

CPD PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution:

Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

By Iskra Kirova

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**PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND CONFLICT
RESOLUTION:
RUSSIA, GEORGIA AND THE EU IN ABKHAZIA
AND SOUTH OSSETIA**

Iskra Kirova

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CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy

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**PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION:
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I. Introduction

The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia over the secessionist entity of South Ossetia brought renewed international attention to Europe's still unresolved territorial issues inherited in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A source of recurrent tension since the time they first broke out in the early 1990s, Georgia's two protracted conflicts with its break-away territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had given rise to regional confrontation between Georgia and Russia, and even geopolitical competition for influence in the South Caucasus. Russia played a central role in the conflicts from the very beginning, gradually directing its leverage in the two entities to undermine Tbilisi's growing pro-Western orientation. Moscow's open participation in military action against Georgia on the side of South Ossetia in 2008 and its subsequent recognition of the entities' proclaimed independence threw the international dimension of the conflicts into even starker relief. This broader geostrategic rivalry often overshadows the local, intercommunity roots of the conflicts.¹

The 2008 war ended with European Union (EU) brokerage and continued security involvement, opening a new process of international talks mediated by the EU, UN and OSCE. It set back Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects and brought up the question of NATO's open-door policy and strategic ambition in the region. Today, the two entities are in political and legal limbo. Georgia's territorial integrity is almost unanimously recognized internationally but Tbilisi has de facto lost sovereignty over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia rushed to recognize them as independent but with the exception of only a handful of other states, failed to persuade the international community to follow suit. To this backdrop, the region continues to resurface as a mini theatre of great-power politics, which often obstructs rather than helps conflict resolution.

The tools of traditional diplomacy have not brought results over many years. The latest efforts to deal with the conflicts within

international security and negotiations formats have also stalled. At the same time, bottom-up venues for conflict transformation remain relatively open and freer from the constraints of regional and international politics. Such approaches that focus on people rather than political status merit attention as they could provide inroads to begin tackling some of the protracted conflict issues. This is all the more so as international and local actors are warming to these opportunities and have started to wield their soft power to shape popular attitudes and affect the conflict dynamics.

Public diplomacy can offer substantial contributions to conflict resolution given its mandate to facilitate dialogue, confront misperceptions and bridge narratives. Whether through media and communication, education, culture or economic ties, the public diplomacy toolbox is geared towards generating social capital and creating an enabling environment for reconciliation.² Public diplomacy is especially relevant to situations of low intensity, protracted conflict, defined by a history of antagonism and distrust, where it can develop measures to foster shared experiences and narratives, maintain interaction and a degree of predictability in relations and lead ideally to a gradual transformation of hostile attitudes.³ Continued isolation, conversely, serves to perpetuate and deepen hostility, harden confrontational positions and reinforce misperceptions.

In this context, we look at public diplomacy broadly as “an international actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public”⁴; as well as through the prism of what is defined as *new public diplomacy* that places the emphasis on the emergence of civil society organizations as political actors on the international scene.⁵ Public diplomacy in this latter sense is no longer only a state-led activity, but becomes a process of “relationship building” whereby the state is only a “facilitator” of contact between non-governmental parties at home and abroad. In this new conception, public diplomacy is not a unilateral form of communication but a mutually beneficial partnership. While international negotiations define the political parameters of conflict

resolution, the work of genuine conflict transformation is done precisely through this type of grassroots relationship building between the conflict parties on the ground. As such public diplomacy advances “milieu goals”⁶ that create an enabling environment for conflict resolution, rather than working directly on the political level.

While substantively different, soft power and public diplomacy are linked in that public diplomacy is a process of engagement that is used as a “mechanism”, “instrument”, or “primary policy” for wielding soft power.⁷ Soft power, as coined by Joseph Nye, describes the ability of a political body to influence the behavior or interests of others through attraction rather than coercion or payments.⁸ Soft power is thus a resource that regional and international actors can leverage by means of public diplomacy to achieve policy goals.

Russia as the regional power center has used soft as well as hard power methods, often controversially, to extend its influence south of its border. Following the 2008 war, Russia fully consolidated its grip on the break-away entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Its political, economic and cultural influence there remains unchallenged today. Since the war South Ossetia has become almost completely inaccessible to any other international actor, while international presence in Abkhazia is limited. In recent years, however, the EU as an emerging center of gravity for the South Caucasus has started to muster its supplies of soft power region-wide and deploy public diplomacy instruments to shift the conflict dynamics. By launching a strategy of engagement with the populations in the entities coupled with non-recognition of their proclaimed independence, the EU aims to provide an alternative to relations with Russia for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Georgia has until now failed to extend substantial soft power vis-à-vis the entities. Often disregarding popular sentiment there for a greater focus on geopolitics, Tbilisi has only as of recently developed a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy based on a “human-centric” approach that aims to establish goodwill through people-to-people and civil society contacts, education, economic

ties and the provision of services. These efforts might arguably have missed the window of opportunity for effecting a positive change. While their policies differ, through the means of soft power and public diplomacy, both the EU and Georgia hope to drive conflict transformation and possibly resolution in their preferred direction.

The unpermissive legal and political environment due to the entities' unrecognized status poses a crucial challenge to the implementation of these softer, people-focused approaches. As an informal platform of interaction with or between non-state actors, public diplomacy offers a great degree of flexibility in contexts where legal and political constraints exclude other types of relations such as formal diplomatic engagement. In this sense, public diplomacy encompasses approaches that have become known as multi-track or track two diplomacy and that are now established as a critical complement to official negotiations between adversaries in conflict resolution and reconciliation.⁹

Even in the context of such non-official forms of engagement, fears of creeping legitimization of the secessionist entities persist in Tbilisi, whose policies continue to oscillate between engagement and isolation. Persuading Georgia that public diplomacy is in its own best interest remains central to conflict resolution. Suspicion on the part of the de facto authorities that public diplomacy might undermine their independence agenda is equally problematic. The EU has attempted to maneuver the sensibilities of both sides, while at the same time seeking legal space to engage without compromising its own position on status.

This paper looks at the public diplomacy and soft power strategies employed by Russia, Georgia and the EU towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It begins with an examination of Russia's influence in the two territories as the backdrop for the engagement of other actors who pursue a change in the status quo. It then looks at Georgia's and the EU's efforts to reach out by means of public diplomacy, identifying the main challenges and opportunities in their approaches and drawing conclusions for public diplomacy more broadly. Given

that Russia does not aim to alter the conflict dynamics and has largely achieved its policy goals in the region, a descriptive overview of Russia's hard and soft power in the entities is provided, followed by more prescriptive analysis of the EU's and Georgia's public diplomacy strategies for conflict resolution. Research for this paper is based on the public record available and primary sources such as government documents, and supplemented by interviews with EU, Georgian and Russian officials, civil society representatives and international experts conducted in Brussels.

II. Current Context: Traditional Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy

Efforts to resolve the conflicts within international political and security formats have faced a number of obstacles and the entities' international isolation has deepened following the August 2008 war. International presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was severely constrained after Russia used its veto power at the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to end their missions in the break-away entities.¹⁰ Currently, the only international mission in Georgia is the EU's Monitoring Mission (EUMM), deployed on the basis of the 2008 ceasefire agreement. The EUMM was put in place to help stabilize the situation on the ground, but it has been denied access to the territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia and the de facto authorities. In addition to working to prevent a renewal of conflict, one of the goals of the mission is to reduce the adverse impact of separation by making the areas along the boundary lines between Georgia and the entities safe and secure for local residents, creating conditions for civilians to cross. The limits to the mission's operations have meant a further hardening of the divides between Georgia and the secessionist territories and the populations on both sides. They also demonstrate the extremely challenging circumstances for public diplomacy in these conflicts today.

The only functioning negotiations format for dealing with Georgia's conflicts at present are the EU, UN and OSCE mediated

international discussions in Geneva. The talks focus on a narrow set of security and displacement issues and have been essentially stalled due to inability to come to an agreement on the non-use of force and international security arrangements. The over 20 rounds of talks have served as a platform for the parties to declare mutually exclusive positions on the conflicts, and have also been the scene of walk-outs by the de facto authorities. Russian-Georgian relations are at their nadir. Moscow and Tbilisi routinely accuse each other of sabotage and terrorist activities.¹¹ They have no diplomatic ties and on the occasion of the three-year anniversary of the war on 8 August 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev again categorically ruled out any possibility for dialogue with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.¹² The antagonism between the two countries is highly personalized and their leaders customarily trade uncivilized insults and threats at each other.¹³

Deadlock at the political level and failure to transform the situation on the ground through international security formats make the development of other approaches imperative. The need to expand contact with the populations and organized civil society in the entities has gained broad acceptance among policy makers involved in conflict resolution. One prominent forum recently concluded that overreliance on traditional diplomacy and insufficient attention to civil society dialogues has hindered conflict resolution in the region.¹⁴ Experts have suggested working under the radar of big politics and emphasizing people-to-people contacts outside the political context that feeds ethno-political confrontation and insecurities.¹⁵ Linkages across the conflict divide can help build shared experiences and interests and eventually improve political relations. While public diplomacy and track two peace processes towards the conflicts have already been applied, they have suffered from many flaws. More needs to be known as to the components that can make these approaches more successful so that they can be improved and reinforced.

At present, the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is almost completely isolated. The entities' external relations are conducted exclusively with Russia. Only a handful of other states have recognized them as independent, largely out of solidarity with Russia or in exchange for material benefits.¹⁶ There are generations of people who have not traveled anywhere but to Russia. The two territories' profound dependence on their northern neighbor and their isolation from the rest of the world, and from Georgia, impact heavily on conflict narratives and attitudes towards reconciliation.

III. Russia's Hard and Soft Power in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Russian policy of support for Abkhazian and South Ossetian secessionist aspirations and the forging of tight links with their residents is linked closely to Georgia's attempts to break away from Russia's sphere of interest. This policy was visible in Russia's military support of the entities during their conflicts with Georgia in the early 1990s, at a time of a nationalist and strongly anti-Russian leadership in Tbilisi. After a short period of rapprochement, it invigorated again after 1999 when Georgia announced its intention to become a NATO member. The year 2004 marked a defining moment when an assertive Mikheil Saakashvili and his government brought in by the Rose revolution showed readiness to defy Moscow and press ahead with an ambitious reintegration agenda, as well as anchor Georgia firmly in the West.¹⁷

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia described the response by Russia to the "westernization" of Tbilisi's foreign and security policy as "a coercive Georgia policy".¹⁸ It consisted of using the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to spoil Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions and bring it back into Russia's orbit. This policy was openly confirmed by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who, in a 2011 address to a Russian military base just north of Georgia, stated that Russia's 2008 war over South Ossetia had successfully thwarted NATO's expansion to the region.¹⁹

The more Russia demonstrated its dissatisfaction with Georgia's international positioning and its willingness to take a side in the conflicts, the more Abkhazia and South Ossetia looked to Moscow for support. Russia moved to foster secessionist tendencies using its leading position in the peace processes for the conflicts and its role as the main peacekeeping force in the entities. Though Russia was already in an advantageous position to disturb Georgia's territorial integrity, public diplomacy played an important supportive role in consolidating Moscow's leverage.

