



Commentary

The dilemma of the *bolero* of Minsk

For the last twenty-one years a diplomatic effort aimed at finding a solution to the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, known informally as the OSCE Minsk Process has failed to achieve a breakthrough despite the efforts of many, and hundreds of meetings over thousands of hours.

On several occasions, particularly in the period 2008-11 the sides looked very close to agreeing a road-map that would see them gradually moving towards a lasting solution. The conflict initially centered around the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory that is internationally recognized as being part of Azerbaijan but which has a majority Armenian population. However since the hostilities in the 1990s, and the subsequent ceasefire in 1994, other problems and issues have arisen. Nagorno-Karabakh and a large chunk of Azerbaijani territory around it have been under Armenian control since, and a de facto administration has declared itself independent. In the meantime hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people, mainly Azerbaijanis but some Armenians also, continue longing to return to their homes. In Nagorno-Karabakh itself the population lives on a permanent war-footing and Armenia is under blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey. An arms race has turned the region into a potential dangerous flashpoint.

The solution, many believe, is to be found in the so-called Madrid Principles. Intensive negotiations have been held since 2008 between the two Presidents, Ilham Aliiev of Azerbaijan and Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia. Yet every time a solution was in sight, something happened and one or the other of the sides lost heart, taking everything back to square

one. Or so one is led to believe, except that the diplomats mediating the process keep reassuring everybody that this is not the case because, after all the Madrid Principles have been agreed, with some reservations by all the sides. The sides in the conflict on the other hand insist that the devil is in the detail, and that principles are one thing, signing an agreement is another.

So for nearly two years now the process has descended into a quasi surreal exercise, with the leaderships of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the diplomats representing the three states that co-chair the Minsk process (France, Russia and the United States), engaged in a series of monotonous, slow, small and repetitive steps - a diplomatic equivalent of the Bolero de Ravel, whilst the international community obliviously cheered on, with the enthusiasm of an audience on a first night at La Scala.

At this point only the most naïve optimist has any hopes that the process as it stands is going to give results. For this to happen something has to change that will shuffle all the certainties and create a new basis for negotiations. Several things can do this.

The first is war. A new conflict can change the present dynamic. It is one reason why the sides still consider it as an option of last resort. The implications of a new conflict for the countries concerned and for the region in general will be enormous, and the price in human suffering, given the present level of armament, will be huge.

The second development that could change the status quo is serious change in the domestic political situation of either or both of the two countries. This is not something that is impossible to happen, but even if it does the outcome is unlikely to be either clear or predictable for some time.

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Ten questions about... The MINSK PROCESS

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(1) What is it?

The OSCE Minsk Process is the mechanism that the international community has designated to try to find a resolution to the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis on Nagorno-Karabakh and other issues. The process was launched in embryonic form in 1992 in the framework of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, but became more formal when that institution became an organization (OSCE) in 1994.

(2) Why is it called the Minsk Process?

The original idea was to prepare the sides in the conflict to participate in an international conference in Minsk. The conference never took place, and the process has no relationship with Minsk whatsoever, but it continues using this name because the sides could not agree on a new name for it.

(3) Who is in charge of the Minsk Process

Formally it is the OSCE and more specifically a group of member states of the OSCE that were originally designated to organize the Minsk Conference, but in fact it is the three countries that co-Chair the group, France, Russia and the United States who are in charge. Other members of the group and other OSCE member states sometimes complain that they are not even informed of what is going on

(4) Who are the people involved?

The three co-chair countries are represented by diplomats, usually Ambassadors or diplomats of similar rank. The three current co-Chair are Ambassadors Igor Popov (Russia), Jacques Faure (France) and Ian Kelly (USA).

(5) And who does the day to day work?

For a long time the continuity of the process has been kept by Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk who every year is appointed as the special representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office. He is assisted by a small team of field officers based in the region.

(6) France is one of the co-chair countries. Does that mean the European Union is represented?

No France is a co-Chair in her own right and does not represent the EU. At its pleasure it sometimes keeps the EU informed of developments in the process.

(7) What are the Madrid Principles?

The Madrid Principles are a set of ideas based on the 1975 Helsinki Final Act which were presented to Armenia and Azerbaijan by the Minsk Group co-Chair during the OSCE Meeting in Madrid in 2007. The principles have since been fine-tuned in line with discussions held with the sides. They aim to provide the sides with a framework within which they can then start negotiating a peace agreement. They provide for a phased Armenian withdrawal from Azerbaijani territory around Nagorno-Karabakh which they occupied during the conflict, opening up of communications, demining and demilitarization, after which it is envisaged to deploy a peacekeeping force and the granting of an interim status to the territory. They also envisage a legally binding public expression of will to determine the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh. In their generic format the Madrid Principles have been accepted by the sides, "with some reservations". However once the sides started asking for details and clarifications it became clear that the distance between them was still substantial.

(8) What are the biggest achievements of the Minsk Group?

Individual diplomats representing the three co-chair countries have often said that the fact that no new conflict has taken place between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the last two decades is thanks to the efforts of the Minsk Process. There were times when the Group expressed optimism that a solution was round the corner, but it never happened. The Group has managed to keep the sides talking, even in times of tension, but in the last two years even that has become difficult.

(9) What are the biggest criticisms of the Minsk Group?

They are sometimes criticized for not having delivered. But to say this is unfair since it hardly depended on them. However the way the process has been managed, the way the sides were allowed to engage with it, and the secrecy surrounding every step of the negotiations are sometimes mentioned as things that could have been done differently.

(10) Is there a chance that the work of the OSCE Minsk Group will ever succeed?

There are different views on this. Officially most diplomats and politicians will tell you that it is the best mechanism available and the sides have to make it work. In private some are saying now that the process has ran out of steam. For the moment everybody seems to be happy to leave it in the laps of France, Russia and the United States. But for how long? 

This Q and A was compiled by the staff of Commonspaceextra, based on publicly available sources.

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There is also no guarantee that different governments in either Baku or Yerevan will approach the Karabakh conflict resolution process more positively.

The third is a change in the overall international situation. A dramatic escalation of the stand-off between the international community and Iran, or a dramatic change of leadership in Russia may force one or both countries to rethink their strategy. But any such development will not necessarily contribute to a peaceful solution of the conflict either, although it may create a different situation on the ground.

Shuffling the certainties can however also happen in the framework of negotiations, but given the lack of trust and communication between the sides this can only happen if the international community is ready to take the trouble to create the right conditions for it.



President Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia meeting diplomats from the Minsk Group co-Chair countries in Yerevan on 21 March 2013. (Picture courtesy of the Press Service of the President of Armenia).

The only way a peaceful and durable solution can be achieved is always going to be through negotiations, which is why the focus inevitably goes back to the Minsk Process. Based on what the participants of this very secretive process have been telling the world we can now conclude that the process is presently mainly focused on managing the conflict and trying to prevent an escalation, rather than proactively trying to find a solution to it. This is unacceptable.

It is easy to lay the blame for the evident failure to find an agreement after twenty one years of negotiations on the mediators. There is always going to be a temptation to shoot the messenger, but this needs to be avoided, even if there is some justifiable criticism of the way the process has been conducted. Yet equally, saying that the problem is the lack of the political will of the sides to engage positively with the process, to make compromises and to take courageous decisions to ensure a peaceful solution, is not going to take us far either.

The question needs to be asked if the international community has done all it can to make it easier for the sides to move forward; it demands flexibility from the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis but offering an endorsement of the Bolero of Minsk as the only way out of the present impasse comes across as being as inflexible and unimaginative as the intransigence of Mr Aliev and Mr Sargsyan.

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Diplomats from the Minsk Group co-Chair countries with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliev in Baku on 2 April 2013 (picture courtesy of the Press Service of the president of Azerbaijan).

It is time for the international community to go back to the drawing-board on this matter, and to come back with a new initiative that builds on the experiences and lessons learnt from the Minsk Process but one that would entice the sides to engage with afresh with a revitalized effort to find a solution to this conflict that continues to suffocate the region's progress and to cause direct and indirect hardship to millions of people.

This commentary was prepared by the editorial team of commonspaceextra

Corruption, traditional gender roles, threats and harrasment keep women away from peace talks.

It has now been 20 years since Arzu Abdullayeva and Anahit Bayandour were honored with the Olof Palme Prize for their efforts to achieve “international understanding between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in one of the areas of a most bitter conflict”. Internationally honored, their achievements were though almost completely ignored in their respective countries. The womens activist’s competence and potential in achieving a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabach conflict were not realised. This is only one example of how women’s efforts on the grassroot level, how fruitful or promising they might be, never take them to the arena of formal peace negotiations. This experience of women in Armenia and Azerbaijan is to a large extend shared by women in other conflict regions – according to The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation’s report Equal Power – Lasting Peace.

With the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 from 2000 the international community made a major commitment to women’s right to equal participation in conflict resolution and peace processes. The resolution highlights that women’s participation is a matter of international security and is crucial to achieving sustainable peace. However, more than ten years after its adoption, UNSCR 1325 is still largely unimplemented. For instance, at the 24 largest peace negotiations held between 1992 and 2010, only 7,6 percent of the negotiators and 2,5 percent of the mediators were women¹.

While women’s exclusion has long been a known fact and has been problematized many times, the specific mechanisms of women’s marginalisation have not been analyzed. The obstacles to women’s participation in peace processes is the focus of the report Equal Power – Lasting Peace. The report is based on field studies made in five conflict-regions – Armenia/Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and Liberia. 79 female peace builders, along with key actors in national and international communities, were interviewed to map out the obstacles for women’s participation in peace processes and to examine the challenges of building gender-equal peace.



In all the field studies the findings are the same: women make crucial contributions to conflict resolution and peace building at the grassroot level, but when it comes to being part of the political power and decision-making in their countries, doors are firmly closed for them.

Two decades of gradual marginalisation. Taking a closer look at Armenia and Azerbaijan, the situation for women has changed quite a lot in the last two decades, according to the women activists interviewed. At the end of the war, women were regarded as more qualified to solve practical matters, this is how the study’s participants explained women’s increased influence in peace negotiations in the beginning of the 1990s, the period that the informants referred to as “the golden years” of women’s participation. However, the longer the conflict dragged on, the more exclusive the peace process became. Since the end of the 1990s, the peace process has become secluded and intransparent and the involvement of civil society has been reduced severely.

“In the 1990s, women were participating openly in the peace negotiations. Today, women do not even get close to the process. The (representatives of the) Minsk Group meets only with high-level governmental officials,” one of the interviewees said.

Furthermore, the emergence of so called GONGOs (NGOs initiated by the state or other official power structures) has significantly affected the position of the other NGOs. GONGOs enjoy official protection and are the ones who now get invited to meetings with authorities and visiting international officials. According to the interviewees, women are less prevalent in GONGOs than in NGOs and GONGO’s agendas are also quite different from NGO’s.

"If you have a look at all the statutes of the NGOs, they all actually have provisions for protection of human rights. In our society, this is kind of an opposition to the existing government. GONGOs are not involved in peace making activities at all. Unfortunately NGOs are currently in the shadow of the GONGOs," according to an informant.

"Artificial" gender awareness. Both Azerbaijani and Armenian interviewees describe a reality of "artificial" gender awareness, with national authorities adopting statements on women's rights and equality, but not creating action plans or monitoring functions that actually would make them work. In their contacts with representatives of the international community, the participants also felt a lack of understanding of the broader context of how women's rights and empowerment can contribute to peaceful conflict resolution. This is important as it affects which projects get international funding.

"Donors expect us to start talking about peacebuilding, but we can't do that if we do not talk about gender issues first" one interviewee pointed out and another one mentioned how her organization works with women achieving economic independence, since that could contribute higher involvement of women in the society and in the peace process.

Corruption and culture of politics. Both Armenian and Azerbaijani interviewees highlighted undemocratic political systems and corruption as obstacles for their participation. With less income and less influential contacts than men, women stand very little chance of actually advancing to political positions with influence: election campaigns are becoming increasingly expensive and women can hardly ever cover those costs. This, together with deeply rooted traditional ideas of what a woman "should be," severely limits women's possibilities to become active agents in their society. As Azerbaijani interviewees explained, a woman's participation in politics depends on the influence that her family has in the society: if her family is influential, she will succeed, but her male relatives will want to use her acquired position. "If she is an independent candidate from a simpler background, she will definitely be accused of something bad," the women reported.

