Chapter 8

Theory and Experiences of Ethnonational Conflict Regulation: Their Relevance to the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

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Internal, ethnonational conflicts: dynamics and difficulties

At the end of the 1980s, the gradual weakening of the communist dispensation in the Soviet Union occasioned a reorganization of inter-group relations, often to the detriment of peaceful coexistence and moderation.Titular nations of Union republics and Autonomous republics found themselves locked into a process of self-definition and a quest for national and international legitimacy. The consolidation of the new states in terms of borders, population and political power brought about a nationalizing tendency which, despite existing ethnic heterogeneity, sought a close fit between the nation and the state, thereby alienating the minorities in the new states.[1] Nationalist policies and rhetoric speedily filled up the ideological space vacated by the exit of communism. Ghia Nodia correctly points out that not only was the rise of primordial nationalist feelings spurred on by the end of communist encapsulation, but these feelings were effectively stimulated through the introduction of democratic principles.

Democratic politics require the definition of the demos. Democracy, understood as the rule of the people by the people, begs the question of what is to be understood as "We, the people".[2] Group definitions inherent in nationalism proved to offer the most powerful instrument for identifying the players in the new democratic game. Insider/outsider stigmatization occurred during the definition of the demos along nationalist lines, and this gave rise to violent ethnonational tensions. The problematic necessity of defining the demos in new democratic states, as argued by Nodia, is, however, only one of the conflict-prone features of democracy. Democratic institutions also firmly install the elements of competition and group support in society. Access to political power in democracies depends on the degree of group support one manages to gain in an electoral competition. Elections are little more than a struggle for support, a competition between groups. Ethnonational definitions provide an easy and obvious basis for securing group support, support which is indispensable in the competition for power. Politicians will therefore find it tempting to use ready-made ethnic definitions for rallying popular support.

States with century-long traditions of dealing with ethnonational diversity in a democratic context (such as Belgium, Canada, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) have never ceased to be troubled by ethnonationalist mobilization. Even the textbook example of ethnonational peace and calm - Switzerland - is increasingly confronted by inter-group friction. It should hardly be surprising, therefore, that the end of communism and the subsequent introduction of democracy has given rise to a large number of internal, ethnonational conflicts. Many former Soviet states are currently struggling to come to grips with the problems of (ethnonational) diversity under the new post-communist, democratic dispensation. The nature and complexity of internal conflicts based on ethnonational division renders regulation and accommodation particularly difficult. In general, the marrying of diverging interests requires a concerted effort, and the addition of an ethnonational dimension increases even further the difficulties inherent in regulating a conflict.

Ethnonational identities base their credibility and legitimacy on an interpretation of the historical past. The reference to mythical forefathers, battles, homelands, etc., entrenches the national self-perception in history. By bringing history back into the picture, ethnonationalism also brings historical wrongs and traumas back to centre-stage in politics and conflict. But historical traumas cannot be relived in a more satisfactory way. Historical legacies are the structural foundations of a conflict situation, and it is not possible to erase them. Conflicting players seeking settlement thus have no alternative but to accept the remnants of frustration which history has left them. The past cannot be regulated. This means that historical traumas are difficult to address in concrete bargaining terms.

As Donald Horowitz points out, ethnonational affiliations tend to permeate all features of social life, especially when ethnic tensions emerge. In a conflict, an ethnonationally divided society no longer consists of workers and employers, buyers and sellers, conservatives and liberals, but essentially of members of different ethnonational groups, as the ethnonational dimension supersedes all other forms of social segmentation.[3] By homogenizing the members of an ethnonational group, ethnonationalism also becomes intimately linked with other forms of social affiliation.

Besides the purely ethnic dimension, ethnonational conflicts involve religion, ideology, economic interests, partisan politics, etc. These bundles of intertwined interests and demands are hard both to disentangle and to satisfy. The regulation of ethnonational conflicts presents the difficult task of reducing complex and intertwined demands into disentangled, workable packages of issues to be addressed. Moreover, national identities and the emotions they awaken correspond to the basic human need for self-definition in a changing and puzzling environment. Ethnonational identities infuse emotions and psychological needs into conflicts. Disputes tend to revolve around issues related to a sense of belonging, security and

national pride - all of which are highly emotional and non-negotiable matters.

Zartman singles out another typical and problematic characteristic, namely, the asymmetric nature of many internal ethnonational conflicts. Tensions between insurgents and incumbents are often characterized by an asymmetry in coercive capacity, legal position, international support, numbers and administrative or bureaucratic capacity. Such asymmetric relations are less amenable to regulation because the stronger party has little incentive to deal with the weaker side on an equal footing, while the weaker side will invest more in attempts to change the disadvantageous balance of power than in attempts to settle the conflict.[4]

Internal conflicts display a recurrent pattern, in which one side tries to maintain the asymmetry which the other side is seeking to redress. Asymmetric internal conflicts are likely to remain in a state of constant flux until some level of symmetry is reached or until the existing asymmetry is no longer perceived by either side as sufficient reason not to seek a joint settlement. Needless to say, such realizations may only emerge when both sides have exhausted one another in conflict, at the expense of a great deal of time, energy and bloodshed.

Once violent acts have been perpetrated, internal conflicts often enter a spiral of violence. Repetitive cycles of violence can be arrested, but they do jeopardize the chances of a future settlement, not least because the harm inflicted raises the level of frustration which will need to be addressed in a settlement. Violence also decreases the possibility that the warring partners will perceive each other as credible and acceptable partners in dialogue.

Conflicting parties often find the thought of being on speaking terms with those who have allegedly committed atrocities against them to be unacceptable. Inter-group violence involves regular armed forces, but it also attracts uncontrolled, disparate armed groups lead by warlords or common criminals. These irregular forces gain prominence during the conflict, a prominence they are likely to lose once the peace process is on track. Though they have no vested interest in the specifics of a settlement, their lack of hierarchic control puts them in a position to derail the settlement process by not complying with agreements or by breaking fragile cease-fires.

