

Georgian/Abkhaz Youth Dialogue Programme Study trip to Northern Ireland

3-9 October 2009

REPORT

Conciliation Resources (CR) recently took six Georgians and Abkhaz involved in our youth dialogue initiative to Belfast. Meetings with community leaders, youth groups and politicians from various sides gave them insights into peacemaking and reconciliation there which are relevant for their own conflict.

As part of its ongoing peacebuilding and conflict transformation work in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, CR has been supporting groups of young adults on both sides of the conflict to develop their conflict awareness and political analysis skills through extra-curricular discussion clubs. One objective of this programme has been to prepare selections of these young people to meet one another so they can hear and understand each other's needs and fears, which are often hidden behind firm positions that seem diametrically opposed to each other.

Opportunities for direct contacts across the conflict divide are rare, leading to growing stereotypes and misperceptions in both societies. The events of August 2008 have made confidence-building efforts more complicated than ever. At the same time the new realities may offer new opportunities for internal debate and coming-to-terms; and it is imperative in the current context to keep channels for communication open.

The study trip participants have taken part in CR's previous dialogue meetings in Geneva and London. Experience gathered in Northern Ireland is going to help them develop strategies of how to work within their own societies to make them more conducive to constructive processes toward long-term conflict settlement. Although the contexts of the conflicts can be very different, there are a number of issues that came up during the trip, which reminded the participants of their own realities and provided relevant learning points to take on board and follow up on back home.

Similar to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the political positions articulated in the Northern Ireland context seemed diametrically opposed and irreconcilable. And yet, the political actors managed to make peace and reach an agreement. As some of the interlocutors in Belfast pointed out, the crucial factor for success was that negotiations were eventually held without preconditions. The unionists and the nationalists held equally legitimate political aspirations that had to be mutually acknowledged and respected in order to move forward. "Good listening skills were required in the negotiation process", said Jane Morrice, former MP of the Women's Coalition.

At the same time, as a Georgian participant pointed out at the reflection session toward the end of the trip, “political agreement does not secure peace and stability”. One of the Abkhaz seconded: “Political will alone is not enough to solve a conflict of many years. It is essential to carry out long-term confidence-building work within the society that follows a well thought-through strategy.” Civil society needs to play a major role in promoting mutual trust and respect at community levels. Examples for this could be found in various interface projects in Belfast and elsewhere. Eric Cownie of the Whitewell Interface Project sees empathy as the key human faculty to develop in order to solve conflicts. “Otherwise people on both sides will continue to deny, qualify and justify the suffering of others”, he said. Chris O’Halloran of the Belfast Interface Project named miscommunication, fear, rumours and prejudice as main reasons for reoccurring violence in the communities he works in.

One point that struck all the participants as crucial was that political agreement in Northern Ireland seemed possible only after external powers had lost their vested interests. As one participant put it: “In my opinion it is always easier to solve a problem if there is political will and if the problem is being solved directly by the parties of conflict, rather than by third parties that pursue their own interests.” Therefore, “bilateral contacts between our societies need to take place at all levels.” In this context, pragmatic economic factors also played their role: people and decision makers both in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland came to perceive Northern Ireland as a burden and realized that reintegration of this territory would cost their taxpayers a lot of money. One interlocutor in London said: “If both the Georgian and Abkhaz societies were to develop economically, the conflict would become easier to solve.”

Another factor leading to negotiations and compromise was that those involved began to reflect their own actions and motivations. As one participant recalls in her feedback paper, “the IRA and other paramilitaries’ leaders came to the very important understanding that their own strategy of using violence took them further away from their goals.”

When the group exchanged experiences with activists of ‘The Spirit of Enniskillen’, a trust supporting young people into making their own contribution towards dialogue in divided societies, they felt reminded of their own situation. A reoccurring theme was the fear of being judged as traitors by one’s own society for interacting with ‘the other side’ and trying to raise difficult issues. “I really would like to see changes in my society as well as my government in this respect, I don’t want to have a fear of being judged by my own society or feel guilty for being engaged with Georgians”, one Abkhaz said.

The processes in Northern Ireland have shown that concepts of peace, justice, citizenship and statebuilding can mean very different things for different constituencies within a society. The key problem is how to manage existing diversity peacefully and effectively. Our facilitator in Belfast, Clem McCartney explained that not the different groups themselves constitute the problem, but the way the relationships play out between them. Politicians in Stormont have restored relative peace and stability through inclusive decision-making, which has created ownership of all parties involved. Representatives of both ruling parties pointed out the achievement that compromise has become an acceptable concept. The downside of this is that changes take place very slowly and gradually and there is a sense of stagnation, with two politically opposed parties ruling the country in parallel. “Tit-for-tat killing was replaced by tit-for-tat vetoing”, said Simon Hamilton of the Democratic Unionist Party.

Both Georgians and Abkhaz participants agreed they need to build societies where different cultures and views are respected and all groups enjoy equal rights. They feel it is essential for them to understand the needs and fears of those on ‘the other side’ so that eventually a compromise can be found that works for all affected parties and can lead to sustained peace and stability. They know they have a long way to go, but are confident that their bilateral meetings can help them make small steps in the right direction.

After the trip the participants were asked to send in brief reflections where they highlighted main learning points and conclusions. Here is a selection of thoughtful quotes:

Politicians made the ground for peace by the Good Friday agreement; and civil society started to put this agreement into practice. Neither only politicians nor only civil society can do anything alone.

I can understand the feelings and needs of the Abkhaz. I remember when one of them said that he is in favour of Russian troops, because he can sleep without fear of Georgian attack. It is difficult to listen to such words, but I understand him, because we all are human beings and we all have the same feelings. Nobody wants war.

Civil society activism is essential to reconcile divided societies. Investment in public opinion is needed to prepare societies for reconciliation.

I believe, that the attempt of CR to create closer relations between Georgian and Abkhazian youth will have a good outcome in the future. And the Northern Ireland conflict will remain as the best example, how people with different backgrounds can live together peacefully.

Certainly the main lesson learned from my Northern Ireland experience is that peace is achievable and an agreement can be signed.

Strong efforts undertaken by both communities in Northern Ireland deserve respect. I believe that such examples like common youth projects in the field of sports and culture could be successfully made use of in our situation.

Especially important was to notice mutual understanding of each other's positions and views about the overall situation and perceptions of participants. Both Abkhazians and Georgians made it clear during meetings that they really do understand each other's arguments, although they all were brought up in different circumstances and environments. This is a great achievement in comparison with past years.

Another recommendation I would like to give my government is that peace is feasible in any conflict as well as signing of a peace agreement. I feel that this also should be a guiding point for our authorities while developing foreign policy.

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