As politics in this region is regarded by many as a dirty business, women risk a great deal merely by being associated with it, such as the options for marriage and family life. This means that women face double exclusion. By going into politics they put their whole future at risk, only for being marginalized by their own parties. Even without engaging into politics, being a female activist in the South Caucasus region is very risky. This is particularly true for women working with sensitive issues such as peace building and sexual and reproductive rights. Most of the interviewees experienced both open and overt discrimination and harassment because of the work they do. In addition, because of the prejudice and negative attitudes that they face, many women become mentally worn out because they constantly have to defend themselves and the work they do.

In Azerbaijan, the interviewees said that women are accepted into politics as long as they don't challenge the power hierarchy and only deal with issues considered to be women's domain, like health or culture.

"We have one active woman MP who is at least talking about women's issues and stands on our side. (...) She has a non-confrontational stance, and doesn't pose any threat to the

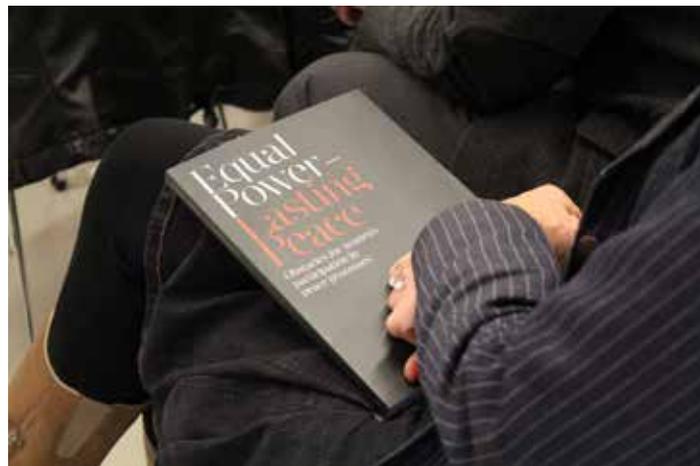
government. She never touches sensitive issues," one interviewee said.

The informants also pointed out the "commercialisation" of the political system. One Armenian women's organization that previously ran a project to get women elected as mayors described their experience: "We were extremely successful. Every village gave us three or four names, we trained them and managed to get 15 women elected to local assemblies. But that was in 2000, now we can't even dream about it, because these positions are now worth money".

Unfortunately, the international community can hardly be seen as a role model for the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments when it comes to women's participation in the peace and security domains. Only 16 percent of the UN peacekeeping operations, and none of the EU's CSDP operations are led by women². When it comes to the Nagorno-Karabach peace process specifically, not a single woman has been part of the OSCE Minsk Group (in the capacity as Co-chair or Special Representative) since the ceasefire was achieved in 1994.

The report's recommendations to the international community are thus to lead by example when it comes to women's representation and to commit to women's equal participation in political decision-making in the South Caucasus. The report findings also suggest a necessity to expand the current peace talks beyond the present focus on territorial boundaries and status to include the human dimension of the conflict. The peace building work carried out by civil society in general and local women's organisations in particular should be acknowledged and means should be considered to support capacity building measures to spur women's participation in peace talks. 

Malin Ekerstedt, Julia Lapitskii



The short version of the report on the Nagorno-Karabach conflict can be found at http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org/download/Popular_version_Armenia_Azerbaijan.pdf,

The short version of Equal Power – Lasting Peace on Armenia/ Azerbaijan in Russian: <http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org/ru/resource/azerbaydzhan-i-armeniya-uvyazshie-v-konflikte-zagornyy-karabah/>

The full version of the report can be downloaded at: <http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org/download/Equal%20Power%20-%20Lasting%20Peace.pdf>.

“Memories without borders” – M

a documentary film that touches

exposes the lasting emotional pa

In March London-based NGO and EPNK member Conciliation Resources brought the film-makers behind *Memories Without Borders*, a new Armenian-Azerbaijani-Turkish documentary film, to participate at the film's first screenings in Brussels, Paris and London. Part of the ongoing Dialogue Through Film initiative, *Memories Without Borders* explores how recollections of recent and long-gone troubles transcend the closed borders dividing communities and lives today.

Featuring perspectives from people living in four locations – Istanbul, the contested territory of Nagorny Karabakh, the Azerbaijani capital of Baku and southern Armenia – the film explores different personal experiences of exclusion and discrimination, family silences on heritage, contesting official history and remembering violence. Running through all the stories told in *Memories Without Borders* are common threads of unresolved violence spanning generations.



Dr Laurence Broers of Conciliation Resources introduces a panel discussion following the screening of the documentary film “Memories without borders” in Brussels.



The film is the result of a two-year collaboration between a group of Turkish, Armenian and Azerbaijani filmmakers, coordinated by Conciliation Resources and supported by the European Union. The film was made by the Internews Media Support NGO (Yerevan), Internews Azerbaijan Public Association (Baku), the Stepanakert Press Club and CAM Film (Istanbul). It was made without a common language among the production teams, without access to each other's countries and with only two meetings, one at the beginning and one at the post-production phase.

“If life does indeed imitate art, and viewers come away from Memories Without Borders posing new questions of themselves and the conflict they are living through, then the film will have succeeded.”

While the four chapters reflect very different moods in societies in Turkey, Nagorny Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia, they all imply, whether explicitly or implicitly, that the quest for the recognition of past wrongs cannot be ‘privatised’ by national community. It is only when this quest is universal that the past can be dealt with constructively. *Memories Without Borders* represents an aspiration to a future when Turkish, Armenian and Azerbaijani memories will be more complete, when narratives of victimhood are balanced with acknowledgement that all parties have been perpetrators too, and emblematic events of national suffering are learnt about alongside even-handed treatment of the suffering of others.

Mixed reactions to raw nerves and gains of conflicts.



“Memories Without Borders represents an aspiration to a future when Turkish, Armenian and Azerbaijani memories will be more complete, when narratives of victimhood are balanced with acknowledgement that all parties have been perpetrators too, and emblematic events of national suffering are learnt about alongside.”

Reactions to *Memories Without Borders* in Brussels, Paris and London among audiences including both local and visiting Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Turks, have been varied. The more negative reactions included perceptions that the film fails to include perspectives from all of the relevant communities, and that it does not offer positive role models especially for Armenian-Azerbaijani co-existence. These reactions say a lot about expectations of a “peacebuilding film”. On one level, some viewers expect specific formats and interpretations of the conflict to be replicated in film. For example, if the story of a refugee from one side is told, some viewers felt that a symmetrical story from the other side is required.

On another level, there is for some (but by no means all) viewers a desire to see on screen idealised visions of ethnic harmony and cross-conflict relationships. Some viewers found the film insufficiently hopeful.

