Rather, it is a discussion, dialogue platform, created in accordance with the agreements of D. Medvedev - N. Sarkozy of August 21 and September 8, with the inaugural session on October 15, 2008. Within the framework of the Geneva discussions, two working groups are working - on security issues and on humanitarian issues. The political foundation for the Geneva Discussions is the six-point Medvedev-Sarkozy plan of August 12, 2008:

1. Do not use force.
2. Stop all hostilities permanently.
3. Free access to humanitarian aid.
4. The Georgian armed forces are returning to their places of permanent deployment.
5. The armed forces of the Russian Federation are withdrawn to the line preceding the start of hostilities.
6. Creation of international guarantees to ensure stability and security in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (The Georgian version reads like this: "The start of international discussions on the conditions of security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia").⁴

The drafting of the text of the agreement, as well as the subsequent steps to implement the clauses of this agreement, ran up against many obstacles, both political and linguistic. Politically, one of the most painful issues is the question of the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Although it was originally intended to include the issue of status in the clauses of the agreement, it was not included in the final version.

The original text of the sixth point was as follows: "The start of international discussions on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia." After consultations with Mikhail Saakashvili, the thesis on the international discussion of the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, previously included in the sixth point of the Plan, was excluded.

In addition to the political differences of opinion, the implementation of the clauses of the agreement faced linguistic obstacles. Disagreements over the implementation of the terms of the peace agreement arose due to

⁴ Six Point Peace Plan. Documented by the Government of Georgia
<https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/9bbbc7.pdf>

inaccurate translation: the original document was signed in French and subsequently translated into Russian and English. The Russian text speaks of security "for South Ossetia and Abkhazia," which implies and justifies the establishment of "buffer zones" at the borders of the republics, while the French and English versions talk about security "in" these republics, which implies the "inculcation" of security.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claims that due to inaccurate translation, the last paragraph was distorted and turned into a wording where the emphasis is placed on the "guarantees of security on the territory of the republics."⁵

Today, the Geneva Discussions are the only official dialogue platform. This format is attended by representatives of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, and the United States under the co-chairmanship of the UN, EU, and OSCE. And while this dialogue platform has not yielded serious political results so far, it has demonstrated itself as an effective mechanism for developing measures and agreements to promote and push for specific initiatives. For example, during the fourth round of the Geneva discussions in February 2009, participants of this format agreed to establish incident prevention mechanisms along the border in order to ensure safer living conditions for the local population. A 24-hour hotline was also created. Representatives of law enforcement and security agencies from both sides, the Russian military and border guards, the EU mission in Georgia and the OSCE are taking part in this work.

Despite some concrete achievements, the perception about the Geneva format is quite ambiguous in South Ossetian society; hence, there are diverse opinions about the effectiveness of this platform.

Some people think that this is a good format since it includes all key representatives: on the one hand, the OSCE, the European Union, the UN, and on the other hand, representatives of the Russian Federation, Georgia, the United States, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, plus representatives of the "government in exile". But there is also an opinion that the Geneva Discussions cannot be effective because this platform is "overloaded" with conflicts: Ossetian-Georgian, Abkhaz-Georgian, Russian-Georgian, Russian-Western. All these conflicts have their own peculiarities, their uniqueness, are at different levels, and have different characteristics. Since the platform is highly complex due to the intertwining of many interests of local, regional, and global actors, it is difficult to make decisions that would satisfy all interested parties.

During the time that the Geneva Discussions are active, the main issue - the issue of security - has not been resolved. Perhaps because the parties assign different meanings and conceptualize differently what security is for them. One of the important security aspects within this format is the signing of an agreement on the non-use of force, but for the parties the question of which parties will be the signatories of this document is fundamentally important. Georgia categorically refuses to sign this agreement with South Ossetia

⁵ Lavrov: The world community must ensure the security of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
<https://www.yuga.ru/news/133271/>

and Abkhazia, as this would mean de facto recognition of the status of these newly formed states, which contradicts Georgia's national policy of non-recognition. On the other hand, Georgia is ready to sign such an agreement with the Russian Federation, as it believes that the war in August 2008 was between Georgia and Russia, thereby not recognizing South Ossetia as a party to the conflict. It should be noted that there is another important aspect of this issue - depending on who is the signatory, the responsibility of the parties to the conflict also changes. Even if you look at the situation from the point of view of the policy of non-recognition and territorial integrity of Georgia and considering that the war was fought on the territory of South Ossetia, if the document was signed between Georgia and South Ossetia, this emphasizes the act of aggression on the part of Georgia defining South Ossetia as a victim. If the signatories are Georgia and Russia, this shifts the emphasis to Russia as an aggressor and, accordingly, an occupier following the results of the war, and Georgia looks like a victim. From Georgia's point of view, the absence of formal agreements on the non-use of force between Georgia and the Russian Federation and with the presence of Russian military bases on the territory of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the security of Georgia is not guaranteed and there are no deterring factors that would prevent the possible outbreak of hostilities on the territory under its control. In this context, for Georgia, security means the signing of an agreement on the non-use of force between Russia and Georgia, the withdrawal of Russian military bases from the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the replacement of Russian military forces with international mechanisms represented by some type of international peacekeeping or police forces. Russia and South Ossetia are against the international presence before the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia by Georgia and the international community, as well as against the withdrawal of the Russian military base. In the eyes of the Russian Federation and South Ossetia, the legality of the Russian military presence is conditioned by a bilateral interstate agreement. In addition, the South Ossetian side considers Georgia to be the aggressor that unleashed the 2008 war, therefore the latter is obliged to assume all obligations on the non-use of force by signing a legally binding document with South Ossetia.

In the absence of a signed agreement between the parties, the current guarantee of security contains three main factors:

1. Sets of agreement between the Republic of South Ossetia and the Russian Federation - "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance,"⁶ "Treaty of Alliance and Integration,"⁷ bilateral interagency agreements between the Ministries of Defense, security agencies and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ossetian and Russian sides.⁸
2. The presence of the Russian military base on the territory of South

⁶ Treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia. <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/199>

⁷ Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on alliance and integration. <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4819>

⁸ List of bilateral agreements. Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of South Ossetia. <https://rfsosetia.mid.ru/perecen-dvustoronnih-soglasenij>

Ossetia in accordance with the "Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on a unified Russian military base on the territory of the Republic of South Ossetia."⁹

3. Commitments made by Georgia on unilateral non-use of force through adoption of number of national normative legal documents.¹⁰

In the Georgian-South Ossetian context, the only functioning official dialogue platform is an important mechanism for discussing a range of conflict-related issues. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the interests and positions of many parties are intertwined on this platform. In fact, there are three conflicts that are included on one platform - the Georgian-Ossetian, Georgian-Abkhaz and Russian-Georgian. Moreover, this "heavy format" is further complicated by the invisible presence of a conflict of interests along the Russia-West division lines. These factors hinder rather than facilitate in-depth discussion of issues related specifically to the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. If we also add the lack of political will from the parties, we can then conclude that the resolution of the Ossetian-Georgian conflict is not possible in the near or even in the medium-range future. But even if the Geneva Discussions do not register significant achievements, the existence of this format is already extremely important for building peace, as it maintains the opportunity for dialogue between the parties.

Informal dialogue platforms

Civil society played an important role in the peacebuilding process. Since the mid-90s, it has participated in various dialogue formats, both regionally and internationally. Until 2011, South Ossetia demonstrated openness and cooperation with the international community, involving civil society institutions in this process. The Department of Internal Policy and Information Support of the Administration of the President of the Republic of South Ossetia presented a draft "Program for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of South Ossetia for 2009-2011." The document states that, "the establishment and development of the Republic of South Ossetia as a dynamic, modern state with high standards of quality of life is possible only through stimulation and involvement of human potential by the means of developing civil society."¹¹ Unfortunately, after 2011 local NGOs that were involved in peacebuilding and human rights activities appeared under immense pressure. In 2014, the South Ossetian parliament adopted the "On non-profit organizations" law. According to this law, organizations receiving financial support from foreign sources are categorized as "foreign partners," and there are significant

⁹ Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on a unified Russian military base on the territory of the Republic of South Ossetia. https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/2_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page-128/45159

¹⁰ Resolution on Basic Directions of Georgia's Foreign Policy. Parliament of Georgia. <http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/23920/Parlementsresolutie.pdf>

¹¹ Draft program for the establishment and development of civil society in the Republic of South Ossetia as an integral part of statehood for 2009-2011. <http://osinform.org/26281-proekt-programmy-stanovleniya-i-razvitiya-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-v-ryuo-kak-sostavnoy-chasti-gosudarstvennosti-na-2009-2011-gg.html>

restrictions of their activities.¹² Initially, these organizations were classified as “foreign agents” following the example of the Russian version of the law, but after lengthy debates between representatives of civil society with deputies in the parliament, they managed to convince parliamentarians to change the term “agent” to the term “partner.”¹³ This law, the massive media campaign against NGOs, the creation of obstacles by the authorities for participants in various peacebuilding projects to leave the country to participate in different meetings, and the threats and pressure towards them, caused major damage to such an important civil society institution as NGOs. Almost all these organizations were forced to close down and cease their activities as legal entities. Some of them closed, experiencing deep disappointment in peacebuilding work, because their long-term, meticulous work was destroyed by the war. Others were not able to withstand the pressure from the authorities, and some terminated their activities to protest against injustice towards them and their work. Currently, civil society in South Ossetia is fragmented. Individual activists continue their activities in the areas of peacebuilding and human rights protection as individuals, and participate in various initiatives in their personal or expert capacity.

Even though today the dialogue interaction between the Georgian and Ossetian society is in crisis, the region has accumulated sufficient experience in conducting dialogue. During the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, there were many bilateral, regional, international peacebuilding platforms, that brought together youth, scientists, women, experts, journalists, and representatives of mixed families. Many of these initiatives were short-term in nature and experience showed that the most effective were long-term engagements. Several of these platforms can be highlighted as example of long-term peacebuilding dialogue platforms.

One of the first formats of dialogue in the Georgian-Ossetian context was the Harvard University negotiation project led by Roger Fisher. In the mid-90s, the project created an opportunity for different groups from Georgia and South Ossetia to meet to discuss a wide range of issues and problems related to their relationship. Journalists, experts, women, and youth were the main participants in this format.

The Harvard project was supplemented by a unique platform created with the help of the British organization International Alert Caucasian Forum. It was a network of local peacebuilders and non-governmental organizations active in the field of conflict resolution and prevention, which included civil society activists and NGOs from the North and South Caucasus and Moscow. The activities of the Forum were aimed at finding peaceful ways of resolving conflicts in the Caucasus through strengthening trust between peoples. Many events and activities were conducted within the framework of the Caucasian Forum, however, the most significant contribution was the nurturing of the

¹² Law of the Republic of South Ossetia “On non-profit organizations” <https://ugo-osetia.ru/politika/ofitsialno/zakon-respubliki-yuzhnaya-osetiya-o-nekom-mercheskikh-organizatsiyakh>

¹³ South Ossetia adopted a law on non-profit organizations
Source: <http://cominf.org/node/1166501847> <http://cominf.org/node/1166501847>

peacebuilding resource in the Caucasus, the strengthening of civil society on the ground, as well as the development of the practice of facilitation and mediation through combination of Western and traditional Caucasian methods.

After a period of relative calm, peacebuilding activities regained relevance after the 2008 war. Despite the fact that various peacebuilding projects intensified in the post-war period, one of the main dialogue formats was the Point of View platform, created at the initiative of the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University (USA). Even though initially only one university-facilitated meeting was planned, the productivity and effectiveness of this format ensured its long-term nature. For several years, Ossetian and Georgian participants met three or four times a year within the framework of the Point of View format. The groups consisted of representatives of the expert community, NGOs, civil activists, representatives of government agencies, journalists, and residents of border areas. Issues related to missing persons, imprisoned citizens of South Ossetia in Georgian prisons, problems related to the irrigation system and the Zonkari reservoir, and human security problems on both sides of the border and other humanitarian issues were discussed at the meetings. The Point of View platform facilitated the handover of archive materials related to South Ossetia by Georgian colleagues. This format also served as a catalyst for cooperation - the participants found partners for further projects and research. With increasing pressure on civil society in South Ossetia, maintaining the previous form of this site became impractical. However, despite this challenge, the accumulated experience and trust made it possible to restructure this dialogue platform and reorient the work to focus on expert and analytical research and analysis. Experts, coordinators, and facilitators continue to work and analyze the current situation in Ossetian-Georgian relations and try to contribute to building sustainable peace and security in the South Caucasus region. They hold international conferences and develop publications on issues related to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.

If the previous formats were focused on the already mature citizens of the republics, then the dialogue platform created by the Berghoff Foundation focused exclusively on the youth of the republics. The focus of this dialogue format was educational, and young people from South Ossetia and Georgia studied the conflict contexts of other countries during exploratory and study trips. These study trips introduced a new vision of their own conflict through the prism of other conflicts, which helped to evaluate/re-evaluate what was happening and helped to look at the situation from different angles. Later, within the framework of this project, training and education of young facilitators took place. One of the spin offs of this format was the “Listening” project. As part of the project, audio recordings of the memories of ordinary people about the war, their experiences and emotions were collected. Later, these audio recordings were played at the next meeting. Through listening together to these memories, the participants experienced these emotions together with the respondents, and started to understand and realize the tragedy of the situation more deeply. These are the type of projects that nurture real peacebuilders for whom peace is not only a terminological concept, but also a vital necessity.

The experience of these unofficial platforms emphasizes the value of dialogue formats not only for solving specific humanitarian issues like the irrigation system, issue of prisoners, and missing persons, but also creates an opportunity for rethinking the past, developing emotional empathy and nurturing a new generation that perceives peace as one of the main values.

Practice shows that building sustainable peace requires collaboration of all interested stakeholders. When formal dialogue platforms work in synergy with civic formats, they can be successful. But in addition to external dialogue platforms, an intra-societal dialogue is also necessary. This is both within civil society and between society and the government, since on many issues, including those related to the Ossetian-Georgian conflict, there is no internal consensus.

Contemporary challenges for the Ossetian-Georgian dialogue

The development of conflicts, as well as the development of possible measures for their peaceful resolution, takes place in dynamic conditions of political, social, economic and geopolitical changes. This amalgam of constantly changing factors creates various challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the Ossetian-Georgian dialogue.

Internal challenges

1. Ambiguous perception of the Ossetian-Georgian conflict resolution. Part of the South Ossetian society believes that the conflict was resolved by the results of the August 2008 war. This segment of the population considers it inappropriate to have a dialogue with the Georgian side until Georgia gives a political and legal assessment of the events in the context of Georgian-Ossetian relations in the 20th through the early 21st centuries, does not recognize the genocide of the southern branch of the Ossetian people, and does not recognize the independence of the Republic of South Ossetia. This conviction is also supported by the sense of confidence in security, the issue of which is perceived as resolved by bilateral Russian-South Ossetian treaties, interagency agreements in the field of defense and security, and the presence of a Russian military base on the territory of South Ossetia. Another part of society is confident that the conflict has not been resolved and is unlikely to be resolved in the near future. Absence of active military fighting does not mean existence of a sustainable peace. Rather, it looks like a temporary break. This is a very dangerous situation, as the events in Karabakh once again showed, and unresolved conflicts can periodically flare up. This will continue until the conflict is completely resolved.
2. Isolation of South Ossetia. After 2008, step by step, circles of isolation began to form around South Ossetia. This was facilitated by both external and internal factors. The first circle of isolation was the result of Georgia's policy towards South Ossetia. On October 23, 2008, Georgia adopted the "Law on the Occupied Territories," the purpose of which was "to determine the status of the territories occupied as

a result of the military aggression of the Russian Federation, to establish a special legal regime in these territories."¹⁴ In accordance with this law, all foreign citizens entering South Ossetia from the Russian Federation are subject to sanctions upon entering the territory of Georgia. The second circle of isolation (self-isolation) was created by South Ossetia itself through closing the border with Georgia. South Ossetia has only one open border with the Russian Federation. This means that, on the one hand, legal entities and individuals cannot enter from the Russian side due to the prohibition of the Georgian authorities, but on the other hand, from the Georgian side, they also cannot enter because there is a ban on the part of the South Ossetian authorities. The third circle of isolation is created by the Russian Federation. To enter the territory of South Ossetia, foreign nationals need to obtain not only the consent of the South Ossetian authorities, but also the consent of the Russian side. In addition, citizens of foreign countries must obtain a multiple-entry Russian visa, since the way to South Ossetia lies through Russia. This is a rather complicated process. The fourth circle of isolation is created by the international community, limiting South Ossetia's participation in international events and access to international mechanisms and various international platforms. The fifth circle of isolation/self-isolation is currently created by an objective circumstance of a global scale - the pandemic associated with COVID-19.

3. Weakness of civil society institutions. After the end of the 2008 war, the civil society of South Ossetia took an active part in breaking the information blockade against South Ossetia and in the process of objectively informing the international community about the events of August 2008, trying to convey the position, interests, and fears of South Ossetian society. After the adoption of the Law on Occupied Territories by Georgia and the closure of the Ossetian-Georgian border from South Ossetia, it became more difficult for international organizations to enter the country. Many donors refused to support projects in South Ossetia due to lack of access to the territory and inability to monitor the implementation of projects. This undoubtedly had a negative impact on the activities of many South Ossetian NGOs since international donor organizations are actually the only source of funding for them. After the adoption of the law "On non-profit organizations" and pressure on civil society institutions, the third sector of South Ossetia fell into decay. The fragmented third sector was unable to unite to defend its interests and was crushed one by one. However, some members of these organizations have begun to take on individual roles and continue to work as civic activists and experts in peacebuilding.
4. Socio-political crisis and aggravation of internal contradictions. The

¹⁴ Law of Georgia "On Occupied Territories."
<https://matsne.gov.ge/ru/document/download/19132/6/ru/pdf>

socio-political situation in South Ossetia is complicated by a number of unresolved issues and new challenges. One of the most problem prone areas that affects the socio-political life of South Ossetia is the issue of delimitation and demarcation of borders. In August 2019, the incident with the arrangement of a checkpoint by the Georgian police near the village of Tsnelis (Uista) in the Znaur region not only caused tension in Ossetian-Georgian relations, but also raised significant public outrage. Ossetian society believed that this situation is the result of the negligence of its own authorities, which resulted in South Ossetia losing part of its territory. The situation is aggravated by fears that similar episodes may occur in other parts of the Ossetian-Georgian border. Poor and unclear work on demarcation and delimitation of the border resulted in local residents losing part of their property (land, garden, real estate), which ended up on the other side of the border. The same situation has developed with the border villages in Georgia. This, of course, causes considerable discontent among local residents on both sides of the border.

The functioning of the law enforcement system is another area in which incidents result in massive public discontent. The hunger strike to protest the conditions of detention in the correctional facility of Tskhinvali ended with the use of force by riot police. Several prisoners were hospitalized with injuries, which caused a public outcry and condemnation of the actions of law enforcement agencies. There was a heated political debate in parliament, where opposition forces tried to force the resignation of the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Internal Affairs. The unsuccessful attempt by the opposition to remove two ministers personally supported by the president caused a political crisis in the country. The crisis was aggravated by another incident that shook Ossetian society. At the end of August 2020, Inal Dzhabiev, detained for the allegations of assassination attempt of Minister of Internal Affairs, died after or during interrogation and, based on the published photographs widely circulated in social media, he was subjected to ill-treatment and torture while in custody.

The quarantine measures affected the economic situation in the republic, primarily affecting those who worked in small and medium-sized businesses. In March 2020, food supply disruptions began, which led to panic buying of food, and caused a shortage of essential goods, food, medicines, face masks and antiseptics, etc. Nevertheless, the food crisis in the country was due not so much to the closure of the border, but to a change in customs rules. Local entrepreneurs appeared unprepared to conduct business according to the new rules provided for by the updated customs protocols that came into force in 2020. Previously, a simplified regime for custom clearance of goods was in effect, but from 2020 the rules of the Customs Union were applied. Thus, for the first time in the post-war period, South Ossetia

faced a food crisis. In such socio-political crisis, one of the key tools for neutralizing political opponents is speculation about their involvement in the Georgian special services and their work to facilitate the return of South Ossetia to the jurisdiction of Georgia.

The arising public-political crises since 2011 underlined the failures in the political system of South Ossetia. Today, the existence of a presidential system is already being questioned, and there is a growing public debate on the need to transition to a parliamentary system. But at the moment South Ossetia is not ready for the transition to a parliamentary system, since as global experience shows, such a system actually functions in countries with developed democracy and a high-level of legal consciousness in society, which unfortunately is not yet available in South Ossetia. Nevertheless, it would be more optimal to switch to a mixed system, since it does not completely transfer all governing leverage to parliament, although it significantly limits the executive power of unilateral decision-making.

External challenges

1. Instability in the region. The second Karabakh war in September 2020 alarmed all the countries of the South Caucasus and posed a serious challenge to stability in the region. The war in Artsakh refreshed the memories of the 2008 war in South Ossetia and re-actualized security issues. Most likely, the results of the 44-day war in Karabakh are not final and hostilities will resume. The current situation is possibly an intermediate stage in the process of the complete annexation of Karabakh by Azerbaijan or in the step-by-step return of the lands lost during the war by Artsakh. For the first time in the past 18 years, territories have been conquered by military means in the region. South Ossetian society fears that the results of the Karabakh war may inspire Georgia to take active steps in returning South Ossetia to be under its jurisdiction. There are signs of development of new poles of political domination in the South Caucasus. From the point of view of security and national interests, the South Caucasus is a critical region for Russia. The Karabakh war allowed Russia to expand its military presence in the region through the deployment of military peacekeepers, and it will most likely remain there for a long time. With the unfolding of the Karabakh events, Turkey has openly declared itself as a major player in the South Caucasus, and will have to be reckoned with. Most likely, Turkey will compete to establish its leadership in the region. This means that it will enter an active phase of partnership-rivalry with the Russian Federation, which, will most likely not want to give up its leading position in the region. In the South Caucasus, Russia will be supported by South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenia, to which Russia has clearly demonstrated who the boss is in the region and in which direction it is needs to turn, especially since Turkey is Armenia's a long-standing enemy. Turkey

will be supported by Georgia and Azerbaijan. The latter is indebted to Turkey for the victory in Karabakh. Even though there is an ambiguous attitude towards Turkey in Georgian society, in the rest of the region Turkey is seen as a partner because of Georgia's NATO membership aspirations. Therefore, Turkey's presence in the South Caucasus will mean NATO's presence. In addition, it should be noted that there are strong anti-Russian sentiments in Georgia and therefore it will probably support Turkey as a power that opposes Russia, forming a new configuration of the balance of power in the region. This means that the South Caucasus will periodically enter a zone of turbulence, which may pose a threat to all the countries of the South Caucasus.

2. Failure of international mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts in the region. Over the entire period of the work of international missions to resolve conflicts, none of them have been successful. The failure of the OSCE is especially noteworthy. It failed in 2008 in South Ossetia as an organization working in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. In September 2020, the OSCE Minsk Group again failed to do anything to prevent the war in Karabakh. There is a great deal of skepticism in the region about the presence of this organization in conflict zones as it has shown itself to be inadequate to address security matters. Perhaps the organization needs internal restructuring and the development of clearer and more effective mechanisms for the prevention and/or resolution of conflicts.
3. The pandemic. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, in April 2020, South Ossetia was quarantined by the decision of the authorities. This decision was justified, since the number of infected in the border countries - Russia and Georgia - increased dramatically. It was assumed that the quarantine of the country would buy South Ossetia time to prepare for the spread of the virus in the country. Entry to South Ossetia was restricted as much as possible, and all those who entered underwent a two-week strict quarantine. It was these measures that allowed the virus to be kept under control, which meant that South Ossetia survived the first wave. Although the quarantine measures were justified, they turned out to be too long. Living in a confined space for several months has become a big problem. During the severe quarantine from mid-April to mid-September, the South Ossetian authorities did not take sufficient action to protect their population. During the second wave of the pandemic and the lifting of quarantine measures in South Ossetia in September, the virus spread, but it turned out that the hospitals were not technically ready to accept such an influx of patients. The country's health care system was faced with a shortage of personal protective equipment for doctors, medications, and consumables. Problems with the payment of pensions to retired citizens who receive pensions on the territory of the Russian Federation were added to the health problems. Due to quarantine, they could not leave for several months to withdraw their pensions from their accounts. The pandemic and being in forced self-isolation brought

out and exacerbated internal conflicts, which pushed the problem of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict into the background. After the 2008 war and to this day, no progress has been made in the resolution of the Ossetian-Georgian conflict. Over the years, all civic dialogue platforms have disappeared. If before the quarantine there were still some civil society meetings with the Georgian side in various formats - bilateral, regional, and international - such meetings have become impossible due to the pandemic. The only remaining dialogue platform is the official platform - the Geneva Discussions, which also partially switched to online mode. After the forced quarantine measures including the official closure of the borders, relations with the Georgian side practically ceased. Despite this, some of the dialogue formats were able to adapt to the new conditions of teleworking and remote communication and went online. The pandemic has shown that the virtual space will become an inevitable part of the life of every person. The realization will come that the professions that were in demand yesterday will be irrelevant in the near future. Importantly, the pandemic has shown once again that new approaches to regional security should be developed with the participation of all actors of the regional processes. We also need new approaches to the issues of conflict resolution/settlement/transformation.

Unfortunately, it can be said that the South Caucasus is a region only as a geographical concept, and does not appear as such either from an economic or political point of view. The only thing that unites all six countries of the South Caucasus is the geographical location and the conflicts that separate them. There is no common South Caucasian identity that could stand above ethnic or cultural-religious identity. There is joint involvement in the processes taking place in the region. From this position, one can explain why not a single model for the creation of a regional security system in the South Caucasus, periodically proposed by different countries of the region, could be implemented, as well as why it is unrealistic to talk about the creation of such a system in the near future.

A qualitatively different situation is developing in the world today. Global shifts and changes are taking place. A global transformation is underway, which will create new realities, new challenges, new threats, and new opportunities. If you look at the South Caucasus region through this prism, you can see that all the views, all the mechanisms and tools that have existed until today are hopelessly outdated, and therefore different approaches, a different vision, and different thinking is needed in order to adequately respond to the quickly changing reality and address issues in the field of prevention, transformation, and resolution of conflicts. Our outdated, blinkered thinking does not correspond to new realities. We do not see the new opportunities that the changing world opens up, we do not change the perspective and our viewpoint of the situation, therefore we cannot find new solutions and approaches that, perhaps, lie on the surface and can be much simpler than we expect. The most important obstacle to this is the lack of the will of the parties to accept new realities.

As for the dialogue in the process of building peace, it is priceless and is not only a tool, but is also a value in peacemaking. Dialogue is a form of exchanging opinions, points of view, and statements. This is a form of communication that involves feedback. When there is no personal interaction, personal contact, or “humanization” of the other side, each person killed on the opposite side will simply be a statistical figure. But if the other side is conceptualized as individual faces, fates, and personal emotions, then each victim on the other side can be seen as someone’s personal tragedy, evoking sympathy and emotional participation in the ongoing tragedy. It is these emotions that push us to take action in defense of peace, encourage us to make tough decisions, and to resist violence, thereby laying a brick in the foundation for a peaceful future.