As noted earlier, ethnonationalism touches upon many aspects of social life. Territorial, linguistic and socio-economic delimitations are part of how ethnonational groups define themselves. The overwhelming variety of ethnonational identities is made up of different mixtures of similar constituent elements. The apparent diversity of ethnonational symptoms should not distract us from identifying the similarity of underlying causes that can be found in cases of ethnonational hostility. When the specific features of each single conflict are temporarily put aside for the sake of generalization, we find that a common thread running through many ethnonational conflicts is a basic fear of extinction. Insurgent ethnonational

groups in Canada, Belgium, the Basque country, Northern Ireland and South Africa, to name but a few, have all been driven by a primordial fear of being overwhelmed or, as Horowitz puts it, of being swamped by ethnonational outsiders. This anxiety often reflects the numerical inferiority of the ethnonational group or a downward demographic trend. Even where demography does not lend legitimacy to fears of extinction, the perceived disappearance of important ethnonational markers (language, customs, culture) will. Flemings were always the largest group in the Belgian population. Despite Flemish numerical preponderance, the higher social status associated with French language use stimulated an increased "frenchification" of the Flemish population. The gradual retreat of the Flemish language in favour of French led to the perception that a crucial defining characteristic of "Flemishness" was under attack. Flemings felt engulfed by the French language, and the nationalist movement capitalized on the fear of extinction of "Flemishness" in Flanders. Generally, fears of extinction - which are present in many if not all ethnonational conflicts - will need to be reduced or proved unwarranted if regulation is to be successful. In practice, this anxiety will only be allayed once institutions have been established that guarantee the continued survival of the ethnonational group. The ongoing tensions between Quebec and anglophone Canada are evidence that even the most (socio-economic) successful states remain ineffective as long as they fail to provide sufficient guarantees of ethnonational survival.

The Regulation of Internal Conflicts: What are we Aiming at?

Pointing out the complexity of ethnonational conflict is one thing, suggesting how conflicts can be reduced and satisfactorily managed is another, even more demanding exercise. There are no uniform, straightforward answers to the question of how to reduce ethnonational conflicts. Each conflict is different - for example in time, space, parties involved, intensity, issues, etc. - and it is likely that different conflicts will require different approaches. A technique which was successful in conflict A may prove to be irrelevant - or worse still, detrimental - in conflict B. It therefore makes little sense merely to copy successful structures from one country to another in the hope of producing results which will reduce the conflict. Different diseases require different treatments.

Even if we are aware of the need for context-specific regulations, the path to be pursued needs to be specified. What precisely is meant by conflict regulation or conflict reduction? Should the intended regulation merely focus on the cessation of violent interactions, or should it do away with all sources of friction between groups in order to be deemed successful? Clearly, the first stumbling-block in dealing with internal, ethnonational conflicts is the difficulty of defining conflict regulation itself.

One could uphold an intuitive notion of peaceful coexistence devoid of conflict, but hardly any ethnonationally divided country (except perhaps Switzerland) would fit in with this intuitive notion of conflict regulation. All states characterized by ethnonational segmentation have experienced

some degree of inter-group friction and conflict. If we were to accept the absence of conflict as the ultimate aim of conflict regulation, hardly any ethnonationally divided state would qualify as a case of successfully regulated conflict. The absence of conflict cannot be used as an operational indicator of the success of conflict regulation.

Once ethnonational tensions have occurred they will affect future relations between the opposing groups. No regulation or pacification will succeed in turning the clock back. In this sense, conflicts can never be "resolved" or ended in an absolute sense. The conflictual acts which occurred during the tensions will continue to affect and colour interactions between the groups, even if pacification has decreased the intensity of the dispute. Settlements cannot efface previous conflictual acts, nor will every source of friction be brought to a mutually fully satisfactory outcome in an agreement. The heritage of past conflictual acts and the remnants of dissatisfaction on one or both sides will often contain the seeds of future conflict between ethnonational groups. Settlements may decrease the amount of overt hostility or violent interaction, but they will never end or bring about the disappearance of conflict.

Strategies aiming at the annihilation of conflict between (ethnonational) groups are unrealistic and often even undesirable. It could be argued that inter-group conflicts are a perfectly normal and essential feature of politics. If societies consist of different individuals organized in different groups, it is likely that these groups will develop dissimilar sensitivities, needs and preferences, which are a corollary of their group or individual differences. The institution which, following the formulation of dissimilar interests, processes these different interests into a common policy outcome, is the state. The creation of policy outcomes applicable to all involves high stakes, divergent interests and intense competition between these group interests, often resulting in disagreement and conflict. In the policy process, the competing groups resort to a number of coercive, persuasive, bargaining and other tactics to achieve their desired outcome. The heated competition to determine policy outcomes clearly involves conflictual relations. It is commonplace to portray conflictual relations in politics as detrimental, dysfunctional and counterproductive to the functioning of a political system. All too often there is a tendency to overlook the fact that these conflicts identify the relevant issues, they clarify the sensitivities and importance attached to these issues by societal players and they also illustrate the power balance between groups. In this respect, conflicts are an essential and even a functional feature of politics, allowing the production of realistic, balanced and sensitive policy. The point here is that the goal of conflict regulation cannot be the disappearance of conflict. Conflicts are a normal and functional corollary of group differences. Conflict-regulating strategies should aim at controlling and orienting the conflict towards stable outcomes, rather than investing in the creation of conflict-free environments.

The proposed view - that conflicts are part and parcel of political decision-making - should not be interpreted as an unqualified plea for the uncontrolled proliferation of conflicts. Tensions and conflicts often

escalate and lead to highly sub-optimal outcomes or even to the collapse of the policy-making institutions. Regulatory strategies should focus on avoiding such detrimental escalation by stimulating the recognition and acceptance of divergent interests as the starting-point from which differences can be processed into stable policy outcomes. Conflict regulation techniques will not succeed in resolving conflicts, but will at best manage to channel damaging tensions towards outcomes which allow for the coexistence of competitive groups. Having reduced unwarranted expectations of the capacity of regulatory acts to end conflict, we now propose the following definition: the successful regulation of internal conflicts occurs when group dissatisfactions and opposing interests are confronted and addressed in a political system and conflicting demands are subsequently processed, at the lowest possible cost and risk, into stable policy outcomes. Some elements of this definition of conflict regulation require closer scrutiny. First, regulation requires dissatisfactions to be voiced and responded to by the conflicting parties. Without clear statements of group discontent, there is little to which regulatory techniques can be applied.

If the deprived group fails to mobilize (for lack of organizations, infrastructure, communication, etc.), it may not be effective in putting forward demands. Once grievances have been voiced, the group in relation to which the discontent is expressed needs to recognize and attend to the problem. This is certainly not always the case, as the (dominant) group, to which demands are addressed, can choose to ignore or deny the existence of this dissatisfaction. By denying the existence of a conflict, the (dominant) group legitimizes its lack of response and avoids taking any policy steps designed to reduce the dissatisfaction. These two conditions for successful conflict regulation are often lacking. Conflicts may seem to have been pacified, but the apparent calm is merely due to the failure of dissatisfied groups to put forward their demands or the result of a (dominant) group's preferring to deny the existence of a problem for as long as it can.