The film also met with positive reactions. Several viewers commented on the ‘kindness’ evident in the film. Although traumatic events are remembered and retold, there is a notable absence of recrimination. Others commented on the willingness of the directors and production teams to challenge the stereotypes and clichés in their own societies. For example, one viewer concluded that far from being a film about ‘repatriation’ or settlement of occupied territories, the second chapter ‘Avetis’ (filmed in Karabakh) is really about the unexpected directions taken by a boy’s rebellion against his father. The nationalist fervour of a diasporan Armenian in this film is revealed as incidental to a deeper family crisis. The underlying question is whether we can make peace without resolving crises in our personal relationships.

Other viewers saw hope and the possibility of change in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations from their juxtaposition with Armenian-Turkish relations. The Turkish chapter, ‘Lost&Found’, presents stories of constructed, chosen and incidental identities among its three protagonists. Armenian-Turkish relations do not have to be hostage to established stereotypes and clichés, and identities may be multiple and fragmented. In this way, in the words of one viewer in London, they may find a way to meet each other and reach accommodation.



Personalities from the region who were involved in the production of the documentary “Memories without borders” participated in screenings and discussions in London, Paris and Brussels in March 2013.

The discussions following the screenings covered a wide range of topics reaching beyond film, including the incentives for trade between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the democracy deficit in Armenia and Azerbaijan and the role of creative arts in reconciliation. Overall, the capacity of film to open questions, within individuals, and both within and across communities, was clear both at these events and in the presentations of the film in Turkey and the Caucasus last October. This is perhaps not the most conventional ‘peacebuilding film’, but it supports the notion that peacebuilding films are not about offering solutions but about posing questions. If life does indeed imitate art, and viewers come away from *Memories Without Borders* posing new questions of themselves and the conflict they are living through, then the film will have succeeded. ●●●

Memories Without Borders can be watched online at www.c-r.org/mwb

“Our approach

Exclusive Interview: Paata Zakareshvili, State Minister for Reintegration



Paata Zakareishvili is an unlikely person to be thrown on the front line of high powered international diplomacy. A long time civil society activist with an impeccable record of support for human rights and initiatives for peace Zakareishvili stands out amongst the lawyers, footballers and former Komsomol boys in the cabinet of Prime Minister Bidzhina Ivanishvili. His task is however not easy, for the issues of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are no longer a localised internal problem but have since August 2008 become prominent in global diplomacy.

Speaking to Marion Kipiani in a wide ranging interview for, **Commonspaceextra** Zakareshvili emphasizes continuity in the objectives of the Georgian government, but highlights important changes to the approach for achieving them. Zakareshvili speaks about the peaceful nature of the new Georgian government's approach, but will this be enough to take the current negotiations to a point where a breakthrough can be achieved?

Q: We would like to start by asking you about the conflict resolution processes with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and your approach as the new State Minister for Reintegration. How would you say your approach differs from the one of the previous government and previous State Ministers?

A: Our approach is peaceful, and we are trying to do our best to make the Abkhaz and Ossetian parties feel that the Georgian state is taking into consideration their interests. We agree with the State Strategy that was adopted by the previous Government and its context but we consider that previously its implementation was politicized. We try to stick to the actual essentials of the Strategy and to implement it. We have changed the rhetoric – conflict resolution is not part of propaganda anymore. The Abkhaz and South Ossetian parties often used the Former Georgian Government's aggressive rhetoric to demonstrate to the world that Georgia was a permanent source of danger for them. But we are trying not to give them reason for such arguments, so that we can start actually taking steps towards peace building.

Q: What is your assessment of the “Geneva Talks?” Are you happy with the format of the talks or do you see any need for changes?

The current format is acceptable for us, but personally I am not against discussing proposals concerning changes to the format, however we should be sure that these changes are necessary. The Abkhazian and South Ossetian participants left the last meeting [in Geneva], which was the first in which the new Georgian Government took part. They claimed the format needed to be changed. But we did not even discuss any changes so it is not clear for us why the format would need to be changed. Perhaps some results are difficult to reach because the format is not perfect. So we are ready to discuss the proposals of format change if we will see what kind of result it will lead us to. But so far we do not see what Geneva Talks participants mean by changing the format and what result they are trying to reach by this.

In fact, the Geneva talks are a format for providing conditions for resolution of the Georgian-Russian conflict. Change of the format is mainly in the interest of Abkhaz and Ossetian participants. As to Georgian-Russian relations, we think that the current format can lead to results if the sides will be constructive.

... is peaceful”

...ster for Reintegration of Georgia

Q: Do you foresee any possibility of yourself perhaps visiting Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

Of course it is not excluded if there is a necessity for it but there are no conditions or foundation for it to be done right now. The main thing is not just to go there but the reason for going there. Actually I never faced any problem to go anywhere but it is all about the question - where will this or that activity lead us and what will the outcome be.

Q: What is your assessment of the role of the European Union, as a partner in the Geneva talks and more generally in conflict resolution?

Nowadays the European Union is the only international organisation that institutionally works on the issue of conflicts. Until 2008, the UN and OSCE were present in the conflict zones but they had to stop their activities due to the attempts of the Russian Federation. EU is the only organization that Russia didn't manage to prevent from activities as Russia is not its member and thus could not prevent their engagement from within. The EU as a mediator managed to convince Russia to sign the six-point plan. With the report of Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, in September 2009 the EU took an unprecedented step – it assessed the reasons for the conflict and investigated its facts. And finally, the EU represents the structure that works alongside the conflict territories as the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM).

Q: How do you assess the possibilities of the EUMM Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) restarting at the Abkhaz Administrative Boundary Line (ABL)? [The Abkhaz side has not participated in the IPRM since spring 2012 after accusing the Head of Mission of showing disrespect toward Abkhazia.]

I doubt there is a chance for a restoration of the work of the Gali Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism in the nearest future. With the new Georgian policy this problem does not hold a threat anymore, however. The Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism was created as a local crisis prevention mechanism. The new Georgian Government with its policies tries not to create any tensions along the ABL. Naturally it would be better if the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism were working. Having said that, by this we also prove to the Abkhaz side that we are doing everything to minimise tension and by this reduce the risks created by the non-existence of Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism.



Members of the European Union Monitoring Mission have been conducting patrols near the Georgian conflict zones since 2008.

