

Georgian policy on Abkhazia: strategy or tactic?

Liana Kvarchelia

(The article was written for the International Alert's 'Dialogue through Research' publication).

Two concepts have come to dominate Georgian political discourse on the so-called 'conflict regions' since August 2008: 'the occupied territories' and the proclaimed new approach to resolving these conflicts, under the so-called 'strategy on the occupied territories'.

Although the preamble in the official document, entitled 'the State Strategy on the Occupied Territories'¹, begins by stating the humanitarian aim of securing a future in which 'all citizens of the country shall enjoy the privileges of democratic governance, globally integrated and developed economy and live in a tolerant, multi-ethnic and multicultural society'², its political component is manifested in the statement that the population of 'the country'. i.e. Georgia includes the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are also referred to as 'occupied territories', which means that the Georgian authorities are not only ignoring the will of the people in both republics along with their right to self-determination but are also denying their own responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities (in 1992 and 2008) and thus rejecting the entirely legitimate fears and security needs of the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia regarding the threat posed by Georgia.

The Strategy contains direct references to the so-called 'Law on the Occupied Territories'³, and also states that the Strategy 'expresses Georgia's unwavering resolve to achieve the full de-occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, to reverse the process of the annexation of the territories occupied by the Russian Federation and reintegrate these territories and the population as a constituent part of Georgia'⁴. It is clear, then, that this is not a new Georgian strategy but merely a new tactic to which the Georgian administration has had to resort following the failed attempt in August 2008 to 'restore its territorial integrity' through the use of force.

The rationale behind the use of such terms and behind the adoption of official Georgian documents relating to Abkhazia⁵ since August 2008 can only be understood in the context of action taken by the Georgian administration in recent years. The motives of the Georgian administration in promoting its 'new' approach and the goals of its Strategy are clearly a logical continuation of the Georgian policy formed after the rose revolution. This denied any conflict

¹ Hereafter referred to as 'the Strategy'.

² The 'State Strategy on Occupied Territories. Engagement through Cooperation'. <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/strategy.pdf>

³ Hereafter referred to as 'the Law'.

⁴ The 'State Strategy on Occupied Territories. Engagement through Cooperation'. <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/strategy.pdf>

⁵ Although the Georgian documents relate to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this article deals mainly with Georgian-Abkhazian relations.

between Georgia and Abkhazia *per se* and portrayed the conflict to the global community as one primarily between Russia and Georgia. Georgia has a number of interconnected aims in shifting the emphasis onto Russia. Since the Georgian administration was not prepared to make any serious concessions to resolve the conflict, it was not interested in holding a genuine dialogue with Abkhazia. It was most likely calculating that Abkhazia could be 'returned' through an international enforcement operation or by resorting to military force. Following this logic the Georgian side viewed the main obstacle to 'restoring its territorial integrity' not through the prism of self-determination processes following the break-up of the USSR, and not through the prism of its own aggressive policy (the entry of Georgian troops into Abkhazia in August 1992) but from the perspective of Russia's role as guarantor of security in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, that had attempted to preserve the status quo for many years.

The entry of Georgian troops into the Kodor gorge in 2006 led to a long period in which Georgian-Abkhaz talks were shelved. Since then Georgia's position has hardened and it has delayed signing an agreement on the non-use of force under various pretexts. The significant increase in military expenditure, hopes expressed that collaboration with NATO might restrain Russia and become an instrument for the 'resolution' of the conflict (whilst preserving 'territorial integrity'), the renaming of the Georgian Ministry of Conflicts to the 'Ministry for Reintegration' etc. all clearly show that Georgia was not interested in holding substantive talks with Abkhazia. Instead, Georgia calculated that an escalation of the situation would help it to squeeze Russia out of the region as a mediator and security guarantor.

The attack on Tskhinval by Georgian troops in 2008 was the culmination of the 'rose' generation's policy on the old conflicts. After suffering a crushing blow from Russia, Georgia is skilfully positioning itself as a 'victim'. The argument increasingly put forward by the Georgian administration is that there are no Georgian-Abkhaz or Georgian-Ossetian conflicts as such, but merely an 'expansionist policy' by Russia which controls the 'puppet regimes on the occupied territories'. Tbilisi's position is therefore that if Georgia is to sign any agreement on the non-use of force, it would only be with Moscow.

