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**CONTRARY MEMORIES: BASIS, CHANCES AND CONSTRAINTS
OF DEALING WITH THE PAST IN GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ
DIALOGUE**

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In my paper, I will focus on the transitional justice mechanisms of truth finding and reconciliation. In recent years, there have been some fruitful attempts to transform the perception of past violence and enable processes of reconciliation between Georgian and Abkhaz stakeholders of war memorialization. The Berghof Foundation has engaged in the wide-scale process of tackling these issues by taking into account differing – even contradictory – perceptions of past events on both sides of the conflict divide. I will explore the predominant “conflict supporting narratives” (Bar-Tal 2014) in perceptions of the parties to the conflict and their common (violent) past. Subsequently, I will share some lessons learned and basic working principles in addressing these contradictory perceptions and creating space for innovative approaches to the deadlock of competing narratives in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict setting.¹

KEY WORDS: *dealing with the past, narratives, reconciliation, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, dialogue, Caucasus, history*

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Magdalena Frichova conducted a study on the applicability of transitional justice mechanisms to Georgia’s conflicts. She concluded rather vaguely:

“In practical terms, using transitional justice here would be fraught with challenges. Transitional justice approaches would have to be introduced slowly, with carefully managed expectations in terms of acceptance and impact. The capacity of political actors and communities to maintain the procedural integrity required for a transitional justice process is limited.” (Frichova 2009, 24)

Today, eight years later, neither the Georgian Civil War nor the Georgian-Abkhaz or Georgian-South Ossetian Wars have been systematically assessed, their heritage has

¹ This paper was presented at the ECPR general conference in Prague, in September 2016. The original text has only been slightly adjusted. I want to thank Ingra Schellenberg for her critical remarks and language correction on the original draft.

yet to be fully explored, and many taboos and “blank spots” remain in the official discourses of all three societies. While certain features of transitional justice mechanisms can be seen in Georgia, currently these are single initiatives that do not add up to a full-fledged system of transitional justice.²

In this paper, I will not provide a complete map of the current transitional justice mechanisms in Georgia. Instead, I will introduce you to some of the observations and insights made by the Berghof Foundation Caucasus Programme in its efforts build up and maintain a network of young people and war witnesses in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia. These programme participants exchange and discuss war memories and experiences across conflict lines in an activity we call “History Dialogue”.

In this context, I want to concentrate on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict setting. There are two reasons for this. First, as many of you will know, the space for civil society activities in South Ossetia has narrowed significantly in recent years. It is therefore much riskier for our partners in the region to be associated with our project, and the results of our work must be kept confidential. Second, the war in 2008 left wounds so deep in South Ossetian society that it is still very difficult to address the events linked to the conflict. In Abkhazia, the war ended over 20 years ago, meaning that today, even though the legacy of war is ever-present, people have had time to recover, thereby making it easier to discuss the violence of the past.

In the beginning of this paper, I will provide some insight into the history of the conflict and of the Berghof Foundation’s work in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict setting. As a second step, I will focus on the history and main features of the war narratives that are common today in Georgia and Abkhazia. Afterwards, I will present some practical experiences of using these discourses in workshops and on a television talk show in the region. Finally, I will offer some conclusions and provide some perspectives on further work.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To begin, let me provide you with some key information on the history of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Its roots date back to the nineteenth century when the integration of the Caucasus into the Russian Empire caused about 500,000 Abkhaz to leave Abkhazia. Over the following decades, and also during the Soviet period, Georgians and other nationalities settled in Abkhazia. In 1989, only 17 percent of the population was ethnic Abkhaz, while 47 percent was Georgian (Fischer 2016, 47-49).

² In its newest report, ICTJ suggests a whole range of measures including National Dialogue on the Past and the Future, see: Varney 2017.

