

Press Release

From 16-20 July 2001 the fifth in an ongoing series of dialogue workshops on the Georgia/Abkhazia conflict and peace process took place in Berlin, Germany. The series is organised by the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management (Berlin) and Conciliation Resources (London), two international non-governmental organisations with experience in facilitating similar processes in other regions of the world and working to support civic peace initiatives in the Caucasus.

The dialogue process provides a forum for informal reflection and joint analysis for officials, politicians and representatives of civil society. Everyone participates in their individual capacity, not representing any organisation or institution. The process aims to facilitate a mutual exploration of options for a long-term settlement of the Georgia/Abkhazia conflict. The organisers are committed to complementing the official United Nations sponsored peace process.

A basic premise of the series is that inspiration can be gained by learning how similar problems have been addressed in other conflict and peace processes. In previous seminars participants have explored experiences from Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus and Sri Lanka and reflected upon some structural and procedural similarities even though the conflicts and peace processes are different in each case.

The current workshop, entitled "Between Conflict and Settlement: Exploring Transition Processes", addressed ways in which conflicting parties can consider and design concrete steps to move from a hot conflict or unresolved post-war situation towards sustainable resolution. Transitional agreements are becoming more common. Experience suggests that in transitional processes parties often shift between strategies of avoidance, confrontation and problem solving, while trying to identify those features of such an agreement that might facilitate mutually acceptable outcomes and those that might maintain or even intensify the dispute.

In order to stimulate reflection on interim processes the participants were joined by Wilhelm Verwoerd from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. Verwoerd outlined how negotiations in South Africa utilised a series of interim procedures to deal with the hostility and diametrically opposed positions and interests of the parties. These procedures evolved overtime as the talks moved from secret pre-negotiations to a public negotiation process. Important features included the inclusivity of both confidential and public dialogue processes, the latter occurring at many levels of society. These processes gradually encouraged interlocutors to move beyond mutually exclusive outcomes. In reflecting on how the transition from war to peace is proceeding in Georgia/Abkhazia the participants examined what structures are already in place and considered what guarantees could be built into the process as a means to incorporate the needs and fears of different stakeholders.

Attempting to deal with the past was an important feature of the transition process in South Africa, as it is in all peace processes. Conflicting perspectives on the immediate and long-term past invariably interact with the prospects for a constructive conflict resolution process. Verwoerd, who worked for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reflected on how in working through the past, rather than getting stuck in it, societies have to address issues of acknowledging the experiences

of those affected, truth, justice and reconciliation. A variety of mechanisms can be used to do this, but to achieve a sustainable settlement they cannot be avoided indefinitely since for communities to flourish in the future, regardless of the specific state structures, there needs to be a basis of co-operation between them.

The discussion was framed by the exploration of the relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia in ways that do not lead either party to compromise on basic needs. While finding a sustainable political settlement to a protracted ethno-political conflict such as between Georgia and Abkhazia is unlikely to be a quick process, the participants acknowledged that opening different channels and forums for dialogue is an important component of the process.

The participants in the seminar were Koba Davitashvili, Vakhtang Khmaladze, Tamaz Khubua, Shalva Pichkhadze, David Sanikidze and Paata Zakareishvili from Georgia and Manana Gurgulia, Tamaz Ketsba, Ruslan Kishmaria, Alexander Stranishkin, Viacheslav Tsugba and Aslan Tsvinaria from Abkhazia. Nino Durglishvili and Abesalom Lepsaia, guest researchers at the Berghof Centre, participated as guests.

The seminar was funded by the German Foreign Office (Berlin) and the Development Service of the Protestant Church(Bonn).

Press release issued by the Norbert Ropers (Berghof Center) and Jonathan Cohen (Conciliation Resources)