Peace in Georgia: Creating an inclusive framework for regional peace and security

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This discussion paper:

- Offers an independent perspective on the August conflict so as to inform ongoing reflection and debate;
- Provides suggestions on appropriate approaches to securing future peace and security in Georgia and the wider region; and
- Outlines areas of critical concern that need to be addressed for the above to be achieved.

The views it contains are based on an assessment mission to Georgia undertaken between 27 August and 04 September. The assessment mission gathered opinions from the Georgian government, civil society and international actors, as well as holding follow-up consultations with stakeholders in London, Brussels and Tbilisi. Access constraints meant Saferworld was unable to capture views from constituents living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After looking at how recent events have created a need to reappraise approaches to conflict management in Georgia, this paper goes on to highlight three key areas of concern in the quest for long-term peace:

1. Early warning and conflict preparedness
2. International engagement in future peace-keeping and peace-building initiatives
3. Increased participation in attaining peace

Saferworld is an independent non-governmental organisation that works to prevent and reduce violent conflict and promote co-operative approaches to security. It has worked in partnership with the Georgian Government, civil society and international actors since 2001, supporting initiatives around national and regional control over arms trafficking and small arms, human security, and the link between aid and conflict.

Reappraising approaches to the conflict

The recent and still unfolding events in Georgia have created a need to reappraise the future shape of security and the course of peace in the Caucasus and beyond. Although it will take time to process its full implications, there are a number of observations and concerns emerging from the conflict that require immediate as well as longer-term attention. The events leading up to the violence, and the crisis itself, have not only further polarised positions between divided groups, but also challenged all actors to reassess their approach to conflict management and resolution in Georgia. The following preliminary considerations are a key part of this reassessment:

- While current diplomatic efforts to ensure stability advance, the task of building an appropriate and more responsive approach to future peace-keeping and security provisions should remain sensitive to long-term peace-building goals.

- While there is a necessary and urgent requirement to respond to the immediate fallout created by the crisis – in terms of civilian protection and humanitarian needs – it is also

important to be attentive to the impact of current actions by all parties, including the international assistance community, on shaping future dynamics around the pursuit of peace. Sensitivity to the context by participating actors is therefore critical and a starting point for all endeavours.

- In designing an updated peace-keeping and security framework for the expanded conflict areas (South Ossetia, Abkhazia and adjacent areas), advocates for peace should ensure that there is no return to the former essentially flawed status quo, and instead rethink how the different strands that make up this conflict are addressed.

- Consequently, while the focus is on the future, a credible and shared analysis of past peace-keeping and peace-building processes should be developed to ensure critical lessons are included in planning for long-term peace and stability. This should be a collective undertaking by all actors involved in strengthening peace and security in Georgia, a process that maximises joint learning and ensures a common frame for future action.

- All international and internal actors have played some part, to a greater or lesser extent, in permitting the hostilities to escalate.

- Because of its central role in the conflict, the future actions of Russia will be a determining factor in how security will be managed and peace addressed in the region. Nevertheless, the attainment of peace is a shared responsibility between all local and international players.

- In the long run, and assuming international interests in Georgia permit, the burden of achieving a settlement around peaceful coexistence lies with the Georgians, Abkhazians and South Ossetians, though this outcome is some distance away. However, this is a long-term process and presently all those affected by the recent conflict are understandably distracted, if not traumatised, by recent events to the point that the internal debate over the long-term road to peace has yet to begin.

The following sections will highlight key areas of concern in the quest for long-term peace:

1. Aspects to early-warning and conflict preparedness

1.1 Caught napping or in denial?
There was a general sense of surprise among most actors in response to how quickly events unfolded, the conflict erupted and became 'internationalised'. However, this view is at odds with evidence of escalating tensions since mid-2006, especially in the contested areas. During this period there was a steady increase in the frequency and intensity of ceasefire breaches to the point that, in 2008, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observed up to 20 ceasefire violations a day, involving proportionately higher-calibre weapons over time. Despite widespread international perceptions, there was nothing 'frozen' about a conflict that had in fact escalated following a series of events, including:

- Changes in the profile of Georgian and Russian security forces deployed in the region since May 2006 which created a more hostile environment;
- The establishment of additional parallel authorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia;
- Unilateral economic rehabilitation programmes in Georgian villages (funded by the Georgian Government) and Ossetian villages (funded by the Russian Government); and
- Preparations for military confrontation by all sides.

While the OSCE implemented its mandate to track factual events and report on them, these indicators were not adequately picked up by international decision-makers, the media or civil society groups. As a result, it appeared that the international community was not responsive to the developing conflict dynamic.