During Soviet times, ethnic tensions repeatedly arose, but were effectively suppressed.³ The Georgian-Abkhaz War in 1992 – 1993 was a consequence of the disintegration and clash of the Soviet Empire. In 1991, Georgia became an independent state. The first few years of Georgian independence were accompanied by massive nationalist euphoria in the Georgian population and civil war under the presidency of former dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia. At the same time, drawing on experiences of oppression, the Abkhaz nationalist movement started to push for more political power and independence in a federalist state, initially as part of the Georgian territory. State institutions were weak, and this confrontation led to repeated violent clashes in 1989. After Abkhaz independence had been declared, these clashes were followed by outright war, which lasted from August 1992 to September 1993. In addition to about 10,000 war dead on both sides, about 250,000 ethnic Georgians were displaced. To date, only between 40,000 and 50,000 of them have been unofficially allowed to return (Fischer 2016, 50). Most of them live in the Gal'i region, but are denied passports by the Abkhaz government, which fears for its political power. Abkhazia is currently acknowledged as a state only by Russia and few minor states.⁴

THE BERGHOF HISTORY DIALOGUE PROCESS

The Berghof Foundation has been working in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict setting since 1997. In our engagement as an organization, we began by co-facilitating the “Schlaining Process”, bringing together state and administration officials from Georgian and de-facto authorities. In 2006, we started to conduct dialogue study travels for young professionals, and in 2012, we began our trilateral work on history, memory and identity that we still pursue today. This recent work can of course be seen as a transitional justice mechanism, and I would like to explain how it came about.

In 2012, a new Georgian government was about to be elected. After the aggressive nationalist line that the previous government had been following, the political space for dialogue work had begun to widen. The Berghof Foundation had previously worked with and trained a pool of young people in dialogue meetings, the “Young Facilitators Group”, who were ready to engage in their societies. Simultaneously, during these dialogue meetings, participants and facilitators experienced a subtle, yet significant, challenge. On a superficial level, good contact between the conflict sides could be made, but the development of deeper trust did not happen. One obstacle was a reluctance in discussion to tackle those war-related events that had most significantly influenced the families of the young people gathered at the meeting. Another obstacle was the significant pressure on Abkhaz youth from within their

³ For a comprehensive overview of Georgian-Abkhaz relations in history, see: Auch 2004.

⁴ Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru.

society, especially from victims' organizations, who would criticize young people for their readiness to meet and engage with people representing the Georgian side.

To further develop our work, we identified the following aims:

- Deepen dialogue within the societies and spread more information about both sides' views and experiences.
- Win over war victims as dialogue supporters.
- Deepen the dialogue between conflict sides.
- Enhance the awareness and acknowledgement of atrocities and trauma on all sides.

In response, the Berghof Caucasus Programme developed a new dialogue process designed especially to tackle the difficult topic of war history and enhance intergenerational discussion in this field. Target groups and key actors were young adults, as well as war witnesses. The main features of this dialogue process have remained the same since it was implemented in 2012. The process works on four levels that are conducted simultaneously:

1. Young people in all three regions interview their elder peers, recording their entire biography.
2. Young and old listen to interesting excerpts from the interviews together – we call them episodes – and discuss them together in workshops.
3. Interview episodes are exchanged across the conflict line, so the voices of the “other side” are also heard and discussed in workshops.
4. Twice a year, young people and war witnesses from all three sides meet in Yerevan to discuss interview episodes from all three sides.

A central feature of this peacebuilding process is that the main work is conducted not in direct encounters between representatives of the three sides, but rather indirectly, during the internal workshops within each of the three regions. This method of discussing one's own narrative (and the other sides' narratives) through interviews, without the actual representatives of those other sides being present, is what we call “indirect dialogue”. In our experience, it creates the space for listening, commenting on and discussing the other sides' memories and views, while simultaneously reflecting on how the conflict is treated in one's own society. In indirect dialogue, the audience can hear voices from the other sides, even though the speakers themselves are absent. This means that there is space to express freely all kinds of

emotions in response, without the risk of harming those speakers or their broader communities. Once scepticism, anger, disappointment or other negative and critical responses have been articulated, other feelings and thoughts can usually be perceived and the space widens for more open and genuine discussion.