Second, successful conflict regulation involves the processing of conflicting demands at the lowest possible cost and risk. It is not possible to indicate precisely the point at which conflicts are processed at the lowest cost and risk. Such operationalization requires quantifiable indicators of costs and risks and a thorough understanding of how the conflicting parties assess these costs and risks. The general notion of lowest possible costs proposed here is that the amount of resources, time and energy devoted to dealing with the conflict does not interfere with the successful formulation of other policy outcomes. Conflict regulation can be deemed successful (where all the other conditions are met) if the cost of dealing with the conflict does not hamper the policy-making capacity of the political system. The regulation of a conflict can drain a substantial amount of resources, to the extent that all other policy issues need to be put on hold, leading to a policy blockage and the inability of the political system to function at all. Such instances of policy-making overload are failures of conflict regulation, even if they come about without violence. Next to

costs, the element of risk needs to be taken into account. The costs involved in regulation may be low while the chances of jeopardizing the continued existence of the political system may very be high. If the regulation of conflicts involves bringing the political system time and again to the brink of disintegration and collapse, then the techniques applied are unsuitable for repeated use and, therefore, unsuccessful.

Third, successful conflict regulation should result in the formulation of stable policy outcomes. A stable policy outcome is perceived as one from which none of the parties has an incentive to deviate. There is no incentive to deviate because, in the given circumstances, all the other reasonably possible outcomes could be expected to leave each of the parties worse off. A stable outcome does not necessarily correspond to the full realization of one or both parties' goals. It is likely to leave a residue of dissatisfaction on each of the opposing sides. Despite falling short of a full realization of their goals, both sides can adhere to the outcome and render it stable because they are aware that the struggle for maximum individual gain leads to mutually inferior outcomes.

Inherent in the above description of a stable outcome is the fact that the stability achieved is unlikely to be maintained indefinitely. Changing circumstances (changing environments, needs, leaders, etc.) can alter and decrease the benefits linked to an outcome, thereby making other outcomes more desirable. Conflicting parties seeking the regulation of their differences should therefore be prepared for an ongoing process of establishing new stable outcomes. Longevity of outcomes can be pursued by entrenching them in institutions. Institutional frameworks (constitutions, bureaucracies, jurisprudence, etc.) tend to reinforce and attribute a certain "robustness" to outcomes, thereby prolonging their existence. Institutionally embedded outcomes can be expected to be more resistant to change, but there is ample empirical evidence that even institutionalized outcomes are not immune to changing needs and environments.

The definition of conflict regulation presented in this paper can be regarded as fairly pragmatic for several reasons. First, the termination of conflict (understood as the end of tension and friction between groups) is rejected as a goal of conflict regulation. The aim is not to abolish conflict, but rather to limit some of its destructive consequences. Conflicts between groups cannot and should not disappear. Instead, conflict regulation should aim to process conflicting demands, at a low cost and low risk, into stable outcomes. In more concrete terms: conflicting groups should learn not to avoid living in disagreement, but to live with disagreement. Second, the definition is not centred on the presence or absence of violence. On the one hand, the absence of violence - desirable as this may be - is no guarantee of successful coexistence. Non-violent conflict situations may be accompanied by high costs and risks and a failure to produce stable policy outcomes, rendering group coexistence fragile or even unbearable. On the other hand, the use of violence does not necessarily entail the failure of conflict regulation.

Law enforcement or the voicing of discontent can take a violent form. Such eruptions of violence do not, by definition, jeopardize the success of regulation or group coexistence. Although the use of violence in conflicts is not a suitable indicator for determining the failure or success of conflict regulation, it is unlikely that violence will be part of a successful regulation strategy, as the use of violent means to enforce an outcome is usually a costly, risky undertaking and leads to hotly contested, and therefore unstable, outcomes.

Joint Decision-Making as the Optimal Approach to Conflict Regulation

Three ways of settling a conflict may be discerned: an external authority can impose a solution upon the conflicting parties, the conflict can result in an outcome through a number of unilateral actions, or the conflicting parties can decide to settle their differences jointly. It will be argued that the latter approach is both normatively and factually the preferable procedure for regulating conflict.

Conflicting parties deciding to settle their disagreements jointly accept that the formulation of a conclusion to the conflict shall be dependent on the agreement of both sides. This necessity for mutual agreement has important consequences for the nature and quality of the decision-making process.

The pursuit of a mutually acceptable outcome implies an interactive process. First of all, the grievances and demands of both sides are put forward. These grievances will need to be addressed if an outcome is to ensue, and this forces all participants to note and act upon the dissatisfactions expressed by their opponents. Moreover, this exchange of information clarifies the sources of discontent, the relevant issues and the relative importance attached to the matters in dispute. It cannot be assumed a priori that the adversaries have adequately assessed the contentious issues. Conflicting parties often have only indirect information regarding how far the opponent is willing to go. One side's sensitivities, intentions and real goals are often uncertain or blurred by their opponent's negative perceptions. Confrontation and the exchange of information and perceptions are instrumental in forging workable definitions of the conflict situation. Joint decision-making encourages conflicting parties to redefine their own positions and, more importantly, to reconsider their perception of the opponent in the light of conveyed information.

Through the interactive exchange of information and the subsequent adjustment of perceptions, opponents gain knowledge of each other's goals and bottom lines. This exchange of information reduces the element of uncertainty in the interaction. The importance of minimizing uncertainty and achieving certainty cannot be overestimated, as certainty with regard to the relevant features of the conflict situation (issues, opponent, minimum demands, etc.) allows for the emergence of mutual trust in the joint decision-making process. Conflicting parties operating under

conditions of great uncertainty as regards their opponent's motivation, means and goals cannot be expected to develop sentiments of trust vis-a-vis an unpredictable adversary. The exchange and adjustment of information reduces uncertainty, increases the predictability of the opponent's behaviour and favours the emergence of trust. Conversely, uncertainty in interactions is a factor which inspires feelings of fear and vulnerability - feelings which, according to psychological theory,[5] are highly conducive to violent reactions.

