

German Approaches and Policies towards Russian-Georgian Relations

The Georgian-Russian Relations from the beginning of 2016 until September 2016 as seen from German experts

September/ October 2016

OSCE, EUMM, Geneva Talks, and the German influence – Finding formats and a language to solve the conflict

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Alica Wittschen

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Introduction

If you take a look at the world right now it is obvious that there are many conflicts. They have all evolved because of different reasons, in different areas, and are of different size. The conflict in Georgia might be considered as “frozen” by many, but never the less, it is a conflict that needs to be solved. Like in almost any conflict, finding a solution is not easy, as all the conflict parties have a different opinion on what the solution should look like.

For this reason I researched and interviewed the opinion of experts about Russian-Georgian relations, and their point of view towards finding a solution to solving the conflict, for example through different formats. As Georgia is striving to becoming part of the EU, the opinion of German experts was also included. Germany was chosen as it holds a strong position in the EU and can thus majorly influence the decision making in the European Union.

Additionally, as I am currently living in Georgia for a year, working for the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN) but being German, researching about this topic was very interesting for me.

Methodology

The basis for this paper was a research about the German perspective on the Georgian-Russian relations from the beginning of 2016 until the end of September 2016. This first part was based on internet research only. German newspaper articles and analysis published by German political institutions in this timeframe were used to find out information on this topic.

At first, the general analysis by German experts of the situation between Georgia and Russia was examined. If they then proceeded to give recommendation and directions to Georgia, Russia and/or Germany, their proposals were also included. However, recommendations directed to Germany were often not directed to Germany as an independent state but to Germany, a member of the European Union.

All the used articles had to be published between January 1, 2016 and October 1, 2016. This timeframe was chosen on the one hand to narrow down the quantity of articles. On the other hand it resulted in ensuring that all the opinions were written more or less under the same circumstances, meaning that the opinions of the experts could be compared better. In addition, the judgements of the experts were probably based more on recent events shaping the Georgian-Russian relations.

The downside of this proved to be that in German media and news, the issue of Georgian-Russian relations is relatively rarely the topic of discussion. Thus, the amount of material that was published in the timeframe of the paper was manageable size.

After the first part about the German option on Georgian-Russian relations was completed, it was decided to continue working towards the topic of the Georgian-Russian conflict. In addition to

the previous internet research, a questionnaire was elaborated and the search for suitable interview partner began. While in the first part of the research all cited experts were from Germany, in the second part the experts were, or used to be, working for German NGOs or foundations with offices in Tbilisi. Others were members of Georgian NGOs or professors from Universities in Tbilisi, having specialized in the field.

After the experts were interviewed, the recorded interviews were transcribed and then the content analyzed.

As a result of having conducted two different types of research, this paper consists of two main parts:

- “The German opinion on Georgian-Russian relations – How German experts see the relationship between Georgia and Russia from the beginning of 2016 until October 2016”
- “OSCE, EUMM, Geneva Talks, and the German influence – Finding formats and a language to solve the conflict”

Difficulties

As already mentioned, it turned out to be a challenge to find enough articles written by German experts on the Georgian-Russian conflict. Even less experts actually gave their recommendations rather than only reporting the situation without commenting it.

The questions included in the interview covered a broad field. As a result, not all of the interview partners were specialized in all of the questions. In some cases they did not feel to be in the position to be giving adequate answers.

Additionally, the transcription of the interviews turned out to be very time consuming, especially more time consuming than I had expected.

Never the less all these difficulties only had a minor effect on the overall outcome of the paper.

Part 1 :

“The German opinion on Georgian-Russian relations – How German experts see the relationship between Georgia and Russia from the beginning of 2016 until October 2016”

October 2016

Introduction

How a conflict is judged often depends on one's position within the conflict. Is the party directly involved or only a bystander, does the conflict have an immediate effect on it or does it barely change anything?

In the past Georgia and Russia were deeply involved in conflicts with one another. Both sides judge the conflict differently, according to their position. But how is the situation regarded from the outside, from the German perspective for example? How present is it in German news? How is the status quo examined and what kinds of recommendations are given according to this point of view?

Recent Georgian-Russian Relations in German media and publications

While the development of the relationship between Russia and Georgia is very present in Georgia, it is far less discussed in the German press or other German publications. A great number of articles published in 2016 referred and evaluated the Rose Revolution or events that followed them. As a result, rather few articles discussing the current situation could be found. If so, they, in most cases, provided only general information. Only in several articles experts were expressing their opinion on the topic or ideas and recommendations for actions to be taken in the future.

Writing about Georgia or Georgian-Russian relations, German authors almost always connected the conflicts in South-Ossetia and Abkhazia, the possibility of Georgia joining the EU or NATO and the talks about the Visa free entrance to the EU for Georgia to it. The latter has especially received attention in the past months. This already shows that besides the Georgian-Russian relation in itself, the focus on the German side is the European involvement that influences the relationship between the two countries. As a result, recommendations are often directed towards various actors within the EU (such as member states or different kind of European organs) or the EU itself.

In numerous articles, comparisons were drawn between the situation in the Ukraine and their relationship with Russia and situation in Georgia.

Sabine Fischer, head for the German scientific research group for eastern Europe and Eurasia of the foundation for science and politics, claims that the crisis in the Ukraine since 2014, has demanded too much of Germany and its EU partners' attention. This led to the fact that other conflicts such as those in Abkhazia, South-Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh have not received enough¹ attention from Germany.

Generally, Georgia is not often mentioned in German news, however the parliamentary elections in Georgia in October 2016 have made their way into the media.

How Georgian-Russian Relations are perceived from the German point of view

Recommendations are made depending on how a situation is perceived. To understand the reasons behind the experts' suggested directions in the Georgian-Russian relations, it is important to know how the events were assessed from their point of view.

Evaluating the recent development, experts came to the conclusion that the relation between Georgia and Russia has generally improved over the past years. They detected different stages from 2008 onwards, until today.

