The Role of Public Diplomacy in Transforming Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict: Dialogue and Collaboration

Nana Abuladze [*]

International Black Sea University, International Relations BA Program Senior Student

რეზიუმე

წინამდებარე ნაშრომი ასახავს თვისებრივი კვლევის შედეგებს, რომლის მიზანიც იყო, აღგვეწერა სახალხო დიპლომატიის როლი ქართულ-აფხაზური კონფლიქტის ტრანსფორმაციაში. ნაშრომში სახალხო დიპლომატია განმარტებულია, როგორც ურთიერთობის ფორმა ხალხებს შორის ინფორმაციის გასაცვლელად (დიალოგი) ან კონკრეტული, მოკლე ვადაზე გათვლილი, მიზნების მისაღწევად (თანამშრომლობა).

კვლევის ფარგლებში ავიღეთ შვიდი ნახევრად სტრუქტურული ინტერვიუ სამოქალაქო საზოგადოების წარმომადგენლებისაგან. რესპონდენტები არიან კოორდინატორები და მონაწილეები იმ პროექტებისა, რომელთა მიზანიც ქართველებისა და აფხაზების დაახლოებისაა. ერთი ინტერვიუ ავიღეთ წერილობით, რადგან რესპონდენტი არის აფხაზი და ისურვა, ანონიმური დარჩენილიყო.

კვლევის შედეგად დადგინდა, რომ სახალხო დიპლომატიას დადებითი როლი აქვს ქართულ-აფხაზური კონფლიქტის ტრანსფორმაციაში. კერძოდ, ის ათავისუფლებს ადამიანებს ირაციონალური შიშებისა და სტერეოტიპებისაგან, ხელს უწყობს ნდობისა და ურთიერთგაგების ჩამოყალიბებას, რაც შემდგომ უკვე გრძელვადიანი ურთიერთობისა და მეგობრობის საფუძველი ხდება. კვლევისას გამოიკვეთა წინაღობებიც, რის გამოც სახალხო დიპლომატიური კავშირები არ არის ისეთი ნაყოფიერი, როგორც სასურველია. პრობლემები მოიცავს: პოლიტიკურ სიტუაციას, გადაადგილების თავისუფლების პრობლემასა (აფხაზების მხრიდან) და უარყოფით დამოკიდებულებას, რომელიც ჯერ კიდევ არსებობს მხარეებს შორის. აღსანიშნავია, აგრეთვე, ლიირებულებათა კონფლიქტი სამოქალაქო საზოგადოებასა და მთავრობას შორის, რომლის გამოც ეს ურთიერთობები ვერ ინაცვლებს ქვედა დიპლომატიური დონიდან მაღალი პოლიტიკის დონეზე, რაც აუცილებელია, რადგან სახალხო დიპლომატიური კავშირები პოლიტიკური გადაწყვეტილების მიღების პროცესს ვერ ჩაანაცვლებს და წარმოადგენს მხოლოდ დამხმარე საშუალებას ამ პროცესში.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: კონფლიქტის ტრანსფორმაცია, ქართულ-აფხაზური კონფლიქტი, სახალხო დიპლომატია.

─────────

[*] E-mail: abuladzenana99@yahoo.com

Abstract

The goal of the paper is to demonstrate the role of public diplomacy in transforming Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. The paper defines public diplomacy as people-to-people communication intended to discuss common problems (a dialogue) and to work on certain issues together (collaboration).
In order to accomplish the case study, a qualitative research has been done. 7 in-depth interviews have been conducted with the coordinators and participants of the projects that are implemented by the representatives of civil society and aim to re-establish close and friendly relations between Georgians and Abkhazians.
The paper argues that long-lasting and friendly relations can be restored between people with the help of public diplomacy, since it establishes mutual understanding and trust, disposes people from irrational fears and stereotypes.
The challenges and problems of public diplomacy include nationalistic attitudes of Georgians and Abkhazians, the instable political environment, the problem of freedom of movement for Abkhazians, the critical attitude towards the participants of the projects, the conflict of values between the civil society and the government. The latter is the reason for which the relations are not transferred from grassroots level to that of high politics, which is essential to ensure, since public diplomacy it is not a substitute for political decision-making.

