

**The Role of the United Nations in the Georgian-Abkhazian
Conflict**

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This article analyses UNOMIG efforts at stabilization and mediation in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, arguing that while progress in both realms has been slight, there is reason to conclude that stabilization attempts have been more successful than those of mediation. The author contends that difficulties in the mediation sphere can largely be attributed to UN insistence on Georgian territorial integrity and on a comprehensive settlement including continued substantial progress on the question of Abkhazia's political status. While coordination between the CIS peacekeepers and the UN has proceeded smoothly, the multidimensional involvement of the Russian Federation has complicated the constellation of actors surrounding the conflict. Owing to these external as well as other internal factors, the author concludes that the outlook for Georgian-Abkhazian negotiations in the short to medium term appears bleak, but that the conclusions drawn from the role of the UN in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict can be useful for understanding difficulties the UN is likely to encounter in similar interventions.

I. Introduction

The recent war in Iraq has again called into question the potential role of the United Nations in world affairs. Even long before the US-led invasion of Iraq, increased concern was being voiced about the weakness of the UN within the global system, especially in conjunction with the situation in Kosovo, but also in the context of interventions in Africa and elsewhere. Lately the developments in Iraq have overshadowed most other events, serving as they have as a reminder that we live in an increasingly unipolar world. Nonetheless, the UN remains an important actor in global affairs, in spite of its financial dependence on wealthy states and the difficulties posed by the decision-making mechanisms employed by the Security Council. Instead of merely dismissing the UN's role in the international arena, it is crucial to review its activity in a variety of contexts to determine the actual impact of its various agencies and to discover both structural flaws and potential for improvement.

UN activity in Georgia and Abkhazia serves as an excellent case study for this purpose. 2003 marks ten years since the Georgian-Abkhazian war came to an end and the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was established. While the Iraq war did not fail to have an impact on the situation in the South Caucasus, neither is this region immune to the influence of the United States. The area has nevertheless remained largely under Russian influence in the period under consideration. Thus we have a situation in which the UN is a major player in attempts at conflict resolution, but is simultaneously constrained by a regional hegemon (here the Russian Federation) in its room for manoeuvre. This study traces the

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development of UNOMIG and its coordination efforts with other UN agencies in order to determine UNOMIG's contribution to the management of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. It also attempts to generalize particular UN difficulties or relative successes related to the conflict in order to ascertain the viability of UN interventions in similar conflicts in future. In particular, we will focus on UNOMIG efforts in the fields of both mediation and stabilization and assess their relative impacts on the development of the conflict. By stabilization we mean the UN capacity to provide a secure environment for the Abkhaz population in the conduct of their daily affairs.

The conflict over Abkhazia has both ethnic and territorial components and has been present in some form for a number of decades, but became particularly acute during and after the rule of Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose pro-ethnic Georgian tendencies alienated the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While the situation in Abkhazia was kept barely under control by means of a compromise arrangement on ethnic group representation in the Abkhaz parliament, after Gamsakhurdia was driven from power and replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze¹ this arrangement collapsed and the situation escalated into outright war, which lasted from August 1992 until October 1993. As a result of the war approximately 250,000 persons (mainly ethnic Georgians) fled Abkhazia for other regions of the country. The Abkhaz received a limited amount of support from mercenaries and volunteers, mainly from the North Caucasus, as well as some equipment and assistance from Russian troops stationed in the area, although the Russian role in the fighting was as ambivalent as it has been since the war. Thanks to these sources of support and their own persistence, as well as the fact that the Georgian forces both lacked coherence and were obliged to do battle simultaneously on different fronts,² the Abkhaz were able to drive the Georgians out and establish a *de facto* independent region, which has, however, failed to receive any form of official international recognition.

Since the war, Abkhazia has been largely isolated from developments occurring in Georgia proper, and has repeatedly attempted to extend its economic and political ties with the Russian Federation, with many Abkhaz applying for and receiving Russian citizenship. Internal political developments have been largely in the hand of President Vladislav Ardzinba, although his influence has been declining as his health deteriorates. Civic freedoms such as that of expression have been severely curtailed and the political opposition has generally not

¹ Shevardnadze was first elected chairman of the Georgian parliament (1992) and only later (1995 and again in 2000) occupied the post of president.

² In the first years of Shevardnadze's rule there was still armed opposition to his leadership by supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

been able to play a significant role. Meanwhile, the economic situation has been slowly but steadily approaching crisis proportions, despite periodic assertions to the contrary by the Abkhaz government. Nonetheless, an apparent initial willingness to compromise on issues such as the political status of the region has long since been replaced by intransigence on this and other questions, such as that of refugee return.³

UN involvement in the attempts at resolution and management of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is multifaceted and complex. The leading role is assumed by UNOMIG, which consists of a Chief Military Observer and up to 130 subordinate observers from a large number of UN member countries. The mission also includes about 95 international civilian personnel and 175 local civilian staff.⁴ The Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) is simultaneously the head of UNOMIG. While UNOMIG headquarters is officially located in Sukhum/i, where the SRSG is represented by his/her deputy, there is also a sizeable office in Tbilisi. UNOMIG's work is embedded in the so-called 'Geneva peace process', a framework initiated in 1997 to bring all negotiations on the conflict under the UN umbrella. This process allocates the role of 'facilitator' to the Russian Federation and grants observer status to the OSCE and the 'Group of Friends of the Secretary General on Georgia'.⁵

The Geneva process involved setting up three working groups on security issues, refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) return, and economic and social questions. This in turn institutionalized the role of other UN agencies which had up to that point played greater or lesser roles in the management of the conflict and in dealing with the situation on the ground in Abkhazia and Georgia proper. While the UNOMIG Chief Military Observer heads the working group on security issues, the other two are chaired by a UNHCR representative and the UNDP Resident Coordinator, respectively. Other UN agencies concerned with the Georgian-Abkhazian situation are the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), which is involved in tracking development projects in the region and in the implementation of IDP integration projects, and United Nations Volunteers (UNV), which has discreetly been involved in a number of small development-type projects on the territory of Abkhazia. In terms of outside cooperation, the UN shares information with the OSCE on developments in Abkhazia and includes the OSCE in a limited fashion in conflict management attempts. Further, UNOMIG observers cooperate closely with the CIS

³ Among representatives of Abkhaz civil society, however, other, potentially more flexible perspectives on the status question can be found. See e.g., Nadezhda Venediktova, "Spetsial'nyi perekhodnyi status dlia nepriznanykh gosudarstv?" in *Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* No. 7, February 2003, pp. 8-9, which suggests a UN-sanctioned 'interim status' for regions which desire official recognition of their independence.

⁴ For constantly updated figures, see the UNOMIG website at www.unomig.org.

⁵ The latter group consists of representatives from France (coordinator), Germany, Great Britain, the United States and the Russian Federation. Its role will be described and analyzed later in this article.

peacekeeping force (CISPKF) in Abkhazia, whose activity they monitor but on whom they are also dependent for providing a certain degree of security for the conduct of UN operations.⁶

Prevailing Georgian opinion on the conflict, especially in the early years, was that it was the result of a provocation by the Russian Federation, which was intent upon retaining a high degree of control over Georgia. Some observers even claimed that the conflict was one between Georgia and Russia and the Abkhaz merely served as pawns in the battle. More nuanced views are to be heard from certain Georgian and Russian scholars, such as Ghia Nodia or Alexei Zverev,⁷ but attributing the conflict to Russia's behaviour remains quite prevalent in some academic and many political circles. A more moderate school holds that the role of the Russian Federation is more ambivalent, with certain Russian actors supporting Abkhaz claims and others backing the Georgian position, while still imputing to Russia the power to resolve the entire situation given the political will.⁸ Thus the Georgian and to some extent the Russian position, while not necessarily involving a complete dismissal of the UN role, imply a clear subordination of its significance to that of the Russian Federation. This attitude is often accompanied (especially among Georgian government officials) by the perceived need to find a counterweight to Russia. Particularly in recent years, this potential role has been played in Georgian minds by the USA and western alliances, above all NATO.