Under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili from 2004 until 2013, the rhetoric between the two countries was examined as heated and tense. Georgia focusing on the admission into the EU and NATO was seen as a possible threat from the Russian side. Logically the relationship did not improve².

A change in the bilateral relation came along with the parliamentary election in 2012 and the presidential elections in 2013³. The political focal point then shifted towards renewing and improving the relationship with Russia. Since then, Johannes Wetzinger noticed that the discussion about Russia has become more controversial⁴. Even though on the one hand a membership of the EU and NATO is still desired by many, as it is also seen as protection from Russia, numbers of those showing sympathy with Russia are rising on the other hand as well⁵. According to Maïke Döffler the reason for this is the fact that the admission into the EU and

¹ Fischer, Sabine, "Nicht eingefroren!", Berlin, 2016

² Wetzinger, Johannes, "Analyse: Die Beziehung zwischen Russland und Georgien"

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Die Zeit, "Wo die Grenzen wandern"

NATO are further delayed into the unseen future⁶. It is thought of as very probable that during the upcoming elections in Georgia pro-Russian parties are to be voted into parliament⁷.

As Georgia is one of the parties directly involved in the conflict, the bilateral relationship between the two neighbouring countries has in the past strongly, but not solely, been influenced by the course of Georgian politics, domestic as well as external⁸.

The increasing normalization of the relationship between Russia and Georgia was accredited to appointing a special emissary in the Russian relationship from the Georgian side⁹. However, German experts do not expect the normalization to improve from this point on.

Russia's role in the conflict is seen as both: on the one hand an external actor and mediator in terms of peace building, but on the other side also a political actor because of its "military presence and political involvement"¹⁰ in the conflict of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia.

The country tries to maintain the status of the regional superpower, not only in the Caucasus region, but Eastern Europe as well¹¹. Because besides Georgia other countries in Eastern Europe are heading towards the EU too, the experts detected an increasing security problem: Russia sees the trend as a threat and fears loosing influence, especially in comparison to the EU¹². This shows that the conflict is not only determined by the relation between Georgia and Russia, but also very much by the relation between Russia and the EU.

It is seen as a concern that in the past, Germany and the EU have identified too much with Georgia; as a result the Russian side does not see them as a neutral component anymore, but as a political actor who is supporting Georgia.

While in most cases the conflict between Georgia and Russia about Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered to be so called "frozen conflicts", Sabine Fischer claims the opposite. They have been influenced by other conflicts in Europe (e.g. the crisis in the Ukraine), as well as by the relationship between the European Union and Russia: Thus it has been dynamic¹³.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *Note: This part of the paper was finished just before the elections.*

⁸ Wetzinger, Johannes, "Analyse: Die Beziehung zwischen Russland und Georgien", 2016

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Fischer, Sabine, "Nicht eingefroren!", Berlin, 2016

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

Directions and Recommendations

As already stated, there are far more observations on the conflict, either on today's situation or the situation of the past, than recommendations or expectations for the future.

Most of the publications by German experts are directed to either Germany or the EU as a whole. Possible future actions and recommendations were, as a result, also directed to Germany or the EU. Far less were directed to Georgian actors.

Recommendations for Georgia:

In the past, the relation between Russia and Georgia has improved. It is strongly advised that this is continued in the future and that the countries carefully approach each other. Trying to find solutions in a pragmatic way is seen as the best possible way for a positive outcome¹⁴.

Georgia should not be fixated too much on trying to receive the membership of the European Union or the NATO and should enhance reforms within the country¹⁵.

Recommendations for Russia:

It is perceived that Russia does not have a great interest in cooperating with the EU or Germany. However it is advised that Germany should cooperate with Russia as much as possible. While doing so, actions should be determined but transparent as well to receive the best results in solving the conflict. Objective talks should be maintained¹⁶.

Direction for the EU/ Germany

Independently from each other, experts came to the conclusion, that Germany, respectively the EU, should support Georgia's political and economic reformation and its security policy. In these terms, the democratization should be reinforced, as well as the peaceful conflict resolution. These steps are not directed to the cause for the conflict directly, but supposed to indirectly strengthen Georgia from the inside and reduce the likelihood of an erupting war. Conflict could be prevented in the long term¹⁷.

For the upcoming elections on October 8, 2016, Germany should assure that they take place under democratic standards¹⁸.

As in 2016 Germany has the chairmanship of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the German newspaper 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' (faz) advises that Germany should use this chairmanship to initiate new missions in Georgia. In addition, Germany

¹⁴ Wetzinger, Johannes, "Analyse: Die Beziehung zwischen Russland und Georgien"

¹⁵ Bilger, Oliver, "Georgien wirft Russland schleichende Annexion vor"

¹⁶ Fischer, Sabine, "Nicht eingefroren!", Berlin, 2016

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

has, because of the OSCE chairmanship, the responsibility to reduce the possibility of conflicts in the future, to build trust in the region and to initiate negotiation¹⁹.

However, no big changes in relationship between Russia and Georgia are expected because of the conflict about South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

A “direct engagement but without recognition” should be applied to the conflict with Abkhazia and South-Ossetia according to Sabine Fischer²⁰. She suggests that the dialogue with authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be continued to de-isolate both regions in the future.

The second reason why the relationship is not expected to change is Georgia’s continuing orientation towards the West²¹. This has an impact on the relations between the EU and Russia, both sides are trying to gain power in the region. Because of the economic crisis in Russia, as well as because of socioeconomic tension in the country, Johannes Wetzinger assumes that Russia will be even more encouraged to remain in a position of power. This would weaken EU-Russian relation, which would in turn have a negative effect on the relation between Russia and Georgia.

Because the Geneva talks are seen as the only place for discussion between the countries, Sabine Fischer stresses their importance. It should be further invested in track 2 and track 1.5 policy, to improve the relation²². She criticizes that the EU does not have a own strategy to work on conflicts. Outcomes are depended on the relationship between EU member states and the effected countries as well as the interest towards the conflict.

