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Civil Society and Conflict Transformation in De Facto States

The Case of Abkhazia

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De facto states are considered to be highly specific entities, thus meriting a detailed analysis of how conflict transformation functions within such states and what role is played in them by civil society organizations (CSOs), which are traditionally considered one of the key actors in conflict transformation. The authors discuss the factors that limit the activities of these CSOs as a result of the restricted sovereignty of de facto states. The study is based on three field research projects focusing on CSOs in Abkhazia, carried out in 2009, 2014, and 2015.

INTRODUCTION

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in the early 1990s, the international community recognized the independence of fifteen former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs). At around the same time, several other autonomous republics or regions located within the individual SSRs attempted to gain their independence, and some of these separatist movements achieved de facto independence. However, they were not recognized as independent states by the international community. Today there are four de facto states within the territory of the former USSR: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. The emergence of these de facto states was preceded by armed conflicts of varying degrees of severity. The fact that their independence was not recognized either by the states from which they seceded or by the international community is a clear indication that these conflicts have not yet been resolved; instead, they persist in a more or less "frozen" state (Hoch, Souleimanov, and Baranec 2014).

All attempts at a peaceful solution of these conflicts have so far failed—both those proceeding via official diplomatic channels (track one diplomacy) and those involving non-state actors (track two diplomacy). Despite growing interest in the role of non-state actors in conflict transformation within de facto states (e.g.,Tocci 2008; Mikhelidze and Pirozzi 2008; Popescu 2010; Simão 2010; Garb 2012; Ayunts 2012), there are still some aspects of this issue that remain relatively under-researched. The first of these aspects is the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in track two diplomacy and conflict transformation within de facto states. Second, the above-mentioned literature addresses the concept of de facto states only implicitly; it does not primarily focus on the problems resulting from the restricted external sovereignty of de facto states, which may affect the quality of the track two diplomacy.

In view of this situation, the present article examines track two diplomacy using the example of Abkhazia; it focuses specifically on how track two diplomacy is perceived and evaluated by representatives of Abkhazian civil society. The authors explore how the restricted external sovereignty of de facto states influences or limits the ability of CSOs to function as positive actors in the peace process—a process that, in accordance with the large majority of contemporary studies, we view not as conflict resolution or conflict management, but as conflict transformation.

The first part of the article focuses on the theory of conflict transformation, the concept of peacebuilding, and the role of CSOs in this process. It then introduces and defines the phenomenon of de facto statehood and discusses the specific problems this type of statehood poses for CSOs

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engaged in track two diplomacy. The authors then move on to outline the formation of Abkhazian civil society and discuss its involvement in conflict transformation. The discussion of the role of CSOs in conflict transformation within de facto states is divided into two parts. The first focuses on selected aspects of conflict transformation and points out the limits imposed on the positive activities of CSOs by the internal situation within Abkhazia. The second part moves on to focus on the roles played by Russia as a patron state, the West, and Georgia in the conflict transformation. Throughout the article, the primary emphasis is on how these issues are perceived by the Abkhazian CSOs themselves.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term *conflict transformation* appears in the literature with a broad range of meanings; it is frequently used interchangeably with *conflict management* or *conflict resolution*. In this study the use of the term is drawn from the work of Hugh Miall (2004), who distinguishes conflict transformation from conflict management and conflict resolution. Although he acknowledges that all three concepts share many common features, he sees the main differences as lying in the general approach taken by the actors toward the possibility of managing and directing the conflict from a state of ongoing violence to a sustainable peace, as well as the types of activities undertaken by external actors. Miall (2004) claims that the reality of contemporary conflicts only rarely enables the parties to reformulate their positions and find solutions from which they can all profit (win–win solutions). In his view it is first necessary to change the attitudes of the part of society that supports continuation of the violent conflict and whose values and interests are incompatible with sustainable peace. This means that conflicts are transformed gradually, via numerous changes both large and small; a key role in such changes is played by representatives of civil society with an interest in peaceful conflict transformation (Lederach 1995).

Civil society is a term with a relatively wide range of meanings. In the past, various political thinkers have attributed various forms and functions to it (see, e.g., Ehrenberg 1999; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001), and today there still exist various conceptions of civil society. In this text the term is used to denote a system of autonomous entities, independent of the state, which enable competition among various ideas and interests—in other words the "liberal" concept of civil society, drawing on the approach of Ralf Dahrendorf (1995) and conceptualized by Sven Reichardt (2004). However, in line with Jürgen Habermas (1991), we also consider civil society to comprise the sphere of free communication; by this we seek to emphasize that civil society need not always take an institutionalized form, as in the case of traditional non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but that it may also involve various discussion platforms, think-tanks, epistemic (academic) communities, church organizations, freely operating media, or independent journalists. All these actors can be subsumed under the broad-based term *civil society organizations* (CSOs).

Conflict transformation theory states that CSOs have access to the parties that are directly involved in the conflict, and thus potentially have the ability to bring these parties to dialogue (Burton and Azar 1986). They may also encourage the local population to become involved in the process of long-term reconciliation. Civil society may thus represent an important force in the process of changing the social climate within societies affected by conflict, especially in situations where the political representatives of the parties involved in the conflict are unwilling or unable to back down from their positions (Mikhelidze and Pirozzi 2008).