Russia's support was expressed tangibly at the people level. As Abkhazian scholars point out, Moscow's "swing towards Abkhazia" in the 1999-2002 period, although not reflected in any way in its official rhetoric, found practical expression in the easing of economic restrictions on break-away Abkhazia imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the beginning of applications processing for Russian citizenship, preparations to launch a railway link and a visa-free travel regime. This outreach "met with growing expectations in Abkhazia."²⁰ The population of the entities increasingly turned to Russia and viewed it as a protector of their well-being.

In an example of Moscow's final departure from supporting Georgia's territorial integrity, Russia upgraded substantially its formal ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in April 2008 and launched a sweeping public diplomacy offensive. Then-President Vladimir Putin ordered the Russian government "to interact with the actual bodies of power in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including organizing cooperation in the trade, economic, social and techno-scientific fields and in the spheres of information, culture and education, particularly with the enlistment of Russia's regions." Putin specifically underlined the "socio-economic goals" of the measures that he contrasted with other countries' decision to recognize Kosovo's declaration of independence.²¹ This move and the rhetoric that surrounded it indicated that public diplomacy was going to be one of the main instruments for Russia to cultivate the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

1. Wielding security guarantees and economic benefits

Moscow's overwhelming political and economic influence in the two entities has been extensively documented. As a compelling number of analysts point out, their recognition as independent states by Russia has ironically served to increase Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's dependence on their patron even further.²² Russia is their exclusive partner and investor. It has signed agreements to station permanent military bases on their territories and police their de facto borders for at least 49 years.²³ In the case of South Ossetia, it participates directly in the decision-making process as Russian officials staff about half of South Ossetia's de facto government.²⁴

The Russian state and Russian business interests are heavily involved in the economies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including in the management of Abkhazia's airport and railway system, and oil and gas exploration off of Abkhazia's Black Sea coast.²⁵ The Russian ruble is the official currency in both entities. Russia finances practically the entire South Ossetian budget and the larger part of Abkhazia's. In 2012, Russia will provide financial aid to Abkhazia in the amount of 6.802 billion rubles (\$210 million) or nearly 70% of the republic's budget, and 5.497 billion rubles (\$170 million) to South Ossetia representing 92% of the entity's revenue.²⁶ These are substantial sums of assistance given that Abkhazia and South Ossetia have a population of about 214,000 and 30,000 people respectively.²⁷

The re-election of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin in March 2012 is likely to further accelerate Russia's expansionist policies. If the new president's first initiatives are any indication, Moscow's involvement in the entities is projected to increase. Putin met the de facto presidents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia before seeing any other foreign leader, while an executive order signed on the day of his inauguration highlighted the promotion of Abkhazian and South Ossetian statehood as a foreign policy priority.²⁸

The extent to which the two territories have become dependent on their northern neighbor makes soft power only one aspect of a

broadly asymmetrical relationship of Russian political, military, economic and socio-cultural influence. Russia's role as a security guarantor of the entities' proclaimed independence and its significance as an economic provider are arguably at the core of Abkhazian and South Ossetian attitudes towards Moscow. Nonetheless, Russia has also used soft power and a wide range of public diplomacy tools to create lasting bonds with the populations in the entities. These include traditional public diplomacy approaches such as educational exchange and visa-free travel, but also more unprecedented and controversial instruments.

2. Public diplomacy or people annexation: The policy of passportization

The policy of "passportization" is arguably Russia's trade-mark innovation in public diplomacy that allowed Moscow to gain the favor of the population of secessionist entities around its borders. The policy is an extension of Russia's "humanitarian outreach"—as public diplomacy activity is called by Russian policy makers—towards its "compatriots" abroad. Moscow counts in this category all those who identify an ethnic, linguistic or cultural link to the Russian Federation, which for a long time applied to all former citizens of the USSR, and has taken it up as a foreign policy priority to nurture close economic, people-to-people, educational, cultural and other ties with these communities.²⁹ Having passed a new citizenship law in 2002, Russia made it possible for former Soviet citizens to receive Russian citizenship through a simplified, and as has been argued, arbitrary procedure and began conferring Russian passports on a massive scale that allowed and encouraged residents of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, as well as of other restive areas in the post-Soviet region, to become Russian citizens.³⁰

In effect, Russia advertized its nationality by offering incentives in return for the adoption of Russian citizenship such as social security and higher pension payments, but also easier travel and education opportunities. Russia's policy of passportization was not practiced only in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but achieved a much

greater scale there than elsewhere. According to most estimates, virtually all non-ethnic Georgian residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have taken up Russian citizenship as a result of this policy.³¹

Populations in secessionist entities were particularly susceptible to Russia's outreach as a Russian nationality offered the only means to travel abroad given their internationally unrecognized status. In fact, agreement to the policy has been justified by the de facto Abkhazian authorities as simply an issue of practicality as "without a Russian passport Abkhaz could not travel."³² Abkhazian civil society leaders have similarly pressed the issue, saying that the West was pushing Abkhazia towards Russia as they could not travel except through Russia and by taking Russian citizenship.³³

A Russian passport facilitates enrollment in higher education in Russia for Abkhazian and South Ossetian students.³⁴ It further provides significant economic benefits. In 2007, Russia paid 590 million rubles in pensions to residents of Abkhazia, and 100 million to South Ossetia.³⁵ According to 2008 data, Russian passport holders in Abkhazia received a pension of 1,600 rubles compared to that of only 100 rubles offered by the de facto government.³⁶ The ratio is similar in South Ossetia.³⁷ Russian passport holders also participate in Russian political life, including by voting in Russian elections.³⁸ The de facto presidents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia both voted for instance in the latest Duma elections on 4 December 2011 for which Russia set up 12 polling stations in the two break-away entities.³⁹

The passportization policy drew Abkhazians and South Ossetians closer to Russia through strong legal, political, economic and social bonds. It should be acknowledged that without Russian passports, the population of the two entities would have remained completely isolated. Whatever scarce opportunities for international travel and civil society contacts existed and continue still today, are possible only because these passports were made available starting in 2002.

Nonetheless, the policy helped create enclaves in already unstable territories by extending Russia's legal reach over them

and thus worked against their integration within the internationally recognized metropolitan state. Despite the benefits it offered, the transparency of its goals can be questioned, as well as its place within the legitimate public diplomacy toolbox. Even as a form of humanitarian outreach towards compatriots, the passportization of foreign citizens differs significantly from other established public diplomacy instruments and is not purely “humanitarian” in nature.

The analysis of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission into the 2008 Georgia war found that the conferral of Russian nationality violated international law by depriving Georgia from exercising its jurisdiction over a large number of its citizens. As the report concluded, unlike the granting of cultural and educational benefits where there is relevant international custom and the consent of the host-state can be presumed, the policy of passportization without explicit consent by the Georgian state infringed upon its sovereignty. It also noted that through this policy Russia promoted “progressive annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by integrating these territories into its economic, legal and security space.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Members of the European Parliament have described Russian passportization as “annexation of peoples” and noted that acceptance of these documents internationally would legitimize this aggressive policy.⁴¹ The passportization policy allowed Russia to claim an obligation to conduct military intervention in defense of its “citizens” in August 2008 and thus served as a main driver of the conflict.⁴²

Visas and passports have been both a public diplomacy and pressure tool throughout the conflicts. Already in December 2000, when relations with Tbilisi grew increasingly strained, Russia unilaterally introduced a visa regime for Georgia, but exempted Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The European Parliament at the time called these measures “a challenge to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia” and a “*de facto* annexation of these indisputably Georgian territories.”⁴³ Following the war and its recognition of the two entities, Russia negotiated visa-free travel agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in October 2009 and February 2010 respectively.⁴⁴

3. Power of attraction and isolation: Russia's offerings in education, culture and media

Even if chiefly a hard power in the region, Russia uses also classic public diplomacy to foster its influence in the entities, though typically on a much grander scale than customary. Moscow has put in place a system of educational exchange that provides a generous quota of state funded scholarships for Abkhazian and South Ossetian students to receive higher education in the Russian Federation. Since the beginning of these educational exchange programs with Abkhazia in 1993 until 2008, reportedly 770 Abkhazians studied in 78 Russian higher institutions on fully funded scholarships by the Russian Federation.⁴⁵ Abkhazia's quota of scholarships is large enough that the entity of 214,000 inhabitants regularly fails to fill all allocated seats. For instance, in 2010 Russia allocated 84 slots for which Abkhazia was only able to select 57 qualified candidates.⁴⁶

All qualified South Ossetian students are also welcome to pursue their studies in the Russian Federation. As one MP and professor at the South Ossetian State University noted, since the beginning of the quota student exchange system with Moscow, the University is only able to attract "leftovers", graduates with a lower level of knowledge.⁴⁷ A whopping 275 state scholarships were reportedly granted to South Ossetia in 2009 when in that same year all of South Ossetia's high school graduates were 597, meaning that nearly every second graduating student was able to receive free higher education and a stipend to study in Russia.⁴⁸ In 2010, Russia offered 180 slots to the 430 graduates of South Ossetia.⁴⁹

This compares to meager numbers of youth from the entities who are able to travel and study in the West due to difficulties with arranging an acceptable document for international travel. For instance, the EU set up a cultural exchange project in 2010 to bring a group of Georgian and a group of Abkhazian students to study together in Brussels but only 3 Abkhazian students could be enrolled in it because of difficulty with their travel abroad.⁵⁰ Abkhazian and South Ossetian identity documents are not recognized internationally,

while most European states and the U.S. would not accept the Russian passports conferred on the residents of the entities as legitimate and are unwilling to grant visas and open official exchange programming to their holders.⁵¹ Thus, Russia was and remains the main, if not sole, travel destination and point of social contact for Abkhazians and South Ossetians.

Russia also cultivates cultural ties in the two territories. Moscow's agency for humanitarian outreach to the countries of the former USSR, Rossotrudnichestvo, has opened offices in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali and organizes a rich program of cultural, scientific and educational events and initiatives. Rossotrudnichestvo's mandate includes the promotion of Russian language study, educational and cultural exchange and scientific collaboration, and cultivating links with young leaders and Russian compatriots abroad. Its goal is to foster integration processes within the CIS and to promote a positive image of Russia regionally.⁵² In April 2011, during visits to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signed a number of intergovernmental agreements, including on setting up of Russian informational and cultural centers under the auspices of Rossotrudnichestvo.⁵³

Also active in the entities is the Russkiy Mir Foundation—Russia's equivalent of the British Council or the Organization of the Francophonie. It sponsors programs and organizations that promote Russian language and culture. There are fifteen organizations in Abkhazia and one in South Ossetia that have registered with Russkiy Mir.⁵⁴ Among those in Abkhazia are Radio Soma, a private radio station and the only other local radio outlet besides Abkhazian State Radio, a youth fond, a Russian cultural center and a number of community organizations. As of this writing, there is no EU House or other international cultural or information office present in the territories. U.S. government officials explored the option of opening American corners, an idea welcomed by Georgia, but it appears that these plans were halted by events in 2008.⁵⁵

Russia's cultural and informational influence is also strengthened by the prevalence of Russian as the dominant language of public and private life in the two entities. In fact, according to some estimates, up to one-third of Abkhazians cannot speak Abkhaz, even on a basic level, and even fewer can read or write in it.⁵⁶ Presidential candidates in Abkhazia are required to take a test in Abkhaz in order to be eligible to run.⁵⁷ In November 2011, South Ossetia held a referendum in which nearly 84% voted in favor of making Russian a state language in the entity along with Ossetian.⁵⁸

The two entities are also well integrated into Russia's media space. Russian television and newspapers are widely available. All major Russian television channels broadcast to Abkhazia, though programming from Euronews and National Geographic is also available on the non-government Abaza TV channel.⁵⁹ Russian newspapers and magazines can be purchased at newsstands and kiosks in all Abkhazian cities, offering a wide range of tabloid journalism to more serious political analysis.⁶⁰ In Abkhazia, there is little or no access to Georgian TV, other than by satellite, with the exception of the Georgian populated Gali region.⁶¹ Russian television programming is rebroadcast into South Ossetia. Russian state radio FM broadcasts are also available and some Russian newspapers have reportedly launched editions for the territory. Georgian state-run television and radio also broadcast a few hours of programming to the entity in Ossetian.⁶² Internet penetration in South Ossetia is limited to only a handful of locations. The situation in Abkhazia is better with some reporting that upwards of 25% of the population use the internet.⁶³

While Russia's political and economic clout in the entities cannot be rivaled, the majority of the above listed public diplomacy options are equally accessible to all. Nevertheless, on the information, cultural and people level there is virtually no engagement by any other international actor but Russia.