The 'Law on the Occupied Territories'⁶ recognised Russia as a party to the conflict, in effect assigning Abkhazia and South Ossetia the role of an object rather than a subject in the conflict. The Georgian administration also appears to believe that more action is required to 'return the territories' than merely keeping the focus on the conflict between Russia and Georgia. In this sense the Georgian authorities actively oppose attempts by Abkhazia to establish direct relations with the outside world and to be perceived, above all by the Western community, as an independent actor.

⁶ [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL\(2009\)004-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL(2009)004-e.asp)

It is important to note that, even after the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian war in 1992-1993, Georgia was pressing the world community and particularly the CIS countries to impose sanctions against Abkhazia. Fearing that the situation may become ‘Kosovised’, leading to international recognition of Abkhazia, the administration in Tbilisi has approved a series of documents since August 2008 strengthening the policy of isolating Sukhum^{7, 8}. Georgia’s first attempt to isolate Abkhazia following the events in August was made virtually immediately after the August war and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation. International organizations received a letter from the so-called office of the ‘State Ministry of Georgia on Reintegration’, signed by the deputy minister Dmitrii Mandzhavidze.⁹ This document actively employs the term ‘the occupied territories’. It proposes to the international organisations that all rehabilitation programmes and development projects in Abkhazia and South Ossetia be frozen indefinitely and reviewed. The Ministry insists that any future activity by international organisations in the two republics be cleared with the ‘Ministry for Reintegration’ to identify whether they are relevant to the new context. Along with declarations about the importance of providing humanitarian and rehabilitation assistance ‘to the population living in misery’ in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Ministry required the international organisations to suspend their activities in the two republics, with blunt warnings that any interaction with the authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that did not go through the Georgian administration would be considered an unfriendly act.

The response from the international organisations and donors most actively engaged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was predictably negative, but was only voiced behind the scenes. However the overall impression was that the international organisations intended to ignore the Ministry’s recommendations.

The requirements set out in the letter represented the Georgian authorities’ first formal attempt to regulate the activities of international organisations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and place them under their control. However, quite apart from its failure to meet international standards, this move had no adequate legal basis even at national level. Within a month then Georgia had adopted the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ which was designed to provide a legal basis to regulate and restrict contacts between the outside world and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Law indicates that it will remain in force ‘until the full restoration of Georgian jurisdiction’. Apart from restrictions on the freedom of movement (foreign citizens may only enter Abkhazia through the Georgian-Abkhazian border via the river Ingur), transport corridors

⁷We have in mind primarily contacts with the EU and Turkey.

⁸The ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’, ‘State Strategy on the Occupied Territories’, the “Order of the Government of Georgia enacting rules for organisations conducting activities in the occupied territories of Georgia”.

⁹Letter dated 03.09.2008

(primarily the airport) are blocked, external banking operations are banned, economic activity of an entrepreneurial or non-entrepreneurial nature is restricted. Any decrees and legislation approved by the authorities on the so-called 'occupied territories' are declared unlawful since these authorities have not been appointed or elected in accordance with Georgian legislation. This statement can be used amongst other things to justify refusing to hold talks or sign agreements with the 'unlawful' authorities.

In an attempt to provide legal backing to the international sanctions imposed *de facto* on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Law provides for the signing of bilateral agreements with third countries in which they undertake to impose sanctions on violators of the Law in accordance with their own legislation.