Western authors, on the other hand, have tended to downplay both the UN and the Russian Federation and emphasize the Georgian and Abkhaz sides, at least where potential for conflict resolution is concerned.⁹ Bruno Coppieters states unambiguously that "contrary to the assertions of many observers, the 'key to a peace settlement' is not to be found in Moscow".¹⁰ Western observers tend to accord the UN (at least in theory) a larger role in Abkhazia than their counterparts in the former Soviet Union. They have paid more attention to the UN role

⁶ On cooperation between UNOMIG and the CIS peacekeeping force see below. For a more detailed treatment see John Mackinlay and Evgenii Sharov, "Russian Peacekeeping Operations in Georgia" in John Mackinlay and Peter Cross (eds) *Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping*. Tokyo/New York/Paris: United Nations University Press, 2003, pp. 63-110.

⁷ See e.g. Ghia Nodia, "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia", Working Paper Series, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Winter 1997-1998, <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~bsp/>; Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994" in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Brussels: VUB Press, 1996, pp. 13-71.

⁸ See e.g. Rusudan Gorgiladze, "Georgian Politics and the Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia", *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol 6, No. 1, Winter 1998, pp. 14-17, especially pp. 15-16: "It is very clear that if Russia wants to settle this conflict, it can do this." At the time this publication appeared Gorgiladze was chief staff adviser to Shevardnadze and his special representative for political security and conflict settlement.

⁹ Neil MacFarlane, *Western Engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia*. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1999, pp. 50-52.

¹⁰ Bruno Coppieters, "Western Security Policies and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict" in Coppieters/Darchiashvili/Akaba (eds) *Federal Practice. Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*. Brussels: VUB University Press, pp. 21-58, here p. 42.

starting early on, although the tendency has been to focus on the UN role as mediator. For this reason assessments of its performance have been fairly negative. However, one of the best analysts of the situation, Neil MacFarlane, points out the difficulty of attributing a particular success or failure to any given actor due to the parallel nature of activities, especially the parallel negotiating tracks pursued by the UN and the Russian Federation.¹¹ He further mentions that in spite of these dual tracks it cannot be ruled out that external actors were in fact not the main catalysts for certain events, such as the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian war in 1993.¹² As for the role of the United States, the general western scholarly consensus is that Georgian officials take a naive view of US intentions and that the US does not plan to become involved in the Abkhazia issue nearly to the extent hoped for by the Georgian government.

This article first offers a description of the history and development of the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, including the war years 1992-93, and a brief sketch of the different phases of the peace process. The first section thus highlights the conditions the UN had to confront in Abkhazia at the time of the creation of UNOMIG and beyond. Then we look at UN attempts to mediate in the conflict and the role that the UN has played on various levels, focusing primarily on UNOMIG involvement. While the sections on UN activity are chronologically ordered, each one also stresses one or two aspects of UN performance and their influence on the overall conflict situation. Thus we first assess the impact of the fact that the Russian Federation was present on the scene before the UN arrived, as well as the constraints imposed on UN behaviour by its commitment to Georgian territorial integrity. The next section addresses the relative effectiveness of UNOMIG in mediation and stabilization efforts in the conflict, as well as the focus on IDP return.¹³ A further section deals with the notion of a ‘comprehensive settlement’ with particular reference to the question of political status. The concluding section then summarizes those points which have emerged from the analysis in the empirical sections and attempts to generalize their implications for potential future UN interventions in similar conflicts.

II. History and Background of the Georgia-Abkhazia Conflict

Although we do not have the opportunity here to go into detail about the history of Abkhazia and its changing relationship to Georgia, it is important to emphasize one point: the Abkhazians and the Georgians refer to quite different historical phases to buttress their

¹¹ MacFarlane 1999, p. 51.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Most of the IDPs are ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia during or after the war. Very few fall into the refugee category, which implies that they at least temporarily left Georgia for another country.

arguments for this or that status for Abkhazia. While the Georgians stress certain periods during the pre-Soviet era, in which Abkhazia was frequently integrated with parts of contemporary Georgia, the Abkhazians mention primarily the Soviet period, during which Abkhazia possessed the status of an autonomous republic, with its own governing structures and special quotas to ensure the participation of ethnic Abkhaz in the political system to an extent greater than that implied by their percentage in the population.¹⁴ Thus both sides manipulate history for their own purposes, and arguments can be found for a variety of arrangements by making reference to different historical phases.

The demographic issue is a touchy one and deserves separate comment. While the Abkhaz made up only around 17% of the population of ‘their’ autonomous republic, they argue that this situation is due to a number of historical injustices, not least the Georgianization carried out under Stalin.¹⁵ Therefore, they insist on greater than proportional representation in political and cultural life. Even after the exodus of approximately 250,000 refugees and IDPs (mostly ethnic Georgians) it is still disputable whether the ethnic Abkhaz now comprise the majority in the republic. This demographic weakness is one principal reason for the extreme Abkhaz opposition to significant IDP return, which, as we will see, is a major goal of UN involvement in the conflict.

The focus of this brief history is on the Soviet era and the initial years of Georgian independence. The beginning of the Soviet period was characterized by political and social turmoil. From March to December 1921, Abkhazia was an independent Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). At the end of 1921, the Abkhazian SSR united with the Georgian SSR under a Treaty of Union, which lasted for ten years. In 1931, Abkhazia’s status was reduced to that of an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. Thus by 1931 the situation had stabilized into the constellation which lasted until the end of the USSR in 1991. The degree to which pressure was exerted on Abkhazia to accede to the final change in status remains controversial to this day. What is certain is that throughout the Soviet period cultural and political figures in Abkhazia consistently raised the question of granting the republic a higher status. This generally came to the forefront at times of change within the former Soviet Union, such as the introduction of a new constitution or during a period of relative political openness.

¹⁴ For a brief, relatively pro-Abkhaz account of the history of Abkhazia see Gueorgui Otyrba, “War in Abkhazia: The Regional Significance of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict” in Roman Szporluk (eds) *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. Armonk, N.Y./London: Sharpe, 1994, pp. 281-309.

¹⁵ As of 1 January 1990, out of 537,000 inhabitants of Abkhazia, 44% were Georgian, 17% Abkhaz, 16% Russian and 15% Armenian. See Zverev, p. 37.

Thus in 1956,¹⁶ 1967 and 1978 Abkhaz party officials, supported by intellectuals in the republic, petitioned Moscow for a separation of Abkhazia from Georgia in exchange for incorporation within the Russian SFSR.¹⁷ Although unsuccessful in their primary aim, these efforts did result in a series of concessions concerning culture and personnel.¹⁸ Thus there is a recent tradition in Abkhazia of protesting for a higher territorial status and more participation in political and cultural affairs. During the Soviet period these protests were naturally directed toward Moscow, which had ultimate authority over Georgian party leaders. This constellation contributed to a perception within Abkhazia (and other autonomous republics as well) of Moscow as a potential champion, while the Georgian authorities were viewed as both relatively weak and unwilling to grant Abkhaz demands. To a large extent these perceptions have carried over and even been reinforced in the post-Soviet period.

The Abkhaz protests intensified in the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1988, 60 leading Abkhazians sent a request to Gorbachev to consider the return of Abkhazia to its status as a Soviet Socialist Republic with treaty ties to Georgia. In March of the following year, a mass meeting of Abkhaz activists in the town of Lykhnyi reiterated the call for a restoration of Abkhazia's pre-1931 status. Then, in July 1989, clashes involving Abkhaz educational rights in Sukhum/i left 14 dead and over 500 wounded.¹⁹ In December 1990, the historian Vladislav Ardzinba was chosen to chair the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, and he has remained at the head of the political structure of Abkhazia to this day. By 1991, the cleft between the Georgians and Abkhaz had widened, so that when the Georgians decided to boycott a referendum on the future structure of the former Soviet Union, the Abkhaz authorities insisted on participating. Thus on 17 March 1991, with 52.3% voter turnout, 98.6% of those coming to the polls in Abkhazia supported remaining within a union of

¹⁶ In 1956, three years after Stalin's death, his repressive policies were partially condemned by his successor Nikita Khrushchev at a CPSU Congress. This initiated a period of relative openness which was particularly cathartic for the Abkhaz, as they widely believed that Stalin and his henchman Lavrentii Beria, both ethnic Georgians, had supported pro-Georgian policies to the detriment of ethnic minorities within Georgia. On the ambivalent relationship of Georgians to Stalin and the Stalin period see Theodor Hanf and Ghia Nodia, *Georgia: Lurching to Democracy*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 23-25.