Sabine Fischer also sees Germany in the role of sharing their know-how. This could happen for example in the field of establishing an autonomous supply of energy for Georgia, independent from Russia²³.

Conclusion

Different subjects were taken in to account by German experts when talking about Russian-Georgian relations. While analyzing the German experts’ point of view it has to be said that in most cases their opinions and recommendations were similar or can supplement each other.

The general advice was that Georgian-Russian relations need careful talks and time as they are seen as very fragile.

¹⁹ faz, “Steinmeier warnt vor schwelenden Konflikten”

²⁰ Fischer, Sabine, “Nicht eingefroren!”, Berlin, 2016

²¹ Wetzinger, Johannes, “Analyse: Die Beziehung zwischen Russland und Georgien”

²² Fischer, Sabine, “Nicht eingefroren!”, Berlin, 2016

²³ ibid.

Part 2:
OSCE, EUMM, Geneva Talks, and the German influence – Finding formats and a language to solve the conflict

After finishing the first part of the research about the opinion of German experts on Georgian-Russian relations, the work on part two began. It revolved around the following five main questions on which the interviews were based on:

1. How can German-Russian and German-Georgian relations eventually influence the relation between Georgia and Russia?
2. Should or is the topic of rehabilitation to the OSCE mission to Georgia included in the agenda of German-Russian official negotiations?
3. The EUMM is not reaching the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What would be recommendations on setting monitoring programs in these regions from the side of the OSCE or the UN together with the civil society?
4. Which topics should be included in, or excluded from, the agenda of the Geneva International Talks once they are influenced by track 2 and track 1.5 diplomacy?
5. Does the terminology of a “frozen conflict” and “protracted” situation influence the expectations of the general public in the post-soviet states, that the government can resolve the conflicts peacefully and in a reasonable timeframe?
Does such terminology influence the government’s expectation that the society should accept and justify the decisions and actions of the government in this sphere?

Influences of German-Russian and German-Georgian relations to the Georgian-Russian relationship

While it is obvious that there is a conflict between Russia and Georgia, Germany is neither directly, nor indirectly a conflict party.

For this reason it is necessary to, first of all, take a closer look at the role of Germany. While on the one hand Germany is an individual state and can act individually, it is also a member state of the European Union. Thus “Germany acts both, directly and also through the European structures” (Levan Abashidze). According to him, one “cannot consider German politics apart from the European politics”. “German actions result of joint actions in Europe” (Levan Abashidze).

Because at the moment Germany is a main actor in in the European Union and “majorly influencing the decision making in the European Union”, he furthermore thinks of Germany acting through the European Union, like an amplifier of their opinion. Once Germany expresses their opinion or their recommendations, it will be echoed through the structures of the EU.

But can Germany influence the relationship between Georgia and Russia through their talks and relations with the two countries?

In this regard, it will be first assessed what the interview partners thoughts are on the German-Russian relation, the German-Georgian and then, finally, about the relation between Georgia and Russia.

The German-Russian relationship in regard to the Georgian-Russian conflict

Germany, being “one of the key partners of Russia in Europe” (Ivane Abramashvili), can influence the relationship between Russia and Georgia, and like this, is an important factor in the relationship between the two countries.

While in the past, “since the ‘Ostpolitik’” (Ivane Abramashvili), the relationship between Germany and Russia was usually on a good level, and a “for decades a very special relationship”, it is now “strained” (Oliver Reisner). The major reason for the departing is the current situation in the Crimea and in eastern Ukraine. Additionally, Russian politics are influencing German politics, “trying to interfere into internal politics” (Oliver Reisner). This is not only the case in Germany, but in Europe in general. “Russian propaganda disturbs the internal politics everywhere in the EU” by backing right wing parties, says Malkhaz Saldadze. As a consequence, “it is quite possible that Germany and the German establishment might reshape its position to Russia.” Germany “is more preserved in their relationship to Russia” (David Aprasidze) already. In their relations to Russia, “Germany tries to keep, as far as it is possible, good relations with Russia” (Levan Abashidze), trying to negotiate peacefully and avoiding further conflicts. Not provoking aggression from Russia, especially towards Georgia, is also David Aprasidzes hope of the outcome of German interaction with Russia. In regard to this, he thinks of sanctions directed to Russia as a good method to achieve the goals and to lessen aggression. However, “somehow these sanctions hit more the ordinary people than the elites, the decision makers” (Levan Abashidze).

From a Georgian perspective, Germany trying to avoid any conflict with Russia is sometimes seen as Germany being “too pro-Russian”. But what is a problem for Malkhaz Saldadze in the German-Russian relations is, that “Germany (...) does not have a solid position about Russia, at least from the Georgian perspective.”

The German-Georgian relationship in regard to the Georgian-Russian conflict

Not only in regard to Russia does Germany play an important role, but it also is an important partner for Georgia (Maia Urushadze). An example for this could be Georgia’s approach of

becoming a member of the EU or NATO or in the visa-liberalization process. Germany's more reluctant behavior in this regard, having voted against Georgia's integration into EU and NATO, has obviously not gone unnoticed in Georgia. For Georgia, the "German position is very important for our Eastern partnership and in the visa liberalisation process" (Maia Urushadze). Germany should acknowledge Georgia's pro-Western attitude and efforts, she adds. David Aprasidze thinks that "Germany should keep pressure on Georgia in regard to the internal democratization". At the same time he criticizes that this pressure is built upon the visa-liberalization. Since it was promised to be given to Georgia once they reach certain standards, it should be given to Georgia once these standards are met, the promise should not be taken back again. Should the visa-liberalization process be further postponed, negative impacts on the German-Georgian relationship will be the consequence, with frustrations in Georgia, Maia Urushadze fears²⁴. "We think that the German role is very important. We see Germany as our most important partner and we feel connected to them on an emotional and on a historical level" (Ia Tikanadze).

