The Role of International and Local NGOs in the Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict[1]

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Introduction

The concept of conflict transformation is still relatively new and poorly defined, having gone through a series of stages since the beginning of its regular usage (Lederach 1999; Miall 2003; Reimann 2003; Rupesinghe 1995; Värynen 1991). However, it is clear that most current proponents of transformation attempt to set themselves apart from those of more established concepts such as regulation, management, and resolution by adopting a more holistic approach to addressing any given conflict. Conflict transformation is supposed to encompass all levels of society and includes at least two types of change. First, changes are supposed to be made in the society or societies in which the conflict is occurring in order to provide the possibility for (second) transforming the conflict into a productive phenomenon rather than attempting to eliminate or 'resolve' it. Implicit in this approach is a more positive definition of conflict than those that have often characterized the literature on ethnic and international conflict to date, one that tends to emphasize the potentially useful functions of conflict à la Dahrendorf (1965).

The idea of conflict transformation in the sense described above underlies the 'Lederach pyramid' (Lederach 1997: 39), as well as new approaches which suggest adding to track I and track II a track III level of diplomacy (e.g., Reimann 2003). The pyramid divides relevant conflict transformation actors into three groups: top-level, middle-range and grassroots. Each level has specific tasks in the achievement of the conflict transformation goals outlined above. However, the middle-range actors are deemed particularly important in reaching these aims, as they are assumed to have good contacts both upwards and downwards within the pyramid and therefore to be especially effective as transmitters of conflict transformation approaches. Cordula Reimann follows this approach in the sense of adding a Track III level to the usual Track I and II categories that have already established themselves in the conflict management literature (see, among others, Volkan et al. 1991). However, her emphasis is on grassroots capacity rather than middle-level intervention.

It has long been standard to look at the top level of negotiations in international and separatist conflicts, and the actors are often relatively clear, at least those who take part in the negotiations themselves.[2] However, addressing the middle and lower levels of the societies involved with the goal of altering conditions within them either to facilitate the acceptance of a settlement or even to put pressure on the top level is a more recent phenomenon. This study attempts to do this in the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict by looking at those INGOs and NGOs that focus on conflict transformation and peacebuilding. It argues that in the particular case of conflict management and peacebuilding, Georgian NGOs fall into the middle level according to Lederach's classification. The article will explore the difficulties encountered by Georgian NGOs as peacebuilders in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and will investigate the reasons behind these challenges as well as future prospects for NGO development and impact on the conflict. After presenting a brief background of the conflict, we offer an analysis of the conditions under which NGOs must work in Georgia/Abkhazia (taking into consideration conclusions of other authors on development of civil society in the post-Soviet space), followed by the presentation of empirical data on four western organizations and their

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[2] However, even on this level the situation is usually more complex and less purely hierarchical than perceived by outside observers. See Lederach (1997: 38-41).

Georgian and Abkhazian NGO partners. Finally, we draw some conclusions from the empirical situation on the extent to which the (I)NGOs are contributing to a process of conflict transformation and point to some tentative theoretical implications.

The Role of (I)NGOs and Challenges for Their Development

The role of NGOs has been undertheorized in the conflict literature until very recently. Even now, most attempts at generalizing NGO functions and the factors that condition their roles in conflict situations have been analytical rather than theoretical. One of the most important representatives of the conflict transformation approach, John Paul Lederach, offers a 'comprehensive framework' for a peace process, 'which assumes an interdependence of levels that involve multiple tiers of leadership and participation within the affected population and that integrate simultaneous but pace-differentiated activities' (Lederach 1997: 46). This implies that while it is necessary to examine to an increasing extent the middle and grassroots levels in conflict situations, this alone is not adequate. Rather, the existing emphasis on the top leadership must be integrated into this approach, thus resulting in a more comprehensive analysis.[3] With regard to the middle level, Lederach specifically asserts that '...the middle range holds the potential for helping to establish a relationship- and skills-based infrastructure for sustaining the peacebuilding process' (Lederach 1997: 51). This is especially true because middle-range actors have contacts both upwards and downwards, whereas those on the grassroots level are better connected to the general populace and attuned to its needs. According to Lederach, typical middle-range actors are sectoral leaders, ethnic or religious leaders, academics and other intellectuals, and NGO leaders, although leaders of indigenous NGOs can also be located on the grassroots level. The main activities of the middle level revolve around problem-solving workshops, conflict resolution training, peace commissions and insider-partial mediation teams (Lederach 1997: 39).[4] The NGOs discussed below in the Georgian-Abkhazian case are deemed middle-level actors, and therefore their respective upward interactions with government institutions as well as their downward contacts to society at large will be assessed.

Most conceptual and analytical reflections on the role and functions of conflict-related NGOs have occurred in the context of empirical studies. One dominant pattern in both academic and praxis-oriented contributions has been to contrast a description of the ideal role of an NGO with empirical reality (e.g., MacFarlane 1998). This contrast is well exemplified by Neil MacFarlane's work, which has the further advantage for this study of focusing on NGOs in Georgia. MacFarlane stresses both the larger phenomenon of the creation of NGOs as a means of strengthening democracy as well as the concrete advantages they possess over governments or international organizations for the performance of certain types of tasks. According to MacFarlane, 'the proliferation of NGOs is part and parcel of the pluralist conception of the rooting of democratic governance within a society. To the extent that citizens aggregate on the basis of common interests into effective organizations for the promotion of the latter, this limits the power and flexibility of government' (MacFarlane 1998: 245). He sees the role of NGOs as similar to those found on Lederach's middle level: 'In addition to their direct effect on public policy, NGOs have an important indirect effect in increasing the awareness of the public at large of the nature and significance of policy issues before government' (MacFarlane 1998: 245). The advantages of NGOs in conflict prevention are that they 'do not carry the baggage of government status', are closer to and better

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[3] While this cannot be done within the framework of this article, which focuses primarily on certain middle-level actors, previous work has been done on top-level attempts in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, allowing for a more complete approach when taken in conjunction with the present study (see MacFarlane 1999; Stewart 2003).

[4] An 'insider-partial team' is part of an approach which 'involves intermediaries from within the conflict setting who as individuals enjoy the trust and confidence of one side in the conflict but who as a team provide balance and equity in their mediating work' (Lederach 1997: 50).

informed about developments within the community, are 'often made up of people of stature within communities' and promote functional concerns and therefore can transcend ethnic boundaries (MacFarlane 1996: 246).

In transitional societies, such as those in the former Soviet Union, NGO potential is conditioned in large part by the relationship between local NGOs and their international partners, who are responsible to some extent for setting the agenda, wholly for obtaining funding, and in large part for evaluating project work. International NGOs also have a specific role to play, with certain advantages over local organizations under particular conditions: 'where local organizations are weak and vulnerable to government interference…international groups may fill the gap in non-governmental activity' (MacFarlane 1998: 246). Further, INGOs usually have more prestige and better access to information, can do capacity-building via training, financial support, provision of equipment, etc., can operate across lines of conflict, and can serve an early warning function for international intergovernmental organizations or for their home governments (MacFarlane 1998: 246-247).