WHY SHOULD THE GEORGIAN STATE NOT BE AFRAID OF GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN INFORMAL RELATIONS?

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The Georgian-Ossetian conflict in the 1990s has grown into a difficult one to resolve. Incremental political, social, and economic gaps continue to create barriers that are hard to transgress. Conflicting interpretations of the conflict or outright negligence and mystification make it an arduous task to find effective approaches when choices are already too scarce.

In light of rocky relationships between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, consistent civil dialogue and informal relationships have always been a critical part of efforts for Georgian-Ossetian conflict transformation. For this reason, there have been numerous attempts to invite officials to take part in this process, however, the Georgian state, the main subject of this paper, has mostly viewed such efforts with suspicion. Adjusting security lenses to conflict resolution efforts have led to a situation where, since the 1990s, Tbilisi considered the informal dialogue as a process lacking seriousness or undermining state institutions and, in many instances, attempted to exert control or marginalize it.

Sadly, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and then the so-called treaty on *Alliance and Integration* signed by Moscow and Tskhinvali in 2015, delivered a heavy blow to the Georgian-Ossetian informal dialogue. This turned once dynamic and multilateral contacts into mostly anti-crisis and “fire extinguishing” instruments.

The aim of this paper is to showcase the importance of the Georgian-Ossetian informal dialogue to the Georgian state and wider public so that incumbent authorities as well as members of the public engage in and support it against the backdrop of stalled Georgian-Ossetian relations, so called borderization and problems induced by it. The paper is an attempt to demonstrate that informal dialogue and personal contacts complement the state’s peace policy, while human and social capital that they nurture may effectively be used not only for crisis mitigation purposes, but also long-term confidence building efforts should the Georgian state come to the point of revisiting its stance. At the same time, with instable official communication channels saturated with confrontational rhetoric, informal dialogue remains the only reliable and cooperation-oriented format.

Official and informal peace dialogue in retrospect

An informal dialogue embraces a rather wide range of relationships. In its broad meaning, it covers everything that remains beyond the scope of official diplomacy including non-governmental and informal relations and activities between individuals and groups. Normally, informal dialogue is a well thought of process focused on finding a resolution to the problem. Even

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though its participants operate beyond an official governance system, they nevertheless have ties with decision makers and often become part of the official system.²

Interrelationships between an official peace policy and an informal dialogue in the wake of armed conflicts is, as a rule, rather tight and mutually influencing. Informal dialogues facilitate more meaningful communication between societies encouraging the participation of those whose voices would otherwise never be heard. In addition, one of the purposes of informal relations is to obtain information and get to know the stance of the other party. Within this regard, informal dialogue may even be viewed as a continuation of an official dialogue or diplomatic efforts.³

In Georgia's case, the experience of streamlining formal and informal dialogues has been inconsistent and varying in nature. Since the 1990s, incumbent authorities have had different approaches and therefore, this experience is to be analyzed against the specific political context.

In the wake of the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Shevardnadze's government was rather open to informal dialogues and meetings. Unlike official negotiations during which the parties would jump to discuss the most difficult issues relating to territorial arrangement, representatives of civil society ignored blueprints and tried to incentivize discussions with regard to all possible scenarios. Notably, this process was open to not only supporters of the government, but also opposition from both sides of the conflict as well as IDPs, veterans, ex-combatants, journalists, and various groups of influencers.⁴

However, in light of dysfunctional state control mechanisms, routine arbitrariness of law enforcement and military structures, and permanent military hostilities taking place in the conflict regions, the state policy was nothing but inconsistent. Relationships built throughout years and success stories would disappear overnight as a result of aggressive actions undertaken either by individuals or armed groups.

The 2003 Rose Revolution and Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency had generated new expectations in the public. Saakashvili, who built his election campaign on the promises to strengthen state institutes, build democracy and the economic prosperity of the country, stepped into the conflict resolution processes on day one of his presidency. However, just like his predecessor, his policy turned out to be inconsistent and controversial.

Paata Zakareishvili, one of the architects of the informal peace dialogue formats, argues that along with positive signals coming from the Georgian politics of 2004-2005, one could see a striking change to the context that was absent from Shevardnadze's policies: New Georgian authorities would go

² Kaye, D. (2007). Rethinking Track Two Diplomacy. In *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia* (pp. 1-30). Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation.

³ Chataway, C.J. (1998) Track II Diplomacy: From a Track I Perspective. *Negotiation Journal* 14 (pp. 269-287)

⁴ Antonenko Oksana, Failures of the Conflict Transformation and Root Causes of the August War. In *Failed Prevention - The Case of Georgia*, National Defence Academy and Bureau for Security Policy & PFP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes, 2010, p. 88

to great lengths to prevent Georgian politicians from participating in bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian permanent informal dialogues.⁵ A statement made by Mikheil Saakashvili on 7 April 2005 testifies to the monopolization of the peace process and bringing discredit upon informal dialogues by the state authorities: "We are done with running with Kokoiti and Baghaphsh from city to city. Personally, I am not going to meet with either Kokoiti or Baghaphsh. I will never visit these people anywhere. If they want anything, let them come to Tbilisi. I will give them my work address and even my home number. I am ready to openly talk to them."⁶

Such an approach led to a situation where by 2008 attempts to achieve mutual understanding through thoughtfulness and run a constructive dialogue had given way to radical and uncompromising views contemplating the use of force in Georgian, as well as Ossetian and Russian mainstreams.⁷

Against this backdrop, those engaged in informal relations and dialogue processes managed to come with an accurate forecast of the August 2008 War and identified all major symptoms, which characterize the Georgian-Ossetian conflict to this day:

- Political elites are not ready to take responsibility for embarking on bilateral work focusing on conflict transformation;
- The parties to the conflict have no long-term vision as to how the conflict can be resolved;
- Tbilisi continues to keep the Georgian-Ossetian conflict stashed away and recognizes only the presence of the Georgian-Russian conflict while South Ossetia builds its rhetoric solely on the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and keeps a blind eye to those existential threats brought about by its incremental cohesion with Russia;
- Conflict related issues remain a subject of manipulation with regard to the international PR and domestic politics.

Cumbersome legacy of the August 2008 war

The August 2008 war with its human and political costs delivered a heavy blow to Georgian-Ossetian relations and the confidence building efforts. In addition to reproducing psychological traumas and an image of the enemy on both sides, the war brought about to important trends, which in turn, have significantly influenced the informal dialogue: The broader public has lost all interest in conflict resolution processes, while the political elite have resorted entirely to a 'single conflict' discourse.

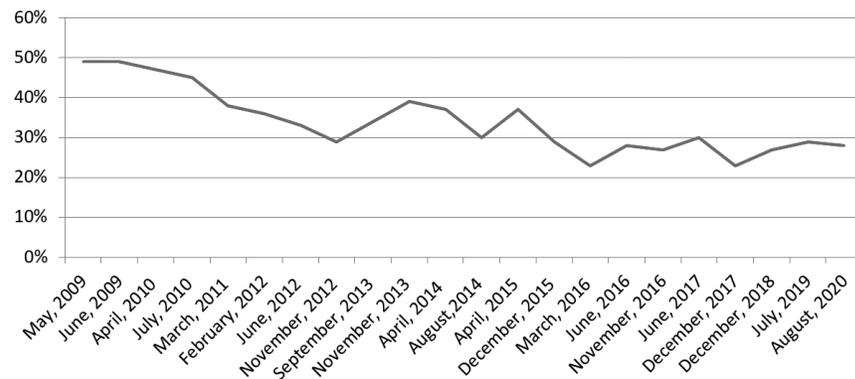
In fact, since 2009 the conflicts have been losing public appeal, a trend that is easily discernable by looking at NDI's annual survey: Even though

⁵ Zakareishvili Paata, 'How the Rose Government progressively destroyed the Georgian-Abkhaz informal dialogue process', Rezonansi, 19-20-22 September, 2008

⁶ 'Georgian Republic', #81, 8 April 2005 cited in Zakareishvili Paata, 'How the Rose Government progressively destroyed the Georgian-Abkhaz informal dialogue process', Rezonansi, 19-20-22 September, 2008

⁷ Antonenko Oksana, Failures of the Conflict Transformation and Root Causes of the August War. In *Failed Prevention - The Case of Georgia*, National Defence Academy and Bureau for Security Policy & PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, 2010, p. 91

the problem of the country's territorial integrity rank among the top five issues for the population, the number of people believing it to be a priority has been on a steady decline (see the diagram below).⁸



Source : www.ndi.org/georgia-polls

This trend has been shaped by multiple factors (i.e. deteriorating social conditions, lack of information about developments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, political populism, etc.), however, the 2008 War with its dire consequences, has been the biggest contributor so far. The Occupation and the recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence by Moscow assured the Georgian population that peaceful resolution is the only way to resolve the conflict, which by now has widely been seen as a complicated and protracted process. In addition, open discussions in public spaces have withered due to the complex nature of the conflict and overall pessimism. Political actors have shied away from taking bold steps and making statements with regard to the conflicts in order to avert a political losing hand, a tendency which is rather damaging since it transforms into nihilistic sentiments among the wider public around the prospect for a peaceful transformation of the conflict.

As for the single conflict narrative pursued by the Georgian political elites, it effectively originated in the aftermath of the 2008 War and was shaped initially by narrow party interests that had little, if anything, in common with the wider public and perceptions dominating the scene in the conflict regions. Along with time, targeted ignorance and conversations only about the Russian Occupation have grown comfortable for the Georgian political elites to the effect that the discourse created for the survival of the party quickly turned into a national policy. This comfort is mainly created by a situation that stresses the responsibility of Russia as a sole factor, and enables the Georgian authorities to turn a blind eye to their own share in the devastating situation and an almost irreversible process of estrangement between Georgians

⁸ Library of NDI Georgia Public Opinion Research. URL: <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

and Ossetians.

It should be noted that from the discourse the single conflict narrative has been translated into an institutional arrangement of the peace policy. The office of the state minister for reconciliation (formerly, reintegration) and civic equality, an agency which should have been a flagship for peace policy planning, is among the weakest governmental organization. This sets the tone for the institutional imbalance favoring powerful security services with an abundance of resources. Security services have viewed the conflicts exclusively from a security angle and frowned upon audacious political and civil initiatives.

Hence, the 2008 War and the Russian Occupation led to the two new trends in Georgia's societal-political life, which have significantly influenced the civil dialogue. The introduction of these two new variables – decreased interest of the public and the single conflict discourse – has created a new status quo and drawn additional red lines, which in turn has further restricted the scale of the Georgian-Ossetian dialogue and the acceptance of new approaches.

The importance of Georgian-Ossetian informal dialogue at present

In spite of expectations of progress following the change in power as a result of the 2012 elections, the national peace policy continues to fail existing needs. In light of the existing gaps in consolidation and coordination and unwillingness to take bold steps, the Georgian Dream's reconciliation policy is entirely centered around the maintenance of the status quo.

In addition to internal factors, the signing of the so-called treaty on Alliance and Integration between Moscow and Tskhinvali in 2015⁹ brought on perhaps the biggest distress to the Georgian-Ossetian informal dialogue since 2008. Since the treaty has harmonized the parties' legal frameworks, as well as social security and economic and educational systems, the space for local civil society actors has drastically shrunk in South Ossetia, as it did in Russia.

Restrictions over self-organization capacities of the Ossetian civil society have transformed the Georgian-Ossetian peace dialogue from a long-term and dynamic process to a one serving crisis management with night watch functions. In spite of this challenging context, the peace dialogue continues to remain faithful in carrying out these functions manifested in the following two directions:

- A) Thanks to the informal dialogue, representatives of civil society routinely exchange reliable information which may be used for the prevention of a looming crisis, making peace policies healthier or addressing a specific problem.
- B) Informal relations may be used to manage or mitigate those crises which cannot be effectively managed by state authorities.

The essence of the first direction is rather self-explanatory, while the other is associated with a comparatively new type of crises that ensued as a result of the 2008 developments and the accompanying "borderization." Three of such developments from the recent past well testifies to the above said.

⁹ Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Южная Осетия о союзничестве и интеграции, 18.03.2015 URL: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4819>

The first case is related to Archil Tetunashvili, 35, a Georgian ex-military who was kidnapped on 22 February 2018 and tortured to death. For 26 days, the Georgian side demanded that the body of the deceased be handed over to the family. Finally, the body was handed over to the Georgian side thanks to the efforts of Georgian athletes and Ossetian-born wrestler and politician Dzambolat Tedeev.^{10, 11}

Tedeev, together with his Georgian counterparts, also played a key role in releasing Maia Otinashvili, a Georgian woman of Khurvaleti village who was kidnapped from her own backyard on 29 September 2018 for an alleged violation of the Russian border, according to the South Ossetian de-facto security committee. On Otinashvili's release after 10 days spent in Tskhinvali jail, Georgian athletes stated that the release was made possible thanks to "mutual respect between athletes."¹² The key role of informal negotiations in the successful resolution of the Otinashvili case was highlighted by the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality and the State Security Service.¹³

Yet another widely publicized case is related to medical doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili, who spent 49 days in Tskhinvali jail after he had been detained on an alleged violation of the so-called "state border" on 9 November 2019. In spite of the intense international pressure applied by the Georgian state, it was only through informal relations with Georgian opera singer Paata Burchuladze and his Tskhinvali based colleague Veronika Jioeva playing the key role, that Gaprindashvili was finally released and handed over to the Georgian side.

Therefore, the existing trend demonstrates that the Georgian-Ossetian informal dialogue and people-to-people contacts have played an important role in crisis management. However, against the backdrop of shrinking space for actions, the work on long-term conflict transformation processes seems more and more complicated. Sadly, without this work, crisis management is far more complicated and difficult to cope with.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to draw the attention of the public as well as authorities to the problem of withering Georgian-Ossetian civil informal dialogue. Since dire developments in 2008 and the "borderization," informal relations on both sides of the Line of the Divide have acquired even greater importance. However, these relations seem to be incrementally difficult to

maintain against the backdrop of the space restricted by politics. Consistent and diverse informal Georgian-Ossetian dialogues originating in the 1990s have turned into fire extinguishers.

For civic activism to reach tangible results and transform into a confidence building processes, it requires engagement, rather than self-isolation from the state authorities. Participation of state representatives in informal dialogue or at least their support, would persuade the parties that the Georgian state is in fact willing to rebuild trust and use all possible formats to this end.

In addition, in the existing hybrid, unstable, and fluid situation in Georgia with the interplay of several actors (both domestic and foreign) in the conflict regions, informal relations are of the utmost importance. Under these circumstances, the state, assuming the latter pursues an adequate policy, must make all efforts to adopt a preventative approach rather than inviting those with important trust and social capital across the lines of the division as a last-minute measure to save the situation.

Therefore, as of today, the proper application of the Georgian-Ossetian informal dialogue and people-to-people contact is as important as ever since these relations create a perspective, which provided that the state revises its approaches, can transform into a cornerstone of the Georgian peace policy and find a way for conflict transformation beyond the political deadlock.

¹⁰ Imedinews, *The wrestler says Tedeev has helped with handing over Tetunashvili's body*. 17.08.2018 URL: <https://bit.ly/32TBNTz>

¹¹ Dzambolat Tedeev was born in Tskhinvali. He is an MP in the North Ossetian parliament and a coach of the Russian national team in wrestling. A wannabe 'president' of South Ossetia in 2011, Tedeev had to give up on his aspiration since he failed to meet the qualification of having resided in Tskhinvali for 10 years. Tedeev is a recipient of 'Hero of Ossetia' award

¹² Aptsiauri Goga, *Maia Otinashvili Returns to Her Family, What the Wrestlers Have to Do with This?* Radio Liberty, 09. 10. 2018 URL: <https://bit.ly/2RSO4la>

¹³ Qartli.ge, 'The decision has been made based on her health status and because of her parents' – footages from Maia Otinashvili's court hearing, 09.10. 2018. URL: <https://bit.ly/3iWgcj8>

WHY IS DIALOGUE A BIG “NO” IN TSKHINVALI?: AN ECONOMIC-FINANCIAL DIMENSION OF THE QUESTION

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Until the recognition of South Ossetia's independence by Russia in 2008, militarily vulnerable and economically fragile Tskhinvali had been willing to engage in direct dialogue with Tbilisi with Georgian and Ossetian politicians, experts, and civil activists holding frequent meetings and targeted discussions. It seemed as if the conflicting parties recognized the urgency of relationships for solving pressing issues. However, the period following 2008 saw a drastic shift in Tskhinvali's attitudes.² Having received security safeguards and substantial economic support along with the recognition from Russia, Tskhinvali lost all appetite for keeping up relations with Tbilisi. This shift may account for a policy pursued by South Ossetian authorities, which may be labeled as partial self-isolationism.³ Tskhinvali cut off all roads connecting with Georgia, banned movement for local communities, and blocked access to South Ossetia for all international organizations.⁴ De facto South Ossetia remains completely isolated from the outside world, except for the Russian Federation, by choice, which is somewhat surprising. One would expect that Tskhinvali, heartened by Russia's recognition, support and funding, would have taken rather bold steps.

For quite some time, Tskhinvali's rigid positioning had been perceived as a manifestation of mistrust towards Saakashvili's government coupled with post-conflict inertia. However, the advent of a new political power – the Georgian Dream as a result of the 2012 parliamentary elections had ostensibly signaled the time for changes in Georgian-Russian-Ossetian relations. The new political group that replaced Saakashvili's government, abhorred by Russia and Ossetians, seemed to be rather benevolent.

Normalizing Georgian-Russian relations and launching a Georgian-Ossetian (as well as Georgian-Abkhaz) dialogue was part of the Georgian Dream's rather voluminous election campaign.⁵ The new government appointed Paata Zakareishvili, a person well known and trusted by the Abkhaz and Ossetians alike, as a state minister for reintegration. Incumbent Georgian authorities believed, and not without logic, that if Georgia pursued constructive policies in relation to Russia, Moscow would enable Tbilisi to reset its relations with Ossetians and the Abkhaz. This very logic assumed that Tskhinvali and Sukhumi would be willing to talk to Tbilisi.

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² Relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali began to take a downhill in 2004. These developments are dealt with in detail in the following chapters (*the author's remark*)

³ “Partial” refers to the fact that Tskhinvali is open to Russia and those countries which have recognized South Ossetian independence.

⁴ Kanashvili, G. “Movement of Ossetians to the rest of Georgia: what is Tskhinvali afraid of?” (2019). Available in Georgian at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/393611/>

⁵ “Nine Steps Taken by the Georgian Dream to Improve Relations with Russia”, (2018) Available in Georgian at: <https://jam-news.net/ge/8-ნაბიჯი-რომელიც-ქართულმა/>

However, it did not take long before Georgian authorities found out that in spite of statements made publicly, not only did Russia not seem to be rushing to encourage Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, but it also viewed such a prospect with suspicion. It also appeared that Sukhumi would agree to a dialogue provided that certain prerequisites would have been met, while the recognition of South Ossetian independence by the Georgian authorities was the only precondition that Tskhinvali demanded prior to engaging in a dialogue with Tbilisi. As a result, in 2020 Georgian-Ossetian relations reached their historical standstill survived only by just a few negotiation mechanisms.⁶

This paper presents an attempt to analyze the extent to which South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region is interested in reviving the dialogue with Georgia, which considering the specific nature of Georgian-Ossetian relations, may be determined by pure necessities. Therefore, for the purpose of the paper, I set out to examine a social-economic model in which the Tskhinvali region currently lives and gauge the degree of its self-sufficiency.

To this end, I studied those financial mechanisms through which Russia has been supporting Tskhinvali since 2008 and compared volumes of the Russian financial support for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Next, in order to provide enough pieces for a bigger picture, the paper provides an overview of those practices which Moscow pursues with regard to highly subsidized regions of its own and other separatist formations. Finally, the last sub-chapter of the paper presents prospective directions within Georgian-Ossetian dialogues identified based on analyzed data.

Economic-Financial Cooperation and the dialogue

Economic cooperation is widely recognized as a powerful stimulus pushing conflicting parties towards dialogue. The Cyprus case, whereby, the progress of the economic development of the southern part of the island has had significant influence over sentiments and attitudes of local communities, provides a good example of the impact of economic cooperation.⁷ Economic incentives have formed the ground for relations between Chisinau and the separatist Tiraspol (further beefed up by the signing of an association agreement by Moldova and the EU).⁸ Ukraine, with certain economic relations (though not always legal) tying its eastern parts, regardless of sporadic hostilities and escalations, is no exception.

The impact of economic-financial cooperation between conflict parties on conflict resolution is well researched. Some commentators argue that such relations (especially when they are illegal) often hamper conflict resolu-

⁶ Geneva International Talks and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (*the author's remark*)

⁷ Ergün Özgür, Nur Köprülü & Min Reuchamps (2019) Drawing Cyprus: Power-sharing, identity and expectations among the next generation in northern Cyprus, *Mediterranean Politics*, 24:2, 237-259, DOI: [10.1080/13629395.2017.1404720](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2017.1404720)

⁸ S. Secieru, 'The visa-free 3D effect: Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine by Stanislav Secieru', (2017), https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2028%20Visa%20liberalisation%20EaP_0.pdf

tion processes.⁹ However, most authors recognize the importance of economic relations as an instrument for the rapprochement of the parties and further transformation of respective conflicts.¹⁰

At the same time, any relation, obviously, must be based on shared interest(s). The interests of the North Cypriots in the southern part of the island is driven by the latter's advanced economic development while Transdnistrians trade their produce in the West under licenses issued by the state of Moldova.

However, there are cases, whereby neither party demonstrates clear-cut economic interest for various reasons. For instance, the entire economic-financial system or social stability may be supported and sustained by a single patron state, or the degree of the economic development in a former metropole may fail to whet even the slightest interest among separatist elites to establish relations. On the contrary, such relations may be at times seen as additional, non-economic threats.

Tbilisi's Economic Policy before 2008

Tbilisi's economic and political relationship with its conflict regions has varied drastically along different periods in time. There were times when Georgia reinforced an economic blockade over Abkhazia through the CIS which remained effective almost up to 2001 (with Putin ascending to power, Russia's attitude eventually changed, resulting in lifting the sanctions against Abkhazia). However, the situation was rather different with regard to South Ossetia due to the fact that South Ossetian authorities were more amenable during negotiations. Additionally, the parties led by Eduard Shevardnadze and Ludwig Chibirov got as close as possible to discussing South Ossetia's integration into the Georgian state on several occasions.¹¹ Therefore, Tbilisi saw no point in implementing harsh measures against Tskhinvali.

As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, South Ossetia's economic model had completely broken: most enterprises were shut down, agriculture was shuttered and Tskhinvali no longer received support from the centers (neither from Moscow nor from Tbilisi).¹² Therefore, maintaining and further deepening economic relations with Tbilisi was vital for both political elites in Tskhinvali as well as the entire society. Against this backdrop, an impromptu trade place emerging in the Tbilisi controlled territory adjacent to Tskhinvali by the end of the 1990s, commonly known as Ergneti Market, came to play a unique role.

Georgians and Ossetians dominated the scene in Ergneti, a destina-

⁹ King, C. (2001). 'The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States', *World Politics*, 53(4), 524-552. Doi:10.1353/wp.2001.0017.

¹⁰ N. Mirimanova, 'Opening the 'Ingur/I gate' for legal Business', International Alert, (2018). Available at: https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Caucasus_OpeningIngurGatePoliticalStudy_EN_2018.pdf

¹¹ Abramashvili, I., Koiava, R. (2018) 25 Years of Georgia's Peace Policy, Caucasian House, P. 61. Available at: <http://regional-dialogue.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/25-Years.pdf>

¹² Alborova, D. (2016) "Institutional Cost of the South Ossetian Conflict: Transformation of Political Institutes in South Ossetia" in *Cost of Conflict: Georgian-South Ossetian Context*. George Mason University.

tion for hundreds of visitors from both South and North Caucasus. According to various sources, revenues from this spontaneous market totaled several million USD.¹³ In 2004, soon after Saakashvili ascended to power in Georgia, new Georgian authorities shut down the market under a ruse of a fight against smuggling.

Incumbent Georgian authorities were indeed concerned with uncontrolled movement of goods and the presence of the shadow economy in the country; however, the closure of Ergneti Market was part of political calculation and served the purpose of causing financial problems to de-facto authorities. In the end, the closure of Ergneti and the May 2004 escalation,¹⁴ in other words, Tbilisi's attempts to exert economic and military pressure over Tskhinvali backfired. More specifically, severing all financial ties with the rest of Georgia made Tskhinvali dependent on the Russian Federation and its support.

According to one of the research papers, in 2005, Russia channeled 20.4 million USD to Tskhinvali. The volume of support would incrementally increase from year to year reaching 70 million USD in 2007.¹⁵

From 2008 to date: Russia's Financial-Economic Patronage

Developments took a drastic turn for Tskhinvali in 2008 following the recognition of South Ossetian independence by Russia which also pledged protection and support for South Ossetia. In addition to acquiring a role of the security guarantor for South Ossetia, Russia also became its financial donor. Even though Russia lent a hand to Tskhinvali before, in 2008 this support became far more organized, consistent and what is the most important, incremental. It is unsurprising that since then Tskhinvali has lost all incentives/desire of maintaining relations with Tbilisi.

As early as 2008, Russia allocated 1.5 billion rubles to the war ridden South Ossetia and beefed up the support by additional 8.5 billion rubles in 2009. The same year Tskhinvali received additional 2.8 billion rubles to cover running costs, or in other words to top off its budget.¹⁶ The total worth of these transactions was estimated at 12.8 billion rubles, or more than 500 million USD based on the current exchange rate. Considering that, even with the most optimistic calculations, South Ossetia's population (both at the time of these transactions as well as today) does not exceed 50,000 individuals, Russia allocated more than 10,000 USD per each citizen of South Ossetia. In real

¹³ Tokmazishvili, M. (2014) "Georgian "economic romanticism" towards conflict resolution and prospects for the post-Olympic period", International Alert. Available at: <https://www.international-alert.org/blogs/georgian-economic-romanticism-towards-conflict-resolution-and-prospects-post-olympic-period>

¹⁴ A military confrontation between Georgian and Ossetian formations in May 2004 that lasted several days claimed dozens of lives on both sides (*the author's remark*)

¹⁵ А.Илларионов, «Грузия и Южная Осетия: финансовый аспект Кто кого субсидирует? В каких размерах? И зачем?».[Илларионов, А. "Georgia and South Ossetia: a financial aspect. Who subsidizes who? In what volumes? For what purposes?"] Available in Russian at: <http://www.iea.ru/macroeconom.php?id=12>.