People meet face-to-face only after they have heard and discussed their own and the other sides' narratives. Only a small group of project participants actually meet the other side directly. The main work is conducted locally by insider facilitators of indirect dialogue from our team. Since the first project, we have established a network of young people and war witnesses in Abkhazia, Georgia and South Ossetia, who work together and exchange their experiences. Our work is covered by local media in Georgia and Abkhazia. In addition, we have developed the television show “Biographical Salon” in Abkhazia, and the radio show “Cross-point” in Georgia, in which interview sequences are discussed. “Biographical Salon” also includes a physical space that serves as a meeting centre that we operate in Abkhazia, together with our local partners. During workshops and evening meetings where witnesses of the war share their experiences, people are encouraged to speak about their own memories and exchange their views of the past. In 2017, the Berghof Foundation will start cooperating with the Georgian Ministry of Youth and Sports. Since then, with support of the ministry, additional workshops and discussion rounds on war experiences will be conducted in Georgia proper.

Today, the Georgian and Abkhaz communities are isolated from one another. This isolation has had, among other things, a huge influence on the contradictory perceptions of conflict history on both sides. Since contact between the Georgian and Abkhaz populations is sparse and informal, myths and idealization of own side's behaviour are common, along with the demonization of the other side. Events and stories that do not fit into one's own perceptions can easily be displaced, even though those events and stories may be of great importance to the other side. These opposing narratives set the foundation for current personal and political challenges and must be the subject of any efforts to engage in a history dialogue across the lines of conflict. Consequently, I investigate them more thoroughly in the following section.

CONFLICT-SUPPORTING NARRATIVES ON BOTH SIDES

Differences in Georgian and Abkhaz perceptions of their shared violent past go back far, preceding even the escalation of the conflict in the late 1980s. Georgian and Abkhaz nationalist movements developed under different circumstances. To understand their origins, one has to take into account relations between the Georgian and Abkhaz communities during the Soviet period. In 1921, both Georgia and Abkhazia were subsumed as part of the Soviet Union.

Abkhazia was initially a Soviet Republic, but became integrated into the Georgian Soviet Republic in 1931. After this event, the political efforts pushing for an Abkhaz ethnic and cultural identity were set against the backdrop of Georgian efforts toward self-determination, within the framework of the Georgian Soviet Republic. The Abkhaz, as a minority in the Georgian Soviet Republic, relied on the support of Soviet state institutions in Moscow to widen and reinforce their minority rights (Fischer 2016, 47). At the same time, the Georgian nationalist movement was ultimately a dissident movement, directed against Soviet (and implicitly Russian) domination. It must be noted that the Georgian nationalist movement was in essence anti-Soviet, while the Abkhaz nationalist movement was pro-Soviet. These general historical alliances continue to impact how the history of the Georgian-Abkhaz War is perceived today. After Georgian independence was achieved, nationalistic Georgian narratives were disseminated.⁵ These discourses also contributed to the deterioration of Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

Mutual development influences how the war is perceived in Georgia and Abkhazia today. In Georgia, the common community discourse(s) sees the war in Abkhazia as a civil war that was set up by the Russians. In Georgian memory, Abkhaz and Georgians used to live peacefully together before and during Soviet times. Mainly Russian and North Caucasian fighters are remembered as military actors. Members of the Abkhaz community are seen as “brothers” and “friends”. From the Georgian perspective, these ties were not destroyed by the war. Instead, Abkhazia has been “taken away” and is today “occupied” by the Russians.

The common Abkhaz narrative represents an entirely different worldview in which many individuals remember being discriminated against by Georgians during Soviet times. From this perspective, Georgian nationalism was the reason for the violent escalation that the Georgians consider to be the Russian-driven civil war. Today, the war is called the “Abkhaz Fatherland War”; it was fought by Abkhaz soldiers (and civilians) against Georgian invaders, and won by heroic Abkhaz defenders. In the Russian cultural context, the first “Fatherland War” was the war against Napoleon, and the war against Nazi Germany is called the “Great Fatherland War”. The term “Abkhaz Fatherland War” therefore suggests the defence against an external power. In Abkhazia, the war destroyed trust in the Georgians and good neighbourhood relations can only be imagined under the hypothetical pretext that Georgia acknowledges Abkhazia as an independent state.

