Conference report
Working together to improve human security in the South Caucasus
Monday 2 – Wednesday 4 December 2013 | WP1263
Conference report

**Working together to improve human security in the South Caucasus**

Monday 2 – Wednesday 4 December 2013 | WP1263

Building on previous initiatives convened by Wilton Park, the meeting involved remarkably diverse representatives from across the region. Participants identified major challenges to peace, reconciliation and socio-economic development in the South Caucasus and numerous proposals at all levels of engagement were advanced for improving the conditions to fulfil human security. It was regrettable however - and an opportunity missed - that de facto officials from Sukhum/i and Tskhinval/i were not able to attend. Nevertheless, those gathered also welcomed the conference for providing a useful opportunity for cross-divide contacts, and for others, it was another important part of the process to help transform the image and stereotypes of the 'other'.

Throughout, the focus remained on the needs and aspirations of the people of the South Caucasus. Challenges and 30 recommendations are elaborated later in the report.

**Introduction: Aims and objectives**

**Background to the South Caucasus**

1. The South Caucasus, comprising the three states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the disputed territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, face a range of complex policy challenges. In per capita terms, the region possesses among the world’s largest number of internally displaced persons and refugees. The region remains deadlocked and divided from violent conflicts between 1988-1994. The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia unravelled the confidence-building initiatives that had been painstakingly constructed for more than a decade between Abkhaz and Ossetians with Georgians.

2. Three sets of countries in or related to the South Caucasus even lack diplomatic relations: Armenia and Azerbaijan; Armenia and Turkey; and, since 2008, Georgia and the Russian Federation. The only regional actor possessing diplomatic relations with all three South Caucasus states is Iran, whose official relations with Western governments are either strained or broken, the recent negotiations on its nuclear capacity notwithstanding.

3. The region’s geo-economic and geostrategic importance derives heavily from Azerbaijan’s energy wealth and its supply to Western Europe through pipelines built from it and across Georgia and Turkey. Although, additionally, the South Caucasus straddle important global transport lines, conflict-related divisions cripple that potential,
to the point of marginalisation.

Aims and objectives

4. In view of interests from stakeholders in the region, including that of the three governments, the conference advanced on previous initiatives convened by Wilton Park, and focused here on safeguarding security and building trust in order to meet human needs.

5. These essential objectives were addressed through dialogue on a range of society-level initiatives to create confidence among people, as well as on intra-regional initiatives that can improve livelihoods and enhance the prospects of the South Caucasus region fulfilling its full trading and economic potential.

6. The conference facilitated steps towards rebuilding relationships between communities in the South Caucasus. It furthermore afforded them the opportunity to engage with the 2014 Swiss Chairmanship-in-Office (CiO) of the OSCE, and for all parties to advance their perspectives and suggestions for greater international engagement in the region.

7. Fourteen suggestions for changes in the conceptualisation of approaches to the region and 16 proposals for practical action are identified. Consensus emerged on a considerable number of proposals; however, some views cautioned about differences.

Divergences in interpretations of the challenges presented by the sources and nature of the region’s conflicts

Consensus emerged on a considerable number of proposals; however, some views cautioned about differences.

8. Much discussion focused on immediate steps, yet others expressed concern about the utility or even counter-productivity of ‘short-termism’ in the absence of clear longer-term objectives (see the recommendations for scenario-building). Nevertheless, necessity of commitment to the long-haul was reiterated, and with the practical aim of undertaking small steps that help to achieve it. There was also a view that, particularly for Georgia, a short time-frame of 2-3 years exists in which to see reactions from other parties before the possibility of societal disillusionment sets in.

9. Some concern was raised over ambiguous perceptions of who might serve as agents of positive change, particularly between younger and older generations; with the former naturally regarded as the future but raised in isolated communities with unidimensional understandings of the region, while the latter have positive memories of integration and cohabitation.

10. To what extent the South Caucasus ever constituted a ‘region’, and therefore can be seen as such now, and the implications for any socio-development that is proposed on a region-wide basis.