Other studies have placed less emphasis on the ideal type of NGO and more on the actual role NGOs can play in the conditions in which they find themselves (Hudock 1999; Mendelson and Glenn 2002). Ann Hudock points out the difficulties of cooperation between northern and southern NGOs, stressing especially the southern perspective that dependence on northern funding and agendas often prevents local organizations from carrying out useful projects. She criticizes the tendency of some scholarship to idealize NGO activists' goals: 'One of the most fundamental weaknesses of the NGO literature is its suggestion that NGOs possess a value base that drives them to act on 'altruistic' motives. This absolutely contradicts one of the key tenets of organizational analysis; namely, that organizational survival is every organization's goal and that, to survive, an organization must place its own interests before those of others, especially those which are potential competitors' (Hudock 1999: 20-21). This observation points to a problem present in the Georgian-Abkhazian situation, where 'civic values' cannot be taken for granted among NGO employees, and where competition for association with western partners and access to hard currency is stiff, leading to a harsh struggle for survival by any given organization.

The empirical findings presented in a collection edited by Sarah E. Mendelson and John K. Glenn (2002) also contrasts starkly with the ideal-type NGO attributes presented by MacFarlane and others. In just one instance of this, Mendelson concludes that 'the efforts to link local groups to Western networks has [sic] come at the cost of ties *between* like-minded groups and has diverted local groups' attention from pressing local needs' (Mendelson and Glenn 2002: 234, emphasis in original). This is just one of many criticisms which apply to the Georgian case, where the close association between a given INGO and one or two local partner NGOs initially led to compartmentalization of the field and resulted in a lack of communication among both local groups with similar goals as well as among INGOs. Once entrenched, this compartmentalized pattern is difficult to overcome, although there has been some success in this direction in the Georgian-Abkhazian case.

This study takes the Lederach pyramid as a starting point and focuses on the middle section as applied to the Georgian and to some extent the Abkhaz society, specifically on the group of NGOs within the conflict and peacebuilding sphere which can be supposed to possess or be developing contacts both upward to relevant politicians and government institutions and downward to the society at large. It draws further on other studies of (I)NGOs active in developing countries and/or in the former Soviet Union to pinpoint the factors that condition the pursuit of such contacts. Finally, it places the thus

contextualized work of NGOs in a conflict transformation framework in order to assess their role in the situation in contemporary Georgia and Abkhazia.[5]

History and Background of the Georgian- Abkhazian Conflict

Although we do not have the opportunity here to go into detail about the history of Abkhazia and its changing relationship to Georgia, one point should be emphasized. The Abkhazians and the Georgians refer to quite different historical phases to buttress their arguments for this or that status for Abkhazia. While the Georgians stress certain periods during the pre-Soviet era, in which Abkhazia was frequently integrated with parts of contemporary Georgia, the Abkhazians mention primarily the Soviet period, during which Abkhazia possessed the status of an autonomous republic, with its own governing structures and special quotas to ensure the participation of ethnic Abkhaz in the political system to an extent greater than that implied by their percentage in the population.[6] Thus, both sides manipulate history for their own purposes, and arguments can be found for a variety of arrangements by making reference to different historical phases.

Changing demographics have also played a role both historically and in the contemporary situation. While the Abkhaz made up only around 17% of the population of 'their' autonomous republic, they argue that this situation is due to a number of historical injustices, not least the Georgianization carried out under Stalin.[7] For this and other reasons, they insist on greater than proportional representation in political and cultural life. Even after the exodus of approximately 250,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs—mostly ethnic Georgians) it is still disputable whether the ethnic Abkhaz now comprise the majority in the republic. This demographic weakness is one principal reason for persistent Abkhaz opposition to the return of IDPs in significant numbers.

The focus of this brief history is on the Soviet era and the initial years of Georgian independence. The beginning of the Soviet period was characterized by political and social turmoil. From March to December 1921, Abkhazia was an independent Soviet Socialist Republic. At the end of 1921, the Abkhazian SSR united with the Georgian SSR under a Treaty of Union, which lasted for ten years. In 1931, Abkhazia's status was reduced to that of an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. Thus, by 1931, the situation had stabilized around the constellation which lasted until the end of the USSR in 1991. The degree to which pressure was exerted on Abkhazia to accede to the final change in status remains controversial to this day. What is certain is that throughout the Soviet period cultural and political figures in Abkhazia consistently raised the question of granting the republic a higher status. This generally came to the forefront at times of change within the former Soviet Union, such as the introduction of a new constitution, or during periods of relative political openness.

Thus in 1956,[8] 1967 and 1978 Abkhaz party officials, supported by intellectuals in the republic, petitioned Moscow for a separation of Abkhazia from Georgia in exchange for incorporation within the Russian SFSR[9] (Zverev 1996: 39). Although unsuccessful in their

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[5] As the author had better access to material on the work of Georgian NGOs, this study is not able to present a balanced portrait of work in Abkhazia and in Georgia proper, but is necessarily more Georgia-oriented.

[6] For a brief, relatively pro-Abkhaz account of the history of Abkhazia see Otyrba (1994).

[7] As of 1 January 1990, out of 537,000 inhabitants of Abkhazia, 44% were Georgian, 17% Abkhaz, 16% Russian and 15% Armenian. See Zverev (1996: 37).

[8] In 1956, three years after Stalin's death, his repressive policies were partially condemned by his successor Nikita Khrushchev at a CPSU Congress. This initiated a period of relative openness which was particularly cathartic for the Abkhaz, as they widely believed that Stalin and his henchman Lavrentii Beria, both ethnic Georgians, had supported pro-Georgian policies to the detriment of ethnic minorities within Georgia. On the ambivalent relationship of Georgians to Stalin and the Stalin period see Hanf and Nodia (2000: 23-25).

[9] The request for affiliation with the Russian Republic may have been tactical, seen as the only option to which the center might agree. On the other hand, it may have reflected a genuine sense of association with Russia,

primary aim, these efforts did result in a series of concessions concerning culture and personnel (ibid.) Thus, there is a recent tradition in Abkhazia of protesting for a higher territorial status and more participation in political and cultural affairs. During the Soviet period, these protests were naturally directed toward Moscow, which had ultimate authority over Georgian party leaders. This constellation contributed to a perception within Abkhazia (and other autonomous republics as well) of Moscow as a potential champion, while the Georgian authorities were viewed as (a) relatively weak and (b) unwilling to grant Abkhaz demands. To a large extent these perceptions have carried over and even been reinforced in the post-Soviet period.

The Abkhaz protests intensified in the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1988, 60 leading Abkhazians sent a request to Gorbachev to consider the return of Abkhazia to its status as a Soviet Socialist Republic with treaty ties to Georgia. In March of the following year, a mass meeting of Abkhaz activists in the town of Lykhnyi reiterated the call for a restoration of Abkhazia's pre-1931 status. Then, in July 1989, clashes involving Abkhaz educational rights in Sukhum/i left 14 dead and over 500 wounded (Jones 1997: 513). In December 1990, the historian Vladislav Ardzinba was chosen to chair the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, and he has remained at the head of the political structure of Abkhazia to this day, although his influence is waning due to his failing health. By 1991, the cleft between the Georgians and the Abkhaz had widened, so that when the Georgians decided to boycott a referendum on the future structure of the former Soviet Union, the Abkhaz authorities insisted on participating. Thus on 17 March 1991, with 52.3% voter turnout, 98.6% of those coming to the polls in Abkhazia supported remaining within a union of sovereign republics. This behaviour led to threats by the Georgian government to dissolve the Abkhaz parliament (Shubladze 1998: 171).