¹⁷ Zverev, p. 39. The request for affiliation with the Russian Republic may have been tactical, seen as the only option to which the centre might agree. On the other hand, it may have reflected a genuine sense of association with Russia, and at any rate created a precedent for the close relationship between Abkhazia and certain segments of the Russian Federation today.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Stephen Jones, "Georgia: the trauma of statehood" in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds) *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 505-543, here, p. 513.

sovereign republics. This behaviour led to threats by the Georgian government to dissolve the Abkhaz parliament.²⁰

Parallel developments were occurring in Georgian political society during this period. Encouraged by the relative freedom of speech allowed under Gorbachev's new policy of *glasnost*, national movements rapidly developed in many Soviet republics, and Georgia was no exception. More unusual was that the extreme nationalist element with Zviad Gamsakhurdia at its head eventually prevailed, which as Ghia Nodia points out, was a situation unique to Georgia, "the only place among these republics where the pro-independence movement was dominated by its radical factions".²¹ Gamsakhurdia initially commanded a great deal of respect in Georgian society as a former dissident and the son of a well-known author. He was elected president in May 1991 with an overwhelming 86% of the vote.²² Although the nationalist line he adopted did not bode well for relations between Georgians and ethnic minorities, Gamsakhurdia at first reached an agreement with Abkhaz officials on a quota system for the Abkhazian legislature.²³ However, this arrangement came about mainly because the government and the Gamsakhurdia-controlled parliament had failed to avert (and even contributed to the outbreak of) war in the autonomous region of South Ossetia and wanted to avoid a similar situation in Abkhazia. The difficulty with the new quota system was that it allowed for either of the two main voting blocs to stall parliamentary action, which the Georgian deputies soon did. The Abkhaz deputies, together with some others, continued to issue legislation, which led the Georgian faction to form a parallel parliament for which they claimed full legitimacy.²⁴

Gamsakhurdia quickly demonstrated his incompetence at preserving the loyalty of influential officials and angered many as a consequence of his response to the Moscow putsch, when he failed to unambiguously condemn the Communist hardliners. Although he still had great support among the populace, his position among the political elite became increasingly tenuous, and he was eventually ousted by a military coup led by the National

²⁰ Sopiko Shubladze, "Responding to Conflicts in Georgia: A Need for Prevention?" in Gianni Bonvicini et al. (eds) *Preventing Violent Conflict: Issues from the Baltic and the Caucasus*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 168-104, here p. 171.

²¹ Ghia Nodia, "Dynamics of State-Building in Georgia", *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1998, p. 8.

²² Coppieters, Bruno. "Western Security Policies and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict" in Coppieters/Darchiashvili/Akaba (eds) *Federal Practice. Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*. Brussels: VUB University Press, p. 21.

²³ Under this arrangement ethnic Abkhaz were guaranteed 28 of the 65 seats, Georgians 26 and the other groups combined 11. Furthermore, constitutional amendments would require a two-thirds majority, i.e. consensus between the Abkhaz and the Georgians was necessary. Hanf and Nodia, p. 31.

²⁴ Such a parallel structure (which later transformed itself into a 'government-in-exile') continues to exist and has close ties to the *For a New Georgia* bloc, which was created to support former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze. In the controversial parliamentary elections of 2 November 2003 the head of the 'government-in-exile', Tamaz Nadareishvili, occupied the seventh position on the *For a New Georgia* election list.

Guard under Tengiz Kitovani with the support of Jaba Ioseliani and his paramilitary squadron, Mkhedrioni, in January 1992. Unsure how to respond to their new-found power, the putschists invited the former USSR Foreign Minister and Georgian party boss Eduard Shevardnadze to take the reins. The choice of Shevardnadze appeared to promise increased stability and reliable contacts with the west, which could help put Georgia on its feet politically and economically. Shevardnadze was still in the process of dealing with a variety of hostile Georgian warlords when the situation in Abkhazia became acute. In July 1992, just as a ceasefire agreement in South Ossetia had been brokered due to the mediation efforts of Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, the Abkhazian legislature restored the draft Abkhazian constitution of 1925, which did not consider Abkhazia a part of Georgia.²⁵ The following month Georgian troops entered Abkhazia on the pretext of protecting the rail lines and highways in light of pro-Gamsakhurdia ('Zviadist') insurrection in Abkhazia and bordering regions, and encountered resistance by the Abkhazian militia. This constituted the beginning of a war which was to last more than a year.

Between August and October 1992, an initial front line was established between Sukhum/i and Gudauta. During this time much of Sukhum/i was destroyed and subjected to widespread looting.²⁶ This destruction, which expanded over the course of the war to involve much of Abkhazia, indicates the level of infrastructure difficulties which faced the Abkhaz government and society after the war. Repeated Russian attempts at arranging ceasefires, while at times initially successful, were soon thwarted by one of the sides. For example, the ceasefire agreement of 3 September 1992 was broken by the Abkhaz side in October, at which point a new front was created which basically held until a further Russian-brokered ceasefire of 27 July 1993.²⁷ After this, a consistent push by the Abkhaz resulted in their renewed control over Sukhum/i and the creation of the situation which has essentially persisted to this day. In the course of fighting many resentments were created by the behaviour of both sides, leading to a loss of trust between the Abkhaz and Georgians that is still a major stumbling block both to official negotiations and to reconciliation on the ground.²⁸ The mainly ethnic

²⁵ For a more detailed account of this period than we can present here see Hanf/Nodia, pp. 34ff.

²⁶ Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan*. Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 2000, p. 130.

²⁷ John Mackinlay and Evgenii Sharov, "Russian peacekeeping operations in Georgia" in John Mackinlay and Peter Cross (eds) *Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping*. Tokyo/New York: United Nations University Press, 2003, p. 89.

²⁸ It is this loss of trust which is one of the primary issues addressed by the efforts of numerous local and international NGOs to effect a transformation of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. See Susan Stewart, "The Role of International and Local NGOs in the Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict", paper presented at the conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), Marburg, Germany, 18-21 September 2003.

Georgian IDPs which fled Abkhazia at that time and have since resettled under difficult conditions in other parts of Georgia have helped spread this mistrust of the Abkhaz within the broader Georgian population. Nonetheless, the IDPs are in many ways a heterogeneous group and by no means all, if even the majority, support the hard line taken by the outspoken leader of the so-called ‘government-in-exile’, Tamaz Nadareishvili.²⁹

Following the end of the war, several different phases of the peace process can be distinguished. It is helpful here to rely on a slightly modified version of the pattern suggested by Natalie Sabanadze, which proposes that international involvement in South Caucasian conflicts falls into three relatively clear stages.³⁰ The first is primarily one of Russian dominance, the second is characterized by an increasing role of international organizations, and the third involves mounting US influence. This pattern can be loosely applied to the case of Abkhazia. Certainly, Russian intervention was dominant during the war and in the years immediately following. Starting in 1994, the UN began to play an expanding role, although Russian influence remained strong. The third phase, that of increasing US activity, is valid more with regard to attention to the South Caucasus as a whole and to stability in Georgia in particular than to specific attempts to affect the outcome of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.³¹ One clear example of this interest is the ‘Train and Equip’ programme run by the United States Department of Defence, in which Georgian soldiers are educated in tactics deemed useful for counter-terrorism purposes.³² So far these efforts have not spilled over into more concrete contributions to conflict management concerning Abkhazia, except through ongoing US participation in UN structures such as the ‘Group of Friends’. However, the Georgian government under Shevardnadze demonstrated a clear desire for more direct US involvement in the process of conflict settlement, and this line is likely to be further pursued under the new Georgian leadership, whichever form it may take. The close connections with the US which are already emerging under the transitional leadership of Nino Burdjanadze as

²⁹ In October 2003 Nadareishvili stated: “If peaceful methods fail we must act as the United States acted in Iraq and Russia behaved in Chechnya. We must win Abkhazia back by force. It’s quite realistic if Russia stays neutral.” See RFE/RL Caucasus Report, Vol. 6, No. 35, 10 October 2003 (citing the Georgian daily *Akhali taoba* of 7 October), www.rferl.org.

