PART 2

Politics and Mediation

CHAPTER 3

The Schlaining Process

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While I take sole responsibility for the content and views expressed in this article, the Schlaining Process itself was a collaborative endeavour. Martin Schumer and Norbert Ropers were critical in conceptualising what we called the "social infrastructure for peace", the way a dialogue process could contribute to this and then making the process happen. Clem McCartney introduced an essential creativity and adaptive approach to the facilitation team. Colleagues at Conciliation Resources provided continuous and vital support – in particular Rachel Clogg, whose accompaniment of the process throughout was indispensable, latterly assuming a central facilitation role. Colleagues at the Berghof Centre were crucial to developing the process – in particular Oliver Wolleh and Antje Buehler, who acted as process observers, feeding ideas into the facilitation and undertaking support activities. A number of non-governmental donors and governments funded the process and the latter provided support in facilitating participant travel (especially the governments of Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). Representatives of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) provided invaluable insights, as did colleagues from a number of other initiatives – Paula Garb, Bruno Coppieters, Walter Kaufmann, Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan and Magdalena Frichova. The participants and many political and civic actors in their respective communities provided challenge, critique and support. Above all, the process would not have happened without Manana Gurgulia, Paata Zakareishvili, Liana Kvarchelia and Arda Inal-Ipa, whose courage and commitment to change the way their societies resolve conflicts was and remains inspirational.

1. Introduction

Peace processes generally operate on multiple levels. Negotiations between parties aimed at reaching agreements to bring a conflict to a conclusion take place in the domain of political leaderships and high-level diplomacy: political leaders, democratically elected or not, are those who sign agreements. However, resolving conflicts is about much more than the signing of an agreement – formal negotiation processes alone are insufficient for sustainable conflict transformation. While direct engagement between the conflict parties is the ideal means to arrive at an agreement, the deep-felt antagonism if not hatred engendered by violent conflict, not to mention the insecurities that are inherent in the asymmetries of many conflicts, make this extremely difficult. Furthermore, conflict itself has the effect of transforming the aspirations of communities that have endured violence. Therefore, to arrive at a point at which parties can conceive of agreement in the aftermath of violence, myriad efforts are required to prepare the ground and an holistic approach is needed reflecting on wider political and social changes, and working at different levels. These efforts often run concurrently and are undertaken by different types of actors, both insiders and outsiders.

This chapter explores the experience of the Schlaining Process (named after the Austrian town where the first meeting was held in 2000), which the author co-facilitated.[2] This process facilitated 20 dialogue workshops between Georgian and Abkhaz interlocutors between 2000 and 2007 and was part of a wider series of engagements undertaken by Conciliation Resources in partnerships (sometimes formal and structured, sometimes informal) with a range of Abkhaz, Georgian and international NGOs. In order to situate the specific process, some observations will be made about civil society roles in peace processes and the nature of the Georgian and Abkhaz conflict and peace process.

2. Civil society and peace processes

Civic actors play multiple roles in trying to contribute to the transformation of relations within as well as between communities fragmented by violence.[3] Operating within and across societies, initiatives serve to promote rigorous analysis of the symptoms, causes and possible solutions, stimulate dialogue, challenge stereotypes, rebuild relationships, be more inclusive of marginalised groups, and devise and offer substantive suggestions to national politicians and international mediators. At the same time, through joint

2 The Schlaining Process was co-facilitated by Conciliation Resources (CR) and the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management from 2000–2005 and thereafter by CR. See O. Wolleh (2006). *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue Process*. Also refer to the press releases issued following meetings 4 to 20. Available at http://www.c-r.org/resources?search_api_views_fulltext=Schlaining+Process%3A+Press+release&=Search.

3 See T. Paffenholz (Ed.) (2010). *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*. London: Lynne Reiner Publishers. This collection provides an excellent overview of different civil society engagements in peacebuilding.

endeavours, they seek to promote a transformation of analytical, behavioural and perceptual frameworks. Civic engagements promote change in many ways, but the contexts in which they operate make it clear that such efforts cannot be divorced from politics. Indeed, one of the innovative elements of civil society conflict resolution work has been that in contexts in which politics has been dysfunctional, civic actors have provided bridges between political elites and those social constituencies prepared to have a vision of what peace can mean. Public perceptions, expectations and fears relating to peace processes are often fundamentally detached from the limited interactions of elites at the negotiating table. Without significant work to engage societies affected by conflict, options for change will remain limited and the effectiveness of negotiations to carve out a sustainable resolution will be questionable.

Within the wide spectrum of civic engagement to promote change, a number of interlinked processes evolved in the Georgian-Abkhaz context. Some of these processes sought to promote dialogue across the conflict divide and generate ideas that could deepen and reframe understanding of options, as well as influence wider societal thinking and feed into formal processes. Most of these operated purely at the civil society level between specific professional, functional groups or with cross-sections of civil society. The Schlaining Process was explicitly designed to bring civic actors, officials and politicians together in a dialogue and problem-solving environment.

3. Understanding the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and peace process

Contested identities are central to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.[4] From a Georgian perspective, the conflict is now often presented as a Georgian-Russian conflict. In the early 1990s, this conflict was about Georgia's attempt to secede from Soviet and then Russian influence. In the 2000s, it became increasingly about the Russian reaction to the Rose Revolution and the explicit desire of the Georgian leadership to move towards Euro-Atlantic integration. A key marker for the Georgians was the 1993 defeat and the mass displacement of Georgians, leading to accusations of ethnic cleansing, which continue to be used as a principled, rhetorical and political instrument against the Abkhaz and as a reminder of the humanitarian trauma experienced by tens of thousands of people. From an Abkhaz perspective, long-standing antagonisms and fears of political and demographic domination were aggravated by perceptions of Georgian colonialism and the nationalistic rhetoric present in Georgian discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This rhetoric was captured in the phrase of Georgia's first post-Soviet President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia –'Georgia for the Georgians'. While the factors that generated the

4 See: Y. Anchabadze, B. Coppieters and G. Nodia (Eds.) (1998). *Georgians and Abkhazians, The Search for a Peace Settlement*. Kolln: Bundesinstituts fur ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien; L. Broers. '"David and Goliath" and "Georgians in the Kremlin": A post-colonial perspective on conflict in post-Soviet Georgia', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 2, June 2009, pp.99–118.

conflict in the first place are not necessarily those that sustain it in the present, fears of assimilation or external domination continue to have a currency for both parties. Indeed fear, playing across generations and feeding off retelling of past experiences, is a driver of conflict like nothing else.

Like all conflicts, there are many layers that can and need to be analysed to inform possible approaches to engagement and peacebuilding. These layers are shaped by the parties' interpretations of the conflict. Some relate more to the internal politics and government-society relations on either side of the divide. Others relate to the relations of actors (internal and external) operating across the divide. Five layers that offer entry points for engagement can be identified as being:[5]

- Georgian-Abkhaz relations in Abkhazia (with a dimension focusing on issues of security and human rights in the Gal/i region, as well as encompassing the broader and complex relationship of the Abkhaz with the displaced ethnic-Georgian population);

- Georgian-Abkhaz relations in regard to rival claims to sovereignty over Abkhazia;

- Georgian-Russian relations (an elite-led, interstate dimension driven by different strategic visions and security concepts rather than by ethnic hatred);

- Russian-"Western" relations: driven by a renewed sense of rivalry that grew under the presidency of Vladimir Putin and most acutely seen in the issue of Kosovo's recognition, but reflected as a complex set of interstate relations between Russia, the US and the EU – such relations are nuanced by different dynamics and patterns relating to different issues and actors;

- Abkhaz-Russian relations: often underplayed and simplified to argue that Abkhaz leaders are seeking integration into Russia; this belies the Abkhaz assertion that independence is their aspiration and the veiled acknowledgement that dependence on Russia is potentially a threat to their identity.

These layers have evolved over time and continue to evolve, with different aspects assuming greater potency and priority at different times. For third parties assessing potential for engagement, the analysis reveals the very different starting points that the parties to the conflict have as well as their differing sense of what negotiations could produce. From the mid-1990s, negotiations facilitated by the UN struggled to create a common agenda and too often became a crisis management mechanism rather than one

5 I am grateful to Laurence Broers for sharing his ideas on the layers of the conflict from his forthcoming article, 'Unpacking the meta-conflict: claims to sovereignty, self-determination and territorial integrity in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict'.

able to promote substantive negotiations. Looking at the aforementioned five layers, the focus of the negotiations was the Georgian-Abkhaz dispute over sovereignty, but these efforts were continually bedevilled by the Georgian-Russian relationship and the interplay of Russia and the Western powers. However, the way the UN positioned itself in relation to the parties – essentially supporting the outcome promoted by one of the parties – resulted in a structural flaw that undermined its ability to mediate an acceptable outcome. This should not, nevertheless, detract from the role successive UN Special Representatives played in maintaining a process with the parties and addressing flashpoints.

As the negotiations continued for more than a decade, it became clear that neither the Georgians nor the Abkhaz bought into the idea that negotiations would bring them closer to their goals or generate an outcome in which they would have confidence. The Abkhaz perceived the UN as a club of states, which, notwithstanding its attempts to facilitate a Geneva process, made the territorial integrity of Georgia a pre-condition and therefore excluded their desired outcome – recognition of the independence they declared in 1999. The Georgians had less and less faith in Russia's integrity as a mediator (and member of the UN Secretary General's Group of Friends) and thus the ability of the Friends to generate its desired outcome – restoration of its territorial integrity. With both questioning the integrity of the negotiations, over time the geopolitics behind the peace process enabled the parties to effectively export the ownership of the conflict's resolution to external sponsors – the US/EU in Georgia's case and Russia in Abkhazia's case. The lack of a common voice and vision from the powers behind the mediation turned the negotiations process into a contested space. With other international priorities taking precedence, the external sponsors drifted in and out of modes of urgency. Generally, they were comfortable to maintain what was perceived as a stable status quo (allowing the misconstrued notion of "frozen conflict" to take root – the conflict was not frozen, the process to find peace was) and at times pushing with more energy for resolution.

Whereas under President Shevardnadze there was a sense that Russia could be used to resolve the conflict in Georgia's favour, after two years in power President Saakashvili was convinced that Russia was the key obstacle to resolution. This led to a new emphasis on the fact that it was not a Georgian-Abkhaz conflict but rather a Georgian-Russian one. This was accompanied by a more resolute strategy to reframe Russia's role, so that it was not seen as a third party mediator but a third party power player perpetuating the conflict. In doing so, the Georgian strategy sought to internationalise the conflict and gain more sustained external support. However, a corollary was that the Abkhaz perceived this as a strategy to isolate and pressurise them. This led to an increased reliance on Russia and resistance to Georgia. From Georgia's perspective, external support proved to be less unconditional than anticipated. As Georgia and Russia descended into a spiral of provocative steps, the 2008 war became increasingly likely.

This short summary of drivers of and layers to the conflict and the peace process that were at work during the period of the Schlaining Process cannot do justice to their complexity. However, it seeks to highlight that the nature of identity is both rooted in the political context but also evolving in response to it, as something that drives the conflict, something that is utilised by the parties to represent themselves and their cases, and something that actors seeking to intervene have to grapple with. Understanding this shaped the way in which the Schlaining Process evolved. While multiple layers conditioned the scope for resolution, our analysis of what we had to offer was that we should not lose sight of the centrality of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. In particular, it was perceived as important not to allow resort to big power politics, or expectations of what big powers could do, to undermine the agency and ownership of the process by those most directly engaged in and affected by the conflict. While a process such as this could not substitute the role of a mediator, let alone formal negotiations, it could provide challenges in a separate space not impeded by perceptions of partiality or the constraints that the UN faced in having to balance the different positions of members of the Friends Group. The lack of status and leverage enabled the Schlaining Process to be a creative environment for participants to explore issues that, in other contexts, could have been given unwarranted value or importance before they had been adequately explored. In many ways, this situation was ideal for the evolution of a track of this sort.

4. Track II and Track 1.5?

There is sometimes a lack of clarity as to whether or not there is a distinction between the levels at which Track 1.5 or Track II initiatives operate. One definition of Track II, which addresses this issue, is that: it 'can broadly be understood to mean unofficial, non-governmental interventions to prevent or resolve violent conflict. Such efforts can attempt to mediate conflict directly in the absence of official mediation, prepare the way for such official efforts or work alongside formal talks to improve the climate and contribute to a successful outcome to negotiations. The focus is on unofficial work in support of official diplomatic negotiations that address civil war, as distinct from other activities that may contribute to a peaceful society such as the people-to-people peacebuilding ... Our notion of track two includes what some refer to as "track one-and-a-half" initiatives, which might be more linked to official processes than other initiatives in the track two spectrum, but generally involve many of the same people. Drawing the line around what constitutes "the second track" is inevitably a subjective judgement.'[6]

The facilitators of the influential Inter-Tajik Dialogue process, who from 1993 to 2000 convened a series of 29 meetings, spoke of the way in which 'its members and their

6 P. Dixon and M. Simmons (2006). 'The role of track two initiatives in Sudanese peace processes' in P. Dixon and M. Simmons (Eds.) *Peace by piece: Addressing Sudan's conflicts, Accord: An international review of peace initiatives*. London: Conciliation Resources, pp.60–61.

process have become a mind at work in the midst of a country making itself'.[7] The process had four stages: deciding whether to risk talking with the adversary and ensuring that there was broad representation from conflict factions; mapping problems and relationships to get beyond blame and move into analysis as well as to create the space for pre-negotiations or negotiations; probing problems and relationships; and building scenarios and planning strategies that contain mutually reinforcing or complementary steps to create the momentum for overcoming obstacles.[8]

Hal Saunders, a former US diplomat who co-facilitated the process, commented on the "Sustained Dialogue" approach that 'many conflicts are not ready for formal mediation and negotiation. Given that formal negotiations seldom explore the issues of identity, fear, historic grievance and injustice, which are vital to the resolution of a conflict, "Sustained Dialogue" provides a space where citizens can begin to change the relationships themselves'. The Inter-Tajik experience was one that the facilitators from Berghof and Conciliation Resources had in mind when embarking on the first meetings of what became known as the Schlaining Process.

The Schlaining Process was an initiative that involved those engaged in formal mediation processes (officials) in an informal context. Having participated in and helped facilitate initiatives that only involved civic actors as well (more often seen as Track II as opposed to Track 1.5), two observations stand out. Firstly, Track 1.5 is inherently linked to the macro-political process and while Track II might not be, it is still necessary for the facilitators to be acutely sensitive to these dynamics. Secondly, such processes, whatever we label them, are, however, about facilitated dialogue and not mediated negotiation. They are inherently about reframing opportunities and preparing the ground for more effective negotiations.

5. Evolution of the Schlaining Process

The Schlaining Process sought to provide a format that respected the vulnerabilities and insecurities of parties, while giving them space to explore ways in which to find more cooperative approaches to shared problems. There was an aspiration to influence the context and even the negotiations, but not an intention that the parties would start to negotiate within the framework. Having said this, the encounters between participants clearly involved negotiation in the sense that ideas were put on the table and pushed back and forth to test traction and resonance. The testing of ideas and examination of issues was a way to explore the degree to which they might be malleable in other contexts.

