

Strengthening Civil Society Dialogue Capacities: Marking five years of the Istanbul Process

FOR GLOBAL
PARTNERSHIP
FOR THE
MIDDLE EAST
AND NORTH AFRICA

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Dr. George Khutsishvili

As the fifth anniversary of the Istanbul Process is coming up, this publication is released to commemorate the work of Dr. George Khutsishvili, the director of the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation who passed away in October 2013. The work of George Khutsishvili revolved around his beloved Georgia, as well as the Caucasus region in general - a context with several complex conflicts. He was the initiator and the regional representative of the Caucasus network of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, and the founder of the Russia-Georgia Dialogue Process, also known as the Istanbul Process.

The Istanbul Process was an expression of his passion for the use of dialogue as a tool to prevent violence and peacefully resolve conflict, and can be seen as the first step in a process of normalisation of relations between Russia and Georgia. This publication provides an overview of the activities and results of the Process, which brought together political experts from both countries to discuss the aftermath and ways forward after the 2008 conflict.

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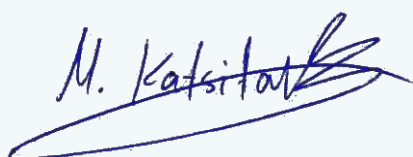
I. Introduction

Among the dialogue processes facilitated within the framework of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) in recent years, the Istanbul Process has played a prominent role. In the aftermath of the August 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN), located in Tbilisi, initiated a dialogue between Russian and Georgian political experts. These meetings were later dubbed the Istanbul Process for its location, which participants deemed conducive for a sensitive dialogue process. Since its inception, the Istanbul Process has become the longest-living dialogue between high-profile experts from Russia and Georgia and has developed serious capacity to influence the relations between the two countries.

Initially the Istanbul Process started as a Track-two diplomacy effort. It produced a wide range of exchange and analysis of the fundamental causes of the conflict, key trigger factors, and potential mechanisms for normalising relations. The participants included independent political experts and analysts, prominent journalists and editors of key media outlets, civil society representatives, academics and leading scholars from think-tanks in both societies. These experts have contributed to the process in various ways, most notably through their joint political analyses, by conducting and publicising studies on the subject, and through sharing perspectives in their respective societies through the media and advocacy efforts. Additionally, experts from both countries have joined in international advocacy visits, of which the September 2012 visits to Washington and New York turned out to be key events in raising awareness and international support for the dialogue process.

After the October 2012 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia, the political environment of the Russia-Georgia relations changed substantially. For the first time, the Istanbul Process had a chance of raising its status from Track-two (strictly non-governmental) to Track-one-and-a-half (including informal participation of governmental and political figures). The prospect of political negotiations on a broad spectrum of issues, not yet crossing the 'red lines' into bilateral relations, has gradually been gaining momentum ever since. In May 2013, several participants in the Istanbul Process continued the advocacy efforts in Brussels to share the developed recommendations with several EU institutions, as well as relevant think tanks working on European and foreign policy. The publication that follows will provide a chronological overview of the process from its inception up to this point.

The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation would like to sincerely thank all participants of the Istanbul process for their continued engagement and contributions. We would furthermore like to express our gratitude to the Carnegie Moscow Center for their support in particular with the empirical study of perceptions in Russia. Finally, GPPAC and ICCN would like to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of Belgium for their support of the Istanbul Process.



Maya Katsitadze

Executive Director
International Center on Conflict and Negotiation
Regional Secretariat of Global Partnership for the
Prevention of Armed Conflict



Peter van Tuijl

Executive Director
GPPAC Foundation
Global Secretariat of the Global Partnership for the
Prevention of Armed Conflict

II. The Istanbul Process as a response to the 2008 crisis

1. The August 2008 Crisis

The August 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia brought the relations between the two countries perhaps to their lowest point since the collapse of Soviet Union, and interrupted all institutional relations between Moscow and Tbilisi. Previously, Russia had acted as a broker of negotiations in the two territorial conflicts affecting Georgia where it was part of a joint peacekeeping force present in the break-away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, as a result of the military confrontation of August 2008, the Russian army together with Abkhazian and South Ossetian forces effectively controlled the entirety of both territories. A cease-fire agreement was signed by parties by 16 August which had EU observers deployed along the administrative borderline areas.