⁵ Nino Chikovani describes them as “essentialist”, ethnocentric, exclusivist and politicized with no space for ethnic diversity (Chikovani 2013, 81-83).

Georgian Narrative	Abkhaz Narrative
Before the war, Abkhaz and Georgians lived in harmony.	Before the war, Abkhaz were discriminated against by Georgians.
The conflict was set up by the Russians. If anyone should take responsibility, it must be shared equally between Georgians and Abkhaz.	Georgian nationalism was responsible for escalation of the conflict.
Civil War	“Abkhaz Fatherland War”
The war was fought mainly by Russian and North Caucasian fighters.	The Abkhaz soldiers were heroic defenders of the Fatherland.
Abkhazia was “taken away” by the Russians.	The Georgians were foreign occupiers.
Georgian and Abkhaz peoples are linked by familial and emotional ties that were not severed by the war. Abkhaz people are brothers and friends.	Since the war, Abkhaz and Georgians cannot live together. Positive neighbourhood relations depend on the recognition of Abkhaz statehood.

As can easily be seen, these narratives are contradictory in various ways. Moreover, both versions can be identified as “conflict supporting narratives”, as described by Israeli researcher Daniel Bar-Tal (2014a; 2014b). As I will elaborate, in the Georgian Abkhaz context, I see three qualities that have been named by Bar-Tal:

1. They justify the violence and destruction committed by the group’s own members.

In the Georgian version, violence is justified because Georgians needed to defend what they perceive as Georgian territory against Russian invaders. In the Abkhaz case, the Abkhaz population had been suffering from Georgian nationalism and bigotry, so when the Georgians invaded, they needed to fight back.

2. They enable the maintenance of positive personal and collective identities.

The Georgian friendship narrative completely ignores the damage caused to Georgian-Abkhaz relations as a result of the violence of war and Georgian bigotry that preceded the war. Representing themselves as friends and brothers of the Abkhaz people helps the Georgians to project a positive image of their own side. All violence is externalized. In the Abkhaz case, the violence is not concealed, but integrated into their heroic self-perception. Building on the Soviet myth of the “Great Fatherland War”, the war is symbolically charged and all doubts concerning one’s own side’s failure or faults are extinguished.

3. They help each group to position itself as a victim when presenting itself to an international audience.

The Georgian narrative, by concealing pre-war interethnic problems and the role played by Georgian nationalism during the escalation phase, shows the Georgians as victims of Russian expansion. This perception, of course, has recently been enhanced in the international community by Russia’s hybrid war in Ukraine. The Abkhaz narrative also fails to recognize its own nationalism as the motive behind escalation. The motive for the Abkhaz Fatherland War characterizes the Georgians – in the role of the “fascists” – as the sole aggressor. This perception certainly appeals to the Abkhaz, as well as the Russian, public, who are Abkhazia’s only significant international allies.

In juxtaposing these two positions, it becomes clear that each side displaces precisely those aspects of past events that are crucial for the other side.⁶ While delivering understandable and convenient explanations to the parties to and allies in a conflict, these conceptions become impediments to constructive dialogue in cross-conflict communication (Bar-Tal 2014b, 666). It must be kept in mind that these basic assumptions and views are adopted by wide segments of the population and are not usually questioned or even perceived as interpretations. Also, in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the other side’s views are not generally widely known. To set up and facilitate a dialogue on these issues, three elements are therefore crucial:

1. To raise awareness of one’s own discourses and interpretations of war history.
2. To raise awareness of events and aspects central to the other side’s view.
3. To show that on each side there are people who reflect critically on their own assumptions and stereotypes.

