CORE Working Paper:

Summary of fieldwork (1st round) in Georgia/Abkhazia

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The summary of the research is based on the results of semi-structured interviews with the policymakers of the ruling elites, opposition groups, civil society representatives (including independent CSOs, CSOs co-opted by the government and those having a pro-government stance) both in Georgia and Abkhazia, professors from Tbilisi State University, EU diplomats, i.e. officials of the EUMM and EU Delegation in Georgia as well as representatives of various EU-member states' embassies in Georgia. The interviews were conducted by Nona Mikhelidze in Georgia and by Vanessa Boas in Abkhazia.

A. Public opinion about the conflict, its root causes and dynamic before and after the August 2008 war

Root causes
Georgia:

1. The collision between the Georgian and Abkhaz national projects: Georgia seeing Abkhazia as an autonomous province of the country and Abkhazia seeking independence (at least broader autonomy[1]). These national projects express the willingness of both communities (Georgian and Abkhaz) and not only that of the respective political elites;
2. Lack of communication and ensuing misunderstandings between Georgian and Abkhaz communities in Abkhazia. Georgians failed to see the fears Abkhaz had regarding losing their identity. On other side Abkhaz failed to understand the real importance Abkhazia had for Georgian statehood. The statements made by them since the 70s maybe were an attempt to safeguard their identity but they also had separatist characters, that strengthened Georgian fear that the Abkhaz were challenging their territorial integrity.[2]
3. The wrong idea (caused by lack of knowledge and experience) about the possibility for political co-existence and power-sharing on the ground.
4. Nationalism by which was/is widespread amongst the whole Georgian society. Nowadays the political elite is not nationalistic in itself, but tries to strengthen these sentiments in the population, in order to achieve the consent of the electorate for its internal policy. By feeding this sentiment the government makes the conflict irresolvable. At this point it is questionable whether the ruling elite is really interested in conflict resolution in the short-run, as long as the conflict exists it can serve as an excuse for all the failures (or unpopular reforms) in domestic and foreign policy making.[3]
5. Russian (Empire, Soviet Union and Independent Russia) foreign policy making towards Georgia and Abkhazia aiming at deepening confrontation between Georgians and Abkhaz and strengthening alienation (estrangement) of one from other[4]; Russia's direct involvement in the war in the 90s, thereafter in the peace process and finally its war with Georgia in 2008.[5]

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[1] In the interviews in Abkhazia many declared they were ready to accept a federation/confederation based settlement.
[2] Member of the opposition political party. Interview, Georgia 15.10.2011.
[3] Civil society representative. Interview, Georgia 12.10.2011.
[4] This is an ongoing process strengthened by other trends such as demographic changes in Abkhazia, where the ethnic Russian minority is growing after the Russian recognition in 2008
[5] Georgian state official. Interview, Georgia 13.10.2011.

6. Geography. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were the only autonomous republics in the Soviet era, bordering directly on Soviet Russia's territory. This created in these two societies a perspective of unification or integration with Russia.[6]
7. Unwillingness of international actors to engage with the conflict resolution process seriously. This cannot be regarded as one of the root causes of conflict eruption in itself but rather as the factor which has made conflict settlement more difficult.

All these causes of the conflict are shared by whole society in Georgia, including CSOs, academies and policy makers of opposition groups. As for the Georgian government, it recognizes only the Georgian-Russian dimension of the conflict and neglects other causes, considering that they are due more to the confrontation that is usual for relations between capital cities and provinces. Thus it believes that if Russia stopped fuelling the conflict, the latter could be resolved in the short-run. The latest statement of Russian president Medvedev, that the August 2008 war was the only way to stop NATO enlargement, strengthened further the above convictions of the Georgian government. Another factor that contributes to developing further such approach is Russia's policy inside Abkhazia to exercise control over the local government's formation and policy making.

Abkhazia:

1. The Georgian policy aiming at assimilation of the Abkhaz with Georgians; unwillingness to recognize Abkhaz identity;
2. Georgian resistance to accepting a federation (prior to the war in 1992-93);[7]
3. Georgian war rhetoric and its inability to understand these root causes of the conflict (since 1993).

These opinions are shared by the Abkhaz society at all levels, including the Abkhaz government. Abkhaz public opinion excludes the Russian factor in the conflict and the conflict resolution process (at least at the level of rhetoric). However the Abkhazs have a constant fear of their assimilation into the Russian community, which tends to become a majority in Abkhazia.