¹⁶ «В Южной Осетии утвержден бюджет на 2011 год», [South Ossetia adopts the 2011 budget], (2010). Available in Russian at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/179104/>

terms (with the estimated number of the population not exceeding 35,000) this figure spikes to 20,000 USD per capita.¹⁷

One would expect that allocation of such generous support would have taken an immediate effect on the wellbeing of the local communities. However, embezzlement of money, the scale of which appeared to catch even Russia by surprise, had significantly halted the pace of the reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure destroyed during the war¹⁸ and forced some of Tskhinvali residents to seek shelter with relatives and neighbors or accommodate themselves over the course of many years. In the long run, these developments caused strain between Moscow and Tskhinvali to the effect that the prosecutor's office and the Accounts Chamber of Russia were needed to get to the bottom of the issue.¹⁹

In spite of these complications, Russia never stopped providing support to South Ossetia. As a result of this support, Tskhinvali received 26 billion rubles (more than a billion USD) as a budget support in the period from 2008 to 2010.²⁰ Even though the funding had diminished to a certain extent in the following years (since the damage sustained as a result of the war had been mitigated), it did become consistent and irreversible in nature. Effective since 2008, the Russian Federation has been South Ossetia's financial partner. Notably, Russian-Abkhaz relations has taken the same course.

Russia provides financial transactions to these subjects through two channels: the first is an investment program which aims to support socio-economic development in the republics. The investment program mainly takes care of local infrastructure including schools, stadiums, roads, etc. For example, in 2020 at least 21 local infrastructure projects were in the pipeline in Tskhinvali region alone.²¹ The investment program and spending priorities are defined by so called "joint (Russian-Ossetian and Russian -Abkhaz) government commissions."

The second of the two channels directly connecting the Russian federal budget to local budgets in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is used by Moscow for running financial expenses in Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. Funds channeled this way cover operational costs of de-facto structures, salaries of public servants, pensions, and other social liabilities.

¹⁷ According to a national census of 2015, the population of South Ossetia totals 53.532. However, according to various sources, the number ranges from 25.000 to 35.000 «Итоги всеобщей переписи населения Республики Южная Осетия 2015 года», [Results of the National Census of South Ossetia, 2015]. Available in Russian at: <http://ugosstat.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/itogi-perepisi-RYUO.pdf>

¹⁸ At the same time, it is difficult to calculate a share of funding that would disappear along the way from Moscow to Tskhinvali and what part would be consumed after its arrival. Embezzlement of funds was a frequent occurrence under de-facto president Kokoiti's government with isolated incidents also taking place during his successor Tibilov's term.

¹⁹ «Генпрокуратуры РФ и Южной Осетии будут совместно выявлять нарушения в расходовании финансовой помощи», [Russian and South Ossetian general prosecutors' offices will work together to identify financial fraud], (2010). Available in Russian at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/174691/>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ «Инвестпрограмму Южной Осетии обсудили на онлайн-совещании с президентом», [South Ossetia investment program discussed with the President, during the online discussion], (2020). Available in Russian at: https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/South_Ossetia/20200703/10811874/Na-onlayn-soveschaniy-s-prezidentom-obsudili-realizatsiyu-Investprgrammy-v-Yuzhnoy-Osetii.html

Ossetia's winning hand: who benefits more – South Ossetia or Abkhazia?

As mentioned above, since 2008, Russia has been acting as a main guarantor of financial and economic stability of Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. Moscow spent enormous amount of money on rehabilitation of post-conflict Tskhinvali eventually acquiring the function of a donor for the South Ossetian budget. In the wake of the 2014 Ukraine events culminating in the annexation of Crimea and the emergence of additional de-facto republics in the Eastern Ukraine, some argued that Moscow's funding would not be enough to cover all de-facto republics. However, time has shown that this forecast was not entirely accurate.

Russia has continued to top up Tskhinvali's budget for the past several years. At the same time, the period since 2015 has seen considerable changes in this pattern. In the period between 2008 and 2010, Moscow allocated 1 billion USD in support of South Ossetia. In 2011, the volume of Moscow's support totaled 9.5 billion rubles, roughly 300 million USD.²² In the following years, up to 2015, South Ossetia received the equivalent of around 180 million USD. From 2015 to 2019 (inclusive) the support from Moscow ranged within the limit of 125 million USD hitting a historical low in 2020 when Tskhinvali received only 87.1 million USD.²³

However, during these years, de-facto authorities have also been highlighting the urgency for developing local economies and increasing a local share in budget revenues. In fact, Russia's share, which accounted for 99 % in 2011, eventually dwindled to 90%. It should also be noted that budget deficits have mainly been caused by the failure of de-facto authorities to generate local revenues.²⁴

All these figures suggest that in spite of slight variations, Russia maintained about 90 % of South Ossetia's budget and allocated around 2.5 billion USD to respond to local needs from 2008 to 2020. This, coupled with other Russian supported projects which directly or indirectly benefited the Tskhinvali Region, like rehabilitating the Roki Tunnel with a total budget of 400 million USD,²⁵ or the construction of military bases, suggests that Moscow's contribution significantly exceeds the amount allocated for budget support.²⁶

²² «Бюджет Южной Осетии на 2011 год составил более 9,5 млрд рублей», [South Ossetia budget for 2011 exceeding 9.5 billion rubles], (2010). Available in Russian at: <https://regnum.ru/news/economy/1340519.html>

²³ «Бюджет Южной Осетии-2020: сколько и на что», [South Ossetia's budget: how much and for what purposes], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/infographics/20191204/9702210/Byudzhnet-Yuzhnoy-Osetii-2020-skoiko-i-na-chto.html>

²⁴ «Дефицит государственного бюджета не отразится на исполнении защищенных статей – министр», [Deficit of the state budget will affect the implementation of the protected articles – Minister], (2012). Available in Russian at: <http://cominf.org/node/1166493921>

²⁵ «Отремонтирован тоннель, по которому Россия вошла в Грузию в 2008 году», [A tunnel used by Russians to enter Georgia in 2008 has been rehabilitated], (2014). Available in Russian at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/26676058.html>

²⁶ This calculation does not cover those funds that local residents receive as Russian state pensions. Even though a great majority of population are Russian citizens, some of them are not eligible to the Russian state pensions due to various regulations. Since, the exact number of beneficiaries remains unknown, I decided against including these data in the total sum. At the same time, it is also evident that, this component further beefs up Russia's general support (*the author's remark*).

The scale of Russia's support for Tskhinvali becomes apparent when compared with the support provided to the other beneficiary - Abkhazia. Even though Moscow recognized the independence of both actors as part of the single process, Moscow's approach has never been identical, at least from a financial perspective.

Unsurprisingly, Sukhumi, unaffected by military actions, had not benefited the same way as Tskhinvali in 2008. However, Russia has maintained this trend in the following years as well. In 2008-2020 Russia's contribution to Abkhazia's budget never exceeded 70%.²⁷ At the same time, Russia's support to Abkhazia has been less than that for South Ossetia not only by percentage but in monetary terms as well. For instance: in 2019 Russia allocated 7.4 billion rubles (approximately 115.6 million USD) for South Ossetia and only 4.4 billion rubles (roughly 68.7 million USD) for Abkhazia.²⁸ Similarly, in 2020 Sukhumi received 4.7 billion rubles (67.1 million USD) while Tskhinvali was allocated 6.1 billion (87.1 million USD).²⁹

Comparison of Russia's support to Tskhinvali and Sukhumi respectively since 2008 yields that South Ossetia receives twice as much from its main donor as Abkhazia. At the same time, this difference has been greater in early years following the recognition. The difference becomes even starker considering the fact that Abkhazia significantly outranks South Ossetia with regard to the size of population (250,000 and 50,000 respectively).³⁰ (See Table #1 below).

Such different treatment of Abkhazia may be explained by the fact that, due to its Black Sea coast, greater potential for tourism, trade ties and more developed economy, Abkhazia is better positioned to generate its own revenues and therefore, is not in as much need as South Ossetia. In fact, Abkhazia contributes to 30% of its own budget, however, at the end of the day, these budgets are commensurable: for instance, in 2020, South Ossetia's budget totaled 7.5 billion rubles (107.1 million USD)³¹ while in Abkhazia it was 8.3 billion rubles (118.5 million USD). In the end it all boils down to the impact on an overall quality of life for local population: more specifically an average monthly salary in South Ossetia is twice as high as in Abkhazia and totals 20,000 rubles (equivalent to 260 USD or 850 GEL).³²

²⁷ «Госбюджет Абхазии: 1995 – 2015 гг.», [The state budget of Abkhazia: 1995 – 2015], (2015). Available in Russian at: <http://abkhazinform.com/item/2640-gosbyudzhet-abkhazii-1995-2015-gg>

²⁸ «Деньги Абхазии: бюджет республики на 2019 год», [Abkhazia's money: the 2019 budget of the republic], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/infographics/20190327/1026958591/Dengi-Abkhazii-byudzhet-respubliki-na-2019-god.html>

²⁹ «Дефицит сохраняется, доходы растут: Кабмин Абхазии принял проект бюджета на 2020 год», [Deficit remains, revenues grow: the Cabinet of Ministers of Abkhazia adopts the 2020 draft budget], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20191028/1028703188/Defitsit-sokhranyaetsya-dokhody-rastut-Kabmin-Abkhazii-prinyal-proekt-byudzheta-na-2020-god.html>

³⁰ «Абхазия в Цифрах», [Abkhazia in figures], (2018), The State Statistics Office of Abkhazia. Available in Russian at: <https://ugosra.org/abkhaziya-v-tsifrakh/2018-god.php>

³¹ «Бюджет Южной Осетии-2020: сколько и на что», [South Ossetia's budget: how much and for what purposes], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/infographics/20191204/9702210/Byudzhet-Yuzhnoy-Osetii-2020-skolko-i-na-cto.html>

³² «Статистический сборник за январь-июнь 2020 г. Управление Государственной Статистики Республика Южная Осетия», [Statistical directory, January-June, 2020. Office for the Management of Statistics, Republic of South Ossetia], (2020). P. 12. Available in Russian at: <http://ugosstat.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/1-6-2020.pdf>.

It is hard to assume what lies at the heart of Moscow's generosity towards South Ossetia - unconditional loyalty or other reasons. One way or another, this question is not among those that this paper aims to answer. However, the results of the analysis suggest that Ossetians are in a far better financial situation than the Abkhaz, which in turn explains why Sukhumi maintains an openness of some sort to the outside world (including Georgia), while Tskhinvali keeps its doors shut.

South Ossetia in North Caucasus Subsidy bubble

Obviously, Russia's policy towards South Ossetia cannot be entirely unique. In order to shed some light on the socio-economic context that Tskhinvali is most likely to be in, one has to analyze Russia's active policy towards the subjects of the Federation as well as to other separatist regions.

Currently, the Russian federal budget comprises the contribution of just handful of subjects while accumulated funds are then used to subsidize other regions. In 2020, 13 subjects contributed to the formation of Russia's budget. The number of "budget-forming" subjects has been on a steady decline in recent years (the Russian Federation comprises 85 regions). At the same time, Dagestan has topped the list of beneficiaries based on the size of subsidies: in 2020 it received 72.8 billion rubles. Chechnya, yet another of the North Caucasus republics, also sits high in the top ten of subsidized regions ranking fourth with 33.4 billion rubles worth subsidy.³³

Moreover, if arranged not according to the amount of subsidies, but based on a share of a subsidy in local budgets, the picture in the North Caucasus republics is far gloomier: Subsidies account for 79.9%, 79.5%, 67.4% and 67.3% of budgets of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan and Karachay-Cherkessia, respectively.³⁴ It should also be noted that only 8 federal subjects are affected with more than 10% of unemployment in the North Caucasian republics topping the list. According to the 2019 data, unemployment in Ingushetia reached 26.2% while Dagestan, Chechnya, Karachay-Cherkessia and North Ossetia reported 13.7%, 13.6%, 12.2% and 10.5% of unemployment respectively.³⁵

Russia pursues the same policy with regards to separatist formations. A study looking into this matter revealed that Moscow spends an annual 5 billion USD on five so called "de-facto republics" (Transnistria, Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Abkhazia and South Ossetia).³⁶ Considering population size in first three formations and funds that Russia has

³³ «Дотационные регионы в России и их рейтинг», [Russia's subsidized regions and their ranking], (2020). Available in Russian at: <https://rosinfostat.ru/dotatsionnye-regiony/>

³⁴ «Самые Дотационные регионы России и сколько платит население властям?», [The most heavily subsidized regions of Russia: how much do the population pay to their government?], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://spydell.livejournal.com/666222.html>

³⁵ Ольга Шернукова. «Миллиарды в трубу: где в России не хотят работать», [Olga Shurnikova. Billions down the drain: in which part of Russia are people reluctant to work?], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2019/06/26/12445501.shtml>

³⁶ «Братья по расходам. Непризнание республики приняли годовые бюджеты», [Partners in spending. Unrecognized republics adopt their annual budgets], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://newizv.ru/news/economy/10-02-2019/bratya-po-rashodam-nepriznanye-respubliki-prinyali-godovye-byudzhet>

been channeling to Tskhinvali, this amount seems rather feasible. It should also be noted that Crimea, a region annexed by Russia, also remains heavily subsidized (subsidies accounting for 68.7% of the budget).³⁷ In the nutshell, Russia continues to act as a main and consistent financial partner for de-facto republics providing for the latter's vital resources.

In addition, in 2008 both South Ossetia and Abkhazia officially became the charges of the Russian Federation. Visions for the development of both subjects are laid down in the *Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership* brokered between Sukhumi and Moscow in 2014 and the *Treaty on Partnership and Integration* signed by Moscow and Tskhinvali in 2015. According to these treaties, Russia is to provide support to both South Ossetia and Abkhazia for public sector salaries and state pensions to become on a par with those in the neighboring Russian Southern federal Okrug and North Caucasus federal Okrug.³⁸

This context is interesting in that, in spite of allocations from the Russian federal budget, there has been no breakthrough in the conditions existing in the subsidized regions, where unemployment and grave social conditions continue to affect quality of life of local populations. The failure of the existing socio-economic model to encourage a shift towards market economy is also highlighted in the development strategy of South Ossetia.³⁹

There is no sufficient ground to anticipate that Moscow is going to revise its economic policy towards South Ossetia especially, in light of a bigger picture, which suggest that resources channeled in the region are rather moderate⁴⁰ (see Table #2 below). On the other hand, it is up to the population of Tskhinvali Region (and Abkhazia) to decide if the North Caucasus perspective is the one that suits them the best considering that the course of events has been taking this very turn cemented by a series of documents. In fact, based on all known parameters, South Ossetia and Abkhazia stand closest to North Caucasus region.⁴¹

Instead of a conclusion: what factors can push Tskhinvali to engage in a dialogue with Tbilisi?

As we can see, since 2008, Russia has been acting both as a security and a financial safeguard for South Ossetia. In addition, Moscow has

³⁷ «Самые Дотационные регионы России и сколько платит население властям?», [The most heavily subsidized regions of Russia: how much do the population pay to their government?], (2019). Available in Russian at: <https://spydell.livejournal.com/666222.html>

³⁸ «Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Абхазия о союзничестве и стратегическом партнерстве» [Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership], chapters 14 and 15. Available in Russian at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4819>

«Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Южная Осетия о союзничестве и интеграции», [Treaty on Partnership and Integration]; Chapters 7 and 8. Available in Russian at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4783>

³⁹ «Стратегия Развития Республика Южная Осетия – 2030», [Development Strategy of South Ossetia - 2030], (2011). P. 9. Available in Russian at: http://economyrso.org/files/Strategiya_razvitiya_Respubliki_YUzhnaya_Osetiya_2030.pdf

⁴⁰ This implies those financial resources that the Russian federal budget allocates for other regions or de-facto republics (*the author's remark*)

⁴¹ For instance, as of today, an average salary in North Ossetia amounts to 28.7 thousand rubles (1 213 GEL), almost 30% more than that in South Ossetia. For a comparison, according to the data provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, an average monthly salary totals 1 129 GEL (*the author's remark*)

demonstrated greater generosity towards Tskhinvali, a trend corroborated by the comparison of financial resources allocated by Moscow to Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. With its social-economic arrangement, South Ossetia has grown similar to North Caucasian republics heavily subsidized by Russia. Apparently, Tskhinvali's political elites are rather happy with such a state of affairs, which in turn, makes an already complicated process of dialogue (which is not entirely unsafe from a political point of view for Tskhinvali) with Tbilisi unappealing.

Despite this ostensibly favorable setting, there is a series of challenges, which may put the South Ossetian society in dire straits if the latter chooses to turn a blind eye to these challenges. Some of them, including demographic issues, migration, and the economic structure, indicate that the existing development model in South Ossetia requires significant changes if not a profound revision.

Rapid depopulation in South Ossetia represents a pressing, incremental problem. Based on locally available and somewhat unreliable data, Tskhinvali's population has been on an increase from 53,000 in 2015 to estimated an 57,000 in 2019.^{42, 43} However, even this data surmises that the population density is as low as 14.4 persons per km², which, considering the Georgian average (65 per km²) looks rather gloomy. Also, in addition to Tskhinvali, in all four regions of South Ossetia, registered deaths outnumber registered births. For instance, in 2019 30 people were born and 78 passed away in Tskhinvali rayon; in Dzauri (Djava) rayon there were 26 births and 47 registered deaths cases while in Znauri rayon the number of registered death cases was three times as high as that of birth— 21 and 65 respectively. 34 died and 20 were born in Akhlagori district.⁴⁴ These figures suggest that all rayons in South Ossetia, except for the capital Tskhinvali, face the risk of rapid depopulation.

The second biggest challenge faced by South Ossetia is migration. On one hand, since 2008, South Ossetia has become a popular destination for labor migrants from Russia and Central Asian countries due to wide scale construction projects.⁴⁵ Yet, on the other, most young people, who are incentivized by higher education quotas which Russia allocated on an annual basis for South Ossetian students to study in Russia's top 100 universities, would prefer to move to Russia.⁴⁶ As a result, those students who were expected to use their education and knowledge on the development of their home country, would prefer to stay in Russia. This may indicate that youth believe Tskhinvali

⁴² «Итоги Всеобщей Переписи Населения Республики Южная Осетия 2015 Года», [Results of the National Census of South Ossetia of 2015] P. 11. Available in Russian at: <http://ugosstat.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Itoги-perepisi-RYUO.pdf>

⁴³ «Статистический сборник за 2019 г. Республика Южная Осетия», [Statistical directory 2019 of the Republic of South Ossetia], (2019). P. 15. Available in Russian at: <http://ugosstat.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/1-12-2019.pdf>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ «Мигранты в Южной Осетии: нарушения, проверки и география стран», [Migrants in South Ossetia: violations, inspections and geography of source countries], (2019). Available in Russian at: <http://cominf.org/node/1166527147>

⁴⁶ «Лимиты 2019: куда и как поступают квоты для абитуриентов Южной Осетии», [Quotas for 2019: distribution of student funding quotas for South Ossetia], (2019). Available in Russian at: <http://cominf.org/node/1166521522>

offers little, if any, opportunity to fully reach their potential.

The structure of the economy in South Ossetia poses yet another problem. The structure can be illustrated best by a breakdown of the population by economic activities. According to the data provided by the South Ossetian Office for the Management of Statistical Data, as many as 20,876 individuals are registered as employed with minimum of 17,000 being on a public payroll accounting for more than of 82% of the employed. When it comes to other sectors, retail and wholesale trade top the list with 1,721 employed. Surprisingly, only 435 citizens are reported as working in agriculture, seemingly a priority sector and with 41.3% of the population residing in the rural areas.⁴⁷ These figures suggest that the South Ossetian economy is nonexistent and in the event that Russia terminates or significantly decreases its direct monetary transactions, Tskhinvali will not be able to deliver on its social commitment (meaning that it will not be able to pay salaries, pensions, and ensure the operation of de-facto structures).

The development trajectory in South Ossetia has been somehow shaped by its physical location. South Ossetia is surrounded by the rest of Georgia and the Caucasus Pass, and connected to Russia by the Roki Tunnel. It takes around three hours (if the weather allows) to cover 170 km, a distance between Tskhinvali and Vladikavkaz, Russia's closest large city, while the nearest Georgian city of Gori and the capital Tbilisi are respectively 30 and 90 minutes away from Tskhinvali. Therefore, Tskhinvali may, based on the choices it is to make, remain in deadlock or build a development model of its own on South-North transit potential. Against the backdrop of Georgia's inability to reclaim and Russia's unwillingness to accept South Ossetia as its part, the latter is left with a Hobson's choice.⁴⁸

Above mentioned circumstances provide a sufficient justification for South Ossetian political elite and society to revise the existing development model. At the same time, a menu of choices is rather limited: Tskhinvali can maintain its policy of partial self-isolation (that is the isolation from Georgia and the rest of the world) or pursue a course of partial openness maintained by the Abkhaz, Transnistrians, and North Cypriots to various degrees of success.

If Tskhinvali opts for the second option, one of partial openness, it will have access to many windows of opportunities together with Georgia and other countries in the region. For instance, the reopening of the Ergneti market under the shared administration of Tbilisi and Tskhinvali seems rather difficult, yet a manageable course of action. Residents of South Ossetia may enjoy easy and quick access to the rest of the world through Tbilisi and Kutaisi airports provided that South Ossetian authorities are willing to lift bans over the freedom of movement. In addition, the Georgian East-West central highway (located just few hundred meters away from South Ossetia) provides brand

⁴⁷ Statistical directory 2019 of the Republic of South Ossetia], (2019). P. 22. Available in Russian: <http://ugosstat.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/1-12-2019.pdf>

⁴⁸ «Интеграция и деградация: как живет Южная Осетия спустя 10 лет после войны», [Integration and degradation: life in South Ossetia 10 years after the war], (2018). Available in Russian at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-45106205>

new opportunities for the movement of goods while, in order to avoid frequently encountered problems at Lars checkpoint, goods can be redirected to the Transcam - Trans Caucasus Motorway upon a prior agreement.⁴⁹

Step by step engagement in regional projects is likely to improve the social and economic standing of South Ossetia. Meanwhile, discussions and deliberations around the above-mentioned issues would significantly contribute to the establishment of healthier relationship between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi.

Presumably Tskhinvali (as well as Moscow) is afraid of economic, social, and other relations that are highly likely to be restored should Tskhinvali tilt towards excess openness. This may result in the Tskhinvali Region becoming part of Georgia's economic and social space and open a path towards changes in the political sentiments of local populations in favor of Tbilisi. In theory, such a risk exists, however, the experience of Abkhazia, Transnistria, North Cyprus and South Ossetia itself, points to the contrary. Hence, it can be expected that the South Ossetian political elite, backed up by Russia's recognition and security safeguards, will be much more courageous.

Finally, tragic developments surrounding Nagorno Karabakh have demonstrated the fragility of any status quo and but, also pointed to the preference of finding consensus over violent changes. Hopefully, societies of the South Caucasus will manage to internalize this truism and avert disasters before it is too late.

Table #1

Beneficiary	South Ossetia		Abkhazia	
	Total (million, USD)	Per capita (million, USD)	Total (million, USD)	Per capita (million, USD)
2011	323,2	6037	217,2	902
2012	176,9	3304	218,7	908
2013	175,8	3284	147,5	613
2014	145,04	2709	137,2	570
2015	134,2	2509	108,07	449
2016	124,09	2318	116,5	484
2017	123,5	2307	80,6	335
2018	105,2	1965	67,03	278
2019	114,4	2137	67,9	282
2020	87,1	1627	67,1	279
Total	1,509	29187	1,227	5100

⁴⁹ Lars checkpoint connecting Georgia with Russia is a usual route for most shipping companies (both Georgians as well as from other countries in the region) moving goods between Georgia and Russia. The checkpoint is often closed during winter because of severe weather conditions. Transcam - Transcaucasus Motorway connects the Russian federation and the South Caucasus through the Roki Tunnel. Because of political situation, its use is only limited to South Ossetia (*the author's remark*)

THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN PEACEBUILDING AND HUMAN RIGHTS WORK

*(based on the author's peacebuilding and human rights work
between 2000 and 2019)*

Lira Kozaeva¹

*"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women,
it is in the minds of men and women that the
defenses of peace must be constructed."*
UNESCO Constitution

Resources allocated by the Russian Federation to South Ossetia in 2008-2010 totals estimated 1 billion USD. However, it is hard to gauge how they were distributed across the years. Therefore, the table below shows the breakdown of the Russian support in the period between 2011 and 2020 when the de-facto budget grew rather transparent. At the same time, Tskhinvali received in total of minimum 2.5 billion USD which significantly exceeds the volume of support received by Sukhumi in the same period. It should be noted that while calculating the amount of support per capita, I relied on the results of national censuses in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Had I resorted to other sources, this amount would have presumably increased 1.5 times or doubled.

Table #2

Beneficiary	Total (million, USD)	Per capita (million, USD)
South Ossetia	114,4	2 137
Abkhazia	67,9	282
Dagestan	1,022	351
Chechnya	469,6	370
North Ossetia – Alania	146,7	205
Republic of Crimea	313,6	166

Table 2 suggests that, when examined per capita, the volume of support received by South Ossetia exceeds that of the subjects of the Russian Federation.

We routinely hear the word "dialogue" in our everyday life. For each of us, this word means something specific and different. For me, as a person who spent years working on the issues related to peacebuilding, rekindling human relationships, overcoming obstacles on the way to building peace and confidence, dialogue is critically important. The value of dialogue in our context, that of existing conflicts of interest, is the ability to transform the hatred and desire for revenge into a rooted idea of nurturing peace.

The question that we have to answer is how to do this? Is dialogue with the other side needed at all? Some may perceive the other side as an enemy, others might choose to ignore them, another group may see them as neighbors with whom we can at least co-exist or even be friends. Our society has very ambiguous stands on this issue. My years of work in peacebuilding and human rights defense have convinced me of the necessity of dialogue. It was solely because of the dialogue that for many years I was able to succeed in my work. Dialogue is necessary not only to express a point of view but also as a necessary condition for establishing relations between individuals, between an individual and the government, and between an individual and society. Through dialogue, it is possible to solve a problem, change a certain situation, change perceptions on certain issues, and deepen understanding of the situation.

Social, and most importantly, political developments in the Ossetian society significantly influence the perception of the conflict with Georgia. Within this context, the need and necessity of a dialogue with the other side are actively discussed in the Ossetian society. Recently, a dialogue series between South Ossetian activist Timur Tskhurbati and documentary director and head of "Studio Re" Mamuka Kuparadze was published online. This dialogue series generated a significant discussion both within the virtual space as well as within the society as a whole. Unfortunately, the part of the population that supported this initiative and this dialogue was in the minority. The majority of the South Ossetian society was outraged by this initiative. The expression of outrage brought together several important elements. Discussion of these elements is important in order to present a full picture of what is going on. One of the central elements of the public outrage is the disproportionate levels of

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trust that society feels towards the civil society and civic actors compared to the trust that the state structures enjoy when it comes to the issue of resolving the conflict with Georgia. The criticism was expressed in such hard-hitting phrases as "who are you to take responsibility for engaging in a dialogue with the other side? There are other people for that" alluding to the government and the officials. It is important to note here, that the dominance of this perception within the public circles and public consciousness signals that the South Ossetian society perceives the development of relations with Georgia as falling within the scope of work of official structures. Of course, this approach leaves only a very small niche in our society for civil society activists to work on peacebuilding and building dialogue bridges with the Georgian society.