4. Sports diplomacy: The 2014 Sochi Olympics

More public diplomacy opportunities are on the horizon. They might inject a new momentum in conflict resolution efforts or deepen the current crisis. The 2014 Winter Olympics are due to be held in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, some 15-20 kilometers from the border with Abkhazia, and could serve as an occasion for both sports diplomacy or further confrontation. The Olympics will be a major nation-branding project for Russia but there are already many indications that the event will be hugely politicized, if not controversial.

The Olympics provide an opportunity for Russia to economically develop and showcase Abkhazia, very much so to Abkhazia's expectations, which projects economic growth in the years leading up to the games. Abkhazia has offered support for development projects in preparation for the Olympics and leaders and businesses are hoping to profit from the proximity of the venue for infrastructure development, demand for building materials and jobs, as well as tourism.⁶⁴ More importantly, the Abkhazian leadership expects to be included in the organization of the games, to host personnel and offer Sukhumi airport to relieve traffic at Sochi.⁶⁵

Any formal or informal moves to include Abkhazia in the organization of the games or to host Olympic facilities on its territory without Tbilisi's consent will undoubtedly provoke international opposition and fears of tacit legitimization. Georgia has already attempted to organize an international boycott of the Olympics, saying that it is "immoral" for a country that is occupying its neighbor's territory to host an event such as the Olympics just 10 kilometers away from the "occupied territory".⁶⁶ Georgia has also lent support to a group of Circassians calling for a boycott of the games because Sochi was the site of a brutal military campaign against Circassians by Tzarist Russia.⁶⁷ Rejecting the notion of full boycott by the U.S. and Europe as untenable, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker has called for conditioning attendance at the Olympics on Moscow's cooperation on resolving the conflicts, but few other

western diplomats have declared that any conditions to participation should be imposed at all.⁶⁸

Ideally, some cooperation between Russia and Georgia in the organization of the games, particularly to guarantee security, would be useful. For this to happen, all sides should refrain from attempts to politicize the event and link it to the issue of Abkhazia's status. Practical cooperation could follow the example of the Georgian-Russian agreement on Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) that found a creative solution for monitoring trade across the Russia-Georgia border, including the sections outside of Georgia's control.⁶⁹ Joint solutions should be pursued for instance in developing infrastructure, such as the rehabilitation of railway and other transport links, to which Georgia has committed within its new policy of engagement with Abkhazia. The proximity of the games will also provide more opportunities for international contacts for the Abkhazians, including through more tourism to the region, which should be fostered by all sides.

IV. Attitudes and Perceptions in the Entities

Not surprisingly against the backdrop of its cultural influence, most Abkhazians and South Ossetians feel a deep connection to Russia reinforced by its role as a security guarantor and economic provider. De facto leaders from the entities have consistently proclaimed the development of close ties with Russia as their top priority. At his first press conference on 27 August 2011, newly-elect de facto President Alexander Ankvab said that he would continue the course of late Abkhazian leader Sergey Bagapsh "who was keen supporter of relations with Russia and we will further develop those ties."⁷⁰ All candidates in South Ossetia's latest presidential elections campaigned on the promise of close cooperation with Russia.⁷¹

Russia's protection and security presence is welcomed by the population. In Abkhazia, where public attitudes are more easily observable due to its relative openness to international contacts, many express satisfaction with the current arrangement saying that Russia

has allowed them to feel secure for the first time in years.⁷² According to a recent public opinion survey, about 80% of the population of Abkhazia, with the exception of its ethnic Georgian inhabitants, approve of the stationing of a permanent Russian military base on its territory.⁷³ Abkhazian elites see Russian protection as an opportunity to direct energies away from the confrontation with Georgia to their state-building effort.⁷⁴

Overall, public preoccupation with Georgia has decreased significantly. According to the above-mentioned survey, support for reintegration with Georgia is virtually absent and only reported by ethnic Georgian residents of Abkhazia. Georgia doesn't possess a lot of power of attraction either. For instance, the overwhelming majority of the population of Abkhazia finds economic conditions in the de facto republic better than in Georgia and believes that Abkhazia is heading in the right direction.⁷⁵ As civil society actors report, Georgia doesn't figure in the public discourse in Abkhazia and is largely seen as an issue of the past.⁷⁶ This loss of relevance impacts on motivation for restoring relations with Georgia and broader conflict resolution.

Nonetheless there is some anxiety over Russia's overpowering presence. Russia's growing economic and political influence is a central issue of Abkhazian public life. Abkhazians are committed to having an independent state and have voiced concerns over being "swallowed" by Russia.⁷⁷ The railway, airport and oil exploration agreements provoked opposition criticism and protest about giving up important state functions and resources to Russia. Government plans to allow Russian citizens to buy property in Abkhazia, announced in early 2010, sparked public discontent over a Russian demographic incursion and have not materialized.⁷⁸

The Abkhazians have actively sought Western involvement and express frustration with what they perceive as the West's lack of interest in engaging with Abkhazia. Abkhazian de facto officials have blamed the West for not giving them any other choice but a closer relationship with Russia.⁷⁹ After the retail chain Benetton canceled

plans for a store in Abkhazia, one prominent civil society leader noted, “If this is a sign of how the West will behave in the future, then Abkhazia is doomed to remain locked in Russia’s embrace.”⁸⁰ An Abkhazian parliamentarian similarly lamented Abkhazia’s dependence on Russia saying, “This is what happens when nobody supports you. Our only partner is Russia. Is the West worried that we will be buried by Russian capital? That we will be assimilated?”⁸¹

Former de facto President Sergey Bagapsh too has stated that Abkhazia needs to rely on Moscow because the West would not engage, noting that “European structures are not helping [us]. Russia is helping.”⁸² Bagapsh has also reportedly said that Abkhazia is a “European country” and committed to a non-aligned policy.⁸³ The Abkhazian leadership is known for its past efforts to pursue a “multi-vector” foreign policy that would involve Russia, the EU and Turkey, the latter being home to a large Abkhaz diaspora. The policy entailed actively seeking increased contacts with European countries.⁸⁴ Given Abkhazian developmental needs and the hitherto reluctant response from Europe and others, appetite for such diversification could soon be decreasing. The West should seize upon the genuine interests and anxieties that motivate Abkhazia’s openness in the interest of conflict resolution.

Attitudes in South Ossetia are different, as far as they can be assessed. Suspicion of international contacts there is much higher as demonstrated by South Ossetia’s continued refusal to grant access to any but Russian organizations. South Ossetia’s openly stated interest in joining the Russian Federation, likely due to its lack of viability as an independent entity, explains this complete disengagement from international contacts. One survey conducted by the Russian Center for Sociological and Market Studies (SOCIUM) reported in October 2011 that close to 90% of the residents of the territory view positively the integration of South Ossetia into the Russian Federation.⁸⁵ Analysis of attitudes by independent international organizations is difficult due to the aforementioned access problems.

Former *de facto* President Kokoiti and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have both entertained the idea of merging the entity with Russia.⁸⁶ It should be noted, however, that the Kremlin-supported candidate who ran on this campaign promise in the November 2011 elections lost to the opposition.⁸⁷ Until 2004, South Ossetia was economically and geographically more integrated in Georgia's space and it still needs contacts across the boundary line, much more than Abkhazia. Surrounded by a high mountain range and a precarious road to the north across its border with Russia, the entity cannot easily replace Georgia's role in trade or the provision of services. This situation is particularly taxing for the ordinary population that has had to endure a worsening economic situation and poor healthcare. This too represents an opportunity, even if much more limited than in the Abkhazian case, to seek some form of engagement.

Roughly 200,000 ethnic Georgians remain outside Abkhazia, and another 30,000 have left South Ossetia following subsequent waves of displacement as a result of the hostilities.⁸⁸ Their return, which has been prevented by the *de facto* authorities, will significantly change the composition of public attitudes in the two break-away entities. The expulsion of a major ethnic group from both territories is the primary factor that undermines the entities' claim to legitimacy.

The new generations of Abkhazians and South Ossetians have not experienced a time of contact with Georgia. As experts note, emerging elites in the entities have many preconceptions and their knowledge of the conflicts is based on media narratives of the "other" and no personal experience.⁸⁹ Reducing this separation will be a main precondition for the restoration of trust.

V. Public Diplomacy or Selling Policy: Georgia's Engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia

1. A history of overlooking the people level

Most scholars agree that Georgia has sought to reduce the conflicts to their geopolitical dimension of a confrontation between Georgia

and Russia at the expense of their local, intercommunity vector. This view is shared by international observers, as well as some Georgian analysts, who note that Tbilisi aimed to internationalize the conflicts into a Georgia-Russia stand-off and neglected the significance of the deep-seated political, social and identity issues in Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian relations and the politics and public sentiment in the two entities.⁹⁰

This reframing of the conflicts can easily be observed in Tbilisi's official rhetoric. When tensions escalated in South Ossetia in 2004, President Saakashvili claimed that the crisis "is not a problem between Georgians and Ossetians. This is a problem between Georgia and Russia."⁹¹ Shortly before the war in 2008, Saakashvili gave a televised appeal to Abkhazians and South Ossetians proposing a peace plan and encouraging them to stand together with Georgia against an "aggressive force" that for the past 15 years had made decisions for them and tried to draw them in a conflict with Georgia for its own interests.⁹²

While Moscow has played a substantial role in stirring secessionist dynamics as shown earlier, Georgia's relationship with the communities in the two entities is an equally important component if not more critical from the perspective of conflict transformation. The shift in focus from the genuine anxieties and historical grievances of the population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to broader geopolitics is one of the key features of the conflicts and arguably a primary reason for the continued lack of reconciliation.

When he came to office in 2004, Georgia's new president Mikheil Saakashvili sought a quick fix to Georgia's conflicts, pledging to restore territorial integrity within a few years time.⁹³ The new leadership soon lost interest in the more long-term process of confidence building through outreach to the entities. Public diplomacy had become discredited in Georgia's eyes as it had failed to deliver dividends in the resolution of the political status issue.