FOCUS ON IMPROVED RESPONSIVENESS TO CONFLICT INDICATORS: It is important that the reasons why peace and conflict indicators were not translated into international action are better understood. This should entail an evaluation of reporting, communication and early

warning mechanisms to ensure that the conflict dynamic is monitored in a more comprehensive and accountable manner, and that trends are analysed and communicated. Any new mechanisms should be inclusive of representative Georgian, Ossetian and Abkhaz civil society as a balance to potential political appropriation. Any lessons learnt about early warning and response in the Georgian context are likely to have relevance in other countries and regions where similar ceasefires have been agreed but resolution has not been attained.

FOCUS ON TRACKING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS IN GEORGIA: The crisis revealed the resilience of the Georgian Government in the face of an external threat and Georgians are taking consolation in the fact that, on the whole, state institutions continued to function. This appeared particularly true of the police. However, it is important that future stresses on Government institutions, as well as potential risks of instability or disputes outside the immediate conflict areas, are monitored and planned for. In particular, external observers should be vigilant that Georgia does not slip into the realms of a failing state as a result of mounting economic and social pressure during the coming winter months. Attention should consequently be given to ensuring that crisis response mechanisms are sufficiently strengthened to respond to negative political, economic and social developments.

1.2 Responding to the impact on regional peace, security and stability

The role of Russia in the Georgian conflict has had an evident impact on security and stability in the wider region, with a number of countries, including Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan, re-examining the viability of their national and regional security policies and the role of Russia in them. This reassessment has the potential to undermine political, social and economic stability in each country and regionally, but could also represent opportunities for peace if handled appropriately. At the same time, uncertainty has intensified over the role of Russia in the wider international security framework, with parts of the Euro-Atlantic community for example responding to Russia in a confrontational manner that risks an escalation of tensions.

FOCUS ON MONITORING REGIONAL SECURITY AND CREATING AN INCLUSIVE PLATFORM FOR REGIONAL DIALOGUE: In order to build confidence and address the anxieties and concerns of all parties, exploring opportunities and strengthening platforms for a regional dialogue on peace and security should be a priority. Support should also be made available to strengthen and expand opportunities for regional and international civil society to play a role in monitoring regional trends and influencing policy at both the national and regional levels.

2. International engagement in future peace-keeping and peace-building initiatives

2.1 Providing peace and security to affected communities

The August conflict has created deep insecurities across Georgia. This is most evident in the expanded conflict areas, where communities have suffered from human rights abuses and looting, and large numbers have abandoned their homes and livelihoods. However, as a result of the bombing of military targets, the operations of Russian military forces in Western and Central Georgia and their continued presence in Georgia proper, a sense of insecurity has also pervaded the whole country.

Consequently, there is a pressing need to establish a revised peace-keeping and security framework that takes into account the performance of previous missions as well as the new context, including security requirements across the whole country. Arrangements established under the 1992 and 1994 ceasefires had lost legitimacy and appeared fragmented. Indeed, the disjointed character of the instruments and actions of the different peace-keeping and security elements played a part in escalating tensions. As they stand, previous mechanisms therefore appear 'unfit' for ensuring peace and security.

A proposed timetable for establishing a new framework is emerging.[1] However, its future mandate, scope and resourcing in the conflict areas are still unclear and already include a number of elements that are not obviously linked:

- EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM Georgia);
- OSCE Mission;
- United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG);
- The continued presence of Russian military forces;
- Any future Joint Peace-Keeping Force (JPKF) framework; and
- The operation of Georgian, South Ossetian and Abkhaz security and justice mechanisms in the areas of respective control.

Overall, this lack of clarity, especially over how the different elements link together, may undermine the effectiveness of a peace and security framework and its ability to service the needs of affected people and communities.

FOCUS ON DEVELOPING FUTURE PEACE-KEEPING AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: The primary task of all parties should be to establish a peace-keeping and security framework within the conflict areas that:

- Is legitimate;
- Ensures there is no return to violence;
- Meets the security and access to justice needs of affected people and communities;
- Is sensitive to the differences between the Abkhaz and South Ossetian contexts; and
- Provides a conducive environment to wider and longer term peace-building processes.

Lessons should be learnt so that the different components of a revised framework provide integrated mechanisms for peace and security that are understood, accessible and accepted by all parties and communities. In particular, any revised measures to monitor and keep peace must not further reinforce the already increased polarisation and entrenchment between divided groups as a result of the recent crisis. In addition, the skills and preparation of those engaged in the different elements, including for example EUMM Georgia, should be carefully considered.