⁶ I have developed this idea in my article „Erinnerung, Geschichtsbilder und zivile Konfliktbearbeitung – Ein Erfahrungsbericht zur Anwendung theoretischer Konzepte in der friedenspädagogischen Praxis“, Zemskov-Züge 2012.

The goal is not to entirely change each side’s narrative. It would, however, be a positive result if the participants in indirect dialogue could see some aspects of the other side’s experiences and include them in their own perceptions. Therefore, using the Berghof History Dialogue approach we have consciously decided not to work with official history narratives themselves, but with individual memories. Stef Jansen has described how official narratives and individual memories are linked in the case of the Serbs and Bosnians, which I believe similarly applies to the Georgian-Abkhaz context:

“[...] individuals engage actively with official histories they encounter, incorporating some elements in their personal narratives, while ignoring others. [...] people’s engagement with such discourses depends not only on their nationality, but also, among other things, on their personal experiences during the war and on their current circumstances.”
(Jansen 2007, 207)

For working in the field of history dialogue, this means that individual narratives reveal the essence of national discourses. At the same time, they are refracted by an individual’s experiences. Moreover, in biographical narratives, it is often possible to understand how a person has come to hold a certain view, and also how those views have changed over a lifetime. In this regard, they are more flexible than official narratives and show potential for individual change to take place. To illustrate and deepen these reflections, I will provide some examples taken from our work.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

The first example I want to introduce is from an interview with a Georgian ex-combatant who used to live in Abkhazia.⁷ During the interview, he repeatedly mentions his “Abkhaz brothers”. He states:

“An excellent military leader from monarchical times once said, that those who cannot love, cannot fight. You cannot fight without love. The ones who are capable of loving – they fight. Luckily this is true. And we – I – say what happened in Abkhazia, we know ourselves, anyway, there is one advantage we both have, both of us are capable of loving.”

⁷ The interview quotations in this paper refer to the Berghof Caucasus Program internal interview archive, the quotations have been taken from interview episodes, marked by the number of the interview and minutes in the original audiofile.

He finishes this line of thought, saying that in the end it became clear that both sides were “stupid” and had been caused to clash by a “villain” (Interview G109, 11.00-13.59).⁸ The respondent’s account is remarkable for several reasons. First and foremost, he rejects the violence of the war. Instead of saying, we have lost, but we will come back, he says that it was wrong to fight. This must be underlined, because not long ago, under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, aggressive rhetoric, including the phrase *“What’s lost by war can be won by war”*, was widespread in Georgian society. In this interview, however, the main basis for the dialogue is fulfilled: refrain from violence.

Yet, at the same time, the interview does not condemn violence in principle, but conceals it as an act of love, therefore justifying it to a certain extent. Interestingly, the respondent justifies it on both the Abkhaz and the Georgian sides. He does not distinguish between the Abkhaz and the Georgian sides, but speaks mainly about “us”. Even after the interviewer interjects, asking him to formulate the lessons learned from the war on the Georgian side, he explicitly refuses. It seems to be unbearable for him to admit his (or his people’s) own wrongdoing or even express regret, without including the other side. In constructing his narrative like this, he underlines his own conviction that the war has not separated the sides. He ends this sequence with the evaluation: *“and now, if we want it or not, if we say it, or not, deep in our souls, in our hearts, we despise ourselves.”* (Interview G109, 11.00-13.59)⁹

This is a widespread feature in the Georgian narrative about the war, but it ultimately supports the conflict. While critically reflecting on Georgian failures, the respondent includes the Abkhaz side, stating that they have the same reasons to express regret. Thus, he basically occupies the space of the other side’s regret by making it virtually impossible for the other side to formulate its own shortcomings for itself. This discourse constructs a setting in which the Abkhaz people are not seen as an independent party to the conflict. Paradoxically, by insisting on formulating regrets