Over the years, there had been a number of public diplomacy and related confidence-building initiatives supported by the international community. These included dialogue workshops and parallel peace processes that were an indispensable component of the overall peace efforts. A noteworthy track two framework was the so-called Schlaining process between Abkhazia and Georgia led by the British NGO Conciliation Resources and the Berghof Center for Constructive Conflict Management. From 2000 to 2007, it brought together, in an informal capacity, officials, politicians and civil society representatives from both sides to reflect on and analyze jointly the options for long-term conflict settlement. The process complemented the official UN sponsored peace process.⁹⁴ Other projects that facilitated regular and structured dialogue between civil society representatives of Georgia and Abkhazia included an initiative by the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the University of California Irvine, which ran a multi-year series of conferences and publications, as well as a project by the Free University of Brussels.⁹⁵

Equally important was the work of British NGOs LINKS and VERTIC which organized a track two process in the South Ossetian context that in some cases provided the first ever platform for officials from South Ossetia and Georgia to meet outside the formal setting of the official peace talks.⁹⁶ Track two initiatives often featured study tours that helped share knowledge and international experience in conflict resolution from other contexts such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus or Sri Lanka. The advantage of these processes was that they provided a forum for an open discussion free from the constraints of formality or publicity; they facilitated a regular exchange of information and inclusive dialogue among the official parties and civil society representatives; and they allowed a sincere representation of positions not tied to a particular agenda or negotiations deliverables.

In the early 2000s, ties between the communities were active and people-to-people and economic contacts emerged as a central confidence-building mechanism. There were direct transport links between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, markets, and a profitable contraband

trade run by Georgians and Ossetians. The rehabilitation of the railway link from Sochi through Abkhazia to Georgia was being negotiated, and Tbilisi and Sukhumi cooperated in the exploitation of a shared hydropower station.⁹⁷

However, with the formal peace processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia coming to a deadlock, especially towards mid-2006, Georgia lost interest in a parallel public diplomacy track and sought a demonstrable impact of such initiatives on the resolution of the status question. Georgian officials disengaged from track two dialogue initiatives calling them a “waste of time”.⁹⁸ Tbilisi complained that confidence-building and assistance programs led by Western organizations were not helping conflict resolution and were in fact strengthening separatist tendencies. For instance, Georgia began reconsidering its support for a major EU infrastructure rehabilitation program on the divide with Abkhazia that just a few years earlier had been enthusiastically welcomed by the sides as a way to build ties and mutual trust.⁹⁹ Tbilisi started viewing such work as strengthening the de facto regime and questioned the overall usefulness of economic assistance for conflict resolution. Criticism was also leveled against other programs, including NGO dialogue activities.¹⁰⁰

It should be noted that the international community itself had been promoting outreach and public diplomacy as a way to bring dividends at the negotiating table. A UN official made a pertinent observation in 2007 that “assistance has become politicized, in part by the way that the international community has chosen to sell it: as a way to move forward with the political process.”¹⁰¹ He noted that the Abkhazians were approaching assistance as a zero-sum game, while the Georgians were not seeing it in their interest as the political process remained stalled. Thus, when after years of track two efforts political negotiations did not advance, Georgia started reconsidering its support for these approaches.

Shaakashvili’s government chose to adopt a more forceful strategy, one that would employ outreach only as directly relevant in advancing its political interests. One tendency that emerged at the

time was an attempt by Georgia to channel international engagement in the entities. Tbilisi insisted, for instance, that EU projects there be part of budget lines intended for Georgia and negotiated with the government within the bi-lateral EU-Georgia framework for relations.¹⁰² The Independent Fact-Finding Mission into the conflict also notes that after 2004, Georgia preferred to see NGOs as an instrument in articulating Tbilisi's proposals rather than as alternative lines of communication.¹⁰³

While Georgia launched a massive public diplomacy offensive in South Ossetia in 2004—proposing a package including the payment of pensions, free emergency ambulance service, free agricultural fertilizers, humanitarian aid and railway rehabilitation, and launching radio and TV broadcasts in Ossetian—it combined it with political and even military pressure on the South Ossetian *de facto* authorities, including a major anti-smuggling operation that nearly ended in full-scale war.¹⁰⁴ With this carrot and stick strategy Georgia hoped to decisively regain control of the region. Instead, the use of force discredited the public diplomacy and the strategy backfired, planting distrust towards any future outreach. Growing obstacles to freedom of movement, communication and trade as the government put more pressure on the entities were among the other factors obstructing attempts to bring communities together over both conflict divides.

Diplomats and analysts encouraged Saakashvili to seek ways to engage. One renowned scholar stated in 2004 what still rings true today:

“Shevardnadze did little to reach out to the average people in these peripheral regions or to restore their confidence in the recognized government. Reversing that practice should be one of the key criteria by which outside powers judge Saakashvili's leadership. [...] Saakashvili has a chance to change Shevardnadze's dismal legacy. But that will require statesmanship in the purest sense of the word, including articulating a clear case for why residents of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and any other part of the country should think of their

future as lying within a state controlled by Tbilisi. Continued kvetching about territorial integrity and the nefarious designs of the Russian Federation will only alienate the secessionists further.”¹⁰⁵

In 2007, the U.S. Special Envoy for Kosovo urged Tbilisi not to make the same mistake as Belgrade had in refusing to engage.¹⁰⁶

Georgia’s contradictory policies took place in parallel to the gradual integration of the entities into Russia. The process culminated in March 2008 with Russia’s unilateral withdrawal from the CIS economic and military sanctions on Abkhazia and with the April instructions by President Putin to establish relations with the de facto authorities in order to provide “substantive, practical assistance to the populations of the unrecognized republics.”¹⁰⁷ This integration with Russia overtook the controlled and limited effort made by Georgia and the international community to engage.

While inflexible in their pursuit of independence, the de facto leadership of the entities was still ready to negotiate with Tbilisi in 2005. They reportedly sought increased connectivity with Georgia through economic links, infrastructure and other projects.¹⁰⁸ By 2007, however, Georgia reported that the Abkhazians had started blocking contacts, allegedly on the recommendation of “Russian supporters”, including study tours and people-to-people links which they were embracing just two years earlier.¹⁰⁹ Georgia continued to raise such concerns until the war. In April 2008, Georgia’s Minister for Reintegration claimed that an “iron curtain” blocking people-to-people contacts had fallen on Georgia’s borders with the entities and that Russia and some Abkhazians were doing all they could to keep it in place.¹¹⁰ He later on noted that the Abkhazians are bent on preserving the status quo and “fear movement of people” that might bring a change.¹¹¹

Shortly before the war, Tbilisi came to the realization of the need for much more profound steps of engagement, without political strings attached. The idea of a “human-centric” policy first emerged at that time. Some of the measures proposed by the Reintegration

ministry included exchanges, cultural programs, reopening railroad and other transport connections, more diplomatic and NGO travel to the regions, a legal framework for trade and easing of the sanctions on Abkhazia.¹¹² Unfortunately, by then all former openings had closed.

By pushing a maximalist political agenda over a short period of time, Tbilisi abandoned confidence building and instead used public diplomacy to sell a coercive policy. This was done at the expense of genuine engagement and failed to result in real dialogue or interdependence. Rhetoric out of Tbilisi didn't help dialogue either by treating the two communities simply as Russia's hostages. Working against the tide of integration of the entities into Russia and the profound distrust on the part of their population, Georgia should have sought to broaden rather than limit public diplomacy and engagement, including by others. By employing public diplomacy only as directly relevant to its policy goals, Tbilisi unnecessarily politicized its outreach. This instrumentalizing of public diplomacy was one of the factors that undercut the effect that confidence-building initiatives could have had. It made it more difficult to implement measures that required cooperation from the two sides and not surprisingly resulted in projects that didn't seem to advance conflict resolution. Georgian officials towards 2006 saw little relevance of the rehabilitation programs in Abkhazia to the overall peace process, but by that point these were among the only initiatives that could be agreed.

2. Back to intercommunity relations? Georgia's engagement through cooperation

Following Georgia's military defeat in the 2008 war with Russia and the political damage of Russia's recognition of the proclaimed independence of the entities, conflict resolution within Georgia's internationally recognized borders became radically more difficult. The loss of all common ground with the entities brought about a certain revision of thinking in Georgia's post-2008 approach to the conflicts. A new feature is that public diplomacy, at least nominally,

became a central track in Georgia's efforts, which refocused from an immediate resolution of the status issue to more long-term restoration of trust.

2.1 Tbilisi's soft power solution

The new approach was developed in Tbilisi's "State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation".¹¹³ Endorsed in January 2010, the strategy lays out Georgia's "human-centric" vision for renewing its links to the break-away entities, restoring dialogue between communities and opening the territories for international contacts. It aims to de-isolate Abkhazia and South Ossetia and offer to their residents the same benefits that are provided to Georgian citizens. The initiative represents a fully-fledged public diplomacy strategy, employing virtually all public diplomacy tools, including a focus on facilitating networks and contacts between non-state actors. It has been presented as Tbilisi's soft power solution to the conflicts.¹¹⁴

The new policy promotes people-to-people contacts through intercommunity projects among war-affected populations and former combatants, youth or professional organizations, among others. It proposes native-language education and scholarships to study in Georgia and abroad to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The latter are also given equal access to free healthcare and social benefits in Georgia and are promised emergency assistance on the territory of the entities. The strategy proposes to establish a legal framework for grassroots trade and special socio-economic zones along the conflict lines. Other overtures include dedicated donors funds to provide grants for implementing organizations and joint business ventures crossing the conflict divides, the restoration of transportation links to enable the movement of goods and people, and legal and administrative measures to allow international travel for the populations of the entities. The strategy will also support human rights in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the work of human rights activists and networks there. It promises to ensure the protection of cultural heritage, language and identity rights.¹¹⁵

Some of the suggested measures—for instance those that seek legal solutions to enable the export of products from the entities to international markets¹¹⁶, travel on internationally recognized documents or the opening to residents of the entities of international educational and exchange programs available to Georgia—carry particular significance down the road given Georgia’s progressive EU integration. If Georgia were to benefit from a free-trade area and visa liberalization with the EU, such mechanisms will provide strong incentives for cooperation.

An Action Plan accompanying the strategy elaborates the practical measures to implement the proposed activities.¹¹⁷ Some of the initiatives are already underway. Under the plan, a status neutral liaison mechanism was set up to serve as a communication link between Tbilisi, the de facto authorities and civil society. Operating under a UN umbrella, the office has reportedly been able to establish good relations on the Abkhazian and Georgian sides and to support project implementation by the international community.¹¹⁸ The Action Plan also provides for neutral—with respect to citizenship status—identity documents to enable residents of the entities to claim the same benefits as those available to Georgian citizens (see below). As part of its media and communications strategy, Georgia has promised free Internet access in the entities and a free laptop computer for first-grade schoolchildren.¹¹⁹

The healthcare sector is one of the areas of greatest potential for engagement. Sophisticated equipment—such as CAT scans or cardiac facilities—and medication like insulin or antiviral drugs are not available in the entities and are expensive in Russia.¹²⁰ According to officials, some 9,000 Abkhazians have already received fully subsidized healthcare in Georgia since the war.¹²¹

Georgia emphasizes the independence of the strategy from the political status question and has formally indicated that it will not seek a settlement of the conflicts until confidence and interdependence between the communities is restored—a goal that is also implicit in the strategy. In presenting the new policy, Georgia’s Minister for

Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili has stressed that security and status are intentionally not featured in the strategy and are issues “of a medium to long-term nature.”¹²² Similarly, Georgia’s Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze has noted Georgia’s readiness to proceed with the newly proposed measures in a status neutral way.¹²³ The strategy takes other important policy steps by committing Georgia to a peaceful solution of the conflicts, acknowledging past mistakes and recognizing the existence of “political differences” with segments of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹²⁴

While Tbilisi’s new approach is a move in the right direction, problems with the strategy’s conceptualization are likely to prevent it from achieving its desired effect. In promoting the initiative, Minister Yakobashvili has aimed to distance it from the government’s reintegration objectives for the territories so as to depoliticize the outreach. Nonetheless and as noted by the minister himself, the strategy is but one pillar of a dual policy that consists of a soft power approach aimed at winning hearts and minds in the entities and a hard line on the non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹²⁵

The strategy doesn’t fail to mention that it is part of Georgia’s overarching determination to achieve full de-occupation and reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These objectives, prominently featured in the preamble and throughout the document as well as its subsequent promotion by the government, undoubtedly undercut Tbilisi’s proclaimed status neutrality. Even if politically prudent, continued reiterations of the goals of “de-occupation and reintegration” will do little to generate openings for engagement. Such references speak louder than subsequent clarifications that “this is a long-term goal, which is not a subject matter of the strategy, but rather an eventual by-product of the confidence and trust that could be built between the war-torn communities.”¹²⁶ Abkhazians have previously expressed interest in many of the strategy’s proposed initiatives—particularly in the field of healthcare, cross-border and NGO contacts—as long as they are not carried out under the heading of reintegration with Georgia.¹²⁷ Avoiding blatant proclamations of

such polarizing goals could have put Tbilisi's strategy on a more solid ground.