We can say with a certain degree of confidence that such public-social and political disposition of the society towards the dialogue process is due to the inability of most of society to differentiate between different levels of diplomacy. There are several levels of diplomacy: official, economic, public, citizen, etc. The level of official diplomacy is the area where state structures and officials function. However, citizen diplomacy is an area and a platform that engages a completely different layer of society. Most often these are the representatives of civil society, however, representatives of cultural and educational institutions, journalists, public figures, and other representatives of different layers of society can successfully engage here as well. People who are engaged in citizen diplomacy carry out their activities through different forms and means that allow them to present truthful information about their country to the citizens of other countries.

One of the reasons why dialogues like the one between Timur Tskhubati and Mamuka Kuparadze received such ambiguous and often negative assessment within the Ossetian society is because of the perceptions about the incompetence of the civil society. The central form of governance that existed during the Soviet era as well as after the independence has solidified in the public consciousness the perception that the state institutions are the ultimate protectors of the national interest. The novelty of the civil society institutions, and the turbulent political life right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, where the conflict with Georgia held central importance, prevented the development of public perception of the civil society as equally as competent as the state institutions.

The second reason why the society in South Ossetia is critical of dialogue with the other side, to put it mildly, and often does not support and welcome such initiatives, is the inability to differentiate between the two levels of diplomacy - official and citizen. As it was already mentioned, official diplomacy has a very clear trajectory of development, is pursues different goals, and is controlled by the boundaries of the official political ideology of the state structures. It is less flexible and is clearly oriented toward achieving political goals. In comparison, citizen diplomacy is more flexible and implies finding solutions to humanitarian issues and achieving specialized goals. Citizen diplomacy works to support official diplomacy, and not undermine it. These are complementary processes. However, this is precisely a vision that is less developed in our society. More often, there is an opinion that civil society has assumed

the role of "negotiators" and different dialogue projects seek to replace official negotiations, like the Geneva Discussions. This, of course, is not true.

In South Ossetia, one can frequently hear an opinion that the state structures are successfully engaged in a dialogue (which in this context is equated to the resolution of the conflict). This is not fully accurate, though, for two main reasons:

- The composition of the official state delegation during these meetings is limited.
- They are not free in their statements. They say things and speak about issues that they are allowed to and only in the form that they are allowed to.

These are the challenges that all conflict contexts in the world face. The official negotiations are limited and constrained by the boundaries of political ideologies, and in this regard, the South Ossetian situation is not unique. However, luckily, all over the world official negotiations are complemented with unofficial or citizen diplomacy that involves a wider range of people, experts, and interested parties.

In many cases, civil society and civic activists become the driver of citizen diplomacy. Dialogues and meetings within the framework of citizen diplomacy are aimed at creating platforms and communication channels that can facilitate exposure to alternative points of view for the representatives of conflicting societies. Civil society dialogues have the following important aspects:

- Civil society activists are able to express their thoughts and points of view without holding back the emotions and without "picking" the right words. Despite this, the relationships among the civil society representatives on both sides usually remains friendly and trustworthy.
- Representatives from the international community usually have more trust in the information received from a civic activist than information presented by the officials.
- Civil society dialogues are also a good barometer of public attitudes and allow the representatives of international institutions to evaluate possible reactions to some concrete measures, initiatives, and statements.

Despite such an ambiguous perception of the process of dialogue and citizen diplomacy in South Ossetian society, the efforts of civil activists are aimed at supporting the processes taking place at the level of official diplomacy and complementing them. In this regard, we can outline several main functions of dialogue that are applicable, in particular, within the Georgian-South Ossetian context.

First, it is supportive in solving humanitarian issues. After the events of August 8, 2008, it was through the efforts of citizen diplomacy that finding a solution to several issues related to the consequences of war became possible. Once the cannons went silent, we started to bury our dead and take the seriously injured to Vladikavkaz. Many dead Georgian servicemen remained in the Oak Grove, above the city, and along the Tbet highway. It was August, the bodies were lying in the open sun. The danger of an epidemic loomed

over the city. The cadaverous smell was already felt. I called my colleague and partner from Georgia, Manana Mebuke, explained the situation, and told her that these bodies should be taken out. On the second day, she called me back and said that not a single official Georgian agency confirmed the fact that there were dead Georgians in South Ossetia ... I took dozens of photos and sent them to Manana. To the credit of our authorities, they did not throw the bodies of dead soldiers into one big pit and cover them with soil as it was done with our deceased prisoners of war in Georgia. Coffins were brought from North Ossetia and these soldiers were buried following Christian burial practices. Sometime later, thanks to the intervention of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Thomas Hammerberg, Georgia took action, and the dead Georgian soldiers were reburied in their homeland. Of course, the official authorities worked in this direction, but our activity at the civil society level immediately after the 2008 War worked in unison with the officials and brought about significant results.

In this context, the second function of dialogue is informational. It needs to be noted that dialogues contribute to the dissemination of objective information about the events that happened in South Ossetia. Dialogue allows for objective information to be provided not only to the representatives of Western countries and international structures but also to share that information with the representatives of the other side who often do not have access to "not unfiltered" information. In my practice, there are many cases when the dialogue process allowed for a sharing of different points of view with the participants and as a presentation of the documents and facts to which they previously did not have access. One such case happened in Istanbul in September 2008 during a meeting between Georgian and South Ossetian civic activists. Internationals were also present at this meeting. Among the participants was the director of "Studio Re" Mamuka Kuparadze. The discussion was heated and rough. During the break, Mamuka Kuparadze pulled me aside and said, "Mrs. Lira I have a question for you. I know that you will tell me the truth. When the Georgians entered the city, did they fire?" Without saying a word, I took out my cell phone and turned on a recording of a roaring, loud "march" of Georgian motorized units along the main street, which were advancing, shouting, and directing shots at residential buildings, and at the same time, calling for the economical use of ammunition. Mamuka watched the video completely shocked and whispered: "Here, nobody knows about this!"

I know that many in our society are radically against any meetings and dialogue platforms with the Georgian side. However, this raises a question: How can we convey the truth to our opponents, to the international community if we don't meet with them and don't engage in a dialogue?

Of course, a dialogue needs to be constructive. Dialogue participants need to be well informed, educated, and need to understand the purpose of dialogue. And most importantly, the results of the dialogue need to be cross-cutting with the interests of the state whom the subjects of dialogue are representing.

My work in the Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue process went through several different stages. Of course, it all started with the first open

phase of the conflict in the 1990s. It is probably impossible to convey all the horrors of the war and active military action. However, I think it is important to note that all the cruelty, deprivation, and pain that people experience during the war lead to a complete apocalypse of consciousness. Only through a personal transformation, a process that is based on a shift in consciousness, can one start thinking about building a dialogue with someone who they consider to be an enemy. This mental shift happens when someone realizes that certain conditions are needed to know themselves, to change, to learn to manage emotions, to hear and understand another person who is not to blame for their misfortunes and grief and who is going through the same grief and misfortune on the other side of the barricades. This shift helps to find common ground for future joint fights against the madness of the war, for eradicating the hatred and desire for revenge in the minds of people. This change in personal consciousness generates the desire to build new peaceful, dignified, and mutually respectful relationships.

The first phase of my work in dialogue format was built on human rights defense. I have developed a personal approach where peacebuilding was equated to defending human rights, and I tried to reach that goal through dialogue. 19 years of work followed the following pattern: peacebuilding - dialogue - human rights defense - dialogue - results. Of course, the dialogue was at the foundation of my peacebuilding and human rights work. I believe that dialogue, as a way of receiving and reproducing information about everything that exists, is at the core of world order.

Involvement in different dialogue projects, as well as the organization of such initiatives with my Georgian counterparts, are a key element of my work. These dialogues made it possible to achieve certain results in the search for those who went missing during the first military campaign, and in finding concrete information about the fate of those who were imprisoned in Georgia. As a result of dialogue, productive cooperation with human rights defenders and peacekeepers on the other side developed. For many years, the work to restore peace was carried out in a human rights mainstream. Contacts with colleagues were established, and there were small steps that were of great importance for individual people on each side. For example, a mother was able to pass on a letter to her son, or get an update from him, or relatives found out where their loved ones are buried. Of course, these do not change the course of history or introduce changes to the political life, but it gives a lot to that particular person. Yes, the conflict and the war destroyed everything in no time, but rebuilding is done one brick at a time.

The second phase of my work started after the 2008 August War. In December of 2008, with the support of George Mason University in the United States, a meeting between representatives of Georgian and South Ossetian civil society was planned in Washington, DC. This trip became possible through the financial, public, and moral support of renowned Ossetian public figures living in Moscow. During that period, an urgent issue was to provide the international community with objective information about events that happened in South Ossetia and break through the information blockade that South Ossetia found itself in. This meeting was very tense. Dislike and wariness dominated

the environment. At this meeting, everything was built around questions and answers. As a result of humanity's ability to think through new information and make sense of it, we were able to slowly move forward. Unexpected questions and solutions were emerging. If I start to list all the small but meaningful projects that were born after this meeting and all the concrete results that we were able to jointly achieve, I would probably need to write another article. Some results are well known within our society. For example, the repair and restoration of the Zonkari dam. The dismal state of the dam was discussed at one of these dialogue meetings, and it marked the beginning of an important process of repair of this structure in order to avoid ecological and human catastrophe. Another example is Marik Dudaev's release from Georgian prison in 2011 and in 2016 the return of three South Ossetian prisoners serving a life sentence in Georgia. Even though all final agreements on these issues were reached at the official level, at the level of citizen diplomacy we paved a difficult path and laid the foundation for this. Thanks to mutual trust, dialogue formats, and the experience of long-term cooperation, the most difficult and seemingly not solvable problems have always found their solution. These few examples from many others show that the process of dialogue does not interfere with official processes, and does not cast a shadow on them, but on the contrary helps to prepare the ground for achieving the most important results.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN POLITICS AND CIVIC DIALOGUE COOPERATE: A STORY OF ONE EXCHANGE

Paata Zakareishvili¹

Introduction

Water dripping day-by-day wears the hardest rock away. Perhaps, this is the best phrase to underline the importance and value of dialogue between societies that are in conflict with each other. Long, persistent, and often inconspicuous work at the civil society level can move mountains.

I would like to tell two stories from my professional experience. They demonstrate the real possibilities of civil dialogue and show how many important things can be brought to life if we skillfully use existing tools, even if they are in limited quantities, and are better than any theories and hypotheses. These two stories are somewhat connected and one leads into another. They prove to me that human relationships and professional skills built and preserved throughout years of dialogue processes that happen at the right moment become a valuable resource to resolve a concrete and clearly formulated issue. Essentially, it is a unique resource. Perhaps, my experience will convince those who undervalue the importance of a continuous civic dialogue process.

I will tell how difficult the road to achieving the result was, how different interests clashed in the process, and how parties interpreted the process differently, as it usually happens. What does happen when civic dialogue and official negotiations intersect? What role can sustained contact and interaction between the two civil societies play?

In 2012 I headed the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality (back then it was called Ministry of Reintegration) and I already had years of experience participating in the dialogue process both in Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian contexts. It should be noted, unfortunately, that until 2008 there was no long-term and permanent dialogue process in the Georgian-South Ossetian context. Before 2008, work in the Georgian-Abkhaz direction was developing more widely and actively. There was a constant dialogue between the civil society sectors in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Similar processes did develop in the South Ossetian direction. Colleagues from Tbilisi and Tskhinvali maintained personal relationships and even engaged in spontaneous meetings, however, they were irregular and a long-term dialogue process was not established. This trend continued until 2008.

In 2008 the war broke out. Perhaps, absence of civic dialogue was one among many interconnected and intertwined reasons, due to which we missed the opportunity that led to a new, bloody reality. If there was a well-functioning and stable civic dialogue process, we would follow the developments more carefully as was the case with the Georgian-Abkhaz dimension. For

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example, when there were escalations in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the Kadori gorge or the Gali district, Georgian and Abkhaz NGOs were quick to react, publicly and effectively. The authorities on both sides would notice these activities and they would take them into account. Unfortunately, nothing similar was happening around the South Ossetian conflict.

Only after the end of the Georgian-Russian military confrontation in August 2008, did it become clear to everyone that the absence of Georgian-Ossetian civic dialogue relieves the anxiety and allows militaristic sentiment to plan and realize military options of achieving its goals in a more comfortable setting. The new reality clearly demonstrated that one-sided militaristic propaganda should be counterbalanced with multidimensional, confirmed, and truthful information with a clear civic position. This realization forced a change in approach. First attempts to develop a permanent functioning Georgian-Ossetian civic dialogue emerged. US-based George Mason University helped to put this process on track. It took the lead and responsibility of organizing bilateral meetings. A Georgian-Ossetian platform for the constant exchange of opinions was created. This put into motion a functioning of civic dialogue. It was called "Point of View," a name that later became a trademark.

Civic dialogue vs. official negotiations

The "Point of View" platform that was inaugurated in 2008 was actively working. The dialogue process that included meetings and informal discussions were underway. The civil society representatives of South Ossetia were participating in these meetings and were voicing problems that concerned the local population. I participated in almost all of these meetings and that is why I was aware of the issues that concerned people on the other side.

In tandem with the civic dialogue process, the official negotiations were carried out by the representatives of the authorities. These meetings took place in Geneva, which is why they were called "Geneva meetings." Besides Geneva, official meetings also regularly took place in the village of Egeneti where there is a checkpoint on the line of contact. It should be noted that the Ossetian side raised issues of concern both at the formal and informal levels.

One of the issues that repeatedly failed to find a resolution at the official meetings was the demand to release Ossetian prisoners. These demands covered two separate cases. One of them concerned three Ossetians who were serving a term in the Georgian prison for terrorism, and another was the case of Marek Dudaev who was imprisoned in Tbilisi for criminal offenses. Of course, such important topics were discussed not only at the Geneva meetings but also at the "Point of View" meetings. However, the quality of discussions around this sensitive and painful topic was fundamentally different at these different platforms. Issues did not get solved in Geneva. These issues could not be solved at the "Point of View" either. However, the informal discussions had one fundamental advantage: parents and relatives of the prisoners were able to directly participate in the civil society dialogue (they had absolutely no opportunity to take part in Geneva meetings). Relatives came to the meetings, explained their position, and presented their arguments. Thanks

to this involvement, the participants in the civil dialogue had a clearer understanding of the state of affairs about this case. This helped a lot to understand how exactly the issue could be resolved.

I followed the topics that were raised at these meetings, collected facts, and analyzed the information. I've studied conflicts for many years. I constantly read, dove deep into the topic, and tried finding ways to resolve and transform the conflict. During my many years of work in the conflict regions, I came face-to-face with people who suffered from the consequences of the conflict. Perhaps, my personal qualities helped me to develop a particular skill which I cherish even today - I felt the pain of people and understood the interests of the Ossetian side. As a result of all these conversations and thoughts, I have developed the following picture for myself. On one end, there was a list of issues that the South Ossetian side raised constantly. On the other hand, there were two fundamentally different platforms where these topics were simultaneously discussed - Geneva and Egeneti from one side and "Point of View" from another. Discussions on both platforms, unfortunately, were fruitless. Where the issues were publicized, problems were voiced but there was no solution for several years.

New realities - old opportunities

The situation dramatically changed in 2012. During the parliamentary elections in October 2012, the political power changed in Georgia. The "Georgian Dream" coalition gained the majority in parliament. The coalition consisted of several political groups and I was offered the post of the State Minister for Reintegration. So, with the experience of participation in civic dialogues, I ended up in public service.

Throughout all the time that I have been working with conflicts and participating in civic dialogue (in the 1990s and before the 2008 War and after that), I follow one principle - initiatives that are aimed at resolution or transformation of the conflict should not be proposed officially and made public. These initiatives should be directly implemented, of course after clarifying and confirming the details with the other side, however, this should be done informally, and without major public announcement. I believe that this approach is the key to success for any initiative that involves joint projects of the conflicting parties.

Unfortunately, when offering the Abkhaz or Ossetian side peace initiatives and assistance projects, the Georgian side usually does not go to them directly but routes these offers through Vienna, Brussels, Strasbourg, or Washington. International partners and friends are always enthusiastic and welcome Tbilisi's peace initiatives, however, Sukhumi and Tskhinvali are very skeptical about these initiatives.

The issue here is that public statements put the competition process into motion. The other side has to react to your initiative. However, how should they react if you have not coordinated with them about your intentions in advance? It is good when it is positive: "Yes, we are ready to accept your support, we need it." But, we know that in reality the situation is much more complex. Can they accept your help publicly? Probably not and it is usually

the opposite. With almost 100% certainty, we can predict what the response will be. It's like playing tennis: the party to the conflict that makes a public, uncoordinated statement must calculate what it might hear back. When you convey your idea to the other side through public channels, you almost push the other side to respond, "No, we won't accept your help." That's because, due to internal political realities, they often can't publicly say, "Yes, we will take it." Using this ineffective approach, Georgia has buried good initiatives that are already at the idea stage numerous times.

An example of this argument comes from the Georgian state program on healthcare developed for the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The program allowed the residents of these regions to receive free quality healthcare at Georgian medical institutions. During the implementation of this project, we moved away from the previous trend of publicly announcing it at the highest level, as was done previously. Instead, we began implementing it at the level of each individual patient. So, the offer to receive healthcare was sent not to Abkhazia or South Ossetia but directly to the patients that needed medical treatment. The program was launched without the support of the media. No one knew when and how it started. It started on its own. And this is how the project worked - unobtrusively, quietly, almost unnoticed, but at the same time, productively. Over time, Sukhumi and Tskhinvali realized that this was not an individual or random approach, but a systematic and structured one. Since the project was already in full swing, it became impossible to abandon.

Unfortunately, the official Georgian side does not follow this approach today. Instead, it follows a different strategy when developing a project, like one aimed at economic support or education, and makes a public statement about its intentions. For example, in March 2020 the Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality made a statement through mass media that, "Georgia is ready to help South Ossetia to fight the coronavirus." One might think that there is nothing problematic in this, however, this offer for help was not coordinated with the South Ossetian authorities in advance. This is what predetermined Tskhinvali's response, and to no one's surprise, it was negative. It is unclear what other response Tbilisi was expecting to get. If the Georgian authorities considered the thought process of the other side, they would not rush public announcements. What does it mean when one side of the conflict is interacting with the other side only through official requests? This means that it does not have informal stable contacts (including civic) with the opposite side in its toolbox and cannot manage conflicts using the platforms - official and unofficial. Why voice a proposal out loud if it is not viable from the beginning? Will the Ossetian side accept the offered assistance in the fight against coronavirus in this way - even if it is a genuine offer? Unlikely. Most likely it will refuse the help. Indeed, literally on the same day when Georgia made the statement, the de facto Minister of Foreign Affairs of South Ossetia answered through the media, "Our borders are closed - and this is our main defense against Georgia." And thus, he closed the topic once and for all. This is how good intentions end when politicians have no experience achieving results using bilateral contacts.

The first step in the long journey: The case of Marek Dudaev

Assuming the office of the State Minister of Georgia, I immediately embarked on the realization of my main principle: do not impose one-sided policies and get to the issues that concern the South Ossetian side. By studying them and working on them, they eventually transformed into bilateral joint projects. I've selected several issues that fell under my jurisdiction and complemented each other. However, a channel of mutual trust needed to be established first with the South Ossetian side. Very soon such an opportunity came up.

In April 2013, the Georgian parliament adopted legislative changes to abolish the unconditional accumulation of sentences. According to the amendments, in the case of a combination of crimes, the judge did not have to resort to an unconditional summation of punishments, as it was before. Instead, he could be guided by a different principle, in which the more severe punishment absorbs the less severe. The notable feature of the laws is its ability to be applied retroactively. It applied to those convicts who had already served their sentences under the summation of sentences. "All convictions made on the principle of summation of punishment will be subject to revision," the then parliamentary secretary of the government Shalva Tadumadze told MPs. Under this innovation, dozens of convicts were released.

Soon it became clear that this reform also benefited Marek Dudaev - one of the Ossetian prisoners serving a sentence in the Georgian prison. South Ossetian human rights activists were working on his release for years within the "Point of View" format. Dudaev was detained by Georgian law enforcement agencies in the spring of 2004 and sentenced to 23 years in prison in Georgia on charges of several serious crimes, including the murder of three people. At this point he had already spent eight years in a Georgian prison.

Dudaev himself had a rather vague idea about the reform. After giving some thought I decided: we should not stop this process with the release of one person, but take advantage of the right moment and begin a longer-term process of releasing all prisoners who are held by the parties to the conflict. Indeed, why not? The plan that I came up with was as follows: we can frame Dudaev's release not as part of the general reform, but as a gesture of goodwill from the Georgian side.

On June 7, 2013, Marek Dudaev was released from Georgian prison. I waited for him outside the gates. We got into my company vehicle and drove to the checkpoint in the village of Ergeneti to hand him over to the Ossetian side. It was an hour drive. En route, I told him about my position on the release of other prisoners, "Your release is our gesture of goodwill. In response, I need one of our guys that are sentenced in South Ossetia. Give us the one who is serving the longest sentence." I had to test if the Ossetian side was ready to cooperate on the continuation of the process of prisoner release, those who were sentenced in Tskhinvali, Tbilisi, and Sukhumi (about 20 people in total). This was the key aspect and the success of the whole plan depended on it. Dudaev got excited with the plan and promised to share our conditions with the Ossetian side. In an hour, he was already home.

Waiting for an answer

It had been several months since the release of Marek Dudaev. Tskhinvali was silent. The unofficial process was not moving forward as quickly as I had anticipated. Meanwhile, official negotiations took place as usual in Geneva and at the local level in the village of Ergeneti. During these meetings, as always, the Ossetian side was raising the question of the release of three Ossetian prisoners serving a term in the Georgian prison for terrorism. The South Ossetian side behaved as if Marek Dudaev's release did not even happen. At some point, using the official channels of communication I passed the following message to the Ossetian side: "You've been asking for the release of Marek Dudaev for a long time. We released him. And got nothing in return. How can I ask my government to also release other convicts? Show us your goodwill. Then you can think about the release of these three prisoners."

At this stage, the resources offered by the civic dialogue were engaged. Through our colleagues at "Point of View," we started to work with the relatives of these three Ossetian prisoners. As a result, they wrote an official appeal to their authorities in Tskhinvali. They asked for the pardon of the Georgian citizen, Mr. Teymuraz Jerapov, who was arrested in 2010 and who was convicted to 13 years in prison for, "an attempt to seize and hold on to power." Seven months after the release of Marek Dudaev, on December 31, 2013, Tskhinvali pardoned T. Dzherapov. "I hope I'll get to my grandchildren in Kutaisi in time, like Santa Claus," he said after leaving the prison. The process has begun. I exhaled. We are on the right track. The turbulence was over and the process became stable. Everything went as planned. The establishment of a channel of mutual trust was successfully completed. This meant that it could be used to solve other important problems as well.

The ultimate goal: exchange of all for all

Inspired by the success of the first case, work began to plan the next steps. The task was to combine the interests of the South Ossetian side with the interests of the Georgian side. The release of three Ossetian prisoners serving time for terrorism could not be realized without appropriate steps from Tskhinvali. This turned out to be a tougher nut to crack than it seemed at first glance. By the time I started working on solving this complex case, the Ossetian convicts had already served 11 years. Their release, even in a form of exchange for Georgian prisoners who were in Tskhinvali prison, could cause an uproar and discontent in Georgian society. What can be done in this case? The only option was to scale up and enlarge the process and turn it into a mega-exchange. This was also meant to achieve the release of those Georgian prisoners who were serving time in Abkhazia as well. There were five Georgian prisoners in the prisons of South Ossetia. And there were eight in Abkhazia. Many of them were accused of espionage and were sentenced to terms ranging from 7 to 12 years in prison. In the course of the negotiations, it was decided that it was necessary to exchange "all to all." Give three Ossetian prisoners and get in return all Georgian prisoners from both Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. It was a bold daring plan, but I understood that if it worked, no one in Tbilisi would dare to object to why we released the terrorists.

Time and time again, a civic dialogue process came to the rescue. It played a significant role in this process. On the South Ossetian side, we usually worked with the civil society, while on the Abkhaz side we worked with the politicians. That's why we've decided to utilize both formats - official and unofficial. I compare this with the way that skis are used in the snow. Skis work in pairs - one helping the other. This is the only way to move forward. The plan of the three-sided exchange looked the following way:

1. I get in touch with civil society in Tskhinvali.
2. The civil society representatives in Tskhinvali get in touch with the relatives of prisoners serving time in Tbilisi prison.
3. The relatives get in touch with the government officials in Tskhinvali
4. Government officials in Tskhinvali get in touch with the government officials in Sukhumi.
5. Authorities in Sukhumi agree to support their South Ossetian colleagues and agree to their request.

I understood that the scheme was a complex one. If Sukhumi agreed to release Georgian prisoners, we would release the Ossetian prisoners. The only caveat was for the Ossetians to convince Sukhumi that this was a lucrative deal. The success seemed ephemeral, but the game was worth it.

We started with contacting the representatives of the "Point of View" civic dialogue with the intent to ask them together with the relatives of the prisoners to put pressure on the authorities in Tskhinvali. Our position, which we communicated to the South Ossetian side, was the following: "At the Geneva meetings, your authorities constantly say that the relatives and parents of the prisoners ask to release their children from the Georgian prison. But the requests made in Geneva evaporate into thin air. The case of the release of your guys is not moving forward, since in return the Georgian side does not get any benefit. Tbilisi does not see its interest in this. Moreover, if Tbilisi unilaterally releases persons convicted of terrorism, it may trigger an internal political crisis. But there is still a chance. We have known each other for many years and trust each other. We can get things off the ground - at least try. Do you want to get your prisoners? We understand. And we want to get our prisoners back. To find a solution that would suit everyone, we suggest the following plan. Georgian prisoners are serving time in Sukhumi. There are no Abkhaz prisoners in Tbilisi. We can organize a triple exchange: the Abkhaz give us our guys, we give you yours. The only thing required of you is to ask Tskhinvali to come to an agreement with Sukhumi."

The participants of the informal dialogue supported my idea. The message was sent. The clock started ticking. The plan started to work slowly. The important thing was that it was in motion.

The relatives followed through with the plan with the help of civil society. They tried influencing the official Tskhinvali and were successful in convincing the South Ossetian authorities that the deal benefited South Ossetia. This was a huge step forward. We were on the finish line. And it seemed that all that was left was to formally organize the exchange. The exchange was agreed to for December 4, 2015. But right at the finish line, as it usually happens, an unexpected obstacle came up. The President of Georgia, Giorgi

Margvelashvili, did not sign the decree on the pardon of the three prisoners convicted for terrorism. What could've been done? The exchange was put on hold and postponed for better times. The question was what to do in the meantime? There wasn't too much time to waste. Fortunately, both Tskhinvali and Sukhumi were sympathetic to the temporary hitch and, within the framework of the trilateral exchange of information, agreed to postpone the exchange until spring.