2.2 Ensuring current humanitarian and future recovery responses are context-sensitive

The conflict has had a significant impact on the people and communities from South Ossetia and the surrounding areas, and to a lesser extent on those from the Kodori Gorge, Gali and the areas bordering Abkhazia. Many have been killed or displaced. Once EUMM Georgia has been deployed and Russian military forces have withdrawn from Georgia proper, it is anticipated that priority will be given to ensuring the return, where possible, of both Georgian and Ossetian displaced persons in these areas. Growing concerns over the impact of infrastructural development and foreign assistance on the conflict dynamics were raised prior to the August conflict but not adequately tracked or addressed. Substantial resources have already been committed and more are anticipated to help communities rebuild their lives.

FOCUS ON SENSITIVE RETURN AND RECONCILIATION IN THE CONFLICT AREAS: The process of return and reintegration should be supported and planned by all actors collectively and sensitively, so that interventions do not further polarise people or provide the foundations for future instability. Particular emphasis should therefore be placed on:

- Involving affected peoples and communities in shaping the peace-keeping and security measures in their areas;
- Establishing mechanisms to resolve disputes, and address grievances and retribution;
- Providing space for eventual interaction between divided communities;
- Sensitively re-establishing linkages on policing and justice with a view to future cooperation in the long term; and

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[1] The EU has agreed to deploy 200 observers by 01 October and Russia has committed to the withdrawal of Russian military from Georgia proper (apart from Abkhazia and South Ossetia) within ten days of the observers' deployment, followed by international discussions on the conflict in mid-October. Uncertainty remains as to whether this timetable will be adhered to.

- Learning lessons of past performance to inform future aid design and implementation, including the urgent need to conduct conflict assessments to guide sensitive planning.

FOCUS ON ESTABLISHING A COHESIVE POLICY TOWARDS COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY CONFLICT: The broader policies and management of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Georgia (who currently make up almost 10% of the population), and especially those displaced during and since the 1992 and 1994 conflicts, should not be viewed separately from the immediate crisis. The present differential treatment between new and older IDPs has the potential to create tensions if not conflict at a time when Georgia should focus on stability and the cohesion of its diverse population as part of a long-term strategy for peace.

2.3 Linking peace-building processes with the political framework for negotiating peace

The international community had established a range of formal and informal processes to maintain peace in Georgia and find durable solutions to both conflicts. In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia joint negotiating frameworks were established by the respective ceasefire agreements. The OSCE has played a role in supporting conflict resolution in South Ossetia, while UNOMIG has played a similar role in Abkhazia. In addition, and in accordance with its commitments in the EU-Georgia Neighbourhood Action Plan, the EU has in recent years become more involved in trying to establish lasting solutions to the conflicts. Numerous actors interviewed raised questions over the past effectiveness of these formal mechanisms, which had lost legitimacy among some actors, and their appropriateness for the present context in Georgia and the region.

At the same time, a range of NGOs have been involved in informal efforts to build an environment conducive to resolution of the two conflicts by promoting dialogue, exchanging experience and establishing joint projects between the conflicting parties. While crucial, this approach has not always been understood, has been implemented in constrained circumstances, and is presently under review by different actors following the recent crisis.

FOCUS ON JOINT EFFORTS TO REINVIGORATE AND IMPROVE PEACE-BUILDING PROCESSES: All national and international actors involved in supporting peace in Georgia should collectively review the peace-building framework they are operating under as a whole, and how the different strands of activity fit within it. This is essential so that these actors learn lessons from the successes and limitations of existing approaches and build consensus on a future shape relevant to the emerging context. This process should pay particular attention to ensuring that the linkages between formal and informal approaches are better established.

2.4 Linking internal Georgian reforms and regional peace

The international community provided substantial support for the Georgian Government in the years preceding the conflict, largely based on Georgia's intentions to build a state based on Western-oriented principles. This support has taken different forms, including the development of administrative capacity, military retraining and re-equipment, commercial and banking development, and democratisation (including support for media and civil society).

While this support has been an essential part of Georgia's economic and social development, the international community needs to be sensitive to its potentially positive role in influencing the response of the Georgian Government and society to the challenges brought about by the conflict. In particular, there is a concern that international interest in the East / West dimension to the crisis will overshadow attention to the necessary internal conditions and reforms that will affect long-term peace and security.