Key Words: *Conflict Transformation, Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict, Public Diplomacy.*

Introduction

The goal of the research is to describe the role of public diplomacy in transforming Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. The following topic is relevant and crucial today for two reasons: first, the importance of public diplomacy is rising. As Leonard, Small and Rose (2005) put it, since the last ten years it is public opinion that has been shaping international diplomacy: diplomatic environment has transformed into the competition arena between state and non-state actors which aim to win public's attention. In other words, the world has changed and diplomatic practice changes with it. Technological progress and the invention of internet has contributed to this process much (Gregory, 2008). Although public diplomacy is often criticized and not conceived seriously by the representatives of traditional diplomacy (Melissen, 2011), the scholars still agree that it is becoming more and more crucial (Cull, 2009; Hernikson, 2006; Melissen, 2011; Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Gregory, 2008; Payne, 2009). This is the reason for the relevance of the research from the global perspective. On local level, though, it aims to study the role of public diplomacy in transforming the frozen conflict in Georgia. Conflict transformation approach goes beyond conflict resolution approach, i.e. merely achieving a win-win situation in which the claims of both parties are satisfied (Miall, 2004; Reimann, 2004). Conflict resolution means ending the undesirable situation, while conflict transformation means ending the undesirable and producing desirable, i.e. changing the destructive effects of conflict into constructive ones, altering the patterns of relations (Lederach, 2003). Even if Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is resolved on a political level, it is Georgian and Abkhazian people who will have to live together in one state. Payne (2009a) notes that public diplomacy can be a reliable tool for healing not only local, but global divides. Therefore, it is reasonable to examine whether public diplomacy can be helpful instrument in case of Georgian-Abkhazian divide.
The paper comprises three chapters. The first one describes the origins of grassroots diplomacy in

3

post-conflict Georgian-Abkhazian relations and the role of international society in it. The second chapter analyses the achievements of public diplomacy such as: shattering of stereotypes, fostering understanding, establishing trust and friendly relations between the parties. The last chapter is dedicated to the obstacles which include political situation, the attitudes of Georgians and Abkhazians and the issues related to funding and the freedom of movement, the latter being a problem for Abkhazians.

Literature Review

Public diplomacy, as Henrikson (2006) notes, has always been an oxymoronic and obscure term. Nevertheless, its definitions can be organized in three categories: Cull (2009) and Henrikson (2006) define public diplomacy as a form of communication between a government of one state and people of another state. One of the actors must necessarily be a subject of international law, thus, this technique of communication with public can be used not only by governments, but by international organizations too (Cull, 2009; Henrikson, 2006). In contrast with that for Payne (2009a) public diplomacy means people-to-people contacts, which he also calls "grassroots diplomacy". Another term suggested by Lederach (1999) is "second-track diplomacy". The third group of scholars such as Cowan and Arsenault (2008), Gregory (2008), Mellissen (2011), Leonard, Small and Rose (2005) uphold a broader definition of public diplomacy, stating that it can be used by state and non-state actors. This definition is in fact the combination of the former two.

There is a debate regarding the purpose of public diplomacy too. The first purpose of public diplomacy is to influence the public (Cull, 2009; Henrikson, 2006). Cull (2009) argues that public diplomacy is used for communicating with foreign public in order to handle international environment. This can mean reshaping the image of a country or promulgating an idea. In any case public diplomacy must serve policy priorities (Cull, 2009).

Henrikson (2006) agrees with Cull (2009) stating that public diplomacy is for supporting a policy in any sphere, whether this is political, economic or military. He further explains that according to old definition, public diplomacy exists to have impact on the decisions and actions of states. It is because of this purpose that public diplomacy is called "diplomacy". However, public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in a way that it affects the states indirectly, through media, through the means of communication or public opinion (Henrikson, 2006). Henrikson (2006) then observes the shift in purpose that has taken place recently and concludes that today public diplomacy is for influencing societies and not states as such.

The second purpose of public diplomacy is communication and the re-establishment of relations in the aftermath of a conflict (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Cull, 2009; Leonard, Small & Rose, 2005; Henrikson, 2009; Lederach, 1999). According to Cowan and Arsenault (2008) public diplomacy can be used for information exchange, have a transformative effect in conflict situations and re-build confidence between the parties (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). Similarly, Leonard, Small and Rose (2005) emphasize the existence of political, economic, cultural and religious divides in the world and view public diplomacy as a means of reducing the influence of the divides. Additionally, Leonard, Small and Rose (2005) focus on the importance of trust-building stating that this is a rule and practice of public diplomacy. Henrikson (2006) states that public diplomacy can be used to establish mutual trust between peoples. Cull (2009) and Lederach (1999) argue that relations can go from grassroots level to the level of high politics, thus having a transformative effect in post-conflict situations. Lederach (1999) discusses the story of signing the Oslo accords, noting that Norwegian facilitators organized meetings between the representatives of civil society and only then these relations went to the level of politicians.