It must be admitted that the constructiveness of the South Ossetian and Abkhaz sides allowed once again, without haste, to work on the Georgian side. Step by step, we overcame all obstacles - old and newly emerging. The relatives of the Georgian prisoners serving time in Sukhumi's prisons were already aware that the exchange was to take place. Representatives of relevant government agencies had already visited them and asked to sign a request for clemency. Obviously, they started to worry that the process of exchange had failed. The situation was getting tense again. In the end, after long and difficult twists and turns, the details of which are not worth burdening the reader with, the obstacles on the Georgian side were resolved, and the president signed a pardon decree. The road was clear - we started organizing the exchange again.

This time around there were no obstacles. On March 10, 2016, a historical trilateral exchange of "all for all" happened. It took no more than 30 minutes. We received all the prisoners from Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. A total of 12 people. Tskhinvali received their three men. The plan initially seemed impossible, but it worked.

What was left "behind the scenes"

It seemed that everything went well and all interested parties got what they wanted, and the civil dialogue platform convinced everyone that it was needed, useful, and in some cases even necessary. However, soon after statements were made, there was doubt cast on the significance of the cooperation between the two formats even for such an important topic as the exchange of prisoners. Soon after the exchange, in April 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia commented on the accomplished "triple exchange." The main message was that one should not overestimate the significance of the Georgian-Abkhaz meetings held by international organizations at the unofficial level.

"We have carefully studied the statements made by the Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality Paata Zakareishvili regarding the extreme importance of the Georgian-Abkhaz meetings at the unofficial level, held by various international organizations. According to Zakareishvili, such meetings help to resolve specific issues in Georgian-Abkhaz relations. In particular, he mentioned the exchange of prisoners, which was successfully carried out in March of this year. According to Zakareishvili, the exchange was made possible thanks to the active work of the Georgian-Abkhaz informal dialogue formats. In this regard, we consider it necessary to remind everyone that the only international platform where there are real opportunities for resolving any issues between the parties to the conflict (including the issue of

exchange of prisoners) is the Geneva Process, based on the Medvedev-Sarkozy agreements of 2008. The Geneva format, which involves officials representing the parties to the conflict, is mediated by the UN, EU, OSCE, Russia, and the United States. Thus, the only international platform where there are real opportunities for resolving any issues between the parties to the conflict, including the problem of exchange of prisoners, remains the Geneva format. All other meetings, conferences, seminars, and round tables are exclusively informal in nature, take place within the framework of the civil sector, and do not influence decision-making by state structures," the message from Sukhumi, published in the media, said.

Such an official statement leads to the thinking that not everyone fully understands the importance of multi-vector work for achieving a result. Obviously, no one is questioning the value of the Geneva discussions. In the context of conflict transformation, it is indeed a sustainable and acceptable format. However, the importance of informal communication and civic dialogue, which only complements and strengthens the "Geneva platform," should not be underestimated. It would be shortsighted to rely only on any one of the formats - both official and unofficial. I think that these two most important formats should not be opposed to each other. They are not mutually exclusive, therefore they should not compete with each other, but complement each other. We should not separate them - on the contrary, we need to look for ways for their mutual reinforcement and coordination. I think it would be useful to continue the discussion around this issue so that there are no doubts about the value and compatibility of both formats.

On the other hand, I got the impression that the official Sukhumi did not quite correctly interpret my gratitude to the civil sector. I would like to once again thank the Abkhaz side for their cooperation. Without them, without their clear, well-coordinated, noble, and gratuitous support, this unique exchange would have been impossible to carry out. This is completely unambiguous. But at the same time, I must emphasize that the Abkhaz civil society sector did not participate in the negotiation processes in any way. Both then and now, speaking of cooperation, I mean exclusively the South Ossetian civil society.

Another episode that is worth mentioning relates to a subsequent event with the participation of the Georgian authorities that happened after the exchange. This is the story of the Georgian prisoner Georgi Lukava. He was arrested in 2011, and in 2013 Sukhumi convicted him of banditry and premeditated murders. Lukava was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment in a general regime correctional facility. A year and a half after the "triple exchange," on December 25, 2017, at the request of the Abkhaz side, he was exchanged for another prisoner - Roland Dzhiba, who was serving a sentence in Tbilisi. After seven years in the Dranda prison, Lukava was released.

When he was handed over to the Georgian side, official Tbilisi stated that this is, "the continuation of positive cooperation and another good precedent, within the framework of which our citizens have already been released from the prisons of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali." Thus, Tbilisi wanted to present Lukava's release as a continuation of the "triple exchange of prisoners," but these two events are not connected in any way. Let me explain why. It should

be noted that the issue of Lukav's release was also raised by the Georgian side - negotiations on his inclusion in the "exchange" list took months. But the Abkhaz side was categorically against it. This was because he was accused of serious crimes (including several murders). The principled position of Sukhumi could have stumped the exchange of 12 prisoners, on which all the participants in this daring plan spent a lot of time, effort, and resources. Therefore, unfortunately, we had to implement the exchange plan without Lukava - he was not on the list of those released. The news that he had been exchanged was a pleasure for me. Nevertheless, I boldly declared that Lukav's case with such a positive ending has nothing to do with the exchange that took place on March 10.

Conclusion

The exchange of "all for all" was a successful culmination of a complex and unique process. A single factor played a decisive role that determined the success of this process: parallel work was happening on both "fronts" - both at the official level and on the civil society platform. All that was needed was to point these two vectors in one direction. For me personally, this amazing story has convincingly proven that politics can come up with and execute even the most incredible plans - if only it can correctly calculate the capabilities of each communication channel, and will recognize and appreciate the indispensability of civic dialogue.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN ORGANIZING A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CONFLICTING PARTIES. THE MODERN ASPECT OF THE GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN CONFLICT

Lana Parastaeva¹

*"The present reaches fulfillment through
the historical ground which we bring
to effective activity within ourselves."*

Karl Jaspers. "The origins and goal of history".

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of dialogue between the parties of unresolved conflict, even when it is not currently in an active phase. This article examines the basic concepts of the philosophy of dialogue and its applied meaning in the context of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict at the present stage, as well as the consequences of the active phase of the conflict (the Georgian-Ossetian war in August 2008) in the media, as one of the indicators of the level of (non-)readiness of South Ossetia and Georgia for dialogue. At the same time, the author does not claim broad research validity, but focuses on her own journalistic experience and observations.

To begin with, let's dwell on the very concept of dialogue. Like any concept, dialogue has been studied since the inception of philosophical thought, and in the Golden Age of philosophy was used as the main way of transferring knowledge. Thanks to the Internet, representatives of different races, cultures, and nationalities living in different parts of the world can be involved in interpersonal dialogue. This process does not contradict the classical formula of dialogical philosophy, where the very fact of participation of several people in the search for truth implies that they have a common ability to reason and underlines the inadequacy of each individual mind to achieve the set goal. It seems that almost all modern social networks are built around this main concept, and are aimed not only at exchanging visual images, but motivating users to share their own views on a particular problem.

It should be noted that the object of the classical philosophy of dialogue is the interaction between internal and external, one's own and another's culture. That is why dialogical philosophy underwent rebirth in the 21st century, when the development of communication technologies resulted in so-called "communication explosion."² This determined the need to study the processes of communication and interaction on a new level. In addition, due to globalization, the development of dialogue in multicultural and multicultural spaces has acquired particular importance.

The modern scientific approach has developed general requirements for conducting a dialogue: lingua franca, a common subject of discussion, which presupposes, on the one hand, some common knowledge among the participants, and on the other hand, existence of points of disagreement; the

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² Kireev, P.S. New media in the modern information and communication space.

need for communication between participants; cooperation in dialogue, the ability to listen to another; the need for a critical attitude to statements made; freedom of expression; clearness of the issues discussed.³

Undoubtedly, the study of communicative possibilities is relevant for all societies that have experienced war, when there is a dehumanization of the enemy and alienation in the philosophical sense, and therefore, building a dialogue seems impossible. This is also true in the case of the Republic of South Ossetia and Georgia.

Since conducting a broad study of the Ossetian-Georgian conflict and the possibilities of dialogue within the framework of one article was not possible, the author will focus on the present stage. 30 years after the start of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and 12.5 years after the 2008 war, which ended the active armed confrontation in the communication space and especially in the official media, as well as social media, the overwhelming majority of texts are based on two main narrative elements: a) on the part of Georgia - South Ossetia is occupied by Russia, it has no opinion of its own; b) from the South Ossetian side - Georgia does not abandon its intention to seize South Ossetia.

It should be noted that just like after World War II, international organizations played their role in the post-war building of dialogue between South Ossetia and Georgia. Unfortunately, after the 2008 war, the measures taken by Georgia to prevent access of international organizations to South Ossetia (the notorious Law on the Occupied Territories) played a negative role, which at this stage led to the leadership of South Ossetia now no longer approving of contacts with international organizations.

Immediately after the 2008 war, Georgia actively used the methods of aggressive information policy and manipulation of public opinion to prevent the South Ossetian position and the South Ossetian interpretation of August 2008 events and the events previous and subsequent years, from becoming available in the international, European, and regional media spaces. This policy remains unchanged to this day. However, the attitude of South Ossetian society, as well as the representatives of the media, changed quite dramatically. For more than 12 years of peaceful life, society stopped reacting to the provocative information policy of Georgia and is more interested in solving internal problems.

The lack of resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and different visions of the future give rise to dramatically different narratives in societies, which are picked up and disseminated by the media. Through the means of communicative media channels, elements of storytelling that present the other side in an unpleasant light generate a public outcry, especially when they highlight the most sensitive aspects.

As a small illustration of these observations, let's discuss an incident that occurred in the spring of this year. In early April 2021, one of the Georgian TV channels aired material about the alleged excavation of holy relics

³ Philosophical Dictionary of the Engineer. 2016. Ed. Doctor of Philosophy. Sciences G.S. Arefieva.

in the Ikort temple.⁴ The narrative used terms such as “vandalism,” “insult to Georgian shrines,” “occupiers,” and “destruction of Georgian history.” The material also provided the opinion of experts who supported this point of view. This form of storytelling and this use of media, of course, creates a negative perception of Georgian society.

Until 2008, a similar news piece on Georgian television undoubtedly would have received wide coverage in the South Ossetian press, but today in the absence of even a confrontational dialogue, no refutation followed.

Exploring the semantics of the published text, we can say that Georgian journalists mostly adhered to propaganda clichés: “Russia is an occupier country,” “Ossetians have no opinion of their own.” The South Ossetian media did not react at all to this story, most likely because this publication was only available in Georgian language.

And here we come to one of the key conditions necessary for dialogue: lingua franca, especially in terms of semantics. Even with such a small example, we see that not just semantics, but the absence of even a common language of communication, despite the presence of a common subject of discussion, hinders dialogue. Other necessary conditions are also absent: cooperation in dialogue, the ability to listen to others, there is no critical reflection to the statements of the respondents, there is no freedom of expression.

Of course, we can find other examples when a confrontational, but nevertheless public dialogue between the media of South Ossetia and Georgia takes place, and in almost 90% of cases one can state the presence of a common language - most often Russian, less often English. As an example, we can cite the materials Echo Kavkaza, Sputnik South Ossetia - Sputnik Georgia and several other smaller publications.

Undoubtedly, the reaction should come from the representatives of South Ossetia, and only then others. And here we see that almost no one is interested in this. Obviously, the local media prefer not to notice the other side of the conflict, while there are no official statements - if we talk about South Ossetia, or the possibility, through mentioning South Ossetia, to express their attitude towards Russia - in the case of Georgia.

We observe the emergence of anti-dialogue relations - “relations when one or both partners of interaction consider each other only as an object, a thing and fundamentally deny the presence of any commonality between the partners of interaction and thus the possibility of a dialogue.”⁵ This format of relations that can lead to segregation, forms the foundation of the next round of tension between the parties to the conflict.

In the article, “The Role of Mass Media in Organizing a Dialogue between Government and Society”⁶ I. Dzyaloshinsky, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Independent Institute of Communication Studies, Professor of the State University Higher School of Economics indicates problems that

⁴ <https://mtavari.tv/news/38747-okupantebma-ikortis-tadzridan-cmindanacilebi>

⁵ I. Dzyaloshinsky “The role of the media in organizing a dialogue between the authorities and society.”

<http://www.dzyalosh.ru/01-02-Media-Grazhdan-Obschestvo/Rol-SMI-2006.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

need to be addressed in order to organize an effective media dialogue:

- participation of representatives of all parties in the dialogue. Someone must ensure the participation of those who, for some reason (lack of their own media, the opportunity to participate in dialogue in “foreign” media, etc.) cannot do it themselves.
- inclusion of all shades of positions of each party involved in the conflict.
- participation of “undesirable,” “inconvenient” experts, sociologists, specialists, and ordinary citizens.

In the context of Georgian-Ossetian dialogue, the Russian media often acted as mediators in the past. For example, the Kommersant publishing house had a rule that if one correspondent goes to South Ossetia, the other goes to Georgia. Or local correspondents or stringers worked in a similar way if there were no full-time correspondents in the region.

As an example, I will cite the coverage of the work on the determination of the state border between South Ossetia and Georgia, which is regarded as an administrative border in Georgia. In 2014, issue 14 of the Kommersant-Vlast magazine published two texts from both sides of the border, showing life in the border zone from both sides. “Dividing by cutting it alive”⁷- from the Georgian side, and “One can’t live like this”⁸- from the South Ossetian.

The first tells about the life of a resident of the village of Khurvaleti, whose house ended up being on the South Ossetian side of the border. The second article tells the story of the residents of the South Ossetian village Artseu, the major part of which, the so-called Bichikatysykh (23 houses) remained on the territory of Georgia.

The materials noted that after the August 2008 war, “there is no trust, no respect, no desire to hear each other and talk. For five years now, the parties have been meeting on a neutral platform in Geneva to resolve the main issue - to achieve guarantees of the non-use of force in the conflict zone. No such agreement has been signed in five years.”⁹ It should be noted that to this day, more than 12 years after the war, the Treaty on the Non-Use of Force has not been signed, which naturally does not contribute to the restoration of trust and constructive dialogue.

On the other hand, the material from the South Ossetian side noted that Artseu is not the only settlement on the territory of South Ossetia, part of which remained on the territory of Georgia. An example is the village of Tsnelis in the Znaur region, where ten houses remained on the Georgian territory.

Five years later in 2019, the village of Tsnelis, that was renamed to Uista, gained popularity due to the establishment of a Georgian police post there, which caused escalation both in the border zone and in the internal political situation in South Ossetia. In the same period, the situation worsened in the northwestern section of the border near the village of Sinagur. This

⁷ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2443849>

⁸ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2449970>

⁹ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2443849>

problem was covered in detail in the article, “Checkpoints” on talcum powder and on “bones:” the balance on the border of South Ossetia is crumbling,”¹⁰ which stated that, “the status quo that existed for the last 11 years was grossly violated by Tbilisi.”

It should be noted that when the border was drawn according to old Soviet maps, the lands of some former Georgian collective farms ended up on the side of South Ossetia, and Tskhinvali since 2009 has been talking about the need to create a delimitation and demarcation commission to discuss and resolve controversial issues. But Georgia continues to insist that South Ossetia is an occupied territory and does not want to enter into dialogue. As a result, ordinary citizens of both sides of the conflict suffer.

In the cases described above, we see that there is a common subject for dialogue, however, due to the political situation, there are no opportunities for its full-fledged constructive implementation.

We must admit that the influence of the past on the present is too strong. In Europe, after the world wars, the qualitative shift towards humanistic philosophy happened precisely because there was a feeling of alienation and at the same time recognition of unchangingness of the geographical location of countries. That is why both politicians and scientists began to comprehend the processes that led to a great catastrophe, which resulted in the flourishing of dialogical philosophy, the influence of which we can see not only on the intercultural, interpersonal level, but also on the inter-nation, inter-ethnic levels.

The lack of dialogue, including among the media community, most often leads to a deepening of the conflict, development of an image of the enemy, and consequently to an escalation of the conflict. For a complete and constructive solution to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, it is necessary to build a dialogue at several levels, involving those structures and segments of the local and international society that are directly or indirectly involved in this conflict.

In 2008, the intervention of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation stopped the Georgian military and drove them out of the RSO. The military phase of the conflict was over, but as we see, the conflict continues and without effective dialogue it is impossible to say that it will not enter the hot phase again. The confrontation did not end, even after the international community recognized the start of unprovoked aggression against South Ossetia by Georgia. Heidi Tagliavini’s report on the 2008 war investigation points to these indisputable facts. Nevertheless, Georgia continues to accuse Russia of attacking it and calls South Ossetia an “occupied territory”.

With regret we must state that some international organizations adopt this terminology, although legally the term “occupation” is not applicable to South Ossetia - Russia is developing interstate relations with South Ossetia. In this case, it is already necessary to speak about the need for dialogue with international organizations.

The process of revival of South Ossetia is moving forward with in-

¹⁰ <https://eodaily.com/ru/news/2019/09/07/blokposty-na-talke-i-na-kostyah-balans-na-granice-yuzhnoy-osetii-rushitsya>

THE MONOPOLY OF VICTIMHOOD: THE ROLE OF TRAUMA NARRATIVES IN THE GEORGIAN-SOUTH OSSETIAN DIALOGUE

Natia Chankvetadze¹

“The Grave is empty...”
“We were looking up, in the sky...”
“They burnt my swallows...”
From the book, *Apple Orchards*²

credible difficulty. Over 30 years of life in a state of latent and/or open threats have led to some stagnation in the development of state institutions in South Ossetia. Today, the country faces burning issues, the solution of which will ultimately lead to the prosperity or complete destruction of the country. The path of developing foreign policy relations often runs into the wall built by Georgia and its allies around South Ossetia.

And can we no longer talk about a dialogue. It is obvious that the Georgian side has a clear focus on the implementation of its own strategy, in which the future of South Ossetia is envisioned exclusively as part of the territory of Georgia.

Thus, we can state that there are no conditions necessary for a dialogue. But here I would like to note that after the Second World War, Germany was also not inclined to admit its own erroneous path, however, the world powers facilitated conditions in which the acknowledgement of the erroneous path was recognized by both the population and the country's leadership. Today, in Georgia we see a completely different approach. TV channels broadcast unreliable, nevertheless easily verifiable information about South Ossetia, but there is no reaction to this.

I would like to express confidence that dialogue is one of the main prerequisites for peace. We need to conceptualize peace as not just the absence of war, but as a world where our differences - ethnicity, language, race or culture - are not an obstacle to coexistence and development.

In the context of increasing globalization and an increase in the level of education, this seems to be a more achievable goal, if there is an understanding of the importance of this process and the recognition of the harmfulness of revanchist ideas and reminiscing over the past. Yes, Jaspers, of course, is right and *“The present reaches fulfillment through the historical ground which we bring to effective activity within ourselves,”* but the past should not become the future, but remain a memory, to support “never again” philosophy. Today unfortunately, we have to admit that despite the declared importance of the dialogue, upon closer examination we see that both South Ossetia and Georgia are not ready for it, which raises quite understandable fears about the future.

Introduction

Societies divided by armed conflict often claim that the pain, trauma, and suffering they experienced are exclusive. They remember, tell, and re-tell stories that are personally experienced or socially constructed, and the line between reality and fantasy blurs. War stories that speak of violence and the cruelty of the “other” side take up space in individuals' minds and in public discourse. Consequently, the memory of peaceful coexistence slowly fades away. Additionally, the lack of daily interaction and limited opportunity for inter-group dialogue complicates the process of building empathy and promoting recognition of each other's trauma and suffering. Thus, conflict-affected societies produce and re-produce radicalized narratives, which reinforce their side of the story as true and delegitimize others.

Georgians and South Ossetians experienced armed conflict in the early 1990s and the war in 2008. Because of the humanitarian crisis and severe political, economic, and social consequences that became a direct legacy of the conflict, Georgian and South Ossetian societies are drifting apart, and are less likely to see and acknowledge each other's stories of suffering. Thus, the goal of the following article is to discuss the exclusivity of trauma and victimization narratives in Georgian and South Ossetian societies, and how inter-group dialogue can contribute to the deradicalization of those narratives and promote inter-group tolerance and empathy.

Background

The question – why did the armed conflict start? – reveals the collision of conflict-divided societies. The responses are contradictory, exclusive, even hostile. The Georgian-South Ossetian context is no exception. Both Georgians and South Ossetians have their own perspectives to explain the causes of the armed conflict in the 1990s and the war in 2008 year differently. Nonetheless, two sets of arguments or positions emerge as the root cause of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict in the early 1990s.

The first set of arguments is connected to Soviet policy on national-

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² Stories of the 2008 August War

ities,³ chaotic processes of the transition after its collapse, and the Russian Federation's aspiration to keep control over Georgia in the aftermath. Russian engagement, through various means, created fruitful ground for armed clashes between Georgians and South Ossetians. Some also argue that the dissolution of the Soviet Union removed the official rhetoric of unity as an instrument to mitigate conflicts between the people of the Soviet Union.⁴

Another set of arguments is concerned with rapidly raising national identity and ethnic polarization. Even though the majority of South Ossetians lived not within the Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia but in other regions of Georgia,⁵ one of the first protests of South Ossetian people was about language. They protested the aspiration of then Georgian political leaders to have Georgian language as the main language in the region.⁶ Further to this, the rising ethnic nationalism of political leaders in both societies pushed apart South Ossetians from the Georgian national project. Media outlets and journals also played a role in widely distributing hostile stories, describing discriminatory behavior by Georgians and South Ossetians respectively.⁷

The Georgian-Russian war in August 2008 also affected Georgians and South Ossetians. Even though the August war is also referred to as "The War Over South Ossetia" or "The War In South Ossetia," it should be mentioned that the conflict exceeded the territory of South Ossetia and affected all of Georgia.⁸ The August War is crucial for various reasons. The war led to the recognition of South Ossetia as an independent state by Russia, and a handful of other states, and further reinforced contradictory narratives about the conflict and its essence in Georgian and South Ossetian societies.

What we tell matters – Stories about the conflict that constitute exclusive trauma narratives

People who endured the war and face protracted conflict are displaced, living in collective settlements and war-destroyed areas. They have their own way of making sense of their experiences and view their trauma and suffering as exclusive.

The stories Georgians and South Ossetians tell about the conflict constitute radicalized, often simplified narratives about each other and the essence of the conflict. Yet, the concept of a story is different from a narrative.⁹ A "story is an account of an event or set of events that unfolds over time and whose beginning, middle, and end are intended to resolve (or question the possibility of resolving) the problem set in motion at the start."¹⁰ While a narrative is a, "broader enterprise that encompasses the recounting (production) and receiving (reception) of stories."

Two books, *Untold Stories* and *Apple Orchards*, gather together per-

sonal accounts of the 2008 war and its consequences. Nino Lomadze, author of *Apple Orchards*, explains that the stories Georgians and South Ossetians tell typically have three lines.¹¹ First, there is the telling of personal experiences of suffering, pain, loss of loved ones, forced displacement and the constant fear of tomorrow. Second, stories about "others," mostly soldiers or those who used guns, murdered, threatened, and robbed so-called ordinary people. For Georgians, "others" are Russians and Ossetians, while for Ossetians "others" are Georgians. The third line contains stories of regret. Both Georgians and South Ossetians recall memories of their neighbors and relatives who, despite their ethnic belonging, helped each other to escape, protected each other's property, and quite often saved each other's lives. In their stories, there are also silences, long pauses, when people cannot and do not want to "justify" or "explain" anything.¹² Importantly, individual stories also recall times of peaceful coexistence and brotherhood.¹³

Unlike stories, it can be argued that narratives have more complex and complicated moral judgments based on the told stories. In protracted conflicts, narratives become structurally and increasingly simple.¹⁴ The dichotomy is between "true" and "false," "villains" and "innocents," "us" and "them." The way people tell stories about the conflict and its causes also contributes to moral polarization. Moral polarization is demonstrated by distinguishing between the storyteller and another party in the conflict.¹⁵ In other words, what and how people tell stories about the conflict also demonstrates moral superiority. For example, the storyteller seeing themselves or their group as innocent and the "other" as responsible for all bad things that have happened. Even though Georgian and South Ossetian conflict stories integrate single accounts of individuals, those who belong to the 'other' side and are not seen as necessarily bad, yet the overall image of "other" is still negative and emotionally laden.

Stories about the protracted conflict and the war in particular, which are told, re-told and widely shared in Georgian and South Ossetians societies, construct contradictory narratives. The latter can also be referred to as radicalized narratives. Georgians focus on Russia interference and its continuous attempt to keep the country under its control. On the other side, South Ossetians point to the Georgian political leaders and their reluctance to engage in the discussion with South Ossetians as a party to the conflict.¹⁶ Georgians also argue that Ossetians have zero agency in the conflict, while South Ossetians are reluctant to acknowledge the influence of Russian politics.

Overall, both societies neglect the complexity of the conflict and seek to narrow it down to one dimension. Clearly, one can argue about the objectivity of each side's narratives and bring the arguments that support and refute each side's claim. Differentiating between "true" and "false" narratives is not the aim of this article nor is it the intention of the author, who strongly believes

³ Broers, 2009

⁴ Cornell, 2001

⁵ Abramashvili and Koiava, 2018

⁶ Alborova, 2016; Jishkariani, 2019

⁷ Chankvetadze, 2019

⁸ Popjanovski, 2009

⁹ Hardy, 2008

¹⁰ Hardy, 2008, p. 248

¹¹ Author's interview with Nino Lomadze; 28 November, 2020

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cobb, 2013

¹⁵ Hardy, 2008, p. 252

¹⁶ Allen, S. and Greiff, J., 2013

that ordinary people who endured the war and displacement think of their story as sacred, which cannot be judged objectively.

Radicalized and simplified narratives push for determinant judgments in the public discourse.¹⁷ Once narratives are radicalized, censorship of others who would challenge them or speak differently about them is critical.¹⁸ Radicalized narratives in Georgian and Ossetian societies are reflected in exclusive trauma narratives through the exclusive attribution of responsibility. To create a compelling trauma narrative, the identity of a “perpetrator,” the “antagonist,” must be established.¹⁹ The response to the question of who caused the trauma has to be clear and straightforward. However, the formation of a trauma narrative is always a matter of symbolic and social constructions.²⁰

In the Georgian and South Ossetian contexts trauma narratives are simplified, and they reflect on collective societal beliefs, national traumas, and identities at large. Victimization narratives rely on the societal beliefs about enemy images. Interestingly, the “[Image of] enemies are neither merely projection nor are they merely real.”²¹ Armed conflicts are real, killing, kidnapping, torturing people during wars are real, but projection and externalization of our unwanted elements onto enemies, as Volkan names it, are the product of fantasy.²² In other words, victimization narratives have real and constructed parts and they strengthen stereotypes, prejudices, and negative emotions toward an out-group, which produces and re-produces victimization narratives and keeps the simplified version of them functional.