The importance of CSOs in creating open and democratic communication channels is illustrated by Lederach's peacebuilding pyramid (Figure 1). Peacebuilding requires an influential civil society in the vertical dimension, as well
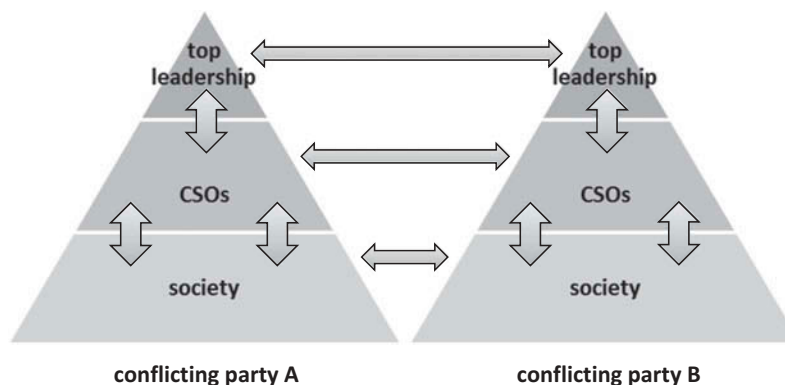

FIGURE 1   Lederach's model of the peacebuilding pyramid. (Illustration by the authors based on Lederach 1997.)

as interconnected CSOs that are active across the ceasefire line. In this approach, peacebuilding is viewed as a long-term process that includes direct or mediated interactions between the conflicting parties, in order to prepare their positions for negotiating agreements on key issues at the political level (Darby and Mac Ginty 2000, 8).

However, this concept of peacebuilding runs into problems if one of the conflicting parties is a de facto state that has seceded from the other conflicting party. Because the "mother state" does not recognize the de facto state, dialogue between political representatives of the two parties tends to run into considerable complications, as the mother state does not acknowledge the government of the de facto state as a legitimate political representation. This is the case both in Nagorno-Karabakh (where the Azerbaijani party refuses to negotiate directly with the Karabakh Armenians, instead considering the Republic of Armenia to be its partner in peace talks) and in Abkhazia (where, in addition to the government of the internationally unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia, there also exists the Government of Abkhazia in exile, now based in neighboring Georgia but from 2006 until 2008 in the Georgian-controlled upper Kodori valley). With the channels of track one diplomacy blocked, the situation is particularly suited to track two diplomacy, although certain complications can still be expected due to the de facto nature of one of the conflicting parties.

Various authors give different definitions of de facto states. According to Scott Pegg (2008, 1), however, "disagreements come only around the edges of the defini-tion, while not disputing the basic elements of it." The definition used in this article is taken from Pål Kolstø (2006, 725–26), and its purpose is to distinguish between de facto states and other specific political entities that emerged in different ways and whose day-to-day function-ing is also different. A de facto state is thus understood here as a political entity that has unilaterally seceded from an internationally recognized state, that exercises permanent control (and has done so for at least two years) over the majority of the territory to which it lays claim, that performs tasks of state administration over the population of that territory, and that strives to achieve international recognition yet receives such recognition either not at all or only to a very limited extent.[1]

Some de facto states have managed to survive over many years,[2] not only due to heavy investment in their own security, but also thanks to strong support for the national independence project among the local population and from a strong patron state (Kolstø 2006, 723). Eiki Berg and Martin Mölder (2012) persuasively demonstrate that the populations of the two de facto states they analyzed (Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia) support not only independence, but also a democratic polity. The trend toward democratization in de facto states has been bolstered by the local elites' opinion that a democratic form of government would contribute to international recognition of their states by Western countries (the so-called

democratization-for-recognition strategy) (Broers 2005; Caspersen 2008). The essentially democratic character of some de facto states has enabled the development of CSOs that function independently of the government; however, fears regarding the survival of the political entity itself (in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh) or the ethnic nation (in the case of Abkhazia) (Berg and Mölder 2012, 535–39) have placed CSOs involved in track two diplomacy in a problematic position, as they are participating in dialogue with an enemy that threatens the very existence of the entity in question (Garb 2012, 94).

Internal support for national independence may have both positive and negative impacts on the ability of CSOs to engage in conflict transformation, and the same applies to the role of the patron state. The patron state has its own interests in the conflict, and because the de facto state is both economically and militarily dependent on the patron state, CSOs may come under pressure from the patron state if their activities in track two diplomacy come into conflict with the patron state's interests. However, the patron state may also be a key player enabling local CSOs to engage in conflict transformation by facilitating direct contact between the CSOs and foreign partners involved in conflict transformation.

The important role played by foreign partners in conflict transformation between a de facto state and the mother state is due to the fact that CSOs existing in de facto states have limited opportunities for obtaining funds to support their activities. Not only may their conflict transformation activi-ties be viewed as undesirable both by the political elite and by a large part of the general population, but de facto states themselves lack adequate financial resources (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 493–98). For CSOs in post-Soviet de facto states, the key partners contributing funds to support their peacebuilding activities are primarily European NGOs as well as individual European states and the European Union (EU) itself (cf. Simão 2010, 28). This raises three main problems. The first is the attitude toward CSOs within the de facto states, which is limited by existing preferences and strategies in the foreign policy of third countries and the mother state (Simão 2010, 18)—in our case Georgia, which has traditionally blocked European partners' attempts to fund projects in Abkhazia. The second problem has been identified by Nathalie Tocci (2008, 28–30), who notes that the influence of foreign (especially European) donors may in fact have a destructive effect on local CSOs if they become distanced from the needs of the local society, thus delegitimizing the track two diplomacy in its entirety. The third potential problem is connected with a "realistic" critical approach to the entire concept of peacebuilding and track two diplo-macy; in de facto states—which, after all, are not standard democracies—we cannot expect the existence of vertically developed communication channels between civil society and the political elites that would enable CSOs to influence political decision-making (Simão 2010, 31).

METHODOLOGY

Because the aim of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the role played by CSOs in conflict transformation within de facto states, the text makes the maximum possible use of the authentic voices of key actors in Abkhazia who contribute to the formation of public opinion there. For this reason the research was carried out via interviews with important local non-state actors, including representatives of non-profit organizations, the news media, universities, the Church, and other key institutions that influence public opinion within (and to a certain extent also outside) this de facto state, including some of the official state representatives. (See Appendix.)