7 R. Slim and H. Saunders (2001). 'The Inter-Tajik Dialogue: from civil war towards civil society' in K. Abdullaev and C. Barnes (Eds.) *Politics of compromise: The Tajikistan peace process, Accord: An international review of peace initiatives.* London: Conciliation Resources, p.44.

8 Ibid., pp.45–46.

Given the level of participation, these other contexts included formal negotiations between the parties.

The process grew out of capacity-building work with Abkhaz and Georgian NGOs in the 1990s. This work was initiated by Martin Schumer, a United Nations Volunteer (UNV) field worker. In working with civic activists in Sukhum/i and Tbilisi, Schumer responded to a perceived need to bring activists from across the Caucasian conflict divides together. A Caucasus-wide meeting on human rights and conflict resolution was organised by UNV and the Helsinki Citizens Assembly for NGO activists in Stadtschlaining at the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR) in the summer of 1996. Discussions between Schumer, the author (who was an invited presenter at this meeting) and a couple of the participants led to a week-long meeting of 22 Georgian and Abkhaz civil society actors (including one official and one member of parliament) in January 1997. UNV and Conciliation Resources then worked with the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes in Abkhazia to organise a series of civil society training activities for nascent NGO activists, journalists and students, but also drawing in young officials. Activities were also organised for journalists and IDPs in Georgia as a means to support activists there and to learn more about their context. Discussions were held with local partners about systematising involvement to create what was termed a "social infrastructure for peace", linking community level work to the provision of opportunities for political dialogue.

Based on what we were learning and our assessment of what might be a constructive contribution, the facilitators of the January 1997 workshop[9] were interested to explore whether or not a problem-solving approach could be introduced to interlocutors close to the respective seats of power. Local NGO partners also saw a need for dialogue encounters not to be restricted to civic activists, as had largely been the case to that date. A couple of civil society processes were developing at this time[10] and Abkhaz partners in these were also involved in developing civil society capacity-building initiatives within their own community. They articulated the position that it was critical to reach beyond the narrow circle of NGO activists in order to have a wider social and political impact within their community. They also wanted to diminish their own vulnerability in the face of criticism that they were talking to Georgians at a time very soon after the conflict, when many resisted this.

A key Georgian interlocutor shared this analysis, adding that there was insufficient contact between officials and politicians across the divide. Furthermore, partners felt officials and politicians should be introduced to the rigorous debate experienced by civic

9 They comprised the author and Norbert Ropers from the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, with Martin Schumer providing essential guidance but choosing not to facilitate the workshop because of his role working in the communities.

10 One under the auspices of Paula Garb and the University of California, Irvine (http://www.peacebuilding.uci.edu/pb_cs_abkhazia); another under the auspices of the London-based NGO International Alert, whose process soon assumed a Caucasus-wide dimension, leading to the establishment of the Caucasus NGO Forum.

actors in informal processes, which they considered to be qualitatively different to those in formal processes, in which the officials found it easier to hide behind the smoke and mirrors of formal negotiations. The consensus was that what were termed as "meetings without ties" would be of benefit to political actors.

Both Georgian and Abkhaz partners were also concerned that the democratic space in their respective societies was limited and that the prospects for widening this space and resolving the conflict were linked. Democratisation was seen as being of value in its own right. However, broadening the democratic horizon would also create a more pluralistic environment for a more profound discussion of conflict-related issues. This thinking was unlikely to come from elites constrained by fears for wider security on the Abkhaz side and managing an increasingly dysfunctional state in the latter Shevardnadze years on the Georgian side. There were different perspectives within opposition circles in Georgia. Some argued that it was more critical to focus on building a democratic polity in Georgia and that only then would it be possible to turn to the resolution of the conflict. However, one of Conciliation Resources' main partners was of the view that without integrating the resolution of the conflict into the democratic transformation that was necessary, the process of entrenching democracy would be hostage to the risk that the conflict could become part of a nationalist agenda that would undermine democracy.

Throughout 1999, Conciliation Resources conducted extensive discussions with civic actors, officials and politicians. In addition to making the case for the validity of a problem-solving approach to officials and politicians more accustomed to Soviet-style rhetoric and diktat, one of the key issues that had to be overcome was facilitating travel for the Abkhaz participants. They were in possession of Soviet passports, which were not regarded as valid documents to travel to Austria, the designated venue for the first workshop. This issue was resolved when the Austrian authorities agreed to issue *laissez-passer* documentation after agreement on this had been reached with the Russian and Georgian authorities.

While such technical issues were being resolved, political issues continued to be discussed. In addition to support from the Austrian Ambassador for the South Caucasus, the US Special Negotiator for Conflicts in the former Soviet Union spoke with President Shevardnadze on behalf of the organisers to encourage him to support the participation of senior Georgian officials in the first meeting. This external encouragement accompanied the efforts of Conciliation Resources' key civil society partner in regard to Georgian participation. On the Abkhaz side, the persuasion primarily had to come from within. Abkhaz civic interlocutors navigated the sensitivities of senior Abkhaz officials, some of whom saw the utility of engagement. Even those who were in favour were nonetheless cautious – the most supportive stating to the author at that time that 'we don't want to engage in a solely Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, but we are open to you facilitating some informal contact'. Initially, the facilitators did explore the option of a wider dialogue framework to address the

desire expressed by the Abkhaz official. However, a structured dialogue involving too many parties risked negating the objective of direct Georgian-Abkhaz engagement. Therefore, the notion of the "prism" arose as a means to address this, as explained below.

Against this background, a more structured and sustained dialogue process commenced in 2000. From then until 2004, there were three five to six-day meetings a year. In 2004, tumultuous political developments on either side of the conflict divide allowed for only one meeting. In 2005–2006, there were three meetings each year, with the format evolving to three to four-day meetings because the more senior-level participants found it hard to have longer meetings.

The process of reframing the conflict from mid-2006 had an impact on the space for Track II initiatives. From mid to late 2006, as the Georgian authorities promoted a policy of internationalising the conflict (aimed at diminishing Russia's influence), the focus on the Georgian-Russian dimension of the conflict had the effect of diminishing the space for Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue and isolating Abkhazia. Purely civil society processes were not formally prevented, but in official circles in Tbilisi there was a mood that they were less welcome. Therefore, civil society initiatives that sought to engage senior officials and politicians in cross-conflict work were increasingly regarded as unproductive. As a result of this dynamic, it became harder to convene meetings just at the point at which it seemed meetings were more necessary than at any previous time. In the summer of 2007, a meeting took place in London which included MPs but no government officials. However, two Georgian MPs from the governing party withdrew their participation three days prior to the workshop, indicating that they had been pressured to do so. Conciliation Resources perceived an urgent need for continued engagement, as the security context in the region deteriorated and rhetoric suggested a rise in tensions. Nevertheless, efforts through the spring and early summer of 2008 to convene further meetings did not meet with the support of sufficient constituencies within the Georgian authorities.[11] From the perspective of the facilitators, the lack of willingness to engage on the part of Georgian officials signalled the end of the Schlaining Process.

6. Structuring and sustaining the dialogue process

6.1. Objectives

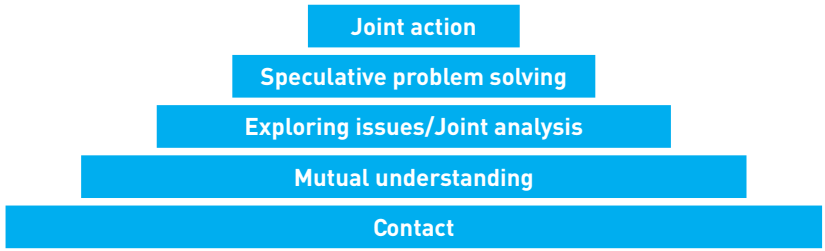
As conceived by the facilitators, the dialogue process had several objectives. A key aim was to provide an opportunity for influential actors on either side of the divide to engage with one another in a secure space. This objective sought, in part, to build relations

11 In June 2008, a meeting of senior politicians and officials from the respective parties took place in Stockholm. Irakli Alasania, the Georgian President's Special Representative on the conflict, initiated the meeting with the support of a Swedish academic. In discussion with several participants shortly after the meeting, they indicated that it served to confirm divergent positions that were being entrenched during the summer of 2008.

between decision makers across the divide as well as among those influencing decision makers. It also aimed to provide a forum in which, over time, analytical thinking could take place and through speculative problem solving feed new ideas into the formal process. Addressing the absence of communication across the divide in the aftermath of war was not just about informing the formal process; it also aimed to create a space to challenge stereotypes that were being entrenched and to see ideas percolate into the public domain. This recognised the need for change in both contexts – official and public.

From the outset, the facilitators conceived of a series of interlocking phases, represented in the diagram below.[12]

Figure 1: Key interlocking phases in the dialogue process



These phases were not conceived of as mutually exclusive steps nor as engagement restricted to the Schlaining Process. While each subsequent phase was built on the previous phase, this did not mean that more work was not required to consolidate the previous phase, nor that phases could not be skipped: the phases outlined were not presented as a precise continuum, but as an ongoing mutually reinforcing process. This pattern of thinking linked the idea of the dialogue process as part of a multi-dimensional approach. An important element of this was recognising that effective work across the divide would be more productive when built on single community work. An assumption was that in order to have confidence to engage on sensitive issues with interlocutors across the divide, it would be necessary for the actors seeking to do so to have roots in their own community. This would provide them with credibility and mean that the ideas and issues they were representing in the dialogue would be reflective of concerns in their own society. Conciliation Resources therefore facilitated a range of activities with civil society and political actors on either side of the divide as well as bridging the divide.[13] These efforts were undertaken in a context in which other actors engaged in

12 C. McCartney (1986). 'Human Rights Education' in Northern Ireland Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights, *11th Annual Report*. London: HMSO.

13 See Conciliation Resources' website for information on some of these ongoing activities and reports of initiatives, available at http://www.c-r.org.

activities, and at times there was close cooperation between different civil society actors. Cumulatively, this contributed to a nascent "social infrastructure for peace".

6.2. Getting started – the prism

In order to get the process started, the facilitators needed to achieve the "buy-in" of senior interlocutors. There was scepticism about what dialogue could offer, and it was important to present a structured rather than open-ended format with which they would feel comfortable. This scepticism, in part, came from a hesitancy to discuss their own situations because this could have exposed vulnerabilities. The facilitators therefore decided to introduce thinking from different contexts, both regional and thematic. This had both a substantive rationale (to introduce new perspectives) but also a political one (to dilute emphasis on the Georgian-Abkhaz dynamic, which some participants were wary of discussing at the outset). The facilitators initially discussed the idea of bringing interlocutors from several conflicts together. However, they recognised that this would be a logistical nightmare as well as such a dilution of the Georgian-Abkhaz focus as to comprehensively change the objective. Therefore, the notion of a prism was devised: experts or participants from another conflict zone would be invited to take part in the first days of the workshop so that it was not solely a Georgian-Abkhaz meeting but also a forum to share their perspectives and thereby support the Georgians and Abkhaz to reflect from a different perspective on their own experience. For the first workshop, two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Northern Ireland – one from the Ulster Unionist Party and one from the Social Democratic Labour Party – were invited. However, prospective participants had also indicated that there would be an interest to have a thematic focus as well as a conflict prism. As a result, an expert on the application of sanctions was also invited to attend for one day in the middle of the workshop.

As it transpired, the presence of these additional resource people, and especially the Northern Ireland MLAs, helped save the process when on the eve of the workshop the Georgian State Minister unexpectedly sent an additional participant who had not been agreed upon. The participant was a senior political figure from the community of IDPs and the Abkhaz threatened withdrawal – partly because he was not an agreed participant and partly because he was a figure of prominence in IDP political circles. The issue of IDP participation, which the Abkhaz authorities were very reluctant to entertain, had in fact been circumvented by the presence of a young IDP who worked for the Two-sided Coordination Commission, which had been supportive in preparing the workshop. The problem was the *fait accompli* of an unannounced arrival – despite the fact that the individual was known and respected by most of the Abkhaz participants. Indeed, he was better known among the Abkhaz participants than among the Georgian participants.

The workshop opened with the participants sitting in separate rooms discussing how to respond to the imminent arrival, later that day, of the additional participant.

In their separate rooms, they reviewed their options and then came together to develop a joint solution: to have a "non-dialogue" workshop – a meeting not discussing the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict but other conflict-related issues, starting with Northern Ireland. This was a ruse to enable the Abkhaz participants to say that they had been at an international seminar should there be criticism that they had been present with a leading IDP politician. It was also a means for the Georgians to save face, knowing that the near collapse of the meeting had emanated from the impromptu arrival at the instigation of Tbilisi.[14] The fact that the workshop was effectively transformed into an academic seminar on issues beyond Georgian-Abkhaz relations (although informally the participants were exploring their own issues) also gave the parties the confidence that the facilitators were not pushing a separate agenda, but rather giving the parties the space to form their own view and agenda about the process. This was a crucial confidence-building step for the process.

The prism remained an introductory part of each workshop (usually for up to two days) for the first two years. This was partly due to the structure it provided (thereby increasing participants' comfort), partly because of its symbolic or political value to the Abkhaz, but increasingly because of the substantive comparative contribution that was made. This enabled the parties to run their own story through the experience of another conflict. In the first four workshops, political actors representing different parties to the conflicts in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Sri Lanka and Cyprus – each being conflicts with relevant comparative elements – presented the prism. The fifth prism was the issue of dealing with the past seen from the perspective of a South African who had worked on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission there. This provided an effective introduction to the theme of reconciliation that had persistently bubbled beneath the surface of debates but with which it was hard to grapple. This difficulty was perhaps due to the participants' reluctance to let go of positions that they felt bolstered their respective interests. It was also a reflection of the deep challenge presented by the need to look critically at the conduct of their sides in the lead up to war and during the war. To this day, the divergent narratives of the conflict parties and their societies remain a fundamental issue separating them.

6.3. From prism to politics

Following the fifth workshop, the process could have gone in different directions – deepening the comparative and thematic issues that were undoubtedly helping each of the workshops. On the one hand, the participants could be eased into the critical issues pertinent to their own situation; on the other hand, they could choose to pursue a

14 It is worth noting that the arrival of this individual was a response by the then State Minister to pressure exerted on him by representatives of the Government-in-Exile, which felt excluded from the meeting and therefore sought to disrupt it through public critique. The new arrival was an adviser to the State Minister but was not close to the head of the Government-in-Exile. Therefore, his participation protected the State Minister and deflected the Government-in-Exile's critique.

dialogue explicitly and solely focused on the Georgian-Abkhaz dynamic. To an extent, the path was becoming clearer as the participants increasingly wanted to focus on their own experience and a more meaningful dialogue. Events in the Kodor/i Gorge in November 2001, as preparations were being made for the sixth workshop, decided the course. A period of increased tensions almost led to a resumption of hostilities. As a result, up until 10 days before the workshop, there was no confirmation of participation. On the one hand, the organisers did not want to commit additional funds to flying in "prism" resource people when it was far from certain that the workshop would happen; on the other hand, more decisively, it was clear that if the workshop happened, it would need to focus on the critical moment at hand.