In the Georgian-South Ossetian context, the above-mentioned discussion can be applied in the following way: Both societies have victimization narratives that are simplified and contradictory and are a product of real experience and constructed stories that attempt to see the responsibility of the “other,” but of not themselves. However, one also needs to pay attention to the context in which those narratives are produced and reproduced. In the Georgian-South Ossetian context, ordinary people do not necessarily decide on the re-production of narratives and this political context has an impact. In South Ossetia, freedom of expression is extremely limited and local media is under control of de-facto authorities and legislative amendments. In 2014, the capacity of local authorities was increased to brand organizations receiving grants as “foreign partners,” which significantly reduced space for civil society organizations and activists to voice their concerns and opinions freely.²³

The influence of public discourse over the narratives about the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict and its essence is visible in Georgian society too. Even though one is not exposed to physical threat due to critical or contradictory opinions, it is still challenging to advocate for more complex narratives. The latter becomes particularly difficult amidst the ongoing process of “border-

¹⁷ Cobb, 2013

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Alexander, 2004

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Howar Stein in Volkan, 1997, p. 107

²² Volkan, 1997

²³ Hug, 2019; Freedom House on South Ossetia, available at:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-ossetia/freedom-world/2020>

ization,”²⁴ which negatively affects communities living across the Administration Boundary Line (ABL)²⁵ and focuses the attention of the local mainstream media on it.

To conclude, in the Georgian-South Ossetian context trauma narratives are exclusive, but the conflict is complex. On the one hand, Georgians and South Ossetians deal with external manipulation and Russia’s resource-based power that exploits conflicts in the region, including in South Ossetia, for its own political interests. On the other hand, societies deal with the internal struggle of looking at trauma narratives critically and acknowledge the legitimate pain of another side. While we have a limited-to-no capacity of influencing Russia’s political agenda in the region, there is still a slight possibility of re-producing trauma narratives with more complex insights in both societies.

Inter-group dialogue – A way to accept the other’s victimhood

The August War in 2008 became a threshold in Georgian-South Ossetian communication, as the war destroyed all previous political formats and led to the closure of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission in Tskhinvali. However, Geneva International Discussions (GID) and Incidents Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), which was created as a result of GID, function until now and attempt to address the consequences of the August War.

Besides Track I or 1.5 dialogue formats, in the Georgian-South Ossetian context Track II²⁶ dialogue is a significant process for both societies and it can go on for years. Although Georgian-South Ossetian civic dialogue is limited to particular groups and does not involve large masses, it has critical importance to challenge the exclusivity of victimization narratives and increase tolerance and empathy towards another side’s trauma.

The value of Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue has been demonstrated by the number of projects, including the Point of View, Georgian-Ossetian Civil Forum, Team of Trust, etc. Contact hypothesis suggests that contact encourages people to see what they have in common, while also reducing prejudice and building solidarity between groups.²⁷ Although Georgian-South Ossetian civic dialogue has not achieved a breakthrough in the conflict resolution process, it did maintain social ties among civil society representatives from both sides and encouraged them to engage in a sustained process. Additionally, Georgian-South Ossetian civic dialogue managed to establish the network of dialogue-minded people, who see and acknowledge the importance of continuous communication. Importantly, Georgian-South Ossetian

²⁴ Civil, ge, 2019

²⁵ According to Amnesty International (2018), since the “Borderization” began, around 1000 families lost all or partial access to their farmlands, pasture-lands and woodlands. Some families found even their yards cut into two parts, where the house is under the de-facto South Ossetian control and yard remains on the territory of Georgia proper.

²⁶ “Non-governmental, informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals, sometimes called non-state actors” in Diamond & McDonald, 1991, p. 1.

²⁷ DeLamater, 2018, p. 461

dialogue also contributed to the mitigation of the day-to-day difficulties conflict-affected people face in both societies.²⁸

Inter-group dialogue also has the capacity to elaborate trauma narratives and stimulate intra-societal discussion around them. Inter-group contact can open up a new, micro-level dimension of the conflict transformation process in Georgian and South Ossetian contexts and encourage people to challenge stories that constitute radicalized narratives. The dialogue can also raise the importance of talking about trauma and identify ways to promote mutual understanding.

Stories, which speak of the conflict experience, are crucial for the following reasons: First, it is a moral responsibility to tell the stories of people who did not survive the war or who struggle with its consequences now. Second, people who experienced war and displacement need to tell their story. Additionally, the listener becomes a co-owner of the traumatic event, and she/he could help the narrator to find closure.²⁹ Third, war stories are similar to each other, sometimes even identical, and there is the potential to remove the demarcation lines and make them part of one big story of the war.

Although stories may illustrate experiences of the war, the implications of protracted conflict, and sometimes revive anxiety, anger, and disappointment in people, they can also ignite constructive dialogue and reduce radicalization and increase inter-group empathy. Furthermore, they can also inspire intra-societal discussion. Often, parties are locked into conflicts precisely because narrative transformation is unlikely to happen from within and the accusation-counteraccusation process becomes ingrained in a pattern of interaction.³⁰ By looking into the trauma narratives deeply, conflict-affected people may acknowledge that victimization cannot be exclusive and that by maintaining a simplified narrative about the other side they perpetuate a vicious cycle and expose themselves to external and internal manipulations.

While trying to figure out which side upholds absolute truth, Georgians and South Ossetians are well-manipulated by Russian politics as well as self-perpetuating, dysfunctional, and simplified victimization narratives. Ossetians are overdependent on Russia's economic and financial support and successfully copy-paste its oppressive regime. Georgians on the other hand, are fixed with idea that South Ossetians have zero agency in this conflict and limit themselves to see the complete picture of the conflict.

Consequently, both societies believe that they are primary victims of the war and miss the opportunity to deal with the daily implications of the protracted conflict efficiently. Inter- and intra-societal dialogue that challenges the exclusivity of victimhood has the potential to support conflict transformation in the Georgian-South Ossetian context. Complex trauma narratives may help Georgian and Ossetian societies to rethink a simplified version of the "other side."

²⁸ Allen, S. and Greiff, J., 2013

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Cobb, 2013, p. 52

Conclusion

In a protracted, multi-dimensional, ethno-political conflict, the room for creativity is extremely limited. Track II dialogue processes, which brings Georgians and South Ossetians together, has a capacity to be creative and identify ways on how to challenge the exclusivity of victimization narratives and to discuss them with the wider public. Mutual trust and intellectual and human resources accumulated by the inter-group dialogue in the Georgian-Ossetian context have the sufficient capacity to go beyond the small group of dialogue-minded people and engage the wider public in the process. Obviously, narratives are not produced within a day and recognition of their complexity, as well as the deconstruction of their simplified essence, will not happen quickly either. However, exclusive trauma narratives keep both Georgians and South Ossetians vulnerable to external and internal manipulations so consequently, both societies need to find ways to challenge them.

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ESTABLISHMENT OF INTERNAL PUBLIC CONSENSUS AS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS THE PROCESS OF PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF THE GEORGIAN- OSSETIAN CONFLICT

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A civil society that functions as an open, self-developing system is currently shaped by processes of a different nature. On one hand, these are spontaneous and grass-roots processes, on the other hand, there are also targeted processes that impact the functioning of different institutes of civil society. In the current environment, this work is based on an exchange of different ideas and values including those in politics and law.

Different dialogue processes in which the representatives of the South Ossetian civil society were involved have functioned as constructive platforms for the exchange of ideas and values for many years. These platforms, together with the socio-political processes that unfolded in South Ossetia, helped to shape the political, legal, and civic knowledge and experience for a wide range of public figures in South Ossetia.

This type of idea-value exchange is one of the central aspects of the development of political culture. In general, political culture is understood as the desire and ability of society to participate in various forms of public affairs management and to contribute to the solution of issues of state importance based on self-organization and self-regulation.

Among the goals of civil society institutions, we can highlight the following: Interethnic communication, the establishment of a constructive dialogue between society and the government, the protection of the individual from possible arbitrariness of the authorities, and the development of a culture of discussion. A typical civil society structuring in South Ossetia is the involvement of various civil initiatives in the political process, as well as the exercise of control over civil society institutions by state authorities.

The continuous conflict with Georgia aggravates the development of civil society in South Ossetia and puts a strain on the implementation of dialogue around its resolution. The formal process and civil dialogue, both internal and external, can help develop mutual understanding between the parties and thus contribute to the resolution of the conflict. The development of various dialogue processes and the active participation of representatives of civil society in them emphasizes the trajectory of democratic development of the state and society. It also contributes to an increase in the informed involvement of the public in the public and political life of the country.

South Ossetia can be viewed as a zone of risky civil institutionalization where there are special mechanisms of self-government and self-organization. Three conditional algorithms for the formation of civil society in South Ossetia can be outlined. First is the democratic algorithm, which involves the

identification and integration of public interest based on the self-organization of social groups. Second is the nomenclature algorithm which involves the identification and integration of public interests at the initiation of state authorities and administrative structures. And the third is the ethnocultural algorithm which involves the identification and integration of public interests through the activities of national and cultural associations. These algorithms should help to develop the institutions of social democracy, which will be responsible for one of the most important processes in the South Ossetian society - the establishment of human security. Nevertheless, currently, there are problems with the functioning of each of these three civil society development algorithms in South Ossetia. Let's consider them in more detail.

The weakness of civil society institutions

Civil society is a sphere of human activity outside the family, state, and market, which is created by individual and collective actions, norms, values, and social ties. Civil society functions through a set of non-governmental institutions and self-organizing intermediary groups capable of organized and responsible collective action to defend socially significant interests within the framework of pre-established civil and legal rules. Civil society institutions include political parties, non-governmental organizations, public organizations, associations and movements, non-state media, and other forms of voluntary associations of citizens to solve socially significant problems.

The first institutions of civil society in South Ossetia emerged in the mid-1990s. These were the first non-governmental organizations of the republic. Their emergence during this period was associated with the work of international organizations. International organizations traditionally prefer to interact with local non-governmental organizations when solving humanitarian problems. These organizations did not exist in South Ossetia until the mid-1990s. Thus, the need to solve humanitarian problems on the territory of the republic led to the emergence of the first non-governmental organizations. In the late 1990s, international organizations began to work in South Ossetia under the auspices of UNHCR. Their presence stimulated the emergence of the first non-governmental organizations in South Ossetia. It should be noted that along with the solution of humanitarian issues, international organizations also initiated the first dialogue processes. The participation of representatives of South Ossetia in these dialogue processes helped to develop the foundation for the civil society that today functions in South Ossetia.

The first South Ossetian non-governmental organizations also interacted with international donor organizations, however, the activities of the latter were suspended several years later. Donor organizations in South Ossetia were replaced by the OSCE, which operated within the country until 2008. It should be noted that the OSCE is not a humanitarian organization - it is a political organization whose activities are aimed at ensuring interaction and cooperation in Europe. The OSCE has a grant award system to support local organizations, and when international donor organizations left South Ossetia, the OSCE launched regular competitions for grants for local non-governmental organizations. South Ossetian non-governmental organizations received

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financial support from the OSCE, actively interacted with the leadership of the republic, performing such functions as communication with the international community and humanitarian support for the population that was on the brink of survival as a result of the war.

It is important to take into account that the activities of non-governmental organizations in South Ossetia often happens within the framework of dialogue processes organized by international organizations. The value of the dialogue was not only in establishing contacts with the Georgian side but also in providing civil society and public organizations in South Ossetia with access to international platforms. The cooperation of South Ossetian non-governmental organizations with the OSCE promoted political and public dialogue within the country.

In 2008, the OSCE's activities in South Ossetia were suspended and financial support to local non-governmental organizations was also terminated. After 2008, non-governmental organizations operating in South Ossetia worked towards objectively informing the international community about the war and related events.

In the early years, representatives of the South Ossetian governmental bodies supported the activities of local non-governmental organizations, however, they soon stopped doing so. The press launched a campaign against nongovernmental organizations, which were accused of betraying national/state interests (although nongovernmental organizations do not possess any state secrets or any confidential information). Thus, the government withdrew its support, and pressure from mass media also impeded the activities of non-governmental organizations.

In 2012, Russia adopted Federal Law 121 "On Foreign Agents," which was aimed at regulating the activities of non-profit organizations (NPOs) receiving funds and other property from foreign sources and participating in political activities. The leadership of South Ossetia effectively duplicated the Russian law and put forward its own law "On non-profit organizations of the Republic of South Ossetia." The law obliges non-governmental organizations receiving money from abroad to register as agents of international organizations and to report on the sources of funding for projects and programs implemented by these local organizations in South Ossetia.

Representatives from South Ossetian non-governmental organizations fought in parliament against the adoption of this law. Nevertheless, the only tangible achievement was in the change of the term "agent" to the term "partner." The term "partner" is more appropriate, since local organizations, working with international ones, develop partnership relations, but do not represent their interests in South Ossetia. The fact that representatives of South Ossetian non-governmental organizations were able to achieve a change in terminology within the framework of a normative act is the result of the experience and knowledge that these organizations acquired during their work at the local level, as well as in partnership with international organizations in different formats.

Under the adopted law, non-governmental organizations of South Ossetia are required to register as partners of international organizations and

use the term "partner" in all their publications, report on the receipt of funds from abroad, and indicate the sources of funding for projects and programs that are being implemented. At the same time, the Ministry of Justice was allowed to use its discretion to recognize work or partnerships with an international organization ineffective and suspend any action of non-governmental organizations for up to six months, including freezing their accounts.

Perhaps the Federal Law "On Foreign Agents" is relevant for Russia, since it allows more efficient regulation of the activities of many non-profit organizations. However, for South Ossetia, this practice of regulating the activities of non-governmental organizations is not justified. First, the number of non-governmental organizations here is incomparable with the number of organizations in Russia. Second, such severe restrictions are detrimental to the activities of South Ossetian non-governmental organizations. The adoption of this law catalyzed the process of closing down non-governmental organizations that functioned in South Ossetia. Thus, the process of suppressing civil society institutions in the republic began. The formal justification of this process pointed to the fact that their work did not comply with the legislation of South Ossetia.

One particularly interesting fact needs to be highlighted: Non-governmental organizations that receive funding from the Russian Federation should technically also fall under the law, "On non-profit organizations of the Republic of South Ossetia" in terms of "performing functions of foreign partners." However, such non-governmental organizations are not subject to this law - they are not required to call themselves "partners" of international organizations in their publications, and they are not subjected to pressure from the Ministry of Justice.

As a result, all capable non-governmental organizations in South Ossetia were forced to close. Currently, the existing non-governmental organizations in South Ossetia are operational only on paper and do not have a real impact on society. Charitable organizations perform targeted work in the republic: They collect funds for targeted purposes and hold charity concerts. Currently, there is also no demand for platforms of interaction for non-governmental organizations and the mass media. We can say that the non-governmental organizations of South Ossetia today operate in a semi-underground way. Nevertheless, we can talk about the preserved potential for public activity and, thus, conducting an intra-social dialogue on the territory of South Ossetia. The South Ossetian government does not understand the benefits of non-governmental organizations in the republic, interpreting the word "non-governmental" as "anti-governmental." However, the status of a non-governmental organization only means that the organization does not receive funding from the state budget of South Ossetia.

At the same time, when there was a need to inform the global community about the military confrontation in South Ossetia, the government of the republic turned to non-governmental organizations. Since South Ossetia was not recognized as a subject of international law, it was the representatives of civil society (non-governmental organizations) who appealed to international organizations. Thus, it was the non-governmental organizations of South Os-

setia that fulfilled the communication function between the republic and the international community. The value of conducting a dialogue with international organizations is in its possibility to present information about the situation in South Ossetia during the conflict to the international community, highlight the issues related to the solution of humanitarian problems, engage the international community in solving the problems of the post-conflict period, and to contribute to the establishment of sustainable peace.

In the long term, the founders of currently inactive non-governmental organizations are unlikely to showcase a desire to re-engage in public activities. Thus, we can say that non-governmental organizations as an institution of civil society are currently absent in South Ossetia.

Another indicator of the development of civil society is the existence of strong, influential political parties. Political parties in South Ossetia are also experiencing significant pressure from the authorities, which impedes their functioning. Suppression of the activities of political parties also illustrates the suppression of civil society institutions in South Ossetia.

To summarize, we can highlight the weakness of these civil society institutions in the republic. This is due to the unfavorable legal and political situation, which impedes the effective functioning and development of civil society institutions in South Ossetia. This situation is a result of the position of the authorities in the republic, who deny the need for democratic reforms.

The need to decentralize power

South Ossetia, as well as Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, inherited the system of political governance from the Soviet Union. This is a mobilization system of governance, where the power is concentrated in the hands of one subject - an individual, or a political party, or a group of people.

After the collapse of the USSR, an armed confrontation unfolded on the territory of South Ossetia. The wartime political order implied that the governance in the republic would be of a mobilization nature. It should be noted that such political order is in opposition to democracy, restricting the rights and freedoms of the population (in particular, the population's right to movement becomes limited).

The application of mobilization governance on the territory of South Ossetia was due to the extreme circumstances that required quick management decisions. This system of governance was the most suitable for the republic during the period of military confrontation. However, after 2008, when Russia recognized South Ossetia's independence, the need to have such a governance model disappeared. It was a time for implementing systemic reforms. Society had expectations of positive changes and the development of democratic structures: separation of power, development of the system of checks and balances, establishment of a multipolar power system, development of civil society, and transparency of public administration based on the feedback from the society.

Thus, after 2008 we arrived at a point where there is a need for decentralization of power and development of statehood and mechanisms of democratic governance. For democratic mechanisms to function in South

Ossetia it is necessary to decentralize the power. It would've been practical to delegate some of the powers to local self-government bodies, which are mobile and possess information locally. In addition, it would be sensible to delegate part of the power to parliament and establish an independent justice system.

The 2011 revolution in South Ossetia was due to the deep disappointment of the society, which at that time, was much more modernized compared to the authorities. The unwillingness of the authorities to delegate power and relinquish part of the control lead to the disappointment of the society. It is important to note that the structuring of society is achieved through a natural historical and political process, so the authorities' fear of losing control is not justified.

Political parties and non-governmental organizations play the role of buffer between the authorities and society. This was something that did not exist in South Ossetia. This buffer develops political programs that are aimed at fulfilling the needs of different groups within the society. Respectively, different groups within society develop around ideological leaders of various political programs. The absence of the latter directly leads to the discontent of citizens with the state authorities. It has to be noted, that inter-societal dialogue is the mechanism that allows different parties of the public-political process to state their positions and potentially reach a consensus in solving pressing issues, including the issue of the distribution/re-distribution of power.

Perhaps, the desire for consolidation of power is explained by the incompetence of the South Ossetian government and lack of understanding of the fundamental laws of the functioning of society. The need to track the dynamics of public sentiment was ignored, as was the society's need for democratic transformations. Today the problem of decentralization of power in South Ossetia is still urgent. Society needs the development of democratic mechanisms both at the level of state leadership and at the level of development of civil society institutions.

In addition to the central authorities that develop the political agenda and carry out legislative activities, local self-government bodies impact the conditions for the functioning of civil society. The development of local self-government institutions is an important indicator of the development of civil society. Let us consider their activities in the context of the functioning of civil society in South Ossetia.

Inability to elect local self-government bodies

In the context of developed civil society, the local self-government bodies are formed through an election process. As a result, the local governments are accountable to the local constituencies. Ineffectiveness of local self-government bodies automatically leads to a situation when certain government representatives simply are not going to be re-elected. The opposite statement is also true: the effective functioning of local self-government bodies, the development of economic activity result in a positive assessment by the population, and in the desire to keep specific representatives in power. Thus, it can be concluded that effective self-government election mechanisms

contribute to the development of economic activities and local political activities.

The institution of local self-government is defined by the Constitution of South Ossetia. On February 18, 2004, the Law of the Republic of South Ossetia No. 44 "On local self-government in the Republic of South Ossetia" was adopted. The law mandated the development of municipal formations in the republic, as well as the formation of elective and other local self-government bodies. However, this article of the Constitution of the Republic was subject to a moratorium for a long time, which was lifted only in 2012. A year later, the deputies again vetoed it, and the full application of several articles of the Constitution was postponed until 2014. After that, the issue of introducing local self-government was put on a backburner. Thus, we can say that today in South Ossetia, the electiveness of local self-government bodies is absent as a phenomenon.

In addition, the process of the development of civil society is negatively impacted by the conservative social mindset. This is manifested in the domination of family and kinship ties in public life, which as a rule are the basis for holding positions of state and municipal service, for ensuring access to resources, obtaining education, as well as for social mobility in general. It should be noted that due to the underdeveloped structures of civil society, social support to people who find themselves in a difficult life situation is provided primarily by a wide range of relatives. This weakens the motivation of the majority of the population to participate in public administration through the help of civil society institutions. As a result, the influence of the population on political decision-making is extremely low.

An important problem in the context of the functioning of civil society is the presence of public consensus on key issues of social development and the most urgent tasks of public administration. However, there is no such consensus in South Ossetia. Let's consider this problem in more detail.

Absence of public consensus

Today in South Ossetia the problem of lack of public consensus on the political future of the Republic of South Ossetia is very urgent. In particular, the issue of South Ossetia's unification with the Russian Federation has been controversial for many years. Since 1989, a liberation struggle has been going on in the territory of South Ossetia, aimed at recognition of the independence of the republic. At the same time, until 2008, the prospects for recognition of independence by the international community were very vague.

In 2008, the Russian Federation recognized the independence of South Ossetia, and the goal of a years-long struggle was practically achieved. At the same time, the directions of further strategic development of the republic after the unexpected recognition of independence turned out to be undeveloped. Therefore, shortly after 2008, two opposite ideas surfaced - the unification of South Ossetia with the Russian Federation or the strengthening of its own statehood. The opposition of these ideas and the lack of internal political consensus led to the fragmentation of society, its stratification, and its susceptibility to manipulation. It is important to note that over the years

that have passed since the recognition of independence, the socio-economic situation of Ossetia has not improved. The country lacks its own industry, large and even medium-sized business are non-existent, and there is no food security. The state budget of South Ossetia is formed based on investments from the Russian Federation. Therefore, in an economic sense South Ossetia remains dependent on the Russian Federation. This naturally results in the limited sovereignty of the republic.

Over the years since the recognition of independence, the power structures of South Ossetia have become part of the Russian power structures. This arrangement ensures social protection for law enforcement officers who receive Russian wages and pensions. However, this also negatively affects the national security of South Ossetia, which does not have its own army or its own power structures. It should be noted that South Ossetia is characterized by an unfavorable geographical position, which at the same time is very advantageous in geostrategic terms. South Ossetia is a north-south transit point, connecting Russia with the countries of the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf. After the signing of the "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" with the Russian Federation, the fourth Russian military base was deployed on the territory of South Ossetia, which today acts as the main factor in deterring aggression from Georgia.

In particular, the report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation on the work done for 2019 contained a phrase indicating that Georgia was neutralized, however there was an asymmetric response to Georgia's actions from South Ossetia. There was no further explanation of what the asymmetric response was. This may indicate that South Ossetia and the Russian Federation have different views on the boundaries of foreign policy security. In the future, such a discrepancy in assessments may lead to difficulties in mutual understanding between the Russian Federation and South Ossetia. Moreover, in the long term the geopolitical context may change. This makes it necessary for South Ossetia to independently resolve key issues of national security. At the moment, for South Ossetia, the most pressing issue is the solution of socio-economic problems - the development of industry, raising the standard of living for the population, and combating unemployment and poverty. Today the Russian Federation has certain geopolitical interests in the territory of South Ossetia. However, in the future, Russia's geopolitical interests may change. In addition, the interests of the Russian Federation and South Ossetia in different spheres may not align.

In the near future, there is a possibility of opening a transit through the territory of South Ossetia to Armenia. However, currently, South Ossetia is not ready either legally or technically to support this transit corridor. On the one hand, the opening of transit will make it possible to replenish the state budget. On the other hand, there is a danger that the transit of goods will lead to environmental degradation, queues at border crossing points, and deterioration of the quality of roads. The idea of transit also causes controversy in society and again actualizes the issue of achieving an internal political consensus, which is necessary both to achieve the political development of the republic and to solve socio-economic problems.

SOCIAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF THE VALUE OF DIALOGUE FOR A PEACEFUL FUTURE

*Maria Kumaritova*¹

*Nothing has changed in me, however,
before naming my enemy
I think about it a lot.
- Confucius 5th century BCE*

Opposing directions of political development imply different ways of achieving them, including different programs. It is necessary to come to a definite decision regarding the political future of South Ossetia and consistently implement this decision. In order to come to a decision that will, to one degree or another, suit both opposing parts of South Ossetian society - both supporters of South Ossetia's unification with the Russian Federation and supporters of strengthening and developing their own statehood - a dialogue is necessary.

Instead of conclusion

So, today we can witness the weakness of civil society in the Republic of South Ossetia, due to four key problems.

First, the institutions of civil society are very poorly developed in the republic: the activities of non-governmental organizations are now practically halted and the majority of these organizations have been liquidated due to legislative pressure.

Secondly, the local self-government bodies in the republic are not formed by an election process, despite the fact that this principle is enshrined in legislation - in the Constitution of South Ossetia and the corresponding 2004 law. However, as a result of the moratorium, the relevant articles of the Constitution have not yet entered into force.

Thirdly, the republic needs a decentralization of power. A mobilization model of consolidation of power in the hands of a narrow circle of people that is relevant for wartime does not apply to modern socio-political conditions. Society needs democratic reforms, however, the republic's leadership is not ready to develop democratic governance mechanisms.

Finally, the development of civil society in South Ossetia is hindered by the problem of the lack of public consensus on the further political development of the republic: unification of South Ossetia with the Russian Federation or the development of its own statehood are considered as opposite ways of development, while none of these paths finds unequivocal support in society. The republic needs to choose one of the paths of political development and implement it through the development of an appropriate program, giving priority to solving social and economic problems.

Lack of public consensus hinders effective dialogue with Georgia and the settlement of the Ossetian-Georgian conflict. Consequently, in the context of the settlement of the existing conflict with Georgia, it is also necessary to reach an agreement on the further political development of the republic. Thus, for the effective functioning and further development of civil society in South Ossetia, it is necessary to solve these four key problems. The development of civil society institutions will contribute to the solution of socio-economic problems and the settlement of the conflict with Georgia.

What is a peaceful future? What does it look like and what does it entail? This concept is complex, multidimensional, urgent, and problematic. Most importantly, it is highly speculative since the debate around it often rests on the premise that the future is uncharted territory. Any prognosis, hypothesis, or assessments of the future are fruitless tasks since they are not able to tell us much or anything at all. At best, they reveal the fears, hopes, and wishes of people who try to investigate their future and see what it might look like. In this sense, it is logical to ask the following question: What are the social and political functions of the future? For a significant group of people, the future can be a powerful source of hope and comfort. In the context of different dialogue processes, it is important to clearly define their goals and outline the objectives: What do we want to achieve by convening meetings in the framework of different dialogue processes? Essentially, we must answer three classical fundamental questions that determine the existential state of a human being. These are the questions that were formulated long ago by one of the most influential names in German philosophy of the 19th century, Immanuel Kant: 1) What can I know? 2) What should I do? 3) What can I hope for?