For Georgia, having Germany as a partner would be especially important as Germany also is or at least was a "reliable partner for Russia" (Malkhaz Saldadze), and could thus act like a mediator.

While, as already mentioned, Germany is more reluctant in the German-Georgian relationship, Georgia, does "very little about the German-Georgian relations", (Malkhaz Saldadze) too. He sees a "great problem" in this. Because Georgia is a "small county with limited possibilities. If we manage to somehow push bigger states forward to bring our problems to their agenda, it will be, of course, very effective for us", explains Maia Urushadze. And just as Sabine Fischer has expressed in the first part of the research that the conflict in Georgia does not receive enough attention from the West, Levan Abashidze stresses that it is important to bring the topic of the South Caucasus, with all its conflicts, to the agenda. At the moment the concentration is centered elsewhere, he says. In this way, Malkhaz Saldadze expresses similar thoughts by saying that "Georgia should use the German-Georgian relationship to push Georgian concerns and topics to a more international agenda. Make Germany an advocate for Georgia in the OSCE would be benefitting Georgia". At the same time they both express their doubts in the likeliness that this is going to take place. "Why should Georgia be attractive to Germany?" he wonders. "In what kind of way might Georgia be attractive for Germany, in order to make Germany an advocate of Georgia in the OSCE?" Additionally, "Germany lacks the Georgian perspective about the issue."

²⁴ While doing the final touch up for this paper, Reuters News Agency released: "The European Union will let Ukrainians and Georgians visit the bloc freely after diplomats and lawmakers agreed on Thursday on an emergency brake to suspend visa waivers, ending an EU dispute holding this up",

Source: Baczynska, Gabriela, EU unblocks visa-free travel for Ukraine, Georgia, Reuters News Agency, published on Dec, 08, 2016, last viewed on December 10, 2016
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-eu-idUSKBN13X0QI>

For this reason “gaining Germany as an ally” would be rather “wishful thinking”, than a possible reality, Malkhaz Saldadze says. He concludes that Georgia failed in its “diplomacy to deal with Germany.”

External (indirect) influences

Next to Germany’s direct relations with Russia and Georgia, other external issues will influence Germany’s decision-making in regard to the conflict and to the two conflicting countries.

A big role will the further development of the conflict in the Ukraine and the situation of the Crimea play, which is seen as unpredictable (Malkhaz Saldadze). Because the situation in the Ukraine already is a problem Germany and the EU are confronted with. If Georgia would become a part of the EU, they would be taking on another problem, reminds Maia Urushadze.

The further development in the US, after Donald Trump winning the previous elections, is also to be taken into consideration. Depending on how Trump will continue his behavior in regard to the Ukraine and Putin, Oliver Reisner could imagine that “if Trump recognizes the Crimea”, it would have immediate impact on the relation between Georgia and Russia. By recognizing the Crimea, “international treaties are void”, which in turn would encourage Russia to “proceed its attempts really to regain its influence over its former republics.” Additionally, actions in the Ukraine would lead to reactions in Germany, and to a possible change in their behavior towards Russia, and then to Georgia.

Russian-Georgian relations

Not only does the outcome of the elections in the US effect Georgian-Russian relations, so does the recent elections in Georgia in October 2016. Their actions are partly based on their like or dislike of Russia, mentions Levan Abashidze. The political parties and the government should “act reasonable” in their behavior to Russia, trying to be more peaceful, says Levan Abashidze.

However, at the same time, there is “ignorance about Russia” in Georgia (Ia Tikanadze).

Direct influences from the relationship between Germany and Russia to the relationship between Georgia and Russia could be seen in Germany’s more preserved behaviour towards Russia. David Abashidze hopes that for Georgia this could be seen in a positive way, “so that the relationship between Georgia and Russia will not deteriorate further.” At the moment, there are “nationalistic features and antagonism towards Russia” (Oliver Reisner).

Ivane Abramashvili predicts that “if Russia loses Germany as a partner in Europe, there is going to be a whole different architecture”. However, this possible change is being looked at with a hope for changes in the Russian-Georgian relations (Ivane Abramashvili). In “this case we might have some chances to even get the NATO membership”, he thinks.

For Levan Abashidze “Germany is very important as a direct influence in this triangle Germany – Russia – Georgia.” From the Georgian side, many interview partners hoped to have Germany in the role of a mediator in the Georgian-Russian relations. Through its relations with Russia, it can make sure that there is no intervention into the Georgian domestic policy from the Russian

side, hopes David Aprasidze. Germany is a “factor of peaceful negotiations” (Levan Abashidze), a peacekeeper and a stabilizer for the overall situation, as it aims at solving the conflict peacefully (Levan Abashidze). If “Germany simultaneously works with Russia and if Germany explains all the steps why they are working with Georgians, perhaps we could find a way out of this stuck situation, from this deadlock” (Maia Urushadze). “Georgians have to be patient and [should] try not to lose contact [...] with Russia”, is the advice from Ivane Abramashvili. Furthermore, Georgia should try to bring the issue of Russian-Georgian relations to the agenda of Russian-German talks (Maia Urushadze) and make efforts to make Germany a partner in the OSCE (Malkhaz Saldadze) – even though the latter might be “wishful thinking” for Georgia.

Missions and Monitoring

Rehabilitation of the OSCE Mission to Georgia?

Pushing the topic of Georgia to the agenda of German-Russian talks could also be related to another issue that could be discussed in German-Russian official negotiations: Namely the rehabilitation of the OSCE mission to Georgia.

However there is no information on if that is the case. The OSCE mission has had no mandate for Georgia, since Russia vetoed its renewal in 2008²⁵. The possibility of the OSCE mission being rehabilitated is seen as rather pessimistic and commented with “sounds nice but it has its limits” (Maia Urushadze). “Georgia is for reestablishing the OSCE Mission in Georgia”, says Maia Urushadze, but “will Russia be ready to the OSCE to return to Georgia?” (Oliver Reisner). At the same time, for Ivane Abramashvili the OSCE “has not achieved anything before” and “is not going to deliver anything tangible.”