Parallel developments were occurring in Georgian political society during this period. Encouraged by the relative freedom of speech allowed under Gorbachev's new policy of *glasnost*, national movements rapidly developed in many Soviet republics, and Georgia was no exception. More unusual was that the extreme nationalist element with Zviad Gamsakhurdia at its head eventually prevailed, which as Ghia Nodia points out, was a situation unique to Georgia, 'the only place among these republics where the pro-independence movement was dominated by its radical factions' (Nodia 1998: 8). Gamsakhurdia initially commanded a great deal of respect in Georgian society as a former dissident and the son of a well-known author. He was elected president in May 1991 with an overwhelming 86% of the vote (Coppieters 2000: 21). Although the nationalist line he adopted did not bode well for relations between Georgians and ethnic minorities, Gamsakhurdia at first reached an agreement with Abkhaz officials on a quota system for the Abkhazian legislature.[10] However, this arrangement came about mainly because the government and the Gamsakhurdia-controlled parliament had failed to avert (and even contributed to the outbreak of) war in the autonomous region of South Ossetia and wanted to avoid a similar situation in Abkhazia. The difficulty with the new quota system was that it allowed for either of the two main voting blocs to stall parliamentary action, which the Georgian deputies soon did. The Abkhaz deputies, together with some others, continued to issue legislation, which led the Georgian faction to form a parallel parliament for which they claimed full legitimacy.

Gamsakhurdia quickly demonstrated his incompetence at preserving the loyalty of influential officials and angered many due to his response to the Moscow putsch, when he

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and at any rate created a precedent for the close relationship between Abkhazia and certain forces within the Russian Federation today.

[10] Under this arrangement ethnic Abkhaz were guaranteed 28 of the 65 seats, Georgians 26 and the other groups combined 11. Furthermore, constitutional amendments would require a two-thirds majority, i.e. consensus between the Abkhaz and the Georgians was necessary. See Hanf and Nodia (2000: 31).

failed to condemn the Communist hardliners unambiguously. Although he still had great support among the populace, his position among the political elite became increasingly tenuous, and he was eventually ousted by a military coup led by the National Guard under Tengiz Kitovani with the support of Jaba Ioseliani and his paramilitary squadron, Mkhedrioni, in January 1992. Unsure how to respond to their newfound power, the putschists invited the former USSR Foreign Minister and Georgian party boss Eduard Shevardnadze to take the reins. The choice of Shevardnadze appeared to promise increased stability and reliable contacts with the west, which could help put Georgia on its feet politically and economically. Shevardnadze was still in the process of dealing with a variety of hostile Georgian warlords when the situation in Abkhazia became acute. In July 1992, just as a ceasefire agreement in South Ossetia had been brokered due to the mediation efforts of Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, the Abkhazian legislature restored the draft Abkhazian constitution of 1925, which did not consider Abkhazia a part of Georgia.[11] The following month Georgian troops entered Abkhazia on the pretext of protecting the rail lines and highways in light of pro-Gamsakhurdia ('Zviadist') insurrection in Abkhazia and bordering regions, and encountered resistance by the Abkhazian militia. This constituted the beginning of a war which was to last more than a year.

The consequences of the war for both Georgia and the Caucasus were multiple. First, the loss of de facto control over Abkhaz territory increased the Georgian government's difficulties in building a functioning state. Despite Georgia's entry into the United Nations in 1992, the question of the separatist regions was avoided in the current Georgian constitution and the issue of territorial integrity remains unresolved to this day. This has recently been starkly highlighted by the dispute between the central Georgian government and the region of Ajaria over the degree of the latter's autonomy.[12] Georgia's lack of capacity to deal with the situation in Abkhazia is furthermore a symptom of its larger difficulties in the democratization sphere, which have not been overcome with the appearance of a new, popularly supported president. On a material level, the infrastructure within Abkhazia has largely been destroyed, and Abkhazia is an isolated region except for its increasing ties to the Russian Federation (see below).

Second, Abkhazia is not alone but rather one in a series of similar conflicts over separatist regions, including another in Georgia (South Ossetia) as well as Chechnya in the Russian Federation and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. Thus, in addition to posing a problem of territorial integrity for Georgia, Abkhazia is symptomatic of a general instability in the region, which has had myriad consequences for the development of emerging statehood in each affected country as well as for the relations among the countries. So far, attempts at international mediation have failed to do more than 'freeze' the conflicts, which have undergone various stages. Natalie Sabanadze suggests that these conflicts so far tend to follow a similar pattern of three relatively distinct stages: 1) Russian involvement and international neglect, 2) increasing activity by international organizations, and 3) an attempt to counterbalance Russian influence by increasing US involvement (Sabanadze 2002).

Third, the war and its outcome have geopolitical implications due not least to significant Russian Federation support for the Abkhaz both during and after the war, which has increased Georgian dependence on Russia and at the same time impelled Georgian government to attempt to employ the UN and especially the USA as a counterweight to Russian influence in the region. Particularly the Russian military establishment has been supportive of the Abkhaz, while the presidential administration and the foreign policy

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[11] For a more detailed account of this period than we can present here see Hanf and Nodia (2000: 34ff).
[12] For information and commentary on this dispute see the 2004 issues of the RFE/RL Caucasus Report under www.rferl.org/caucasusreport/.

establishment have been more balanced in their pronouncements and actions. In addition, the border with the Russian Federation is quite porous and a large number of Abkhaz possess Russian passports.[13] New Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's tactics regarding the geopolitical aspect of the Abkhazia conflict have been to make friends with all involved international parties, obtain material (and where possible military) help from the US and the EU, and reach compromises with Russia in order to reduce its support for separatist regions. However, Saakashvili's apparent plan to woo back the separatist regions by orchestrating an economic boom in Georgia seems quite implausible. Furthermore, Saakashvili has raised concerns among the leaders in the relevant regions by some of his statements, which can be interpreted as a willingness to resort to violence for the sake of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity, as well as a recent build-up of military equipment and personnel on the Ajarian border (Fuller 2004). This lends credence to the idea that he covertly supports violence as a method, and can easily raise Abkhaz fears that they are next on the list.

Conditions for NGO Development in Georgia and Abkhazia
Without pretending to offer an exhaustive list, we will present here several factors that have conditioned the development of the NGO sphere in Georgia and Abkhazia over the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While many of these aspects are valid for most post-Soviet situations, some are specific to cases in which war has occurred.

First, there are those factors associated with the legacy of the Soviet era, during which a civil society in the western sense was almost completely absent. All social institutions, including religious ones, were almost completely under government control. This phenomenon has been described in much greater detail elsewhere,[14] but for our purposes it has meant that Soviet citizens were not able to gain experience in creating civil society organizations, nor did they possess an awareness of the functions of such organizations and the methods of their work. Furthermore, there was no consciousness in the broader society of the need for and usefulness of civil society institutions. The lack of such consciousness led to initial suspicion of their employees and their motives, which implied a widespread lack of support in the broader society. Thus, in the beginning phases NGOs had to fight not only for their existence but also for recognition within most segments of society, rather than being able to count on a certain amount of passive social support as similar organizations could in the west. The same suspicion and lack of recognition was usually present among government officials, particularly those who had held their posts during the Soviet era as well. Such officials often perceived attempts to criticize government actions as a threat to the system, and they could count on some understanding of this attitude within society as a whole. For these and other reasons John K. Glenn concludes that the initial thrust of civil society development did not centre around the creation of NGOs, but rather focused on democratic movements, which eventually metamorphosed into fledgling party systems (Glenn 2001).