The workshop that ensued in December 2001 was important on a number of levels. Firstly, it brought the participants into their most rigorous critical dialogue to date, allowing them to utilise the safe space of the forum to explore why hostilities almost resumed. This enabled them to begin a more creative discussion about how to avoid such a scenario in the future. This paved the way for considerably more speculative problem solving in the subsequent workshops. Secondly, Dieter Boden, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (UNSRSG) availed of the opportunity of the workshop being in Berlin, where he was at the time, to come to speak to a group of senior actors from the respective sides about a UN plan that was being devised to structure future negotiations. The plan, which became known as the Boden Document, was instigated at the request of the Group of Friends. However, it proved controversial for the Abkhaz because it precluded their desired outcome and therefore they refused to receive it. In what was a period of heightened tension, Ambassador Boden conducted a two-hour question and answer session with the participants. This allowed him to convey his ideas and impress the participants with the integrity of his thinking. While the wider context did not allow a resumption of the negotiation format, the conduct of the workshop at this time was a significant statement of intent to talk on the part of the parties.

The idea of using prisms to reflect on one's conflict from a different angle was still used after the fifth workshop, but in a less formal way. Speakers from other conflict zones were no longer invited; instead, the facilitators occasionally interjected structured mini-sessions about other conflicts. With more structured comparative insight being provided in other contexts, the Schlaining Process became much more focused on the dialogue between the parties.[15]

The presence of Ambassador Boden at the workshop also highlighted another important issue worth noting: the need to create communications channels with the mediators of

15 In 2002, Conciliation Resources organised three study visits to Northern Ireland for political and civic actors from the two sides. See its report at http://www.c-r.org/resources/occasional-papers/study-visit-reflections.php. Further study visits organised by Conciliation Resources, Berghof, Alert and others to other conflict regions over subsequent years have continued to generate significant comparative insight.

the formal process. The facilitators regularly met with the UNSRSG and senior UN staff in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i. On several occasions, the facilitators were invited to travel to New York to brief representatives of the UN Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA) and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO); on one occasion, they organised a brainstorming meeting for the SRSG in London. These interactions, together with regular meetings with representatives of the Group of Friends, enabled the facilitators to better understand the constraints impacting on the formal process and to share insights from the Schlaining Process. The clearest element of the relationship between processes was the involvement of some of the same participants in both tracks. Those who did participate in both credited the Schlaining Process with providing an environment in which informality allowed issues to be explored in different ways than in the official process, which rarely had the luxury to explore issues in creative or unorthodox ways. Ambassador Boden's participation in the workshop in Berlin was one of two occasions when an external diplomatic actor took part in the workshops. There were, however, other occasions when the facilitators organised meetings between participants and diplomats in the countries where the workshops took place as a means to better inform these diplomats and expose the participants to a wider circle of diplomatic approaches.

6.4. Rolling planning and facilitation

In order to provide a forum that could meet the above-stated objectives, a very elicitive style of facilitation evolved – this entailed listening to the participants and constructing agendas for discussion around their needs. A rolling planning approach was part of the process from the outset, although as indicated above, to ensure the participants were comfortable, the very first workshops were more structured. The facilitators did not arrive at workshops with set models to share, but rather constructed the content of the workshop by being aware in advance what the parties were emphasising about their needs and priorities. In addition, space was provided at the outset of each workshop for the participants to highlight the issues that were currently important to them. Indeed, the custom evolved that the first day would be a time for the participants to scrutinise one another's analysis of the context; the facilitators would then use this analysis to identify those issues that might lend themselves to a more tractable discussion and those that were stuck but in need of reframing. The approach demanded intense reflection at the end of each day in a facilitators' team meeting. The facilitators would then conceptualise a structure for the ensuing days or day, often delegating one or other facilitator to lead in the building of particular frameworks to facilitate the discussion.

It was important that the facilitators had a close relationship, often working together in other contexts as well. As a result, there was an almost intuitive interaction. The process was made possible by the marriage of a team of facilitators that contained detailed contextual knowledge, broad experience of other contexts and conflict transformation

concepts that could be interjected at appropriate moments. Underpinning this was a willingness, indeed an eagerness, to hear how the participants processed their context and experience and then a desire to find ways to feed this back to them from different perspectives. The facilitators' roles also evolved over time: the author had more experience of the region and, in the first phase of the process, was responsible for getting the buy-in of the parties and linking the discussions in the workshops back to the political and civil societies on either side in order to maintain the buy-in. Norbert Ropers and Clem McCartney had more conceptual and facilitation experience and led the dialogue process. Over time, the author's role changed, becoming more prominent in the direct facilitation, especially after Norbert Ropers withdrew from the process to concentrate on a substantial initiative in Sri Lanka. Members of the wider team, who started as process observers, feeding ideas into the detailed team discussions at the end of each day, began to play roles in facilitating smaller working group sessions and subsequently full sessions. The collective inputs of the team were critical – pushing and prodding our respective ideas and acting as safety nets for insights that escaped one or other of us.

The facilitators sought to provide a confidential space in which participants could exchange information, undertake joint analysis of key issues and systematically reflect on possible scenarios. Information exchange was critical – in the post-war period, many of the participants' assumptions about the other side were either dated, viewed through rose-tinted glasses, or seen through lenses which imposed antagonism that for some was needed to justify post-war political agendas relating to their own constituencies. However well the participants thought they knew one another and "the other side", the workshops persistently acted to dismantle stereotypes and misconstrued illusions. Joint analysis was crucial in regard to understanding the conflict itself, the process of attempts to resolve it and the opportunities that could be seized. The importance of this in a conflict resolution process is critical, given that the lack of a shared understanding of the conflict is something that severely impedes the possibilities for parties to the conflict to find mutually acceptable outcomes. Scenario building – exploring what the desired or likely context could be in a number of years' time – was intended to generate fresh perspectives on situations that could arise, in contexts defined by the participants themselves.

In creating the space for interactive engagement, the facilitators aimed to maintain the dynamic of debate, being sensitive to bottlenecks that arose in specific discussions and judging when to push participants or the group as a collective. At times, there were moods of avoidance in regard to tough issues, either from one or other side or from the group as a whole. If the participants were not testing each other, the facilitators had to judge whether or not to introduce an element of challenge, or whether there were genuine reasons relating to politics or emotion that meant an issue was best left for the moment and returned to in a different way at a later point. Likewise, debates sometimes reached an impasse and the facilitators had to decide whether it was worth allowing a seemingly stuck discourse to continue and find its own way out, or whether it was better to bring it to a conclusion.

At times, a change of method was a way to introduce a new dynamic and revitalise a stalemated discussion. Maintaining the tempo and managing the list of speakers involved ensuring that all had the opportunity to express their views, while trying to avoid deference that could slip in, be it in relation to gender or the political status of some participants. At the same time, it was important to judge when the flow of the debate needed a change in the order of speakers and whether someone's seemingly urgent interjection should be heard. What would this mean to the group dynamic and other participants' sense that they were being given a fair voice? Often the group could self-regulate but not always. In general, the participants were very trusting of the facilitators and the different tools and methods that were introduced to maintain the flow of discussion.

In addition to plenary discussions in which all participants could take part, from the beginning of the process the facilitators introduced small working groups to facilitate more intimate discussion. The working groups were initially single community. This allowed participants to reflect on their own situation in a more secure space, without "the other", before regrouping in plenary. At the third workshop, mixed working groups were instituted. Much reflection was given as to whether or not the participants would respond constructively to this. Over time, however, the participants became very comfortable and familiar with this style of work, which allowed them to test issues and one another. These working groups were sometimes moderated by one of the facilitators or one of the extended team members. However, more often than not, the participants were given the space to interrogate issues without any external actors present. Reporting back to the plenary became a time for ideas to be articulated and scrutinised beyond the initial circle of those who had discussed them. This perhaps gave participants a sense of how ideas might then be transferred to other forums on return home.

The object of this style of discourse and facilitation was not to generate specific outcomes or agreements, but rather insights that could inform the search for these outcomes in other contexts, such as formal negotiations, whose participants had the legitimacy to endorse them. The facilitators regarded this as a forum to stimulate thinking that would be fed back into the respective political communities and influence engagement in the formal process.

6.5. A dynamic phase of dialogue – influenced by political change

As noted earlier, the process evolved in content and character. In 2002 and 2003, the workshops took on an increasingly analytical and penetrating character. The participants became increasingly familiar with one another; the political context was fluid as the Shevardnadze regime stagnated and it was clear that something had to change; and perhaps also because Conciliation Resources' wider engagement was deepening on either side of the divide, with a greater breadth and depth of engagement (accompanied by that of other civic actors) creating some momentum.

The Rose Revolution in November 2003 acted as a catalyst of change in many ways and inevitably impacted on the Schlaining Process. A meeting was due to take place in mid-December, six weeks after the early November election in Georgia that sparked the change of regime. Despite the very fluid context, the organisers remained in touch with key interlocutors. Both sides maintained expressions of interest to convene the meeting. Georgian partners and leading participants who had committed to the meeting wanted to convey to the Abkhaz their excitement at the change they were witnessing in Georgia and to put relations on a new and positive footing. Abkhaz partners and senior officials saw the meeting as an opportunity to get a firsthand account of what was happening in Georgia; the recent events were generating considerable concern in Abkhazia, where there had been a degree of comfort with the "devil they knew" as opposed to the less familiar constellation of actors now coming to power.

The discussions in the workshop proved to be very frank. The Abkhaz participants in essence challenged the Georgians to say what would be new and in what way a different approach to the conflict could prevail. In many ways, it was too early for Georgian participants to talk coherently about a different approach; instead, what they sought to convey was a different vision of Georgia, although this was a vague and intuitive expression rather than one that was fully articulated. Nonetheless, there were some precise formulations. Over the year prior to the December 2003 workshop, a couple of the Georgian participants had been involved in drafting a detailed concept note articulating a new relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia. This process is detailed below, but they saw the workshop as an opportunity to present the key ideas to the Abkhaz participants and gauge their reaction. This and the wider context made for an exciting meeting. Something of this mood continued through to the next workshop in May 2004, when the Georgian Minister for Conflict Resolution and other senior figures participated. However, coming as it did only days after the removal of Aslan Abashidze from power in Batumi, the May workshop found key Georgian participants on the crest of a wave and not so open to the caution that Abkhaz participants were urging upon them that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were very different cases from Ajara.

Hostilities in South Ossetia in the summer of 2004, and the protracted and conflictual Abkhaz presidential election process in the autumn and winter of 2004–2005, meant that it was not until April 2005 that another workshop was convened. By this point, a more sober mood had descended over the Georgian euphoria stimulated by the Rose Revolution. At the same time, the Abkhaz had assumed more confidence in the wake of their presidential election, which, despite requiring mediation from Moscow, saw a candidate prevail who had not been Moscow's choice.

These developments required the facilitators to constantly refresh their analysis, in consultation with civil society partners, and to build new relationships with changing political elites. The process of doing this contributed to the deepening of discussion during

the meetings in 2005 and 2006. The Georgian President's Special Representative himself took part in a couple of meetings in 2005. He revealed an ability to convey empathy to the Abkhaz in a way that suggested there was an openness to new approaches. In the workshops, the conversation started to analyse future options. This evolution in the process coincided with the development of the "Key to the Future" and the "Road Map", respectively Abkhaz and Georgian documents. Contributing authors of both these documents took part in Schlaining meetings in 2004–2006. In June 2006, these respective visions were examined side by side by participants in the 18th workshop. They critiqued the plans and found many shortcomings; for all their limitations, however, they were perceived by participants to articulate a space in which cooperative options for the future could be identified. This analytical optimism was short lived. Six weeks after the workshop, a new set of "Kodor/i events" heralded an apparent triumph of hawks over doves in the Georgian strategy for progressing the conflict resolution process. Thereafter, the space for both informal and formal engagement between officials and politicians from the two sides narrowed. Civil society engagement did not wield sufficient leverage to redirect the oncoming juggernaut of deeper estrangement and resumed hostilities that culminated in the August events of 2008.

6.6. The role of insiders and partners

As outlined above, the Schlaining Process evolved out of discussions between the UNV/Conciliation Resources/Berghof team and Abkhaz and Georgian civil society actors between 1997 and 2000. The early discussions that developed the vision of the process took place in bilateral frameworks between the external facilitators talking separately with Abkhaz and Georgian partners – the opportunities to meet altogether were few. Over time, as the process evolved, the workshops themselves provided a space in which to discuss collectively how to proceed, what sensitivities existed, whether or not the process was having an impact, and how to engage with the conflict dynamic and the wider societies. The "outsiders" brought the bridging opportunity, a sense of solidarity in addressing very challenging issues, insights from other contexts, a willingness to critique and push colleagues out of their comfort zones, and access to resources to enable the meetings to occur. The "insiders" were, however, the critical interlocutors navigating the psychological and political minefields of their respective societies.

The process was nurtured by relationships that call to mind the notion of "insider partial and outsider impartial" actors. This idea was developed by John Paul Lederach, reflecting on his experience in Nicaragua. Lederach realised that his task as an outside impartial mediator would not have been possible without close working relationships with insiders close to the factions with which he was working, but committed to the peace process. Acknowledging the importance of insiders to the facilitation process points to the importance of culture and context in peacemaking, as well as the power (and rightful ownership) of agency from within. But it also highlights the secondary role and limitations of an external mediator/facilitator, no matter how experienced and skilled she or he might be.

As an external third party, it is critical to appreciate the cultural context of the society or societies in which the intervention is being made. Cultural difference can be difficult to penetrate and it is important to avoid being deceived by first impressions or to reach hasty conclusions. For example, in the Schlaining Process, Georgians and Abkhaz got on well at the margins of the workshops, even during the sessions: they would tell jokes, reminisce, eat and drink together, assuming specific cultural patterns, which at times needed to be interpreted for the facilitators. Participants from both sides, however, would be clear that this cultural empathy should not disguise the very real political interests dividing them. Partners, the insider facilitators, were important in providing reference points to help the external facilitators navigate this.

Yet, it is also important not to get bogged down in socio-cultural issues. In all conflicts, the cultural patterns and conflicting perceptions of parties are crucial, and this demands sensitively expanding one's access points within a society. It also necessitates recognition that the third party is not by definition trusted, and there might be many tensions around the role of an outsider seeking to facilitate change. Confidence has to be gained through acting in good faith, but at the same time the parties might have different perspectives of what this means because of their different perceptions of the conflict – a third party has to enter into the motivations and rationale of the parties with which it is working, rather than blithely impose an external value system. This makes the relationship with trusted insiders critically important.