³⁰ Natalie Sabanadze, “International Involvement in the South Caucasus”, ECMI Working Paper #5, February 2002, <http://www.ecmi.de>.

³¹ This applies to the EU as well, which has recently appointed a Special Representative to the South Caucasus, the Finnish diplomat Heikki Talvitie. See Ahto Lobjakas, “Caucasus: New EU Envoy Predicts Only Tentative Engagement”, RFE/RL, 17 September 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2003/09/17092003181303.asp>.

³² For a series of press releases tracing the evolution of the programme, see <http://web.sanet.ge/usembassy/gtep.htm>.

interim president indicate a potentially larger role for the United States in future Georgian developments.³³

III. UN Intervention in the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

1992-94: The Role of the Russian Federation and the Issue of Territorial Integrity

Although the UN was present in Abkhazia as early as September 1992 with a fact-finding mission, it is clear that the main international role in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in the early stages was played by the Russian Federation. It is now basically accepted that Russia has been present in the conflict in various, often contradictory, ways and that the Russian executive and legislative did not respond to the situation in a coherent or monolithic manner.³⁴ Rather, the Ministry of Defence and the Duma generally offered verbal as well as tangible military support to the Abkhaz separatists, while the Russian president and Foreign Ministry lent their backing to the Georgian government. Even this differentiated picture is highly oversimplified, however, since on the one hand Georgia was also a beneficiary of Russian military equipment, while on the other hand Russian government structures sometimes found it convenient to turn a blind eye to Russian assistance to the Abkhaz, as Abkhaz successes could be interpreted as making Georgian officials more amenable to concessions *vis-à-vis* the Russian Federation.³⁵ Indeed, Russia found itself in a paradoxical situation. While it was not in Russia's interests to condone separatism in a neighbouring country due to its own problems with Chechnya, the *de facto* independence of Abkhazia suited Moscow because it promised to keep Georgia more dependent on the Russian Federation for help in resolving the conflict and for refraining from attempts to lure Abkhazia away from Georgia.

The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was established in August 1993 by UN Security Council Resolution 858, just as the war between Georgia and Abkhazia was coming to a close. The UNOMIG mandate was originally limited to verifying compliance with the ceasefire agreement reached by the Georgian government and the Abkhaz authorities on 27 July 1993. This ceasefire failed to hold, however, as did further attempts brokered by

³³ On initial contacts between the US and the interim Georgian government see RFE/RL Caucasus Report, 24 November 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/caucasus-report/2003/11/41-241103.html>; "Evropa i SShA privetstvuiut otstavku Eduarda Shevardnadze", *Kommersant*, 25 November 2003, p. 1.

³⁴ On Russian interests in Georgia and Abkhazia in the early years of the conflict see Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region" in Bruno Coppieters (ed.) *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Brussels: VUB Press, 1996, pp. 91-102.

³⁵ Indeed, Georgia's entry into the CIS, as well as the opening of Russian military bases on Georgian territory (including one in Abkhazia) was achieved under pressure from the Russian Federation due to Georgian difficulties both in Abkhazia and with pro-Gamsakhurdia insurgents which jeopardized the integrity of the Georgian state.

the Russian Federation (3 September) and the UN (1 December). Although heavy fighting ceased after September 1993, a viable ceasefire accord was not achieved until May 1994, under Russian auspices. Confronted with a *fait accompli*, the UN acceded to the implications of the May 1994 agreement, which presumed a monitoring role for UN military observers.³⁶ The UNOMIG mandate was duly altered in July of the same year to reflect the changed circumstances.

Thus by the time the UN became involved in serious attempts at conflict resolution, the Russian Federation had already established itself not only as a co-mediator, but also as a participant in the conflict with an extremely ambivalent role. This complex situation posed a particular challenge to UN structures. To a large extent, the UN was forced to play second fiddle to the Russian Federation and to attempt to incorporate the agreements the latter reached with the parties to the conflict into its mediation process. The May 1994 ceasefire accord is a clear illustration of this phenomenon, as it established a Commonwealth of Independent States Peacekeeping Force (CISPKF) agreed to by the parties and the Russian Federation without consulting the United Nations.³⁷ The reports of the UN Secretary General leading up to the May 1994 agreement indicate that the UN was aware of the possibility of such a development but was powerless to take control of the process, as the political will to send UN peacekeepers into the region was lacking.³⁸

In an attempt to integrate the Russian Federation into the UN peace process under consideration of its special role in the region a mechanism was devised which continues to characterize the constellation of actors at present. The Russian Federation received the role of ‘facilitator’, with UNOMIG officials, first in the form of a Special Envoy, then of a Special Representative to the Secretary General, representing the UN in negotiating efforts. The CSCE (later OSCE) was also granted a small role in the process, often with observer status, but this organization has not played a significant part in mediation efforts.³⁹ As mentioned

³⁶ This and other key texts from the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict can be found on the website of Conciliation Resources (www.c-r.org), a British NGO which has been active in capacity-building and civil society development in Georgia and Abkhazia. In 1999, a Special Issue of their journal, *Accord*, was dedicated to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. See www.c-r.org/accord/geor-ab/accord7/.

³⁷ Although this force continues to function under the aegis of the CIS, the military units provided have been primarily or exclusively Russian. Nonetheless, the CIS must periodically approve an extension of the peacekeepers’ mandate.

³⁸ This was largely due to a hesitance to initiate further peacekeeping operations due to some spectacular failures at peacekeeping attempts by the UN, especially in Africa. For a brief discussion of the evolution of peacekeeping efforts see John Mackinlay, “Introduction”, in Mackinlay and Cross (eds) 2003 (see footnote 7).

³⁹ It was agreed upon early on that the UN should take the lead in the peace process in Abkhazia and the CSCE/OSCE in South Ossetia, and this decision has been largely adhered to, although the OSCE is present in a joint UN/OSCE human rights office in Sukhum/i. See Olivier Paye and Eric Remacle, “UN and CSCE Policies in Transcaucasia”, in Bruno Coppieters (ed.) *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Brussels: VUB Press, 1996, pp.103-136.

earlier, a number of UN agencies other than UNOMIG have been active in Abkhazia, particularly in the provision of humanitarian aid. UNHCR has the longest history of involvement, dating back at least to the Quadripartite Agreement of April 1994, because of the importance attached to a quick, safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs. Later on UNDP, UNOCHA and UNV became involved to differing degrees in supplying assistance to Abkhazia, particularly the Gali region.⁴⁰

Just prior to the ceasefire agreement two other documents were signed, this time with the direct participation of UN mediators: a declaration on measures for a political settlement and a so-called Quadripartite Agreement establishing a commission consisting of representatives from the parties, UNHCR and the Russian Federation. This agreement stipulated that conditions would be created for the rapid return of Georgian refugees and IDPs to Abkhazian territory.⁴¹ Although the Quadripartite Agreement was to become a cornerstone of UN activity in Abkhazia, its implementation has consistently been thwarted by the Abkhaz side, and aside from spontaneous repatriation, the number of refugees and IDPs to return to Abkhazia has been small.⁴²

Although the role of the UN has been stronger in some phases of the conflict negotiations than in others, the necessity of working with the Russian Federation and the CIS has continued throughout the last decade.⁴³ The Secretary General places this enforced cooperation in a positive light: “This [expanding the mandate of UNOMIG to include monitoring the CIS peacekeeping force] will be a further step in the new direction of cooperation in peace-keeping activities between the United Nations and regional organization [sic] and alliances, as has already been done with the Organization of African Unity, the Organization of American States, the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. I am confident that the first joint venture between the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Independent States will enhance the effectiveness of efforts by States to promote peace and security in a troubled era.”⁴⁴

While there is something to be said for the Secretary General’s argument in general terms, it is nonetheless doubtful whether or not this cooperation has indeed increased effectiveness in

⁴⁰ Due to UN respect for Georgian territorial integrity, even UN humanitarian aid has been provided inadequately to Abkhazia proper, which has, especially in the 1990s, been primarily the province of international NGOs. The main UN assistance efforts have been concentrated on the Gali region, to which most (ethnic Georgian) refugees and IDPs are returning.

⁴¹ For the texts of both these documents see the Conciliation Resources website (www.c-r.org).

⁴² The issue of IDP return is discussed in greater depth in the following section.