Second, and also partly related to the Soviet legacy, is a hesitancy on the part of large segments of the population to become involved in any even remotely political activity. Due to the primarily negative associations with government organs instilled during the Communist period, many people desired to be left alone to live their lives without any connection to politics. Although perhaps a majority sought an alternative to communism, democracy also eventually acquired a bad reputation because it was linked with economic difficulties and interference from outside (e.g., international organizations such as the

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[13] According to one report, 120,000 of the estimated 320,000 current inhabitants of Abkhazia have Russian Federation passports. See 'Visiting Moscow, Abkhazia Chief Underlines Importance of Peace with Georgia', Rosbalt, 1 December 2003, eng.globalisation.ru/live/news.asp?id=4683).

[14] See among others Howard (2003: 20-26) who presents an excellent analysis of the reasons for the weakness of civil society in post-communist Europe, building upon and expanding on the 'legacies approach' to evaluating the post-Soviet space.

IMF) which led to domestic hardship, as well as with politicians who proclaimed democratic ideals but largely failed to put them into practice. In addition, western countries and institutions, which loudly promoted democratic principles, came to be seen in an increasingly ambivalent light due to an increase in available information and also to the ambiguous role western actors played (and continue to play) in the development of formerly communist states. While viewed as important political and economic partners, western institutions were often believed to be employing a double standard (one for the west, one for the east, or one for Russia, another for smaller post-Soviet states), and this not unfounded perception jeopardized positive associations with the idea of a democratic system.

A third factor conditioning the development of the NGO community in post-Soviet societies is a widespread lack of resources. These can be human in nature (see the discussion on attitudes to civil society institutions above), as well as material and financial. This latter dearth has necessarily led to a search for outside training, equipment and funding. Such a search has a variety of consequences. On the one hand, it can introduce a potentially positive element of competition into the emerging NGO realm, forcing organizations to attempt to generate high-quality proposals. However, all too often this initial phase encourages a certain amount of parroting of supposed western civic values in order to obtain grant monies, rather than to the actual internalization of such values by locals, which is a slow process depending *inter alia* on conditions outside the NGO community. Thus, an overly rapid and uncritical adoption of western funding organizations' agendas took place, with little sense of the need and/or available capacity to reflect on significant differences between western and post-Soviet societies and to modify approaches accordingly. This deficiency worked in two directions: just as many post-Soviet activists were overly willing to accept superficially the opinion of western civil society experts, so were these experts too inclined to present their ideas without being aware of the modifications necessary in the context of societies shaped by communist institutions.

Another possible factor that influences the development of civil society has so far been explored only in a different context, that of protest or the lack thereof over wage arrears in Russia (Javeline 2003). Javeline's argument is that there is little desire for citizens to become engaged politically in civic initiatives, such as protest groups, because it is extremely difficult to pinpoint who is to blame for the various ills that befall post-Soviet societies. Applied to Georgia/Abkhazia, this argument would mean that people become mired in a range of questions over who is to blame for the conflict (the Abkhazian government, the Georgian government, the Russian government, the Russian military, or North Caucasus mercenaries?) and cannot find their way out of this maze to take concrete action. This argument counters the all-too-frequent assumption of passivity among post-Soviet populations as an adequate explanation for a variety of societal phenomena.

Factors that were introduced or reinforced by the months of war include especially a deteriorated or absent trust in members of the other ethnic group on the emotional level, and a lack of infrastructure on the physical level. Furthermore, the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the war allowed a small elite group to come to power in Abkhazia which was able to establish tight control over society, so that Abkhazian NGOs must work within more strict parameters than Georgian ones and are more often accused of collaborating with the government.

However, over the past year or two the power of the small elite under Ardzinba has been eroding, with a government reshuffle in the spring of 2003 and the emergence of a supposedly influential new opposition movement, 'United Abkhazia', this year.

(Abkhazia's Leadership Struggle, 11 April 2004, available online at www.kafkas.org.tr/absoluten/showarticle.php?articleID=353). While it is unlikely that its leaders will be able to agree upon a single opposition presidential candidate for the elections scheduled for 28 October 2004, the status of the current Prime Minister Raul Khadjimba appears increasingly jeopardized. These developments have been overshadowed by more dramatic ones in Georgia proper, where Eduard Shevardnadze was ousted from the presidency in November 2003 and replaced by the leader of the protest movement that forced the ouster, the charismatic former Justice Minister Mikhail Saakashvili. After being elected President in January 2004 with over 96% of the vote, Saakashvili's party also managed to gain 76% of those parliamentary seats up for grabs in a March 2004 re-run of the tainted October 2003 elections, the overtly corrupt nature of which served as the impulse for Shevardnadze's expulsion.

In response to the radically altered political situation in Tbilisi, representatives of all three potential breakaway regions of Georgia—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Ajaria—took part in a sort of informal 'summit' in Moscow to sound out various Russian officials on the extent of their support. However, an apparent refusal by the Russian authorities to pledge significant assistance led in the Abkhaz case to caution. The Abkhaz Foreign Minister released a statement about the need for a peaceful relationship with Tbilisi (see 'Visiting Moscow, Abkhazia Chief Underlines Importance of Peace with Georgia', 1 December 2003, Rosbalt, eng.globalisation.ru/live/news.asp?id=4683). Saakashvili for his part immediately tried to convince the UN to exert pressure on the Abkhaz side. Using strong language to describe contemporary Abkhazia, he deemed it 'a classical situation of ethnic cleansing, a situation that is totally against every principle of humanity' (McMahon 2004). However, the UN has failed to use the change of power as an opportunity for a fresh start at negotiations.[15] Thus, despite a new constellation in Tbilisi, internal politicking and Russian reluctance in Abkhazia, as well as the disinclination of the UN to seize the moment, have led to a holding pattern in the conflict.

Goals and Activities of INGOs in the Georgia-Abkhazia Conflict
This article focuses on four international NGOs and their Georgian partners.[16] These organizations are embedded in a larger context of (I)NGOs working on different aspects of the ongoing conflict and its consequences. Much of this work is in the more traditional areas of humanitarian aid, such as health, nutrition, and income generation.[17] While working alongside other NGO actors and international organizations, there is not much significant networking between the types of organizations examined here and those doing more conventional humanitarian work, which means that the peacebuilding and conflict transformation attempts become 'pigeonholed' rather than spreading throughout the NGO community. Only recently, has there been a successful effort to network more within the conflict transformation arena, which may be the precursor to more effective contacts with other spheres.