Equally problematically, the document openly states that “the primary nature of the conflicts on the territory of Georgia is of an international character”¹²⁸, demonstrating that the fundamentals of Georgia's perspective have changed little since the war. The strategy devotes considerable space to discussing Russia's role in the conflicts and in its very title views Abkhazia and South Ossetia merely through the prism of Russian occupation.¹²⁹ A strategy devoted to engagement with the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would have done better not to dwell on Russia's goals in the region.

Not surprisingly, Abkhazia and South Ossetia met the policy with outright dismissal. Abkhazian de facto President Bagapsh called it “a soft bribery” and threatened to tighten border control to prevent the creation of “a fifth column” in Abkhazia's border regions. He added that the strategy is “a guideline of what Abkhazia should not do” and that Abkhazia will not receive international assistance through Georgia.¹³⁰ Rejecting the reference to Abkhazia as “occupied territory” and Georgia's reintegration objectives, the Abkhazians stated that “such obvious political frameworks make these initiatives of the Georgian authorities absolutely unacceptable for the citizens of Abkhazia.”¹³¹ An altogether positive response by the entities could not have been expected even without the strategy's controversial elements. Nonetheless, if the implementation of the strategy is to have any impact, Georgia should at the very least pursue greater operational neutrality and focus on the wider conflict transformation process rather than continue to be seen to work towards its predefined end goals.

2.2 Status neutral mechanisms and policy bias

Tbilisi developed its new policy in extensive consultation with international and domestic actors, but with little discussion with the entities themselves.¹³² Drafts of the strategy were reportedly shared with the Abkhazians who refused to discuss a strategy that described

Abkhazia as an occupied territory.¹³³ Key practical measures that require buy-in from both sides should have been discussed rather than crafted unilaterally by Tbilisi.

The strategy ties the majority of its overtures to the acceptance by Abkhazia and South Ossetia of status neutral identity and travel documents issued by the government of Georgia. These will be needed for anyone wishing to have access to free healthcare or university education, social benefits and international travel. Possession of a status neutral ID further allows greater freedom of movement in and out of the entities.¹³⁴ According to Georgian officials, acceptance of these documents does not confer Georgian citizenship on their holder and serves solely practical purposes.¹³⁵ The identity documents do not carry Georgian state symbols but they do mention the Georgian Ministry of Interior as the issuing party. The international travel document further includes the Georgian international country code for purposes of repatriation.¹³⁶

Georgia started issuing the new documents in late 2011. One of the main aims of the policy is to counter the use of Russian passports by residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to travel abroad. A number of countries have already accepted the new status neutral travel documents for the issuing of visas, among them the U.S., Japan, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.¹³⁷ The European Commission has also endorsed the documents, though visa policy is in the hands of each EU member state.¹³⁸ Given the support of influential international actors, more countries are likely to follow suit and accept the new documents, opening potentially attractive travel opportunities to the entities.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia have, nevertheless, denounced Tbilisi's overture, noting that it may instead create obstacles to freedom of movement and promote further isolation.¹³⁹ The de facto Abkhazian Foreign Ministry disputed the true neutrality of the documents pointing to the mention of the Georgian country code and rejected Georgia's unilateral action on the issue.¹⁴⁰ Abkhazian de facto President Ankvaab has warned that international organizations

trying to promote the new IDs would be expelled from Abkhazia.¹⁴¹ Moscow too snubbed the initiative, though officials have noted that such moves might have had a better chance at success if Tbilisi had discussed them with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, rather than with the U.S. and the EU.¹⁴²

Considering the strong opposition by the *de facto* authorities to the status neutral documents, it is difficult to imagine how residents of the entities would be able to use them, not least for fear of persecution. If the status neutral documents are enforced as the only legal option to travel abroad, they could indeed limit rather than expand mobility. The issuing of these documents might have a further counterproductive effect if it prompts the *de facto* authorities to tighten border controls and limit freedom of movement. Some analysts have pointed out that those who would be ready to take up these documents would probably rather just receive a regular Georgian passport.¹⁴³ So far mostly students and people seeking medical assistance have made use of the documents.¹⁴⁴ Tbilisi's policy is not to publicize these initiatives and draw attention to holders of the IDs.¹⁴⁵ There have, however, been reports of patients being obliged to accept a status neutral ID before they can receive urgent medical assistance.¹⁴⁶ Such conditionality might undermine the confidence-building effect of healthcare provision and should be discontinued.

A less controversial solution would have been the issuing of truly neutral documents by an international organization in accordance with past practice.¹⁴⁷ Minister for Reintegration Yakobashvili proposed a creative solution such as a UN-issued *laissez-passer* during discussions of the strategy in 2009.¹⁴⁸ This option has evidently been substituted for a much more conservative approach. Neutral travel documents of the *laissez-passer* type had also been discussed following the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in the early 1990s. At the time, the Georgian government rejected the idea.¹⁴⁹ This inflexibility has in part contributed to the subsequent large-scale acceptance of Russian passports by residents of the entities.

All sides should pursue pragmatic solutions enabling international travel and contacts. The case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is unique and there are no immediate parallels with other status-related conflicts in the European neighborhood. Even though Abkhazians would like to draw a comparison with Kosovo and insist on a similar recognition of their passports, the internationally managed process that Kosovo underwent to achieve its current, and still limited, legitimacy—including a series of UN Security Council Resolutions (especially 1244 which put into question Kosovo’s status), a UN administration of the entity as well as compliance with UN-mandated “standards before status” policy on the right to return—puts Kosovo in an entirely different category.¹⁵⁰ Kosovo is also now officially recognized by 91 states. For these reasons, it is unlikely that Abkhazian passports would be accepted internationally any time soon.

The closest comparison that can be drawn is with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) whose population, however, is in a much more privileged position in terms of travel and international contacts. Turkish Cypriots are entitled to EU citizenship and a great many of them have accepted EU passports and IDs issued by the Republic of Cyprus.¹⁵¹ A handful of countries would also issue visas to TRNC passport holders but travel on these documents is otherwise severely restricted.¹⁵² There is a fair amount of international goodwill toward Turkish Cypriots who in 2004 voted in a referendum in favor of an internationally-proposed settlement of the conflict, the so-called Annan plan.

The option of status neutral IDs like a *laissez-passer* or a “temporary travel document” seems most suitable in the Abkhazian context.¹⁵³ As an interim solution acceptance of Russian passports should also be allowed. Such moves can be accompanied by clear statements that they are not done in acquiescence to Russia’s policy in the region, but because of the non-recognition of the independence of the entities. The Georgian issued status neutral documents are a positive step of goodwill, but they should not be imposed as the only travel option if this will result in limiting rather than broadening international contacts.¹⁵⁴

Doubts persist with other aspects of Tbilisi's public diplomacy. The strategy of engagement was introduced against the background of a heavily restrictive regime imposed on Abkhazia and South Ossetia immediately after the war. The border between Georgia and the entities was closed and a new Georgian Law on Occupied Territories criminalized their relations with the outside world. The law placed limitations on the movement of people, economic and other activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁵⁵ The environment for people-to-people contacts remains precarious to this day. Even when possible, crossing of the de facto border is allowed only at a few locations. It often depends on the discretion of the border guards and carries the risk of arbitrary detention from either side.¹⁵⁶ In principle, only residents of the borderline communities, largely ethnic Georgians, are allowed to cross into Georgia¹⁵⁷, which hinders the development of inter-ethnic relations and makes Georgia's public diplomacy with its key target audience—ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetians—highly questionable.

Even though the strategy eased the environment for small-scale cross-border trade, the great risks associated with crossing the borderlines deter economic contacts, undermining another key aspect of Tbilisi's outreach.¹⁵⁸ It is also unclear how Georgia will promote international trade and economic contacts given the prohibition by the Law on Occupied Territories of investment and business in the entities. The strategy seeks dialogue with the Abkhaz diaspora and Georgia has invited Ankara to participate in the implementation of economic and people-to-people initiatives, but Benetton Turkey quickly withdrew plans to open a store in Sukhumi in 2009 after protests by the Georgian government and challenges under the new law.¹⁵⁹ For the time being, the combination of the strategy and the Law on Occupied Territories shapes a process of de-isolation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia only through Georgia. This has invited some to speculate that the new policy is largely window-dressing designed to improve Georgia's international image rather than offer real benefits to the populations in the entities.¹⁶⁰

Tbilisi has also adopted a regulation that places all international and civil society activities in the entities under the close scrutiny of the Georgian government, potentially compromising the neutrality of the actors and their initiatives. According to these new “modalities” for engagement, Tbilisi has to approve all projects to be implemented in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and receive regular 6-monthly reports on their progress. Notifications and project descriptions are to be submitted to the Georgian government before the start of any activity and regular consultations should be carried out to align policy and priorities.¹⁶¹

The government has insisted that they do not want to limit the work of international actors and NGOs that promote confidence building but that they do want to ensure that only “impartial” and “legitimate” organizations are allowed to operate in the territories.¹⁶² While some of the government’s anxieties can be understood, the required close association of donors and implementing organizations with Tbilisi threatens the limited space for operational neutrality of public diplomacy. This is all the more so as Abkhazia and South Ossetia reject initiatives carried out under the umbrella of Georgia’s engagement strategy.