11. The roles of economic interaction, including questions about its role in conflict transformation, noting:

- some earlier instances of trade, including the existence of marketplaces, created an illusion that conflict was resolved
- some forms of trade may be illicit and unethical
- relative economic openness or opportunity can allow for added militarization, particularly through the Russian supply of arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan
- a potentially damaging symbiosis between economy and conflict, including
economic relationships in themselves do not generate positive images’

‘peace is also not necessarily made in Tracks, but by brave individuals, particularly those in and between societies’

An ‘inertia tax’ or ‘conflict tax’ on populations, which impoverishes individuals, constrains communities, hampers inter-community development, and obstructs regional potential’

• vested interests that arose from the conflicts and are maintained through the current conflict-related status quos
• that economic relationships in themselves do not generate positive images, with Turkish business activity, for example, at times being perceived as threatening in Georgia
• whether private, including foreign, investment creates confidence and security across communities or, instead, requires them as preconditions

12. Although hateful and bellicose language was fully recognised as destructive, double-edged issues in its management were observed. For example, belligerent Azerbaijani rhetoric is reported in Armenia as evidence of aggression; pauses, however, can be interpreted as signs of Azerbaijani weakness.

13. Who can initiate, agree and secure peace requires political will, namely by high-level formal authorities, but that peace is also not necessarily made in Tracks, but by brave individuals, particularly those in and between societies.

14. Timing: compelling arguments are routinely advanced that time is not suitable, either for conferences, or for new initiatives. Cyclical events, such as elections, and particular events, such as the Sochi Olympics, present obstacles to peace initiatives and risk scuttling new initiatives. Specifically on the February 2014 Winter Olympics, views diverged on whether prospects for progress in the South Caucasus would be hampered or improved thereafter.

15. Different views emerged on Russia’s roles and intentions in the South Caucasus, although with some agreement that Russian perspectives amount to an alternative scenario for the South Caucasus. In turn, such detachment of views presented further challenges for the creation of a common strategy for the region.

Despite some differences on the analysis of the problems and their implications for advancing solutions, substantial agreement arose on:

• the principal challenges to enhancing human security in the regional, and then
• positive prospects for changes in thinking and in
• practical initiatives as measures forward.

(i) Preponderant views on challenges to enhancing human security in the South Caucasus

16. The region’s thinking derives from the 19th and 20th centuries, focusing on legacies from the time of Tsar Alexander I, the First World War and from the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, and has not moved forward.

17. This leaves a dangerous status quo throughout the region, particularly regarding Karabakh.

18. With considerable international indifference over the South Caucasus region, and, some exceptions notwithstanding (such as the Geneva International Discussions (GID), formed after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008), a lack of external political will to seek solutions.

19. An acceptance by many local and regional interests of the status quo, and even of vested interests in it.

20. An ‘inertia tax’ or ‘conflict tax’ on populations, which impoverishes individuals, constrains communities, hampers inter-community development, and obstructs regional potential.

21. A lack of sufficient reference to individual needs and improvements to well-being in the attention the region does receive.

22. A propensity within the region to miss opportunities; a poverty of ideas for conflict
transformation and an over-reliance on existing but insufficient mechanisms to attempt to enhance mutual understanding, peace and developmental progress.

Despite the multiplicity of challenges in the South Caucasus, numerous ways forward were advanced. They are divided into areas of (II) reconceptualisation and (III) of action.

(ii) Recommendations – Reconceptualisation: prospects for changes in thinking

These can be summarised as ‘maintain optimism; maximise opportunities’.

23. Near-worst case scenario as grounds for optimism. A positive starting point derived from a negative: the situation is so poor that it can only improve within the South Caucasus region; in the region more broadly construed; and then more widely, among major partners. Russia’s insecure North Caucasus region may encourage, even compel, it to seek improvements in the South Caucasus. Relations between the EU and the Russian Federation were also considered to be so poor that they could only improve.

24. Avoid ‘time-is-not-right’ thinking and recognise that no time is ideal, and the risks in the region remain and that the status quo is damaging.

25. Recognise that other seeming intractable conflicts have been transformed; examples from other conflicts, including Algeria, Nepal and Kosovo demonstrate how alternative channels of communication, creation of political space, inclusive measures and alternative terminology could be found.

26. Continue to ask what people want and ask and understand why local issues are being raised; ask also how our own messages may be heard.

27. Despite entrenched interests benefitting from the status quo many other parties pronounce their desire to do better, to explore new ideas and to raise the bar of expectations. In Georgia, peaceful governmental change after elections in 2012 and 2013 offers prospects for improved dialogue and interaction, choice of rhetoric and reconsideration of policy approaches. Prisoner release was noted as a particular innovation. Considerable optimism and creativity have been expressed, although expectations are strong for reciprocal statements and actions.

28. Although the status issue has been frequently used to stall or prevent dialogue, much imagination and will exist to work around the status issue. The status issue should not be allowed to prevent initiatives. Negotiated outcomes that avoided or reframed the status issue should be used as encouragement for other initiatives. Focus can be placed on de-isolation, including on practical issues that could be achieved by reframing or bypassing the status issue and can in turn create some trust. Specifics notwithstanding, areas for such further exploration include trade, functional cooperation (such as water supply) and education.