“For Georgia [the OSCE Mission would be] an additional mechanism. This European mechanism could be important in regard to the problems we have, especially when it comes to the conflict regions. Additional monitoring and negotiation can only be seen as positive. And of course, one of the topics of the negotiations could be the dialogue with Russia” (Ia Tikanadze).

In this way, the OSCE could be a way to find a peaceful solution (Levan Abashidze) – if Russia is not against the establishment of a mission.

Substitutes instead of the EUMM for monitoring missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

²⁵ Robinson, Matt, UN mission leaves Georgia, OSCE mission shuts, June 30, 2009, Reuters News Agency, last accessed: November 21, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-monitors-idUSTRE55T3OR20090630>

A mission from the OSCE is not the only option there is for monitoring missions. Levan Abashidze expresses similar thoughts to Ia Tikanadzes by saying that “all formats are good which are possible, whether it is UN, OSCE, EU or European Council” This is especially important because today, the only international presence in Georgia is the European Monitoring Mission to Georgia (EUMM)²⁶. While the mission has a mandate that allows it’s presence on Georgian grounds, access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is denied. Like this they cannot report on the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For Ivane Abramashvili, “it is really good that there is the mission from the EUMM”, but since they are not allowed into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he is “not sure if spending all the money is going to deliver something (...) on the actual conflict ground.” The Georgian side can only “hope that the European monitors are being accepted” (Ia Tikanadze). But this acceptance is not going to happen without the “consent with the other side as well, which is not the case” (Ia Tikanadze). Next to consent, another important factor is trust. Ivane Abramashvili senses that there is a lack of trust in regard to organizations of the European Union, and both “EU and NATO seen as the political ally of Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia”. Members of the EUMM add that there is “no room for the EU to be involved in the discussions”.

Still, David Aprasidze thinks that “the EUMM is a very crucial mechanism, it provides a political shield to somehow defend Georgia, it is a political guarantee”, as well as it is “a watchdog for human rights” (Ivane Abramashvili). Yet, he is “not sure if it is going to change anything” “on the actual conflict ground”.

Besides setting a monitoring program from the sides of the EUMM, there are also other possibilities. One option could be a mission implemented by the UN. Because the lack of trust towards the EU, Ivane Abramashvili thinks of the UN as “the only option” as it is the “only institution that is going to be trusted.” On the contrary, Levan Abashidze assumes that a mission from the UN “is not possible now”, as there are “very strong disagreements.”

Taking these points into account, it is visible that setting a monitoring mission from either organization or institution is highly wished for from the Georgian side. However, there are no general assumptions on which format is most likely to bring success, or even first of all should be (re-)established.

In this regard: “If the OSCE or any other international organization, with or without the civil society, will manage to persuade Russia to let them enter the other side, then of course it makes sense (...) and you can invite UN or the OSCE and other players as well. But in this moment, I don’t think it is very feasible to do so” (David Aprasidze). The reason for this is that “the positions in the conflict seem to be fixed” (Ivane Abramashvili)

²⁶ Whitman, Richard G., Wolff, Stefan, in: *The European Union as a Conflict Manager*, page 203
Routledge, 2012,

https://books.google.ge/books?id=qxe3W6rpkyYC&pg=PA203&lpg=PA203&dq=reasons+fot+closing+osce+mission+to+georgia&source=bl&ots=1c_fa3_aHd&sig=hkMMdSCiQNBGIVvvi7PV4NnAK0I&hl=ka&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiGoZTnr-TQAhVM7hoKHc8OBCAQ6AEIUjAI#v=onepage&q=reasons%20fot%20closing%20osce%20mission%20to%20georgia&f=false

Geneva Talks

Whether it is with the UN, the OSCE or programs of the European Union, it is always “not a question of missions, it is a question of [readiness] for open negotiations on both sides”, states Oliver Reisner. This readiness for “open negotiations” plays a major role in the Geneva International Discussions, the only platform of discussion where all the representatives of the conflict, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Russia, Georgia and the USA, are brought together, as well as the EU, the OSCE and the UN.

With the talks being the only platform for all the participants to meet, Georgians have “no luxury of choice between different formats” (Maia Urushadze) to find a possibility to solve the conflict. As a consequence, the Geneva Talks, as well as the sideline talks between Zurab Abashidze and Grigory Karasin, are still kept, despite often be criticized for not being productive enough and not creating an outcome. Malkhaz Saldadze partly blames Russia for this. Part of the problem is that “neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia are present as full-fledged members of this dialogue” and thus “have to rely on Russia”, concludes Oliver Reiser. While Russia is saying that they only try to observe as a mediator, they “interfere all the time”, claiming that they are the supporter and defender of [Abkhazia and South Ossetia]. For Oliver Reisner, Russia is not acting as a mediator in the conflict, but acting in accordance to their own interests. Despite the “negotiations [being] dominated by Russian positions” (Ia Tikanadze), it is “most important is to think of a format that allows the Abkhaz and the Ossets (...) to have their own say and not to rely on the Russian Federation as a mediator” (Oliver Reisner). Because of this dependance on Russia, “it is difficult to conduct track 2 diplomacy”, says Oliver Reisner. David Aprasidze demands that “Georgia should not be left alone in the negotiations with Russia”, as the relations between the two countries are just too “asymmetric”. On the contrary, Ia Tikanadze suggests that “ideally we would have (...) negotiations with Abkhazia, without Russian participation and without the western friends. Only Abkhazia and Georgia.”