There is a third opinion regarding the public diplomacy, which encompasses both influence and communication and post-conflict reconstruction approaches (Gregory, 2008; Melissen, 2011; Payne, 2009). Gregory (2008) defines the purpose of public diplomacy as "to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; build and manage relationships; and influence opinions and actions to advance interests and values." (p.276). For Gregory (2008) public diplomacy is primarily a tool of communication. Melissen (2011) uses the definition by Gregory (2008), but perceives influence as a primary purpose of public diplomacy. For this reason, Melissen (2011) states, it can be used not only for supporting short-term goals, but for forging long-lasting relations between the parties. Moreover, through public diplomacy relations can be established not only on regional but also on international level. Finally, public diplomacy can contribute to post-conflict reconstruction (Melissen, 2011).

As Melissen (2011) and Gregory (2008), Payne (2009) argues that public diplomacy can heal the political, cultural, religious and economic divides globally. On the other hand, public diplomacy can be used to support democratic policies, fair elections and the freedom of media in foreign public (Payne, 2009).

The third part of disagreement between scholars concerns the elements of public diplomacy. There are three approaches, in two of which, i.e. those by Cull (2009) and Henrikson (2006), the concepts overlap. For Cull (2009) exchange diplomacy is an independent element of public diplomacy, while for Henrikson (2006) it is one of the instruments of consolidation. The latter Henrikson (2006) views as the element of public diplomacy and defines as boosting the support of a state within the circle of its allies. By exchange diplomacy both authors mean giving the citizens of the state to go abroad and to host the visitors from abroad (Cull, 2009; Henrikson, 2006). On the other hand, the concept of exchange by Cull (2009) can be an element of penetration (Henrikson, 2006), since Henrikson (2006) defines penetration as a way to influence the foreign public through establishing relationships with people deep inside a foreign country. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy, which is a separate element for Cull (2009), can serve as a sub-element of enlargement defined by Henrikson (2006) as the increase of country's influence in terms of politics, economy, culture and ideology not within a particular foreign public, but globally. Cultural diplomacy implies the promotion of the cultural achievements and their transference abroad (Cull, 2009; Henrikson, 2006).

Although Henrikson (2006) does not use the term "advocacy", it can be understood as a sub-element of enlargement, while it is an independent element for Cull (2009). Cull (2009) defines advocacy as a process of promulgation of a particular idea or interests of an actor among the foreign public. Henrikson (2006) and Cull (2009) focus on international broadcasting too. However, whereas international broadcasting is an independent element for Cull (2009), Henrikson (2006) perceives it as a tool of containment. Containment means setting the boundaries for powers and influences in order to hinder their impact and it is a separate element of public diplomacy (Henrikson, 2006).

Additionally, distinctive concepts are also present in the classifications of both authors. Cull (2009) identifies listening and psychological warfare. Listening for Cull (2009) means obtaining and analyzing the information about the foreign public and using it for re-shaping the policy respectively. Psychological warfare is used in times of war to spread the information among the foreign public and to influence it, i.e. to frighten it (Cull, 2009). Henrikson (2006) names transformation defined as bringing considerable changes globally through public diplomacy.

Gregory (2008), Melissen (2011), Leonard, Small and Rose (2005) and Payne (2009) use the concepts suggested by Henrikson (2006) and Cull (2009), while Cowan and Arsenault (2008) suggest different approach: They identify three layers of public diplomacy: monologue, dialogue and collaboration.

Monologue according to Cowan and Arsenault (2008) means delivering a particular message to the foreign public. Monologue is a one-way process and can have a form of speech, proclamation, press

5

release or the works of arts (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). A dialogue is a multidirectional and reciprocal process of information exchange (Cowan & Arsenault). This can be done on official meetings, scientific or professional conferences, on TV shows, via the forums in internet or through participation in cross-cultural projects (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). The aim of a dialogue is not essentially to reach an agreement, but rather to enhance relations and mutual understanding between the parties (Cowan &Arsenault, 2008). Collaboration encompasses the dialogue, however, it differs from dialogue in having particular aims that serve as a basis for establishing long-lasting relations (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). The paper upholds the following theoretical framework:

1.The importance of public diplomacy is analyzed in the context of post-conflict reconciliation;

2.Public diplomacy is defined as people-to-people communication or grassroots diplomacy, since Georgian government does not have a direct contact with Abkhazian public. Thus, discussing its influence on conflict transformation is irrelevant.