Georgia's approval of the 'Law on the Occupied Territories' placed the international community in a difficult position since it required Russia to be recognised as an 'occupying force'. Despite its criticism of Russia for recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the international community considers this a step too far. Not accidentally the report of the International Fact-finding Mission¹⁰ on the events of August 2008 assigned a large portion of the responsibility for initiating military action to Georgia. The Law was also criticised from the perspective of international standards. In his report of 3rd February 2009¹¹ the UN Secretary-General noted that some prohibitions in the 'Law on the Occupied Territories' cause concern in the international community in terms of humanitarian organisations' access to zones suffering from conflict. The Venice Commission¹² also commented on this, noting a set of provisions which should be brought to the attention of the Georgian authorities. The Commission found certain issues that needed to be addressed, including: criminalisation of irregular entry into the 'occupied territories' with no explicit exclusion of emergency; the criminalisation of economic activities necessary for the survival of the population. The Commission noted that the potential restriction and criminalisation of humanitarian aid contradict the rule of customary international law that the well-being of the population has to be a basic concern of those involved in a conflict in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1866 (2009). Concerns were also raised regarding the fact that some provisions of the Law would be applied retroactively. Finally the Commission recommended that the Georgian authorities view the Law as a transitory document which should be subject to periodical review.

¹⁰ Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia.

¹¹ Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, pursuant to Security Council resolution 1839 (2008), 3 February 2009 [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/MYAI-7NZ7WS-full_report.pdf/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/MYAI-7NZ7WS-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf)

¹² EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW (VENICE COMMISSION) OPINION ON THE LAW ON OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF GEORGIA. Adopted by the Venice Commission At its 8th Plenary Session (Venice, 13-14 March 2009) [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL\(2009\)004-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL(2009)004-e.asp)

To soften the impression given by the Law the Georgian Parliament was forced to redraft it and introduce some amendments which however did not affect the basic provisions of the Law and certainly did not change it substantively. The amendments merely provided more detail on access of the population of the ‘occupied territories’ to international humanitarian aid.

Comments from influential international institutions directed at the Georgian authorities regarding the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ and the publication of the report of the International Fact-Finding Mission on the events of August 2008 signalled a new tendency among the international community to regard actions by the current administration in Georgia with fairly serious criticisms. To avoid accusations that they were adopting a non-constructive position, Georgia had to contrive somehow to present the world with a ‘new’ concept that, while essentially operating in Georgia’s interests, would simultaneously create an impression of being a constructive step towards the transformation of the conflict. The ‘State Strategy on the Occupied Territories’ was designed to do just that. The rhetoric that accompanied the development of the Strategy was clearly aimed at a positive reception by the West and improving the image of the administration in Tbilisi, with the occasional reference to ‘confidence-building’ and the needs of the ‘population living in misery’. Some ‘softening’ of the tone was also needed to ensure that both Georgia and the world community could reasonably expect ‘constructive action’ from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in response to Georgia’s ‘peace’ initiatives. However the Georgian authorities were unable to maintain this tone for long. While assuring the international community of its concern at the isolation of the population ‘on the occupied territories’, it also protested strongly at the highest diplomatic levels at the opening of a ‘Benetton’ shop in Sukhum or the sale of Abkhazian *adjika* sauce in Armenia. Foreigners whose passports contained stamps indicating that they had crossed the Russian-Abkhaz border on the river Psou were subjected to arrest and significant fines. Harsh statements continued to be issued on participation in international sporting events and arts festivals by representatives of Abkhazia, including children’s groups. The Georgian military continued to seize Turkish commercial shipping sailing *en route* to Abkhazia in neutral waters¹³. Georgia attempted with some success to persuade Western states to refuse to issue visas to residents of Abkhazia holding Russian international passports¹⁴. All this occurred against a background of failed attempts to sign a Georgian-Abkhaz agreement on the non-use of force within the Geneva talks process. These and

¹³ A Georgian court sentenced the captain of a Turkish ship seized in the summer of 2009 to 24 years’ imprisonment which led to a protest by the Turkish government. It was only following the intervention of the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutogku and the payment of an \$18,000 fine that the ship’s captain and four crew members were freed.

¹⁴ Later, in the Plan of action on the Engagement Strategy the Georgian authorities offered as a ‘compromise’ to provide Abkhazian citizens with ‘neutral’ travel documents issued by Georgia.

many other actions were clearly at variance with official assurances that the aim of the Strategy was to overcome Abkhazia's isolation.

