

## Press Release

The thirteenth dialogue workshop in an ongoing series on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and peace process took place in Berlin from 7-11 May 2004, bringing together government officials, politicians and public figures from both sides of the conflict. These workshops provide a forum for participants to discuss and analyse opportunities and obstacles in the peace process in an environment that encourages creative thinking, realism and mutual respect. As an informal and non-official process no decisions are taken.

Political events in Georgia over the past six months, from the "Rose Revolution", through the election of President Mikheil Saakashvili to the departure from office of Aslan Abashidze formed an important part of discussions. Likewise the Georgian participants were eager to hear from the Abkhazian participants about recent developments in Abkhazia and in particular about the process for conducting the presidential election in Abkhazia that is expected to take place in October 2004, and its possible outcome. The participants recognised that the integrity of the democratic process in Abkhazia is of considerable importance, notwithstanding the fact that the election is not recognised by the international community or the Government of Georgia. All acknowledged that the new leaderships on both sides will have the opportunity to impact more on the negotiations process but that any new approach will need to be sensitive to what is publicly acceptable.

In discussing the current and prospective political situation it was evident that there are often misunderstandings between the parties. The participants were challenged to think about whether or not statements and actions by politicians and public figures are always perceived as intended by the other side.

Participants explored the commitment of the two sides to their stated positions – that of territorial integrity on the part of Georgia and that of recognition of independence on the part of the Abkhazians – and whether they can articulate their positions in a way that better incorporates the aspirations of the other party. Those taking part in the seminar examined options for the future and the importance of a framework for negotiations that satisfies the needs of the parties to the conflict.

In exploring these issues the participants were mindful of important recent international developments such as the conduct of the war in Iraq and the referendum on the territorial arrangement of Cyprus.

The workshop was characterized by a constructive exchange. It is hoped that this will contribute to a culture of dialogue and understanding between the respective communities.

The Abkhaz participants in the workshop were Arzadin Agrba, Laura Avidzba, Beslan Kubrava, Leonid Lakerbaia, Garik Samanba and Alkhas Tkhagushev. The Georgian participants were David Berdzenishvili, Giga Bokeria, Archil Chitava, Zurab Jguburia, Giorgii Khaindrava, Konstantin Kublashvili, and Paata Zakareishvili. Everyone took part in their individual capacity, not representing any organization or institution.

The workshop was organized by the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management (Berlin) and Conciliation Resources (London), two international non-governmental organizations that have worked in the Caucasus for a number of years and with experience facilitating similar processes in other regions of the world. Facilitation was by Clem McCartney, Jonathan Cohen, Oliver Wolleh and Rachel Clogg.

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Jonathan Cohen (Conciliation Resources) 13 May 2004