As was mentioned in the introduction, a number of scholars have pointed out the problematic asymmetric nature of most internal or ethnonational conflicts. Generally, the asymmetry can be qualified as a power imbalance, based on coercive, legal or moral grounds, between the dissatisfied group and the incumbents. Such asymmetry is deemed problematic because equals are said to make peace more readily and more easily than unequals.[6] Adversaries seeking conflict regulation through joint decision-making accept, by implication, that settlement can only occur if both sides agree. Joint decision-making, therefore, equalizes the relative weight of asymmetric adversaries in the formula for the final decision.

As unanimity is essential to this formula, both need to agree, so each of them has the power of veto. Joint decision-making entails an equalization of power in the decision which might not be paralleled by equality in the coercive or legal capabilities of the conflicting parties. This equalization of power in decision-making is one possible reason why rival groups reject joint settlements, because their favourable power position on the battlefield is significantly curtailed by the equalizing effects of joint decision-making. In general, jointly accepted outcomes will be less power-induced than those which are the result of unilateral or external (hierarchical) actions. This does not mean that conflict regulation through joint decision-making will be devoid of power struggles or the effects of bargaining power. The degree of dependence, the availability of alternatives, the consequences of non-agreement and the salience and importance of the issues at stake for each of the parties will largely determine the parties' strength in the joint decision-making process. Power relations between the conflicting parties will still be a crucial variable in this process, but imbalances will be partially redressed by their equal share in the formula for the final decision.

Finally, outcomes resulting from joint decision-making will incorporate the minimum demands of each of the parties. Under unilateralism or imposed regulations, there is no guarantee that the needs of both sides will be addressed in the final outcome. The unanimity rule implicit in joint decision-making means that, in order to be mutually acceptable, an outcome should satisfy at least the minimum needs of both parties. This mutual satisfaction of minimum needs renders the outcome more stable than unilateral or imposed solutions, which are likely to give rise to dispute and the re-emergence of inter-group hostilities.

At the start of this section we stated our conviction that joint - as opposed to unilateral or hierarchical - decision-making is the most beneficial

approach to conflict regulation. Joint decision-making encourages a full discussion of all dissatisfactions through a clarifying exchange of information, which reduces uncertainty and allows for the emergence of trust. Moreover, the unanimity rule partially reduces asymmetry and guarantees that at least the minimum demands of the opposing sides will be part of a mutually accepted outcome. The inclusion of minimum demands increases the stability of the outcome, as each side receives a share of satisfaction.

Bargaining and Negotiations: the Stuff Joint Decision-Making is Made of

Juxtaposed interests and demands in a conflict situation will not simply dissolve once joint decision-making has been selected as the procedure for regulation. But there is still a need for a painstaking search for an outcome that offers a mutually satisfactory balance between the juxtaposed demands. The process of weighing up these demands and finding ways of rendering incompatible interests more compatible under joint decision-making involves a bargaining process.

As bargaining is so central to decision-making, we shall explore this concept further. A standard definition of bargaining is offered by Rubin and Brown. According to these authors, the bargaining process should display the following characteristics:

1. at least two parties are involved in the interaction; 2. these parties have a conflict of interest with respect to one or more different issues; 3. whether or not previously acquainted, the parties are temporarily involved with one another in a voluntary relationship; 4. the essential activity in this relationship involves either the exchange of one or more specific resources or the resolution of one or more issues among the parties (or both); 5. the nature of this activity is sequential rather than simultaneous, in the sense that there is a presentation of proposals or demands by one party followed by the evolution and presentation of counterproposals by the other, until a resolution or impasse occurs.[7]

The above paragraph gives a good description of bargaining, but reveals little of the nature of the relationship which binds bargainers. Negotiations often signal the beginning of co-operative coexistence. Nevertheless, they should not be perceived as a purely co-operative activity. Conflictual attitudes remain an important feature of a bargaining process. Bargaining relations are best understood as mixed-motive relationships. The relationship combines a concern for co-operation with conflictual attitudes. Bargainers are separated by some conflicting interests and linked by some common interests.[8] The conflictual element can be traced back to the fact that each bargainer aims at maximizing his/her benefit in the outcome bargained for. The struggle by each bargainer to obtain a favourable outcome, in a context of incompatible interests, entails conflict. Without diverging interests, the parties would not need to bargain - to reach the desired goal, it would be enough to co-ordinate their actions. Despite the

conflict-prone configuration of interests, bargaining processes have an important co-operative dimension. The incentive for co-operation comes from an awareness by the bargainers that their goals cannot materialize without the some degree of participation by their adversaries. The parties must feel that goal achievement is to a large extent dependent upon the agreement of the opponent. The combination of co-operative and conflictual stimuli locks bargainers into an almost "schizophrenic" relationship which Schelling describes as "incomplete antagonism" or "a precarious partnership". For an interaction to be defined as a bargaining process, both the conflictual and the co-operative dimensions need to be present. Interactions lacking the mixed-motive characteristics are either open conflict or co-ordination settings which, as Bacharach and Lawler succinctly state, have little bearing on a bargaining situation: "If they had no incentive to co-operate, they would not bargain at all, if they had no incentive to compete, they would not need to bargain". The definition formulated by Rubin and Brown clearly points to the dynamic nature of bargaining. Negotiations are portrayed as a process which can be summarized in a number of subsequent stages. Several authors (Rangarajan 1985, Gulliver 1979) have analysed bargaining processes from this developmental perspective.[9] Bargaining is presented as a sequenced process in which the negotiators move through distinct phases, each of them containing different problems, until a solution or collapse follows.

Though the authors define the phases differently, the sequenced descriptions of bargaining are roughly parallel. For our present purposes, a short summary of the essential bargaining phases will suffice:

1. The initial phase consists in the expression and recognition of discontent. The parties voice their dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs, and this dissatisfaction is noted. Through tacit bargaining, the parties signal and test each other's willingness to commence negotiations.

2. If the discontent expressed is responded to in a positive fashion, indicating that the party addressed acknowledges the problem, the phase of "negotiation about negotiation" (NAN) can begin. During the NAN a consensus on basic attributes of the bargaining setting is sought. This involves decisions about a mutually acceptable arena or forum for negotiations, the agenda, rules about decisions, the number and type of actual negotiators and the acceptance or rejection of preconditions to negotiations. Each of these decisions can be the object of dispute and bargaining. Many negotiations reach the NAN stage but then collapse because of disagreement on the fundamentals of the setting for the bargaining. Often, unresolved disagreements during the NAN phase point to a lack of commitment by the parties to the bargaining process.