With Moscow's recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia immediately after the August War, the tensions between Russia and Georgia seemed destined to remain unresolved. This was reflected in the official positions of the two countries which differed from the start. Whereas the issue has not been up for discussion in Moscow, Georgian politicians considered the problem a priority. These conditions made the restoration of an understanding between the parties very difficult. There was thus a need to seek other venues to engage the issue, one of which proved to be the experts' dialogue promoted through the Istanbul Process.

2. The Istanbul Process is born

In November 2008, George Khutsishvili sought the support of the global network of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict. He argued that in the immediate post-war context, when all diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia were broken, there should be a format that would enable the two sides to relate to each other. In this way they could explore different perspectives without being bound to the official positions of the Russian and Georgian leadership.

The Track-two diplomacy approach seemed to offer a much-needed framework to restore the channels of communication without participating actors having to commit to the official policies of Russia and Georgia vis-à-vis "the other". As a global network of civil society organisations working across conflicts on an international level, the GPPAC was in a position to play an impartial role in facilitating the process. It could therefore offer a framework that provided the politically neutral environment needed for the Russian and Georgian sides to engage with each other in a dialogue process.

Given the broken diplomatic relations, neither Tbilisi nor Moscow was an option for convening. Istanbul was chosen as a neutral location to host the first encounter. The participants from both sides were selected to include respected civil society leaders, recognised academics, as well as former government and diplomatic officials who were all prominent political experts and opinion leaders in their societies. The first meeting, named "Georgian-Russian Relations: Ways out of Crisis", took place in November 2008, and constituted the first direct cross-border exchange of positions and opinions between the Georgian and Russian sides since the August War. It also marked the beginning of what was to become a long term process of exchange concerning the fundamental causes of the conflict and analysis of on-going political developments. Its results were translated into recommendations for establishing mechanisms that would potentially stabilise relations between Russia and Georgia. And the main directions of further work were agreed in a Memorandum titled The Istanbul Process, which grew to become the title for the continuing dialogue between Russian and Georgian political experts.

While the first encounter sought to explore differing viewpoints, by analysing the less sensitive issue of the historical background, as well as fundamental causes behind the political dynamics in the two countries, the further process shifted gradually towards addressing more pressing matters related to deeply seated grievances and unaddressed concerns in Russia-Georgia relations.

By 2009, despite a number of differences in positions and perceptions, the participants of the Istanbul Process succeeded in identifying and negotiating a basic set of common principles that would condition mechanisms for on-going dialogue between the two societies. Preliminary agreement reached within the group included the following:

- There is no alternative to the development of Russia-Georgia dialogue if we desire to overcome the crisis; the dialogue on a broad range of issues related to Russia-Georgia relations should continue to be developed without any preconditions, and no topics should be excluded from the discussions;
- In order to achieve an impact on a broader public level, the dialogue needs to be continued on different levels and in different formats, with civil society playing a key role in this process;
- The dialogue needs to be developed based on a “step-by-step” principle in order to promote movement towards the main goal: stage-by-stage normalisation of Georgia-Russia relations;
- There is a prospect of a mutually acceptable resolution of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia issues, which should take place through peaceful means only and in accordance with the acknowledged principles of international law;
- All sides engaged should promote and encourage the return of Internally Displaced Persons to their respective areas of origin;
- The continued militarisation of the South Caucasus as a result of regional conflicts remains one of the principal threats; the public opinion should be mobilised in order to address this threat and in order to advocate for political decisions in this regard;
- It is extremely important to create an adequate informational space, resources and tools to further develop a public discourse on the above mentioned issues and directions.

3. Continued collaboration between political experts 2009-2013

After the initial meetings, the Istanbul Process participants continued to convene regularly to provide their analyses, attempting to unmask the political myths influencing the consciousness of both societies across the conflict divide. Political motivations defining relations between Russia and Georgia, often hidden in the official rhetoric, were jointly studied. As the Istanbul Process participants systematically worked their way through analysing a contradictory “paradox of war”, it was generally agreed that despite the high amount of damage caused by the August war and the subsequent frozen relations, there was a range of dividends that both Russian and Georgian leaderships had gained as a result.