However, Levan Abashidze thinks that these direct negotiations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia are only possible and likely to have a chance to produce an outcome if IDPs and refugees are allowed to come back to Abkhazia, if Georgia is able to offer a way of real autonomy to Abkhazia and if they are open to experiment on the “playground of opportunities” to achieve an agreement. In addition he thinks of reasons to make Georgia more attractive and approachable to Abkhazia. Despite the critiques, there was a general unity among the interview partners: The Geneva Talks should be continued as there are only “very little direct contacts” and a “broken dialogue” (Oliver Reisner) between the conflict parties. Keeping up the talks would mean providing an “exchange of information [that] goes through official sources” and “being able to measure their tendencies” (Maia Urushadze). In this way they are “corridor talks” (Maia Urushadze), which are “important to keep the door to Russia open” (David Aprasidze). In addition they are contributing to the internationalization of the process and giving the situation more international attention (David Aprasidze).

Even though there are “there are many topics to be discussed” (Ia Tikanadze) at the Geneva Talks, only humanitarian, cultural, educational, trade and economic issues are being addressed. For Ia Tikanadze discussing humanitarian issues in the beginning is a way to open the way to

more political topics, and to, even though it may sound contradictory at first, “depoliticize the situation” (Ivane Abramashvili). In that way, it might be possible to slowly give way to more political topics.

Interview partners think that addressing humanitarian issues should be maintained, even if the discussions are influenced by track 2 diplomacy. In fact, Oliver Reisner believes that a dialogue is not possible on “a formal level. Because those formats would imply recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which is what Georgia doesn’t want. (...) In that sense, there is one possibility to support any kind of dialogue (...): on track 2 level, though the civil society actors.” But on the other hand, David Aprasidze, even though thinking that it is more productive to be discussing humanitarian issues rather than political questions, is “not expecting (...) a big impact from [discussing] these small issues”. In his opinion “this humanitarian issue, track 2 or track 3 will not impact track 1”. And because the situation is so “politically determined and there are frameworks, so that you can’t change a lot. I don’t believe in these low-level or grass root activities in this regard”, he says.

Another topic that should be reactivated in the Geneva Talks is the problem of human rights, thinks Ivane Abramashvili. He hopes that despite other political questions, the topic “will be viable”.

Still, the humanitarian issues have to mark the beginning of the talks (Ia Tikanadze), as “the overall starting points [of the participants] are too distinct” (Levan Abashidze). With Georgia claiming that Abkhazia and South Ossetia belong to Georgian proper and Russia recognizing their independence, neither Russia nor Georgia is going to take back their decisions (Levan Abashidze). As “both sides insist on certain preconditions” (Oliver Reisner) that they are not willing to give up, the situation has become stuck. The overall expectations on making changes through the Geneva Talks are thus rather pessimistic, especially changes on a political level. In his opinion there are only positive outcomes of the talks “when they are in this disconnected political situation. Malkhaz Saldadze has identifies the problem as “the same issues are discussed from various perspectives which do not have any points of intersection”. The “problem is never going to be solved at the Geneva Talks, because it is so political” thinks Ivane Abramashvili, who just before has exclaimed that humanitarian issues can depoliticize the situation. Like this it seems as if all the talks about non-political topics will not change the situation. Contributing to this stuck situation is, according to Ivane Abramashvili, the fact that all the participants of the talks are politicians. As a result they have and will position themselves from the perspective of the country they are representing. Malkhaz Saldadze thinks it is “non-pragmatic and non-realistic to demand changes from the Geneva Talks” because he does not expect any changes in the future to happen. David Aprasidze concludes: In the political question, it is a “deadlock”.

To fight this deadlock establishing another mission does not seem to bring any outcomes (Oliver Reisner) at least from the Georgian side. The establishment of any missions generally rely on Russia’s agreement to them (Oliver Reisner).

To find a solution, it would require “to think out of the box on what might be alternative solutions” (Oliver Reisner) to already existing attempts. For Maia Urushadze, a possibility might be to start talks that are including neighboring countries, for example Armenia and Azerbaijan. It could also serve as a form of trust building. “Seeking more result-oriented formats” (Ivane

Abramashvili) is important, while keeping the question of “what are the channels, what are the possibilities for the conflicting parties” (Oliver Reisner) in mind, whether it is through EU, OSCE, UN, or any other mission. He relates this to starting a dialogue or negotiations through programs implemented by NGO’s for example. “Civil society organizations should identify channels with the government”. Again, if this succeeds, the dialogue should not thematize the conflict in itself, but rather humanitarian issues. Keeping “all the possible contacts” (David Aprasidze), is extremely important. Finally, Malkhaz Saldadze reminds that “advancements in finding a solution is only possible if the attitude and the language” is transformed.” But for the current situation as well as for whatever solution there might be, it has to be kept in mind “that unilateral solutions are not solutions” (Oliver Reisner).

Influences of the terminology of “a frozen conflict”

From what the experts have said about the Geneva Talks, one can very well say that they are seen as “frozen” (David Aprasidze). But not only the Geneva Talks are thought of as frozen, the entire situation is considered to be a “frozen conflict” or “protracted”.

However, while interviewing the experts, it became clear that there is no agreement on the suitability of this terminology. While some agreed with the terminology, thinking of it as “a good one because it gives some real feelings of what it is all about, that there is a conflict” (Levan Abashidze), or that it “describes the reality” (David Aprasidze), others disagreed. Others only partially agreed, taking into account that there are “still (...) parts of the population that still feels victimized [and] are still facing difficulties” (Maia Urushadze). By comparing the number of deaths, or the calm situation at the boarder to that of other “hot” conflicts, “you could say that yes, it is [a] frozen” conflict in Georgia. But for the feelings and emotions and understanding and expressions [of the people], you can say no, it is not frozen” (Maia Urushadze).

But it is “very complicated, when it comes to proper words” (Maia Urushadze), since “all conflicts have their own dynamics”. Finding the right expression that everyone can agree with is difficult.