Field research in Abkhazia was carried out in three stages: in October 2009, in June/July 2014, and in August/September 2015. In all three cases, respondents were recruited using the snowball sampling method (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Noy 2008). First, gatekeepers were identified and contacted (in the first instance, an independent Abkhazian journalist and a representative of a major Abkhazian CSO; in the second, a leading Abkhazian journalist and a high-ranking Abkhazian politician); and in 2015, a representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization. These gatekeepers enabled us to gain access to Abkhazian civil society; we were then able to recruit other respondents who were actively involved in civil society (or had been in the past). We carried out a total of 17 expert interviews.[3] In each case the interview began with the respondent talking about the issue in an unstructured way, and then continued as a structured interview. In 2009 all the interviews were conducted in English; in 2014 there were five interviews in English and three in Russian, and in 2015 all five interviews were in English. The length of the interviews ranged from 75 to 120 minutes. In view of the sensitivity of the topic and the low number of key actors, it was agreed with the respondents that they would remain anonymous, and only their affiliation would be given here.

THE EMERGENCE OF ABKHAZIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL DIALOGUE

The conflict between Abkhazians and Georgians reached its armed phase at the beginning of the 1990s. The Abkhazian population's desire for self-determination encountered resistance from the Georgians, whose nation-building project was incompatible with this desire as it was predicated on the indivisibility of Georgian territory. The conflict claimed around 8,000 lives, with around 240,000 people forced to flee Abkhazia, and led to de facto separation of Abkhazia from Georgia (ICG Report No. 176, 1).[4] The basic infrastructure sustained severe damage, as did the mutual relations between the ethnic groups that made up the traditional population of Abkhazia. Today there are still tangible tensions between Abkhazians and Georgians in the ethnic, political, and economic spheres; although the guns are now silent, the conflict continues.[5]

Civil society in Abkhazia has undergone an interesting course of development that can be divided into three key phases: (1) the formation of civil society (1992–1995); (2) involvement in political dialogue (1996–2007); (3) prevailing focus on domestic issues (2008 onward).[6]

During the disintegration of the USSR, all of the union republics were the scene of movements seeking to promote national interests. In most republics these movements were primarily anti-Russian in their focus, but in Abkhazia, the Aidgylara People's Forum profiled itself as an anti-Georgian movement. Many of the important civil society activists in Abkhazia today began their public careers as members of Aidgylara. This has two key implications: first, these activists enjoyed a strong level of credibility following the war; and second, not only Abkhazia's political representation, but also its non-profit sector is strongly anti-Georgian in its sentiment (Interview no. 4 and Interview no. 10). Both during the war and in the postwar years, Abkhazian CSOs were involved mainly in humanitarian activities, focusing particularly on postwar psychosocial stabilization and assistance to victims' families, women, orphans, and invalids. Civil society in Abkhazia did not emerge as a result of external pressure from a community of donors, as was the case in many other post-Soviet republics; instead it came into being as a natural response to humanitarian needs during the war and in the postwar period. This was—and still remains—the source of the sector's strength and internal stability and the high degree of support for these CSOs within Abkhazian society (Interview no. 3).

One of the most important and longest-lasting initiatives focusing on dialogue among civil society actors was launched by the University of California Irvine (UCI) in 1997. The participants consisted mainly of representatives from Georgian and Abkhazian CSOs in addition to international civil society leaders. From the beginning of the initiative, the shared goal of all its participants was to prevent the recurrence of violence and to expand the circle of actors supporting exclusively peaceful solutions to the conflict. In the first few years of the UCI project, the participants were keen to avoid discussing political issues or proposals for political solutions to the conflict. As the parties developed trust in the process and their counterparts on the other side, the goal shifted to the promotion of a mutually beneficial, peaceful resolution of the conflict. Since that time the UCI process has regularly brought together civil society activists, and sometimes government officials, to discuss current political developments and to generate policy analysis and recommendations (Garb 2012, 91). The project included fifteen large-scale conferences and thirty meetings involving an average of ten delegates from the Abkhazian and Georgian sides of the conflict. From 1997 to 2004, the main organizer of these meetings was UCI's Paula Garb. From 2004 onward the activities took place in

conjunction with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Conciliation Resources, and International Alert.[7]

In 1998 representatives of the Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, working in conjunction with Conciliation Resources, began to organize the so-called Schlaining process, which brought together Abkhazian and Georgian decision-makers (and their advisors) around the same table to discuss key issues in the peace process. The difference between the UCI process and the Schlaining process is that the UCI process "primarily involved civil society leaders and sometimes decision-makers, whereas for Schlaining, the opposite was true" (Garb 2012, 93). The meetings focused on searching for possible ways and paths of conflict transformation. From 1998 to 2004 there were over twenty meetings of representatives from Georgian and Abkhazian civil society. Many of these meetings gave rise to joint written declarations on possible ways of dealing with various disputed issues in the conflict; the process also led to the development of a network of cooperating representatives of the non-profit sector who met regularly and built up mutual trust and understanding. One of the organizers of these meetings, Oliver Wolleh, maintains that the civil sector's role in conflict transformation debates was more important in Abkhazia during this period than in Georgia (Wolleh 2006, 54). Due to the high degree of aversion to Georgians found within Abkhazian society, participation in meetings with Georgian representatives was itself considered quite controversial. "Abkhazian NGOs had to justify their participation in the dialogues with Georgia by arguing that they were acquainting the Georgian public with Abkhazian opinions. In many respects, the NGOs thus acted as envoys, informing the world about the Abkhazian government's views on the conflict" (Interview no. 4).

The situation changed dramatically in 2005–2007, when the peace process ground to a halt on the official level. The Abkhazian representatives attribute this change to the growing pressure exerted by the Georgian regime for the restoration of the state's territorial integrity; Mikheil Saakashvili's government wanted quick results rather than meetings and talk (Interview no. 3 and Interview no. 8). This opinion is not only advanced by the Abkhazian side; it is also confirmed by a Georgian civil society representative, who explained, "Our government wanted everything at once: accession to NATO, good relations with Russia, and reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There was little patience for dialogue and long-term rebuilding of trust. The Georgian government wanted actions, not talks, to drive the conflict resolution process. But this only increased the mutual mistrust between Georgia and Abkhazia" (cited from Popescu 2010, 9).