Since official Tbilisi and Moscow were not receptive to the idea of normalisation of relations, as at the time both seemed to benefit from the status quo, the Istanbul Process participants agreed that in this context the emphasis had to be made on addressing a growing societal polarisation. Independent media were identified as particularly instrumental in that sense, and hence the Istanbul Process extended the scope of participants engaged to include influential journalists and editors of key Georgian and Russian media outlets that would be able to convey some of the conclusions and insights from the Istanbul Process to both the Russian and Georgian societies.

As dialogue participants deconstructed dominant political narratives of their respective states, the difference in their own relations became apparent. Through on-going communication, the two sides were able to make a significant shift from at times confrontational perspectives towards a place where communication became more transparent, allowing the uncovering of some of the deeper value-based issues. In chronological order, the different meetings throughout this period have focused on: the need to initiate a dialogue; how to overcome the stalemate; the elections of 2012; the possibility of restoring relationships; and the state of the NGO sector and civil society organisations in Georgia and Russia.

The level of confidence and trust that gradually developed between the participants allowed them to initiate joint actions. To date, these have resulted in: the publication of a collection of articles in a book analysing the way forward out of the crisis; two sociological studies on the public perception of “the other” in both Russian and Georgian societies; advocacy trips undertaken to inform international policy makers; as well as continued collaboration outside of the range of the Istanbul Process, both on an individual basis and through the engaging the GPPAC’s Dialogue and Mediation Working Group. What follows is a short description of these core achievements.

3.1 Russia and Georgia: the ways out of the crisis

The collection of articles was published in 2010, and was a collaborative effort of ten authors who wrote nine articles; each analysing the origins and outcomes of the conflict in its own way. The articles mostly focus on political myths that influence the discourse of both societies across the conflict divide. Through this lens they address the questions of fundamental causes to the conflict as well as the key factors triggering military action; the influence of the overall geopolitical context in the region on the current dynamics between two countries; and the mechanisms to support stabilisation of relations between Russia and Georgia.

As one of the experts analysing the psychological roots of the conflict argues, the Russian and Georgian societies could have both been “suffering from a severe form of intoxication with political illusions”. While another chapter explains that despite the high costs of damages caused by the August 2008 events both governments also benefited from the conflict in certain ways. The further subjects of chapters range from “the Orwellian power phenomenon of Russia-Georgia relations in the 21st Century” by George Khutsishvili to “the development potential of post-soviet economic relations between Russia and Georgia” by Vladimer Papava.

3.2 Perceptions of Russia and Russians in Georgian Society: An Empirical Study

As the issue of the perceptions of Russia in Georgia and the perception of Georgia in the Russian society remained a recurring theme of discussion among the Istanbul Process participants, a research project to understand these perceptions was launched. This project aimed to enhance the understanding of both the participants and the public of these issues, and therefore results of the study were analysed and presented to key stakeholders including government officials, civil society and the general public.

For the research, individual interviews were conducted in Georgia to understand the opinion of different segments of the population. Based on the nature of the problem under discussion, focus groups were organised according to the age of the participants. In addition, to ensure the completion of a representative opinion study, the research included the opinion of internally displaced persons. Along with the main study, media analyses were conducted, looking into TV broadcasts zooming in on Russia.

The research findings were structured around the following areas:

- Perceptions of the Russian government's policies with respect to Georgia
- Perceptions of the Georgian authorities' policy towards Russia
- Obstacles to the normalisation of relations between Georgia and Russia
- Perceptions of the influence of political elites' private interests in the political and economic relations between Russia and Georgia
- Assessment of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008: what happened and whether it was possible to avert the crisis
- Assessment of the possible threat from Russia
- Perception on possible common interests between

Russia and Georgia

- The results of a content analysis of the TV news broadcast

According to the hypothesis of the study, the experience of living in the former Soviet Union had an impact on the perception of Russia. However, as shown by the results, this hypothesis was confirmed only in part. In particular, only one difference was found between students and other (older) age groups: students did not believe in the necessity to establish friendly relations between Georgia and Russia. Unlike students, the respondents of older age groups articulated their deep regret regarding the loss of friendly relations and believed that these needed to be re-established.