3. The paper is based on the concepts of three layers of public diplomacy as defined by Cowan & Arsenault (2008), because the elements of public diplomacy suggested by Cull (2008) and Henrikson (2006) focus on the role of government being inappropriate in terms of post-war Georgian-Abkhazian relations. Additionally, only dialogue and collaboration are examined. The reason for such limitation is that in order to analyze the results of monologue one must visit Abkhazia and conduct research there, which is impossible in the scope of this study.

Methodology

In order to accomplish the case study, the qualitative research has been done. 7 in-depth interviews have been conducted with the coordinators and participants of the projects that are accomplished by the representatives of civil society and aim to re-establish close and friendly relations between Georgians and Abkhazians. One of the interviews has been conducted in a written form, since the respondent is Abkhazian and requested to remain anonymous. The combination of purposive sampling and snowballing has been used. The reason for using snowballing is the following: the process of people-to-people communication between Abkhazians and Georgians being a sensitive issue for Abkhazians, is not visible. Therefore, the only way to find the ones who work for fostering people-to-people contacts, is to ask the respondent for information. The following persons have been interviewed:

1. The representative of "Caucasian House" - the coordinator and participant of the youth projects;
2. The representative of Georgian Reforms Associates (GRASS) – the coordinator and participant of youth projects;
3. The representative of Caucasian Institute – the participant of the project organized by the University of California, Irvine;
4. The representative of The Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts – the COBERM beneficiary;
5. The participant and coordinator of the project organized by the University of California, Irvine;
6. The representative of the Ombudsman office;
7. The Abkhazian respondent aged 24, the participant of youth meetings.

1.The Origins of Grassroots Diplomacy in Post-conflict Georgian-Abkhazian Relations and the Types of On-going Projects

As the respondents have admitted, the dialogue and collaboration between Georgians and Abkhazians

started after the war in 1995-1997. One of the respondents recalled the earliest attempt of post-conflict collaboration the aim of which was to find the people who had been lost in the war. The parties exchanged any source of information whether written, published or oral about the people who were to be found. There were no crucial results achieved in terms of finding the people, however, this collaboration led to the creation of electronic database in which the information concerning the lost people was collected and saved. This was followed by the series of meetings of the representatives of Georgian and Abkhazian civil societies organized by the University of California, Irvine. The meetings were dedicated to different topics, as one of the participant admitted, and were accomplished in Sochi, Istanbul, Europe and in California. The Heinrich Boll Foundation and Conciliation Resources involved in the later phase of the project, as the respondents noted. The papers and discussions at the meetings were published in 15 volumes according to the project coordinator.

After that Conciliation Resources involved actively in grassroots diplomacy between Georgians and Abkhazians and started to work in three directions, as one of the respondents admitted:

1. With Georgian and Abkhazian public to inform them about the conflict, the ways of peacebuilding and to empower the IDPs;
2. In facilitating the dialogue between Georgian and Abkhazian people and insure their cooperation in research;
3. In facilitating the dialogue of youth.

Today public diplomacy between Abkhazians and Georgians has two directions according to the respondents: the dialogue and collaboration between the youth and the dialogue and collaboration between the representatives of different professions. The latter, according to the respondent, includes: translators, architects, the museum staff, restorers, the people working on human rights (the office of ombudsman), the people from penitential system, the people who work on the digitalization of archives, the doctors, the English teachers.

Additionally, there is the IPRM (Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism) in Gali district for solving daily problems.

The involvement of international society has had a significant role in grassroots diplomacy. The following international governmental as well as non-governmental organizations are engaged in the process: the UN, the EU, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, International Alert, Safer World, Conciliation Resources, Heinrich Boll Foundation, Berghof Foundation. As one of the respondents noted, the international society has had a decisive role in terms of funding and organizing the projects as well as in terms of sharing the experience.

2.The Role of Dialogue and Collaboration in Conflict Transformation

The advantage of people-to-people meetings is that they are informal, i.e. do not involve the Russian side, media or government officials. This gives the parties freedom to express opinions and to discuss problems openly. As one of the respondents has noted, Abkhazians might be very strict and radical during the official meetings, this is a way of defending their position before the international society. Additionally, in case of the presence of Russian representatives, they are afraid of being cooperative with Georgians. According to another respondent, since the informal meetings are not broadcasted, both parties can talk easily regarding their concerns. Therefore, the first result of a dialogue, as one of the respondents mentioned, is that there is a process of sharing information and experience freely, which is essential for further development of friendly relations.

Since grassroots diplomacy gives people the opportunity to receive the information from the primary source and have direct contact with each other, it affects relations changing perceptions and attitudes.