3. Once the basic features of the negotiations have been agreed upon, substantive bargaining can take place. The real bargaining usually starts with the bargainers stating their maximum demands and the legitimacy of their enterprise. The aim of the entire process that follows these statements

is to bridge the differences between the adversaries. This necessitates an identification of the crucial issues at stake. Negotiations are simplified by concentrating on a number of priority issues. In order to narrow the differences on priorities, initial demands can be redefined in more manageable terms. Another, much-used technique for narrowing gaps in initial expectations is the exchange of benefits and disadvantages between negotiators. If the bargainers have asymmetrical priority lists, the log-rolling technique can be applied. Log-rolling is an exchange of concessions on issues of differing importance to the bargainers. Each bargainer gets his/her way on one issue in exchange for making a concession on another issue of lesser importance to him/herself.[10]

4. A last and often underestimated phase concerns the implementation or execution of the agreement. This is the stage at which poorly-negotiated agreements often collapse. During implementation, the ambiguous nature of stipulations and a lack of genuine consensus tend to surface forcefully. Agreements usually require re-negotiation and monitoring devices to keep the implementation of the agreement on track.

Turning Adversaries into Co-Operative Negotiators: Stalemate and Interdependence

As indicated above, the factor spurring the opponents to co-operate in bargaining is their acknowledgement that they depend on each other for reaching their individual goals, their awareness that they cannot reach a desirable outcome on their own, without the inclusion of their adversary. The perception that unilateral alternatives are ruled out points to the interdependence of the opponents. The degree and nature of their interdependence has important consequences for the bargaining process.

When alternatives are scarce and the failure of the negotiations is imminent, the negotiators will be confronted with a stalemate. Their commitment to the bargaining process will depend on how they assess this deadlocked situation. In a case of great interdependence (few alternatives and strong probability of stalemate), the evaluation of the stalemate situation in terms of costs and benefits will be determined by the importance to the bargainers of the issue(s) at stake. Bargainers with few alternatives who attribute a high priority to the issue(s) under negotiation are likely to regard a stalemate as undesirable. Bargainers for whom the issue(s) at stake has (have) a low degree of salience will tend to asses the deadlocked situation as bearable.

The degree of interdependence is the basic variable that determines the bargainers' commitment to the bargaining process. Players who feel that they can gain satisfaction independently, or by drawing on alternative resources that do not involve their opponent, have little reason to invest in the troublesome process of finding a mutually acceptable outcome. On the other hand, those who are aware of their mutual dependence have no other option than to commit themselves to negotiations. The failure of negotiations in cases of low interdependence leaves the players to their

(unilateral) alternative options. Failed negotiations in conditions of great interdependence leave the players facing a stalemate, since there are no alternatives. A high degree of interdependence thus implies a scarcity of alternatives and a high probability of stalemate in the event of failed negotiations.

The degree of interdependence is thus crucial to understanding any bargaining process. A clear assessment of interdependence indicates the extent to which bargainers have alternatives to joint decision-making in trying to secure an outcome, and it clarifies the likelihood of stalemate when negotiations collapse. Bargaining theory focuses mainly on processes occurring during negotiations (agenda, stages, tactics, concession rates, threats, etc.), but under-emphasises determining features outside the direct negotiations. The extent to which players have alternatives to bargaining and their appreciation of failed negotiations are elements fashioned outside the negotiations but which have a direct impact on the negotiation.

A number of recent studies in the field of international relations have addressed the question of when conflicts are "ripe for resolution". These studies have investigated the conditions necessary for prompting players to seek a settlement rather than the continuation of hostilities. The generally accepted conclusion is that conflicting players cease hostilities when confronted by a "mutually hurting stalemate". This "mutually hurting stalemate" is defined as "the point where parties no longer feel they can use force to gain unilateral advantage and become willing to consider other options". At this point the parties perceive the costs and prospects of continued confrontation as becoming more burdensome than the costs and prospects of a settlement (Zartman, Hampson, Druckman). The concept of "hurting stalemate" goes a long way towards encapsulating the constellation which promotes bargaining and joint decision-making. Stalemate indicates that players feel they cannot improve their position by continuing the hostilities.

Furthermore, stalemate is supposed to harm both sides, which suggests that the players will not merely cease hostilities but need to invest actively in altering the stalemate. Zartman's concept of "mutually hurting stalemate" amounts to a necessary but not sufficient condition for describing a conflict as "ripe for resolution". A hurting stalemate indicates the point where the conflicting players no longer perceive the continuation of open hostilities as a beneficial strategy. The decision to stop fighting necessarily entails a simultaneous decision to begin co-operating. In a situation of hurting stalemate, unilateral actions merely cease to be a viable strategy - they do not preclude the emergence of other non-co-operative interactions.

Instead of seeking a joint settlement, the players may - and often do - seek to involve external players who can enforce an outcome hierarchically. Or the adversaries may invest in rendering the condition of stalemate less harmful by increasing their self-sufficiency. All too often, players confronted by a hurting stalemate in a conflict develop a capacity to live

with the deadlocked situation, preferring to accept a state of inertia than embark on the cumbersome process of settling the conflict jointly.

Though useful, the concept of "hurting stalemate" only partially describes the constellation leading to joint settlement. An additional factor is needed to push conflicting players towards the bargaining table to work out a joint settlement. Beside a hurting stalemate, a perception of great interdependence has to be solidly entrenched in the minds of the adversaries. It is not enough to be blocked in a conflict: opponents also need to realize that their fates are intimately linked and that there is little prospect of this changing in the near future. As long as the conflicting parties feel that the net result of the conflict can be an outcome which does not take into account the position of the adversary, joint settlement is unlikely to ensue. A joint settlement can only occur when the adversaries realize that living with the opponent is difficult, but living without the opponent is impossible.

Two cases of successful conflict regulation - namely, Belgium and South Africa - are enlightening in this perspective. Ethnonational and racial tensions have been prominent for decades in these countries. Though the two countries have not experienced similar levels of violence,[11] these tensions were highly divisive and dominated politics in both countries in recent decades. Despite high ethnonational/racial polarization and juxtaposed interests, both conflicts resulted in a negotiated settlement. There was no outright cessation of (violent) inter-group hostilities, but each settlement produced a stable outcome in the sense that none of the key players (ANC, NP in South Africa and Christian Democrats, Liberals and Socialists in Belgium) subsequently sought to change the fundamentals of the agreement. The analysis of what led South Africans and Belgians to overcome their outstanding differences by working out a joint settlement can contribute to a general understanding of what drives players to joint decision-making.