Ivane Abramashvili has noticed that the “term “frozen conflict” is not used as much in Georgia as in foreign articles or by foreign experts.” In Georgia, only experts dealing with the conflict issues are using the expression, says Malkhaz Saldadze.

But does the use of terminology, such as of a “frozen conflict” and a “protracted” situation influence the perception of the general public towards the conflict or, vice versa, did the way the public felt determined the vocabulary?

To Maia Urushadze the discussion about terminology does not matter, because it is the society that feels that the situation is frozen and that there are no improvements. “They are reflections of the population and of reality. And there is consensus in the society that it is a very difficult problem and that it needs time to be solved.” With this perception she is not alone. “Most people

understand very well that there is no quick solution”, says Levan Abashidze. As the roots of the conflict lie in the 1980s and 1990s, when a different government was in power, with “absolutely different people”, it is not the fault of today’s government, he concludes. But if today’s government is not obliged to feel responsible for the conflict, will it feel responsible for finding a solution to it? And as “over time people’s expectations are becoming more realistic” (Ivane Abramashvili) and they “understand very well that there is no quick solution” (Levan Abashidze), the government probably will not feel any pressure from the side of the public to try to find a solution soon. Levan Abashidze thinks that “you cannot demand from our contemporary government or political parties to solve this problem.” The fact that the government is not giving time frames is not seen as something negative from Maia Urushadze, as “giving time frames is not the thing politicians should do”. She compares this with the situation under the Saakashvili government, when time frames (which were not able to be kept) only lead to frustration among the people. “Those parties who want to bring up the conflicts, for different reasons (...), they fail because in the society there is no understanding in this issue” (David Aprasidze). In line with this goes Levan Abashidze’s statement: “If there is a populist party that would say they could solve this problem, I don’t think people would trust them”. Thus, the Georgian government should be mainly focusing on the problems within Georgia and on “our own development” (Maia Urushadze). In terms of the conflict, change was produced in Georgia (David Aprasidze). This again justifies the actions of the government, even though the outcomes might be debatable (David Aprasidze).

Additionally, you cannot be solving the conflict on the national ground only (Ivane Abramashvili). The situation is not only dependent on the situation in Georgia alone, but also on the political situation in and around Georgia – which also means dependent on the political situation in Russia and their (re-)actions. But with “the way Russia works right now, it is simply not possible that Georgian-Russian relations will improve” (David Aprasidze). The situation outside of Russia, the conflict in the Ukraine for example, is adding external difficulties. As a consequence, there is a demand for a change of the Russian government from the Georgian side, hoping that the situation will improve.

It can be observed, that from the Georgian side, it is often perceived that there are not too many measures to be done from the Georgian part, and that it is dependent on Russia.

For Ia Tikanadze waiting for something to happen from the Russian side is not benefiting. “The governments [Georgian government] actions are not appropriate at all”, as they are not doing enough in terms of working towards an improvement of the situation. There is “absolute ignorance towards this Russian factor”, she thinks. This ignorance “is not pragmatic for our interests”, she stresses. Additionally, “time is playing against our interests”. The government should be urged to take actions because in the time being, while nothing is happening, the “generation who has not lived in peaceful coexistence with the other side” is constantly growing. On the opposite, Ivane Abramashvili thinks that through the young generation the public discussion is slowly being reactivated, as “they don’t have the hatred in them anymore.”

To find a solution, reconciliation is needed. “Without reconciliation we can’t solve the conflict” urges Ia Tikanadze. The connections and human contacts which used to be there could be means to get closer to reconciliation. But if more time passes this could be more and more difficult.

Ivane Abramashvili has additionally noticed that in the past the conflict is being less discussed in the public. That the frozen conflicts “do not appear on TV screens” or “in the media” is also seen by Malkhaz Saldadze. However, they should be. While the problem used to be ranked number one, there now are other issues that are seen as more important (Ivane Abramashvili). Like this, “it is smoothly removed from the agenda by the government itself”, judges Malkhaz Saldadze. “For the last two election campaigns, this topic was not so often brought to the agenda” remembers Maia Urushadze. “Politicians do not speculate with the topic”, she adds, as they do not want to risk losing voters, or “loosing [their] grip on power, as Oliver Reisner puts it. In this way, the issue of trust, as already mentioned above, plays a role again. Taking on the problem of trying to solve the conflict can of course resolve in failed attempts, which would then lead to the “people not trusting them” (Levan Abashidze). Like this, the government is doing what might be very comfortable for them, but they should rather seek the way that has the biggest outlook on contributing to solving the conflict than the easiest way out (Malkhaz Saldadze).

He does not only blame the Georgian government for this, but the media as well. Journalists should be more demanding, reporting the actions of the government. “They should also be interested, (...) because it is the media that creates this arena of discussion. (...) But I don’t see any broad discussions.” (Malkhaz Saldadze). This leads to assuming, that if this “arena of discussion” would be more activated by the media, and the population would be more activated, the government might be pushed towards achieving changes. While “everyone accepts that there is a problem”, “there is no willingness to talk about it” (Ia Tikanadze).

Yet, Ivane Abramashvili recalls some public events that have, at least to some extent, reactivated the public discussion. He uses the UEFA super cup, taking place in Tbilisi in 2015 as an example. Not only Georgians were attending this “mega event”, but also young people from Abkhazia.

But how it is now, it does not seem to be seen as urgent from the side of the general population to make changes. They see the conflict as frozen and don’t expect it to unfreeze in the near future (Levan Abashidze). That “it might be “a conflict of years or even decades”, is not only what he is thinking, but also what the population feels. However, “this feeling that [the conflict] is frozen and that it is not moving anywhere” is lately perceived as a problem from the general population, says Ivane Abramashvili. In order to lessen this feeling of a frozen situation, he thinks “a change in legislation, this law on occupied territories” might be helpful. As a result Abkhazia and South Ossetia might feel less isolated.