One of the Georgian respondents admitted that initially he feared that Abkhazians would not be well-disposed towards Georgians and would not cooperate, which did not appear to be true. For the question whether the attitudes are changed through people-to-people communication, the Abkhazian respondent provided the following answer:

"For the first meetings I had a fear that it would be unreal to talk with them [Georgians], to find common interests in cooperation. In addition, that Georgians had a negative attitude towards us."

This case reveals that Georgians and Abkhazians have irrational fears towards each other and people-to-people diplomacy can dispose them of these fears.

The importance of receiving the information from the primary source holds in case of collaboration too. However, here it can serve for avoiding scandals on political level. One of the respondents retold the following story:

The director of the museum of Akhali Atoni removed the bas-reliefs from the Akhali Atoni temple and placed them in the museum. Georgian government became aware of the fact through media by which it had been portrayed as if Abkhazians had damaged the monument. The Georgian government officials planned to raise the issue in Geneva. In reality, though, as the respondent explained, Abkhazians took the bas-reliefs to the museum to protect them from further injury, which is a common practice used by museums. After receiving the explanation from the respondent, the government officials removed the issue from the Geneva agenda. Thus, if there were no people-to-people contacts, the biased information received through media would lead to a political scandal further worsening the relations between Georgians and Abkhazians.

Additionally, grassroots diplomacy can eliminate stereotypes. One of the respondents said that unless the meetings between Abkhazians and Georgians had been held, both parties would have the inadequate beliefs. She brought an example from her own experience mentioning one of the myths regarding Abkhazians, which was popular in late 1980s. According to it Abkhazians were not the indigenous population of Abkhazia, i.e. they were not Abkhazians as such, but Apsua – the people from mountains. As the respondent indicated, the proponents of the myth claimed that there was no vocabulary connected to the sea in the language the Apsua (as they called Abkhazians) spoke. Instead, the people naming themselves as Abkhazians borrowed Russian words adding "a" in the beginning (for example, Abkhazian word for "boat" was "A-lodka", while "Lodka" means "boat" in Russian). The respondent decided to test the argument regarding the inexistence of the vocabulary connected to the sea in Abkhazian language. She wrote down the words connected to the sea in Russian and during one of the meetings asked Abkhazians to write their Abkhazian synonyms. Abkhazians wrote the synonyms with Russian letters to make it readable for her. These revealed to be Abkhazian words with no Russian parts. Thus, the main argument of the claim was destroyed. The respondent added that if not the meetings she might have never checked and never acknowledged the truth.

Another effect of dialogue is that it can eradicate the perception of "other". One of the participants of the project organized by the University of California, indicated that initially both parties used the meetings as venue for firmly stating their positions. If Abkhazians stood as a single group initially, supporting each other and having one voice, they started to criticize each other at the following meetings the same way they had criticized Georgians before. This means that there was no more "we" and "they" in their perception. The Georgian side had the same experience: one of Georgian respondents, the participant of youth meetings, recalled the following story: after the discussion the participants, all of which were students, went for lunch. While standing in queue in McDonalds the respondent turned to Abkhazians

to ask them what they would order and subconsciously addressed them in Georgian. He repeated the "mistake" three times, because, as he has admitted, he could not recognize the differences between Georgians and Abkhazians.

Apart from eliminating the negative attitudes and perceptions, dialogue contributes to the creation of positive attitudes. The first is trust-building. As one of the respondents declared, the parties talk about politically sensitive issues and share not only different but opposing thoughts without hostility.

Another positive aspect is that dialogue fosters mutual understanding. One of the respondents has stated that even though she knew facts about Abkhazians, she became more sympathetic towards them after she met them. The respondent recalled the complains of ethnic Georgians residing in Abkhazia that Abkhazians were rude and answered impolitely if someone talked to them in Georgian. At the meetings the respondent attended, Abkhazians stated that they had felt themselves unequal with Georgians. At one of the meetings the Abkhazian historians retold a lot about how Abkhazians welcomed and helped Georgian families being settled in Abkhazia. Although, in 1990s when the relations between Abkhazians and Georgians exacerbated, the Georgian families did not support Abkhazians. Thus, the reason of the "rudeness" of Abkhazians became clear for the respondent: Abkhazians felt themselves oppressed.

The re-establishment of sympathy and trust leads to the creation of long-lasting relations. As the Abkhazian respondent noted about the participants, "during these projects, they make friends. In addition, after the end of projects they do not lose the feeling of friendship." The re-establishment of friendship has two-fold importance: first, this is crucial for the relations between the peoples. One of the respondents admitted that when a Georgian or an Abkhazian is associated with a certain person in one's perception, one is less likely to commit an act of aggression or assault either verbally or physically. In contrast with that, if one does not know a Georgian or an Abkhazian and has an image of enemy, the conflict is more likely to happen.