Q: Now we would like to ask you about some concrete proposals on conflict resolution which were floated during the last months. Regarding the restoration of the railway lines through Abkhazia, how do you see the potential for conflict resolution of this idea?

The restoration of the railway is just an idea; there are no negotiations ongoing so far. Our interest was actually to find out in how far the Russian Federation would be ready to discuss this idea, and now we see that there is no interest from the side of Russia. I have personally been involved in the processes of conflict resolution for a long time, and very often other parties have blamed Georgia for not taking steps they were themselves not ready to implement. I doubt that Russia would be ready to discuss the railway line because then they would have to revise their policy of recognition [of the independence of Abkhazia]. Our motivation was to propose this idea in order to move the current situation from deadlock but Russia lacks interest. There have been two meetings so far between [Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory] Karasin and [the Special Representative of the Georgian Prime Minister for bilateral relations with Russia Zurab] Abashidze and this topic has never been brought up.

Q: Regarding South Ossetia, a proposal was floated in January for the restoration of Ergneti market [a market where Georgians, South Ossetians and Russians traded jointly before it was closed by the then-Georgian Government in 2004]. Could you give

us an idea about the status of this proposal and the Ossetian reaction to it?

What makes Ergneti market different from the proposal of restoring the railway through Abkhazia is that the reopening of the market is a discussion going on at the local level but the Georgian Government has not even suggested this as an idea yet. Some Members of Parliament and representatives of Gori municipality have raised this topics but this is not an initiative of the Government. We think that the Ergneti market was an interesting phenomenon of trading between Georgia and Russia when the road connection between Russia and Georgia was actually open, and when Russia was using this as a way to circulate goods through Russia and the Caucasus. Until this road connection is re-established there is really no point of talking about Ergneti market because the local trade between Gori and Tskhinvali is not on a level to allow a serious discussion of this topic. It is early to discuss this; some other conditions need to be satisfied before we can start talking about Ergneti market.

Q: Are there any other concrete proposals toward Abkhazia regarding the restoration of contact and confidence building?

There are certain proposals but they are currently work in progress. That is why I am not willing to speak about them, taking into account the Abkhaz side's wish not to publicly discuss these proposals until we can show some results.

Q: Given your own background in working in civil society on conflict resolution, what is your view at the present moment of the involvement of Georgian civil society? Do you see specific strengths and weaknesses and would you have any recommendations to Georgian civil society organisations?

"We are ready to cooperate with the civil sector, and what makes us different from the previous government is that we are not trying to control or manage civic initiatives."



Images from the August 2008 Georgia-Russia War



Russian rocket lands on a car in the Georgian Black Sea city of Poti during the short Georgian-Russian War in 2008.

Well, I was not the only one working on this topic in Georgian civil society. There are other organisations and individuals who have a lot of experience in working in this area. When I was active in the civil sector, I saw the errors in the policies of the governments of [Eduard] Shevardnadze and [Mikheil] Saakashvili and I tried to talk to the other sides in the conflict in order to develop joint suggestions. We are ready to cooperate with the civil sector, and what makes us different from the previous government is that we are not trying to control or manage civic initiatives. We are not preventing anyone from or persecuting them for working on this topic, like I myself had been pressured. The previous governments were not involving me in any projects, I was acting independently. Now we are trying to involve the other sides to the conflict, so anyone who can find a common language with the Abkhaz and Ossetian parties is welcomed by us. And we are ready to engage and participate in these processes if there is interest in this. We will accept their proposals, just as we ourselves used to propose ideas to the previous government.

Q: As to what concerns the ongoing efforts to improve bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia, how do you evaluate the potential of improved Georgia-Russia ties as having a positive impact on conflict resolution with Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

The normalisation of relations between Georgia and Russia is absolutely necessary and will happen in one way or the other. Unfortunately, we will not reach good-neighbourly relations for quite some time to come. And as long as Russia recognises the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, diplomatic relations [between Georgia and the Russian Federation] will not be restored. As long this does not happen, we will not be able to say that relations are normalised. But besides that there are a lot of other issues on which we can cooperate, such as on the questions of the North Caucasus, trade, transport, religious and cultural relations – all the other things that do not include diplomatic relations. 🌈

“Georgian Dream is cautious of sudden movements and conscious of its precarious position”

People in South Ossetia express views on recent political changes in Georgia

Irina Yanovskaya, head of the local NGO “Journalists for Human Rights” talks to personalities and activists in South Ossetia on their perception of the new Georgian Government.

Georgia is going through a period of great changes. How do experts rate the current state of Georgian-Ossetian affairs in terms of human rights, personal safety, and economic issues?

Political expert and representative of the South Ossetian socialist party Fydybasta [“Fatherland”] Vyacheslav Gobozov prefers the term “Georgian-South Ossetian relations” to “Georgian-Ossetian relations,” and believes relations are currently close to non-existent.

“At the moment everything is limited to episodes of contact between Georgian and South Ossetian NGOs, the main actors and sponsors of which are various political and social elements from western countries. These meetings and discussions have not the slightest noticeable effect on the situation, at least in South Ossetia – or on Georgian-South Ossetian relations,” Gobozov says.

He doubts that the situation will evolve in the near future, even with the changes taking place in Georgia: “First of all, it’s not at all clear how the political stand-off between Mikhail Saakashvili’s United National Movement and Bidzini Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream coalition will end. Secondly, the difference between the two movements’ approaches to Georgian-South Ossetian relations is of a purely tactical nature.”

Gobozov claims that in terms of principles, the two parties’ positions are nearly identical. Furthermore, he believes that since taking power, the Georgian Dream’s tactical position has drifted towards that of the United National Movement. Ivanishvili’s team has either renounced or made serious adjustments to many of its proposals for ‘cardinal’ changes put forth during the election campaign. And in spite of its declarations, Georgia’s new leadership has not taken a single concrete step towards what it calls “the restoration of trust between our peoples.”

“This may be due to the fact that Georgian Dream is still conscious of the precarious nature of its position, and is cautious of making any sudden movements that might give the Saakashvili team a chance for a comeback. Also significant is the fact that the coalition is made up of political entities of vastly different stripes, whose views on the situation are often diametrically opposed.



In any case, these factors, and a host of others, inspire deep pessimism about the possibility of any serious changes in Georgian-South Ossetian relations, not only concerning political relations, but also humanitarian and economic issues,” Gobozov insists.