The organizations selected are those which have been concerned the longest and most intensively with the conflict, and are therefore deemed the most likely to have achieved results in their attempts to reach the goals mentioned above. Furthermore, all four have a reputation in Georgia/Abkhazia and elsewhere for serious work in the conflict management and peacebuilding sphere. In most cases, the INGOs chosen had established ongoing contact with Georgian or Abkhaz groups prior to starting their

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[15] For an analysis of the UN strategy in the conflict up to November 2003 (and most likely beyond) see Stewart (2003).
[16] Unfortunately the Abkhazian partners cannot be considered here more than superficially due to lack of material.
[17] For a consistently updated overview of the humanitarian assistance situation in Abkhazia, including the activities of conflict transformation and peacebuilding INGOs, see the briefing notes of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at www.reliefweb.int.

projects, and therefore brought a previous knowledge of the societies and the perspectives involved to the table. The INGOs are:
1) International Alert
2) Conciliation Resources
3) Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management
4) University of California at Irvine (Paula Garb project)[18]

Since most of the efforts of the Berghof Center, and in particular those investigated below, have been undertaken together with Conciliation Resources, the activities of these two organizations will be examined together. The aim of this section is not merely to describe the work of the selected organizations, but further to evaluate how their goals fit into the diagram suggested by Lederach, in which middle-level actors are supposed to facilitate transformation in both upward and downward directions.

International Alert
A well-known NGO operating from London, International Alert (IA) is currently carrying out three initiatives in the Caucasus, all in the realm of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. All of these fall under the umbrella of the Eurasia Programme, the declared aim of which is: 'to contribute to the peacebuilding efforts of civil society organisations, and others, in the Caucasus and the former Soviet Union spaces. The programme sees an opportunity to develop targeted initiatives for bridging the gaps between NGO and grassroots peacebuilding, and official governmental peace processes' (Strategic Plan 2001-2004: 19). The three initiatives are:
a) Georgian regions project: a conflict prevention initiative dedicated to improving the relationship between Tbilisi and the governing structures of Georgia's regions;
b) Caucasus NGO Forum: a Caucasian-wide network of civil society leaders and NGOs focusing on peacebuilding;
c) Georgia-Abkhazia project: by focusing on various groups, such as youth, women and ex-combatants, writers, and the disabled, attempts to organize and involve them in peacebuilding activities.

The emphasis here will understandably be on number three. However, to some extent the third initiative emerged from and continues to be linked to number two, as it was initially only in the context of a larger Caucasus-wide initiative that Georgians and Abkhazians could engage in a productive dialogue. IA claims that it 'has contributed through facilitation (along with other international partners) to breakthroughs at the non-governmental and civil society level. One of the main expressions of these breakthroughs is the establishment of a network (with the initiative of Paula Garb) which demonstrates some capacity for co-ordination and co-operation between local, international, bi- and multi-lateral peacebuilding activities' (Strategic Plan 2001-2004: 19).

The objective of the Georgia-Abkhazia project is 'to strengthen the ability of civil society structures in order to enable them to increase their influence on the official and diplomatic negotiation processes' (Strategic Plan 2001-2004: 21). Mechanisms for doing this include holding workshops for leaders in each of three (later more) fields for the purpose of enhancing their capacity for peacebuilding. For organizational purposes Georgian and Abkhazian co-ordinating councils were created which are also supposed to help in 'translating those experiences into influence with governmental peace processes' (Strategic Plan 2001-2004: 21). The outcomes are to include peacebuilding projects, improved networks, and better relationships between governmental structures and emerging peace constituencies. Thus IA clearly places a definite emphasis on contacts

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[18] Although not technically an INGO, this academic undertaking has many aspects of a typical INGO project, as it possesses not only theoretical but also eminently practical goals.

upward to government officials and even to those involved in the international negotiation process. While some impact on the broader society is to be assumed from the planned and implemented peacebuilding projects, this appears to play a secondary role compared to the influence intended to be exerted on the respective governments. However, clear importance is attached to work which strengthens the support of middle-range actors for a peaceful transformation of the conflict.

Conciliation Resources and the Berghof Center

Two staff members of Conciliation Resources (CR) have been involved in the region since the early 1990s, although official activities in the Caucasus started in 1997. The focus is on the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict and therefore narrower than that of IA. In conjunction with local partners in Sukhum/i and Tbilisi from the NGO sphere, research institutes, and the media, CR pursues the following goals: civil society capacity building, media and public awareness raising in Abkhazia and Georgia, and the initiation and enhancement of dialogue processes. Thus there is more emphasis on influencing governmental behaviour regarding the conflict than in the IA case, and a greater focus on links downward to the broader society (or among middle-range actors), although within the work on dialogue processes the focus has shifted partly toward the inclusion of government officials.

Since 2000, CR's work within the context of the project has been clearly structured in three mutually reinforcing areas: capacity building, public awareness and the media, and informal dialogue. Capacity building has consisted of many aspects, including information sharing, training for journalists and NGO representatives, as well as training in international relations and democratic institutions for students, civil society activists and officials from parliament and the foreign affairs ministry and the administration of a grant program for NGOs in all regions of Abkhazia. Work with the media has involved meetings with journalists, which have led to collaboration between a Georgian and an Abkhaz journalist both working for the BBC. There have also been support and training of IDP journalists, as well as various publications and participation in TV and radio programs.

The dialogue process has been carried out together with the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management in Berlin and has consisted of a series of meetings where small numbers of Georgian and Abkhaz participants have been able to reflect on their own and other conflicts. The participants have come partly from the NGO community but also include middle-level government officials. These meetings have been confidential, with some participants belonging to a sort of 'core group' which consistently takes part and others being involved on a rotating basis. According to the Berghof Center, the dialogue 'is based on a six-stage process: 1) establishing contact; 2) fostering mutual understanding; 3) joint analysis of conflict issues; 4) exploratory problem-solving; 5) shared activities; and 6) seeking inspiration for negotiations' (www.berghof-center.org/english/projects/georgia.htm). Thus the culmination of the process is intended to be influence on the top-level negotiation processes. The results, however, have so far been located more in the realm of developing contacts to the broader society: 'The seminars have already made it possible to agree to a range of confidence-building measures in the field of media cooperation, as well as a strategy for parallel NGO projects' (ibid.).

Conciliation Resources also emphasizes some limited results: 'Perhaps the most striking outcome of engagement to date has been the personal evolutions taking place in the individuals involved in the different aspects of CR's work. The sense of solidarity, commitment and mutual enlightenment that the Abkhaz, Georgian and international partners get from working with one another is an important starting point on the long road to reconstituting the social trust that is essential for peacebuilding' (www.c-r.org). Nonetheless, CR recognizes the challenge of achieving measurable outcomes: 'In all its

work in the Caucasus, CR recognises the difficulties involved in assessing a project's impact on broad social and political processes. Nevertheless, we work with our regional and international partners in the belief that well-designed initiatives from a range of actors can cumulatively contribute to influencing the nature of the dialogue across communal divides, as well as the way in which peace processes are conducted and who has a voice in their implementation' (www.c-r.org). This belief in the eventual effectiveness of a series of small steps is typical of the (I)NGOs working in the area of peacebuilding. CR expresses more explicitly than the other organizations its commitment to a conflict transformation perspective going beyond individual projects: 'Thus one of the tasks for international NGOs supporting local partners is to advocate the need not just for a peaceful solution to the conflict in question but for changes in the societies themselves. Among the issues to be addressed are the relationships between state and civil society, governance, accountability, cultural diversity and political pluralism' (Annual Report 2000, www.c-r.org).