Conflict dynamic after 2008

Georgia:
The conflict dynamic has changed after 2008. Before the conflict was labelled as frozen, now it is not considered as such. And this new reality has been recognised by the international community as well. Until 2008 the Georgian government hoped to resolve the conflict (supposedly also by military means), because it excluded Russia's direct intervention. Now for the ruling elite, Abkhazia is an occupied territory by the great power and this reality means that Georgia excludes the military option to settle the conflict. Thus the government continues to regard the conflict as a confrontation with Russia. And this tendency has been strengthened after the August 2008 war.

Abkhazia:
Relations with Georgia are far more strained and the Abkhaz position has become more rigid resulting in the rejection of the idea of a confederation and insistence on independence.The Russian recognition of the de facto states has changed the conflict dynamic completely. Russia now is seen as an Great power that has stopped NATO enlargement, vetoed the extension of the UN and OSCE

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[6]Professor of the Tbilisi State University, Faculty of Social Sciences. Interview, Georgia 14.10.2011
[7] Civil society representative, Interview, Abkhazia 10.10.2011.

mandates in conflict zones, prevented the EUMM to enter Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Before 2008,the Abkhaz had no hope that someone could recognise their independence. Therefore they were more willing to negotiate (e.g. the negotiation in 2005 between former Abkhaz president Sergey Bagapsh and chief of the Abkhaz government in exile IrakliAlasania; in 2006 Shabma arrived in Tbilisi with the document 'key to the future', etc). Now Georgia does not exist anymore for Abkhazia, it is neither a threat nor the source of development. Georgia begins simply to disappear from Abkhaz discussions.[8]

B. Local governance initiatives and public opinion regarding them

State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation (2010) and Action Plan for Engagement (6 July 2010).

Ongoing initiatives in the framework of these documents:

- Status Neutral Document, i.e. an identification document available to residents of Abkhazia who do not possess a Georgian citizen's identification. It allows Abkhaz to travel abroad without having to acknowledge Georgian citizenship. Furthermore, the holder of this document will be authorized to receive free healthcare services, secondary, vocational and higher education, including participation in exchange programs and other benefits available to Georgian citizens. The document does not contain any Georgian state symbols. The government is in the process of preparation of these documents.
- Liaison Mechanism established between the communities in Georgia and its regions to promote greater communication between them. It is represented by two offices in Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

Planned initiatives:

- The creation of special socio-economic zones adjacent to the dividing line (Gali and Ochamchire) in order to promote development and joint socioeconomic activities between the regions.
- The Cooperation Agency and Trust Fund providing assistance in implementing programs and joint activities between the divided communities, while the trust fund will promote the goals of the action plan.
- Joint Investment Fund and Financial Institution aiming at providing both sides with the start-up capital for joint business ventures, while the financial institution would facilitate financial transactions across the dividing line.

Abkhaz opinion on the state strategy on occupied territories: Totally unacceptable as it does not envisage Abkhaz independence. Furthermore Abkhazia is not occupied.

Criticism of the state strategy by Georgian opposition groups and CSOs:

- Wrong title: Abkhaz do not consider themselves as occupied. There is already a law on occupied territories, so there was no need to repeat the same substance into the strategy.

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[8] Civil society representative. Interview, Georgia 10.10.2011.

- This is a one sided strategy, nobody consulted the Abkhaz side. The Georgian commission elaborated the plan with the viewapproach 'if Abkhaz have some interest they will join us.'
- The strategy does not recognise Abkhazia as a part of the conflict, whereas the Abkhaz attach great importance to being recognised as a full-fledged party.
- The strategy speaks only about Russian responsibility in the conflict and says nothing about Georgia's.
- The strategy on occupied territories was designed for international actors more than for the Abkhaz people.
- Liaison mechanism existed even before this strategy, so it is no value added.
- The initiatives in the framework of this strategy are not developed enough. There are no details about their implementation, timing, inclusiveness and form of cooperation, etc.
- Lack of information regarding the initiatives, as the government does not publicise them. So ordinary people on both sides do not have any information about the projects implemented in the framework of the strategy.

C. Bi-communalism:

COBERM – Confidence building early response mechanism
Funded by the European Union and administrated/implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

The overall objective of COBERM is to foster a peaceful transformation of conflicts through: Enhancing direct people-to-people contacts across conflict divides; Strengthening local and national peace building Initiatives; increasing capacities within communities, civil society, media and governments to mediate political differences through peaceful and constructive ways.