The current government has been wary of allowing activities that would serve to strengthen societies and governance in the entities, seeing them as reinforcing their de facto statehood. They have therefore insisted on measures that focus on joint projects on both sides of the divide. Georgian officials have in the past been critical of NGO work saying that it has helped create a civil society elite, particularly in Abkhazia, and done nothing to bring the two communities together.¹⁶³ Some Georgian opposition leaders are open to more profound engagement, including talking to the authorities in Abkhazia and relaxing the legal regime on the entities. They note that the non-recognition policy is not under threat and this provides space for more active outreach. They also believe that more opportunities should be given to NGOs and foundations to work in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and develop their societies.¹⁶⁴

Tbilisi has for the time being adopted a permissive approach in the implementation of its regulation on engagement in the entities. According to information provided by the Georgian government, until now 94 project proposals have been submitted in the framework of the “modalities” for engagement. Of these, 60 proposals focused on Abkhazia, 30 on South Ossetia and four on both regions. All 94 received “non-objection orders”.¹⁶⁵ The final version of the regulation was also substantially improved to remove more contentious requirements included in the initial draft such as placing project funding under the management of the Georgian government. Still, some controversial elements remain. The modalities for instance require that if a project entails international travel by residents of the territories, it should be exercised either by a Georgian passport or by a neutral travel document. This might jeopardize valuable track two initiatives, particularly given that in the case of South Ossetia civil society dialogues have to be carried out in third countries due to the issue of access. The modalities also demand that terms in project documents follow conventional Georgian usage and transliteration which might unnecessarily antagonize some local partners.¹⁶⁶

The international community welcomed Tbilisi’s outreach as the right approach towards transforming the conflicts, but cautioned against the restrictive legal regime imposed on the entities.¹⁶⁷ The EU, U.S. and others finance a large number of initiatives carried out under the Georgian strategy.¹⁶⁸ The EU formally launched its own policy of non-recognition and engagement, following through with many of the same ideas.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

The launching of a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy demonstrates a shift to a policy of attraction in Georgia’s post-2008 approach to the conflicts. This is a step in the right direction but the strategy is still marred by too many mixed messages and little realism. This has discredited some of its valuable initiatives and put into question the overall aim of Georgia’s policy. The combination of public diplomacy with a number of restrictive measures shows

that Georgia has still not fully embraced a policy of engagement with the entities. Rather, its public diplomacy retains some inherent contradictions as Tbilisi wavers between outreach and isolation, and enticing and coercive strategies. Georgia also persists in its attempt to oversee and channel contacts with the entities with the risk of discrediting neutral efforts at conflict transformation. The basic premise—that Georgia’s conflict is primarily with Russia—remains in place and hinders reconciliation.

Georgia’s outreach takes place in a challenging environment much of which is beyond Tbilisi’s control. This is all the more a reason to avoid placing contacts under a mutually-exclusive political framework. Despite an attempt to shift attention away from the thorny issue of status, Georgia’s political agenda creeps into its new outreach and undermines any honest effort at rebuilding trust without preconditions. The pre-formalized end goal of “engagement” makes public diplomacy resemble a sales pitch for a unilaterally defined policy. With only one-way communication and no real “cooperation” in defining common goals, it will be difficult for the strategy to succeed.

Given the history of antagonism, Georgia should undertake a long-term process of rebuilding confidence that will be best supported by non-politicized practical measures to widen its connectivity with the entities. It should continue with a permissive regime of engagement and provide even more space for public diplomacy by others, given the intrinsic limitations to its own efforts. A policy of de-isolation only in Georgia’s proper direction and excluding other openings will be self-defeating.

VI. Softer Power as a Conflict Resolution Strategy: The EU’s Approach to the Conflicts

The EU uses soft power as its primary instrument for conflict resolution in Georgia. This approach has to do with the EU’s traditional role as a development actor, as well as its policy of promoting political change and reform in its neighborhood in exchange for

deeper integration. In its relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Brussels too has defined a policy of engagement that aims to increase the EU's footprint and leverage, provide an alternative to ties with Russia and broaden the space and venues for conflict resolution. This, as described by the EU Special Representative (EUSR) to the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, is "what the EU does best, namely to use its soft power to nudge societies in the direction of Europe while fostering a stronger European identity."¹⁶⁹

The EU has a longstanding record of supporting confidence-building and people-to-people initiatives in Georgia and the entities. Until August 2008, the European Commission was the largest donor supporting rehabilitation and civil society projects in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁷⁰ At the same time, until the 2008 war the EU did not have much of a security and political profile in the region. Projecting only soft and no hard power, Europe appeared a weaker player in the shared neighborhood with Russia, but on the other hand, maintained a degree of impartiality in the eyes of the conflict parties. Unlike the U.S. for example, its history of relatively apolitical and neutral engagement with all sides places Europe in a better position to do public diplomacy for conflict transformation.

When working on the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the EU has tended to adopt an inoffensive, development centric logic, focusing on bottom-up non-politicized initiatives. Particularly before the 2008 war, this translated into a strong emphasis on improving living conditions for IDPs, rehabilitation of essential infrastructure and socio-housing support. Some initiatives targeted the root causes of conflict more directly and aimed to build ties between the communities on the two sides of the conflict divide through joint economic and infrastructure development, information and culture sharing programs and dialogue platforms that addressed competing narratives.¹⁷¹ In Abkhazia, which offered a more open environment, a number of public diplomacy initiatives were launched in civil society capacity building, inter-community dialogue, and support for inter-ethnic youth and women's networks where NGOs played a key role in project development and implementation.¹⁷²

Despite the relatively harmless nature of these initiatives and their benefits to all communities, even before the 2008 war public diplomacy suffered from attempts by both the de facto authorities and Tbilisi to control outside interventions. In South Ossetia for instance, representatives of the two sides, who also participated in the official peace settlement processes, sat on a steering committee that approved all projects launched on the ground. This reinforced the EU's focus on purely development initiatives, where political agreement by both sides could easily be obtained, while it limited more grassroots and intercommunity work. It further made confidence building and public diplomacy dependent on the ability of the political sides to find common ground. As an EU official managing post-conflict response observes, "By directly linking political interests to project management, project implementation became hostage of political disagreement between the Georgian and South Ossetian sides."¹⁷³ This made public diplomacy in South Ossetia dependent on the political mood and particularly vulnerable following the clash in 2008.

The 2008 war changed the environment for public diplomacy significantly. It sealed off the territories, making outside engagement difficult, while Russian influence increased exponentially. Today almost all EU-funded projects inside South Ossetia have been terminated, while projects in Abkhazia face multiple challenges due to the changed political environment and Abkhazia's declaration of independence. Heavy Russian investment in all sectors in the entities seriously undermines the EU's developmental approach, making EU assistance appear minuscule. Even though the EU remains the largest international donor in Abkhazia, financing about 80% of international projects there, its funding of about €15-16 million in the period after the war doesn't come anywhere close to the almost €460 million provided by Russia since 2009.¹⁷⁴

Following the war, the EU elevated its political and security profile by brokering the August 2008 ceasefire agreement, deploying a monitoring mission and acting as one of the mediators in the Geneva international discussions between the parties. Europe also provided

Georgia with a major post-war assistance package of up to €500 million.¹⁷⁵ The EU has yet to transform this strengthened position, as well as its soft power, into tangible reconciliation benefits. It has only partially addressed the new realities with its revamped policy towards the conflicts.

1. The policy of non-recognition and engagement

In response to the changed situation on the ground and in tune with Georgia's own move towards greater engagement with the entities, the EU in December 2009 adopted a policy of "non-recognition and engagement".¹⁷⁶ It is addressed at Abkhazia and South Ossetia and seeks to open space for interaction with their populations and the local authorities while precluding that such contact could entail a change in the EU's position on the non-recognition of the entities' proclaimed independence. Thus, the policy seeks to find pragmatic solutions to influence conflict dynamics on the ground by disassociating them from the issue of status.

Non-recognition and engagement embraces public diplomacy in that it strives to de-isolate the territories and offer an alternative to relations with Russia by interacting with their populations in non-formal ways through civil society and people-to-people contacts and economic ties. The latter are expected to foster alternative political perspectives and a diversification of narratives on conflict as a precondition for the long-term goal of conflict transformation. The policy also aims to promote such linkages between Georgia proper and Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The document outlining the parameters for non-recognition and engagement is classified but EU leaders have on various occasions indicated some of its aspects. When first discussing the policy with Abkhazian de facto President Sergei Bagapsh in 2010, the EUSR for the South Caucasus and main architect of the policy, Peter Semneby, placed special emphasis on economic projects and exchange opportunities, noting joint interests in the area of transport communications, particularly the rebuilding of Abkhazia's railway

network, and the establishment of intensive student exchange programs.¹⁷⁷ Later on he also highlighted small-scale business development, healthcare and IDP assistance.¹⁷⁸ In its Report on the EU Strategy for the South Caucasus, the European Parliament advocates for the use of cross-border programs, people-to-people contacts and freedom of movement. It also stresses the fact that the isolation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is counterproductive to conflict resolution.¹⁷⁹ The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, also endorsed the approach based on reaching out to the populations in the regions through confidence building and people contacts.¹⁸⁰ Ideas raised on other occasions include the opening of an information office or cooperation through technology and know-how transfer.¹⁸¹

Despite this cross-institutional agreement on its main direction, more than two years after its launch the policy remains a sensitive issue and has not been filled with much content beyond the broad acknowledgement of the need to engage. The policy's concrete aims, resources and plan of action have not been clearly defined and articulated. Most recently, in a foreign ministers statement from February 2012, the EU reiterated some of its earlier ideas in a more concrete and explicit fashion. It stressed that it will pursue "greater EU visibility in the regions"—perhaps suggesting the opening of some form of presence on the ground—and "active work to promote economic and trade relations, facilitate travel and start transformative and approximation work."¹⁸² The latter likely implies greater use of sectoral cooperation to strengthen ties and support confidence building.¹⁸³ Implementation, however, is lagging. For the most part, the EU's engagement continues at the level of small-scale dialogue projects and a focus on post-conflict rehabilitation.

A number of noteworthy public diplomacy initiatives have been put in place under the EU's newly launched Confidence Building and Early Response Mechanism (COBERM) with a budget of €4.87 million over two years from 2010 to 2012. It offers quickly accessible funds specifically for projects that enhance people-to-people contacts across the conflict divide, promote a culture of tolerance and build

increased capacities of civil society, media or marginalized groups.¹⁸⁴ When added to earlier funding for confidence building and people-to-people contacts, the overall amount that the EU has spent on public diplomacy initiatives for conflict resolution in the years after the war comes up to over €7.3 million, making public diplomacy a main track in the EU's approach, though still insignificant.¹⁸⁵

Some projects financed under COBERM focus on small-scale regional economic initiatives such as the joint production of tea, cheese and wine, and the creation of a common "Caucasian" brand for the products.¹⁸⁶ Others promote dialogue activities for Georgian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian civil society and youth who meet in third countries, or undertake study visits to other conflict regions such as Transdnistria (Moldova). A Georgian and South Ossetian women project aims to develop the peacemaking potential of women's networks.¹⁸⁷ EU funding also supports peace journalism as in the case of the bilingual newspaper *Kartlosi* which publishes articles by Georgian and Ossetian journalists focusing on daily life in the conflict region.¹⁸⁸ Conflict resolution is also promoted through policy dialogues such as a Georgia-Russia expert-level policy forum, as well as civil society roundtables and participatory conflict analysis that craft joint recommendations to the EU on conflict transformation and resolution.¹⁸⁹

However, the majority of the engagement activities remain limited in scope and are largely confined to a small circle of active civil society participants with little trickle-down effect to broader segments of society. Experts and NGO representatives have criticized the international community for failing to maximize its impact, saying that it continues to engage the same "small, closed and non-transparent group of people" in public diplomacy for years.¹⁹⁰ While today there are markedly more dialogue and people-to-people initiatives compared to the predominantly developmental focus of the past, there is still little tangible outreach to the populations at large and the EU's initiatives lack visibility. They cannot rival Russian influence neither in terms of mass impact to affect popular narratives, nor by generating sufficient economic interest.

Some civil society representatives report difficulty finding participants for programming, particularly in South Ossetia, due to apprehension about contacts with NGOs and for fear of persecution by either community or the authorities.¹⁹¹ It should be noted that even though South Ossetia remains heavily isolated and arguably without any scope for decision-making independent of Moscow, the de facto authorities in Abkhazia welcomed the policy of non-recognition and engagement pragmatically with a willingness to seize on the opportunity for contacts and acquiescence towards the line on non-recognition.