Maria Pliyeva, a blogger, journalist, and leader of the independent Citizens’ Initiative movement believes that any changes in Georgia will have no effect on South Ossetia, as long as Georgia’s newly sworn-in leader does not decide to start up any new military actions. “I hope Ivanishvili will refrain from this, despite the fact that he wants to keep his campaign promises as much as anyone else. And we all know that over the past 20 years, Georgian presidents have come to power through promising, first and foremost, to return what is allegedly their territory.”

As far as Georgian-Ossetian cooperation in the area of human rights is concerned, Pliyeva says it does not exist – and never did. “In most conflict-affected countries, international organizations work on these issues, but since Georgia’s passage of the law on occupied territories, no international organizations or human rights workers can enter South Ossetia – at least none who might travel to Georgia and end up being the subject of a Georgian criminal investigation. The only ones who occasionally visit are two Russian human rights workers – representatives of the human rights organization Russian Justice Initiative, who work with incarcerated Georgian citizens located in South Ossetia, and South Ossetian citizens held in Georgian prisons. There is no other outside contact in the field of human rights. As far as I know, even human rights workers in Georgia and Ossetia lack any contact. There’s no sort of cooperation between them,” Pliyeva explains.

Pliyeva believes this is due to the absence of any form of trust between the two parties– even on a professional level – and to the fact that international organizations, which were designated to work on these issues, are not particularly involved.



Young Ossetian men celebrating after the end of the short Georgia-Russia War in August 2008.

In Pliyeva's view, if the Ergneti market starts functioning again, it can be expected to have a positive effect on South Ossetia's economy. "Of course, there is one catch here – Georgia considers the goods that arrive from Russia through the Roki tunnel to be contraband, given the fact that there are no Georgian customs officials at the Ossetian-Russian border. But if Georgia recognizes South Ossetia, then these goods will no longer be 'contraband.' The market will then have a positive influence on Georgia's economy as well, as Ergneti was also an important factor in their economy."

Ex-combatant and editor of the independent newspaper 21st Century Timur Tskhovrebov believes the changes taking place in Georgia are a matter for Georgian citizens.

"The way I see it, there have been some 'cosmetic' adjustments to Georgian laws. I don't really see any policy changes, although the attempts to move economic relations forward are a positive sign."

In Timur Tskhovrebov's eyes, human rights and security in South Ossetia are almost entirely unaffected by Georgian-Ossetian relations. Given the presence of Russian military bases, the chances of a new war are minuscule and the only real threat comes from criminal elements, which the Republic of South Ossetia is capable of handling on its own. As for those members of the population who were forced to leave South Ossetian territory on 8 August 2008, most of whom are ethnic Georgians, responsibility for any violations of their rights lies with the Georgian government.

"They don't recognize the legal standing of the Republic of South Ossetia. How can our leadership be responsible for the rights of citizens of a state that doesn't recognize it? Georgians living in South Ossetia are in no way oppressed, and live in the same conditions as Ossetians – just like any other non-Ossetian residents of South Ossetia," Tskhovrebov insists.

Georgians and Ossetians are both Orthodox Christians. On the one hand, one might think that the religious connection could be a platform for peacebuilding processes. On the other hand, how do experts see the role of Ilia II, the spiritual leader of Georgia who has headed the Georgian Patriarchy from the time of the first Georgian-Ossetian war – and his recent visit to Moscow?

Asked to comment on this topic, Vyacheslav Gobozov points out that unlike Georgia, South Ossetia is a deeply secular state. In South Ossetia, religious structures serve a specific purpose, and have little

influence on the political process. This rules out the possibility of using the religious connection to resolve disputes between Georgia and South Ossetia. Nevertheless, Gobozov explains, the religious element could have a certain place in peace-building processes – "That is, if the Georgian church, under the leadership of Ilia II, had not initially taken on the role of spiritual shepherd to Georgia's more nationalist elements, and served as the inspiration for armed advances on South Ossetia. As it is, the Georgian church's attempts to help normalize relations between Georgia and South Ossetia or Abkhazia have led, and will continue to lead, only to the opposite results."

In Gobozov's view, South Ossetia will not participate in a single process initiated by or involving official representatives of the Georgian church. "The most that the Georgian church can hope for is to carry out a 'dialogue' with some marginal players on the South Ossetian scene for propaganda purposes. However, after the reaction provoked by these marginal players' recent meeting with Ilia II, I think the Georgian church will start to have trouble finding anyone marginal enough."

In light of this, Gobozov says Ilya II's visit to Moscow and his meeting with the Russian president can be viewed as a less-than-meaningful gesture towards normalizing Russian-Georgian relations. It will have no bearing on any hypothetical process of managing relations between Georgia and South Ossetia. If Georgia's leaders really want to make any actual strides, they are going to need to look for some less odious figures.

Blogger-journalist Maria Pliyeva insists that the war of the early 1990s and the expulsion and flight of Ossetians from the inner districts of what was then the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, suggests that the Orthodox church has not played any positive role. Worse, Ilia II gave the war his blessing, a fact to which archived Georgian newspaper articles from that time can attest, Pliyeva claims.

"There have been cosmetic adjustments to Georgian Laws. I don't really see any policy changes, although the attempts to move economic relations forward are a positive sign." - Timur Tskhovrebov.

"After all this, it makes no sense to speak of some sort of spiritual connection. Much has already been said in South Ossetia and



Children in South Ossetia shortly after the August 2008 War.

Abkhazia about Ilia II – I'm not going to add anything or take anything away. He can visit Russia, Serbia, Greece, and even Iran, but the concept of a 'faith-based connection' with the Georgian people does not exist for us," she states.

When asked about this issue, Timur Tskhovrebov states that the church today is politicized, and more concerned with worldly goods than spiritual ones. This goes not only for Ilia II, but for Patriarch Kirill, and, to some extent, the entire Orthodox community.

"You would think they would celebrate the rebirth of the Alanian eparchy, which emerged in the ninth century, but we don't see that happening. Not only that – Ilia II's inhumane statements will not facilitate peace-building; they will only cause tempers to rise. The trip to Moscow was an attempt to put out a fire using the hands of Patriarch Kirill. It won't have any positive effect on Georgian-Ossetian relations. The South Ossetian religious community will start to look more negatively on the officiousness of the Orthodox church – that may be the only thing accomplished by the visit. With his meeting with members of the Ossetian diaspora in Moscow, he threw another apple of discord into Ossetian society. Perhaps this was one of his goals – if so, then, again he succeeded."