Ia Tikanadze wishes to see more action from the side of the government and the political elite to “slowly and carefully loosen this conflict” to achieve “little steps to the beginning of reconciliation of the people”. These little steps should by no means be done in a political way (Ia Tikanadze), just like with the Geneva Talks. In regard to the civil society, David Aprasidze thinks that it should “try to be more flexible, to apply different, more sophisticated tools”. Despite having the perception that the civil society is only one part to finding a solution to the conflict, it is only being able to contribute “a little bit”, such as “cultural ties [and] person to person relations”, he thinks. “As long as there is no or only very limited possibilities for having a dialogue, there really is the question how to strengthen (...) [minority] groups”, says Oliver

Reisner. Additionally “the capacity for self-reflective approaches on the past and on the present” should be strengthened “among the conflicting parties on the ground.”

Finally, Maia Urushadze says that the “term ‘frozen conflict’ does not define Georgian policy but reflects its approach.”

In almost all the interviews it was examined that the people are becoming more realistic or that they see the conflict in a realistic way. However, becoming realistic can be seen in a positive, as well as in a negative way.

Thoughts about the future

In regard to the future, the interviewed experts were, of course, hoping to find a quick solution to the conflict – even if they themselves often thought that the conflict could only be solved in years or decades and not in the near future. There were hopes that if there are direct negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a solution might be found.

Levan Abashidze expresses some small hopes that if Georgia, and the Georgian government shows, that it is a liberal, democratic and prosperous country, it could be attractive for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to come back to Georgia. “Georgia has to be attractive”, is also the opinion of Ivane Abramashvili, as otherwise it is not very likely that the regions will come back to Georgia. “Maybe a soft federation is better for Abkhazia than full independence”, Levan Abashidze says. “If both sides agree to come back to one, Russia will not be against it”, is another of his hopes, because Russia itself says “that Georgia has to negotiate directly with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”

For him it is “important to say, that we don’t want to reunite these regions by force.”

But how likely is it really to happen, that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will join Georgia again? For many of the experts, this was connected with an ‘either-or-question’: Either Abkhazia and South Ossetia or Georgia’s membership in NATO and/or EU.

If Georgia would want to keep Abkhazia and South Ossetia, would mean to “come back to the Russian orbit of interest” (Levan Abashidze), and to “abandon any possible integrational perspectives towards the EU and NATO” (David Aprasidze), and turn towards the Eurasian Union or stay a neutral state. On the other hand, if Georgia would want to be part of the EU or even NATO, it would only be possible without the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. “If we go towards EU, NATO, Europe, we will be losing these territories” (David Aprasidze). But at the same time “you see that there is no reaction coming from the society” (David Aprasidze) towards this possible solution. On the opposite, there is a reaction in regard to heading back to the Russian direction. “Because of conflict and wars, people are not very enthusiastic to be again in Russian orbit” (Levan Abashidze). Additionally, “Russia is not offering something interesting” (David Aprasidze) in exchange for heading in their direction. For this reason David

Aprasidze thinks that if there will be a decision that has to be made between the EU or Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the direction will be towards the EU.

If Georgia would gain the membership of the EU “this membership and access and being part of the EU might be a very strong incentive for the other side” (Oliver Reisner). But steps from Abkhazia and South Ossetia towards Georgia would again rely on Russia’s actions and would only be possible “when there is some weakening of the Russian Federation”.

Even if Georgia will not be a member in the future, the European Union, with its “pattern on how to live peacefully” (Levan Abashidze), could still serve as a model to the Caucasus Region. Perhaps solutions to the current conflicts could be found “without having formal states” (Oliver Reisner).

While a solution might not be in sight from today’s perspective, “that it is possible can be seen with Cyprus” (Oliver Reisner), which could be a “good and positive pattern” for Georgia to look at (Levan Abashidze). With Cyprus having had a conflict similar to the situation in Georgia, that is now settled through missions and a peaceful border, Levan Abashidze hopes that the same might occur in Georgia.

In general, it is often perceived, that the outcome of the situation is not dependent on Georgia, but on actions and events happening outside of Russia. In these events, Russia, and the way it is shaping the “geopolitical puzzle” (Maia Urushadze), is playing the major role.

Georgia is only a small country, Georgia demanding changes will not make big of a difference (Oliver Reisner), unless the external situation, the external attitudes and positions change. And this again would be depending on Russia’s actions.

Summary

While this might be the conclusion to this paper, unfortunately not the conclusion of the conflict, which has been going on for a while and, will probably continue for a while. From none of the missions, talks or formats that were established to help solve the conflict, a major improvement has been achieved, nor is expected to be achieved.

Despite the rather unsatisfying outcomes of the talks, it is important to continue being in contact with Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to eventually find a way out of the conflict. To find solutions, the “conflict should not be allowed too long” (Oliver Reisner), and “while talking about territorial integrity, [one should] not (...) forget that there are people living there. For this reason, Georgia should, despite sometimes feeling dependent on Russia’s actions, not wait for changes to happen but instead should continue to contribute efforts towards solving the conflict. These changes could be internal, such as an improvement on democratization or humanitarian projects, but also coming from working together with other countries, such as Germany. Working on a partnership could help Georgia to raise more attention about the conflicts and bring them to a more international agenda, especially since Germany also is one of the leading members in the EU. To bring forward a change, it requires all actors to contribute to it, the

government, the civil society and the general public. Official, as well as people to people contacts can help to improve the situation, even if it is only one step at a time. In this way, the Georgian government should also not rely on the expression of a “frozen conflict”. The general population plays a role in this regard, being the counterpart to the government. The population might be having a realistic view and not believing that the conflict will be solved in the near future, but could still put some pressure on the government so that the conflict is not being removed from the agenda.

All this shows that solving the conflict depends on many factors, all pieces of one puzzle that have to fit together.

For the future, there is “hope that there is an improvement that is good for everyone involved in the conflict” (David Aprasidze). The only thing left to say is that hopefully, this wish is not “only wishful thinking”, but a possible reality.

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