29. Keep pressure through all international channels that, despite the absence of outright war, the South Caucasus remain a region that demands urgent and sustained attention.

30. Recognise the region has missed many opportunities – and encourage stakeholders to capitalise, instead, on regional possibilities. The importance of this existential change cannot be underestimated or dismissed as rhetoric. It is fundamental to seeking and harnessing new ways forward.

31. The need – asserted by external technology specialists – of entities in the region to plan not in terms of their ‘energy independence’ but of energy interdependence.

32. Think smaller than the region – give accent to local needs and initiatives.

33. Think as a region - and think of common possibilities as well as common threats, including environmental degradation and the risks from nuclear power stations;
heighten potential as a transportation corridor; advise populations and leaderships of the opportunity costs of conflict and/or of a fragmented region.

34. Think beyond the region – including possible North-South connections, roles for regional players (Turkey and Iran), and of the South Caucasus serving as a transportation corridor and logistical support network for trade between Europe and Central and South Asia; also capitalise on the interests in and expressed leanings of South Caucasus countries towards Europe.

35. Reconsider thinking about the types of actors and their potential roles and capacities:

*Domestic-societal*

a) Gender – greater empowerment of women generally but also recognising that the economic migration of men has also given more influence to women;
b) youth - despite situations of historical and cultural isolation and familiarity with an exclusivist account of their conflicts, youth is overwhelmingly recognised as essential for progress and efforts should be increased to involve them in projects that facilitate mutual understanding;
c) local traders and entrepreneurs, noting also that trade has been possible in the region after conflicts, such as the Ergneti market outside Tskhinvali, and with the aim of preventing trade (or the possibility thereof) being instrumentalised for political aims;
d) middle classes and technocratic and professional elites – especially as they will want more political power and will safeguard it, if and when they secure it;
e) civil society - recognising that civil society is not homogenous and may not be more willing to compromise than other actors, robust civil society nevertheless fundamentally enhances dialogue and pluralism and can help to keep authorities accountable. The development of civil society must be anticipated as a long-term prospect, and one that may risk being perceived as ‘foreign-funded’;
f) governmental change in Georgia, to the extent of being referred to as an offer of a new ‘brand’ and an encouragement of interlocutors to produce their own.

*Regional state actors – new or renewed*

a) Iran has a presence in the South Caucasus, and with Iran’s recent change of leadership and its negotiations with Western governments and international bodies over its nuclear capacity, prospects for its role may increase.
b) Turkey, including possibilities of enhanced trade and of renewed discussions on relations with Armenia, despite some perceptions that Baku has substantial influence over Ankara.
c) Russia - although its own engagement is limited to certain forums, it should recognise that, post-Sochi Olympics, could leave the North Caucasus more dissatisfied and the irony that Russia enjoys more influence in the South Caucasus than in the North Caucasus which constitutes part of the Russian Federation.

*International / Intergovernmental*

a) The EU, especially in expectation of it reviewing its own engagement with the region because of the DCFTA with Georgia [the negotiations for which were concluded on 22 July 2013].
b) The OSCE – and then especially for the Swiss Chairmanship-in-Office (CiO)
   - The OSCE has greater capacity than before, even though it has been operationally excluded from parts of the region
   - High hopes for the Swiss CiO in 2014, derived from the Swiss reputation for and achievements in mediation generally, specifically in the Caucasus, including representation of Russian and Georgian interests; the GID; the negotiations regarding the World Trade Organisation; and on facilitating dialogue between
Armenia and Turkey. This CiO has prospects for close cooperation with the 2015 Serbian CiO and also a special representative will be in place for two years.

c) International NGOs – agreement for their increased provision of expertise and of external (non-regional) advice. Discussion also suggested greater inclusion of international NGOs around Track I formats.

d) Specifics notwithstanding, the international private sector for investment potential and the development of the region as a transportation corridor.

(III) Practical initiatives as measures forward

36. Continue to place the needs and well-being of people first, and to continue to restate that centrality; ask people of the region directly what they want; how their livelihoods can be improved, particularly by asking not what boundaries they expect from any peace, but rather what quality of life; and recognise that the international community has a responsibility to improve their condition.

37. Recognise a multiplicity of actors – and recognise within that, that actors within the region are themselves influential, and that unrecognised or (largely unrecognised) entities have distinctive interests from each other and may not expect or require similar responses.