In talks with the EU Special Representative in mid-July 2010, Abkhazian de facto President Bagapsh said that they “understood” Brussels’ policy and are open to dialogue as long as there is progress. De facto Prime Minister Sergei Shamba expressed particular interest in educational exchanges and called also for the development of business ties. Shamba also stressed that Abkhazia is ready to develop economic, cultural, scientific and other relations with the EU without recognition and that they understand well the complexity of the issue of recognition.¹⁹²

In the past, Abkhazian officials have reportedly complained that the West was giving them no alternative to relations with Russia which was not “the best option”.¹⁹³ Back in 2008, de facto President Bagapsh told EUSR Semneby that he was interested in opening Abkhazia to Europe and the rest of the world and welcomed closer EU involvement, particularly economic development projects. He cautioned, however, that Europe needed to act quickly, implying that Russia was moving fast to consolidate its political and economic hold over Abkhazia.¹⁹⁴ Local analysts have pointed out that there are areas in which Europe could play a significant role such as in diversification of contacts and sharing of practices in education, development of the judicial system, promoting good governance and strengthening democratic institutions.¹⁹⁵ Abkhazian parliamentarians are said to have expressed interest in modeling European legislation and developing ties with the European Parliament.¹⁹⁶ There is strong popular receptivity to the policy too. As pointed out earlier,

Abkhazians would like more travel and exchange opportunities with Europe and are interested in European culture and education.

If the EU intends to build leverage through soft power, it has to offer these kinds of more attractive, sought-after opportunities for engagement. Time is of the essence as the new Abkhazian leadership is beginning to lose interest in a policy that has not delivered in over two years. In early 2012, the recently-elect de facto President Alexander Ankvab told the visiting EU Head of Delegation to Tbilisi that the Abkhazians are “tired of this type of diplomatic manners and are coming to an unavoidable conclusion that such relations with the European structures are meaningless.”¹⁹⁷ Abkhazia is increasingly drawing comparisons between the significant amounts of money they receive from Russia that dwarfs anything that the EU has offered so far.¹⁹⁸ While the previous leadership was known for its “multi-vector” foreign policy approach, the current de facto authorities are signaling that the window of opportunity for engagement might be quickly closing.

The primary obstacle to the EU’s approach has been the difficulty of accommodating both the non-recognition and engagement aspects of its policy. Chief among the challenges are Georgia’s reservations towards international engagement with the entities for fear that it would lead down a slippery slope to their legitimization. Georgian authorities have pressed the EU to put a stronger emphasis on non-recognition, rather than engagement, in its policy and to “repeatedly condemn the objective reality of occupation” of the entities by Russia.¹⁹⁹ Undoubtedly, Georgia’s preoccupation with this issue has to do with the international community’s own failure to counteract Russia’s expansionist policy in the entities or enforce the EU-brokered ceasefire agreement. Still, the EU should not repeat Tbilisi’s mistake of politicizing its outreach. As the four years after the 2008 war have now shown, the principle of non-recognition is firmly entrenched internationally. With its own clear position on the issue, the EU should dissociate as much as possible its practical engagement from the subject of status and use all the operational space that the dual-pillar policy provides in order to support a wider conflict transformation process.

While the Georgian and the EU strategies contain many of the same elements, any linkage between the two risks compromising the impartiality of Europe's outreach. The timing of the release of the two policies and the cooperation in their formulation already stoked suspicion in Abkhazia that Tbilisi was seeking to absorb and control Europe's outreach within its own. Analysts claimed that the Georgian strategy is an attempt to "seize the European initiative and place it under Georgian control" and threatened that if "the European strategy continues to be closely intertwined with the Georgian state strategy, there can be no progress towards a real de-isolation of Abkhazia."²⁰⁰

The EU has welcomed the Georgian strategy of engagement and acknowledged that it is in line with its own policy, but it should also take extra care to distance its efforts from Tbilisi's.²⁰¹ When prompted about the efficacy of their strategy, some EU officials respond by noting Georgia's willingness to do more on the ground and its permissive approach towards engagement by others.²⁰² While Georgia's openness is welcome, these responses demonstrate the blurring lines between the two policies. The EU should preserve the distinct identity and independence of its outreach. It should also continue to insist on mutually acceptable implementing rules that would allow independent EU engagement and assistance in the break-away regions.²⁰³

Georgian officials are adamant that Georgia would have a say on activities undertaken by the EU in the entities which are part of Georgia's sovereign territory.²⁰⁴ While the latter point is not questioned, one of the main challenges to the future sustainability of the EU's efforts will be to persuade Georgia that autonomous international engagement is in its own long-term interest. Allowing a diversity of external relations and channels of communication that are not perceived as biased is the only conceivable alternative to further alienation from Georgia and a complete absorption of the entities by Russia.

EU institutions should also avoid the sides' highly polarized rhetoric. One recent counterexample is a European Parliament resolution adopted in November 2011 that called on EU institutions to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "occupied territories".²⁰⁵ This move caused damage to the EU's image as a fair broker, especially in the eyes of those who misinterpreted the resolution to signify official EU policy. As one Abkhazian commentator noted, "The adopted resolution strikes yet another blow on the negative image of Europe and the West as a whole that has already formed in the consciousness of the people of Abkhazia. The majority, who do not scrutinize the refinements and nuances of European politics with regard to the Southern Caucasus, are more and more disposed against Western influence in their country. As a result, the legitimacy of any possible joint-action in the sphere of culture, education and democratic development might be lost."²⁰⁶

In addition to overcoming conceptual hurdles, the EU would need to further improve the practical mechanisms through which it delivers its policy in the entities. Given that development of systematic contacts with the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been agreed as one of the foremost priorities of the strategy, it is regrettable that no working solution has been found to the issue of travel to Europe. A more flexible and pragmatic approach is needed from all sides. The EU should work closely with Georgia and the *de facto* authorities to achieve a mutually acceptable agreement on a travel document by promoting the option of neutral IDs, including such issued by an international organization.

Flexibility will be required to develop the economic aspects of the policy that carry a great deal of Europe's soft power. Here, examples from other contexts might prove useful. These include the arrangements for legal economic activity across the Green Line dividing the island of Cyprus. The Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce has been authorized by the European Commission in agreement with the Republic of Cyprus to certify goods in a useful precedent that economic activity does not constitute recognition.²⁰⁷ In Moldova's break-away region of Transnistria, the European

Commission provides trade incentives to the companies who accept to register with authorities in Chisinau.²⁰⁸ Establishing business links with the entities would not only create a degree of economic interdependence, but also forge regular dialogue with elites and opinion makers. This could have a beneficial spillover effect on society at large.

The EU should as a priority increase its own visibility in the entities and facilitate access to information by opening a presence on the ground. This could take the form of an EU information office which does not need a legal basis, a European Commission status neutral Liaison Office, similar to the one in Kosovo, or a Program Support Office as the one in Northern Cyprus.²⁰⁹ Such an outpost would facilitate contacts and raise greater awareness of EU policies, values and opportunities for engagement.

The EU's engagement policy is implemented in a difficult context with little cooperation from the side of the *de facto* authorities or Russia. While all avenues for engagement should be pursued, the policy should be carefully calibrated not to foster a sense of entitlement in the entities. Engagement on the people level is prudent at this stage but more outreach to the *de facto* authorities should not be offered without reciprocal concessions. For instance, access by the EU Monitoring Mission to the entities is one such condition to be put to the *de facto* leaderships.

The Abkhazians complain of shrinking travel opportunities, visa restrictions and lack of contacts, but they too have taken an uncompromising stance not only by rejecting the status neutral documents issued by Georgia, but by refusing to even accept visas in their Russian passports issued by EU officials accredited to Tbilisi.²¹⁰ EU diplomats have noted that their own access to the entity is irregular and high-ranking officials have reportedly been refused entry.²¹¹ *De facto* President Ankvab in meetings with European ambassadors recently stated that a new format of relations was necessary that doesn't go through Tbilisi and warned that Abkhazia might sever contacts with European officials accredited to Georgia.²¹² If the *de*

facto authorities would rather deepen Abkhazia's isolation, but not compromise on such symbolic issues, engagement with Europe would undoubtedly become difficult.

The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy and the tensions between its two pillars demonstrate the challenges to public diplomacy but also the significance that the parties attribute to such engagement. Both sides' efforts to channel and control international outreach by implication are indicative of the potential of public diplomacy. For the time being, however, the policy needs to be substantially reinforced in order to promote the intended linkages that are sufficiently dynamic and broad to have a tangible effect on the political discourses in the entities. In addition to developing the policy's own toolbox, there are complementary channels for increasing the EU's soft power projection in the region.

2. EU soft power in the neighborhood: The policy of Enlargement-light

The EU engages in the South Caucasus also within the framework of its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) that offers greater integration to the EU's neighbors to the south and east in exchange for political and economic reform.²¹³ Within this broader policy, the EU launched a more targeted regional Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative shortly after the 2008 war with the goal of counterbalancing what it perceived as increasing Russian assertiveness, not just in Georgia, but in the shared neighborhood on the whole. The policy aimed to indicate to the EU's eastern neighbors its intention to play a stronger role in the region. The war between Georgia and Russia provided a primary impetus for the initiative. As stated, the policy responded to "the need for a clearer signal of EU commitment following the conflict in Georgia and its broader repercussions."²¹⁴

This greater focus on the eastern border is driven by many of the EU's new member states, traditionally more wary of Russia's influence in the neighborhood. Sweden and Poland co-drafted the policy that offers the prospect of closer ties and greater political and

economic integration to the EU's six eastern neighbors—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine—in exchange for democratic and market-oriented reforms.

The Eastern Partnership and the Neighborhood Policy are the EU's regional soft power instruments. They aim to shape a process of democratization and alignment with the EU by enticing partners with the prospect of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, visa-free travel and closer political ties. As these partnerships stop short of offering full membership in the EU, they are sometimes referred to as Enlargement-light.

Despite its soft power character, Enlargement-light offers a political and economic alternative to Russia in the neighborhood and as such has security implications. According to the assessment of a Swiss diplomat, “profound EU integration is every bit as important as Article 5. Moscow is ‘agnostic’ on European Neighborhood Policy, in part because it has seriously underestimated the impact of soft power.”²¹⁵ Indeed, many of the soft power mechanisms under the ENP can be strategically used for the purpose of conflict transformation.

In its revamped Neighborhood Policy announced in May 2011 and its latest Council Conclusions, the EU committed to enhancing its involvement in solving protracted conflicts and its support for confidence building and outreach to break-away territories. It acknowledged that many of the instruments used in the neighborhood to promote economic integration and sectoral cooperation could also be mobilized to support confidence building and conflict resolution objectives.²¹⁶ The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus has stated that “approximation is the EU's line on the engagement and non-recognition policy”, signaling readiness for wide-ranging cooperation with the entities.²¹⁷ This is an important realization and the EU should now take practical steps to mainstream conflict resolution in the Neighborhood Policy, which provides a rich template for outreach. This can allow for a more broad-based and profound model of engagement.