During the 1970s and 1980s, tensions between Flemings and Francophones increasingly immobilized the functioning of national government. The power-sharing arrangement in force in the national government produced a stalemate whenever an ethnonational conflict occurred. Parity rules, consensus decision-making in the national government and a number of special majority requirements tempered a direct translation of Flemish demographic predominance into a corresponding share of decision-making power. Flemings and Francophones carried roughly equal weight in policy decisions. Although temporary power imbalances occurred between the ethnonational groups, institutionally-geared unanimity or consensus rules precluded the continued dominance of either side. A system based on unanimity decisions (whether de facto or formal) and diverging interests is, of course, easily stalled. The unanimity rule implies a right of veto for every participant. Each party has the capacity to stall the process and is likely to do so when interests are perceived to be incompatible. Ethnonational mobilization in Belgium infused decision-making with just such incompatible zero-sum perceptions and this, under the unanimity rule,

led to a recurrent stalling of policy-making. The recurrent pattern of government crises and collapse over ethnonational issues during the late 1970s and 1980s led to what Zartman described as a "mutually hurting stalemate".

Similarly, towards the end of the 1980s the South African government and the anti-apartheid movement had reached stalemate stage. The apartheid regime had encountered insurmountable difficulties in containing an increasingly strong and efficient anti-apartheid movement. By the beginning of the 1990s, the ANC-led movement was drawing support from almost every segment of black society (unions, churches, students, women, traditional leaders, homeland populations, etc.). Anti-apartheid mobilization could bring the country to a virtual standstill. The opposition strategy, aimed at making the black population ungovernable, was not without success. The National Party government managed to maintain only limited control over its territory, at very high policing and security costs. The invigorated anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s could corner the regime, but it was still not in a position to overthrow it. The South African government, bureaucracy and security forces still represented a formidable opponent, no longer able to crush the opposition but certainly able to maintain white rule for some time to come. The main conflicting players, the NP government and the ANC, were clearly locked into a stalemate position. The lack of a clear power preponderance on either side limited the potential success of unilateral actions. Two roughly equal sides were at loggerheads, and the continuation of open (violent) conflict was not expected to alter this balance of power in the near future.

As was mentioned before, the concept of stalemate goes a long way towards encapsulating the constellation leading to joint settlement. However, it also overlooks an important feature that was present in the South African and Belgian cases. It was not the mere acknowledgement of a stalemate that drew Belgians and South Africans to the bargaining table. Besides the mutual recognition that the continuation of overt hostilities would merely harshen the stalemate conditions, the conflicting players also realized that they were highly interdependent. The stalemate situation indicated that the existing conflict strategies were counterproductive. A stalemate demonstrates the erroneous nature of current strategies but leaves a number of non-co-operative options open. The realization of interdependence narrows these alternatives down to one single option, namely, a joint and mutually acceptable settlement.

Flemings and Francophones were aware that the only way out of the stalemate would have to be a mutually acceptable joint settlement. The ethnonationally mixed nature of central institutions and the Brussels region, together with supra-ethnonational loyalties to the Belgian state and its symbols, are but some of the contextual features which forced the conflicting players to see their inherent interdependence within the Belgian state. Not only were conflicting ethnonational groups part of the conflict, but they would also have to be integral parts of any reform or new

dispensation that sought the regulation of the conflict. A similar realization of inherent interdependence occurred in the South African case.

Here, stalemate between the apartheid government and the ANC-led movement signalled the failure of existing strategies on both sides. In addition, the realization of interdependence fuelled the notion that any new democratic solution would have to incorporate the desires of both sides. The territorial dispersal of whites on South African soil ruled out white secession as a realistic strategy. Moreover, whites were aware that any new political dispensation would reflect the demographical preponderance of blacks in South African society. In short, whites realized that the change from the current strategy (continued racial segregation) could not be outright white separation and would entail a considerable degree of black rule. Under the influence of Joe Slovo, the ANC leadership revised its demand for a direct transition to full majority rule (which would of course be black rule). Like the white leaders, the ANC was aware that, despite its obvious numerical and political strength, it could not "go it alone". The white minority could still block any real democratic transition. Furthermore, white control over the financial and economic sectors would remain a crucial variable under the new dispensation. In short, stalemate revealed that existing strategies on both sides were leading only to a dead end, while interdependence ruled out all other unilateral strategies and pointed to joint decision-making as the only realistic solution to the conflict.

Suggestions for the Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

In the previous sections, general insights into conflict regulation and joint decision-making have been presented. In this paper, theory is not treated as an end in itself. What matters here is the relevance of theoretical insights to understanding and suggesting approaches to the regulation of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Little reference will be made to the precise empirical elements of the conflict. The emphasis of the following paragraphs is on broad dynamics and general suggestions for improved plurinational coexistence in Georgia and Abkhazia.

Given the problematic, asymmetric nature of internal conflicts, it seems important for the opposing parties in the conflict to perceive and treat each other as equals. Discrepancies in the status of the opponents encourages the weaker side to improve the balance of power in its favour. The lack of equality between adversaries often leads to situations where the inferior side either refuses to negotiate or negotiates while continually investing in extra-negotiational strategies in order to strengthen its position at the bargaining table. Perceptions of equality should not be interpreted as actual equality of resources (military, economic, demographic, etc.) or as a need for purely symmetrical solutions. What is meant here by perceptions of equality is that the adversaries should fully recognize that they cannot impose an outcome upon their opponent.

Low intra-party cohesion and extremist flanking is a phenomenon that has derailed many a negotiation process.[12] The activities of poorly controlled extremist flanks can not only create distrust and doubts concerning the bona fide intentions of the negotiators, but can also significantly jeopardize the satisfactory implementation of a negotiated agreement. Weak leadership control over grass-roots supporters and extremists increases the element of uncertainty in negotiations. It casts doubt on the legitimacy and representativity of the negotiators and on their capacity to reciprocate concessions and, most importantly, it invites scepticism as to whether the opponent can and actually will live up to the agreement during its implementation phase. Many agreements falter during implementation, the phase where general, often ambiguous, stipulations need to be translated into concrete measures. Implementation will forcefully bring to the fore any lack of consensus there may be in agreements concluded under duress or clouded by imprecision. It is clear that during implementation, which is a highly sensitive phase of conflict regulation, intra-party rivalry and extremist flanks can hamper the appropriate execution of an agreement to the point of derailing the entire settlement process. It is therefore imperative that both the Georgian and Abkhaz governments acquire full control over their internal forces. Disparate actions by the Abkhaz militia and unco-ordinated incursions by armed IDPs (internally displaced persons) into the Inguri security zone feed distrust at the bargaining table and hinder the co-ordinated implementation of agreements.