8 Меня с детства учили любить родину, и не только любить – уметь любить родину. Любить так – нельзя. Любовь сама по себе не одно чувство, а сочетание двух. Сама по себе любовь и отвага. Если и я кому то говорю что люблю и ничем не могу пожертвовать, ради этой любви, это ни чувство тогда. Это просто красивая картина перед моими глазами, насмотрелся и ушел. А за любовь надо бороться. Даже один из выдающихся полководцев в монархические годы, говорил, что кто не умеет любить, не умеет воевать. Не сможет воевать без любви. Воюет тот, кто умеет любить а это – к счастью это так. И мы вот, я говорю в Абхазии что произошло мы сами знаем, значит, один плюс, все таки, у нас, у обоих есть, мы оба умеем любить. (смеется) и начали воевать к сожалению. Доказывать, кто больше умеет. И доказали, что никто ничего не умеет. [...] мы оба дураки и какой то злодей нас – за крючок и поспорил между собой.

9 И теперь, хотим или не хотим, выражаем это или не выражаем, в глубине души, в сердце, мы оба презираем себя.

for the Abkhaz, he simultaneously robs the Georgian side of the possibility of receiving that which is most desired: a self-critical, voluntary sharing of responsibility on the part of the Abkhaz people.

There is also an additional element to insisting on speaking for both sides: it evokes the impression that the respondent is grappling with his own fear that relations have broken down between Georgians and Abkhaz permanently. He says:

“We are both indispensably guilty in having shot each other and having had a fight (undec.); but, however softly you speak, there was a war between us. It was not a fatherland war, it was civil war. Now that’s the right way to put it – a civil war between brothers.”
(Interview G109, 25.17-31.28)

Therefore, he argues that all medals earned in the war should be thrown away – on both sides. Such demands, of course, are contrary to the heroic Abkhaz discourse, where medals play a crucial role. This manner of speaking suggests the unification of both sides.

Using this interview in workshops in Abkhazia triggers different discussions (depending on the group). A trainer who discussed this interview in a group with ethnic Abkhaz wrote in her report:

*“The interview evoked turbulent emotions with nearly everybody. Especially when he says that all medals must be thrown away. Also the expression ‘there was no fatherland war, it was a civil war’, because that means that there is no Abkhazia at all, that we are all citizens of only one country – Georgia. [...] If that’s true, then what did Abkhazia’s sons die for? He must answer that question.”*¹⁰

This reaction shows that the overbearing unifying effort is perceived clearly by the Abkhaz listeners.

In such a group, the goal of this discussion would be to challenge one’s own established discourses. The trainer can facilitate a discussion about the meaning of medals in Abkhaz society, but also ask what might be the reasons for a Georgian ex-combatant to reject their medals. Interestingly, the argument about violence and love as a justification for the war evoked no protest. It does not contradict the Abkhaz narrative, in which the soldiers defended their country for love of their homeland. This

10 Интервью Е. вызвала в группе бурные эмоции почти у всех. Особенно когда он говорит, что нужно выкинуть все ордена, если они еще висят на груди. А тоже болезненно было воспринято выражение “Не было никакой Отечественной войны, эта была гражданская война” Т. е получается, что нет никакой Абхазии, мы все граждане одной лишь страны - Грузия. Столько времени прошло как он мог, если он грамотный человек так мыслить. За что погибли сыновья Абхазии. Пусть он тогда даст ответ на этот вопрос.

construction, of course, conceals the fact that in Abkhazia, in many cases, neighbours who had previously lived alongside one another on the land they loved ended up fighting against one another. So, paradoxically, this “love of the land narrative” leaves no space for discussing nationalism, where it is assumed that if your neighbour belongs to another ethnic group, he or she loves the land less, or has less of a right to live there than you do.