⁴³ One recent example of this phenomenon is the Sochi agreement reached in March 2003 between Shevardnadze and Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, which is analyzed below.

⁴⁴ UN Document S/1994/818, 12 July 1994, pp. 6-7.

the promotion of peace in the Abkhazian case. On the one hand, and rather surprisingly, the coordination between the UN and the CISPKF appears to have gone fairly smoothly. It also seems plausible to conclude that communication between the UN and the Russian Federation has been significantly enhanced by this coordination as well as by the joint negotiating mechanism with Russia as facilitator. Without this special role devised for the Russian Federation, the two negotiating tracks would likely have become more polarized and less integrated than they currently are. On the other hand, however, this structure has not kept Russia from engaging itself in the conflict on a variety of levels, which has complicated the constellation of forces involved and has prevented negotiation efforts from being centered on one forum. This arrangement has been viewed by a number of outside observers as hindering an ultimate resolution.⁴⁵

While it can be argued that the UN should have ‘gone in with a vengeance’ in the early stages of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, attempting to wrest the reins of control securely away from the Russians, this claim rests on two highly problematic assumptions. The first is that the Russian Federation had the power to achieve a resolution but was merely lacking the will, so that the UN would simply have needed to act as a more efficient substitute. As mentioned in the Introduction, the ability of the Russian Federation to resolve the conflict has, however, been questioned by numerous analysts of the situation. The second assumption is that the UN was well enough suited as a potential mediator in the conflict to obtain lasting results. For reasons elaborated below this postulate appears extremely unlikely.

It became clear early on with regard to UN activity relating to Abkhazia that the question of establishing the region’s political status was to be given utmost importance. However, in this regard the results of negotiations held in Geneva in February 1994 are still typical for the discussion today: “There remained, however, a significant difference of opinion over the issue of the territorial integrity of Georgia and the relationship of Abkhazia to Georgia. The Abkhaz side declined to sign any document that included recognition of Georgia’s territorial integrity.”⁴⁶ This has been a key obstacle throughout the negotiation process. However, since the UN is comprised of states and *a priori* recognizes their territorial integrity, it has been unable to retreat from this position to arrange negotiations on the political status of Abkhazia beginning from a neutral standpoint rather than assuming the territorial integrity of Georgia. The enforced UN position also strengthened the perceived dichotomy between the UN and the Russian Federation as mediators. The former is distrusted by the Abkhaz due to its stance on

⁴⁵ See e.g. S. Neil MacFarlane, “The Role of the UN”, in *Accord*, Issue 7, 1999, <http://www.c-r.org/geor-ab/accord7/unrole.htm>; Paye and Remacle (footnote 40).

⁴⁶ UN Document S/1994/253, 3 March 1994.

territorial integrity and has therefore become the victim of attempts at manipulation by the Georgian government, which continues to hope that by increasing the UN role in the peace process it can turn the negotiations in its favour.⁴⁷ The Abkhaz, on the other hand, while fully aware that the Russian Federation is only a partial ally, nonetheless prefer it to the UN, since although Yeltsin (and later Putin) have repeatedly supported Georgian territorial integrity, Russian actions on the ground often belie official statements.

Thus the initial period of UN activity in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict illustrated both the necessity of and the difficulties involved in coordinating UN efforts with the Russian Federation, as well as the UN tendency to place the question of political status in the forefront of the negotiations. This tendency proved to be extremely problematic for the UN role as mediator, given its bias in favour of Georgian territorial integrity. Both these issues continued to influence the course of the negotiations in later years, as will become clear below.

1995-99: UNOMIG: Failed Mediator but Successful Stabilizer?

In the second phase of UNOMIG's involvement, the political aspects of the peace process continued to stagnate despite the introduction of new mechanisms to move the process forward. In 1995, as the negotiations continued, the Special Envoy of the Secretary General, Edouard Brunner, was given reinforcement in the form of a deputy, Liviu Bota. Bota, unlike Brunner, was based in the region and was supposed to give new impetus to the negotiations and be able to promote them better by being on the ground.⁴⁸ However, despite various rounds of negotiation no significant progress was made on the political status issue. Therefore in May 1996 the so-called 'Friends of Georgia' were introduced into the mediation process. This group, consisting of the Russian Federation, the USA, France, Germany, and Great Britain, carried on a tradition of similar groups on El Salvador, Haiti, Western Sahara, and Guatemala, "which consult and advise the Secretary-General on specific issues, usually related to a crisis".⁴⁹ A meeting of the ambassadors of the 'Friends' took place in Tbilisi with Shevardnadze and separately with Ardzinba in the spring of 1996.⁵⁰ In 1997, there was more

⁴⁷ More recently, the Georgian strategy has shifted away from the UN toward the USA, in hopes that the latter might be willing to intervene on the side of Georgia in the conflict over Abkhazia. This position has become particularly clear since the Georgian support of the US-led war in Iraq.

⁴⁸ In the spring of 1997, Bota replaced Brunner, becoming the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), rather than the Special Envoy, and continued to be based in Georgia and to shuttle between Sukhum/i and Tbilisi.

⁴⁹ Bruno Coppieters, "Western Security Policies and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict" in Coppieters/Darchiashvili/Akaba (eds) *Federal Practice. Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*. Brussels: VUB University Press, p. 48.

⁵⁰ UN Document S/1996/507, 1 July 1996.

activity by the 'Friends', who had by this time been renamed 'Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia', as the previous name was considered a to imply a pro-Georgian bias. The name change meant little, however, as the Group of Friends was nonetheless viewed by Abkhaz authorities as supporting the UN line of territorial integrity, and not without reason, as it was indeed a mechanism created under UN auspices. Therefore, Ardzinba has frequently refused to meet officially with representatives of the Group of Friends and their interventions have borne little fruit.

On 20 January 1997, the UN Secretary General claimed: "In spite of the difficult circumstances in which UNOMIG has to operate, the Mission's presence continues to be a stabilizing factor in the area and provides useful support to the political process."⁵¹ Indeed, by July 1997 it did appear that there was some improvement in the efforts to reach a political settlement, as the Russian Federation was stepping up its activity and a high-level meeting was planned by the UN in late July. Disappointingly, though, no clear results were obtained, and although there was an attempt to hold further discussions in September, this meeting had to be postponed due to a request from the Abkhaz side and a concurring desire on the part of the Russian Federation. However, due to repeated delays the momentum was lost and the original optimism of the Secretary General was proved unfounded. One positive development during this period was a decision on 20 August 1997 by the Georgian and Abkhaz sides to set up a coordination commission to deal with practical matters. This commission, headed by Zurab Lakerbaia, has contributed a great deal of support for small humanitarian and development projects in Abkhazia, and is frequently praised by the UN for its activity. However, it also serves as a reminder that the parties, rather than the UN, are the actors which appear most likely to have a significant impact on developments in the peace process.

In addition to the principle of territorial integrity, UN activity with regard to Abkhazia was also based on supporting the rapid, safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to Abkhazia, especially the Gali district.⁵² Indeed, UNOMIG's existence was partly justified by its task of contributing to creating the conditions for such a return. However, by 1995 it was clear that the Quadripartite Agreement of April 1994 was not being implemented. Does this imply that UNOMIG is failing in its mission as stabilizing force in the area? Indeed, 1996 saw increasing instability in the Gali sector, temporarily forcing UNOMIG to halt its patrols. In

⁵¹ UN Document S/1997/47, 20 January 1997, p. 11.

⁵² This meant that the refugees and IDPs were almost exclusively ethnic Georgian, since in 1989 the Gali region's population was 93.8% Georgian and only 0.8% Abkhaz. See Edward Walker, "No War, No Peace in the Caucasus: Contested Sovereignty in Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Karabakh", in Gary K. Bertsch et al. (eds.), *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia*. New York/London: Routledge, 2000, p. 160.