The insiders were facilitators within their own societies, but in terms of the process they acted as critical connectors. They made connections between participants as well as with the facilitators. They acted to bridge the gap between elite negotiations and other levels of social organisation, from the grassroots up. They brought "real-life" concerns to outside facilitators, conveying perceptions, reactions, demands and grievances from ordinary people – something that local elite negotiators often failed to do, given that they were politically tied to particular outcomes or averse to the risks that might be implicit in change and compromise. In the case of the Schlaining Process, key individuals from either side of the conflict divide accompanied the process throughout. They constantly excavated the issues at the root of the conflict that impeded progress in peacemaking. They challenged the thinking of the facilitators as well as political actors within their own communities, "mediating" discourse back into their societies. In this context, they were exploring the transformation of relations within their own societies as well as across the divide. Such connectors can operate as individuals but, more often than not, they need institutional backing or to be affiliated to an institution – educational, local/central government, religious or non-governmental. This is, in part, for the logistical support that is required but also for the moral and intellectual sounding board that is required to reflect on the efficacy of such work, which can be an isolating process.

The partners were performing mediatory tasks with no presumption that they were in fact mediators. They performed a task of horizontal mediation as trusted individuals who appreciate sensitivities within their own community and are able to mediate the interests of other members (individual or group) with competing agendas. At the same time, they acted as vertical mediators, working back and forth between the elite and the community levels. In some of these tasks, the external partners were able to play support and indeed occasionally lead roles – be it in holding meetings with government ministers on both sides or with formal mediators (the UNSRSG and representatives of the Friends Group). Sometimes, the external facilitators would meet with government representatives separately; in fact, this increasingly became the trend as the process progressed, because the insider connectors often felt that they needed to maintain separate relations with these political actors in an increasingly complex political landscape and they encouraged the facilitators to develop credible relationships with these governmental and political interlocutors. Different agendas were at play: a Georgian partner might meet a minister to discuss the Schlaining Process, or to discuss a separate issue relating to the conflict/peace process or to wider processes of change. A similar process was underway with the Abkhaz partners. In addition to the vertical dynamic, the partners (inside and outside) also engaged with the wider community in a range of initiatives, again separately or jointly – sometimes as part of what the facilitators saw as contributing to the development of the "infrastructure for peace" but also as part of the insiders' efforts to promote the transformation of their respective societies.

It was important for the facilitators to be seen as independent of the partners and to elicit analysis from a wide range of interlocutors – both in civil society and among political and governmental circles. As the process evolved, one element of this was that the facilitators began to engage in a process of shuttle analysis with politicians and experts on either side. Frequent trips were made back and forth, sharing analysis. This helped to promote discussion, often in one-to-one meetings, about strategies being pursued by the parties and how they might be perceived on the other side. This both helped to inform the content of each workshop and also fed ideas back to official interlocutors, who knew that the facilitators were having parallel discussions with counterparts on the other side.

Working with the partners, it became clear that an insider connector does not need to be impartial but does need to be committed to the peace process. The insider connectors were holding on to their principles and goals, but also looking at how these interacted and evolved in relation to a changing context: for them, the process was not designed to compromise on their objectives. Throughout the Schlaining Process, it was clear that the Abkhaz partners held firmly to their aspiration for the recognition of an independent Abkhazia; meanwhile, the Georgian partners maintained a clear articulation of a territorially integral Georgia in which Abkhazia would have a respected role. What was critical was that they did not demand of the external facilitators that they commit to the objectives of one or other party; rather, they required the facilitators to abstain from

taking a position on the outcome of the conflict and to provide the political, intellectual and psychological space for engagement in an open dialogue that could support the parties in reframing what could be a mutually acceptable and advantageous outcome.

To navigate such a role in politically fraught contexts, an insider connector needs to have empathy and to be creative, assertive, honest and brave. The connectors were at times accused of compromising the aspiration of their community. As a result, they had to constantly balance their belief in change within their own communities with their belief that cross-conflict engagement did not undermine their goals. For the process to be rooted in the respective societies and to have traction with the political debates in both elite and civil society circles, these insiders needed to be respected across political and sectoral divides. In the Schlaining Process, this was something that changed over time: the insiders were actors in the political life of their own communities – the Schlaining Process was one vehicle for them to be so, but certainly not the only one. As the politics of the decade evolved, the reception for civil society actors to play their respective roles also evolved. This impacted on the ability of the individuals to be trusted to play credible, impartial roles.

While the partners did not lose their impartiality in regard to their views on the conflict transformation process, they were perceived as increasingly engaged, and thus partial, in regard to the internal processes of change within their respective polities. This had an impact on the way in which they were seen as actors able to convey insights from the Schlaining Process vertically and horizontally. Bringing an authentic voice to their work, they established credibility individually and collectively within their communities. But there is no doubt that this changed, as did the close access that some had to political elites. This change also had an impact on the way in which the external facilitators were seen. Combining the multiple roles – facilitating dialogue and supporting processes of internal social and political change – had clearly been essential to the credibility of the Schlaining Process at its outset. Over time, however, it began to colour perceptions of the facilitators as well as the insider connectors. For critical constituencies, in particular among senior figures within the Georgian government, this ultimately undermined the credibility of the process.

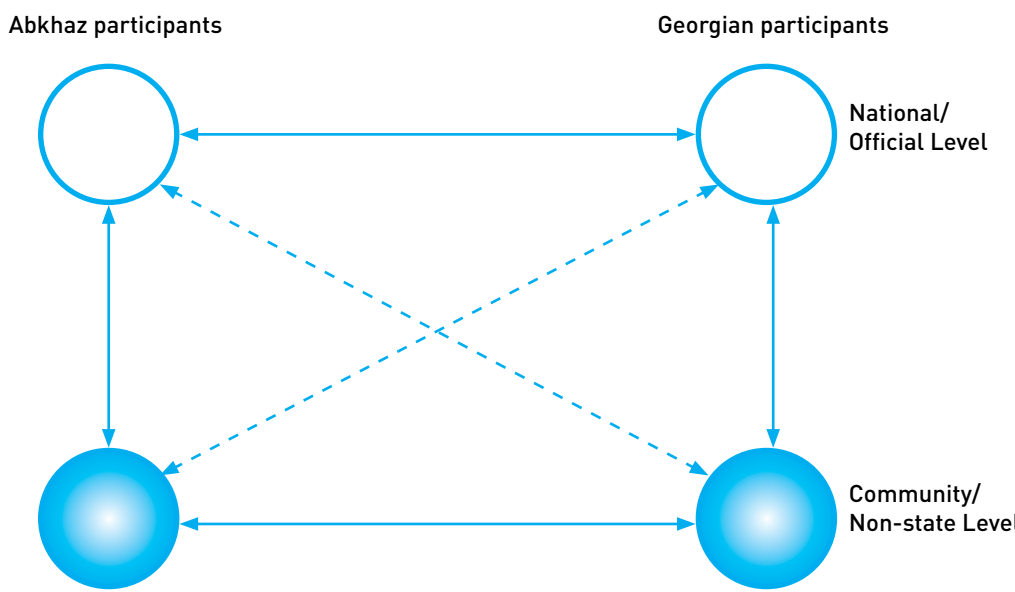
Language is another cultural factor that should not be ignored in undertaking such a process. Undoubtedly, language knowledge is an important issue for facilitators and participants alike. The Schlaining Process operated in Russian – a *lingua franca* for most participants, but not the first language for all and not the first language for the facilitators, although there was knowledge of Russian in the facilitation team. For the facilitators, interpretation was crucial. It was of great importance that a trusted team of interpreters was integrated into the process, having the confidence of facilitators and participants. Knowledge of language is a reflection of insight into a culture and therefore an ability to understand issues from the perspective of those with whom a facilitator is interacting. An insider facilitator has a far greater degree of access to this emotional and political hinterland.

Conversely, the intimacy can serve as a major constraint because of the degree of connection. This leads to a crucial dimension of the work of insider facilitators: being able to connect and at the same time retaining the capacity to detach themselves. Likewise, the facilitators had to navigate the evolution of their personal relations with colleagues from either side with whom close relations were developed over an extended period, and with the ability to remain detached and reflective concerning the meaning of the engagement.

6.7. Whom to invite - the participants

Critical to the purpose of a dialogue process is the issue of who should take part. The partners – representatives of local NGOs and civil society activists – played an essential role in the selection of participants. Together with the facilitators, the partners defined one of the objectives of the process as bringing together senior officials, politicians and public figures (civil society activists included) in order to create a dialogue across the divide as well as within the different communities, as represented in the figure below.

Figure 2: Representation of dialogue between different types of participants



A type of rotating participation evolved to build upon past experience and to widen the circle of those engaged. This expanded exposure to the nature of the dialogue and its outcomes. At the same time, it introduced new figures as and when they assumed appropriate office or became influential within their respective societies. There was a dilemma in that new participants had not gone through earlier stages of analysis – in the first few workshops,

there was extensive analysis of needs and fears, interests and positions, which provided those who participated with a common lexicon and framework on which to build their subsequent joint analysis. These discussions tended to reappear in later workshops but often in different forms and building upon earlier analysis. Therefore, new participants sometimes felt catapulted into an ongoing discussion and set of relationships. While efforts were made to engage prospective participants in advance of workshops and to brief them about the process that they were going to embark on, this was rarely a sufficient introduction. As a result, some new participants integrated into the dialogue more easily than others. Over 100 people participated in the 20 workshops. Some of the participants were influential decision makers, others had responsibility for advising decision makers at the highest level. Some were opinion-formers, and on occasion people were invited for symbolic reasons, relating to their status or to reach out to a particular constituency perceived as being worthy of integrating. These explicit choices were calculated through discussion with partners, based on the balance of participants from the respective sides and the internal politics at any given time. Over time, an increasing number of ministers and parliamentarians took part, although from the first meeting there were deputy ministers, senior presidential advisers and parliamentarians.

In selecting participants, Conciliation Resources consulted widely: with civil society partners, officials/ministers responsible for the peace process and other political actors with influence. Lists of potential participants emerged. The facilitators took responsibility for the list but always informed the respective sides in advance to ensure there was no strong opposition to any individual's participation. The Georgian Minister for Emergency Situations (subsequently the Minister for Conflict Resolution) and the de facto Abkhaz Foreign Minister were the key interlocutors in this regard. A critical issue was to ensure that someone was not invited by the facilitators only to be rejected by the other side – thus, before issuing invitations, confirmation was sought from the other side. We were conscious of the need to build and nurture relations with the respective government representatives dealing with the peace process so that we could have frank conversations about the list of participants and the rationale for inviting certain individuals (as well as being able to have frank discussions about the substantive issues discussed in the process). Approaching participant selection in a consensual way meant that, over time, the participation of certain individuals who represented important constituencies, which were perceived as unpalatable, became feasible. This was particularly relevant in regard to the participation of IDP representatives and especially those with links to the Government-in-Exile. As indicated above, the participation of one such individual almost derailed the first meeting. Subsequently, it was possible to involve an individual who was a member of the Government-in-Exile, but who was explicitly invited in his capacity as a participant in the Two-Sided Coordination Commission. The individual in question did not use his participation to compromise the Abkhaz; over time, this allowed the Abkhaz to be more flexible about the participation of other IDPs.

Selection of participants was driven by a number of factors. An individual's relation to the conflict and peace process was always paramount. Their capacity to engage with the "other" was also important. We wanted to invite people who had something to say and who reflected what we perceived, through our joint analysis with partners, to be important dimensions of thinking regarding the conflict, peace process and the aspirations of the respective parties. The relevance of what they had to say and our judgement as to whether they would be able to listen was accompanied by a critical need to include people who either were or had access to decision makers on either side and who would thereby feed ideas back into the political discourse of their respective sides.

Another important factor was the politics of the situation – people were invited on the basis of their relation to the political process within their own communities. We sought to achieve a balance between different forces within the respective political communities – government and opposition, official and civil society. This was clearly a different approach from the formal process, which was oriented around bringing together the representatives of those wielding power on the respective sides in order to reach an agreement. In Track II, it was feasible to bring together different voices from within the respective communities – in addition to government and official actors, this might mean opposition, civil society or minority voices and often people closer to the communities in conflict. A corollary was that the format could promote improved interaction between officials and civil society actors. Although those in positions of authority did not always welcome the fact that a diversity of opinion was given a platform, the meetings did at times offer one of the few channels of communication between government and opposition representatives from the Abkhaz side.

At the outset of the process in 2000, there was great caution on the part of the Abkhaz. Although there was a willingness to see officials, politicians and civic actors participate together, there was no space for representatives of the nascent opposition. This evolved over time such that, by the fifth workshop, there was more flexibility on the Abkhaz side, which became more restrictive during the Kodor/i crisis in 2001 and more relaxed thereafter. In the first few years of the process, the Georgian authorities were considerably more relaxed regarding the participation of opposition politicians or thinkers alongside senior government representatives, including the minister responsible for the conduct of the peace process and the President's special representative for the negotiations. However, by the end of 2006, the situation reversed in that the Georgian authorities strove to exert greater conformity on the composition of the participants; the Abkhaz, on the other hand, were much more comfortable seeing opposition figures take part. This resetting of the scales was part of the reframing of the Georgian government's overall approach to the conflict resolution process: it wanted greater internationalisation, but it also wanted greater conformity of voice so that a consistent line could be presented. This reflected impatience with the peace process as a whole. It also pointed to a perception that dialogue workshops, which some in government called "talking shops", were not leading to desired outcomes. This context was critical to Conciliation Resources reluctantly recognising that there was less and less scope for

a dialogue process engaging political elites in reframing approaches that could challenge increasingly entrenched positions.

Whether to work with moderates or hardliners was also central to the "who" issue. While it was deemed important to invite people who wanted to engage, it was also important to involve those who had potential vetoes or were linked to actors in society who did. This evolved over time: at the outset, it was especially important to have those who wanted to engage in order to get the process going; but it was also important to have people who represented the thinking of their political communities – otherwise, the process would not have been credible. As the process developed momentum, it then became easier to bring on board those who presented greater obstacles. A balance was needed in that if a veto managed to disrupt dialogue, then the process could not continue; but if the dialogue was too comfortable, then it was not relevant. For the credibility of the process, it was important to work with a range of actors. In the Schlaining Process, it was deemed necessary to create a space in which people could talk and challenge one another; but it was also important to have a space in which the dialogue could continue and not be disrupted by intransigent behaviour, as opposed to intransigent opinions and interests. This did not mean that people with strong views were not invited, but rather that such people who nonetheless saw the value of engagement were. The facilitators also recognised that the nature of the track was such that it was not a shadow environment for the formal process. Therefore, it was feasible to have more heterogeneous participant compositions – had the process been one that was more integral to the official process, then it would have been necessary to have participants who reflected the official line rather than participants who could open up thinking and cross this line.

As facilitators, we continuously reflected on the representativeness of the participants. It was important to achieve a balance between different forces within the respective political communities – government and opposition, politicians, officials and civic actors. Given the informal nature of the track two process, the participants were not being asked to play an official role in representing their society: we wanted them to reflect the society and its interests; but we did not want to put them in a context in which they had to be responsible for or formally accountable to the society – although the likelihood was that they might well feel they were. However, they were not being asked to deliver an outcome in the way that participants in a formal process would be expected to. We refrained from calling the groups "delegations": people were invited to participate in their individual capacity and because they performed functionally relevant roles in relation to the peace process. To call them delegations would have assumed a more formal character than the facilitators, the respective authorities or our NGO partners considered appropriate – although sometimes the participants did see themselves as such and did behave as such. This was more the case when the participants were a more homogeneous group, as was the case with the Abkhaz at the outset of the process and the Georgians for the last but one workshop.