On the other hand, these contacts are used for accomplishing new initiatives: as one of the respondents stated, the people who initially were only the participants are today the organizers of meetings and project coordinators. These meetings and projects are accomplished through the contacts with Abkhazians which have been cherished until today. Additionally, the dialogue leads to collaboration: one of the respondent retold how Georgians and Abkhazians united to launch a separate project for solving the problems connected to road safety in Abkhazia. This was a training with the participation of experts of the field.

Since the collaboration comprises the dialogue, it also changes attitudes and perceptions. As one of the respondents has noted, initially, although the parties were not aggressive, there was an alienation between them. Through the collaborative projects, however, the alienation changed into trust and friendship. The respondent recalled the conference held in February 2017 funded by the COBERM[1] regarding the issues of protection of cultural heritage and compared it to scientific conferences in the period of the USSR, which he attended. The respondent admitted that there was a constant rivalry between Georgian and Abkhazian scholars: Georgians would make an unpleasant for Abkhazians statement, while Abkhazians would declare something that was unacceptable for Georgians. This was not the case of the conference in February 2017, though. Both parties were well-disposed towards each other. Furthermore, there was a suggestion from Abkhazian side to hold four instead of two such con-

---

[1] *COBERM - Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism is a program financed by the EU and implemented by the UN Development program for supporting concrete and immediate initiatives that contribute to confidence-building in divided societies (undp.org, 2012).*

9

ferences annually. Abkhazians also agreed to publish the compilation of conference reports on condition that the compilation is edited by the COBERM. As the respondent added, this is a considerable achievement, since in Soviet times Abkhazian scholars were against publishing their works in one compilation together with the works of Georgian scholars. Additionally, contacts on personal level are resumed: as the respondent noted, he has an active communication with Abkhazians via internet and brings them presents on the meetings as the Abkhazians also do.

The last point to be mentioned is whether there is a potential that these relations between Georgians and Abkhazians go from bottom to up. According to one of the respondents, the Abkhazians with whom she met initially, now occupy the leading positions in de-facto government. The greatest achievement of public diplomacy, thus, is that the people in de-facto government have contact with Georgians and are aware of the situation in the rest of Georgia.

These list of results and effects of dialogue and collaboration is not exhaustive, since the results must be assessed in long-term perspective, as the respondents have noted:

"These meetings should be held... Right now they cannot lead [to] a result, but in a nearest future they show a real outcome."

3.The Obstacles to Public Diplomacy in Post-Conflict Georgian-Abkhazian Relations

The problems that hinder people-to-people communication between Abkhazians and Georgians can be divided into three groups: problems connected to political situation, problems connected to attitudes and technical problems connected to the accomplishment of projects.

The political problems concern the Georgian-Russian relations, the de-facto government of Abkhazia and Georgian government. As one of the respondents noted, after 2008 war till 2012 the dialogue and collaborative projects were stopped and people-to-people relations were frozen. Another respondent emphasized the role of Russia in artificially creating the borders, thus, contributing to the division between the people.

On the other hand, as one of the respondents admitted, it depends on the goodwill of de-facto government whether Abkhazians are allowed to meet Georgians. When Aleksandre Ankvab became the de-facto president of Abkhazia he, according to the respondent, criticized the NGOs that worked for fostering people-to-people contacts and declared that no more meetings would be held. This initially served as a hindrance, however, Abkhazians participating in the meetings managed to persuade the de-facto government in the importance of the meetings.

The last point in terms of political hindrances concerns Georgian government. According to one of the respondents, the government does not monitor the process and it does not evaluate the successes and failures. The respondent brought the example of a document having been elaborated after the 2008 war, the "Engagement Strategy" in the scope of which seven instruments were identified[2] to insure the involvement of Abkhazian public into the social, political and economic life of the rest of Georgia. As the respondent has added, no one knows how many of the instruments are implemented and how many are not, because the government has not been supervising the process.

————————

[2] *The respondent means the Engagement Strategy Action Plan and not the Engagement Strategy itself, since it is the former that comprises the seven instruments. These instruments are the creation of: the coordinating mechanism with a neutral status (LM), neutral IDs and travel documents, the Trust Fund, the joint investment fund (GIF), the cooperation agency, financial institute (FI), integrated socio-economic zone (ISEZ) (Georgian government, 2010).*

The problems connected to attitudes and perceptions concern the existence of image of enemy among Abkhazians. The Abkhazian respondent noted:

"Nowadays we can see that there is no trust between Abkhazia and Georgia. Abkhazians still consider Georgians as enemies."