1998 the situation worsened considerably. Criminal acts and difficulties involving land mines and partisan activities, consistently a problem in the Gali region, deteriorated into outright chaos, with looting and burning of up to 90% of houses in some areas, causing a loss of \$2 million of UNHCR funds, which had been invested in the rehabilitation of the region. The violence led to accelerated activity by Bota, the Group of Friends, Lakerbaia, the Russian Federation, and other actors, but they were thwarted by the fundamental failure of the Georgian and Abkhaz sides to agree on a definition of the Gali district,⁵³ a means of guaranteeing security for returnees, and the nature and timing of economic rehabilitation measures. While the Georgian authorities supported development projects which would link Abkhazia more securely to the rest of Georgia, their Abkhaz counterparts backed initiatives which they believed would make Abkhazia more self-sufficient. After the May events, UNOMIG was criticized by various Abkhaz officials and by a negative Abkhaz media campaign which increased angry sentiments among the Abkhazian population. Further criticism came from IDPs who accused UNOMIG of doing too little to reduce hostilities in Gali.

The Secretary General nonetheless managed to conclude in July 1998: “Not only does the Mission’s presence continue to be a stabilizing factor in the area and to provide useful support for the political process, but it also helps to create a sense of confidence and security among the local population of the Gali district, to which most of the refugees and internally displaced persons are expected to return.”⁵⁴ In light of the developments described above, this statement must be met with significant reservations. Furthermore, the Secretary General’s comment demonstrates that UNOMIG emphasis is on providing conditions conducive to return and on improvements in the Gali region, populated mainly by ethnic Georgians, thereby paving the way for resentment among the ethnic Abkhaz population. The UN, while listening to Abkhaz criticisms and attempting to work with the Abkhaz authorities, does not manage to offer them real concessions (approved by the Georgian side) in exchange for the ones expected of them in the political and IDP return spheres. By its actions UNOMIG therefore constantly shores up Abkhaz accusations of pro-Georgian bias.

Parallel to the developments in Gali, further attempts were being made to reinvigorate the Geneva peace process. In 1997, a Coordinating Council was created at a meeting between the parties in Geneva in November 1997.⁵⁵ It convened for the first time on 22 January 1998 in

⁵³ The Abkhaz authorities had redefined the borders of the Gali district after the war.

⁵⁴ UN Document S/1998/647, 14 July 1998.

⁵⁵ Despite the similarity in names, this council is not the same as the commission headed by Zurab Lakerbaia, which is a purely bilateral mechanism, although it does coordinate its efforts with UN bodies.

Tbilisi, chaired by the SRSG with the participation of the Russian Federation as facilitator, the OSCE, and the Group of Friends. The 22 January 1998 session was further attended by representatives of UNDP, UNHCR, ICRC, CISPKE, and Zurab Lakerbaia in his capacity as Secretary of the Georgian/Abkhaz Bilateral Joint Coordination Commission.⁵⁶ The Coordinating Council created three working groups (WG) which were intended to ensure parallel progress in three different areas: non-resumption of hostilities and security issues (WG 1), IDP and refugee return (WG 2), and economic and social questions (WG 3). The first working group is chaired by the UNOMIG Chief Military Observer, the second by a UNHCR representative, and the third by the UNDP Resident Coordinator. While the Coordinating Council continued to meet in the months following its creation, the working groups failed to become the catalyst for action that they had been intended to be, despite repeated attempts to rejuvenate them (see below).

Finally, during this period two conferences on confidence-building measures were held, the first in Athens in October 1998, and the second in Istanbul in June 1999. These meetings did have some limited success in reactivating bilateral contacts, especially the second, which served as a forum for discussion of IDP return and economic issues, with political aspects being relegated to the background. The Istanbul meeting led to a partial reactivation of the Coordinating Council working groups, and it was hoped that this would jumpstart the peace process. Unfortunately, this proved once again to be a false start, as disagreements between the sides quickly undid the positive atmosphere generated in Istanbul.

The period 1995-99 thus delivered one disappointment after another in the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process. Despite the introduction of various new mechanisms to ease the path toward a political settlement, the UN did not manage to achieve any noteworthy results. This was primarily due to UNOMIG's insistence on emphasizing the issues of Abkhazia's political status and IDP return to the Gali district. In neither of these spheres were attractive offers made to the Abkhaz side, which, for its part, failed to produce any viable counterproposals.⁵⁷ While it could be argued that too much emphasis has been placed on the UN role as mediator in the conflict and too little attention paid to its stabilizing influence in Abkhazia,⁵⁸ this assertion is also open to question. It is plausible that an international presence

⁵⁶ UN Document S/1998/375, 11 May 1998.

⁵⁷ It would appear that one Abkhaz negotiating strategy is simply to reject the proposals offered by the other side without putting forth any of their own. This study does not intend to condone such behaviour, but merely to point out that the Abkhaz actions have been encouraged by UNOMIG's failure to act as a neutral mediator.

⁵⁸ In a recent interview Heidi Tagliavini stated that the greatest achievement of UNOMIG during the past ten years has been "bringing a sense of stability to the region". See "UNOMIG: working toward peace one day at a time. Interview with Heidi Tagliavini" by Allison Ekberg, Editor-in-Chief of *The Messenger*, 30 April 2003, at <http://www.unomig.org/missionhead/SRSGInterviews/messenger/messenger.asp>

dampens the tendency of internal Abkhaz and Georgian forces as well as of the CIS peacekeepers to commit excesses. However, it is extremely difficult to provide actual proof of such a claim. The continued insecure situation in the Gali district as well as the periodic crises there and in the Kodori valley suggest that genuine progress in increasing stability has not been achieved. Nonetheless, if there is a justification for a continued UNOMIG presence in the region, it would seem to lie more in the realm of stabilization measures than in that of mediation.

2000-Present: New Energy, Old Principles

To some extent a new impetus was introduced into the Geneva process with the arrival of Dieter Boden as SRSO on 24 November 1999. This period is clearly characterized by Boden's strong personality and seemingly limitless energy, which nonetheless failed to reinvigorate the peace process. The reason, as we will claim below, is that Boden retained the previous unsuccessful principles on which UN activity in Abkhazia had been based and relied solely on a more vigorous approach to breathe new life into the negotiations. Boden immediately began a round of furious but well-conceived activity in order to inject a new dynamism into the talks. His first move was to generate a paper which would come to be known as the 'Boden document' but was officially entitled 'Basic principles for the distribution of constitutional competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi', and which was distributed to representatives of the Russian Federation, the OSCE and the Group of Friends for comment. In spite of Boden's quick action, the process of reaching consensus among all the above-mentioned parties took close to two years, so that it was December 2001 before the Boden document could be transmitted to the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. This procedure failed because the Abkhaz side, as it had previously warned, refused to receive the document. Repeated efforts to convey the contents of the paper verbally to the Abkhaz authorities without an official transmittal were also rejected. Thus the 'Basic principles' did not become the foundation for further negotiations during Boden's tenure, nor has his successor (since July 2002), Heidi Tagliavini, had greater success in overcoming Abkhaz opposition to a discussion of the document.

Thus Dieter Boden, while definitely adding some needed energy to the peace process, continued to emphasize the political status question with the underlying UN assumption of the preservation of Georgian territorial integrity and therefore failed to move the Abkhaz from their previous dismissive stance. In fact, he conceivably even worsened the situation by explicitly insisting on a so-called 'comprehensive settlement', which foresaw simultaneous

progress in not only the status realm, but also concerning issues of IDP return and economic and social questions. Boden did not limit his attempts at insertion of a new dynamism to the 'Basic principles' document. Rather, he also attempted to reactivate the working groups of the Coordinating Council, although here again with only limited success. This appears to be due in part to his strategy of insisting on parallel progress in all three spheres, which was rendered especially difficult due to the hurdles involved in convening WG 2 on refugee and IDP issues. A rejuvenation of WG 1 proved to be only temporary. Boden did manage to facilitate numerous bilateral contacts, for which success he was indebted mainly to the assistance of Lakerbaia and his bilateral commission.