Key representatives of Abkhazian public life consider the activities taking place as part of the unofficial peace process—the UCI and Schlaining processes—to be of great importance. Our respondents shared the view that, despite the low impact of these meetings on track one diplomacy (primarily represented by the Geneva process), the meetings of representatives from Abkhazian and Georgian CSOs did bring some positive effects. A direct participant in the UCI process from an Abkhazian non-profit organization sums up these positives as follows: "In many ways it helped us to better understand the opinions of the other side. It is a clear success that part of Georgian society is now aware of the Abkhazian stance—and some of these people are currently holding high-ranking government positions in Georgia today. The same applies to Abkhazia. The second main success is the internationalization of the conflict. Today there are many international experts who were present at our informal meetings and who thus have a good understanding of the issues disputed by both conflicting parties. There have also been publications, which are available for everybody to read. Another success in my opinion is that we have all agreed on the necessity to resolve the conflict through peaceful means and to try as hard as we can to prevent any possibility of a recurrence of violence. And that, in my view, is no small achievement" (Interview no. 12). Another representative of the non-profit sector adds: "The impact of these meetings was huge. They eased tensions and helped to explain many things. We heard at first hand views on current events in Georgian society. We discussed various scenarios for future developments. We found out that Georgian society is not a homogeneous entity, but that there are many different shades of opinion. It helped to undermine certain stereotypes" (Interview no. 11). An Abkhazian journalist who was interviewed considers the UCI process to be a forum for the free exchange of information. In her view the meetings were friendly and influenced all the participants. However, she considers the impact "on the ground," for the general population of Abkhazia and Georgia, to have been small (Interview no. 8).

THE ROLE OF ABKHAZIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Abkhazian CSOs currently involved in peacebuilding projects include the Center for Humanitarian Programs (CHP), the Association of Women of Abkhazia (AWA), and World Without Violence (WWV). Other established organizations previously involved in peacebuilding—such as the Inva-Sodeistvie Rehabilitation Center, the Fund of Civil Initiatives, and the Union of Businesswomen—have become much less active in recent years, and the Sukhum Media Club is no longer active at all. The widest spectrum of peacebuilding activities is at the CHP, which collaborates with International Alert, Conciliation Resources, and the Berghof Foundation. The latter organization is also involved in cooperation with WWV, while the Association of Women of Abkhazia is currently working with the Swedish organization Kvinna till Kvinna (Interview no. 13, Interview no. 14, and Interview no. 15).

As has been mentioned above, from around 2005 Abkhazian CSOs increasingly began to focus their activities on domestic political and social issues, and dialogue with

Georgia has gradually receded. This is despite the fact that, since 2005, when the late Sergei Bagapsh became president of Abkhazia with Alexander Ankvab as prime minister, the regime has undergone a gradual process of democratization;[8] Ankvab's government took a much more positive stance toward civil society and political pluralism than was the case of previous governments (Interview no. 4 and Interview no. 8).

The decline in domestic support for peacebuilding activities is reflected quite clearly in the fact that, since 2008, no domestic funding has been provided in Abkhazia to any projects involving cooperation between Abkhazian and Georgian non-profit organizations (Interview no. 1 and Interview no. 6). This situation has remained unchanged . The Abkhazian government's current priorities for domestic CSOs involve supporting the integration of physically or mentally handicapped people into society, developing youth activities, strengthening the independent judicial system, and supporting human rights (Interview no. 11 and Interview no. 8).

Another representative of civil society reaffirmed that the Abkhazian government has provided zero funding for peacebuilding projects. She added, however, that even moral support from Abkhazian representatives is very important for the non-profit sector: "You know, in Russia there is no confidence in NGOs' peacebuilding projects. Projects that are funded from the West are observed by the Russian side with great suspicion. For me personally, support from the Abkhazian government, ministries, and the president is very important. Not that they would somehow publicly support us, but just the fact that they do not create obstacles to our work is brave of them, and I appreciate it. It is one of the reasons why we can continue our work" (Interview no. 14). A representative of an Abkhazian CSO explained the attitude of the Abkhazian president to civil society peacebuilding activities: "President Khadjimba has known us for a long time and he knows that, despite our cooperation with the West, we do not have any anti-Russian or anti-Abkhazian attitudes, and that we are nothing more than Abkhazian patriots. Those who are attacking us are Russian journalists and political scientists. They perceive us as agents of the West. Such condemnation also comes from some Abkhazians" (Interview no. 15).

Speaking about domestic support for peacebuilding activities, the interviewed representative of the Abkhazian Public Chamber adds the following: "Our CSOs are only able to function in peacebuilding thanks to their long-term strategic partners from the West, with whom they have maintained past contacts. Domestic grants are not provided for these activities, so that is not a viable source of funding for us. In the past two years or so we have been attempting to gain funding from Russian grant mechanisms, but so far we have not achieved much success. Moreover, the situation in Russia at the moment is not exactly favorable to the non-profit sector" (Interview no. 7). One of the crucial segments of civil society that can contribute to a culture of peace is

the emergence of alternative media providing information about the conflict to the general public. Abkhazia does have some independent media, such as *Echo of Abkhazia* and *Abkhazian Forum*, but, as one member of civil society noted, "They are more or less connected with a few prominent independent-minded journalists, such as Vitaly Sharev or Manana Gurgulia, rather than being newspapers of an independent character overall. And due to their small readership, their influence on public opinion is not very strong. A few years ago it would have been possible to mention as an independent newspaper also *Chegemskaia pravda*, but recently it has persisted in criticizing the previous government rather than publishing objective criticism of current events. And thus I personally do not consider it currently to be an independent periodical" (Interview no. 13). One periodical of considerable importance for conflict transformation, *Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo*, had to cease its activities around five years ago due to financial problems (Interview no. 11). Important periodicals such as *Novaia gazeta* and *Nuzhnaia gazeta* have close links with the circle of people around the current president, Raul Khadjimba, and they serve to propagate certain established stereotypes, especially the perception of Georgia as an aggressive regime seeking to provoke military conflict and achieve unification by force (Interview no. 9). This stereotype is exacerbated by the fact that Georgian and Abkhazian journalists currently have very little contact with one another. The prevailing discourse in the Georgian media depicts Abkhazia as a puppet regime serving the geopolitical interests of Russia. The media thus serve to deepen the psychological chasm separating Abkhazians and Georgians rather than bringing them closer together (Interview no. 4). With regard to this issue, the interviewed representative of the Abkhazian Public Chamber spoke of the existence of powerful Georgian media propaganda: "Often the Georgian press reports that the Abkhazians would like to return under Georgian administration, but that the Russians will not allow them to. This is deliberate propaganda that in no way reflects reality" (Interview no. 7).