There is much talk today of exposing human rights violations in Georgian jails, and uncovering the existence of political prisoners in the country. Will this change the way international organizations go about building trust between Georgia and South Ossetia?

"I don't think they will change," Vyacheslav Gobozov says. "Furthermore, I'm sure many international organizations – like the PACE [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe]– were fairly well informed about what goes on in Georgian prisons, and about the existence of political prisoners." Gobozov believes it was simply convenient for these organizations to present Georgia as a sort of "bastion of democracy," a "keen student" that was successfully adopting the values of the "free world." The fact that the "certificate of readiness" issued to their Georgian student turned out to be counterfeit will not change how the majority of international organizations approach Georgian-South Ossetian issues in any fundamental way, as their position is governed by geopolitical factors – and a fair amount of anti-Russian sentiment – rather than by the actual state of Georgia's political system. Given this, the effectiveness with which these organizations deal with the Georgian-South Ossetian question is unlikely to change – that is, likely to remain zero.

"I don't think international organizations can change their approach to Georgian-South Ossetian issues simply on the basis of what's going on in Georgian prisons," Marina Pliyeva says.

She stresses that South Ossetia's leaders and citizens should work to change attitudes within international organizations, and that only then can they change the approach of these organizations. Only the rule of law and the establishment of an independent democratic state of South Ossetia can improve their standing on the international stage.

"I am sure many international organisations like PACE were fairly well informed about what goes on in Georgian prisons and about the existence of political prisoners." - Vyacheslav Gobozov.

"If this can happen, I think the day when Georgia recognizes our statehood will not be far off. Just recently Georgia voted in favor of granting Palestine observer status at the UN. This was a surprising and unforeseen move by the Georgian leadership. So we have lots of chances to make our case, we just have to make use of legal channels," she explains.

Timur Tskhovrebov's opinion on the subject is categorical: he is convinced recent revelations about Georgian prison conditions will have no effect on how international organizations approach South Ossetia. "We need to give life to European values here in the Republic of South Ossetia – then international organizations will be forced to change their approach to facilitating friendship between Georgia and the RSO. Right now, these organizations come across as transmitters of Georgian policy to South Ossetia," Tskhovrebov says. "Supporting democratic beginnings in the Republic of South Ossetia, independent of pressure from Georgia, would raise the authority and influence of these organizations in South Ossetian society significantly." 🌈

Irina Yanovskaya contributed this article to commonspaceextra.

A shifting ball



Marion Kipiani looks at the first six months of the Georgian Dream's government and its impact on regional issues.

When the "Georgian Dream" coalition of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili won the parliamentary elections of 1 October by a wide margin, one foreign-policy topic dominated the debate among observers both within the South Caucasus region and outside it: the potential changes in the Russo-Georgian relationship. Mr Ivanishvili had consistently advocated an improved bilateral relationship with Georgia's northern neighbour during the electoral campaign. Soon after taking over as Georgia's Prime Minister, he appointed a former Georgian ambassador to Moscow, Zurab Abashidze, as his special representative for relations with the Russian Federation. Mr Abashidze, whose brief includes strengthening bilateral ties particularly in the fields of trade and cultural relations, met Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin in December 2012 and in March 2013. These were the first bilateral meeting of officials from the two countries since the August 2008 war. Negotiations on the re-introduction of Georgian wines and mineral waters on the Russian market, from which they had been banned on health reasons in 2006, also started thereafter.

International attention was thus focused on the rapprochement between Georgia and Russia and its likely repercussions on Georgia's foreign policy vis-à-vis key strategic partners such as the European Union and the United States. Shifts in regional cooperation and policy towards the neighbours in the South Caucasus were a topic of less debate. Nevertheless, the recalibrated foreign policy of the new Georgian government, which tries to square improved Georgia-Russia ties with a continued progress in Euro-Atlantic integration and an accelerated confidence-building process with Abkhazia and South Ossetia might have significant impact on relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan as well.

The electoral programme of the "Georgian Dream" coalition had stipulated a strengthening of regional cooperation, with Georgia turning into a "platform" for political, economic, social, and business opportunities in the South Caucasus. This goal, however, may be difficult to accomplish given the mutually antagonistic stance of Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as Georgia's still fraught relations with Russia, its unsettled territorial conflicts, and the dense domestic stand-off between the "Georgia Dream" majority in parliament and the formerly dominating "United National Movement" of President Mikheil Saakashvili.



Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili on his first official visit to Baku last year, with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev.

The question of transportation links demonstrated this early on. Georgia proposed a restoration of the railway between Georgia and Russia via Abkhazia, which has been suspended ever since the violent conflict in the region of the early 1990s. This would be the only railroad connection between the Russian Federation and the South Caucasus apart from the Azerbaijan-Russia link leading through the restive North Caucasus republics. The Georgian government flagged this initiative as a confidence-building measure towards Abkhazia and a friendly gesture vis-à-vis Russia. However, while the reactions from both Moscow and Sukhum(i) were pointedly muted, the idea led to vivid, albeit diametrically opposed, reactions in Yerevan and Baku.

Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan expressed interest and promised a "proactive position" of the Armenian government toward the restoration of the railway. However, Azerbaijani MP Musa Gasimli said such a move would make the transfer of Russian military hardware to Armenia possible via the Georgian

"The electoral program of the Georgian Dream coalition had stipulated strengthening of economic, social and business relations in the South Caucasus."