As the process evolved, and as more and more people took part, maintaining relations with participants also generated considerable work: some assumed new positions in different spheres, some fell away, some were integrated into other activities, some were offended at not being invited back, and some did not see the utility of the process. However, an expanding core valued the opportunity to test ideas and assumptions with interlocutors from the other side and to have opportunities to be regularly apprised of the thinking and developments on the other side – in recognition of the fact that such information was very difficult to obtain otherwise.

6.8. Confidentiality and press releases

The participants were conscious that the debates in the workshop could inform discussion outside. From the outset, there was a tension between those who felt it was important to communicate the ideas from the workshops widely in society and others who felt that to do so would be dangerous. The latter were concerned that the speculative nature of the discussion would be lost and creative ideas would be presented as commitments, which was far from the case. The tension reflected the wariness that participants had for one another, which was greater at the outset of the process, as well as the different attitudes towards influencing their own societies. Early in the series of meetings, it was agreed that it was important to convey ideas to the immediate circles within which people worked; but there was also consensus about the need to be cautious about public statements and not to cite the names of participants in relation to specific lines of debate.

An agreement on confidentiality was deemed necessary to provide an environment in which people would be prepared to explore issues more openly without fear of being compromised. To create such a space took time – there was no *a priori* reason why a facilitator or an adversary should be trusted to honour confidentiality and not to compromise those participants who were prepared to make use of the opportunity for speculative and creative analysis. Participants quickly saw that if they wanted the process to continue, they needed to create a relationship of respect. Failure to do so would mean that the parties would not regard the format as one that could enable worthwhile discussions. Confidence in this sense derived from a perception that interlocutors were reliable and worthy of trust. The appreciation of confidence had to be renewed at each workshop as new participants entered the process and it became an important part of the culture of the workshops.

One means to manage the tension between confidentiality and the dissemination of ideas and information became the post-workshop press release, initiated after the fourth workshop. The first press release was issued at the request of the participants. The rationale was twofold: firstly, in small societies it is hard to keep meetings of senior political and public figures secret or to avoid speculation, and such speculation could be damaging if not appropriately managed; secondly, the press release gave participants a

means to honour confidentiality but also to speak about the meetings on return home (the Georgians were more inclined to do so in public than the Abkhaz).

Press releases therefore created a framework for wider discussion. They were drafted by the facilitators at the end of each workshop and agreed with the participants. Drafting the press release was always a question of trying to indicate the parameters of the dialogue without exposing the participants by publicising some of the more creative speculative analysis they had undertaken. As such, the language of the press releases was at times intentionally opaque. Nonetheless, the objective was to signal that it was possible for frank and creative discussions designed to contribute to a culture of dialogue and peace to continue – despite the fact that for much of the time the Schlaining Process was underway, the formal negotiations were in abeyance. In part, this goal was achieved: participants felt secure to discuss the process in their own communities, although Georgian participants tended to be more open and active in conveying insights than did their Abkhaz counterparts; at the same time, there was growing awareness of the process in political, diplomatic and public circles. However, the opaqueness of the press releases did act as a barrier to clarity. In general, the facilitators found that a more effective way to communicate about the process and its nuance was through one-on-one or group briefings. While this limited the scope of the dissemination of ideas generated by the process, it did protect the integrity of the process.

7. Impact and influence of the process

The methodology employed was designed to stimulate reflection on mutually beneficial outcomes and to create an environment for parties to think about their "enlightened self-interest". However, the facilitators acknowledged that the parties did not necessarily subscribe to this or find it easy to step outside power-based paradigms that dominated relations between them at the time. Despite the lack of confidence the parties had in the formal Track I negotiation process, they nonetheless saw it as a means to ensure that any outcome would be guaranteed through the mechanisms of power politics. Therefore, assuming a more exploratory approach in Track II could make parties vulnerable and entailed risk.

Addressing this dynamic, the Schlaining Process was conceived as being "process oriented" rather than "results driven". Nonetheless, processes have impacts and produce outcomes, and to be able to fund them donors need to be persuaded that there is progress relating to specific objectives. In the case of the Schlaining Process, a range of outcomes were identified in regard to substance (analysis that could generate fresh insights), attitudes (through exchanging information and enhancing communication), and behavioural changes among civil society and political actors concerned with the conflict and peace process. It can be difficult to track the passage of ideas from an

informal process into a formal negotiation process or into public discourse: ideas are rarely the property of one individual, organisation or meeting; they tend to percolate through systems at their own pace. Furthermore, change comes as a result of cumulative efforts and is rarely attributed to one specific input. Nonetheless, it is important to examine how the Schlaining Process contributed to each of these domains.

7.1. Substantive outcomes

Through joint analysis and addressing both underlying and emerging issues, the Schlaining Process sought to introduce new frameworks for understanding the sources of the conflict. At the same time, it sought to generate and test ideas and concepts that could contribute to its resolution. During the eight years of its operation, participants in the Schlaining Process analysed all key issues in the negotiation process, such as: the presence/removal of the CIS Peacekeeping Force; the role of external actors, status and constitutional frameworks for the resolution of the conflict; processes for ensuring security to promote IDP and refugee return; the lifting of sanctions/trade restrictions; the feasibility and content of a non-resumption of hostilities agreement; and restitution for IDPs. At different points in the process, different issues had more or less prominence in the negotiations or in public discourse, and the Schlaining Process allowed politically engaged participants to explore them in a joint way that rarely happened elsewhere.

The workshops enabled participants to probe ideas, and the climate of reception for those ideas, in ways that could feed into the political negotiations process. The elicitive nature of the process meant that participants were able to construct the process themselves according to concerns at particular times. The informal dialogue format also provided opportunities for exploring issues that resonated deeply in the collective psyche of the participants. Furthermore, participants had the room to explore hypothetical future scenarios. From 2001 on, there were periodic debates envisioning the future, exploring what the situation might be like in five, 10 or 20 years, and identifying what steps would be necessary to achieve the change (and economic development) that both sets of participants aspired to.

The process was also a forum for exchanges on very specific confidence-building measures. Sometimes, these were ideas that participants worked on in advance and brought to the workshops to test with interlocutors from the other side. For instance, a Georgian participant presented a plan that he and a group of experts developed to promote economic cooperation through the establishment of an economic free zone. On other occasions, confidence-building ideas arose as part of the debate. At a workshop in 2002, there was extended discussion about the possibility of opening representative offices, or failing this press and information offices, in Tbilisi and Sukhum/i respectively (with an Abkhaz team running the office in Tbilisi and a Georgian team running the office in Sukhum/i).

At a more conceptual level, by providing space for an analytical appreciation of opponents' perspectives, aspirations and motivations, it was possible to explore security concerns in an in-depth way that was rarely the case in other forums. A repeated undercurrent was the exploration of the classic "security dilemma" of viewing the other party's actions as hostile and responding with counter-actions to defend one's own interests, which are in turn perceived as hostile by the others and therefore further entrench and escalate the conflict.

As the series of workshops progressed and participants became more familiar and comfortable with one another and the facilitators, they were able to engage in more speculative thinking that would have been highly problematic had it been officially linked to formal positions. A good example of this was in 2003, when an exercise involving respective presidential advisors examined the conditions under which Georgia could envisage Abkhaz independence and the conditions under which Abkhazia could envisage a return to Georgian jurisdiction. Such discussions were challenging and were designed to help the participants to understand the perspective of the other side as well as to deepen their analysis of their own interests and positions. Sometimes, these discussions were held in open plenary sessions, sometimes in role-play exercises and sometimes in a fish-bowl format (with one group discussing and the other group observing). This provided the space for participants to scrutinise the validity and feasibility of the others' aspirations as well as the coherence of their positions and interests. While these explorations did not necessarily lead to a narrowing of the gap between participants' positions, they did contribute to a growing mutual respect. Many participants acknowledged that, in doing this, it enabled senior-level officials to better understand the other and to conceive of a different relationship with the other side.

One senior Georgian official later reflected on these debates. He observed that had he and his authorities been prepared to act upon the insights they were deriving, they would have been able to devise a more effective strategy for responding to the Abkhaz needs. His involvement enabled him to understand why proposals made in the official process were not conducive to progress. However, he acknowledged that the timing of the discussion was such that the increasingly weak Georgian state (pre-Rose Revolution) was not able to respond to creative ideas. Experience of the workshops highlighted that shifts in analysis take time to percolate through to those making decisions. Furthermore, the ideas often arrive in a filtered way that changes their potency.[16]

The most dynamic example of how ideas were fed into the formal political arena is the way in which a concept note on constitutional options (and in particular federal arrangements) for resolving the conflict was developed under the auspices of the Georgian National Security Council. In 2002 and 2003, an adviser to the National

16 Based on the author's discussion with a Georgian participant who served in a senior advisory position in the Shevardnadze administration, June 2007.

Security Council (who in 2008 became Speaker of the Georgian Parliament) took part in two Schlaining meetings and a study visit of senior Georgian and Abkhaz officials under Conciliation Resources' auspices to Northern Ireland.[17] Subsequently, in early 2003, at the request of the then Secretary of the National Security Council, Conciliation Resources provided support to an informal group of Georgian experts, several of whom had taken part in the Schlaining Process, to devise a strategy to present to the President. Conciliation Resources provided funds for the group to meet and to purchase a computer and facilitated discussions with several international experts on legal and conflict resolution issues. The participants saw the strategy as a constitutional proposal to present to the Abkhaz. It was completed in October 2003. However, the subsequent Rose Revolution temporarily mothballed the concept.

As indicated above, a Georgian participant at the Schlaining meeting that took place in December 2003 – in which key allies of Mikheil Saakashvili and leading Abkhaz officials participated – informally presented the concept. At the time, understandably, Georgian officials and politicians were preoccupied with the unfolding Rose Revolution, the conduct of new elections and the establishment of a government. In 2004, the newly appointed Minister for Conflict Resolution publicly spoke of a document under preparation to present to the Abkhaz.[18] Several of the authors were, at the time, close allies of the new President Saakashvili. However, the government chose not to take the concept on as official policy. A couple of the concept's authors put it in the public domain and conducted a series of presentations to different audiences. While this generated debate and some Abkhaz reaction, the fact that the Georgian government chose not to endorse the document meant that Abkhaz officials felt no obligation to respond to it – especially since, despite going beyond the usual generalities in regard to offers of the "widest autonomy", the concept remained one that emphasised Georgian territorial integrity, which was not acceptable to the Abkhaz.[19]

The Abkhaz political community then became involved in its own challenging internal political context during the second half of 2004, distracting attention from the peace process. The document was not explicitly discussed in the Schlaining meetings that resumed in 2005, when the issue of non-resumption of hostilities and the drafting of a Georgian "Road Map" had become the paramount issues in the formal arena. These were also issues brought to the Schlaining Process with the participation of key interlocutors from both sides. Indeed, on one occasion in 2005, the margins of a workshop were used as a venue for an extended discussion between one senior interlocutor from each side to expressly review a text on the non-resumption of hostilities being prepared in the formal process.

17 See C. McCartney, J. Cohen and R. Clogg (2003). *The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: Reflections on four study visits to the United Kingdom and Ireland*. London: Conciliation Resources. Available at http://www.c-r.org/resources/occasional-papers/study-visit-reflections.php.

18 'Saakashvili to announce Abkhazia concept on 26th May - State Minister', *Civil Georgia*, 13th May 2004. Available at http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=6933&search=.

19 Based on author's conversations with senior Abkhaz officials during 2004–2005.

As the negotiations evolved in the subsequent months, these critical issues were repeatedly discussed in the Schlaining meetings. However, the concept note was marginalised from the public agenda, apart from in regard to a series of meetings, especially with IDP organisations, in which one of the concept's authors sought to publicise the content. Unexpectedly, core ideas from the concept were aired in March 2008, on the eve of the Bucharest NATO summit, when President Saakashvili unveiled a new peace plan in a public seminar in Tbilisi.[20] Constitutional ideas presented in the speech were clearly informed by the concept note. Moreover, a leading opposition figure who was present at the seminar – and who had been one of the authors of the concept note (at a time when he had not been in opposition) – was cited during the President's speech as having been one of the inspirations behind his new plan.

Relating this process serves to indicate how ideas can transfer from an informal dialogue process into the strategies of parties. However, their efficacy or potency is in many ways contingent on the political context and timing.

7.2. Influencing attitudes – informational and communications outcomes

As the process evolved, one of its key elements was the structured exchange of information between participants about unfolding developments on either side of the conflict divide. Participants frequently indicated how much they valued the opportunity to interrogate one another about the internal politics of their respective communities. They used this to contextualise the developments relating both to the conflict and broader dynamics, to understand the trajectory of the other community, to test the political mood and diversity of the respective societies and thereby to be able to judge which actors and issues were influencing developments. Providing this opportunity in the overall vacuum of reflective political exchange between the sides was an important means to create more nuanced political thinking as well as to feed into more effective decisions. Examining their respective needs, fears and hopes, the participants created a space in which analytical empathy could develop. This empathy did not arise from participation in one three to five-day problem-solving workshop; it evolved over time through several and preferably regular encounters. Participants were sufficiently sophisticated to recognise the need to triangulate the insights they were gaining with other sources of information. The Schlaining meetings gave direct access to the other side that could not be obtained on a regular basis elsewhere. This was an important outcome of the process, but it was also a limitation – periodic constructive interaction of this sort occurred in a political environment that was characterised by the absence of such interaction.

The exchanges tended to generate a particular dynamic: many Georgian participants wanted to convey the extent of the changes that had occurred in Georgia since the war in 1992–1993.

20 'Saakashvili outlines Tbilisi's Abkhaz initiatives', *Civil Georgia*, 28th March 2008. Available at http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17473&search=.

Through doing so, they wanted to highlight that the Georgian state that was seeking to resolve the conflict with the Abkhaz in the present was not the state that had become embroiled in the war. Therefore, it was a state of which the Abkhaz might be able to consider being a part. For these interlocutors, the process was not a question of the Georgians demanding Abkhazia's return as a matter of course or right, although there were some Georgian participants who assumed this approach. Rather, they presented a vision that there would be value in a more plural, sophisticated political community that contained the Abkhaz as well and that Georgian democracy was moving in a direction that merited their return. In this vein, a key Georgian interlocutor articulated the view that including opposition figures in the dialogue displayed the degree to which Georgia was increasingly able to countenance debate and pluralism. In response to this, the Abkhaz over time came to state that a developed and democratic Georgia would be in their interest – but not because it made Georgia more attractive to them, rather because it made Georgia less prone to instability and the use of force and thus less of a threat to Abkhazia. The Georgian participants in their turn frequently used the opportunity to interrogate the Abkhaz about the situation of different ethnic communities within Abkhazia, particularly the Georgian Gal/i population and the Armenian population. In part, this was a means to emphasise human rights obligations, but it was also a means to tease out vulnerabilities. In addition, a frequent component of these debates was the role of and relations to Russia and how this influenced attitudes to possible outcomes.