Our interviews also showed that the Abkhazian domestic media tend to carry only brief reports, and do not engage in more detailed analysis. The lack of analytical texts has been addressed by Abkhazian NGOs, which are supplementing the work of journalists and bringing in necessary alternative viewpoints, informing the public—not only the Abkhazian public, but also Georgians and third parties—about the Abkhazian stance with respect to the conflict (Interview no. 12).

One highly problematic issue in the transformation of the Abkhazian conflict is that of dialogue via the Church. With respect to Christian–Muslim relations, the religious differences between Abkhazians and Georgians are frequently exaggerated. Muslims make up less than one-third of the population of Abkhazia (Vatchagaev 2010), but religious sentiments are not particularly strong and Islam plays only a marginal role in everyday life (Interview no. 9). In the

context of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict it is therefore more important to focus on the Christian community. Here, however, the problem is that dialogue between the Abkhazian and Georgian churches ground to a halt after the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. In April 2009 the last Georgian priest had to leave Abkhazia, and the Georgian patriarch, Ilia II, has repeatedly been refused permission to visit Abkhazia. In September 2009 Vissarion Aplia, the self-proclaimed head of the Sukhumi-Abkhaz Eparchy, asked Moscow and Tbilisi to approve the autocephality of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church. Neither Patriarch Ilia II in Tbilisi nor Patriarch Kirill in Moscow was prepared to grant this request, but Aplia nevertheless went ahead and made a unilateral announcement of autocephality. In 2011 there was an internal schism within the Abkhazian Orthodox Church, creating one group represented by Vissarion Aplia and the other group represented by Archimandrite Dorotheos, chairman of the Council of the Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia. Both groups are demanding autocephality. The part of the Church represented by Vissarion is keen to forge closer ecclesiastical links with the Russian Orthodox Church, while the Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia is attempting to gain autocephality from Constantinople (Interview no. 13). The former Abkhazian president Alexander Ankvab declared his strong support for the Church's autocephality and stated that he would not support any other solution (Twickel 2011). If the Abkhazian Orthodox Church were to cooperate with the Georgian Orthodox Church, it would thereby demonstrate that Abkhazia was still part of Georgia (Interview no. 9).

Another barrier to peacebuilding dialogue between the Orthodox churches in the Abkhazian–Georgian conflict is the low degree of mutual trust between representatives of the two churches. The 2015 interviews revealed that the relations between the Abkhazian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church are characterized by an even lower degree of trust than exists between the two societies as a whole (Interview no. 16 and Interview no. 13). Even judging from this brief presentation of the Abkhazian perspective—as well as the fact that representatives of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church are currently not in contact with each other at all (Interview no. 17) and that Abkhazian church representatives have never participated in any other meetings with the Georgian side as part of peacebuilding projects (Interview no. 13 and Interview no. 15)—it is clearly evident that in the case of Abkhazia the Church does not represent a viable channel for reconciliation and trust-building between the conflicting parties.

THE ROLE OF RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND GEORGIA IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Russia, as Abkhazia's patron state, Georgia, and the West affect not only the conflict dynamics, but also the capabilities and abilities of the Abkhazian civil society to contribute to conflict transformation. The Russian–Georgian war of August 2008 and Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia's independence had, according to the statements of CSO representatives, a profound impact on the situation in Abkhazia. A particularly interesting aspect of this change has been the shift in the perception of the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict by important figures in Abkhazian public life. In the 2009 interviews our respondents viewed the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict as essentially over (as a consequence of Russia's recognition of Abkhazian independence). However, in the 2014 and 2015 interviews, none of the respondents considered the conflict to be definitively over, and they all viewed Abkhazia's isolated status—a consequence of its existence as a de facto state—as a serious problem.

An illustrative example of the view that was widespread in 2009 is a statement of one of the members of the Abkhazian parliament. He interpreted the attitudes of Abkhazian CSO representatives to conflict transformation as follows: "In the opinion of many Abkhazians, the conflict has been resolved. In the context of the security guarantees given by Russia, the danger of Georgian aggression has now passed. And because not even the most moderate Georgians agree with Abkhazia's independence, there is no point devoting time and energy to joint seminars on conflict-solving that lead nowhere. That is why Abkhazia's civil society is currently focusing its efforts on domestic issues such as administrative reform, media legislation, reform of the judicial system, and copyright protection. These are important tasks in building a democratic state based on respect for human rights" (Interview no. 2).

In stark contrast to this view are the opinions expressed by our respondents in 2014 and 2015. An academic from the Abkhazian State University gave the following view on Russia's recognition of Abkhazian independence: "Russia's recognition of our independence meant a lot to us. To be honest, I think most people expected recognition to come from the West. When the Russians recognized us in 2008 it was a considerable surprise for many people; we had thought it would not be possible due to the events in the North Caucasus. After the recognition in 2008, the prevailing discourse in Abkhazian public opinion centered around the notion that the recognition from Russia—as a strategic partner—would be enough. Now, however, it is becoming evident that this form of partial recognition places great restrictions on the flexibility of our foreign policy. The lack of international recognition is reflected not only in international relations, but also in the day-to-day economic and social situation" (Interview no. 10).