A further factor behind the publication of the Strategy may have been the statement by EU representatives that the EU would adopt a policy of 'engagement without recognition' in relation to Abkhazia. Increasing references to 'non-recognition but engagement' issued from the lips of some European bureaucrats - instead of the traditional expressions of support for 'territorial integrity' - are likely to have been met with consternation in official circles in Georgia. The Georgian authorities are concerned that interaction between Abkhazia and the EU will contribute to the de-isolation of Abkhazia and strengthen its independence by exploding the myth assiduously constructed by Georgia of 'a black hole', 'an occupied territory' with a 'puppet regime'. Ultimately, such developments could lead to the widening of Abkhazia's international contacts. At the very least, the Georgian administration cannot see how direct interaction between the EU and Abkhazia could possibly promote Georgian policy. It therefore appears that the Georgian Strategy is, among other things, an attempt to seize the initiative from the EU and ensure that any international proposals on the de-isolation of Abkhazia are couched in Georgian terms of 'de-occupation' and 'reintegration'.

The idea and process connected with the Strategy have involved some clever public relations activities by the so-called 'Ministry for Reintegration'. Potential critics were invited to discuss the first drafts - independent experts, representatives of Georgian and international non-governmental organisations. In fact they objected to the use of the term 'the occupied territories' in the title and wording of the Strategy since this implied a political framework that rendered meaningless the idea of restoring confidence between the populations on both sides of the conflict. Other substantive comments were also made. The authors of the Strategy (representatives of the 'Ministry for Reintegration') took account only of those comments that did not relate to the main contentious provisions. For example, they removed historical digressions, which were not in any case very appropriate in a document of this type, but retained references to the 'Law on the Occupied Territories' and statements regarding Georgia's intention to reinstate 'the occupied territories' as an integral part of Georgia. Despite this, the minor concessions made to critics of the Strategy allowed its authors to proclaim that the document had been created on the basis of widespread and active participation by local and international NGOs.

Moreover the international representatives behind the scenes intimated that Timuri Yakobashvili, the Minister at the time, was assuring Western diplomats that he was in constant contact with the Abkhaz authorities regarding the Strategy and that certain agreements had been reached on a number of issues. The official representatives of Abkhazia, even before the text of

the Strategy was published, categorically denied their involvement in discussions of the document, stating that there could be no question of any collaboration under the Georgian strategy and on the basis of the ‘territorial integrity of Georgia’ and that Georgia should instead recognise the new realities.

The Strategy was officially unveiled in January 2010. It is striking that the original text of the document was published in English, which confirms the assumption by many experts that the Strategy was intended primarily for Western readers. The document is a clear exposition of the Georgian authorities’ aim: ‘reintegration’. All external communications by Abkhazia must be strictly controlled by Georgia. All contact between the population of the ‘occupied territories’ and the outside world may only take place via Georgia, with Georgia’s consent or mediated by the Georgian authorities. The de-isolation and improved well-being of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are made directly conditional on its willingness to collaborate with the Georgian authorities and obey Georgian law. While proposing extensive collaboration with the population, the Tbilisi administration at the same time reduces interaction with the official authorities of Abkhazia to a minimum. This can only be interpreted as an attempt to de-legitimise the official bodies operating in Abkhazia. The proposal in fact can be regarded as a transitional model by which the citizens of Abkhazia gradually withdraw from the Abkhaz legal framework and come under Georgian jurisdiction¹⁵.

‘Reintegration’, according to the document, is conditional on ‘de-occupation’ i.e. the withdrawal of Russian troops from Abkhazia since security, according to the Strategy, will be ensured by international mechanisms ‘by means of impartial observers, police and/or peacekeeping forces including local resources’¹⁶. The rather more detailed ‘Action Plan for Engagement’¹⁷ proposes the establishment of an additional review mechanisms, the so-called ‘Trust Fund’ designed to advise donors on the acceptability and desirability of funding certain projects in Abkhazia.