Small scale bi-communal projects:

Theme	Number of projects
Youth and education	11
Agriculture and business development	15
Culture and sports	8
Community mobilization/capacity building	10
People diplomacy, dialogue and policy research	11
Human rights	6
Health	1

Main criticism of COBERM:

- All the small-scale projects of COBERM are labelled as initiatives carried out in the framework of the State Strategy on Occupied Territories. It seems that international actors are hiding behind the strategy. The strategy has filled the vacuum created by the inaction of the international community.[9]

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[9]Senior Fellow, Think tank. Interview, Georgia 9.10.2011.

- Lack of information about the implemented projects: the ordinary Abkhazs who are excluded from these projects do not know anything about these initiatives. There is also another version of this reality. They know about all on-going projects, but admit the satisfaction means to be less patriotic.
- There is no evaluation report on the effectiveness of these initiatives.[10]
- The persons (from the commission) engaged with the internal monitoring process have little knowledge about Georgia/Caucasus as well peace-building and conflict related issues. Their conclusions are not reliable.[11]

CSOs and conflict resolution

Georgia

In Georgia we note a preponderance of professional NGOs, research institutes and think tanks, community groups involved in rehabilitation and IDP issues. However the peace process is viewed as the exclusive domain of the state both by the authorities and by the public. Hence, the resistance by the authorities to engaging CSOs in the peace process, the lack of clear strategies of CSOs to engage in dialogue with the state regarding conflict issues, and the tight balancing act that CSOs perform between striving to be credible interlocutors of the state and retaining legitimacy in society. When the peace process is monopolized by the state and this monopolization is accepted by society, the scope for civil society impact on conflict resolution narrows. Despite a sea change in state-society relations with the rose revolution, the approach of the state towards civil society's engagement in the peace process has remained unchanged. Prior to the revolution, civil society in Georgia operated largely in opposition to the state. CSOs were kept out of the peace process, which was firmly in the hands of the Shevarnadze regime. In fact, civil society constituted the seeds for an alternative "political society" in Georgia, which came to the forefront during the revolution. Yet in post-revolution Georgia, as civil society transitioned into political society and the state, not only were many resources taken away from civil society, but also the Saakashvili regime persisted in its predecessor's approach of viewing the peace process as the exclusive domain of the state. The government controlled mass media in Georgia tends to concentrate heavily on the Georgian-Russian dimension of the Abkhaz conflict, implicitly delegitimizing thereby the Abkhaz as an interlocutor.[12]

The third space the one part of civil society going on with their activities without having influence on grassroots. These includes projects of International Alert and Reconciliation resources. The Coberm is contributing to this. There two groups of CSOs inside this space those coopted by the government and other independent CSOs.

Abkhazia
Abkhaz civil society has emerged in the form of grassroots organizations to perform humanitarian functions, gaining a strong backing from the local population as a result of its "needs-driven" nature. Civil society has performed many of the regulative and distributive functions normally performed by the state. Thus in Abkhazia, despite the lack of consolidated democracy and

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[10] Confidential Source, EU-member state diplomat in Georgia. Interview 15.10.2011.
[11] Confidential Source, EU official in Georgia. Interview 17.10.2011.
[12] Nathalie Tocci and N. Mikhelidze, "The European Union, Civil Society and Conflict: A Comparative Analysis", in Nathalie Tocci (ed.), The European Union, Civil Society and Conflict, London and New York, Routledge, 2011

democratic values, civil society has succeeded in retaining some degree of independence and freedom of manoeuvre from the authorities.

According to CSO representatives in Abkhazia, the government involves the third sector in the conflict resolution process, there is close consultation between the two and CSO influence on the ruling elite is significant. They consider that their individual interest is represented by government initiatives in conflict resolution. However this is the case for Sukhumi based NGOs and not for those in Gali. The issue neither the government nor Sukhumi based CSOs address in fact is the Georgian minority in Abkhazia and the return of IDPs and refugees there. Thus ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia are excluded from the peace process[13] (given the ethnic-based democracy for the Abkhaz community).[14]

There is some degree of interaction between Georgian and Abkhaz CSOs. However, the impact of this interaction is extremely limited, and participants in joint events have tended to be the "usual suspects" and the outcomes of these interactions have rarely gone beyond joint reports with little public resonance.