In the opinion of our respondents, the most significant changes brought by the Russian recognition of Abkhazian independence concerned issues of security and increasing economic cooperation. The interviewed representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed the following view on the importance of cooperation with Russia: "Thanks to the

Russians we now finally have a functioning border between Abkhazia and Georgia. There are no longer any cases of criminal activities in connection with the previous Georgian amnesty. The Russians are also helping us in the professionalization of our state administration—sharing their know-how in this area, helping us with reforms and with the implementation of legislation, for example, at the moment, the new Civil Service Act. They have recently contributed 13 billion rubles to support Abkhazia's economic development. Direct budget support from Russia made up between 42 and 45 percent of our budget in 2013 and 2014. These funds are helping Abkhazia to build infrastructure, and the money is also being channeled into many social projects. However, as a result of the conflict and our continuing isolation, our economy remains very weak. Until a peace accord is signed with Georgia, we cannot speak of the conflict as having been resolved" (Interview no. 5).

Despite these words, even in 2015 no domestic financial support was provided to programs promoting cooperation with Georgia. An explanation for this can be found in Abkhazia's relatively high degree of dependence on Russia. The lack of international recognition from the West is viewed in Abkhazia as a factor that is pushing this de facto state further and further into the Russian embrace (Interview no. 7 and Interview no. 14). Russia supports Abkhazia financially, politically, and in the field of security. A key document for security is the treaty on Abkhazian–Russian military cooperation and protection, signed on September 15, 2009, in which Russia commits to protect Abkhazia against any external aggression.[9] This treaty was further strengthened in November 2014 with the signature of the Russian–Abkhazian Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership.[10] A representative of civil society explains Abkhazian attitudes toward this matter as follows: "The signing of this agreement was perceived in Abkhazian society as a necessary consequence of power relations. The world has changed since 2013. With the war in Ukraine and the sanctions, the Russians felt the need to strengthen their position in their sphere of interest, to which we belong. The second reason is our economic weakness. For as long as we are not economically self-sufficient, we have to be dependent on Russia. Our goal is not to be part of the Russian world, but as long as we are absolutely dependent on Russia, there is nothing else we can do" (Interview no. 14). In addition to cooperation on security, there is also close economic cooperation, and Russia is Abkhazia's main trading partner.[11]

Although Russia is now Abkhazia's most important partner in all respects, its activities are not always viewed in a positive light, as is evident from the words of a representative of the non-profit sector: "I am afraid of the growing influence of Russia in Abkhazia in terms of the threat to civil liberties and democratic values. I have information that Russia has on many occasions pressured our political representatives to enact a law on foreign agents. If this law

were to be passed, it would represent a similar barrier to the freedom of our civil society as it does in Russia. Up to now, our representatives in the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs have always supported us on this matter. Hopefully that will also remain the case in the future" (Interview no. 12). Russian organizations are also far from active in peacebuilding. The respondents agreed that the only Russian organization involved in any form of peacebuilding in Abkhazia is the Eurasian Studies Institute. However, the extent of its peacebuilding activities was very limited, and it was closed down in the spring of 2014. Although all our respondents were clear supporters of Abkhazian independence, when asked directly whether there were any Abkhazian politicians who would be willing to agree to the country entering into an association with Russia (as an associated state), they all agreed that this was currently a highly sensitive topic. The representative of the non-profit sector stated: "The form of association with Russia is currently a very serious topic of discussion, and in my opinion it is the reason for the removal of Alexander Ankvab from the presidency of Abkhazia in May 2014" (Interview no. 12).[12]

The European Union has traditionally been viewed in a positive light within Abkhazia due to its emphasis on respect for human rights and civil society. However, European support for Abkhazian democracy and human rights has weakened considerably in recent years. The perception of the West in Abkhazian society at present is complicated; apart from a small number of liberal civic activists, general public awareness of EU values is low, and the EU tends to be viewed in negative terms. The constant emphasis placed by the EU on Georgia's territorial integrity has also led to it being viewed as an accomplice in Georgia's promotion of its own interests rather than as an impartial arbiter attempting to contribute to the peace process. The United States is viewed in an even more negative light by Abkhazian public opinion. This negative view is heavily influenced by U.S. foreign policy, which has played a very active role in preventing other countries from recognizing Abkhazian independence. This opinion was shared by all respondents, and it can also be found in the "Wikileaks" documents.[13] Moreover, mutual relations are strongly influenced by the tense situation between Russia and the West; tensions have escalated recently in connection with the events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Western international organizations involved in conflict transformation within the region—such as International Alert, the Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, and Conciliation Resources—remain active within Abkhazia. However, all the respondents were in agreement that the extent of their activities has shrunk considerably compared with the situation five or ten years ago. A representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization attributes this to reductions in the budgets of these international NGOs in connection with the financial crisis in the EU, as well as with

their shift of attention to the serious ongoing problems in Syria and Ukraine. Moreover, legislation enacted in 2013 requires foreign organizations to cooperate with a local partner; otherwise they are not permitted to operate in Abkhazia. "I think that another reason for the reduced number of projects funded by the West has been the insurmountable barrier between the Abkhazian and Georgian camps. In this regard I consider it a partial success that we have managed to persuade our Western partners of the necessity for internal projects within Abkhazia" (Interview no. 12). A very similar view is taken by an Abkhazian journalist, who sees three reasons for the decline in cooperation with foreign non-profit organizations: (1) political motives connected with Russian recognition of Abkhazia's independence; (2) the financial crisis in the EU, which has had an impact on Western NGOs; (3) reduced confidence in the success of the Abkhazian–Georgian peace process (Interview no. 8).

Despite the decrease in funding and the focus on other regions currently experiencing armed conflicts, the activities of international non-profit organizations in Abkhazia still remain tangible. According to the interviewed representative of the Abkhazian Public Chamber, International Alert and Conciliation Resources are currently working on minority integration and confidence-building projects: "Minorities are a very important issue in our society, and very little attention has been paid to them up to now. The activities of Western NGOs in conjunction with our organizations mainly involve training the leaders of minority groups. Especially the situation in Gali is symptomatic of the current tensions in Abkhazian society. Our national project is an issue that has not yet been resolved. We are jointly working to support the integration of Gali's Georgian population into Abkhazia, so they feel they are full members of Abkhazian society and not second-class citizens. It is a very problematic issue and susceptible to political populism, which I find very disturbing" (Interview no. 7).