The Georgian authorities might have been better advised to de-politicise the Strategy completely and present its sole aim as ‘collaboration to restore confidence’. Although this would probably not generate much optimism on the Abkhaz side – as the Georgian agenda is too obvious for that and the level of trust between the two societies is virtually nil - it would at least have given the Georgian authorities more standing in the eyes of international observers, at little risk to them. However the Georgian administration, alarmed that more voices in international

¹⁵ This aim should be supported by transition structures such as a ‘Financial Institution’, ‘Cooperation Agency’.

¹⁶ The ‘State Strategy on Occupied Territories. Engagement through Cooperation’.

¹⁷ http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/action_plan.pdf

circles appeared to opt for establishing contacts with Abkhazia¹⁸, felt that even the restrictions and bans contained in the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ and the ‘Engagement Strategy’ did not go far enough. They were followed by the Modalities for Engagement¹⁹ for international organisations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which require any activity conducted by international organisations in the two republics to be subjected to thorough clearance by the Georgian administration. This includes reserving the right to ban the activities of any international organisation. It further requires donors not only to consult with the ‘Ministry for Reintegration’ on general policy and priorities for proposed projects but also requires the donor organisations to report every six months to Georgian officials. If a project entails representatives from the ‘occupied territories’ leaving the country for the West, this can only be arranged on the basis of ‘neutral’ travel documents (i.e. a document issued by Georgia).

Discussions of the Modalities during the preparation stage for the first time ever provoked a consolidated protest from diplomats, donor organisations and international NGOs as well as local Georgian organisations.²⁰ Georgian officials were given to understand in no uncertain terms at closed meetings that the Modalities violated international norms relating to the activity of international organisations, and were counter to the spirit of free collaboration and restricted civil society activism. The criticism from official international representatives was, as before, not made public and so was probably not viewed by the Georgian authorities as a warning that might lead to specific sanctions. However the Georgian administration cannot entirely disregard the views of official international institutions, although the authors of the Modalities may feel that the document has received too much publicity for it to be abandoned entirely without losing face. As a result the document was still approved by the Georgian government, albeit with certain amendments. However the donor organisations insisted that the Georgian authorities resume discussion of the document within six months. In fact, the impression is emerging that the Modalities are not being applied as comprehensively as originally anticipated, with officials not insisting on strict compliance in view of the negative perception of the document by Western organisations.

In an alarming trend, however, attacks by the Georgian authorities on individual international NGOs working in Abkhazia and Georgia have increased. These INGOs are

¹⁸ The idea of ‘engagement without recognition’ was first raised by Peter Semneby, EU Representative in the South Caucasus. It was supported in European expert and journalist circles. The initiative was analysed in more detail and supported by the US experts Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell. Engagement without recognition: A new Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia” Unrecognized States. Center for Strategic and International Studies. The Washington Quarterly, October 2010 pp. 59-73.

¹⁹ Regulation of the Government of Georgia - On Approval of Modalities for Engagement of Organizations Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia, 15 October 2010.
<http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/041010/Modalities%20for%20Engagement.pdf>

²⁰ Legal Opinion on the Modalities for Conducting Activities on the Occupied Territories (Government Resolution #320, September 15, 2010) by the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association

perceived both by Georgian and Abkhazian civil society organisation as neutral and non-partisan. Clearly, it is precisely this lack of bias that makes these organisations so disliked by the Georgian authorities. Attacks on these organisations may indicate that the Georgian authorities are attempting to ‘save face’ following their reluctant relaxation of the ‘modalities’ regime by forcing ‘unsuitable’ international organisations to leave the region and attempting to marginalise Georgian activists engaged in conflict-related issues.

There also appears to be intense lobbying of Georgia’s interests by European advisers at the Georgian ‘Ministry for Reintegration’ and representatives of certain international NGOs based in Tbilisi, promoting Georgian policy in the West and thus undermining the already limited opportunities for conflict transformation. This lobbying is likely to have some minor successes. Indeed these ‘advisers’ may have been, for example, behind the German Foreign Ministry’s refusal to fund a number of German NGOs on the basis that they have not cleared their projects in advance with the Georgian ‘Ministry for Reintegration’.