The Eastern Partnership's multilateral track offers a number of regional public diplomacy schemes that could be helpful as engagement platforms with the entities. The EU could include civil society actors from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in its regional Civil Society Forum that has gained considerable ground and now regroups more than 200 organizations from EU member states and partner countries across the eastern neighborhood.²¹⁸ Another noteworthy multilateral public diplomacy initiative is the EU-Neighborhood East Parliamentary Assembly (EuroNest), a forum for parliamentary dialogue between the European Parliament and the six eastern partners.²¹⁹ Organized around the regional multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership, such frameworks offer a less controversial venue for engagement with conflict territories and would allow for a more neutral forum for discussion as they include actors from across the region and a variety of perspectives. The regional approach would also make these initiatives less problematic with Georgia or Russia. They could provide a useful venue for experience sharing on peacebuilding from the region's many conflicts.

Some of the bilateral people-to-people partnerships with Georgia can also be extended to the conflict regions. For instance, status neutral measures should be examined to provide scholarships and university cooperation schemes to the entities under the EU's Erasmus Mundus and Tempus programs in place with the rest of Georgia. The recently launched Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy that support capacities and increased political participation by non-state actors in partner countries could be opened to civil society organizations in break-away entities. A strong and diverse civil society can play a tempering role on one-sided or radical perspectives and would by definition bolster abilities to manage competing discourses. The Endowment's set-up as an independent grant-making organization formally outside the EU system would further allow it to act in a status neutral way.²²⁰

The EU currently supports many similar projects in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but this is done under its crisis response instruments that allow rapid, short-term mobilization of funds,

rather than through programmed funding for the neighborhood.²²¹ Implementation of NGO projects in the conflict regions under the ENP has been problematic because of the need to receive host country approval and formalize the activities under the bilateral EU-Georgia Action Plan.²²² However, given the likely long-term engagement that would be needed to bring conflict transformation, the EU should look for ways to mainstream conflict resolution into its standing policy towards the neighborhood by making ENP funding more easily available for projects in the entities and applying ENP public diplomacy instruments for conflict resolution. The EU should also insist with the Georgian government in the development and implementation of such programming along an EU-driven agenda.

Once Abkhazia and South Ossetia become more active participants in EU programming and are better anchored in a framework of dialogue with the EU, the leverage of Enlargement-light, and particularly the prospects for greater economic integration, could be used to achieve progress on conflict resolution. Opportunities could be offered to the entities under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) currently being negotiated with Georgia. This could entail access to the EU's internal market after proper certification and registration of products as outlined earlier. Thus, the DCFTA could be used as a confidence-building measure to provide incentives to businesses that register in Tbilisi, as in the Transdnistria example, or following the options proposed in Georgia's Action Plan. Such long-term forms of cooperation should be discussed with all sides concerned in due course.

In the area of international travel, the EU should ensure that its regional visa policies are applied in a conflict-sensitive manner. Visa-free travel is one of the most coveted and tangible benefits for the populations of any of the EU's eastern neighbors, including Russia. Georgia has recently started a visa liberalization dialogue with the EU that would lead to visa-free travel in the long term.²²³ This is an important step that will, down the line, increase Georgia's attractiveness to the secessionist entities and contribute to Georgian soft power.

This is all the more so as Russia's visa liberalization process with the EU is much more advanced than that of any other eastern European partner. Russia already in 2003 received the promise of visa liberalization as a long-term goal before any of the other eastern neighbors.²²⁴ The EU-Russia Summit of December 2011 launched the implementation of a set of common steps towards visa-free short-term travel.²²⁵

While EU visa-free travel with Russia would be a positive development on its own merit, if granted sooner and with greater lenience than to other eastern partners, it would reward Russia's controversial passportization policies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in Moldova and Ukraine, raising the value of a Russian passport over those issued by the sovereign authorities. Such a move would be detrimental to conflict resolution efforts. The EU's Russia and EaP visa policies should be harmonized and linked to clear and balanced conditionality for all partners, including cooperation on regional conflicts. The EU needs to use the leverage of visa-free travel—one of its strongest soft power tools—strategically with a view to bringing long-term stability to its neighborhood and not be driven by short-term political expediency.

From a strategic standpoint, the greatest challenge to the impact of EU soft power in its neighborhood will be the ability of its member states to establish a principled and united position in the relationship with Russia. With its growing dependence on Moscow in the conditions of economic crisis, the EU has shown that it is instead ready for a pragmatic, compromising policy. A letter from Germany and Poland to EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, in November 2011 stressed Russia's political influence and economic importance for the EU over its problematic democracy and human rights record, recommending a strengthening of relations.²²⁶ In the context of flawed elections for the State Duma and protests on the streets of Moscow (and other cities) in December 2011²²⁷, leaders at the EU-Russia summit praised the EU's strategic partnership with Moscow and celebrated the opportunities for enhanced ties following Russia's WTO membership.²²⁸

A certain division among EU member states has taken shape, particularly when it comes to the bloc's approach to its eastern neighbors. A camp composed mainly of the EU's eastern and Nordic members insists on a conditions-based relationship with Russia in exchange for reform and security concessions, whereas a "positive interdependence" group of countries led by Germany and France are increasingly pursuing a more pragmatic course in relations. At the May 2010 EU-Russia summit on Rostov-on-Don that agreed an EU-Russia modernization partnership and launched discussions on a visa-free regime, the former pressed for spending wisely the "currency" of visa-free travel, while the latter placed the emphasis on the economic benefits of improved ties with Russia.²²⁹

These divisions between EU members are easily exploited by Moscow and are one of the reasons why the international community has found itself completely incapable to stem the rapidly expanding Russian military, political and economic presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Perhaps most tellingly, the Eastern Partnership itself was only allowed to go forward when in 2008 the camp favorable towards Moscow received assurances that the EU will resume friendly relations with Russia despite its military action against Georgia in South Ossetia. As Wikileaks revealed, "France threatened to stall the Eastern Partnership initiative if the Swedes and others opposed to 'business as usual' with Moscow refused to resume EU-Russia talks. [...] Once the decision on talks on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement [between the EU and Russia] was made, Sweden and Poland, co-drafters of the initiative, were given a green light to 'move ahead'."²³⁰

3. Conclusions and recommendations

The EU's soft power as a conflict resolution strategy in Georgia has a mixed record. Over two years after the launch of the EU's non-recognition and engagement strategy, little impact can be observed on the ground and the policy's content remains unclear. This should not detract from the fact that for the time being public diplomacy remains the only viable track to pursue conflict resolution

in a generally non-permissive legal and political context and stalled international agenda. The EU's strategy rests on sound premises, but more needs to be done to ensure its practical delivery.

The EU has yet to maximize its weight as a regional actor and build sufficient influence. It has a lot to offer by way of soft power—travel, education, trade, know-how—but it has not devised policies that are flexible and proactive enough to realize the potential of this offer. Innovative approaches are needed to ensure that people-to-people contacts take place. The EU has on its borders not two, but five status-related conflicts, all of which are characterized by similar challenges of isolation. An effective soft power strategy for conflict resolution would have a broad significance, not just for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also in Nagorno-Karabakh, Northern Cyprus and Transdnistria.

From a public diplomacy standpoint, the EU is best positioned to play the role of a fair broker in the region. This position should be strengthened by avoiding unnecessary politicizing of its efforts. The EU should focus on facilitating public diplomacy on the ground through a balanced engagement with communities on both sides, rather than on high-profile political statements that are likely to exacerbate existing disputes. In the interest of maintaining the needed credibility, the EU should pursue its own public diplomacy agenda.

If it intends to provide a credible alternative to relations with Russia, Brussels will have to broaden and strengthen the appeal of its policies and seek complementarity in its approaches. For the purposes of long-term conflict resolution, the EU should mainstream its work on conflict in its long-standing soft power policies of Enlargement-light. The multilateral platforms for engagement in the neighborhood can prove particularly useful in this regard.

In order to establish leverage, the EU would need to begin to speak with one voice in its relations with its eastern partners and Russia. The latter will remain a central actor for conflict resolution

in the region. While Europe should recognize Moscow's legitimate interests in the neighborhood, it should maintain a balanced line in its relations with Russia and the other eastern partners, and if necessary raise the cost for Russia's, and Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's, lack of cooperation on conflict resolution.

VII. Conclusions and Lessons for Public Diplomacy

The cases of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia demonstrate that public diplomacy can serve as a primary avenue for tackling hard security issues such as conflict transformation. This approach has been adopted by both Georgia and the EU and remains the only dynamic track for working towards the peaceful resolution of the conflicts.

The informal nature of public diplomacy is of particular value as it permits practical and non-politicized options for engagement. Public diplomacy works on the level of people-to-people interaction and thus targets the wider conflict transformation process without political preconditions. This provides a solid basis for confidence building.

The growing interest in the role of public diplomacy for conflict resolution and its relevance for a number of protracted self-determination conflicts should stimulate a broader discussion on the parameters of "engagement and non-recognition" strategies. Policy debates would benefit from more formalized definitions of what entails non-politicized engagement, what is recognition and how to widen the space for operational neutrality—all aspects that have been hotly contested in the context of engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The example of these conflicts demonstrates the difficulties in keeping public diplomacy truly depoliticized and balanced. All conflict parties have tended to instrumentalize engagement for symbolic or concrete political dividends. As the analysis has shown, public diplomacy is undermined when subjected to short-term political expediency or when promoting a unilaterally defined

political agenda. The same is true of attempts to co-opt or control public diplomacy actors.

Public diplomacy is an important conflict transformation track but not without limitations and it should be considered realistically. It cannot be expected that processes of a much shorter timeframe, such as formal negotiations or other concrete political concessions, will be impacted by what is an incremental approach of building an atmosphere of trust. Public diplomacy should be a framework for dialogue in its own right or it would risk becoming hostage to political disagreement and stalemate.

§ § §

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Endnotes

1. For a detailed historical overview see “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG)”, Vol II, September 2009.
2. Anthony Pratkanis in his study of public diplomacy in international conflicts lists the following core public diplomacy tasks: “change the images and expectations held by those in the conflict to allow negotiations and other means of conflict resolution to take place; create the basis for reconciliation among combatants so that not just the war but the peace is won as well; develop support for international institutions and treaties in pursuit of peace.” Anthony Pratkanis, “Public diplomacy in International Conflicts: A Social Influence Analysis”, in Nancy Snow and Philip Taylor (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, Routledge 2009, pp. 111-154.
3. For other works examining the role of public diplomacy in conflict transformation, see Joseph J. Popielkowski and Nicholas J. Cull (Eds.), *Public Diplomacy, Cultural Interventions and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland: Track Two to Peace?*, Figueroa Press 2008.
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9. The term track two diplomacy was first used by Joseph Montville and William D. Davidson in a work examining the psychological underpinnings of ethnic conflict based on rigid assumptions and postures rooted in past history. Joseph Montville and William D. Davidson, “Foreign Policy According to Freud”, *Foreign Policy*, no. 45 (Winter, 1981–1982), pp. 145-157. The term, as defined by

Montville, refers to “unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aims to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict.” Joseph Montville, “The Arrow and the Olive Branch: A Case for Track Two Diplomacy,” in John W. McDonald and Diane B. Bendahmane (Eds.), *Conflict Resolution: Track Two Diplomacy*, Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State 1987. As McDonald points out “other phrases in current use are citizen diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, nonofficial or unofficial diplomacy, supplemental diplomacy, and public spirited diplomacy”. John W. McDonald, “Introduction”, in McDonald and Bendahmane, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-5. There are clear parallels between public diplomacy and track two diplomacy in this sense as both describe unofficial interaction between representatives of opposing parties that aim to improve mutual understanding and trust. In this paper the term public diplomacy is used as one that is broader than track two diplomacy—including official to non-official, non-official to non-official, and non-official to official tracks.

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