Despite the long-term nature of its work, CR believes that some results have already been achieved beyond the small circle of participating Georgians and Abkhazians, claiming that 'some groups are articulating more nuanced approaches to the conflict resolution process and gaining a greater public voice. This is reflected in positive responses to the aforementioned TV and radio programmes, magazine articles, and seminars with officials, politicians and public activists. Charting this in societies where public opinion is fragmented is difficult. However, an example of how people try to find their voice occurred in October 2001 when tensions between the conflicting parties were reminiscent of the build-up to war in 1992. Back then, there were few, if any, moderate voices. In 2001, several CR partners in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i released public statements cautioning against intemperate and antagonistic approaches' (www.c-r.org). Such developments are also geared more toward influencing the wider society than to having an impact on the behaviour of government circles, although even mild criticism in a small and tightly controlled environment such as Abkhazia can potentially attract the attention of certain government organs.

More recently CR organized a series of dialogue seminars for Georgian and Abkhazian participants which took place in Great Britain and Ireland and were centred around the Northern Ireland conflict. These seminars involved various groups, including economists, politicians and NGO leaders. Each focused on a different aspect of the conflict. In part high-ranking political figures such as ministers or their deputies from both sides participated in the meetings. These seminars thus qualify as a so-called track 1½ measure toward transforming the conflict by offering a different but actual framework in which it can be addressed. They constitute both a continuation of CR's work with civil society leaders and an expansion of their cooperation with government officials to include those at the top level. Thus there appears to be a parallel strategy in line with Lederach: while continuing to pursue developments on the larger societal level, the organization is intensifying its efforts to reach those involved in official negotiation processes.

University of California at Irvine
The projects undertaken by the University of California at Irvine (UCI) under the leadership of Paula Garb differ from CR's dialogue seminars in that they belong exclusively to the track II arena. Since March 1999, a variety of seminars and other activities have resulted in 9 publications in both English (abstracts) and Russian (full texts). The objectives are also somewhat different in that they include academic goals: '(1) Promote constructive dialogue and interaction between citizens on both sides of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict (2) Contribute to theory on conflict transformation by enhancing methodologies for tracking how unofficial diplomacy impacts the stakeholders

in this conflict; (3) Disseminate the results in the region and the international conflict resolution community' (Garb 1999).

The third objective is further specified elsewhere: 'By disseminating research findings, the UCI project aims to engage larger portions of the Georgian and Abkhaz populations—as well as the local media—in community discussions on the peace process, help the parties find ways to overcome the impasse, and support efforts, at least indirectly, in other conflicts where similar contradictions are at the heart of the disputes' (www.isar.org/isar/archive/GT/GT7garb.html). Thus there is an emphasis on contacts with the broader society rather than the development of connections to government officials or international organizations.

Initial conclusions following two years of work were similar to those reached by other organizations, although perhaps more bluntly stated: 'The results of these first studies indicate that unofficial diplomacy has had a major impact on all those who have participated, causing significant personal transformation and changes in perceptions about the conflict, but has not yet influenced public opinion in any tangible way. Most people questioned about these initiatives are either unaware of the activities or have a confused understanding of their value. One main reason for this limited public knowledge is that until now, participants have felt safe sharing their experiences only within a small circle of close relatives and friends. They tend not to look for media coverage of the events, and when they do, reporters rarely respond. If articles or television interviews do appear, they usually go unnoticed' (Paula Garb, 'Small Steps toward Peace in Abkhazia', www.isar.org/isar/archive/GT/GT7garb.html). According to Georgian participants, this lack of interest on the part of the media has mutated over time into a greater familiarity with the project and a willingness to devote some media time to its activities and their consequences.

Garb does, however, claim that in December 1999 the high level of trust achieved by the UCI seminar participants led to a 'major breakthrough in the citizen peace process' (ibid.). At that time, three Georgians (Ghia Nodia, Ghia Anchabadze, and Marina Elbakidze) had the opportunity to speak to and engage in discussions with Abkhaz participants in public forums in Sukhum/i. This was the first time such an exchange between Georgians and Abkhaz had been possible since the war. Since then there have also been numerous visits of Abkhaz peacebuilders to Tbilisi, e.g., two discussions hosted by an independent TV studio (see below) as well as a longer one at the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development. These discussions as well as those in December 1999 in Sukhum/i have been recorded in the project's publication series.[19]

In spite of only tentative and limited results, Garb believes it is worth continuing her work based on two assumptions: 'UCI will continue its work based on the shared conviction that the success of future citizen diplomacy hinges on two factors: first, the degree to which the nongovernmental sector grows in each society; and second, the degree to which representatives of the nongovernmental sector are able to free themselves and the public from dominant ideologies and promote democracy and civil society' (Ibid.). Here NGOs are seen not as representatives of significant trends within the population but rather as an *avant-garde* which is supposed to spread new ways of thinking and acting, in this case with regard to conflict situations. This view of the situation appears to have broader relevance for the entire post-Soviet space, in which NGOs are in many ways playing a pioneering role, as pointed out in a previous section.

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[19] For the text of the publications see hypatia.ss.uci.edu/istudies/peace/progs/projpubs.htm.

Implementation of Projects with Local NGO Partners

The information for this and the following sections was derived primarily from the results of semi-standardized interviews conducted with leading figures in the various partner NGOs of the INGOs outlined above (see interview list).

International Alert

As already mentioned, the IA project on Georgia-Abkhazia focuses on a number of groups, such as women, writers, and young people. Each group has a coordinator which oversees and guides its activities in conjunction with other activists. A coordinating council keeps track of the overall process on the Georgian side.

The process of formation of the League of Women of the Caucasus, which has been encouraged and financially supported by IA, demonstrates on the one hand the somewhat artificial manner in which civil society institutions are being created and on the other an example of a successful synthesis of international and local agendas, with the desire of international organizations to foster the development of civil society coinciding with that of women's groups to form cross-border contacts. Marina Pagava, currently the executive secretary of the League of Women of the Caucasus and closely involved with IA's women's projects, talks about various meetings which took place both before and after the founding of the League. Five years have passed since the initial meetings were held, but this is a relatively short time frame with respect to the development of civil society. Only very recently have the women started to formulate concrete directions of work and projects within these different directions. Thus IA's approach has allowed time for guided but partially organic growth without insisting on specific results within the first years. Although the League is composed of women leaders from throughout the Caucasus, the depth of its contacts to a broader social base is unclear. As for upward connections to the political sphere, initial overtures appear to have been successful, but there has been little substantive interaction as yet due to the low level of preparedness of the League to function as an efficient lobbying organization.

Other foci appear to be further along than the women's group in terms of developing complete projects, which appears to be due partially to the fact that the other directions have spent less time on pan-Caucasian organizing. These foci include young adults (18-30 years), ex-combatants, writers, and the disabled. Guram Odisharia, head of the writers' project, points out the relative successes of all foci except that on the ex-combatants, which has encountered opposition to joint meetings, especially from the Abkhaz side. The writers' project has resulted in certain trips and publications with a peacebuilding purpose, although Odisharia does not see the political aspect of the conflict as being particularly meaningful to writers, whose focus he sees on the individual rather than the collective level. Instead of emphasizing the political, he believes it is more essential to raise awareness about the fact that there are five Caucasian literatures which all exist in relative isolation due to the absence of translations from one into another. Clearly some contact to the broader society is achieved by means of publications; the impact of these is difficult to assess but appears to be growing. Upward contacts to officials are often informal and spontaneous rather than organized, although there are occasional presentations to which government officials are invited and do actually attend. Thus there appears to be genuine potential for expanding contacts in an upward direction. However, the writers' projects in particular seem to be geared more toward raising public awareness about conflict situations and how to deal with them. The problem in the case of the IA group and elsewhere is that most forums which publish on such issues are newsletters or journals with extremely small print runs. Most of these are close to or fall within the NGO sphere, so it is often a case of 'preaching to the converted'. Any information which reaches the mass media is necessarily much briefer in content and at times presented in a distorted fashion.