We can rephrase the first questions from "What I can know" into "What do I know?" Within the specific context in which this article is being written, it refers to our joint history of Georgian-South Ossetian relations. The answer to this question lies within the personal experience of each member of our society, the amalgam of which builds the social cognition of these relations. In many cases, we were witnesses and participants of the events that not only framed but also provided sense to these relations. Any social cognition is rooted in the social facts - real events, real actions of people, and verbal expressions. One of the key factors in exploring the future is the transformation of social facts into scientific facts. From that point onward they stop being separate, isolated sources of information and become publicly available. The process of transformation of social facts into scientific ones is also ambiguous and not straightforward. It depends on the interpretation, assessment, and comments of the researcher, which in turn also depends on the subjective bias of the observer, the level of their literacy, and their dedication to masking

¹ Maria Kumaritova is a political science expert

facts or being extremely honest.

So, what do we know about the Georgian-South Ossetian relations? The Southern branch of ethnic Ossetians and Georgians were not only the residents of one republic - the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, but also citizens of one great nuclear superpower - the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. A country that made a loud public statement that, for the first time in human history, it has solved the nationality issue within its borders. This was a very bold and very provocative statement. Many believed in it, and many more were truly proud of it. The whole history of humankind is the story of human devotion to their illusions, and parting with them becomes a revelation, a drama, and ultimately a tragedy for them.

Of course, the entire spectrum of Georgian-South Ossetian relations is impossible to present and describe within the framework of this article. However, in answering the question, "What do I know?" it is important to outline some key dates and events, the perception of which by the Ossetians became the cornerstone of relationship development. On November 23, 1989, a troubling rumor about an upcoming "peace march" from Tbilisi to Tskhinval reached Tskhinval. That afternoon, a KGB representative reported that a procession of thousands of people left Tbilisi and was moving towards Tskhinval. Teenagers who came running from the Pris village said that the procession coming from Gori resembled a storm cloud. This is how big and numerous the crowd was. People formed a human shield at the city entrance and did not allow the procession to enter the city. The crowd turned around, however, this did not mean that the incident has been resolved. This event became the "Rubicon" in Georgian-Ossetian relations.

As a result of Gorbachev's perestroika policy, independence movements emerged in the Soviet republics that aimed at secession from the USSR and the creation of mono-ethnic states. The idea failed and was criticized by the international community in the mid- 20th century and seemed to be buried once. But it suddenly became popular and was revived in the country that officially declared it had completely solved the issue of the nations. The Georgian Soviet Republic was not an exclusion in this. In 1989, a former Soviet dissident Z. Gamsakhurdia came to power in Georgia. The basic principle of state ideology, which he proposed to his people as a sacred idea for building a new independent state and a democratic society was, "Georgia for Georgians." The development of nationalist and ultra-nationalist sentiments became the "calling card" of the dissolution process of the USSR. The empire was coming apart at the seams and it was torn to pieces by the intensified nationalist ideology, which was so easily picked up by almost all previously "brotherly" nations. In January 1991, Georgia embarked on the implementation of the "democratic" principle of "Georgia for Georgians." Abkhazia and South Ossetian, or more precisely, ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetians, became the empirical field for the implementation of this project.

January 1991 is remembered by Ossetians as "Bloody Christmas," when Georgian security forces entered the city of Tskhinval on the night of January 6-7 when everyone was asleep. This date marks the beginning of open confrontation in this conflict. During 1991-1992, thousands of civilians

were killed and maimed at the hands of Georgian militia in police and military uniforms. On the territory of South Ossetia, 117 Ossetian villages were destroyed or burned to the ground. Many other tragic episodes are remembered by the Ossetians. These later became the core of the information base on which Georgian-Ossetian relations were built over the next 20 years, until August 2008.

The August War of 2008 added another layer of facts and episodes to public ideas about relations between Georgians and Ossetians. Political scientists, military, and economic analysts point to many factors that led to the August war - geopolitical, economic, ethnic, and ideological.

It is important to note that the narratives promoted by the Georgian government in August 2008 added extremely negative facts and information to the informational library of the question "What do I know?" The statement on Rustavi-2 TV channel by General Kurashvili, the commander of operations of the Georgian armed forces, revealed that in order to stabilize the situation in the conflict zone, the Georgian side, "Made a decision to restore constitutional order in the conflict zone,"² and the subsequent naming of the military operation "Clear Field," of course, could not bypass the Ossetian public consciousness.

The question "What do I know?" about Georgian-Ossetian relations was getting a very clear answer: "South Ossetia is only a clear field for Georgians." Considering that we have a new generation, the representatives of which never were Soviet citizens, who do not know anything about each other and who practically don't have a common language, this wave of negative information became foundational in forming a clear answer to the question, "What do I know?"

Of course, not only the Ossetian side ponders the question: "What do I know?" The other side also has its view of those events, its interpretations of the processes that occurred, and its own negative memory of those events. In an environment of isolation and with absence of interaction, these two concepts of "What do I know?" often not only completely oppose each other but also continue to develop and are supplemented by facts that push these two societies further apart. Rapprochement of these two poles and the development of a more integrated answer to the question "What do I know?" is possible only at the empirical level, the level of common sense that can be developed through a dialogue process. In the famous allegory of the cave in the Socratic Dialogue "Republic," the Greek philosopher Plato said, "...the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun..." Perhaps, achieving true knowledge, which will be a blessing for both parties, is only possible at the conceptual, intelligible level. Therefore, different platforms for dialogue interaction are developed. These include official dialogue platforms

² General Mamuka Kurashvili was the Chief of Staff of the Peacekeeping Operations of the Georgian Armed Forces in 2007-08. A more complete statement by General Kurashvili on the air of "Rustavi-2" sounded as follows: "there was a backlash to all proposals to sit down at the negotiating table, there was continuous shooting, the Georgian power structures decided to restore constitutional order in the entire region." The Ossetian perception of some parts of the speech in a more critical light is quite consistent with the specifics of the perception of information in the context of the escalating dynamics of the conflict (*editors' note*).

at the political and elite military level and on unofficial, civil society level (these can be and are often completely different levels and groups of people who are united around different ideas).

In general, dialogue is a form of communication of interested parties and is a method and a way to search for truth in a particular problem area. In the broadest sense, it is a way for people to coexist, for the realization of their “asocial sociality.” This helps people leave the “war of all against all” to unite in civil societies and look for peaceful ways within the framework of science, art, sports, which allow these societies to competitively fight each other without becoming enemies. There is no worthy alternative to such a dialogue.

The development of dialogue helps us to find answers to the second question: “What should I do?” During dialogue meetings, which usually take place on neutral territory, you can cool your emotions, tone down your ambitions of possessing the only possible Truth, and begin thinking. This space not only allows us to compare our different perception of the question “What do I know?” and supplement our information library with additional facts, but also develop strategies of addressing the question “What should I do?” based on the updated analysis of the “What do I know?” question. We are convinced that the most important thing is to reach the peaceful coexistence of our societies, of our people, and finally, of our states. To achieve this, we have to overcome the alienation between our peoples because we are connected by a thousand-year history that has seen both good and bad things. At the end of the day, these two nations are connected in many different ways: mixed marriages, closely interconnected cultures at many different levels - from routine spheres to the field of classic science. And finally, we both live in the same region - the South Caucasus. Within the framework of these provisions, we can discuss and develop joint projects implementation of which will help the parties to achieve goals set by the “Dialogue.” It is necessary to look for a real platform where the future of our nations can be built. One such platforms is dialogue, and its value will be revealed when concrete steps are taken in this direction since, to achieve any goal, you need to choose the means that are adequate to the specified goal.

One of the most important aspects of the answer to the question “What should I do?” is a pragmatic level of mutuality. The Georgian and Ossetian sides have repeatedly come forward with separate initiatives and proposals on the rebuilding of relations and finding a way out of the crisis. All these initiatives have proven to be non-viable because they did not consider the interests of the other side, and they pursued only their own goals and interests. This means that you need to clearly identify both the interests of the parties and the red lines through which neither side will ever cross. The whole society should be involved in this process, not only the official and political elites at different levels but also the civil society in the broadest sense of this concept. This is how public consciousness develops, and this is how we must revive and strengthen mutual trust. In my opinion, without these processes, all other measures - in the areas of trade, economy, culture, and even politics - will always be fragile. In this context, it is impossible to overestimate the role of unofficial peacemaking – “citizen diplomacy,” which has roots in human

history and dives deep into human psychology. Citizen diplomacy can touch that invisible nerve, which can become the real foundation for building mutual trust. In this sense, the dialogue format is the space where seeds of mutual trust between the two nations can sprout, and who are destined to live side by side. And, of course, it is always better to maintain sustained peace than to shed blood and fuel hatred between neighbors.

Finally, it is necessary to determine what, in this context, is the answer to the question “What can I hope for?” This is one of the most difficult issues in the context of building a peaceful future. Answering this question at the end of this socio-philosophical analysis and based on many years of experience participating in dialogue projects, I personally believe that one can hope for the following three results:

1. As already noted, dialogue allows us to replenish our information library with information that will help us perceive the processes taking place around us more comprehensively. I can hope that by sharing information, we can create a better informed and responsible society on both sides. In this case, these societies will have a sufficiently strong information base not to become victims of political manipulations and provocations. I believe that an informed and clear-headed society is one of the pillars of a peaceful future.
2. Dialogue processes often involve a certain level of participation from the international community. In this context, we can hope that through participation in dialogue processes, international organizations will retain their interest in the conflicts of our region and will continue constructive cooperation with all actors. The involvement of the international community as a long-term partner on equal terms with all parties to the conflict is the second column supporting the peaceful future of our societies.
3. Finally, I can hope that dialogue will help us, the two neighboring nations, rebuild bridges of cooperation and highlight those areas of activity that will support the balanced and organic development of the two societies. Cooperation and constructive intertwining of mutually beneficial interests, in my opinion, is the third pillar of a peaceful future.

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE STALEMATE: RUSSIA IN THE GEORGIAN-SOUTH OSSETIAN CONTEXT

Sergey Utkin¹

Uneven path

Moscow's permanent presence in the South Caucasus goes back to the 18th century, while Russian interaction with ethnic communities from the region is much older. Over centuries, the Russian state transformed several times, as did its borders. This inevitably involved contradictory assessments of the pax russica – within the same ethnic groups, one could find those who more or less willingly preferred to serve Russia (and later the Soviet Union), and those who openly or tacitly opposed Moscow's rule. As history went on, this mood changed, often dramatically. Russian domination did not, and probably could not prevent the nation-building process at the time when national identification became so crucial for people in Europe and beyond. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the first attempt of the South Caucasus' nations to take their own path got blocked but, as we can now see in the respective historical narratives, it has not been forgotten.

The Soviet practices with regard to ethnically complex parts of the country involved suppression of nationalist movements, population exchange and other methods, often brutal, with the eventual goal of ensuring stability. As the results of this work were judged as generally successful, the interethnic conflicts that erupted in late 1980s came as a surprise for most people, including those at the top of the Soviet government. While Gorbachev's Perestroika was designed to give people freedom to discuss the improvements that could help the Soviet Union develop, it immediately opened the gates for suppressed national grievances and, in many areas, national state projects that were presented as a natural way out of the economic and political crisis that was felt across the USSR.

This paved the way to the collapse of the Soviet state that, while avoiding the all-out war similar to Yugoslavia, was rapid and unprepared, leaving behind a number of interethnic hot spots. Time and again Moscow is blamed for intentionally creating what is now known as frozen conflicts. This piece has no intention to address these allegations but it is important to note that, bar conspiracy theorists, one could hardly argue that the way the conflicts developed over years and decades could have been initially foreseen or desired.²

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² For Russian experts' assessment of post-Soviet developments see, e.g.: *Evolution of Post-Soviet Space: Past, Present and Future: An Anthology*. Moscow, RIAC, 2017, 352 p. Available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/upload/iblock/5f5/evolutionofpostsovietspace.pdf>. Another interesting recent take by an international expert team can be found in: Arkady Moshes, Andras Racz (eds.), *What has remained of the USSR: Exploring the erosion of the post-Soviet space*. FIIA Report 58, Helsinki, Finnish International Affairs Institute, 2019, 270 p. Available at: https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/fiaa_report58_what_has_remaind_of_the_ussr_web.pdf.

Through the 1990s the new Russia, headed by Boris Yeltsin, aspired to become a benevolent peacemaker for the post-Soviet space, while the developments in the area were often overshadowed by Moscow's domestic troubles. It was no earlier than by 2005 that Russia could reach relative stability in Chechnya and feel the effects of the fast economic growth. It was around the same time that Russia became more vocal, expressing its disagreements with the West.³ The 2008 conflict with Georgia, which developed against the backdrop of debates around NATO enlargement and Kosovo recognition, exacerbated the tensions. In a controversial move, Russia recognized independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with just a handful of other countries following its steps later.⁴ Georgia felt obliged to react, severing diplomatic relations with Moscow. While neither Russia, nor Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were standing still in their political evolutions over the past years, the regional scenery that persists to this day was created then – by September 2008.⁵

For Russia its policies and decisions of 2008 are to this day indisputable – as the official narrative goes, Russia had to react to the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's attempt to militarily regain control of South Ossetia, where Russian peacekeepers were stationed, which made a Russian military response and subsequent recognition of independence inevitable. This attitude has a wide array of political and legal consequences, none of which is seen as legal or legitimate in Tbilisi or in the West, which sides with Georgia on this. As Russia treats Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent, they become parties to bilateral treaties and decide on the forms of cooperation with Russia, including the military realm. Meanwhile, Russia's appeal to Georgia is to recognize the "new realities" in the region.⁶ Obviously, there is hardly a way to reconcile contradictory claims and policies. The parties had to learn to operate in the de-facto stalemate.

Talks on the side-lines

While the broken diplomatic ties between Russia and Georgia could suggest that official communication has stopped, this has not been the case. The interests of Russia in Georgia and Georgia in Russia remain represented

³ Dmitry Trenin, Russia leaves the West, *Foreign Affairs*, June 2006. Available at: <https://carnegie.ru/2006/06/26/russia-leaves-west-pub-18467>

⁴ South Ossetia is also recognised as an independent state by Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru and Syria.

⁵ Russia signed Treaties on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia today in the Kremlin. *President of Russia*, 17 September 2008. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1439>

⁶ E.g. in this remark by Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov: "The independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is a new reality. We were ready to help the Georgian side forge normal relations with the South Ossetians and Abkhaz, do what none of the Georgian leaders after the breakup of the Soviet Union had seriously been occupied with – from Gamsakhurdia to his worthy follower Mikhail Nikolayevich Saakashvili. <...> Saakashvili is not the Georgian people, and far from everybody in Georgia shares the line on creating constant tension in relations with Russia. There is civil society, under the auspices of which contacts are continuing." *Interview with Television Channel Vesti*, July 28, 2009. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5K-JWVmR/content/id/283930

under the diplomatic hat of Switzerland.⁷ The Geneva Discussions,⁸ however inconclusive, bring together representatives of Moscow, Tbilisi, Sukhumi and Tskhinvali for talks about their troubled relationships. Ergneti meetings under the OSCE auspices help resolve issues on the boundary between Georgia and South Ossetia. Meetings of senior diplomats, Grigory Karasin and Zurab Abashidze, allow for a discussion of Russian-Georgian bilateral matters.⁹ The latter even managed to produce certain progress, including on economic cooperation – after being suspended for some time, Georgian famous wines, mineral waters and sweet beverages made their way back into the Russian shops.

The rare moments, when it could seem that, in spite of unresolved controversies, the Russian-Georgian relationship was improving, did not last long. The latest major crisis happened during summer 2019, when an incident with a member of Russian Parliament,¹⁰ who visited Tbilisi, triggered a Russian response, ending regular direct flights to Georgia. Prior to that, Russian tourism to Georgia was massive, helped by the visa-free travel introduced unilaterally, yet by the Saakashvili's government as an appeal to the Russian people over the head of the Russian government. While Georgia is clearly loved by Russians as a tourist destination, the halt of the flights did not produce any visible public backlash, proving that tourists do not form a meaningful lobby for a political change.

The ability to travel was only partially constrained by the Russian suspension of flights and suffered a larger worldwide blow with the 2020 pandemic, and created room for civil society and academic communication that could not change the political tides but had a certain self-value. This helped to build bridges between individuals involved and to deepen the understanding of Russian-Georgian troubles.¹¹ However, these dialogue formats were mostly bilateral and had frozen conflicts as just one of the issues discussed. The direct involvement of people, currently based in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, either was not planned or faced known political and logistical hurdles. On the other hand, the Georgians were eager to engage refugees from the conflict zones with an obvious point of making their tragedy known. This left Russian participants, if those were part of the Russian political mainstream, as the only advocates of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali in these dialogue formats. When it comes to the opposition-leaning Russians, they rarely brought their

⁷ Russian Federation Interests Section at the Embassy of Switzerland in Tbilisi: <https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/georgia/en/home/representations/embassy-tbilisi/russian-federation-interests-section.html>; Georgian Interests Section at the Embassy of Switzerland in Moscow:

<https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/russia/en/home/representations/embassy-in-moscow/embassy-tasks/georgian-interests-section-at-the-embassy-of-switzerland-in-moscow.html>

⁸ Press Releases of the Geneva International Discussions, *UN Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*: <https://dppa.un.org/en/press-releases>

⁹ Tbilisi is in favor of preserving Abashidze-Karasin dialogue. *TASS*, 30 July 2019. Available at: <https://tass.com/world/1071022>

¹⁰ Georgia protests: Thousands storm parliament over Russian MP's speech. *BBC News*, 21 June 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48710042>

¹¹ E.g.: Georgian-Russian Dialogue for Peace and Cooperation by Tbilisi-based NGO Caucasian House: <http://caucasianhouse.ge/en/project/georgian-russian-dialogue-for-peace-and-cooperation/>

disagreements with the Russian government to the South Caucasus realm, as it looked marginal for people preoccupied with Russian domestic political fights.

The mutual distrust between Russia and the West has complicated the environment further. Projects, supported by Western institutions on the Georgian soil, could be seen with suspicion in Moscow, while projects funded by Russia would often be seen as subversive by many in Georgia,¹² merely because of the Russian policies with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Successful dialogue initiatives mostly remained low-key, in a sense that they were not trying to gain public attention, while they still could engage people from the Georgian government and leading Russian experts. Rarely could this be categorized as a peer-to-peer “second track” approach, since expert communication remained little more than that and engagement of political or diplomatic heavyweights on the Russian side remained problematic and not necessarily welcomed by Georgian organizers.

Although the visa requirements for Georgians travelling to Russia made visits to Russian-arranged events more complicated, this practice also developed,¹³ albeit remained limited. Since the organizers of public diplomacy initiatives in Russia are mostly state-affiliated, this often posed a dilemma for Georgians – whether it would be politically appropriate for them to get involved. However, a number of Georgian experts and young professionals believed it was important for them to get on board for the sake of their expert qualifications and out of curiosity.

The new bilateral track

Abkhazia's independence is rejected by Tbilisi, but its existence is not denied. The case of South Ossetia is, in this sense, more complicated – Georgia denies the existence of such an entity, seeing the territory as an arbitrary cut from Georgian territory, and Georgian administrative divisions do not foresee references to Ossetia. Russia is seen in Georgia as the only reason this territory is not controlled by Tbilisi. This makes the very idea of some trilateral dialogue involving Georgia, South Ossetia, and Russia hard to implement, even when it comes to non-official platforms. The bilateral Russian-South Ossetian track is deprived of any ambiguity of such kind – in the Russian eyes this communication is no different from diplomatic and civic engagement with any other independent country. Moreover, at official or quasi-official events held in Russia, Georgian presence, given the severed diplomatic relations, is not appropriate but representatives of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are invited and welcomed. Given the size of these countries, their involvement rarely becomes central, but it certainly contributes to their image of sovereign nations.

The break-away republics naturally see Russia as the principle foreign

¹² E.g.: Kremlin-funded Media Forum Triggers Protest in Tbilisi. *Civil.ge*, 5 September 2018. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/252836>

¹³ E.g.: Opportunities for a Russian-Georgian dialogue were discussed at a joint online conference of the Gorchakov Fund and the Primakov Georgian-Russian Center. *Gorchakov Fund*, 1 May 2020. Available at: <https://gorchakovfund.ru/en/news/view/opportunities-for-a-russian-georgian-dialogue-were-discussed-at-a-joint-online-conference-of-the-gor/>

partner and security guarantor. What is viewed in Georgia as illegal “borderization,” is from that angle strengthening of a sovereign state’s border. What Georgia interprets as an illegal Russian military presence is, in that view, a result of bilateral treaties between Russia and respective sovereign partners. The issues that get to the center of Russian-South Ossetian dialogue include the fates of economic support provided by Russia and similar bilateral issues but hardly the conflict with Georgia in any sense other than a security concern. Given the Georgian official attitude to South Ossetia, being sealed-off from Georgia for a time-being is, for Tskhinvali, the prerequisite for its existence as a state. Thus, the only appeal to Russia in this regard is to reconfirm guarantees of South Ossetian security. On larger foreign policy issues, South Ossetia logically sides with the Russian official discourse, often in its more hard-line version.

For ethnic, historical and geographic reasons, the most important communication South Ossetia has in Russia, apart from Moscow, is with the neighboring Russian region of North Ossetia. The links between the two are numerous, based on multiple personal relationships and economic interaction. The claim is widespread that the Russian region and South Ossetia are simply two parts of the same that might merge again in a not so distant future. The official Russian attitude to such appeals has so far remained more careful than some would expect, refraining from a definite “yes.” The future development of the Russian approach might be dependent on the character of the Russian-Georgian relationship, although Tskhinvali definitely would not like such causality.

What could be done

At the moment it looks like neither Russia, nor Georgia, nor South Ossetia are truly looking for a solution to the uncomfortable status-quo. Russia and Georgia make reproaches to one another, hoping that sooner or later it will be for the other one to change its stance. South Ossetia is afraid of becoming a bargaining chip, and it relies on the Russian claim that the recognition of independence cannot be reversed.

The political stubbornness and mutual paranoid attitudes might prevent conflict resolutions for years to come. Even with new generations of politicians it is hard to expect the existing issues to disappear. The issues that remain the hardest to resolve, since the claims by parties are initially irreconcilable, are those of status. What can, at least in theory, be addressed separately are the humanitarian and security conditions in the conflict area. The working dialogue mechanisms that would engage all parties involved would be helpful in this regard. However, putting this dialogue on track would ask for a few prerequisites:

- All parties have to demonstrate the intention to find a compromise at good will;
- Moscow has to develop an honest dialogue with Tbilisi that both sides will find beneficial in economic terms and stabilizing in terms of security;
- Tbilisi has to admit that, whatever the solution for the status issue will

be, South Ossetia is no less real than Abkhazia, so that its very name can be legitimized in the Georgian public debate;

- Visa-restrictions and other logistical limitations on the movement of people have to be dropped, provided that security on the ground and at border crossings is properly ensured;
- The funding and structure of key dialogue initiatives have to be transparent and impartial, aiming at engaging different views rather than promoting one of them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE PROCESSES IN CONFLICT CONTEXTS: THE EXPERIENCE OF PAN-CAUCASIAN PROCESSES

Juliet Schofield and Larissa Sotieva¹

We often hear it asked - why do we need dialogue in conflict affected regions? What purpose does it serve? What can be expected from dialogue, if the parties are not ready to abandon their principles? What can be resolved through dialogue at the civic, unofficial level if the politics and economics of conflict are the dominant force?

Such questions are very pertinent, and essentially, dialogue is how people understand each other. We all communicate on a daily basis through dialogues with different people and not necessarily in order to achieve some goal or gain some profit. Dialogue is a completely natural continuous process in which we engage in order to understand, to erase our ignorance, to remind people of ourselves, and to bring some objectivity to our subjective perceptions.

Dialogue - The counterbalance to isolation and self-isolation

For conflict-affected societies, it is not possible that dialogue with the opposing side stays the same as in peacetime. On the contrary, societies experience a persistent rejection of the very possibility of dialogue. A public rhetoric develops that is quite distinct from pre-conflict times, which is based on tenacious basic assumptions such as, *"we know all there is to know about them,"* or *"they showed what they are capable of during the war,"* and *"there's nothing to talk about with them."*

However, the lack of desire for dialogue does not come from an overabundance of information, but paradoxically, from the lack of it. Military conflicts escalate precisely because the parties do not have a mutual understanding and because there is no healthy dialogue at the civic and political levels. Dialogue helps to prevent violence, and a well-facilitated dialogue can generate discussions through which an understanding of the roots and history of the conflict from the other party's perspective emerges.

There are many reasons for the reluctance of post-conflict societies to enter into dialogue with each other – for example, the unhealed wounds of war, anticipation of danger and a renewal of hostilities, high levels of distrust, hostility, even hatred, and traumatic memories of military action provoked by any reminders of the opposing side. In such a context, a protective mechanism is triggered in societies aimed at both physical and informational self-isolation. In this respect, it could be said that post-war societies prefer not to enter into a dialogue in order to avoid a repetition of the past, and to avoid learning about each other - information isolation and self-isolation are more comfortable.

However, the resulting information vacuum is ripe for manipulation as well as the emergence and spread of new negative stereotypes and myths

about each other. Moreover, the lack of dialogue and reliable information about each other serves to prevent the emergence of different opinions within the societies in relation to the conflict, both towards the other side and in terms of critique of the position and behavior of one's own side.

Dialogue at the level of civil society is primarily a process of communication in a post-conflict situation, and despite the fact that it is especially difficult to establish, it is nevertheless possible and usually begins with the facilitation of a third party who demonstrates its neutrality and impartiality, and which the parties equally trust. Dialogue does not necessarily pursue any specific goals, but is aimed at creating a space for mutual understanding, providing equal opportunities for civil society of both sides to speak out and be heard, which subsequently influences available information and public rhetoric on both sides. People begin to perceive the conflict more objectively and move away from their subjective judgments.

The benefits of dialogue

There are few mechanisms for measuring the success or quality of dialogue, its value or influence or lack thereof. However, one effective method of assessment is through the deep reflection of the participants, both in relation to changes on a personal level in their perceptions, and changes in their environment that arose due to the dialogue process itself in terms of information shared from the dialogue, and analysis informed by it.

We bring as an example the "Dialogue through Research" Georgian-Abkhaz expert dialogue process, facilitated by us and supported by International Alert. Understanding the high expectations of the dialogue, and the scrutiny and pressure which the participants came under both from the authorities and from within their societies, this new phase in the dialogue process emerged only after a process of deep reflection with each participant separately, then in two groups of Georgians and Abkhaz, and finally together in one joint group.

At that time (spring 2008), when the danger of a resumption of hostilities was extremely high, the dialogue participants decided that the dialogue should be oriented towards conflict escalation prevention, and the most transparent and effective way would be through expert analysis of the situation. A dialogue process was created in which the parties commissioned each other to explore issues and analyze questions that they, as the other side, wanted answers to. The result of this parallel and joint work was a series of publications on different themes highlighting the cost of the conflict for the parties, including themes of security guarantees, international engagement, the politics of non-recognition and also the de-isolation of Abkhazia and what that means in practice - what benefits it would bring and what concerns the sides may have about it.