With regard to the shift in Georgian attitudes to Abkhazia since the 2012 Georgian parliamentary and presidential elections, our respondents expressed disappointment. The interviewed representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave the following view: "Initially we were hopeful that real change might come about. Georgia changed its official state rhetoric, and there were other small shifts, such as the cessation of support for criminal activities in Gali. Georgia was a long-term supporter of the destabilization of this region, especially before the Geneva round of the peace talks. These efforts became particularly intense after the amnesty, which had a major impact on security in the region. Now, however, this is no longer the case. We can see at least some small positive changes, though there has been no genuine progress or effort to bring Abkhazia out of its isolation" (Interview no. 5). The interviewed representative of the Abkhazian Public Chamber is also disappointed by Georgia's "new" policy: "The rhetoric has changed, but otherwise nothing has really altered since the Saakashvili era. We used to blame him for all the problems, but it is evident that he was not the only person responsible for Georgia's attitude to Abkhazia. Liberal opinions do exist within Georgian society, but they are restricted to small numbers of people and are not often heard" (Interview no. 7). A representative of the academic sector likewise stated that she had not noticed any tangible shifts in Georgia's approach to Abkhazia: "Georgian public opinion is still the same as in the Saakashvili era, and so are its politicians. The lack of recognition from Georgia is forcing us into ever-deeper cooperation with Russia. Many Georgians are now aware that it is not possible to return Abkhazia to Georgian jurisdiction. Recognition from Georgia would represent a major boon to our diplomatic efforts, opening us up to the rest of the world. Then our relationship with Georgia could be one of equality—and despite the problematic events of the past two decades, it would certainly be a more amicable relationship" (Interview no. 10).

CONCLUSIONS

CSOs play a threefold role in conflict transformation in Abkhazia: (1) as part of traditional track two diplomacy, communicating with the Georgian side (either in Gali or in Georgia itself); (2) supporting internal democratization in Abkhazia; (3) informing the citizens of Abkhazia about events related to the conflict. However, the importance of the first and second roles has changed over the course of time. Once the armed phase of the conflict was over and the political situation in both Georgia and Abkhazia became stabilized, Abkhazian CSOs—assisted by European CSOs—engaged in dialogue with the Georgian side. This activity enjoyed no significant support from the wider Abkhazian society, and it did not lead to any major progress on the level of track one diplomacy; nevertheless, our interviews indicated that a certain degree of trust has been created between Abkhazian and Georgian CSOs thanks to their regular communication across the ceasefire line, resulting in a shared effort to promote a culture of non-violence and a peaceful solution to the conflict. However, the relatively intensive dialogue between Abkhazian and Georgian CSOs slowed down considerably in the period 2005–2008, and the Abkhazian CSOs began to focus more on domestic issues such as monitoring elections, democratization, and the development of human rights or ethnic minority rights. This development was due to two factors. First, the Saakashvili administration changed its approach to separatist entities. Second, in 2008 Abkhazia received international recognition from Russia and a small number of other countries. Our interviewees stated on several occasions that the Abkhazians viewed Georgian political discourse during this period as characterized by an exclusive reliance on force as a means of bringing the conflict to an end. The war in South Ossetia then destroyed the last remnants of any Abkhazian trust in the Georgian regime.

Thus, from around 2008, the conflict began to be viewed as essentially over, and even the internal democratization ceased to be driven by the democratization-for-recognition strategy. On the contrary, the strength of Russian influence represents a major problem for Abkhazian civil society. Despite the very strong bonds between Abkhazia and Russia, many figures in Abkhazian public life fear that the growing influence of Russia in the sphere of security, politics, the economy, and culture will go hand in hand with a growing influence over the formation of civil society. This may be manifested directly, through funding for Russian-sponsored organizations, or indirectly, due to the increasingly large range of opportunities for Russia to shape the environment in which Abkhazian civil society operates.

The barrier between Abkhazian and Georgian CSOs—and between Abkhazian and Georgian society as a whole—is further reinforced by the specific status of Abkhazia as a de facto state with limited external sovereignty. Representatives of Abkhazian CSOs encounter difficulties traveling to Georgia or to third countries that could serve as neutral ground for track two diplomacy. Moreover, two key activities in track two diplomacy—the Schlaining process and the UCI process—were implemented with the assistance of foreign CSOs, which helped Abkhazian representatives to overcome the barrier of isolation caused by the entity's de facto statehood. Under the influence of the domestic media, Abkhazian society remains locked into stereotypical views of Georgia as a belligerent opponent—a stereotype that was only reinforced by the events of August 2008. The influence of the relative isolation caused by de facto statehood on the restricted ability of local CSOs to participate in track two diplomacy seems unlikely to change significantly in the mid-term future, especially in view of the international community's reticent attitude toward de facto states.

A much more significant impact on the conflict transformation role of CSOs in de facto states is likely to be the shift in focus by CSOs within these states. According to Lederach's theory of peacebuilding, there should be open horizontal communication channels between the conflicting societies, as well as vertical channels supporting the democratic character of individual society. In the case of Abkhazia, however, there has been significant support for internal democracy, whereas the horizontal communication channels of local CSOs were in fact abandoned no later than 2008. This finding has a far-reaching impact on the current theory, as it suggests that democratizing society is not a sufficient condition for opening the horizontal communication channels, but on the contrary, at least in the Abkhazian case, the support for internal democratization worked to the detriment of the track two diplomacy. This was caused by the shift of the perception of the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict as being essentially over because of the August 2008 war and Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia's independence. Support of the patron state appeared to be strong enough for the Abkhazian CSOs to no longer consider the dialogue with their Georgian counterparts to be desirable and helpful. Thus, based on the example of Abkhazia, the fact of recognition by a patron state broke the equilibrium of a frozen conflict that should have been unfrozen by means of track two diplomacy.