Funding and conditions

Abkhazia is marked by the international community's non-recognition of the state and significant levels of socio-economic underdevelopment. The international community has largely kept out of massive involvement on the grounds of non-recognition. Insofar as international law has fallen squarely on the side of Georgia by upholding the principle of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, it has been (overly) hesitant to engage with the secessionist entities. This has meant that civil society in Abkhazia has been deprived of the international funds necessary for its development.

However there were/are still some local NGOs projects financed by Western actors. The international actors and/or state agencies do not attach any special conditions to the funding of Abkhaz NGOs. But projects may get rejected if too politicised.[15]Furthermore the local Abkhaz government sometimes interferes in the activities of some CSOs. For example it sometimes advised NGOs not to attend some external meetings.[16]The government gives little aid and when it does so, it is solely for social welfare through the Abkhazian Development Fund. NGOs are therefore heavily dependent on foreign aid. However, NGOs refuse grants which require that NGOs be registered in Georgia. Now it has become more difficult for International Organisations to finance Abkhaz NGOs as Tbilisi has become stricter and demands that all activities go via Georgia. The funding policy has affected the freedom of action of the NGOs, because most funds are available for conflict resolution and very few for the development of Abkhazia which is equally important.[17]

The conditions to apply for international funding have not changed for Georgian NGOs. The projects are supported by the EU through COBERM, OSCE, the USAID, Soros foundation.

Statebuilding/democracy/conflict resolution/hybrid peace

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[13]Civil society representative, Interview, Abkhazia. 11.11.2011.
[14]Civil society representative, Interview, Georgia. 12.11.2011.
[15] Civil society representative, Interview, Abkhazia. 11.11.2011.
[16] Civil society representative, Interview, Abkhazia. 10.11.2011
[17]Civil society representative, Interview, Abkhazia. 10.11.2011.

Georgia, having no experience in statehood, faces real challenges in its state-building process while concomitantly developing democracy. Many are reasons for this:

- The Georgian government (some representatives from CSOs) consider that there is a problem of mentality of the society, where democracy means freedom from responsibility. Therefore the ruling elite is forced to develop strong political-economic-social institutions with forms of governance that cannot be considered as democratic. For example, nobody likes the judicial system in Georgia, that has become politicised and increasingly dependent on the authorities. Some academics consider that this dependence is an alternative to corruption.[18]
- Another factor that is impeding the development of state-building and democracy at the same time is the perception of the government regarding country's security. The country feels to be in a post-war period, with the constant fear of renewed military escalation with Russia. So most political and financial resources are directed to the security sector. However, opposition groups consider that it is just an excuse not to deal with the democracy.[19]
- Strengthening institutions and the temptation of controlling society in a top-down manner brings to the personalisation of domestic policy making, that is accepted by society to a certain degree.
- The fight against organised crime in Georgia. Many consider that without autocratic methods it would be impossible to achieve the success the government has achieve in this field. For example, the government argues that the decentralization of power can contribute to organised crime in Georgia.[20]

This form of governance – managed democracy, a semi-militarised state and the securitisation of democracy, the creation of enemy images and diffusion of fear of renewed war, etc – by President Saakashvili serves to perpetuate the power of political elites in Georgia as well as to contribute to establishing a hybrid peace (described in the background report and work plan of CORE) as not "always desirable form of peace as it may represent a combination of negative practices of the local and international governance initiatives. In some cases hybrid political regime may combine (semi-)authoritarian rule and democracy".[21] What we have from the EU's side towards the above described state-building process in Georgia is (again what CORE calls) the "accommodation of local cultures of governance".[22] All these have negative impacts on the conflict resolution process, as Georgia has failed to demonstrate that it is a attractive country in which the Abkhaz community can reintegrate.

Nevertheless all internal and international state/non state actors agree that managed democracy in Georgia is a question of time, as Georgia and its government have simply no other choice than to become more democratic. This is because of a simple reality: Georgia has no natural resources, its only resource is the political and economic support Western actors are providing. Consequently it will be forced to undertake successful transition to the democracy, as western support will turn to be conditional on democratisation in long run.

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[18] Professor of the Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Interview, Georgia. 14.10.2011.
[19] Member of the opposition party in Georgia. Interview 13.10.2011.
[20] Official of the Ministry of Internal Affaire. Interview, Georgia 11.10.2011.
[21] D.2.1 Background report and work plan, Deliverable submitted May 2011(M5) in fulfillment of requirements of the FP7 project, Cultures of Governance and Conflict Resolution in Europe and India (CORE).
[22] This EU approach will be further studied during the second round of the field research.