Additionally, the rather common assumption in Georgian society of the existence of “two Russias” had undergone a transformation: there was now a further polarisation between the perception of Russian authorities and the Russian people.

Thus, the results confirmed the assumption that the Georgia-Russia confrontation, by nature, was perceived as a purely political conflict. As a matter of fact, the respondents believed that the conflict was at the level of the current ruling elites, but not of the people, and that there was a lack of political will on both sides rather than a conflict between nations. All the above provided a certain assurance that the normalisation of relations between the two countries be possible provided that sufficient political will from both parties existed.

3.3 Perceptions of Georgia and Georgians in Russian Society: An Empirical Study

In August-September 2012, the Carnegie Moscow Center conducted a similar study of the perception of Georgia and Georgians in the Russian society to facilitate the development of similar knowledge base from the Russian perspective.

According to the findings of the study, Russians saw Georgia as a country focused on its Western aspirations, with significant political and economic

activity, while at the same time it had the image of a belligerent, conflicting and unpredictable region. Georgia was frequently mentioned by the Russian media. However, it was often portrayed in a negative way. Positive coverage also gradually emerged, as more recently Georgia had been featured as a country of reforms that was also an attractive tourist destination. Reforms of public institutions (anti-corruption measures, police reform) were perceived by Russians as one of the main achievements of the country. However, the success of the undertaken reforms is one of the reasons for complicated relations with the Kremlin: Georgia appeared to be an uncomfortable example in comparison to Russia’s own record.

The Russians were curious about the modernisation effort made by the President of Georgia and were interested in his personality and developments in the country. The 2008 conflict, however, caused a serious negative impact on the President’s image and that of the country. These events were also the first that came to mind when Georgia was mentioned. However, Russians had a generally positive attitude to the citizens of Georgia, describing them as an emotional, hospitable, and kind people, which values family traditions. There was an interest in making tourist trips to Georgia and in communicating with people belonging to its culture. And in the perception of the younger generation, Georgia was an attractive tourist destination with diverse cultural activities, sports, and beaches.

The study concluded that despite the existing political differences between Russia and Georgia and the lack of institutional incentives for cooperation, there was potential for a revival of the dialogue between societies and cultures, which could be initiated at the grassroots level. Among the most appropriate measures to facilitate such a dialogue, the following were mentioned: the simplification of the visa regime for the citizens of Georgia from the Russian side; and the abolition of the law “On Occupied Territories” from the Georgian side.

3.4 Advocacy engagements

In 2011 and early 2012, the issue of the Russia-Georgia

official dialogue remained too politically sensitive for the members of the Istanbul Process to proactively engage with Georgian and Russian officials. The participants of the Istanbul Process therefore focused their efforts on communicating with relevant policymakers in both countries. In time, the common vision developed by the participants of the Istanbul Process served as a platform to start engaging international actors with considerable influence in the region including the European Union's European External Action Service, the US Department of States, as well as recognised think tanks in Brussels and Washington DC.

This development eventually resulted in two advocacy trips intended to share the results with relevant international actors. In September 2012, a delegation of Russian and Georgian political experts participated in advocacy engagements in Washington DC and New York where a series of meetings and roundtable discussions were held under the framework:

"Prospects of Russia-Georgia Relations in the Regional Security Context". This included events hosted by US think-tanks, academic centres, and policy makers. A second trip was made in May 2013, when a joint delegation of Georgian and Russian political experts visited Brussels to meet with a number of Brussels based institutions. The aim of this engagement was to present and discuss recent developments in both Russia and Georgia; outline and elaborate on existing and emerging opportunities for the normalisation of relations between the two countries; and to share the results of their up-to date analyses and present policy recommendations developed jointly following the October 2012 elections in Georgia.