These issues were explored repeatedly in the workshops. Participants came with agendas, with arguments and with convictions: some sought to understand and gather insight that might help them recalibrate their arguments and strategies; others sought more explicitly to persuade. In emphasising this, they risked the delusion that the other should think as you want them to rather than that you should understand the motivations driving the other person's thinking. This was a tension running through many participants – the ability to use the format to explore or the desire to use it to convince. The role of the facilitators was to sustain an environment in which debates could persist – literally facilitating debate but also offering challenge to participants. Challenge principally came from the participants themselves – they wanted to ask searching questions of one another. However, at times the collective, regardless of origin, avoided tough issues. As a result, the facilitators tried to encourage them to dig deeper and then reframe their understandings.

Following the December 2006 workshop, a Georgian official, himself an IDP, stated that 'the meeting gave me a different perspective on what motivates the Abkhaz'. This was an important admission, given that the Georgian elite had increasingly limited exposure to the Abkhaz. It reflected how the workshops provided a space in which the sensitivities and strategies of the parties could be better understood and in which people could talk openly. One observer of the process commented that this form of dialogue between political actors was a means of 'creating the space for change' by generating new communication dynamics and perspectives that might be able to bear fruit once

conditions became ripe for more effective negotiations. Another participant likened the process to a marathon race, which demanded thorough preparation and sustained effort over a long time. He regretted that there was a tendency among many political actors to treat the resolution of the conflict as a sprint.

One seasoned Schlaining participant, several years after he ceased participation, recognised what he could gain from such a process when he observed: 'when I took part in negotiations in the early 1990s, I now realise that I just did not know how to talk to the Abkhaz. I didn't know what they were trying to say to me. I didn't know how to listen to them. I did not know how to articulate to them what was important to me. I constantly said things to them that, on reflection, were bound to antagonise them. My experience of the Schlaining Process helped me understand them in a way I could not through the formal process and therefore to know what I could and shouldn't say.'[21]

7.3. Changing behaviour?

A critical question to come out of the dialogue is whether the efforts to develop communication channels between parties and spaces for informed but informal and constructive dialogue could influence not just perceptions but also behaviour. Part of the rationale of the meetings was that relationships were being built and channels of direct communication fostered through face-to-face meetings. The participants could then use these in further communication and to develop constructive working relationships with counterparts previously perceived as "the enemy".

From 2004 to 2006, as noted above, the participants were much more central figures in both the negotiation process and the internal political developments on either side of the divide. This led to the dialogue workshops having a more direct relationship to the formal peace process as well as the political life of the respective parties. The space provided by the process for discussion of the Georgian government's Road Map and the Abkhaz Key to the Future has been noted above, as has the work on the concept on constitutional reform. Another short-lived back channel came out of the participation of senior figures in the Schlaining Process in 2005–2006. These senior figures met in a couple of workshops and then, with the knowledge of their presidents, had further meetings on a couple of occasions near the line of separation. The specific objective of this channel was to lay the ground for a meeting of the respective presidents. While this meeting did not come to fruition, the fact that the channel was initiated was a significant step at the time. It reflected the contribution of the Schlaining Process as a communications channel for parties to convey messages to their counterparts as well as a means for influencing the behaviour of the counterparts. Senior political actors used the Schlaining Process to test ideas in regard to substance and process, reflecting on the reception of these ideas

21 Taken from an interview conducted in June 2007.

and then refining them to present again in future workshops or in discussions in other forums. In this sense, many participants assumed a different approach to dialogue as a result of participation in the Schlaining Process. However, calibrating the scale of individual change is different from pinning down sustained changes in policy or strategy by the parties.

Nonetheless, the Schlaining Process does appear to have informed specific confidence-building measures that were undertaken by participants. While attitudes to what constitutes confidence building can often be misconstrued – parties often placing emphasis on what should be demanded from the other rather than reflecting inwards on the way in which the increased predictability and transparency of one's own side can instil confidence in the other[22] – civil society participants seized opportunities to build relationships that informed a range of cooperative activities. Confidence-building activities initiated, discussed or agreed at Schlaining meetings included: the development of a summer university on international relations in Abkhazia (that enabled more than 20 Georgian and 100 other Caucasian, European and North American students and young professionals to visit Abkhazia between 2002–2006); and invitations to a number of senior Georgian public figures to conferences in Abkhazia in 2004 and 2006. Participation in such events provided a good opportunity for Georgian public figures to meet with and address a wide audience in Abkhazia. It also allowed them to hear the opinions of people outside the circle of those involved in structured dialogue. There was also agreement for Abkhaz and Georgian journalists to make a joint film about the Gal/i region in 2002 and reciprocal films in 2003. In addition, it was agreed that they would work jointly on the publication *Materials for Discussion on the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*,[23] published in 2002 following a year-and-a-half-long process involving more than 30 Georgian and Abkhaz experts and then used extensively in civic education work. As a result of inviting the head of the Open Society Foundation Georgia to one of the early workshops, an ongoing arrangement was initiated for grants to be provided to Abkhaz civic initiatives through the Open Society Institute.

The above initiatives represent collaborative behaviour, which is an important component of a reframing of opportunities in a peace process. While these initiatives were primarily led by civic actors, they were discussed in the presence of politicians and officials, who observed the cooperative and yet mutually challenging relationships of these civic actors. Over time, more important than specific actions were the cumulative responses of official and non-official participants, who continued to engage with one another – both in the Schlaining Process, in other fora and informally – using their insights and analysis to

22 See the author's paper on confidence building and civil society in the South Caucasus, presented at the German Foreign Office conference on the South Caucasus in October 2009. Available at http://www.c-r.org/resources/conflict-post-soviet-europe-south-caucasus-are-there-scenarios-resolution (2.4Mb PDF).

23 Available in Russian on Conciliation Resources' website at http://www.c-r.org/our-work/caucasus/documents/Discussion_Pack_Russian.pdf (676Kb PDF).

inform a wide range of engagements. Perhaps above all, the fact that civil society actors participated together with political actors gave the former confidence to push their ideas into the political arena, to increase notions of accountability, and to sustain an array of other single and cross-conflict civil society engagements.

8. Prospects for dialogue

Following the events of August 2008, a mutually acceptable resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict seems a very distant prospect. For facilitators who invested considerable time and resources in the process prior to the August war, this raises questions about what was achieved, what went wrong and what prospects there might be for future initiatives that can contribute to a reconfiguration of relations.

Achievements in the sphere of peacebuilding and conflict transformation are generally collaborative and cumulative. Over an eight-year period, the Schlaining Process succeeded in: cultivating spaces for contact and dialogue; fostering communication channels across the conflict divide and building relationships; generating insights and new perspectives; and occasionally establishing concrete collaborations for addressing the conflict. Many of these relationships, ideas and collaborations have been sustained to one degree or another, despite divergent trajectories of the respective societies in the period since the Schlaining Process concluded.

In the early 2000s, when there was little structured engagement between political and civic actors across the divide, the process enabled such engagement to become more frequent. In the post-Rose Revolution period, when there was political momentum for reinvigorating talks, the Schlaining Process was able to contribute opportunities for engagement. Such opportunities complemented UN-led talks and broadened the discourse by giving senior-level officials and civil society representatives scope to understand each other and their respective aspirations. Naturally, the process was affected by the dynamics of growing polarisation between Tbilisi and Sukhum/i from mid-2006.

In a context in which the longstanding fragility of the formal negotiations meant that notions of a peaceful transformation began to lose credibility, it was hard for an informal dialogue process to gain traction in helping to shape attitudes to the peace process. The strategic calculations of the parties did not lead them to view their best option as a negotiated solution, thus requiring some form of cooperation and compromise. The parties considered their pursuit of unilateral options to be a viable means of gaining strategic advantage and avoiding the need to make fundamental changes to their basic positions on the key conflict issues, such as political status and IDP return. In this context, it was difficult for initiatives such as the Schlaining Process to fundamentally influence the parties' engagement in dialogue, let alone negotiations.

By 2008, the overall conflict dynamic was such that a process that had highlighted that dialogue was possible and could contribute something, however modest and incremental – and particularly one that emphasised the importance of the Georgian-Abkhaz dimension – was not something the government of Georgia saw as being in its interests.

Observing the conflict post-August 2008, it is clear that there will need to be a reframing of Russian-Western relations, Georgian-Russian relations and especially Georgian-Abkhaz relations in order for progress towards a mutually acceptable outcome to be made. This is the work of multifaceted diplomatic, political, economic and international relations. However, none of this should distract attention from the urgency of inter-communal conflict transformation initiatives, such as the dialogue fora provided by the Schlaining Process. The Schlaining experience also suggests that if in the future peaceful transformation of the conflict is to have a credible currency, then efforts to resource communication and generating ideas will continue to be essential components of the "groundwork" for peacemaking. This groundwork, by its nature, cannot be generated quickly; yet, it would be crucial if more conducive political or contextual conditions were to suddenly emerge. This kind of work is now doubly important, because the current generation of political leaders in Georgia has had limited exposure to the Abkhaz. The latter, in turn, are increasingly drawn to engagement with Russia. As a result, there is very limited direct experience or understanding of the other on which to base decisions. Yet, the cumulative engagement, in processes such as Schlaining, of over 100 individuals and tens of organisations, each with networks and hinterlands, remains a hidden capital of peacebuilding. Such "hidden capital" may pay dividends as and when the much needed reframing of the conflict becomes possible.

CHAPTER 4

The Schlaining Process: An Abkhaz Perspective

Manana Gurgulia

1. Introduction

The Schlaining Process was the working title given to a series of dialogue workshops on the peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The workshops were organised by two international NGOs with many years of experience of working in the Caucasus – namely, the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management in Berlin and Conciliation Resources in London. The idea of holding informal meetings of politicians and civil society activists from Georgia and Abkhazia was originally proposed at the first major meeting of representatives of Abkhaz and Georgian NGOs in January 1997 in Stadtschlaining, eastern Austria. The first workshop in the series was also held there in February 2000. A total of 20 meetings were held between February 2000 and July 2007, with Conciliation Resources taking on the organisation of workshops for the final two years.

Since I was the coordinator from Abkhazia, this article gives a view of the Schlaining Process from the Abkhaz perspective.

The Schlaining Process was a unique platform for informal dialogue between representatives of the two sides to the conflict. It allowed the participants to discuss their concerns and work together on analysing factors that enable and get in the way of conflict resolution. It also provided an opportunity to exchange information on what was happening on the ground.

I would define the overall aim of the project as enabling joint discussions of the various options for long-term resolution of the conflict. This project also provided an informal setting on neutral territory in which the Abkhaz side was able to convey to the Georgian side its vision of the situation, future prospects, its own interests and concerns, as well as gaining a better understanding of the Georgian side's position. When I say "understand", I do not mean "accept" the other side's position – it would be naïve on my part to expect that. The positions of the sides have remained virtually unchanged throughout the whole process. The Abkhaz side insist on a nation's right to self-determination, the de facto independence of Abkhazia and the impossibility of re-incorporation within Georgia. For its part, the Georgian position is based on the principle of national territorial integrity, refusal to accept secession by Abkhazia and the rights of all refugees to return to their homes. Despite these differences, however, there was generally a shared understanding that conflict must be resolved by peaceful means and that any attempt to impose a military solution would be disastrous.

A further major benefit of the process was that it helped to redress the lack of information about the situation on the ground.

Each of the 20 meetings had their own specific aims and objectives.

To summarise these, I would single out the following objectives:

- To study the experience of conflict resolution in various regions of the world (Northern Ireland, Bosnia Herzegovina, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Cyprus, etc.) where, despite differences, certain structural and procedural parallels can be identified;

- To discuss specific steps the parties should take to break the deadlock and make progress towards a lasting peace;

- To discuss draft interim agreements to achieve mutually acceptable outcomes;

- To develop guiding principles and defining steps that the sides could take jointly or unilaterally to resume the negotiation process and move the conflict resolution process forward;

- To discuss potential guarantees on non-resumption of military action and the conditions under and on which the parties would be prepared to sign an agreement on security and non-resumption of military action.

Despite the wide variety of topics discussed at these meetings, they all bore a direct or indirect relation to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and potential approaches to its transformation and resolution. These included: how to minimise risks when holding negotiations; the democratisation of society and state as a basis for a more constructive approach to conflict transformation; confidence-building measures; human rights and collective rights as part of a peaceful resolution process; the effectiveness of the various forms of economic and political pressure applied to one of the sides in the conflict in order to transform it; how to minimise the unintended effects of economic sanctions; how to overcome obstacles to exchanging information between the sides in the conflict; the role of the international community in conflict resolution; Russia's role in the negotiation process; the return of refugees and displaced persons; and the impact of internal political processes on prospects for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Although escalation of the conflict in the region – such as events in the Kodor Gorge or the Gal district – caused additional problems in the already complex dialogue between the Georgian and the Abkhaz side, most participants in the Schlaining Process attempted to keep to the basic principles of openness, respect for the other's opinions, the capacity to listen and confidentiality (according to the Chatham House Rules, under which participants may not be quoted directly).

2. Selection of participants

A total of 57 people took part in the Schlaining Process from the Abkhaz side. They consisted of parliamentary deputies, representatives of the Presidential Administration, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other ministries, along with NGO representatives, experts and journalists. Participants were selected on the basis of the agenda topic (where this had been agreed in advance), the situation on the ground, the status of the official negotiation process, the competence of the potential participants, their influence in the country as a whole and the representativeness of the various official structures (parliament, the executive). Wherever possible, the dialogue workshops were attended by participants in the official negotiation process. Priority was given to ensuring that a wide range of political opinions from Georgian and Abkhaz society was represented.

Since the Schlaining Process does not constitute official negotiations by the sides in the conflict, where binding documents and decisions were taken, attendance by representatives of the Abkhaz and Georgian NGOs was a necessary precondition. The meetings were usually attended by between six and eight persons from each side, including two to three civil society activists.

Participants from the Abkhaz side were selected in consultation with the facilitators – in particular, Jonathan Cohen (Conciliation Resources), the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Shamba, and the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes in Abkhazia, with which the Sukhum Media Club has collaborated on several projects.

The composition of participants was changed from time to time to reflect the bodies represented by the Georgian participants. When the Georgian side sent more deputies to the meeting than representatives of the executive branches, whose participation was subject to presidential approval (particularly after Mikheil Saakashvili came to power), we also made adjustments to our list.[1]

The most sensitive issue related to the participation of the representatives of the "legitimate government of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic".[2] The Abkhaz side objected categorically to their participation in both the official negotiation process and in unofficial meetings. This categorical rejection can be explained by the fact that it represented an attempt by Georgia to present the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as an internal Abkhaz matter. The Abkhaz authorities had agreed to hold negotiations with the official Tbilisi authorities. Meanwhile, Georgia continually attempted to include representatives of refugees from Abkhazia in the negotiating process, maintaining that they were actually the "legitimate government",

1 See P. Zakareishvili. 'How the "rose" government of Georgia systematically destroyed the informal Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process', *Rezonansy* newspaper, Nos. 256, 257 and 259, 19th, 20th and 22nd September 2008.