The same interview was used in a workshop in an Abkhaz area where many Georgians live, as well as Mingrelians, who associate themselves with the Georgians. As the trainer reports:

“Some in the group fully agreed with the respondent. They held the view that it was a civil war that happened in Abkhazia, and not a fatherland war. Some agreed on several points; for example, on the necessity of friendship and mutual understanding, even between those who stood face-to-face with weapons drawn. The younger participants believe that there was a fatherland war, but the respondent can hold a different view. [...] At the same time, the question was raised about the citizenship of Georgians in Abkhazia. It was said that they do not have passports. “Who are we without passports and citizenship?” they asked.”¹¹

This discussion demonstrates a much more diverse group response. Interestingly, this group was able to value the fact that the respondent underlined the need to refrain from violence. Also, the links between historical policies, national policies and ethnic affiliation played a bigger, more definite role in the discussion. While the younger participants have already adopted the Abkhaz narrative of the fatherland war, the older generation seems to cling more to the Georgian perspective. Since the Georgian minority is denied citizens’ rights in Abkhazia, they have more reason to see themselves as Georgian citizens, because they carry Georgian passports. This affiliation, of course, directly affects their views on conflict history.

11 Были в группе, которые были согласны с респондентом полностью. Они были согласны с тем, что в Абхазии была гражданская война, не было отечественной войны, были и такие, которые были согласны частично в некоторых моментах, например, как о необходимости дружбы и взаимопонимания даже среди тех, кто стоял с оружием друг против друга. Более молодое поколение считает все таки, что в Абхазии была Отечественная война, а респондент имеет право говорить как он думает, это его право. Возможно респондент имел ввиду, что когда началась война Абхазия еще была в составе Грузии, соответственно можно назвать гражданской войной, которая постепенно переросла в Отечественную- так интерпретировали некоторые. Поднимался вопрос параллельно о гражданстве грузин, проживающих в Абхазии, о том, что они до сих пор без паспортов, без гражданства, кто мы? – ставили вопрос.

In such a group setting, focusing the group’s attention on the respondent’s manner of subsuming both Abkhaz and Georgian people under the “we” umbrella is the trainer’s goal. If there are ethnic Abkhaz and ethnic Georgians in the room, it would be interesting to ask them about the feelings that the account evokes. Thus, it could be shown that regret can be formulated solely on one’s own account (not on behalf of others), and only on a voluntary basis. The interview and workshop settings are suitable forums for reflecting on and discussing these issues. It is here, in direct contact with the group and the facilitator, while listening to the interview excerpt, that processes of recapitulation and integration of the other side’s experiences into one’s own perceptions can occur. The direct presence of representatives of the other side, in triologue meetings or in an internal Abkhaz dialogue between ethnic Abkhaz and ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, reinforces this effect.

CONSTRAINTS

In our process, however, we have still another level that needs to be served: this is the level of broader public discussion. To achieve sustainable change and raise awareness of conflict-supporting mechanisms in public discourses, it is important that reflection and reconsideration take place not only in a closed room, but are also shared publicly. Additionally, for our work to be accepted politically, we cannot be perceived as a closed group – instead, our work must be transparent and understood by the wider public. Moreover, one of the goals of our process is that controversial and new thoughts and reflections are made publicly available. Obviously, this is more prone to constraints than the workshop setting. As Foucault notes, in every society, discourses are canalized, controlled and selected in order to control their forces and dangers (Foucault 2003, 11).

In our process, the line along which we experience these control mechanisms most acutely is the line between interviews and public statements made in the radio or television programmes. This is true for each of the participating societies. To illustrate this point, I want to quote an Abkhaz ex-combatant who, during the biographical interview, states in a somewhat ironic tone:

“Well, that’s what happened, I finished the war, a shame that I didn’t maraud. Thank God they gave me no medals. That means I fought badly. There are many things that happen in war. You know, honestly speaking, you can get away, like born again, I mean regenerated, and you can die. I mean die and stay alive at the same time; that means you are not the same, as a person.”¹² (A032, 10.50-21.58)

12 “[...] ну так сложилось и всё, отвоевался, жаль, что не смородёрил. Слава Богу, никаких медалей не дали, значит плохо воевал. Очень много там событий на войне, вот вы знаете как, честно говоря, с войны можно уйти заново родившись, ну т.е. переродиться, можешь умереть, ну т.е. как умереть, при этом ты живой, но как человек, т.е. ты не тот”.