NOTES

1. In his 2006 text, Kolstø does not denote these entities as de facto states but as quasi states; however, it is clear from the context that he is referring to de facto states. In 2006 the terms de facto states or unrecognized states (which are now used in the large majority of studies) had still not yet become established, and various alternative terms were used, e.g. separatist states, quasi states, pseudo states, etc. Kolstø himself uses the term de facto states in his texts from 2010 onwards (see Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012 or Pegg and Kolstø 2014). The same applies to other authors, e.g., Berg and Mölder 2012; Caspersen 2008; or O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011, etc.

2. For more on this topic see, e.g., Caspersen and Stansfield 2011, 4.

3. For more on the aims and forms of expert interviews, see, e.g., Flick 2009, 165–69.

4. Abkhazia is currently recognized by four UN member states (Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru). In 2011 Abkhazia's independence was also internationally recognized by two Pacific states, Vanuatu and Tuvalu. However, both states subsequently withdrew their recognition of Abkhazian statehood when they signed a treaty establishing diplomatic and consular relations with Georgia. Vanuatu did so in 2013, Tuvalu in 2014.

5. For more on the Abkhazian conflict and its consequences, see, e.g., Souleimanov 2013.

6. This periodic division is based on 2014 interviews with a representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization (Interview no. 12) and an Abkhazian journalist (Interview no. 8). Both respondents more or less agreed with the division; however, they added that the second and third phases overlapped considerably. The focus on Abkhazian domestic issues dates back to around 2000, but dialogue with the Georgian side became much less frequent from 2008 onward.

7. The proceedings of the fifteen conferences organized by the UCI Center for Citizen Peacebuilding were published under the rubric "Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict." Available at: www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/research/reports/pb_cs_abkhaz_pub.php.

8. The gradual democratization of the Abkhazian regime has been reflected in its evaluation by the Freedom House *Freedom in the World* dataset. At the end of the 1990s and into the new millennium, Abkhazia had a rating of 6 (not free country) in terms of political rights. In 2005 there was a shift to a rating of 5, and in 2013 to 4 (partly free), the rating that Abkhazia had also in the last report in 2015. In terms of civil liberties, Abkhazia is rated 5 (partly free) throughout the period under investigation.

9. The treaty gave Russia permission to use the military bases in Gudauta and Ochamchira for the next 49 years. It states that Russian soldiers have unlimited freedom of movement within Abkhazia, are exempt from the payment of taxes, and are exempt from prosecution under Abkhazian laws. Russian units also guard the land and sea administrative border line between Abkhazia and Georgia. On the basis of the treaty, in 2010 alone Russia invested a total of 465 million USD to provide security to Abkhazia (RIA Novosti 2009, September 15). For comparison, this sum exceeded the 2010 budget of Georgia's entire defense ministry by 30 million USD (Civil Georgia 2009, December 4). Due to the treaty, a quarter of the inhabitants of Abkhazia no longer consider a potential return to a state of war to be a genuine security risk (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2011, 18–20).

10. This treaty creates a new joint force of Russian and Abkhazian troops. Abkhazia also agreed to harmonize its foreign and defense policies with Moscow's. Over the next three years Putin promised subsidies to Abkhazia amounting to 270 million USD (Guardian 2014, November 25).

11. In 2009 Russia provided 1.9 billion RUB (65.5 million USD) as a direct contribution to Abkhazia's national budget, accounting for 60 percent of Abkhazia's entire budgetary spending in that year. The same sum was transferred by Russia to the Abkhazian budget in the following year, when the Russian contribution made up 49 percent of the national budget (ICG Report No. 202, 5). In 2011–2014 a total of 40–60 percent of the national budget was financed directly by the Russian Federation (Interview no. 6).

12. In May 2014 the Abkhazian capital Sukhumi experienced a wave of protests, leading President Ankvab to step down. The official rhetoric of the opposition, led by Raul Khadjimba (who had stood without success in previous presidential elections), drew on arguments pointing out the poor economic situation and the long-term lack of essential reforms. These economic arguments, in the opinion of our respondents, are certainly justified, but five of the respondents mentioned primarily political factors and spoke of a coup d'état.

13. For more on American policy toward Abkhazia as revealed by the Wikileaks documents, see Pegg and Berg 2014.

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APPENDIX

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Interview no. 1: Representative of Abkhazian non-profit organization focusing on conflict transformation, Sukhumi, October 8, 2009.

Interview no. 2: Member of the Abkhazian Parliament, former NGO representative, Sukhumi, October 9, 2009.

Interview no. 3: Assistant Professor at the Abkhazian State University, Sukhumi, October 10, 2009.

Interview no. 4: Abkhazian freelance journalist, Sukhumi, October 11, 2009.

Interview no. 5: Representative of the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sukhumi, June 27, 2014.

Interview no. 6: Member of the Abkhazian Parliament, Sukhumi, June 28, 2014.

Interview no. 7: Representative of the Abkhazian Public Chamber, Sukhumi, June 30, 2014.

Interview no. 8: Abkhazian journalist, Sukhumi, June 25, 2014.

Interview no. 9: Representative of the Abkhazian Church, Sukhumi, June 29, 2014.

Interview no. 10: Academic from the Abkhazian State University, Sukhumi, July 2, 2014.

Interview no. 11: Representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization, Sukhumi, June 26, 2014.

Interview no. 12: Representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization, Sukhumi, June 27, 2014.

Interview no. 13: Representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization, Sukhumi, September 1, 2015.

Interview no. 14: Representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization, Sukhumi, September 4, 2015.

Interview no. 15: Representative of an Abkhazian non-profit organization, Sukhumi, September 7, 2015.

Interview no. 16: Former representative of the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sukhumi, August 31, 2015.

Interview no. 17: Representative of the Abkhazian Church, New Athos, September 2, 2015.