The young adults focus has initially been on young journalists, offering training, seminars, joint meetings, etc., for about two years. There have been some results in the form of journalists from each side writing about the other, so that relatively reliable information has been spread to a limited extent. However, the current intention is to shift the focus gradually to young lawyers, on the theory that they are the future defenders of human rights specifically and of justice in general. In terms of the disabled and the ex-combatants, it is still too soon to speak about concrete results. The work with disabled people is a relatively new direction, which has so far consisted of separate Georgian and Abkhaz meetings and of attempts to assist in finding funding for medical needs. A joint meeting of both Georgian and Abkhaz disabled was in the planning stages in spring 2003. The work with ex-combatants is believed to be crucial since former soldiers carry quite a bit of clout in their respective societies, but it has been difficult as the two sides have differing needs and the willingness of the Abkhaz side to agree to a joint meeting has been largely absent. Nonetheless, both the disabled and ex-combatant projects appear promising in terms of their capacity to reach members of society beyond the NGO leaders and other intellectuals.

Conciliation Resources
The heart of CR's work on the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict are the dialogue seminars which make up the so-called 'Schlaining process', thus named because some of the discussions were held at Stadtschlaining near Vienna, a renowned centre of peace research. These have been carried out together with the Berghof Center. According to Paata Zakareishvili, a well-known Georgian NGO and human rights activist, the idea for the Schlaining talks emerged from reflections on the Paula Garb project (see below), which he also helps coordinate. The conclusion was that since joint talks are functioning on the level of NGO leaders, then an attempt should be made to include politicians in a similar process. Some modifications had to be made to accommodate the more sensitive situation. A confidentiality rule was introduced, under which it was allowed to state what had been said at the meetings, but not to attribute the comments to a particular person. Furthermore, the participants were understood to be acting in their individual rather than their professional capacities. Zakareishvili admits that while the project has brought certain successes, the overall result has not been as impressive as originally expected. While the politicians appear to have changed their thinking on a personal level, this has so far had little or no impact on their politics. Nonetheless, there has been an increased awareness of the potential of NGOs among government officials, at least on the Georgian side, and the beginnings of some cooperation between particular NGOs and certain politicians or groupings in the form of recommendations or documents being requested on specific issues. This latter point was confirmed in a broader context at a workshop on issues relating to the effectiveness of Georgian NGOs in December 2001, at which various examples of NGO cooperation with government bodies for the purposes of generating draft documents were given (Nodia 2001).

As a sort of continuation and expansion of the Schlaining process, CR has organized a Northern Ireland project.[20] Based on the principle that it would be useful for Georgians and Abkhaz to obtain fresh ideas for conflict management by looking at another, to some degree similar conflict situation, the project chose to focus on Northern Ireland as a case where some political results have been achieved. Five separate meetings were held for different target groups, e.g., economists, politicians, and NGO activists, all of whom were acquainted with various aspects of the Northern Ireland situation, and a follow-up meeting to discuss lessons learned was scheduled for spring 2003. While Zakareishvili was pleased with the opportunities presented to the groups during their visits in Northern Ireland and England, he was less optimistic about the impressions received by the Georgian participants. His assessment was that the lessons of the conflict had not really

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[20] This project was carried out by CR alone, without the participation of the Berghof Center.

sunk in to the extent that they could be applied by the participants to the Georgia-Abkhazia situation. Thus while the Schlaining seminars and the Northern Ireland project have successfully involved middle- and even high-ranking politicians from both sides in discussions on Abkhazia and similar conflict situations, their tangible impact on the political situation has been extremely low. However, the seminars have led to a greater awareness of NGO potential in certain government circles, thereby improving the lobbying chances of those NGOs involved in the process.

Another line of work pursued by CR in connection with the conflict over Abkhazia has been its support of various media outlets, including Panorama, a paper published in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i since March 2003 (see OCHA Georgia 2004). Longer cooperation exists with Studio Re, an independent TV studio which characterizes itself as an NGO in the media sector. While the studio receives funding from a variety of institutions, CR is termed its 'European partner' and has financed the bulk of the work on Abkhazia. According to one of the directors of the studio, Mamuka Kuparadze, members of Studio Re have been participating in meetings of NGO activists since 1996, and as a result several joint projects have been carried out, in particular with Svetlana Korsaia of Abkhaz state television. In addition there have been various film productions. The first portrayed the situation in the Gal/i region, the southernmost area of Abkhazia in which primarily ethnic Georgians reside. Many of them became internally displaced persons within Georgia proper as a result of the war, although some have since returned to Gal/i. The film was shown to a limited extent in Georgia but the Abkhaz government refused to allow it to be screened in Abkhazia, although they did permit Studio Re to do further work on the territory of the region. Another film covered the series of meetings organized by CR in Northern Ireland (see above). Furthermore, the studio has organized nine TV discussions on Abkhazia, two of which involved participants who travelled from Abkhazia to take part.

Clearly, the focus of the studio is to reach as large an audience as possible within the broader society. There may have been some limited impact on the governmental level, particularly among Abkhaz government officials who screened the Gal/i film, but the primary orientation of Studio Re is toward the mass societal level. Kuparadze discusses the difficulties involved in reaching Georgian society and in modifying entrenched opinions. He claims that the Georgian mass media and society are distanced from the process which is occurring between Georgian and Abkhaz NGO activists and that there is little understanding of such meetings, particularly since they do not appear to deliver tangible results. These attitudes are compounded by the phenomenon of negative journalism on each side. The Georgian media do not present any positive information about Abkhazia, nor do the Abkhaz do this with regard to Georgia, according to Kuparadze. Instead, negative stereotypes which emerged or were strengthened during the war are reinforced by the media. This is due to the attitudes of the journalists and directors themselves, as well as to the unpopularity of balanced programming. Television stations can more easily ensure high viewing rates by sensationalizing a topic and playing to society's prejudices. Kuparadze points out that while Studio Re is able to realize its goals regarding production thanks to foreign funding, obtaining media time is a much more difficult challenge, although not impossible. The main way in which Studio Re attempts to reach larger audiences is by organizing seminars and discussions on its films or by giving them to others to do so. Thus, the impact of the studio's work is limited, but definitely goes beyond the tiny circle of NGO activists involved in dialogue seminars and similar activities.