3.5 The Istanbul Process and the GPPAC's Dialogue and Mediation Working Group

As a way to facilitate knowledge exchange among its global network and build on the first-hand expertise of organisations working in different conflict contexts, the GPPAC has created a Working Group of expert practitioners for its regional networks involved in Dialogue and Mediation processes. In 2012, the first Working Group meeting took place back-to-back with the fifth round of the Istanbul Process, bringing together practitioners from Latin America and the

Caribbean, Western Balkans, Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, North America, Eastern and Central Africa.

As members of this Working Group, the Istanbul Process participants were able to explore practical experiences, conceptual knowledge, and lessons learned from other Track 2 processes initiated and facilitated by GPPAC members in different parts of the world. The thorough study of a citizen's diplomacy process around US-Cuba relations, supported by GPPAC's Latin American network, the in-depth analysis of dialogue processes in the Western Balkans, as well as the experiences of GPPAC members in Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and Eastern and Central Africa were particularly of use to the participants of the Istanbul Process. Conversely, sharing their own experiences from both Russian and Georgian perspectives further contributed to the work of other GPPAC members engaged in dialogue and mediation processes.

4. The 2012 election year and the current status of the conflict

2012 was a very significant year for the efforts of the Istanbul Process, as this year saw Russian elections in March, and Georgian elections in October. Despite the widespread protests denouncing fraud in the process and the demand for reforms, the elections in Russia led to the re-election of Vladimir Putin as President. Many observers indicated that this outcome diminished the possibility of a change in the Kremlin's attitude towards Tbilisi, by guaranteeing continuity to Russia's official stance at the time.

The Georgian elections however provided an unexpected turn of events, as the governing party - the United National Movement of Mikheil Saakashvili, which came to power following the Rose Revolution of 2003 - was defeated by the Georgian Dream coalition led by a Bidzina Ivanishvili, a businessman who laid the foundations for his wealth during the controversial privatization decade in Russia. While accusations of Ivanishvili's pro-Russian position were still looming, he confirmed that Georgia's future geopolitical direction would be shaped by his government's commitment to continue pursuing proactive Euro-Atlantic integration.

At the same time, Georgia's Prime Minister repeatedly stated that the improvement of relations with Russia will constitute one of the priorities for Georgia's foreign policy, indicating that the restoration of Georgian products exports to the Russian market should be the immediate task of the government.

This change had a major impact on the outlook of the relations between Russia and Georgia. ...In a bid to prove this, Georgia's Prime Minister introduced the new post of Special Representative for Relations with Russia, as a clear indication that the "first step" had been made by Georgia. The country's former ambassador to Russia, a prominent political analyst and notably one of the key participants of the Istanbul Process, Zurab Abashidze, was appointed to this post. Several meetings with his counterpart, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigory Karasin, took place throughout 2013, which led to lifting the ban on Georgian wine and mineral waters by Russia, the opening of additional frontier points along the Georgian-Russian border, as well as the restoration of transport and communication between the two countries. In addition, there are signs that visa restrictions for Georgians travelling to Russia might be eased and President Putin has stated that he supports restoring "full-scale relations" with Georgia. A number of other participants of the Istanbul Process have been elected to the Parliament of Georgia since, while others are involved in the policy making process at various levels .

Meanwhile, the Geneva Talks, an international mediation process over Georgia's territorial conflicts, also continues alongside these developments. Despite obvious divergences on multiple issues, all parties remain committed to continue the discussions within this format. However, in parallel to the positive changes, a new wave of "borderisation" has also taken place on the boundary line between Georgia and South Ossetia since 2013, as reported by the European Union Monitors present in that area. This Russian border guards installed barbed-wire fences along Georgia's boundary line with its disputed region of South Ossetia. Tbilisi claimed that Russia pushes the boundary line further inside Georgia. Thus, the process of normalisation of relations between the two states still has a long way to go.

However, in parallel to the above positive changes, a new wave of "borderisation" has taken place on the border between Georgia and South Ossetia as well. This involved Russian border guards installing barbed-wire fences along Georgia's border with its disputed region of South Ossetia which Georgia claims pushes the border line further inside Georgia.

Meanwhile, the Geneva Talks, an international mediation process, also continues alongside these developments. Despite obvious divergences on multiple issues, all parties remain committed to continue the discussions within this format.