2 This is a reference to the Abkhaz government bodies created in Tbilisi following the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war in 1993.

forced to operate in exile after the war. The first meeting of the Schlaining Process thus came close to breakdown over the issue of participation by the representatives of the "government in exile of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic". Further down the line, the Abkhaz side reconciled itself to some extent with their participation in the process. This was firstly because all participants in the informal dialogue were speaking in a private capacity and not on behalf of the organisations and entities within which they worked. Secondly, people in Georgia itself gradually started to take action towards curtailing the activities of the "autonomous structures". Thirdly, some of the "autonomous" parties with which the Abkhaz participant refused to meet in the initial stages were already involved in the process, because they were either working for NGOs or in Georgian government ministry offices.

3. Dangers and risks associated with the project

The Georgian side, particularly after President Saakashvili came to power, continually attempted to prevent the Abkhaz side having direct contact with the various international and European organisations. President Saakashvili also insisted that any meetings with the "separatists" should be held not on neutral territory but in Georgia, which again was entirely unacceptable to the Abkhaz participants. The government in Tbilisi was clearly concerned that the representatives of Abkhazia, who were unable to present their views officially within the different European structures, would use the Schlaining Process as a platform to state their position. President Saakashvili also introduced a ban on officials from participating in the informal Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue.[3]

Overall, the Abkhaz side had no particular concerns about the project, apart from the negative attitude expressed by a portion of the population to any Georgian-Abkhaz meetings. People could occasionally be heard asking: 'Why are you at the meetings?', 'Who authorised you?' and 'Why are there all these meetings if there is an official negotiating process?' In some cases, people were reluctant to talk about their participation in the Schlaining Process when they returned home. However, the majority of participants understood the importance of informing the population of the process and its objectives, along with the issues discussed and the conclusions.

4. Facilitation of the process

The facilitators of the Schlaining Process were Norbert Ropers and Oliver Wolleh of the Berghof Research Center, Jonathan Cohen and Rachel Clogg of Conciliation Resources, as well as the independent expert Clem McCartney, who was invited by the workshop organisers.

3 See P. Zakareishvili, ibid.

As Oliver Wolleh, one of the process facilitators, outlined, the international team's role was that of facilitators rather than mediators. Mediation tends to focus on "objective" aspects of the conflict, with discussions on the positions and underlying interests of the sides in the conflict held solely in order to achieve a specific result in the form of an agreement that takes into account the interests of all those involved in the negotiation process. Facilitation, on the other hand, emphasises the "subjective" aspects, such as perceptions, feelings, opinions and communications skills.[4]

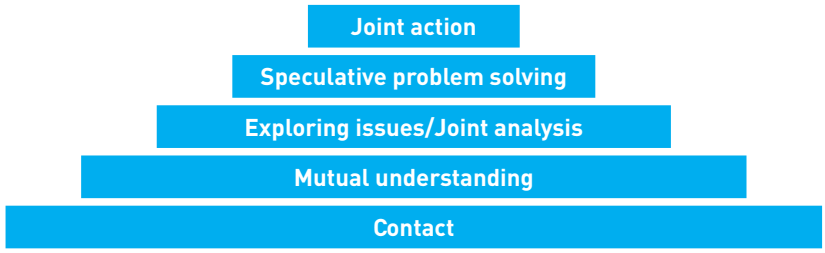
Our facilitators aimed, I would say successfully, to create an environment where the participants in the dialogue workshops could exchange opinions freely and openly. Participants were encouraged to analyse the various aspects of the conflict, its causes, dynamic and the difficulties facing them on the path towards its transformation and resolution.

The dialogue workshops were designed to allow for some issues to be discussed at plenary discussions and others in small group sessions. This gave virtually all participants the opportunity to express their opinion. Even those who would have preferred to "keep quiet" in the large group did speak in the small groups. The plenary sessions were usually run by one of the international facilitators, while in the small groups the participants themselves chose a leader and a rapporteur. No importance was attached to whether the feedback was given by an Abkhaz or a Georgian participant. The small group work was observed by one of the international facilitators, who was on hand to explain the task in more detail if necessary.

The team of facilitators kept the discussion going by presenting the tasks and suggesting discussion topics. Rather than imposing its own topics, the team based the discussion on what the participants had written on cards at the start of the meeting.

Clem McCartney presented an interesting "pyramid" of group interactions, as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 1: Pyramid of group interactions in the dialogue process



4 See O. Wolleh (2006). *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhazian Dialogue Process*. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Available at http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/SC_Difficult_Encounter.pdf (1.4Mb PDF).

The facilitators designed the process to help us to climb up this "pyramid" by discussing the various issues related to the conflict. The highest stage we reached was "speculative problem solving", although not on every occasion.

The organisers and facilitators of the Schlaining Process clearly demonstrated that they had a sufficiently profound understanding of the essential nature of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. We could see that they were committed to helping us find peaceful means of resolving it. Warm and friendly relations were developed between the workshop participants and the facilitators, without, however, preventing them from adopting an open-minded and unprejudiced approach.

5. What got in the way of the project activities?

Practical obstacles to the organisation of the workshops and informal dialogue were created by the periodic exacerbation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the rise in tension and interruptions to the official negotiation process. Nonetheless, at the same time, these obstacles underlined the real need for an informal arrangement for discussing sensitive issues. Moreover, during periods when the authorities, for one reason or another, discontinued official negotiations, the Schlaining Process provided one of only a small number of opportunities for direct bilateral contacts.

Problems or obstacles of a more subjective nature were caused by the personal qualities of individual participants, an inability or unwillingness to listen to opponents, and excessive emotionality. However, on most occasions the international facilitators managed the situation by allowing people the opportunity to speak out during the meetings or by smoothly shifting the discussion to the "coffee break".

Extending direct participation in the Schlaining Process was undoubtedly a positive factor. At the same time, however, the dynamics of the process were affected each time a new participant was introduced. The new participants, particularly those who were meeting with Abkhaz or Georgians for the first time, wanted to "speak out", pour out their grievances, and give a detailed exposition of their own view of the causes and history of the conflict.

One issue that cannot be avoided is the problem with the passports of the Abkhaz participants. Because our passports had been issued by the former USSR, it required no small effort on the part of the organisers to persuade the embassies of Western countries in Moscow to agree to issue visas. We also had to obtain special permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Federal Border Service for the Abkhaz participants to fly from Sheremetyevo International Airport in Moscow. Due to the problems with the passports – which continued until Russia agreed to confer its citizenship on Abkhaz

residents and issue international passports – some Abkhaz representatives were unable to attend the dialogue workshops, although their involvement in this process would have been very desirable and helpful.

6. Results and lessons learnt from the project

The seven-year Schlaining Process is not the only project within which Georgian-Abkhaz meetings have been held. There were also other projects run by Conciliation Resources (London), International Alert (London), the University of California (Irvine, US), the South Caucasus regional office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Berlin), the Danish and Norwegian Refugee Councils, and the Swedish organisation *Kvinna till Kvinna* in partnership with local NGOs, etc. However, unlike these projects – which published materials such as studies, reports and transcripts of meetings (15 volumes of meeting transcripts have been published so far within the University of California project) – the dialogue workshops under the Schlaining Process were confidential. Press releases were issued on the results of the workshops. However, the participants, as required by its ground rules, did not quote specific persons in their interviews or public speeches directly.

This confidentiality policy had both benefits and disadvantages. One advantage was that the officials attending the meetings (although in a private capacity as experts) could talk freely, discuss sensitive issues and hold an open and principled dialogue. A disadvantage was that the public in each country were not well informed about the project. I heard on several occasions the process being criticised for its "secretiveness", both by the public and by journalists.

The Schlaining Process provided all its participants with an opportunity to obtain a fuller understanding of the positions, interests and fears of the sides in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. At the meetings, information was exchanged about the latest political events in Abkhazia and Georgia, and the potential consequences of these events for the peace process were analysed. The various draft interim agreements, framework principles for reviving the negotiation process, guarantees for non-resumption of military action, and much more, were discussed.

The Schlaining meetings were not only a platform where an informal dialogue was held by the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. They also consisted of training components, such as a number of methodological approaches to conflict analysis and ways of transforming it – for example, conflict mapping, the "conflict prism", Gradual Reduction in International Tension (GRIT) and much more.

The participants were also given the opportunity to view our conflict through the prism of other conflicts – that is, those in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sri

Lanka, South Africa and Cyprus. Experts in these conflicts gave some very concise, thought-provoking and memorable lectures, which had a great deal of relevance to our own situation.

Unlike Georgia, which had a large number of international channels open to it for presenting its own version of the "truth" about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, Abkhazia had only a limited number of options. The Georgian government's efforts meant that the representatives of the official Abkhaz authorities (unlike their counterparts in Kosovo) had virtually no opportunity to participate, whether in an expert or observer capacity, in the various international forums where the Georgian-Abkhaz issues were being discussed. The Schlaining Process filled this gap to some extent.

Without wishing to minimise the significance of the plenary sessions and small group work (whether mixed or just one-sided), we should also refer to the intense discussions that took place outside the auditorium. Since the process included senior government officials, I believe that these informal discussions provided them with an opportunity to state their detailed positions, and to gain a better understanding of the interests and concerns of the other side. This enabled them to take these into consideration as they developed their strategic and tactical approaches to the official negotiating process.

The Georgians wanted to persuade the Abkhaz that the war had not changed the fact that they were two closely-related peoples who had to live together within a unitary state. They constantly raised the issue of Georgia's territorial integrity and the return of refugees, linking these to the resolution of all the other issues (political status, removal of sanctions, re-instatement of rail routes, security guarantees, etc.). The Abkhaz tried to persuade the Georgians that Abkhazia would never voluntarily be re-incorporated into Georgia, insisting that its desire to be an independent state, with good international relations with its neighbour Georgia, was fully justified. Achieving this would take more than the 20 workshops within the Schlaining Process.

The events of August 2008 changed the situation in the region. Abkhazia became a partially recognised state and an agreement on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance was signed with Russia which was vitally important for Abkhazia. However, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict remains unresolved, with the drafting and signing of an agreement on the non-resumption of military action remaining an urgent issue. In this new situation, new approaches will be needed.

CHAPTER 5

The Schlaining Process: A Georgian Perspective

Paata Zakareishvili

1. Introduction

This chapter examines, as one of the forms of conflict mediation, a series of informal meetings between Georgian and Abkhaz politicians, and the obstacles to this process, from a Georgian perspective. Peace practitioners have informally coined the term the "Schlaining Process" to describe the series, which is named after the small east Austrian town of Stadtschlaining where the first meetings were held.

The process began in 2000 and was halted in 2007 for reasons outlined later in this chapter. A total of 20 meetings were organised between 2000 and 2007, attended by 57 Abkhaz participants and 56 Georgian delegates.

The first 14 meetings were organised by the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management in Berlin and the UK organisation Conciliation Resources in London, which started its mediation work on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in 1997. Conciliation Resources took on the direct organisation of the project from the 15th meeting onwards.

Conciliation Resources' overall objective in Georgia is the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict by peaceful means. The organisation works with politicians, officials and activists to achieve this by convincing them of the viability of a democratic and non-violent resolution of the conflict. Conciliation Resources also facilitates support for constant dialogue between representatives of both sides. These two areas of the organisation's activities came together in the Schlaining meetings. The meetings took the form of a series of informal workshops, where representatives of the political elites from both sides were given the opportunity to talk freely, discussing and analysing in a workshop setting the key factors preventing and promoting conflict resolution.

Since the organisers of the Schlaining Process also acted as mediators at the meetings, they consistently avoided making any definitive statement on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict itself. Instead, they simply facilitated the development of constructive dialogue between the sides. Those attending the meetings did not have the status of official delegates and thus did not publicly issue any decisions. They did not represent their organisations or ministries and attended the meetings as experts in a purely private capacity.

2. Benefits of the Schlaining format

The process was based on the Chatham House Rules, whereby it is agreed that none of the participants or parties may be quoted in public. This confidentiality agreement enabled participants to discuss matters openly and directly within an agreed framework.

An important feature of the project was that the meetings were attended exclusively by Georgian and Abkhaz senior officials, politicians and experts. No third parties – Russia or other countries and even international organisations – were represented at the meetings.

This format allowed the meetings to have palpable results at the individual level. The process gave Georgian and Abkhaz politicians the following opportunities (the information below is based on the participants' feedback):

- **To communicate regularly in an informal, confidential setting away from third parties** – the regular nature of the meetings allowed participants to exchange crucial information regularly and on a scheduled basis; it also enabled them to be confident that any complex issue that might crop up occasionally between the sides would be discussed in detail in a calm setting, where questions would receive clear and detailed responses rather than demagogy or propaganda;

- **To familiarise themselves with the opposite side's position and interests** – this would then enable them to take these into consideration when developing their own strategies and tactics;

- **To identify (through dialogue) each other's position on a range of issues** – this enabled them to prepare for the next meeting or for other official or unofficial meetings;

- **To check that they had "done their homework"** – in particular, the meetings gave the participants a chance to see and hear each other's response to new proposals and initiatives, which they could later present for official consideration.

The design of the meetings also meant that the process enjoyed high levels of trust from Abkhaz politicians and experts. This was evidenced by their statements at the meetings. It was also reflected by the fact that they did not withdraw from the Schlaining Process during periodic rises in tension in Georgian-Abkhaz relations when they refused to attend other meetings.

As a result of the Schlaining Process, some of the Georgian participants realised the need to prepare systematic proposals which could be submitted to the Abkhaz side (based on extensive public discussions within Georgia). One such example was the document *Concept on the special status of Abkhazia in the Georgian state*, which was in fact written by them and presented to the Georgian public and authorities for discussion – without, however, leading to any change.

After the Saakashvili government came to power in 2003, the Schlaining format had real potential as a sounding board, where the new Georgian politicians could test ideas on

resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict directly with their Abkhaz colleagues. This could have provided them with much-needed encouragement and support. Since the meetings were designed from a mediation perspective, the benefits far outweighed any risk of them damaging the conflict resolution process. Instead, it enabled the participants to become better informed and prepared for action on conflict resolution at the political level.

Despite this, the Schlaining process did not result in any clear outcomes or affect the conflict dynamic, and gradually petered out. In the following section, I consider the political stances adopted by the Georgian side that prevented the process from being taken up and which may well have contributed to its lack of results.

3. Political obstacles to the informal bilateral process from the Georgian side

A brief description is needed of the context in which political factors affected the informal bilateral peacebuilding process from the Georgian side.

While Eduard Shevardnadze held power, Georgia did not object to government representatives participating in the Schlaining Process, although they did not show any interest or support for it. This "non-objection" policy allowed the process to develop, and by 2003 it had already achieved an important output in the form of the document on conflict resolution referred to earlier.

In 2004–2005, the social and political situation was radically transformed across the whole of Georgia and particularly in Abkhazia. Despite opposition to the results of elections, voters in both Georgia and Abkhazia were able to oust the old undemocratic, corrupt regimes and bring new forces to power. Amid these upheavals, the conflict resolution process also gained a new dynamism to match the changes in society. Interest in the Schlaining Process from the Abkhaz side grew. By June 2008, and thus even before the events in August of that year, the Abkhaz side was prepared to attend the Schlaining meeting planned for that month, despite the political tensions. However, in relation to the new Georgian government, it gradually became clear that it was preventing Georgian politicians from attending the regular bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian informal meetings. From the summer of 2005, this position became entrenched, resulting in the Schlaining Process ending after July 2007. A number of specific instances are given below.