<u>University of California at Irvine</u>
The Paula Garb project, run under the auspices of the University of California at Irvine, is characterized primarily by a series of dialogue seminars. (The tenth was held in Moscow

in July 2003.) These differ from the ones offered by Conciliation Resources and the Berghof Center in three ways. First, they do not include politicians, but are exclusively 'track II' meetings, involving a wide variety of civil society activists. Second, there are no meetings involving members of only one society. Instead, all of the seminars have been of a joint nature, including both Georgian and Abkhaz participants. This differs also from the work of International Alert, which often focuses on parallel projects in the two societies before attempting joint undertakings. Third, the results of the meetings are published (9 volumes in all) in English (in part) and Russian (fully), so that they are accessible to virtually all members of both the Georgian and Abkhaz societies. While the original publications included only more or less formal speeches, the later ones also contain the informal discussions which follow, allowing the reader to gain a sense of the priorities and attitudes of the individuals and groups involved.

There appears to have been a significant evolution in the impact of the project within the five years of its existence. According to Paata Zakareishvili, the coordinator on the Georgian side, the books were not popular at first, but now the demand is greater than the supply and some are going into a second printing. He further believes that the project is now relatively well-known in Georgian society and has its own individual profile which sets it apart from others. While at an early stage of the project one participant complained that: 'Until NGOs embrace the principles of a civil society and become a force that has to be reckoned with, they cannot have a tangible influence on transforming the conflict', this now seems to have happened to some degree (Paula Garb, Small Steps toward Peace in Abkhazia, www.isar.org/isar/archive/GT/GT7garb.html). According to Zakareishvili, groups such as the so-called 'Abkhaz government-in-exile' have begun to take the role of NGOs in the development of the conflict seriously and have realized that some Georgian NGOs have established a direct connection to certain segments of Abkhaz society. He further points out that media interest has grown and claims that it is now significant as a means of reaching wider audiences.

Nonetheless, even Zakareishvili admits that the larger societies are being reached only inadequately. While the Georgian and Abkhaz participants are becoming closer in their approaches, and have been able to convince many in the NGO sector and some in the political realm of them, nonetheless the broader society is not influenced by the publications and the project as a whole. He suggests this is in part due to the difficulty of instilling civic values in people in more than a superficial way over the short term. Nevertheless, he believes it is important to keep pursuing the process in a fair and transparent way, as this is a path toward the establishment of a genuine civil society in both Georgia and Abkhazia. However, in order to keep up the project's momentum, a new phase should be introduced in which Abkhaz dialogue seminar participants come to Georgia to interact with the media and thereby with society, while Georgians go to Abkhazia for the same purpose. In this way a larger audience could be reached. But the Abkhaz side is not ready for such a step, which points to a series of differences in civil society development in the two societies. While the Georgians are dealing with a climate which is relatively tolerant of NGO activity, the Abkhaz groups are still under tight control by their government. Second, the opinions of the Abkhaz NGO leaders have remained within a narrower circle of activists than has been the case in Georgia. Third, while both societies are characterized by a high level of mistrust of NGO motives and activities, there appears to be a more open atmosphere for discussion of these in the Georgian environment. These differences are in part explainable by the fact that Abkhaz society is constantly living with the consequences of the 1992-93 war (particularly international isolation) to a much greater extent than its Georgian counterpart.

Conclusions

Clearly, this case study confirms that it is exceedingly difficult to create civil society in the post-Soviet space. This is due in part to the Soviet legacy, which discouraged or prevented the development of social initiatives that were not controlled by the state. This, along with the western belief that a functioning civil society is an important pillar of democratic regimes, has resulted in a certain artificiality of the development of civil society institutions, such as NGOs in the post-Soviet Georgian context. Thus, the organizations have often not emerged from a perceived need within the larger society and therefore do not possess a broad social base. Rather, they are marginal groups supported by western funding which are intended to promote the injection of civic values into larger segments of society as well as to lobby the Georgian government for more peaceful policies regarding Abkhazia. Although contacts to politicians are partially in place and have to some extent been further developed by the NGOs and their international partners, these contacts are often based more on existing personal relationships than on the concept of a political culture in which functional lobbying plays a legitimate role. Still, there has been some progress in this matter, so contacts upward to politicians have had limited success and possess the potential for added development. However, downward contacts to the broader society are still largely absent, as media coverage of the NGO perspectives and activities has been minimal, except in those forums oriented toward a small audience already engaged in civil society initiatives. Thus at least the most significant (I)NGOs in the conflict transformation and peacebuilding sphere in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict are not able to fulfil both functions of middle-range actors as elaborated by John Paul Lederach.

What do these results imply in terms of the conflict situation? Since local NGOs together with their international counterparts have so far had only a miniscule impact as lobbyists, there has been very little if any influence exercised by NGOs on the negotiations on Abkhazia. Nor have they been able to act as legitimate representatives of the larger society, as they still represent a marginal view on the conflict and options for its resolution. INGOs have been able to involve a certain number of middle and even higher level politicians, but this has not led to policy changes thus far. Nor have attitudes within Georgian society in general toward the Abkhaz and Abkhazia changed significantly as a result of the activity of NGOs and INGOs.

Nonetheless, the developments are not all negative. While reaching few people, the projects have changed the opinions of some, at least privately. These alternative opinions are slowly beginning to reach a broader audience via interviews of some of the better known NGO activists, and cooperation between them and specialized government bodies is increasing. Opposition voices in cases of violence in conjunction with Abkhazia are growing, leading to a less monolithic perception of Abkhaz as the enemy. Activities with young people may be able to instil different values in the upcoming generation. Any conclusions must be tentative, but at least the principle of 'do no harm' is being adhered to, and for relatively small budgets the Georgian NGOs and their Abkhazian and international partners are doing commendable work, although its impact is still tiny. The hope and belief is that these groups are laying the groundwork for a more peaceful approach to conflict management and ultimately perhaps a productive transformation of the conflict. One possibility for overcoming the inadequate links with the wider society would be to create stronger ties between existing peacebuilding NGOs and their counterparts doing humanitarian work on the grassroots level, e.g., by introducing peacebuilding components into this work. This could help expand contacts with a broader societal base for the middle level NGOs and could spread more pacific attitudes within the larger society.

Returning to the conflict transformation concept, it is appropriate to recall here that its goals were to encompass all levels of society in the process and to engender two types of change: in the societies, and in the function of the conflict. With regard to the former goal, some success has been achieved in involving middle-level actors, but the grassroots level has largely been neglected.[21] As for the second goal, societal change has been negligible, and a shift in the function of the conflict has not yet occurred to any significant extent, although it appears that the approaches of the NGOs analysed have started a process of perceiving the conflict differently in certain circles, which could be the beginning of an alteration of its function within the societies involved.

The limited success achieved in reaching the grassroots level runs contrary to some of the existing theory on conflict management and transformation, which assumes that NGOs are well connected at the mass societal level. Thus, in terms of theoretical approaches a rethinking of the potential role of NGOs is necessary. Their function and capacities depend heavily on the process by which the organizations came into existence. A rapid and artificial process of creation can eventually lead to the development of civic values among larger population segments, but this cannot be taken for granted in the initial stages, as is perhaps the case when a slower, more organic growth and evolution of NGOs has been possible. Future theoretical reflections on the functions of NGOs within a civil society framework should therefore take into account the conditions surrounding the emergence and development of the specific NGO context under investigation. In other words, a greater contextualization of NGO activity is required for theoretical constructs to achieve validity when tested against a variety of empirical cases.

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[21] For a detailed analysis of the top-level negotiations, focusing on the role of the UN, see Stewart (2003).

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