The negative attitude is reinforced through the Russian propaganda. As one of the respondents stated, Abkhazians receive the information though Russian media, thus, being under constant propaganda that Georgians are enemies, that the integration of Georgia in the EU would afflict Abkhazians. As the respondent argued, this influences the Abkhazian public.

Additionally, the Abkhazians participating in dialogue or collaborative projects are harshly criticized in Abkhazia. As one of the respondents has admitted, the participants are called "the betrayers of the homeland" and are claimed to serve Georgian interests. On the other hand, the myth of "money-wasting NGOs" exists in Abkhazia as well and this also becomes the cause of critics. In the beginning, as one of the respondents has stated, Georgians were the victims of such critics too. This is the reason why grassroots diplomacy between Georgians and Abkhazians is invisible: Abkhazians avoid the disclosure of the relations with Georgians, since their society does not approve these relations.

The last problem connected to attitudes being a characteristic of both Abkhazians and Georgians, is ethnic nationalism. One of the respondents recalled the following case:

After the meeting the parties had to sign the document in order to receive per diem. The meeting was organized by one of the NGOs, therefore, the document had the name of the organization on the top. Two of the ten Abkhazian participants refused to sign the document and receive per diem, because the name of the organization contained the word "Georgia".

On the other hand, ethnic nationalism is the reason why the relations between Georgians and Abkhazians could not go from grassroots to high political level: one of the respondents who has been the minister of reconciliation admitted that he went to politics from the civil society, supporting liberal values. In government, though, the ethnic nationalist attitudes prevailed, therefore, he was unable to implement policies based on liberal values towards Abkhazian public (for example, persuading his colleagues that it would have been better if Georgia had been a federation instead of a unitary state). The respondent emphasized that the conflict of values between the government and civil society still exists impeding the process of transferring the relations from bottom to up.

The technical problems concern funding and the freedom of movement for Abkhazians.

The project coordinators have stated that the amounts of funds available for projects fostering relations between Georgian and Abkhazian people have been diminishing. As a result, projects have little scope and are not held systematically.

The second technical obstacle is the problem of freedom of movement for Abkhazians, which is connected to the document needed for crossing the border – the passport. As one of the respondents has explained, Abkhazians can have five kinds of passports:

1. The Russian passport - this is of two kinds: Russian passport issued for the Abkhazian residing in Russia and for the Abkhazian residing in Abkhazia. These two are easily differentiated on the border and the people owning the latter cannot receive visas (unless they travel to the state recognizing the independence of Abkhazia);

2. The Abkhazian passport – which can only be used while travelling in countries recognizing the independence of Abkhazia;

3. The neutral document – which is completely useless for travelling, as the respondent has admitted;

11

4. The Georgian passport – the acquisition of which is risky, because of the pressure from the de-facto government.

The case of passports illustrates how the technical problem can be translated into attitudes. One of the respondents described the procedure of the solution of the problem of movement:

The donor organizations and the representatives from Georgian side would agree with the ministry of foreign affairs of the country in which the meeting would be conducted to allow Abkhazians to cross the border. At the border Abkhazians would be given the paper permitting them to enter the country, but not the visa unless they had the Russian passport for people residing in Russia. The respondent noted that Abkhazians felt themselves discriminated, since Georgians travelling with them were given visas, while they were given the paper.

Conclusion

The people-to-people diplomacy between Georgians and Abkhazians has a form of an intensive meetings in terms of dialogue and collaboration. The meetings are informal allowing the participants to express their thoughts freely and frankly, to inform and be informed regarding the actual situation in Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia without a media bias. These process influences the patterns of relations, i.e. face-to-face interaction between the participants of it. It changes attitudes, eliminating negative ones and creating positive ones. It shatters stereotypes and irrational fears, establishes mutual understanding and long-term relations instead. Additionally, the existing projects lead to the new initiatives and dialogue transforms into collaboration further connecting the parties. The collaborative projects go beyond their initial aim enabling the government to be informed about the developments in Abkhazia from the primary source, thus avoiding scandals and further disagreements on political level. Additionally, there is a potential that these relations are transferred from grassroots level to that of high politics so that the dialogue is promoted on all levels of Georgian and Abkhazian societies.

The engagement of international governmental as well as non-governmental organizations fostered the process of people-to-people communication between Georgians and Abkhazians. Their involvement has been crucial in terms of funding and sharing the experience.