Conflict regulation strategies should aim at the formulation of stable outcomes. In a previous section, joint decision-making was singled out as the most efficient strategy for achieving such stability. This is based on the principle that an agreed outcome is likely to incorporate demands from both sides. The opposing parties in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict should therefore accept the idea that any solution to their dispute will require each of them to make concessions in order to alleviate their opponent's difficulties. Exploiting the opponent's short term weaknesses to enforce an outcome may be beneficial for domestic purposes, but an outcome achieved in this way is unlikely to remain uncontested in the future. There can be no clear winners or losers in joint decision-making. A clear designation of victorious or defeated negotiators is the most fertile soil for revanchist conflict in the future. The Abkhaz quest for a political status as close as possible to independence is a maximalist strategy that does not take into account Georgian concerns. The Georgian insistence on the return of refugees and IDPs prior to an overall political settlement, meanwhile, disregards basic Abkhaz anxieties.

None of the strategies cited constitutes an adequate basis for successful joint decision-making, because they each aim at maximizing individual benefits, whereas the prime concern should be the establishment of a joint benefit. As long as the conflicting parties merely put forward their own demands without consideration for their opponent's position, interactions will retain a purely competitive rather than a problem-solving quality.

The above suggestions essentially amount to attitudinal and strategical changes which should ideally be thoroughly instilled into the adversaries at the outset of the negotiations. These suggestions have to do with a problem-solving disposition prior to joint decision-making. Interactive dynamics occurring during the settlement process are at least as important as the a priori disposition of the adversaries. The numerous reports by the United Nations Secretary-General on the situation in Abkhazia give a rather gloomy picture of the dynamics during this settlement process. Despite a number of meetings and (partially- or non-implemented) agreements between the opposing parties, hardly any real progress seems to have been made towards a comprehensive settlement. Although the meetings between the Abkhaz and the Georgians have been described as negotiations, it is this writer's opinion that hardly any real bargaining has taken place. The trading of benefits and concessions and the exchange of proposals and counterproposals, which Rubin and Brown identified as the key characteristics of bargaining settings, have not developed in the Abkhaz-Georgian talks. It appears that the negotiation process has come to a halt at the NAN phase (negotiations about negotiations). Negotiations have been hampered by disagreement over the elementary features of the setting for the negotiations. Dissension arose over typical NAN issues, namely, the composition of the Georgian delegation at the bargaining table[13] or the question of whether to refer in the title of the negotiations to the "conflict in Abkhazia" or the "Abkhaz-Georgian conflict".[14]

Furthermore, in none of the talks has there been a genuine consensus on the composition and ordering of the agenda items. The Abkhazians insisted on a political settlement before the return of the IDPs and refugees; the Georgians sought to address these items in the reverse order. The Abkhazians demanded a discussion of the terms of their sovereign status (an independent or confederal state) and rejected the examination of anything short of outright sovereignty; while the Georgian negotiators refused to consider the Abkhaz agenda and insisted that arrangements going beyond an autonomous or federated status for Abkhazia could not form the basis of the negotiations. The talks that followed the unresolved agenda disagreements lacked the indispensable interaction of give-and-take and fell short of genuine consensus. Each side confined its bargaining activity to a repeated submission of its own demands and a subsequent refusal to yield.

Despite the very clear stalemate in the conflict, the conflicting parties did not succeed in starting substantive bargaining. This stalemate is surely one that hurts both sides. Georgians are left with about 260,000 refugees whose continued presence is a serious burden on Georgia's economic recovery. Abkhazia finds itself under an economic blockade and virtually cut off from the outside world, which refuses to recognize an Abkhazian state outside Georgian state borders. Yet the "mutually hurting stalemate" does not seem to be pushing the parties to regulate their differences. It is this writer's view that there are three principal reasons which have kept the adversaries from genuinely seeking conflict resolution, in spite of a prominent "hurting stalemate": 1. insufficient acknowledgement of

interdependence 2. failure to recognize and act upon the opponent's underlying position, and 3. the absence of an emergent political formula which could constitute a way out of the conflict. None of these three causes of the impasse is fixed or static. Each of them can be remedied so as to stimulate more effective efforts at regulating the conflict.

The denial of the inherent Georgian-Abkhazian interdependence is especially prominent on the Abkhaz side. The Ardzinba government mainly focuses on unilateral strategies (referendums, elections, the drafting of a constitution, the return of the diaspora) in an attempt to consolidate the independent status of Abkhazia. The Abkhaz side seems to view continued coexistence with Georgians within Georgia as the least desirable option. According to a senior Russian diplomat, the Abkhaz agenda could be summarized as "to freeze the situation, as happened in Cyprus, allowing time for a return of the Abkhaz diaspora and for the immigration of North Caucasians. Putting the situation on hold for the long term would have the further advantage of gradually accustoming the international community to the fact of Abkhaz independence".[15] In summary, the Abkhaz side seems to be under the impression that a future without Georgia (and Georgians) is feasible, so they dismiss the notion of Abkhaz-Georgian interdependence. The numerous, unanimous UN resolutions in support of Georgia's territorial integrity and the Russian-Georgian blockade are all measures designed to prevent Abkhazia from pursuing an independent, unilateral strategy. Moreover the future of an independent Abkhazia under a newly enforced blockade, internationally isolated and with a large group of increasingly hostile IDPs at its borders, does not seem all bright by any standards. So far, attempts to prevent Abkhaz unilateralism have been expressed in a negative, sanctioning vein. There also needs to be more insistence on confronting the Abkhaz side with the cost of its de facto independence and the benefits and rewards of accepting its interdependence. Instead of merely using penalties as a stick, Georgia and the international community could offer more political and economic carrots to attract Abkhazia to a negotiated solution. This combination of positive and negative sanctions should not, however, be used to pressurize the Abkhazians into endorsing the Georgian proposals, but merely to end unilateralism and to produce a more compromise-oriented Abkhaz bargaining strategy.