Boden's tenure was also noticeable for an emphasis on confidence-building measures, which suddenly entered the standard UN vocabulary on the conflict. The Secretary General demonstrated this new emphasis by stating: 'Both sides should seriously consider the positive impact which confidence-building measures can have on the peace process.'⁵⁹ While previously referring almost exclusively to the meetings in Athens or Istanbul, the term now cropped up with reference to many other types of projects as well. For example, a seminar in Pitsunda in February 2001 which brought together Abkhaz and Georgian officials as well as international experts to discuss statehood and self-determination issues fell under the confidence-building rubric.⁶⁰ A third meeting (similar to those in Athens and Istanbul) was held in Yalta in March 2001, where agreement was reached on a wide-ranging Programme of Action, which included 15 confidence-building measures to be implemented in the immediate future. However, as with so many prior initiatives, this one also was doomed to suffer from the lack of political will of the parties at the implementation stage. At the very least, however, Yalta served as a forum for the parties to reaffirm their commitment to the non-use of force in the resolution of the conflict, as well as to creating the necessary security conditions for IDP return.⁶¹

Dieter Boden, while clearly adopting a 'get things done' approach, nonetheless adhered strictly to the previous UN line, which stressed the preservation of Georgian territorial

⁵⁹ UN Document S/2001/59, 18 January 2001, p. 5.

⁶⁰ This seminar was not organized primarily by the UN, but rather by the Council of Europe, although it was co-chaired by Dieter Boden. See UN Document S/2001/401, 24 April 2001, p. 1. Here there are also potential connections to the work of certain NGOs active in the situation surrounding the conflict, since such organizations frequently emphasize the importance of confidence-building measures. See e.g. a brief description of work conducted by the Berghof Center for Constructive Conflict Management (Berlin) under www.berghof-center.org/english/projects/georgia.htm. See also Susan Stewart 2003 (footnote 29).

⁶¹ On the Yalta talks see Robert McMahon, "Georgia: UN Envoy Hopes Abkhaz Status Talks Follow Yalta Success", RFE/RL, 22 March 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2001/03/22032001120120.asp>. See also "Where are the Keys to a Settlement?", interview with Dieter Boden in *Abkhazski Meridian* No. 1, May 2002, http://www.unomig.org/missionhead/SRSGInterviews/abkh_mer/abkh_mer.asp.

integrity and the creation of conditions for a safe return of refugees and IDPs. Boden made small changes in emphasis but continued to accentuate those aspects unacceptable to the Abkhaz side. In addition, he insisted on a ‘package deal’, which would have involved simultaneous progress in all three areas singled out for attention. It thus increasingly appears that the goal of a political settlement under UN auspices may be less than realistic. Having drawn this bleak conclusion for UNOMIG efforts in the mediation sphere, we can now review stabilization attempts in the period under consideration.

In 2000 and 2001, the Gali district was again a main focus of UN efforts.⁶² A ‘Joint assessment mission to the Gali district’ was carried out by a variety of international organizations and NGOs from 20 to 24 November 2000.⁶³ However, early in 2001 the situation in Gali showed signs of deterioration, with increasing violations of the Moscow Agreement being noted. The same applied to the situation in the Kodori valley, which had consistently been a problem region, being partially Abkhaz- and partially Georgian-controlled. In the fall of 2001, the situation came to a head, culminating on 8 October in the shooting down of a UN helicopter in which all nine passengers were killed.⁶⁴ This called for all UN energies to be focused on crisis management and attempts to restore dialogue between the parties. Nonetheless, tensions remained high. On 11 October the Georgian parliament adopted a resolution to replace the CISPKEF with an international peacekeeping mission, while one week later the Abkhaz Prime Minister Jergenia suggested a closer association of Abkhazia with the Russian Federation.⁶⁵ Both before and after the helicopter shooting, the SRSG and the Chief Military Officer undertook a number of efforts to de-escalate the situation in and near the Kodori valley, but these attempts had only short-term success.

As a result of the events in the Kodori area, no progress could be made on any but the most immediate security issues. Furthermore, in April 2002 the CISPKEF deployed troops and heavy equipment in the valley without informing UNOMIG. The situation was resolved fairly rapidly by a phone call between Shevardnadze and Putin, which led to the immediate withdrawal of the peacekeepers.⁶⁶ This incident serves as yet another indication that direct paths to de-escalation have generally proven more effective than the repeated UN stabilization attempts. Furthermore, the entire situation involving the Kodori valley, like the one in the Gali

⁶² On security issues and partisan activity in the Gal/i district see Dodge Billingsley, “Security deteriorates along the Abkhazia-Georgia ceasefire line” (excerpt), in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 6 September 2001, http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/jir/jir010906_1_n.shtml.

⁶³ Abkhazia Briefing Note, December 2002, compiled by UNOCHA Georgia.

⁶⁴ For more on the helicopter shooting see “Georgia Helicopter Shooting Still Shrouded In Mystery: Q&A with Ermina Van Hoye”. 8 December 2001, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/qanda/articles/eav120801.shtml>.

⁶⁵ UN Document S/2001/1008, 24 October 2001.

⁶⁶ UN Document S/2002/469, 19 April 2002, p. 2.

region in 1998, calls severely into question the capacity of the UN to have a stabilizing influence on developments in Abkhazia.

In July 2002, with tensions still high in the Kodori area and efforts to convince the Abkhaz side to accept the Boden document as a basis for negotiation in full swing, Heidi Tagliavini assumed the post of SRSG upon the departure of Dieter Boden who subsequently assumed a position with the OSCE in Vienna. The remainder of the year was relatively uneventful except for the reopening of a railway connection between Sochi and Sukhum/i on 25 December 2002.⁶⁷ This move, agreed upon by Russian and Abkhaz officials, angered the Georgian government, as it represented a further linkage between Abkhazia and the Russian Federation. Added to this was the fact that increasing numbers of Abkhaz had been applying for and receiving Russian Federation citizenship, which the Georgian government not implausibly interpreted as a Russian manoeuvre to increase its influence over Abkhazia, as well as a sign of widespread Abkhaz disloyalty to Georgia.

Georgian complaints about the restored railway did not fall on completely deaf ears in Moscow, and Georgia was able to turn the situation somewhat to its own advantage. In early March 2003, Shevardnadze and Putin met in Sochi and signed the so-called 'Sochi Agreement', which foresees reopening the rail line between Sochi and Tbilisi in parallel with facilitating a substantial return of Georgian IDPs to Abkhazia.⁶⁸ Working groups were also formed to address the issues of IDPs, improved communications systems and energy problems. The talks occurred with the partial participation of the Abkhaz Prime Minister Gennadii Gagulia.⁶⁹ Not only was the Sochi Agreement an example of a relative success achieved without any UN input, but it also demonstrated the possibility of achieving partial agreement on certain matters by creating a 'tit-for-tat' situation in which each party gains and each concedes something. The political status issue was not touched upon. However, on paper some progress was made in the realm of IDP return (a UN as well as a Georgian priority) in exchange for economic development measures from which both the Russian Federation and Abkhazia (as well as Georgia) stand to profit.

The Sochi Agreement can potentially be interpreted as a reproach to the UN for its insistence on a 'comprehensive settlement', i.e. its refusal to forego discussions on the status issue in order to obtain progress in other fields. The official UN response was to welcome the agreement as a sign of progress in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and to agree to integrate it

⁶⁷ UN Document S/2002/88, 18 January 2002.

⁶⁸ For a description and preliminary analysis of the Sochi agreement see RFE/RL Caucasus Report, Vol. 6, No. 11, 13 March 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/caucasus-report/2003/03/11-130303.html>.

⁶⁹ UN Document S/2003/412, 9 April 2003, p. 2.

into the Geneva process. On the one hand, this shows the relative flexibility of the Geneva process, which allows for the incorporation of what is essentially a bilateral agreement between Russia and Georgia into existing UN conflict resolution mechanisms. At the same time, however, the necessity for such integration reflects the weakness of the UN role in Abkhazia because it emphasizes the inability of UNOMIG to make significant inroads toward the transformation of the conflict due to its focus on the parallel settlement of all major issues.⁷⁰ The consequence of this approach has been that the UN has at times been relegated to an observer status and is forced to fit the decisions of other parties into its own conception of a settlement.

Such a harsh judgement is, however, only partially valid, as the UN remains active with regard to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. In fact, in February 2003, shortly before the Sochi Agreement was reached, a high-level brainstorming session was held in Geneva with the participation of senior representatives of the Group of Friends. However, the goal of generating fresh, innovative ideas for dealing with the conflict was not achieved. Instead, old mechanisms and principles were recycled and upgraded, creating the impression that the Group of Friends either failed to generate any imaginative ideas or was not overly concerned about introducing a new dynamism into the settlement efforts. The Friends approved the structure and mechanisms which have been used to date to achieve a settlement of the conflict. They reiterated Dieter Boden's strategy of working on all issues simultaneously, and proposed the creation of three task forces on 1) political and security issues, 2) IDP and refugee questions and 3) economic and social problems.⁷¹ How these are to differ from the existing working groups is, however, unclear. They may represent a higher-ranking level of involvement than has previously been the case, but this may also imply a greater remoteness from the situation on the ground.