However, there are still considerable problems that impede people-to-people diplomacy and are the reasons why these relations have not brought more tangible results. The first set of concerns is of a political nature and comprises the Russian factor, the attitude of the de-facto government and the inactivity of Georgian government. The latter does not review and asses the past experience of public diplomacy with Abkhazians.

Apart from that there are problems concerning the attitudes. These include: the existence of the image of enemy in Abkhazian public reinforced by Russian propaganda and the criticism which Abkhazian participants of the meetings receive from their compatriots. Ethnic nationalism prevails in both parties of the conflict serving as a hindrance. Additionally, the conflict of values between the civil society and the government officials has been the reason why these relations could not be transferred from grassroots level to that of high politics.

The final group of obstacles includes the issue of funding and the freedom of movement for Abkhazians. The funds available for such projects have been decreased. As a result, the projects have a little scope and lack continuity. As for the problem of passports, it not only hinders Abkhazians to travel freely but also reinforces their feeling of inequality, thus creating a negative attitude.

To summarize, public diplomacy has a positive influence on conflict transformation process between

Georgians and Abkhazians, but there are the problems to be solved. Public diplomacy is not a substitute for political decision-making. It can create a strong basis on grassroots level, but unless these relations, perceptions and attitudes are transferred to the high political level, the conflict cannot be finally transformed. This, however, is essentially a long-term process. Thus, the fact that no tangible improvement of large scope is seen in Georgian-Abkhazian relations, is not a reason for ceasing the meetings. Instead, dialogue and collaboration are to be intensified. As for the effects of monologue on transforming Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, they are still to be examined and can serve as a subject of further study.

References:

1. Cowan, G., & Arsenault, A., (2008). Moving from monologue to dialogue to collaboration: the three layers of public diplomacy. *The annals of the American academy of political and social science,* 616, 10-30. doi: 10.1177/0002716207311863.

2. Cull, N., J., (2009). *Public diplomacy: perspectives from the past* [USC Center of Public Diplomacy version]. Retrieved from: http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/useruploads/u35361/2009%20Paper%202.pdf .

3. Georgian government, (2010). ჩართულობის სტრატეგიის სამოქმედო გეგმა [The engagement strategy action plan]. Retrieved from: http://smr.gov.ge/Uploads/__94d96fb2.pdf.

4. Gregory, B., (2008). Public diplomacy: sunrise of an academic field. *The annals of the American academy of political and social science,* 616, 274-290. doi: 10.1177/0002716207311723.

5. Henrikson, A., K., (2006). *What can public diplomacy achieve?* [Netherlands Institute of International Relations "Clingendael" version]. Retrieved from: http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/publicdiplo.pdf.

6. Lederach, J., P., (1999). *Building peace: sustainable reconciliation in divided societies.* Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace.

7. Lederach, J., P., (2003). *The little book of conflict transformation.* Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

8. Leonard, M., Small, A., & Rose, M., (2005). *British public diplomacy in the "age of schisms"* [Foreign Policy Center and Counterpoint version]. Retrieved from: http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/407.pdf.

9. Melissen, J., (2011). *Beyond the new public diplomacy* [Netherlands Institute of International Relations "Clingendael" version]. Retrieved from: http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/34704913/20111014_cdsp_paper_jmelissen.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1490102138&Signature=tDX9Qj0x7U7ikEQ4AXwadlf%2BV4w%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DBeyond_the_new_public_diplomacy.pdf

10. Miall, H., (2004). Conflict transformation: a multi-dimensional task. In Austin, Alex, Martina Fischer and Norbert Ropers (Eds.). *Transforming ethnopolitical conflict. The Berghof Handbook* (pp.67-89). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

11. Payne, G. J., (2009a). Trends in global public relations and grassroots diplomacy. *American behavioral scientist*, 53(4), 487-492. doi: 10.1177/0002764209347635.

13

12. Payne, G. J., (2009). Reflections on public diplomacy: people-to-people communication. *American behavioral scientist*, 53(4), 579-606. doi: 10.1177/0002764209347632.

13. Reimann, C., (2004). Assessing the state-of-the art in conflict transformation. In Austin, Alex, Martina Fischer and Norbert Ropers (Eds.). *Transforming ethnopolitical conflict. The Berghof Handbook* (pp.41-66). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

14. Undp.org, (2012). Confidence building early response mechanism (COBERM). Retrieved from:
   http://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/operations/projects/crisis_prevention_an d_recovery/confidence-building-early-response-mechanism--coberm-.html