38. Undertake inclusive measures, with a focus on de-isolation, and in that process listen to and respect local needs.

39. Allow or facilitate local resolution of functional issues (such as water or electricity supplies), and support more of the work of outside NGOs and technical specialists in such facilitation.

40. Encourage a full return of the OSCE to the region, noting also the increase in its capacities in recent years, despite its exclusion from some of the region and ‘the strings attached’ to its return.

41. Although many IOs are present in the region, they need greater coordination; in turn, they would benefit from greater coordination with other regional and international actors, including with NGOs.

42. Where it is not yet done, embassies in the South Caucasus should assign monitoring and information-sharing on the South Caucasus region to particular staff members, and they should then communicate this information among each other.

43. Encourage the Russian Federation to recognise that it, too, is but one of many actors in the region and that its interests can be best served by multilateral engagement at all levels, and that the well-being and development of the North Caucasus may also benefit from its contributions to progress in the South Caucasus.

44. Encourage dissemination within societies of existing trans-boundary examples of cooperation, particularly socio-economic, environmental and health care:

- the Inguri hydroelectric facility, which employs 1,000 people from both communities;
- the Zonkari dam (funded by the EU and implemented by the OSCE, to supply drinking or irrigation water to both sides of the ABL);
- health provisions by the Georgian authorities to residents of Abkhazia; and,
- the previous cross-community gains from the Ergneti market.

Apart from the importance of success in their own right, the fact of such successes across dividing lines needs to be publicised more actively to capitalise on the confidence-building benefits that they represent.

45. Connect short-term measures to long-term goals (see scenario-building, below)
46. Expanded channels and diversified actors, such as:
   - Back-channels – recognising that while the mere presence of back-channels does not ensure breakthroughs, generally, impasses require them;
   - Armenia and Azerbaijan were encouraged to reconsider the maintenance of hotlines, especially between their Ministries of Defence; and,
   - Recognition of and support for the capacity of international NGOs to create space and means for dialogue and the building of trust, and reconsideration of their roles around official mediation efforts.

47. Active, systematic monitoring of all manifestations of hate speech and ‘words that kill’ – from graffiti to media and official statements.

48. Encouragement of a ‘rhetoric ceasefire’ and ideally the choreography of reciprocated statements of reduced rhetorical hostility to avoid misrepresentation of such changes as weakness.

49. Expansion of education – including virtual: Support for multilateral initiatives for improving education is essential in itself but also as an essential means of de-isolation. Educational access (leaving the region) and provision (within the region) was strongly felt to be workable irrespective of ‘status’ issues.

50. Confront the past to overcome it; face taboos, mention the unmentionable, and think the unthinkable. These measures can include:
   - Encouragement of the development and dissemination of common narratives, recognising that peace and justice are inextricably linked;
   - An equivalent set of reports to the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (the ‘Tagliavini report’) for the events surrounding war in August 2008, for the events concerning all conflicts in the South Caucasus in the late 1980s and early 1990s;
   - Engagement with the public, including through each community’s media, and through public fora, appearances in educational environments;
   - Confidence and commitment are required to do so – and one can expect responses of fear and hostility from initial efforts but the need to preserve remains and the optimism for eventual understanding is considerable; and,
   - A stronger, more coordinated Western voice in raising alternative views and breaking taboos.

51. Scenario-building: calculate the opportunity costs of the status quo for each conflict area and for the South Caucasus as a whole:
   - these should include areas of disagreement as well as agreement, and account for variables, including those of outside actors;
   - Commission studies of the opportunity costs of each conflict and for the South Caucasus region as a whole;
   - Allow for minimalist and maximalist assessments that include known demands and assertions by each party to ensure greatest credibility;
   - Create credible scenarios of socio-economic development that could be generated by the redirection of parts of current defence spending;
   - The potential that partial and wider rejuvenation of railway systems would bring;
   - The particular losses to the region if its transit route potential is left untapped;
   - Map the potential impact of greater EU involvement in the South Caucasus, including in view of the DCFTA; and,
• Ensure the means for credible and full dissemination of the findings among all stakeholders.

Rick Fawn
University of St Andrews
Wilton Park | December 2013

Wilton Park reports are brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of a conference. The reports reflect rapporteurs’ personal interpretations of the proceedings – as such they do not constitute any institutional policy of Wilton Park nor do they necessarily represent the views of the rapporteur.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park conferences, please consult our website www.wiltonpark.org.uk

To receive our e-newsletter and latest updates on conferences subscribe to https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/