Deliberate attempts to obstruct the Schlaining Process

From 2005 onwards, there were a number of instances of influential political figures on the Georgian side agreeing to attend meetings with Abkhaz politicians, and emphasising the importance of these meetings in preparatory discussions with the Georgian

coordinator (and author of this chapter). However, they withdrew from the meetings at the last minute without giving any explanation for their sudden change of heart. This happened not only in the Schlaining Process but also, for example, in the meeting between Georgian and Ossetian politicians in Ljubljana, Slovenia in February 2005: although two representatives of the Georgian parliamentary majority had agreed to attend the meeting, they withdrew at the last minute.

In the Schlaining Process, this pattern (agreement, interest, willingness to attend followed by withdrawal just before the meeting with no reason given) became the norm.

The idea of a **16th** Schlaining meeting was suggested by Irakli Alasania, who was at the time the personal representative of the president of Georgia for the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. At the previous Schlaining meeting in April 2005, he had proposed holding a shorter and smaller bilateral meeting. The Abkhaz group responded that they were very interested in a dialogue with Alasania. With this proposal in mind, the process mediators carried out a number of consultation meetings with the representatives of both sides. This resulted in agreement to hold a two-day informal meeting with a small number of participants in Vienna. From the Abkhaz side, those who agreed to attend comprised: Stanislav Lakoba, the then Secretary of the Security Council; Leonid Lakerbaia, the Abkhaz Vice-Premier; Batal Tabagua, the Chairman of the Central Election Committee of Abkhazia; and Sokrat Dzhindzholia, a representative of civil society. The members of the Georgian group were proposed by Irakli Alasania. They comprised, in addition to Alasania, Gigi Ugulava,[1] the Head of the Presidential Office, and Nika Rurua, the Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security. However, just before the meeting, after the Abkhaz group had already left Moscow for Vienna, all the participants apart from Alasania withdrew. The situation was saved at the last minute by State Minister Georgy Haindrava, who came to the meeting with his deputy. On the morning of the day on which Alasania was due to fly in, he telephoned and withdrew from the meeting without providing any reasons.

The **17th** Georgian-Abkhaz Schlaining working group was held in London on 18th–20th March 2006. A month before it was held, Irakli Alasania, Nika Gvaramia (who at the time was the Public Prosecutor General) and David Bakradze (the then Chair of the Parliamentary Commission on European Integration) stated their willingness to attend. Nevertheless, with a week to go before the start of the workshop in London, all three withdrew for various reasons. Ivlian Haindrava, Vakhtang Kolbaia and David Bazgadze (members of parliament) were obliged to replace them at the last minute.

1 Following Gigi Ugulava's appointment as Mayor of Tbilisi, the Chair of the parliamentary majority, Maia Nadiradze, was invited. She stated her interest in the meeting and agreed to attend.

The **18th** working group was scheduled for 9th–13th June 2006, once again in the Austrian town of Schlaining. As early as 20th April, Irakli Alasania and Nika Gvaramia stated separately that they intended to attend the meeting in June. They promised to give a final answer by 10th May. However, on 9th May, Alasania and Gvaramia informed us that they were withdrawing.

Prior to the **19th** Schlaining Process meeting – which was held in London on 15th–18th December 2006 – Georgy Lomaia and Georgy Volsky, officials from the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, withdrew.

The **20th** Schlaining Process meeting was due to be held in London on 27th–30th July 2007. David Bazgadze and Roin Janashia, parliamentary delegates and representatives of the parliamentary majority, along with Georgy Kadzhaia, an official at the Council of National Security, provisionally agreed to attend. However, seven days before they were due to leave, all three withdrew from the meeting. On 20th July, David Bazgadze contacted the process coordinator on the Georgian side and informed him that the then Speaker of the Parliament, Nino Burjanadze, had required him and Janashia to withdraw from the London meeting. Burjanadze told Bazgadze: 'We [author's note: presumably the Georgian authorities] will not attend this type of meeting.' This was despite the fact that, a year earlier in March 2006, she herself had agreed to David Bazgadze attending the 17th meeting. So what had changed in one year?

In 2007, on 21st–25th September, the German Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management organised a Georgian-Abkhaz meeting in Cyprus. Despite originally agreeing to attend, the representatives of the State Ministry on Conflict Resolution, Ruslan Abashidze and Dmitri Manjavidze, decided not to attend this meeting.

Following consultation with politicians from both sides, carried out by Conciliation Resources, a further, **21st** Schlaining Process meeting was scheduled. Despite the serious escalation in tension in the conflict zone in June and July 2008, the Abkhaz side agreed in principle to the Abkhaz group attending the meeting, which was scheduled to take place on 27th–30th July 2008 in London. Parliamentary deputy Petre Mamradze agreed to attend the meeting but asked for time to consult with the parliamentary leaders. There were no other government representatives willing to attend. Three representatives of the parliamentary majority responded to the invitation with a firm, resounding rejection.[2] While the negotiations with them were still underway, Petre Mamradze also withdrew. After further consultation with the Georgian side failed to yield any results, the organiser of the process decided to postpone the meeting indefinitely.

2 I cannot give their names because I did not hold talks with them on their participation in the next meeting.

On 4th August 2008, Kakha Lomaia, Secretary of the Council of National Security of Georgia, told a meeting of the Special State Committee, convened to discuss the Georgian president's peace initiative on conflict resolution in Abkhazia and the events in the conflict zones, which was attended by representatives of various state bodies: 'Let's not fool ourselves. We need to have a dialogue with Russia rather than storming into Sukhumi and Tskhinvali.' This statement was made three days before the 7th August and the dramatic escalation of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, which plunged the region into war between Russia and Georgia.

Thus, the halting of the Schlaining Process meant that officials were prevented from participating in a regular informal Georgian-Abkhaz process. Such a process could have built confidence between the Abkhaz and Georgian sides and allowed common interests to emerge in a bilateral format, without the participation of Russia and international organisations.

Given the total absence to this day of any form of Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue, it seems rather perverse to ignore the only continuous (informal) arrangement that exists. Logically, Georgia should have been the first to show interest in changing the status quo in the conflict and exploring any means of finding routes and ways to restore trust with the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides. This would have allowed it to gain a better understanding of their interests, fears and expectations. These constant informal bilateral meetings represented the best opportunity to gain regular information on the processes unfolding in Abkhazia and the former autonomous region of South Ossetia. The groundwork done under the Schlaining Process had created a sustainable format for dialogue of this type. Rejecting it closed one of the few existing routes for dialogue and led to the sides becoming even more isolated from one another. This had to be counter to Georgia's interests.

There were certainly specific reasons for the systematic sabotaging of the well-worn peace process. However, in the absence of reliable facts, we are limited to speculations, suspicions and a number of contradictory versions, which are outlined below.

4. Possible reasons for the demise of the process

Version 1

This version of events relates to a number of public statements by President Saakashvili that any negotiations with the separatists must be held on Georgian soil and that meetings with them outside of Georgia were unacceptable. On 7th April 2005, the president insisted: 'Running off to other cities to meet Kokoiti and Bagapsh is over. I am not personally prepared to meet Kokoiti and Bagapsh and I am not going to seek them out anywhere.

If they need anything, let them come to Tbilisi. I will give them my office address and even my home telephone number. Let them come, I am ready to talk openly with them.'[3]

In this case, Saakashvili, on coming to power, was simply reviving the stance adopted by Tamaz Nadareishvili, Chair of the Supreme Council of the [Georgia-backed] Abkhaz Autonomous Republic from 1994–1999. Nonetheless, there has never been any convincing explanation as to what threats or risks might have been posed by holding informal meetings of representatives of the upper echelons of power outside of the country – particularly given that the alternative was to have no such meetings at all. This position ran counter to the principles of peaceful conflict resolution, which place great emphasis on maintaining constant dialogue.

For their part, the Abkhaz and Ossetians were interested in distancing themselves as far as possible from the other side. If the Georgian authorities attempted to impose their own preconditions for meetings, the Abkhaz and Ossetians would be only too pleased to reject them. The onus was on Georgian politicians to decide for themselves whether or not a constant bilateral, informal political dialogue with leading Abkhaz and Ossetian politicians was necessary. If it was, they should have set up meetings with the Abkhaz and Ossetian representatives at whatever location the latter found acceptable, since the process was more in our interests than theirs. It was extremely counterproductive to impose a requirement that meetings with the separatists could only be held on Georgian territory. Unfortunately, these serious decisions were clearly taken and continue to be taken by individuals at the highest level, without any collective or expert discussion.

Version 2

With hindsight, the interruptions and obstacles to the informal peace process may be seen as an indication that the Georgian authorities were seriously considering the option of using force to resolve the conflict. This is brought up periodically by government representatives openly or in more guarded terms. One example is the statement by the head of the General Staff of the Georgia armed forces, Levan Nikoleishvili. In January 2006, he remarked: 'Georgian peacebuilders will if necessary use the experience gained in Iraq to restore Georgia's territorial integrity in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.'[4]

If this version is to be believed – in other words, that the Georgian side was planning to escalate the "frozen conflict" at the time – then clearly it would not have been in the government's interests to restore trust between the Georgians and the Abkhaz or Ossetians.

3 Interview, *Sakartvelos Respublika*, No. 81, 8th April 2005.
4 Interview is available in Russian at http://www.apsny.ge/analytics/1137455619.php.

If the sides had in fact succeeded in creating preconditions for a serious peace process through these regular informal meetings, any subsequent withdrawal by Georgia from that process might well have jeopardised the support given to the Georgian authorities by their allies and their own population. So, in this version of events, the Georgian government withdrew from the regular informal meetings in an attempt to avoid being held to account in the future by global public opinion and its own population.

If this version has some basis in fact, the government's behaviour at the time is entirely logical. It preferred to continue a policy of "megaphone diplomacy"[5] in relation to the separatist leaders, so that the lack of progress on conflict resolution could be used as a pretext to place the blame on the separatists. This would then be grounds for claiming that resolution of the problem by military means was the only option left open to them. In this view, the sabotaging of the Schlaining Process can be seen as an indicator that we were on the way to war.

Version 3

Some readers may be surprised to hear what sounds like a classic conspiracy theory from the author of this chapter, who has always emphasised Georgia's responsibility for stoking the conflict. However, it is possible that the "Russian factor" also played a part. It is no secret that Russia adopted a challenging position on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and the methods it used to advance its goals were certainly lacking in political correctness. If there is any external power with no interest in the success of regular bilateral Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian meetings, that power can only be Russia. The Roman law principle of "*cui bono*" states that any investigation of cause and effect in a situation should start by considering who stands to benefit from it.

This requires us to consider how Russia could have influenced Georgian policy. Mikheil Saakashvili's aggressive statements regarding Russia are well known. But in that case, how could the "Russian factor" influence the Georgian president? It is difficult to identify with any certainty specific Georgian politicians who are lobbying for Russian state interests in the Georgian parliament. It is all too easy to draw the wrong conclusions by extrapolating in the absence of any hard evidence, and so we will not develop this version any further. However, as an illustration of how Russia is playing along with Georgia, it is worth quoting the words from a speech made by President Saakashvili on 4th December 2007: 'So we are talking in fact about a short period. Even the Russians have repeatedly agreed that South Ossetia is no longer of any interest to them. They have agreed.'[6]

5 This means when the sides only communicate via televised speeches and official statements.

6 'S.Ossetia a Matter of, at Most, Months" – Saakashvili', *Civil Georgia*, 4th December 2007. Available at http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16489&search=.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight that regular bilateral dialogue between the conflicting sides was and remains one of the most effective means of weakening Russian influence and preventing Russia from achieving its aims in Georgia.

Version 4

This version of events refers to the weakening of the civil sector's role in the peace process in order to discredit it. In fact, government representatives generally withdrew from meetings a few days before they started, when it was virtually impossible for the coordinators to take steps to address the situation. If the government representatives had really wanted to stop the process, they could have refused to participate from the outset. However, the authorities may have been pursuing a deliberate, perhaps covert, policy of preventing any position from emerging that would be acceptable to both the Georgian and the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides by first announcing their willingness to attend the meetings but then withdrawing at the very last moment. This may have sought to create the appearance that the informal bilateral meetings initiated by the non-governmental sector were badly organised and that the organisations running them were unreliable. Another possibility is that the authorities were aiming to discredit the process in the eyes of the donors and organisers of the dialogue, so that they would ultimately withdraw funding from projects of this kind.

Version 5

It is possible that the authorities were acting in support of their own bilateral contacts with the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides. However, if they understood the need for such dialogue, it would surely have been more consistent to make use of any other meetings to obtain additional information and to check the information they already had, rather than placing obstacles in their way. We are therefore inclined to believe that no such contacts existed. If indeed there had been, those privy to information in this field would almost certainly have got wind of it. However, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the level of confidentiality was so high that these contacts were kept completely secret.

It is in fact quite possible that there were contacts with the Ossetian side prior to the creation of Dmitry Sanakoev's temporary administration on the territory of the former South Ossetian autonomous region in order to act as a counterweight to Russian influence and provide evidence that not all of the population of South Ossetia supported the separatists. Ultimately, this escalated the conflict, reinforced the perceived threat by Georgia and pushed the inhabitants of South Ossetia even more towards Russia. As time went on, it became clear that these contacts did not lead to peaceful conflict resolution, but rather exacerbated the conflict.

5. After the war: what now?

Whatever the actual causes of its demise were, the Schlaining Process should not have been abandoned. It is quite clear that government representatives are not currently willing to participate in similar processes, which continue today exclusively in the form of meetings between civil society representatives.

All our attempts to accommodate the ruling party's changing policies towards the peace process have so far been met with blank indifference. Since the authorities refuse to collaborate with us, we feel justified in the interests of Georgian society to involve experts and representatives of the political opposition in the process. Even if the authorities continue their familiar policy of indifference to these meetings, the meetings will nevertheless continue at least in a formal sense and give opposition representatives more opportunities to provide the Abkhaz and Ossetian sides with information and proposals of importance to them. At the same time, we should always leave the door open for government representatives to engage with the process at any time or to use the resources of civil society to develop other acceptable formats.

6. Conclusion

The problems in the peace process, including the Schlaining Process in which representatives of civil society took an active role, reflected the rising threat of war. Civil society's fears on this score were borne out by the events of August 2008.

People often criticise us for not being able to stop the war. However, we can hardly be expected to act as fire-fighters or an alert system. It is our view that the search for an acceptable format must go on, so that projects such as the Schlaining Process continue.

Unfortunately, developments in the conflict have also changed the international community's attitude to peacebuilding projects. It no longer treats them seriously. Nevertheless, if it was to listen more closely to what was said within the Schlaining Process, to the alarm expressed by those involved at the time, then it would realise that its sceptical attitude in recent times to peacebuilding projects is not justified.

The international community could, in our view, make a significant contribution to the peace process by convincing the Georgian authorities of the need for bilateral collaboration and encouraging them to acknowledge their mistakes in this regard.