The summer of 2003 brought some minor successes for UNOMIG. In July representatives of both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides participated in part of a meeting with the Group of Friends. Although this fact in itself represented a success, the content which emerged during the meeting pointed to the continued difference in concerns between the two sides. While the Georgians emphasized IDP return to the Gal/i district, the Abkhaz stressed issues of security and the need to ensure that violence would be rejected as a method of conflict resolution. In another development, the implementation of the recommendations issued by the joint assessment mission to Gal/i was carried a step forward by concrete plans (approved by the

⁷⁰ By transformation of the conflict we mean both changing the conflict from a negative into a constructive force in the two societies and the achievement of alterations on all societal levels, not only the highest political level where a potential settlement would be reached.

Security Council) to send 20 civilian police officers to the Gal/i district to provide advice, assistance and training to both UNOMIG personnel and especially to local law enforcement agencies.⁷² This deployment, while certainly beneficial, demonstrated once again that the UN attaches a very high priority to creating conditions for safe IDP return and thereby places itself squarely on the side of the Georgians while neglecting primary Abkhaz concerns.⁷³

The period from 2000 to the present (November 2003) thus does not offer much hope for the future success of UN mediation efforts. Dieter Boden introduced a new energy into UN activities and tried to spark a new round of negotiations by means of the ‘Boden document’ on the division of powers between Georgian and Abkhaz authorities. He also partly re-invigorated the work of the Coordinating Council and placed a new stress on the importance of confidence-building measures. However, none of these efforts brought lasting success because of the continued insistence on tackling the political status issue in parallel with others in order to achieve a ‘comprehensive settlement’, which was flatly rejected by the *de facto* Abkhaz government. Like his predecessors, Boden failed to offer the Abkhaz an attractive enough proposal to bring them to the negotiating table. Indeed, it became clear that the Abkhaz perceived the UN to have a pro-Georgian bias to the degree that they were unwilling even to consider new UN suggestions. This situation has not changed perceptibly during Heidi Tagliavini’s tenure as SRSG.

Furthermore, the failure to devise more imaginative ways of dealing with the conflict indicated that the UN is perhaps running out of steam in its role as mediator. Nor did it appear to serve well in its function as stabilizing force, since the period once again saw a deterioration in security in the Gali and Kodori regions. These relative failures were placed in stark counterpoint by agreements between the Russian and Georgian presidents, which helped both to defuse the situation in the Kodori valley and to foster confidence-building via economic development in exchange for progress in IDP return. These actions indicated that UN persistence in pursuing a ‘comprehensive settlement’ by means of parallel work in three different issue areas may be a poor strategy. Instead, partial achievements in certain sectors may be able to contribute to a transformation of the conflict constellation, both preparing the respective societies for an eventual reconciliation and improving relations among the political actors in order to increase the conflict’s ripeness for settlement.

⁷¹ UN Document S/2003/412, 9 April 2003.

⁷² UN Document S/2003/1019, 17 October 2003.

⁷³ For a confirmation of the significance attached to the IDP issue by the UN see “Georgia: Constructive atmosphere in Abkhazia talks: Q&A with Heidi Tagliavini, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General”, 3 July 2003, <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/0/8658a586f57823e7c1256d590036df60?OpenDocument>.

IV. Conclusions

The above summary of UN activity with regard to Abkhazia over the past ten years points particularly to four conclusions, some of which can be generalized to UN interventions in other geographical contexts. First, it appears that the UN is poorly suited to mediate in conflicts which involve an existing state and a separatist region. This is due to the natural UN tendency to support the territorial integrity of its member states. Such support automatically biases the UN in favour of the state involved and against the authorities in the separatist area. As we have seen in the Georgian-Abkhazian case, such a situation can easily lead to stagnant negotiations, as the officials in the region in question are inclined to reject any UN proposals based on the territorial integrity of the home state. Second, while the UN may not be a suitable mediator in such conflicts, it may nonetheless be able to provide necessary stability in the region involved, which can assist in the settlement process. This postulate was not demonstrated conclusively in the Georgian-Abkhazian case, however, since the security situation in Abkhazia repeatedly deteriorated and it could not be shown that UN efforts were the primary factor in achieving de-escalation. Nonetheless, the UN activities in the field of stabilization appeared to be more successful in the Georgian-Abkhazian situation than did its mediation efforts.

Third, insistence on a comprehensive settlement was shown to be counterproductive in the case under study. By insisting on parallel progress in all three problem areas selected as the focus of UN efforts, UNOMIG doomed the process to founder on the issue of political status. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the second issue area, return of refugees and IDPs, was almost as unattractive to the Abkhaz side as the status issue. The economic and social sphere, potentially of great interest to the Abkhaz authorities, was neglected by the UN due to the difficulty of obtaining Georgian approval for economic rehabilitation projects on Abkhazian territory outside the Gal/i district.⁷⁴ Fourth, the case study was a good test of cooperation efforts between the UN and a regional power, the Russian Federation (sometimes disguised in the form of CIS structures). While the coordination of UNOMIG and CISPKF activities went surprisingly smoothly and benefited both sides, the larger role of Russia in the conflict posed difficulties for the UN's engagement. Although incorporating the Russian

⁷⁴ The recent introduction of 'quick impact projects' by UNOMIG shows a partial recognition of and attempt to deal with this problem. (See the interview with Heidi Tagliavini cited in footnote 59.) However, developments have shown that these projects are conceived largely as a mechanism for creating more favorable conditions for IDP return, meaning that they are likely to be concentrated in the Gal/i area.

Federation into the settlement mechanism with the special role of ‘facilitator’ promoted communications between UN and Russian officials, the Russian Federation still continued to act independently as both a participant and a mediator in the conflict. Since Russia, unlike the UN, was not constrained to emphasize Georgia’s territorial integrity, it was able to demonstrate that by leaving out the political status question certain progress in the transformation of the conflict could be achieved.⁷⁵ Thus the Georgian-Abkhazian case indicates that UN cooperation with regional powers and organizations is inevitable and potentially fruitful, but also complicates the conflict constellation and does not necessarily facilitate settlement attempts.

On the whole, it is not possible to reach an overly positive assessment of the UN role in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. However, the blame for a failed settlement rests ultimately not with the UN but with the direct parties to the conflict. Neil MacFarlane already pointed out in 1999 that the conflict was not yet ripe for resolution, and the same appears to be true today.⁷⁶ Also in 1999, the UN Secretary General stated: “It is imperative that the Georgian and Abkhaz sides understand that the international community expects substantive progress. It is time for each side to demonstrate the necessary political will to take a major step forward”.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, however, the UN cannot generate this political will. Nonetheless, it would seem that by shifting their emphasis away from a comprehensive settlement toward partial successes, UN officials could better facilitate a transformation of the conflict which might eventually pave the way for a political settlement. Another option which follows from the above conclusions would involve a change in UNOMIG activity away from mediation and toward increased stabilization efforts in the region. In the long term this could promote settlement more effectively than a continued insistence on the ‘Boden document’ and its underlying assumption of Georgian territorial integrity. Since the conflict is quite entrenched and there are still many parties interested in a retention of the *status quo*, UNOMIG will probably continue to encounter frequent disappointments in both the mediation and stabilization realms even if it should decide to pursue an altered strategy. Furthermore, as it appears impossible to point to comparable long-term separatist conflicts which have been resolved peacefully and conclusively, and could therefore serve as a model for conflict resolution in the Georgian-Abkhazian case, the UN is likely to be in for a long haul.

⁷⁵ That this progress has remained slight is probably due more to the ambivalent position of the Russian Federation in the conflict than to its inability to reach further agreements with the Georgian and Abkhaz sides.

⁷⁶ MacFarlane in *Accord* (see footnote 46). At the time of writing (November 2003) the impact of Shevardnadze’s ouster on negotiations in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict could not yet be assessed.

⁷⁷ UN Document S/1999/805, 20 July 1999, p. 12.

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