III. Conclusion

After five years in the making, the Istanbul Process has exceeded its expected results. While earlier rounds of talks between the political experts attempted to address options to overcome the stalemate in Russia-Georgia relations, discussions since October 2012 have gone forward with the elaboration of practical steps and policy recommendations to support the gradual process of rapprochement between Russia and Georgia. What's more, due to the developments in Georgian politics, several of the participants found themselves in a position to directly feed the group's recommendations into Georgian policy-making. This makes the evidence-based and exploratory approach of the group all the more important.

Research on the perceptions of Russia in Georgia and Georgia in Russia carried out by ICCN and the Carnegie Moscow Center has been relevant in many respects. On the one hand, it informed the discussions of Russian and Georgian experts and contributed to the public debates facilitated by the Istanbul Process participants in their countries; on the other, it fed into the policy recommendations for advocacy engagements devised in Washington DC and New York in 2012, and in Brussels in 2013.

Throughout 2008-2013, the Istanbul Process initiatives were enriched by its media presence, resulting in a wider discussion of the project findings in both the Russian and Georgian societies. This could be attributed to both the strategic decisions taken by Istanbul Process facilitators, as well as the changes in the geopolitical context after the October 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia. These changes have created the conditions for the new Georgian government to use the perspectives and understanding generated within the Istanbul Process as valuable inputs for the official policies and measures towards the normalisation of relations with Russia.

It is expected that a number of the Georgian participants affiliated with the current government will continue taking part in the Istanbul Process in their capacities as parliamentarians, advisers, and political experts. Their strategic advantage will lie in having direct access to the perspectives and positions of their

Russian counterparts. This will allow them to access first-hand analysis and subsequently transmit policy recommendations to their political leaders.

Additionally, it is hoped that having observed the capacity of the Georgian participants to influence their policy level with regard to Georgia-Russia relations, the official Russian circles will be more receptive to policy recommendations coming from the Russian participants in the Istanbul Process. Any future official dialogue process between the governments of Russia and Georgia would therefore be strengthened by taking the aforementioned developments into consideration.

Lastly, while the Istanbul Process was formerly funded by the Dutch and Belgian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, funding from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs was secured, allowing the Istanbul Process to continue. This will enable it to build on the results of the past five years, and to expand the process further through engaging broader groups of stakeholders from both Russia and Georgia.

The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict is a global member led network of civil society organisations who actively work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The network consists of fifteen regional networks of local organisations with their own priorities, character and agenda. These regional networks are represented in an International Steering Group, which jointly determines GPPAC's global priorities and actions for its conflict prevention and peacebuilding work. GPPAC's mission is to promote a global shift in peacebuilding from solely reacting to conflict to preventing conflicts from turning violent. GPPAC does this through multi-actor collaboration and local ownership of strategies for peace and security. Together, GPPAC aims to achieve greater national, regional and global synergy in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and to strengthen the role of local members in the regions affected by conflict.



Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC)
Laan van Meerdervoort 70, 2517 AN The Hague, The Netherlands
Telephone: +31 070 311 0970 | www.gppac.net

International Center on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN) is an independent, peace-making, research and training institution. ICCN was established with the aim of building peace and accord in the divided post-totalitarian society, placing its main emphasis on conflict prevention and resolution in the Caucasus region with special focus on Georgia. ICCN functions as the Regional Secretariat for the GPPAC Caucasus network. ICCN focuses on empowering civil society, advocating human rights, and tightly cooperating with other important actors in the field of conflict prevention. ICCN aims to accomplish these goals by: strengthening democracy and building civil society; building positive peace and institutionalizing conflict prevention/management in divided societies; and promoting human rights, tolerance and gender equity. ICCN has professional experience in research and analysis, as well as advocacy and lobbying, and regularly produces opinion polls, content analysis, monitoring and expert assessments; nation and region-wide security studies and hosts conferences, problem-solving workshops and trainings, seminars and round tables for target groups, with follow-up publications, including in periodicals.



International Center on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN)
5 Machabeli Street, Tbilisi 0105, Georgia
Telephone: +995 32 299 99 87 | Fax: +995 32 293 91 78 | www.iccn.ge

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