However on the whole the transfer of Timuri Yakobashvili – the author of the Strategy and other associated documents – to another post is viewed by some observers as signalling the failure of the Georgian Strategy, which Abkhaz experts at least felt was doomed from the start as it was wholly divorced from reality. From an Abkhaz perspective the Strategy is more applicable to regions of Georgia (which Abkhazia is not) such as for example Javakheti, which has a different history of relations with Tbilisi. Therefore the proposed assistance in overcoming isolation based on the idea that Abkhazia is an ‘integral part’ of Georgia, is perceived (particularly since August 2008) if not as sacrilege, then at least as a challenge.

The effectiveness of the Georgian Strategy should be assessed against its true aims. The Georgian administration (and society) at this point see ‘restoration of territorial integrity’ (‘reintegration’) as a long-term prospect for obvious reasons. Concerned to prevent any further recognition of Abkhazia, the Georgian authorities are likely to see their short and medium term aims to be the isolation of Abkhazia and its marginalisation in the eyes of the international community. The Strategy itself may well merely be a propaganda exercise and its authors may well be aware that it cannot have any other function. It may be that the Georgian administration also needs to acquit itself of responsibility in the eyes of its own society for the ‘loss’ of Abkhazia. For this purpose it presents its society with a ‘peace plan’ but can always put the blame for the ‘failure’ of the idea on Russia. The Georgian administration understands very well that the idea of ‘reintegration’ can only provoke protest from Abkhazia. However, if so, the Abkhaz side will share the ‘blame’ with Russia for the failure of the Georgian ‘peace’ initiative. The Georgian administration may feel it is in any case in a ‘win-lose’ situation. If Abkhazia starts to collaborate on the basis of the Strategy, Georgia will gradually ‘open up’ Abkhazia for

itself since all contact with the outside world will depend on Tbilisi's approval and come under Georgian legislation. If however Abkhazia refuses to interact ('engage') on Georgia's terms, Tbilisi will achieve its international isolation, citing the 'Law on the Occupied Territories' and the Modalities for conducting activities by international organisations 'on the occupied territories'.

If Europe's declared policy on Abkhazia of 'engagement without recognition' remains a dead letter and does not bring about direct contact between Europe and Abkhazia, or if the Georgian authorities manage to impose preconditions on the Europeans (that go beyond 'non-recognition') and discredit the European policy in the eyes of Abkhaz society by making it conditional on the Georgian Strategy, the attempt to isolate Abkhazia will have been effective. However the prospects of settling the conflict and improving relations between the two societies will become increasingly transparent.

Georgia's position is based on a set of fears which are themselves inconsistent. On the one hand the administration in Tbilisi fears 'creeping' recognition of Abkhazia and is attempting to isolate it from the Western world. On the other hand the authorities in Georgia are worried that Russia's position in the region will be strengthened, but still create obstacles to any expansion of the EU presence in Abkhazia. This position makes sense if Georgia expects the some underlying contradictions in Abkhazia's relations with Russia to deepen, leading to Abkhazia gradually 'drifting' towards Georgia.

For all the difficulties of building relations with a much more powerful ally (and, while it is still only partially recognised, practically the only ally available), Abkhaz society sees Russia as the guarantor of its security. Georgia, on the other hand - the main opponent of Abkhazia's right to self-determination - is seen by Abkhazia as a political and military threat. To obtain security guarantees against these threats, Abkhazia had to give Russia a series of mandates²¹, primarily on military and border protection matters, facing the need to strike the necessary balance between the interests of external security and the need to strengthen its sovereignty. The sometimes faltering progress on establishing the Russian-Abkhazian partnership may lead to false hopes in Georgia that Abkhazia may be willing to return to 'Georgia's bosom' once it realises all the challenges this asymmetrical relationship entails. In fact, Abkhaz society does not view a 'return' to Georgia as an alternative to the alliance with Russia at all. One possible interpretation is that Tbilisi is well aware that Abkhazia is lost to Georgia and that there are no realistic prospects of 'reintegration'. If so, statements that Russia is set to absorb Abkhazia can only be designed, apart from providing some rather dubious 'moral' satisfaction, to 'absolve' the

²¹ *Perspektivy mezhdunarodnogo priznaniya Abkhazia, Sbornik stat'yey* [Prospects of the international recognition of Abkhazia. Collection of articles]. Sukhum, 2011

authorities in the eyes of Georgian society of blame for their failure to fulfil their promise that they would celebrate the New Year in Abkhazia²².