A lack of political will to act upon the opponent's underlying positions can be found on both the Georgian and the Abkhaz sides. The combined Georgian proposals for a return of the IDPs and a federal state, as they now stand,[16] seem very generous but actually offer very little to allay deep-seated Abkhaz fears of Georgian domination. The rigid Abkhaz bargaining stance seems to be fuelled by a strongly held sense of demographical and cultural insecurity. Abkhaz references to the fate of the vanished Ubykh people (the last Ubykh language speaker died in 1994), who populated the Russian Black Sea coast,[17] are a very clear indication of the primordial Abkhaz fear of extinction. Georgian settlement proposals should offer the Abkhaz the most solid guarantees possible of their continued demographic and cultural survival. The Georgian federal proposals do not provide such guarantees. Even in an asymmetric federal arrangement with considerable

autonomy for Abkhazia, it is unclear how an Abkhaz political elite could retain control over its territory if Georgian refugees and IDPs returned. The return of the IDPs and a federal arrangement could simply result in the ethnic Abkhazians (17% of the Abkhaz population in 1989) again becoming a regional demographic and political minority. Federal autonomy for the Abkhaz region, repopulated by the IDPs, would thus amount simply to autonomy status for a region that was politically controlled by a Georgian population. The protection of ethnic Abkhazians would then depend solely on the goodwill of the Georgian elites. Given the violent events of the past, it is not surprising that Abkhazians reject this option. The formulation of a mutually acceptable outcome will thus require a search for problem-specific arrangements that provide real guarantees for the ethnic Abkhazians. A first step towards such solutions would be a Georgian acknowledgement of the Abkhaz fear of extinction.

Abkhaz demands for an independent or confederal state also disregard the Georgians' underlying goals. There is a consensus among observers and the international community that the current state of affairs, with tens of thousands of IDPs outside Abkhazia, is an abnormal and untenable situation that cannot be perpetuated. The Abkhaz reluctance to accept significant numbers of refugees and their vision of Abkhazian statehood indicate a total disregard for Georgian concerns. Clearly, the Abkhaz proposals include just as many guarantees for the protection of returned Georgians as the Georgian federal proposals do for the ethnic Abkhaz, that is, next to none. In this respect, Georgia's insistence on the maintenance of its territorial integrity is perfectly understandable.

What would be the position of Georgian refugees and IDPs in an independent Abkhazia? In seeking the protection and safeguarding of its interests, the Georgian population in Abkhazia would find itself at the mercy of an Abkhaz political elite. Again, given the recent history of violent strife, this prospect is hardly one that appeals to the Georgians.

In summary, the institutional proposals of both parties have insufficiently addressed the basic goals of their counterparts. Abkhazian proposals in no way accommodate Georgian needs. The Georgian federal proposal of 1996 does not respond to the inherent Abkhazian desire for guaranteed political and cultural survival. The Abkhaz confederal proposal does not offer sufficient guarantees that future conflicts between both communities will not lead to secession. A regulation of this conflict is unlikely to be achieved as long as the parties involved continue to pursue exclusive goals which do not incorporate the interests of their opponent. Instead of a rigid adherence to initial demands and a refusal to yield, a bridging technique could be applied. Seeking regulation through bridging means that neither party has its initial demands met, but a new formula is devised that satisfies the main interests underlying these demands. Pruitt and Carnevale provide an elegant example of bridging: "...as in the case of two people who were fighting over an orange. The problem was completely solved when it was discovered that one wanted the pulp to make juice and the other wanted the peel to put in a cake."[18] In a similar vein, Abkhazians and Georgians could

investigate the purposes for which they desire the metaphorical orange. An identification of these purposes could perhaps lead to the formulation of more compatible sets of interests. Bridging would involve a reformulation of the issues at stake, based on an analysis of the underlying interests of both sides. In addition to mutual insensitivity to the opponent's underlying interests, negotiations are seriously hampered by the absence of an emergent political formula that could appeal to both sides. In other words, there seems to be no obvious way of separating the orange peel from the pulp.

The following guidelines may make a modest contribution to the formulation of a way out of the Georgian-Abkhazian impasse. A bridging solution could be based on a federal structure in which 1. Abkhazia has autonomous status, 2. within Abkhazia, territorial units are used where possible, 3. within Abkhazia, non-territorial spheres of authority are applied where necessary, and 4. Georgians and Abkhazians share power in the regional Abkhaz government.

The key element in the above suggestions is that the ethnically mixed parts of Abkhazia would be ruled not by a territorially defined government but by one whose jurisdiction covered population groups rather than territories. For example, the Abkhazians living in ethnically mixed parts of Abkhazia would be under the government of the Abkhaz community, whose authority extended to all Abkhazians in Abkhazia. Those parts of Abkhazia that are relatively homogeneous could be governed by purely territorial governments. The non-territorially defined governments (Abkhaz) could be put in charge of all ethnically sensitive areas (language, education, immigration, security, etc.). Of course, non-territorial government could not, in the nature of things, be used in all fields of political regulation. A number of clearly territorial matters (natural resources, pollution, transport, communication, regional public infrastructure, criminal law, etc.) cannot be governed by non-territorial entities. A vast number of areas of competence will have to be organized on a territorial basis and will require substantial Georgian-Abkhaz co-operation.

Thus a regional Abkhaz government in which Georgians and Abkhazians share power on an equal basis or via mutual veto rights could be considered. An additional guarantee for the Abkhazians could consist in a federal constitutional stipulation that any federal regulation (of the overarching Georgian state government) affecting Abkhazia (the entire region) would have to be ratified by a majority of the Abkhaz community representatives (the non-territorial government of ethnic Abkhazians). Through the combined use of territorial and non-territorial definitions, both Georgians and Abkhazians could enjoy considerable autonomy within the same region. In addition, mutual checks and balances and powers of veto would preclude the domination of one group over another.

These preliminary and cursory suggestions obviously overlook a number of practical complications and difficulties. Nevertheless, they could marry the basic Georgian demands with the underlying Abkhazian goals. These suggestions entail the return of the IDPs, and Georgia's territorial integrity

would be restored in a federal context. Ethnic Abkhazians would gain substantial self-rule, a disproportionate share of regional government power, and rights of veto in relation to federal and regional regulations affecting their community and territory.

Clearly, it will be up to the warring parties to devise their own solutions to the conflict. The role of foreign experiences and proposals can at best be a source of inspiration - they will not provide all the answers. The most serious obstacle to the settlement process is not a technical, but rather a psychological one. Each side is unwilling to drop its unilateral strategies in favour of an evaluation of its opponent's underlying desires. Without a genuine willingness on both sides to consider the opponent's demands, a way out of this complex conflict remains distant.

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