Subsequently, the research was disseminated within the Abkhaz and Georgian societies, public debates were conducted on television and in universities, and the analysis and recommendations became a useful source of information for both the authorities and international mediators. To this day, university students, experts, and even politicians still use these texts in their studies and research.

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At that time, there was no comparable civil or expert dialogue process in the Georgian-Ossetian context. This can be considered as an omission of the international community, which stereotypically believed that the Georgian-Ossetian conflict was insignificant and did not merit the same concentration of effort as the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. It was also an omission of the civil societies of Georgia and South Ossetia, which were unable to establish a dialogue in order to work on the response to prevention and strategy for conflict transformation.

However, the Georgian-Abkhaz analytical dialogue had a pre-history and did not start immediately after hostilities ended in 1993. Some dialogue participants had been involved in negotiations with the other side on the exchange of prisoners both during and after hostilities, while others had participated in various regional all-Caucasian humanitarian and peacebuilding projects, such as the Caucasus Forum of NGOs, the League of Women of the Caucasus, Network of people with disabilities, dialogue of cultural figures, dialogue of historians, business representatives, etc. All of these regional dialogue processes provided opportunities for civil society to cooperate and respond to escalating tensions. They established independent expert groups to visit and speak with different conflict parties and to make their own independent analysis and recommendations on possible ways to resolve the situation.

These dialogue processes involved not only representatives of the civil and expert communities of the South and North Caucasus, but also from the wider post-Soviet region. We all understood that our common Soviet past had left a huge imprint on our societies and that could be both a source of tension as well as a unifying factor. This regional dialogue helped with the exchange of experience, de-isolation of societies, finding like-minded people and establishing cooperation which subsequently grew into projects aimed at mutual understanding and reducing tensions around the conflicts.

As a result of joint cooperation at the regional level, trusting professional relationships were established, which facilitated the emergence of the Georgian-Abkhaz bilateral expert dialogue. And most importantly, this process was made possible thanks to other civil dialogue processes, the contribution of local experts, civil society leaders on both sides, and the strategic work carried out by international institutions and experienced mediators to build opportunities for civil society and trust between these groups after the end of hostilities.

But the same questions were raised when addressing this seemingly advanced and completely transparent dialogue process such as, “what’s there to talk to them about, those who killed us?” “Why them? – better speak to their Moscow patrons.” “Talking to them might be perceived as a rejection of our national strategic interests.”

Realistic and heightened expectations from dialogue

There are deep differences in understanding across the region regarding the role of dialogue in conflict-affected regions, the role of civil society in conflict prevention, and the potential for transformation. These differences and disagreements, as well as the lack of objective assessment by civil soci-

ety of their own capabilities gives rise to inflated and unrealistic expectations from unofficial dialogue processes.

We tried to analyze the roots of such expectations, drawing on our many years of experience in conducting dialogue processes in the region, reviewing the existing analysis on this topic, and also through interviews with leading regional experts.

1. “Political” (Official) and “Civil” (unofficial) dialogue

Often the concepts of political (official) and civil (non-governmental/unofficial) dialogue are used interchangeably resulting in false interpretations and, accordingly, high expectations of political progress among the population. In public discourse, these different processes have often been referred to as ‘negotiations,’ without going into the details, differences and components of two different processes.

Civil dialogue processes can in no way replace political processes, and cannot claim to reach resolutions. However, effective civil processes can help political processes find ways to peacefully resolve conflicts and set societies on the path to conflict transformation, preparing them for a future of peace when a political agreement can be reached.

The lack of full and transparent information or coordinated messages about civil and political processes result in misperceptions that are effectively manipulated by those with vested interests in maintaining the conflict due to the economic, political or other dividends they gain from the status quo.

Their methods are similar across all conflict regions. For example, civil society and international non-governmental organizations are often asked, “what have you achieved over the years of numerous dialogue meetings?” but they never address such a question to the authorities.

In order to avoid misconceptions about official and unofficial processes, public education is needed to ensure transparency of all dialogue processes, and to be clear about the distinct role of civil society and where the responsibility for decision-making lies.

2. Limits and personal responsibility of dialogue participants

Civil society leaders involved in the dialogue, as a rule, enter into dialogue with representatives of the opposing side, assuming that this process will benefit both themselves and their societies. These tend to be people with a heightened sense of responsibility and they enter into dialogue consciously, often assuming much more personal responsibility for it than they can bear.

Each of us has limits based on our real objective and subjective capabilities. The objective reality in post-war societies is that it is difficult to expect visible positive results in the daily life of a particular person without extensive systemic investments and reform.

The more we take personal responsibility and burden ourselves with problems, the more expectations of us from others grow. Society begins to build high expectations from those who go to dialogue meetings and over time, when there is no tangible, positive progress and there are no observable improvements in relations - maybe even the opposite and tensions rise – the

general public start to judge, asking what they are doing and, “who do they think they represent, travelling abroad and discussing who-knows-what with our enemies, if nothing changes for the better”?

Civil society leaders who enter into dialogue with their opposing side should make more effort to communicate within their own societies that this is their personal civic choice, and that they participate in their personal capacity and that they do not assume to represent the people or the government, but only their own civic position.

3. Transparency and effective communication strategies

One reason for this misunderstanding may be an oversight by the facilitator or third-party mediator not to agree with the sides on an effective communication strategy. It would be good, from the very beginning of a process, to explain to the public the motivation and interest of the third party in establishing the dialogue and what it aims to achieve.

As a rule, post-conflict dialogue begins with dialogue between the mediator and civil society leaders, and it is at this initial stage, that communication strategy with wider society is often overlooked, failing to explain why these individuals are being invited to be involved in a process of dialogue with the opposite side.

The facilitator's communication strategy needs to be multifaceted, e.g. addressing donors and the authorities of the conflicting parties, but the first priority should be during the process of selecting dialogue participants. At this stage it is particularly important to communicate the founding principles of the dialogue, what to expect and what not to expect from it, and how to communicate this to the wider community.

In order for the dialogue to be truly accepted as a “civil dialogue”, there must be wider citizen participation. The dialogue should be extended in terms of its informational reach to a wider audience and if possible, to include different layers of society.

4. Societal Trauma

Post-conflict societies exhibit certain characteristics such as high levels of anxiety and a sense of insecurity or anticipation of danger which take years to subside. Post-conflict societies treat all information, interventions or contacts with the other conflict party, with extreme caution and suspicion. Any mention of the opposing side can be a powerful trigger, reminding people of the traumatic experience of conflict, putting people into “fight” or “flight” mode - as the body's natural reaction to danger. Accordingly, the activities of civil society leaders and international facilitators - about whom society knows little of their goals - gives a sense of danger and thus civil dialogue process can be perceived by the population as a risk or a betrayal and predictably are subject to sometimes quite aggressive attacks.

When planning a dialogue process with civil society leaders across the conflict divides, societal trauma should be taken into account and the process should be adapted to the specific conditions and needs of people and society.

5. “Winner” and “Loser” complexes

In a post-conflict situation, once the line of contact or line of separation has been drawn, as a rule, one side feels the victor, the other feels the vanquished, and many claims and recriminations towards each other remain.

This state of ‘winner’ or ‘loser’ influences certain behavioral norms of the societies. The defeated side desires and counts on revenge, while the winner tries to consolidate their victory. In both cases, these behaviors can acquire extreme characteristics transforming the societies’ functional needs. The winner or loser complex begins to dominate public life with all other aspects fading into insignificance, compared with the need to strengthen their positions, to justify the righteousness of their chosen model and to do everything to achieve their aims.

The winner or loser complex gives rise to a population’s perception of themselves and a sense of their uniqueness. Often this originality, acquired through the conflict, becomes the predominant feature in the identity of that society. And these societies find themselves caught up in a process wherein this cultivated uniqueness has a tendency to strengthen over time and develop to extremes. Given that the roots of identity lie deep within us, and are deeply embedded in our societies, work on identity change is difficult and takes a long time.

Thus, the presence of a militarized aspect in a society's identity significantly narrows the possibilities for peaceful conflict management.

It is not only the mainstream of the divided societies who are affected by these models of behavior, they also influence the way in which the societies are perceived in the eyes of those outside the conflict. A vicious cycle ensues - the parties see a certain perception of themselves reflected back to them (e.g. in the global media coverage, or from attitudes of third party facilitators/politicians) and in turn begin to behave in a way that lives up to that reputation, to meet their expectations.

In this case, the most effective format of interaction is dialogue in a regional or multi-lateral format, where representatives of civil society from different parties, regardless of status, can engage in dialogue on common regional issues as well as bilateral cross-divide issues.

A regional/multi-lateral dialogue process can help to break down this idea of the ‘uniqueness’ of a particular conflict situation that has evolved over the years, when different parties can identify and understand the commonalities of their conflicts in other contexts.

Conclusion

We hope this reflection on past dialogue processes, their dynamics, achievements, expectations and difficulties can inform future directions in conflict transformation in the South Ossetian context. Civil dialogue is no substitute for official talks, and does not require participants to relinquish their political positions. Dialogue is about conflicting sides understanding each other - and ourselves. Dialogue is a way of filling the information vacuum and thus reducing the space for manipulation of fear and insecurity, especially when it is sensitive to the psychological effects of protracted conflict. The lessons of

past dialogues suggest that different types of dialogue and transparent communication can be helpful to create an enabling environment for cooperation that can bring concrete and tangible benefits.

THE VALUE OF DIALOGUE: VIEWS OF GEORGIAN-SOUTH OSSETIAN DIALOGUE FROM US UNIVERSITY-BASED FACILITATORS

Susan H. Allen, Paula Garb, and Margarita Tadevosyan¹

Author Positionality

To allow readers to contextualize our analysis of the value of dialogue in the Georgian-South Ossetian context, we will clarify where our perspectives come from. We write as three facilitators of dialogue based at universities in the US. We are currently all affiliated with the Center for Peacemaking Practice at George Mason University's Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution. Allen was raised in the US, and completed her Ph.D. in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at the same institution where she is faculty. Paula grew up in the US, then completed a Ph.D. in Anthropology at The Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography in Moscow where she lived for nearly two decades. She engaged in in-depth anthropological field work in Abkhazia/Georgia, developing near native knowledge of South Caucasus cultures and close relationships. After returning to the US she taught for twenty-five years at the University of California Irvine and now is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Peacemaking Practice at George Mason. Tadevosyan grew up in Armenia, completed her Ph.D. in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason, and is now a post-doctoral scholar with the Center for Peacemaking Practice. Each of us has experience as dialogue participants in our own communities. Allen and Garb have participated in various US-Soviet and US-Russian dialogues, and Tadevosyan has participated in various Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogues. We bring this experiential background as well as our scholarly backgrounds to our engagement with Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue.

Dialogue

The conflict resolution field has documented many approaches to dialogue, and people have been practicing dialogue even longer than there has been a field formally documenting this practice. Stearns (2018) brings together multiple western scholars and practitioners promoting dialogue as a method of education, human transformation, and conflict resolution. Defining dialogue as conversation aimed at increasing mutual understanding (S. Allen 2018) and as, "a communication process that aims to build relationships between people as they share experiences, ideas, and information about a common concern" (Schirch 2007, p. 6), conflict resolution literature highlights dialogue as a way of building better understanding that is informed by multiple perspectives. Using this academic background to consider the case of Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue, we would expect participants in such dialogue

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to develop insights that are built with understanding the perspectives in both communities.

Georgian-South Ossetian Dialogue

Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue has changed over time, as the Georgian-South Ossetian relationship and contexts have changed.

There was a strong history of Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue in the 1990s, including significant Track One-and-a-Half Diplomacy initiatives that were facilitated by unofficial people, but involved some officials from the conflict parties (Nan 2000). Vertic and its successor organization Caucasus Links engaged Georgian and South Ossetian parliamentarians in unofficial discussions as early as 1994 (Nan 2005). The Norwegian Refugee Council and the Conflict Management Group facilitated a long-term process of Track One- and-a- Half Diplomacy from 1995-2000, bringing together officials and other influential people from Georgian and South Ossetian communities to consider the Georgian-South Ossetian relationship (Nan 2004; 2005). These workshops “improved *relationships* (addressing the subjective elements of the conflict), improved the negotiation *process* (addressing procedural elements of the conflict), and introduced *substantive* ideas into the official dialogue (addressing objective areas of the conflict)” (Nan 2004, p. 170).

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, each co-author was a supportive observer of the conflict resolution process with Georgians, South Ossetians, and Abkhaz. Paula led an intensive series of Georgian-Abkhaz dialogues, authored and co-edited many publications on the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process (Garb 2012a; 2012b; Nan and Garb 2006), Susan assisted Paula in some of this work and also studied the Georgian-South Ossetian peace process and the various initiatives involved in it as part of her doctoral dissertation (Nan 2000), and Margarita observed from nearby Yerevan where she studied conflict resolution at Yerevan State University. A recent study (Sotieva and Schofield 2021, p. 40) notes that in relation to the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue processes of the 1990s, “it would be difficult to imagine how a civil dialogue process could have started if it was not for Paula Garb.” Garb’s decades long relationships with Abkhaz leaders allowed them to trust her as she initiated Georgian-Abkhaz dialogues early in the 1990s and as she supported others who also began related dialogues. South Ossetians saw their Abkhaz neighbors’ experience with dialogue, and soon engaged in dialogue with Vertic/Caucasus Links and then Conflict Management Group/ Norwegian Refugee Council.

Re-engaging in Dialogue in 2008

On August 14, 2008, when war resumed between Georgians and South Ossetians, those of us who, since the mid 1990s, had been engaging Georgians, South Ossetians, and Abkhaz in citizen peacebuilding dialogues, feared that all such projects would be on hold indefinitely. Even though fighting had not spilled over into Abkhazia, we knew that our Abkhaz peacebuilders felt almost as though they also had been attacked (Garb 2009). Although we had not engaged in South Ossetian-Georgian dialogues, it seemed likely that

the South Ossetians who had directly experienced the fighting on their territory and Georgians who had experienced military operations by South Ossetians and their Russian allies, would also not want to engage anytime soon in citizen peacebuilding. The trauma of recently surviving war, burying loved ones and friends, and the renewed resentments toward the other side would prevent constructive engagement in the near future. Based on our experiences trying to facilitate dialogues in that region after the wars of the early 1990s, we thought it might take at least a year or more before people on either side would be ready to talk again. And when we could resume dialogues, we might have to start from scratch, first by repairing relationships and only much later, by approaching slowly and cautiously the most difficult issues.

In contrast with these fears, it was heartening that within the first 24 hours of the outbreak of violence in South Ossetia, participants in our Georgian-Abkhaz projects began actively communicating. Not all conversations were without expressions of frustration with the other side, and even some hostility. There were difficult conversations, for instance, about why Georgian civil society did not speak out publicly against Georgian military actions in South Ossetia and about the treachery of Abkhazia’s Russian ally. The Caucasus Forum e-mail list lit up with exchanges of messages from peacebuilders throughout the region. Within two months, several Abkhaz and Georgian veterans of peacebuilding initiatives met in third countries as soon as funding was available to continue planning and implementing new projects.

Two developments led to the decision to bring South Ossetian and Georgian civil society activists together for a dialogue at George Mason University. First, was the resumption of Georgian-Abkhaz peacebuilding projects much earlier than what was originally expected, two months after the August 2008 events. It showed that even in the aftermath of such traumatic events, peacebuilders were willing to talk across this divide. Second, was the desire by some South Ossetian civil society activists to visit Washington, DC, to tell their side of the conflict. They felt that the Georgian side was well represented in Washington, DC, because of the Georgian embassy located there and the many Georgian business and other representatives living in the US capital.

At the suggestion of the dialogue organizers at George Mason University, the South Ossetian civil society activists agreed that while they were in Washington, DC giving public talks, they would also welcome a secluded dialogue with the Georgians who had long-time constructive experience working with Abkhaz peacebuilders, some of whom were also known by the South Ossetian participants. Hence, the first round of Georgian-South Ossetian dialogues was organized in December 2008, at George Mason University’s conflict resolution retreat facility Point of View, just four months after the August War of 2008. The participants agreed to model this first meeting after their experiences with previously successful dialogues. The facilitators sought local engagement in setting the agenda and designing the process, setting a tone of strong local leadership (Nan and Greiff, Jacquie L. 2013).

Practical Value of Dialogue

The Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue that first met in December

2008 became known as the Point of View Dialogue, named for the place of the first meeting. Led by the participants' interests, the initial dialogues focused on humanitarian needs in the aftermath of the war. One dialogue brought medical professionals from both sides together to consider ways ambulances with the International Committee of the Red Cross might be allowed a faster process for crossing the ceasefire line during medical emergencies. Several dialogues brought together technical experts who focused on ways to repair the Zonkari dam, which was in danger of flooding both Georgian and South Ossetian villages downstream if it were to burst. Later, after the dam had been repaired, another dialogue focused on irrigation water flow through the channels that were fed by the dam and that crossed back and forth along the ceasefire line. Still another dialogue included consideration of ways to restart the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), which had ceased to meet. Within weeks of that dialogue, the IPRM resumed. Finally, another dialogue considered what it would take to make it possible for prisoners to be released to return to their home communities. Over a year later, the prisoners were released (Zakareishvili 2021).

These humanitarian issues were areas that required some expertise on both sides of the ceasefire line, and some engagement by both officials and civil society experts to address the practical needs. After a series of these issues had been addressed in the dialogue, the focus of the Georgian-South Ossetian efforts turned towards making sense of the conflict.

A new phase of dialogue arose: Cost of Conflict. This involved analysts from both sides, as well as international experts, in analyzing the conflict. Several publications considered the social, economic, and human costs of the conflict (Alborova, Susan Allen, and Nino Kalandarishvili 2016a; 2016b). Taking the lead from local dialogue leaders, the dialogues now have grown to focus on the current effort: Value of Dialogue.

Local Roles

The local leadership of dialogue initiatives has been important to the success of dialogues in this region. Local peacebuilders know their histories and conflict dynamics well. Georgian and South Ossetian societies have seen their share of devastation, conflict, and destruction. For almost three decades people who used to be neighbors are now separated by barbed wires and difficult-to-cross checkpoints. As active military actions subsided, including after the short war in 2008, and the conflict entered into a simmering stage, many people on both sides learned to live with it. Both Georgian and South Ossetian societies were consumed with other urgent social and political issues like unemployment, corruption, healthcare, and education. Issues directly related to the ongoing conflict surfaced mainly during the election cycles and when certain political dividends could be drawn from them.

In the environment of such societal apathy, there are groups of civil society members on both sides who understand and recognize the danger of such alienation and conflict stagnation. Civil society groups, peacebuilding NGOs, and peace activists rose to the challenge to address the gap caused by the unwillingness of authorities on both sides to constructively engage with

conflict issues beyond the narrow political domain. Many Georgian and South Ossetian peacebuilding NGOs emerged in response to the humanitarian need of the population in the immediate aftermath war in the early 1990s and continued working in this area. The success of maintaining and expanding space where constructive conversations on conflict-related issues were able to develop was based on two separate but interrelated sets of relationships: relationships between the local peacebuilding organizations and partnerships with the international community.

Relationships between local peacebuilding organizations

Peacebuilding work across the Georgian-South Ossetian divide is mainly funded by international organizations, foreign state agencies, and international foundations. As expected, this financial dependency on outside funding creates competition among many organizations that are trying to address the needs of the communities they represent. At the same time, local organizations developed clusters of cooperation that are based on mutual trust and collegial relationships. More often than not, these relationships are a product of early dialogue processes that catalyzed the development of other peacebuilding processes and platforms. These early dialogue processes allowed for Georgian and South Ossetian peacebuilders to form relationships based on the assessment of each other's values. Values-based cooperation is one of the main forms of cooperation between Georgian and South Ossetian peacebuilding organizations. As testified by many of the colleagues with whom we worked for an extended period in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict context, it is challenging and sometimes impossible to work with those with whom your personal and professional values do not align. Learning about each other's shared values through the dialogue process allows these local peacebuilders to trust each other not only in their analysis but also in sharing oftentimes sensitive information on conflict-related issues.

Partnership with international organizations

The strengths of both local and international peacebuilders can support each other (S. H. Allen 2020). International organizations play a central role in maintaining and expanding space where constructive conversations between Georgian and South Ossetian peacebuilders happen. International organizations were the pathfinders in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict context in the early 1990s. Local peacebuilders often stress that they value the relationship and partnership that they have with their international partners. Many local organizations think that international organizations empower and help them to do their work better in the peacebuilding and reconciliation field. Local peacebuilders stress that, "without the participation of these international players, the space for engaging would be much smaller and less effective" (Tbilisi-based NGO representative). In particular, the local-international partnership helps local organizations and peacebuilders by providing an umbrella for their work, access to places/resources otherwise out of their reach, access to the international arena, and provides local organizations with space where information sharing can happen while also creating learning and

growth opportunities for these local organizations. Local peacebuilders, in particular, appreciate the role of umbrella that international partners are able to play and provide them with opportunities to carry out their activities. In addition, as stressed by many Georgian and South Ossetian local peacebuilders, the partnership with international organizations allows them not only to learn new methods and tactics of engagement but also to use the avenues created by internationals to get exposure to other conflict resolution processes.

Continuing Dialogue during the Pandemic

This Value of Dialogue initiative is continuing during the COVID-19 pandemic, with authors working separately to complete their essays. We plan to discuss these publications initially online during the ongoing pandemic and then, after the pandemic, to finally gather in person to consider the publications and next steps. The work together during the pandemic has required that we develop dialogue online. Whereas before, we would usually save more detailed substantive conversations for in person meetings, we have now pivoted to Zoom meetings. We even held a brief celebration of the Old New Year via Zoom, sharing toasts, wishes for good health during the pandemic, and hopes to meet again in person someday.

Conclusion

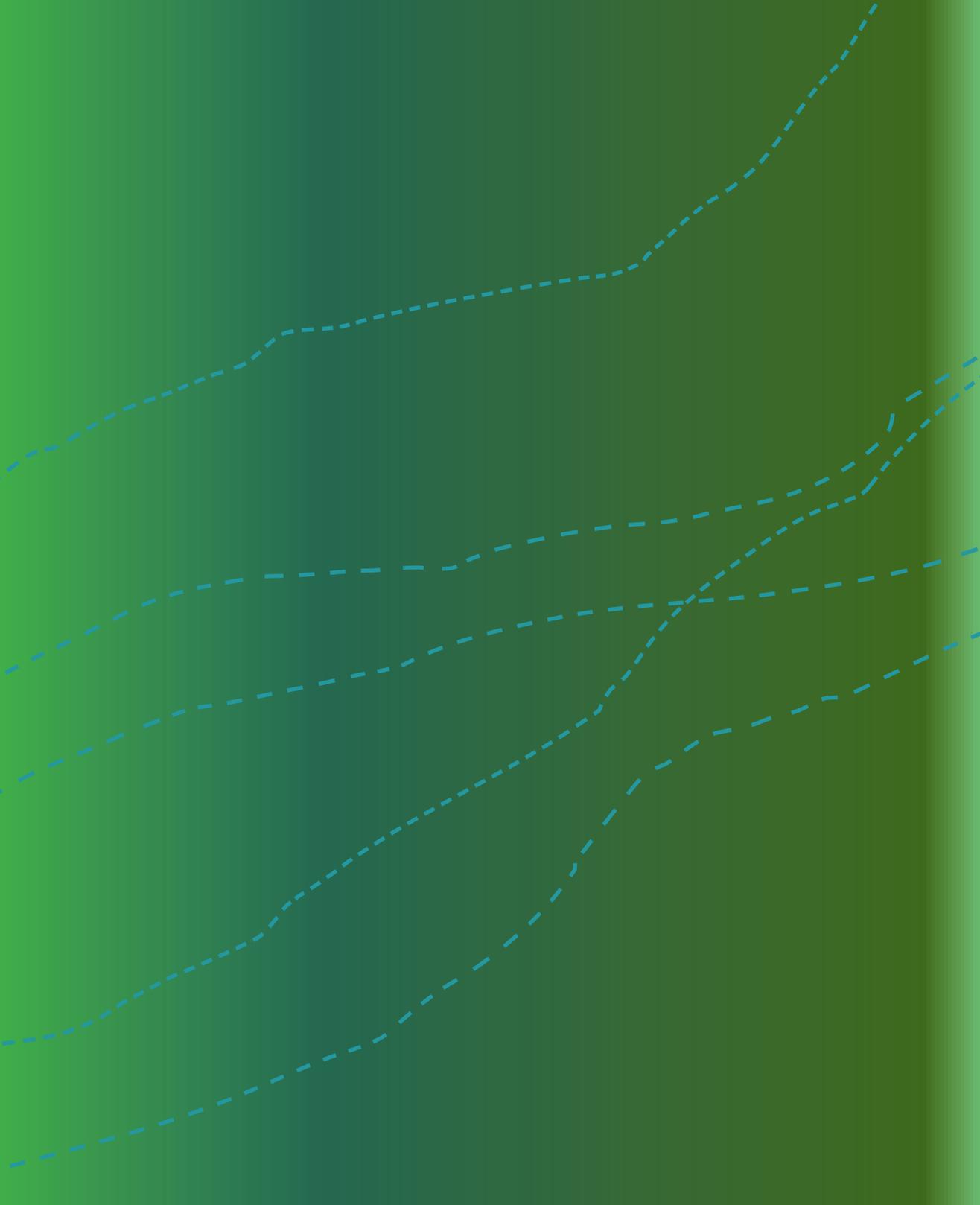
Our experience shows the value of local leadership of dialogue design, as the Point of View Process, Cost of Conflict Process, and Value of Dialogue Process would have been impossible without significant guidance from Georgian and South Ossetian experts who understand what will engage their home communities. Our experience also shows the long-term impact of dialogues Paula Garb, Vertic/Caucasus Links, Caucasus Forum, and Conflict Management Group/Norwegian Refugee Council had facilitated (1990s to 2008) that laid the basis for a quick resumption of dialogue in 2008 very soon after the August 2008 war. Our experience also shows that dialogues must evolve to adapt to changing contexts, taking on different formats and foci as needed.

As we look forward to the next phase of Georgian-South Ossetian dialogue, we see several possibilities for developing the dialogue in new ways. We envision a blending of in-person and online dialogue, as we have developed more comfort with online engagement, and as we expect to be able to meet in person again after the pandemic's worst phase. In the aftermath of the recent fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh and related discussions in the region, we see there are diverse conceptions of peace. We are exploring possibilities to elaborate the different conceptions of peace that shape Georgians' and South Ossetians' approaches to the Georgian-South Ossetian relationship. As time passes, we see a greater willingness to make sense of the past, to preserve archives of the conflict and conflict resolution processes, and to work together to analyze the past decades while building the basis for a peaceful future.

We look to Georgian and South Ossetian peacebuilders to lead the way into the future phases of dialogue and related initiatives.

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