Against the background of the Abkhaz hero narrative, these remarks are quite atypical. In fact, the respondent completely reverses the usual assessment criteria. In saying that it was *“a shame that I didn’t maraud”*, he indicates that he takes a critical stance against those in Abkhaz society who currently live off the wealth they accumulated during the war. The remark, *“Thank God they gave me no medals”* becomes understandable, at the end of the episode, when he mentions his brother, who had been given the title “Hero of Abkhazia” but committed suicide three years before the interview was recorded. About him, the respondent states: *“He was just not needed anymore. It was not what he lived for. Times change so quickly today, and it was hard to survive, to cope”* (A032, 10.50-21.58).¹³

Questioning the outcome of the war in such a way is highly atypical in the Abkhaz war narrative. We invited this respondent to be a guest on the television talk show “Biographical Salon”. When he was approached, he asked why we wanted to talk to him and explained that he was not a hero. During the show, he did not repeat his critical remarks, did not mention his brother, and hardly spoke about the war at all. Finally, the show was recorded, aired and was well received by the audience. While he did not speak as openly as he did during the interview, the audience in the room still perceived and ultimately addressed the difference in his tone. During the question segment, one person in the audience asked the respondent if he would characterize the veterans as a “lost generation”. He agreed with this assessment and added that many of the things that have not gone so well since the war are not openly discussed in Abkhazia today. Following this comment, another audience member stated: *“I heard an opinion that makes me think”*. Therefore, although the full deconstruction of the leading discourse observed in the initial interview was not transferred to the television interview, some smaller steps were made.

This experience led me to the conviction that, for an outsider, it is difficult to assess which forces are exerted on individuals who start testing the boundaries of the leading discourses in their communities. Moreover, indications of change in a narrative can be slight and easy for an outsider to miss, even if one knows the subject quite well. Insiders sometimes do perceive them and can react to even the smallest changes in the dominant narrative.

13 У меня брат, он герой Абхазии, старший брат. После войны, недавно, года 3 назад, он покончил с собой, т.е суицид, он просто, он стал ненужным, это не то за что он жил, тем более, время меняется очень быстро в наше время, это сложно пережить, переварить.

PERSPECTIVES

In reporting on his experiences with German–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian dialogue, Dan Bar-On underlined that it is the dialogue participants’ task to listen to each other and evoke stories from the other side. Only in doing this can each side gradually overcome the paradigmatic accounts of their respective societies (Bar-On 2004, 34f.). This is also the goal of the Berghof Foundation’s work in the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict setting. The workshops and exchanges of stories, as told in the interviews, can help individuals to broaden their views of the conflict. Perhaps most importantly, it can help them to reflect on their own side’s contribution to the escalation and maintenance of the conflict.

In my paper, I have argued that it is possible to address even difficult and painful topics if a constructive atmosphere of trust can be built up. At the same time, there are constraints to transferring these confidential processes to the broader public. The only answer I have to overcoming this dilemma is to suggest that a tactic in which small steps are taken must be pursued. While conducting trilateral meetings and workshops, over the years I have heard the Abkhaz mother of a fallen soldier say that she is ashamed of the deaths of innocent Georgian civilians who had sheltered Abkhaz citizens during the war and were killed in the last days of the conflict by Abkhaz troops. I have heard Georgian Internally Displaced Persons assume responsibility for having had to flee South Ossetia, because they had engaged in nationalistic rhetoric, and I have heard the parents of fallen soldiers extend condolences to their counterparts across the conflict divide. While these are big steps for individuals to take, in the grander scheme of the international conflict system that is presently developing on the borders between the spheres of Russian and Western influence, they are small and tentative steps. They can easily be reversed and undone through violent dynamics and propaganda. At the same time, I firmly believe that exchanging and discussing wartime experiences is crucial for any constructive development to take place between Georgian and Abkhaz communities. Ultimately, I am convinced that the sincere recapitulation of their own past is perhaps the only thing that Georgians have to offer that is presently of vital interest to the other side.

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