Conclusions and recommendations

The approach taken by the administration in Tbilisi to the conflict in Abkhazia appears to be a relatively utilitarian one dominated by short and medium-term goals. Thus, any decisions or tactical moves are primarily aimed at bolstering the authority of the present administration. Naturally, conflict transformation will not be a priority under this approach.

Any change to the existing paradigm would require all sides engaged in the conflict and its resolution to take certain steps:

- Firstly, the policy of denying the existence of a Georgian-Abkhazian conflict should be abandoned. The approval of the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ and lobbying by the Georgian authorities for various international institutions to pass resolutions on ‘the occupied territories’ is only exacerbating the conflict and making the prospect of resolving it even more remote.
- The Georgian authorities must recognise that the conflict cannot be resolved without Abkhaz participation. This involves rethinking the format of the Geneva talks where participants are currently represented in a private capacity. Changing the format would ensure that the sides take increased responsibility for the process and its outcomes.
- The signing of an agreement on the non-use of force between Tbilisi and Sukhum, rather than the clearly politicised Georgian Strategy, could be a major contribution to confidence building between the sides. Georgia’s requirement for a similar agreement to be concluded between Georgia and Russia should not replace the need to sign an agreement with Abkhazia.
- The view is growing within Abkhaz society that the conflict with Georgia is over following the war in August 2008 and Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. However, this glosses over the current and future challenges facing the Abkhaz state which need to be assessed on a more constructive basis. An internal public debate is needed about what is meant by the term ‘sustainable peace’ and what the price might be of failure to resolve the conflict.
- The Georgian Strategy creates problems for the EU policy on engagement with Abkhazia and restricts its options. It discredits the European initiative in the eyes of Abkhaz society by making European engagement conditional on the Georgian idea of reintegration. The international community must understand that the Strategy, along with the ‘Law on the

²² Teleconference by M. Saakashvili, 25 January 2011. <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=21612&search=>

Occupied Territories' and the Modalities of Engagement for international organisations, are destructive in terms of conflict transformation. It is therefore crucial that the EU strategy is clearly articulated and presented as an independent initiative in its own right rather than one committed to a goal of 'restoring the territorial integrity' of Georgia. The initiative on de-isolation needs to come from third parties and not from or through Georgia. Everything proposed by the administration in Tbilisi as 'confidence building measures' is downgraded by the idea 'reintegration' and is met by rejection and mistrust from the Abkhaz side. Consequently the EU strategy must not be conditional on Abkhazia agreeing to 'engage' within the Georgian Strategy. The attempt to instil within the European Union the idea that the EU strategy is merely an adjunct to the Georgian Strategy will in practice simply remove the last opportunity for establishing an international presence in Abkhazia.

- The EU Strategy should avoid making the cornerstone of its policy facilitating collaboration between Abkhazia and Georgia. The priority should instead be to open channels of communication between Abkhazia and Europe, the countries of the Black Sea basin and the South Caucasus. This will itself lead to the creation of a more favourable climate for interaction between Abkhazia and Georgia. Collaboration cannot be expected beyond real need. Current examples of collaboration based on real needs are the interaction over the Ingur hydro-electric power station and the five-sided incident prevention mechanism. It is essential to establish realistic, constructive goals and reject repressive measures.
- The wording of the Georgian Strategy means that it could be interpreted as covering almost all possible forms of communication between Abkhazia and the Western world. This is presumably to thwart any independent attempts by Abkhazia to interact, in particular, with the EU. The authorities and opposition forces in Abkhazia should recognise this and avoid 'playing into' the hands of the Georgian authorities by cutting themselves off from contact with the international community and refusing to see the nuances in European policy.