FOCUS ON STRENGTHENING GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: Donor countries and institutions have already pledged substantial aid to support Georgia in the post-conflict period. International actors supporting Georgia should explicitly make the link between the assistance it receives from multinational and bilateral institutions, Georgia's internal reform programme, and the wider quest for peace. In particular, attention should be given to ensuring that post-conflict development assistance is strategic, with continued support for strengthening and deepening Georgia's democratic culture and the rule of law. Of particular consideration should

be the way that the international community supports security sector reform in Georgia – for example, ensuring that the need for training and equipping is balanced with the need for promoting effective governance and oversight, as well as involving the public in the process. Pursuing strategic peace-building goals through international assistance should also be reflected in the funding instruments used, and the setting of clear benchmarks that are prioritised, sequenced and paced in a manner that contributes towards a shared understanding of regional peace and security.

3. Increased participation in attaining peace

3.1 Deepened public reflection and deliberation on a future vision of national security and regional peace

Although the focus to date has understandably been on the two contested areas – and Russian policy in relation to their future status – a deeper analysis among Georgians, Ossetians and Abkhazians (as well as other minority groups) will also be important in realising future peace and security. The events of August have already started to challenge previous Georgian perspectives around conflict and the attainment of peace, and are presenting society with a number of searching questions over the approach needed to guarantee future stability. For the most part, Georgians privately appear to agree that there will never be a military solution to the country's conflicts, though the space conducive for this crucial discussion has yet to emerge. In addition, while the risks and dilemmas posed by Georgia's strategic position in the region are well understood, there is a growing sense that the country should minimise its susceptibility to external influences by establishing a shared vision for peaceful coexistence among its diverse population, including Ossetian and Abkhaz communities, other minority groups, and immediate neighbours. The opportunity for internal Georgian debate and reflection, and the development of a shared future vision is contingent on a number of factors:

FOCUS ON PROVIDING SPACE FOR INFORMED DEBATE: At a time of national crisis, it is understandable that the relationship between the authorities and citizens comes under stress. Nevertheless, it is critical that over time, Georgian society enjoys the space and leadership to engage in a debate over past policies and future principles for long-term peace and security and how best they can be realised. The desire for this exchange is evident among a growing number of civil society leaders. In response, the Georgian Government should play a leading role in establishing a framework for an inclusive dialogue and view it as a positive process rather than a potential threat. An informed and productive debate is also contingent on the democratic development of state institutions. This includes freedom for and professionalism of the judiciary; enhancing Georgia's parliamentary culture and ensuring that opposition parties and groups provide a positive and structured contribution; and strengthening local governance.

FOCUS ON STRENGTHENING REPRESENTATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY AND WIDENING THE DEBATE: Strengthening a diverse and representative national civil society that has access to, and the ability to inform, national Government and the international community is vital. A dialogue supported by civil society actors should encompass other potential sources of instability and conflict in the country, including the integration of national minority groups, local disputes and human rights concerns. Without taking these issues into consideration, it will be more difficult for Georgian society to make progress on the more problematic issues associated with the two conflict areas.

FOCUS ON PROVIDING CREDIBLE INFORMATION: There is a growing desire among citizens to have access to the facts surrounding the conflict. Many interviewees felt that access to information is essential to inform the type of reflection needed on Georgia's future vision for peace and security.

3.2 The impact of media and access to information on the ongoing crisis

Particular attention should be paid to the quality and diversity of media in response to the strikingly negative impact that media and access to information is having on the ongoing crisis. The dominant media in the region continue to produce uncritical stereotypes and emphasise emotive if not inflammatory opinions. The quality of reporting by the international media has also been mixed, often lacking the contextual background necessary to either capture what was an escalating conflict or represent the facts in a manner sensitive to the pursuit of peace.

Increased freedom and diversification of the media, and its accessibility across the country, were mentioned by numerous Georgians – reflecting the fact that access by the public to information around events leading up to and during the conflict period was limited. For some minorities in Georgia, who for linguistic reasons are reliant on foreign media (in this case Russian), the situation has become confusing if not divisive. As a result, an increasing number of Georgians are beginning to question the impact an overly controlled media is having as it denies the opportunity to assess events more impartially.

FOCUS ON PROMOTING MORE CONFLICT-SENSITIVE MEDIA COVERAGE: Building on the extensive journalistic capacity already found in Georgia, a range of actions should be considered to promote a more positive role for the media. This should include promotion of responsible reporting and editing, based on conflict-sensitive principles and international best practice, and greater freedom for the media and programmes to ensure greater access to a variety of sources of information.