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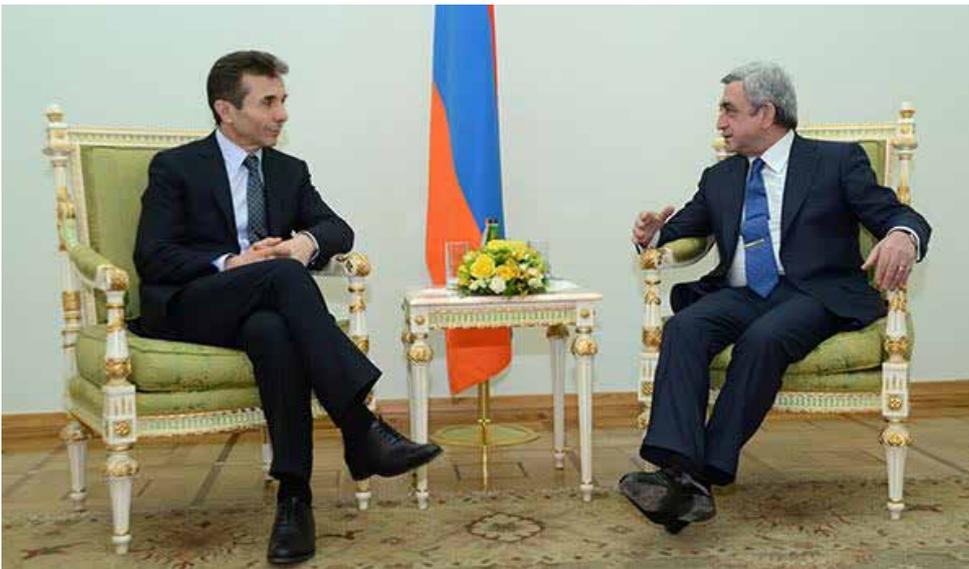
"A prudent awareness is emerging in Yerevan that Georgia is no longer leaving the region any time soon, in contrast to the earlier perception of seemingly moving to Europe NATO much faster and much further than the remainder of the region." - Richard Giragosian.

rail link and could potentially fan the flames of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Mr Gasimli warned of negative consequences for Georgian-Azerbaijani relations, expressing a less-than-veiled threat of Azerbaijan cancelling its economic cooperation and investment projects in Georgia or even recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Political analyst Elkhon Shahinoglu, head of the Baku-based think-tank Atlas Research Centre, comments that relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan have noticeably cooled under the new Georgian government: "PM Ivanishvili's remarks that Tbilisi may reconsider the agreements on energy cooperation with Baku and that the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project [connecting the Azerbaijan and Turkey] may not be economically beneficial for Georgia have been critically judged in Azerbaijan."

The analyst further points out that for authorities in Baku, Tbilisi's continued pro-Western orientation remains of great significance. Otherwise, Russia may strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus. "Russia already supports Armenia, which occupies Azerbaijani territory. If Georgia were to switch sides to the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan would be left to stand alone," Mr Shahinoglu told us. Therefore, he says, the Azerbaijani authorities try to explain to their Georgian counterparts that a situation in which Azerbaijan would withdraw investment and financial resources from the Georgian economy would be difficult for Tbilisi. If they were to avoid such an outcome, in his opinion, it would be necessary for Georgia to take into account the strategic interests of Azerbaijan. This means, inter alia, that Georgia ought to support Azerbaijan with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict just as Azerbaijan supports Georgia concerning the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The Director of the Regional Studies Centre in Yerevan, Richard Giragosian, on the other hand told us that the Armenian government regards the course of the new Georgian authorities as largely positive, including Tbilisi's move towards a "multi-vector" foreign policy. Mr Giragosian told us that a prudent awareness is emerging in Yerevan that "Georgia is no longer 'leaving the region' any time soon, in contrast to the earlier period of Georgia's self-perception of seemingly moving to Europe and NATO, much faster and further than the remainder of the region." Therefore, the analyst pointed out, the Armenian authorities were eager to use this window of opportunity to deepen bilateral relations between the two countries.



President Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia and Prime Minister Ivanishvili at their recent meeting in Baku.

In addition, Mr Giragosian remarked that proposals such as the restoration of the rail link through Abkhazia demonstrated a new sense of flexibility in Tbilisi and a readiness to bring a "win-win approach" to bear on Georgia-Russia relations. These relations are crucial also for Armenian, given the impact of the 2008 Georgian-Russian war on the country. Therefore, the analyst noted,

even though initial reactions from Moscow and particularly Baku on the railway connection were negative, such initiatives and a transformed attitude to issues of regional cooperation could in the long term lead toward overcoming the "zero-sum" approach in the South Caucasus and toward greater stability and security in the region.

It can thus be expected that Georgia's neighbours will watch the further foreign-policy course of the Ivanishvili government with heightened interest. In a year that features three national-level elections – one in each country of the South Caucasus – expect the regional balance to remain in flux. ●●●

About EPNK.

The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) is an independent European civil society initiative that works with local partners in the South Caucasus on a wide range of peace building activities that aim at to positively impacting the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process. EPNK is funded by the European Union.

The members of the partnership are: Conciliation Resources (UK), Crisis Management Initiative (Finland), International Alert (lead agency - UK), the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Sweden) and the London Information Network on Conflicts and State Building (UK).

The partnership builds on previous work that its five member organisations carried out in this field, individually or in groups, such as the Consortium Initiative (2003-2009) and the first phase of EPNK (2010-2011).

EPNK strives to increase the credibility and popular legitimacy of peace building efforts around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Our work is arranged around the following main themes:

EPNK's work is arranged around the following main themes:

- Broadening the base of participation in peacebuilding initiatives, with special attention given to marginalised groups.
- Building confidence between all sides of the conflict through increased people-to-people contact.
- Promoting fresh analysis and new ideas that challenge existing discourses on the conflict with peace-oriented visions of the future.
- Actively engaging civil society in dialogue with policy makers at national and international levels on the transformation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Despite a challenging working environment, the partnership is able to maintain a dynamic dialogue between a broad range of Armenian and Azerbaijani policymakers, media and civil society – including those in and from Nagorno-Karabakh.

This has been done through a wide variety of activities, for example, through publication of news journals, reports, policy papers, studies and bulletins on conflict related issues, launching a news website focusing on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and conflict settlement process, production of documentary films, public film screenings and moderated discussions, conducting peace building trainings and workshops, publishing, conducting comparative conflict studies and visits, training of journalists, photography and arts exhibitions and events, public policy discussions, advocacy and dialogue with governmental and other stakeholders. 

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Women are absent from peace processes in the Caucasus. Malin Ekerstedt and Julia Lapitskii discuss the report of Kvinna till Kvinna "Equal Power, Lasting Peace".



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The documentary film *Memories without Borders*, an initiative of Conciliation Resources working with local partners raised debate during screenings held in Paris, Brussels and London in March.



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Georgia's new Minister for Reintegration speaks to Marion Kipiani in an exclusive wide-ranging interview in which he outlines continuity of policy and change of tactics.



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The opinion of people in South Ossetia is hardly ever heard outside their territory. Local civil society activist Irina Yankovskaya has been collecting their views on the new government in Tbilisi.



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Marion Kipiani of the Tbilisi based ICCN has been following the progress of the new Georgian Government of Bidzhina Ivanishvili and collecting reactions to the new policies from the rest of the region.



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