

**Creating a Common Future:  
Opportunities for Confidence-Building Measures in  
Unresolved Conflicts of the Former Soviet Union**

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## **Chapter 1**

# **The Need for Confidence-Building Measures in the Former Soviet Union**

On September 27, 2020, war erupted over Nagorno-Karabakh, catapulting the small separatist region to international headlines. Large-scale fighting shattered any illusions of stability in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, a small region supported and populated by Armenians in the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan which declared independence in 1991. The seemingly sudden escalation of a so-called “frozen” conflict to outright war shocked world leaders and had many struggling to understand the dynamics that led to such large-scale violence after decades of stalled negotiations. But fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding territories, which Armenia took control of after militarily defeating Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, is not a new or unusual occurrence.

Regular ceasefire violations have characterized the years following the 1994 ceasefire that ended the first war. In April 2016, a brief outbreak of large-scale fighting was ended by a Russian-brokered ceasefire after four days of violence along the Line of Contact, leading to minor territorial gains for Azerbaijan that were heralded as a military victory. The resulting militaristic sentiments from both sides, following decades of nationalist rhetoric, increasing isolation of the respective societies, and lack of progress on diplomatic tracks, created a situation ripe for military escalation. These already dangerous circumstances were exacerbated by Turkey’s new stance of explicit support for Azerbaijan, decreased engagement from international mediators, and changing political dynamics in the larger region. With the combination of Turkish support and growing

public preference for military solutions, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive in September 2020 to build on the successes of 2016 by retaking the land held by Armenia, including Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding territories (Broers 2020).

September 27 was the beginning of six weeks of fighting that ranged from the Line of Contact, located far away from the disputed region, to Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Leaving over 5,000 dead, the fighting frequently reached civilians: over half of Nagorno-Karabakh's population fled after heavy shelling, while the Armenian side simultaneously targeted Azerbaijani cities "far from the front-line with artillery, with deadly effect" (De Waal 2020b). Utilizing the asymmetrical militarization of the past 15 years, coupled with Turkey's support, Azerbaijan reclaimed a large portion of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and a section of the region itself.

Russia once again took on the main mediation role, brokering a ceasefire agreement on November 10 to end the fighting (Rahimov 2020). While the violence is over for now, the situation remains unstable and precarious, with many grave humanitarian concerns left largely unaddressed. Unexploded ordnance in the areas around Nagorno-Karabakh has already killed and injured soldiers and civilians, while uncertainty over property rights and refugee status has left thousands displaced. Azerbaijanis displaced from their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions during the war in the 1990s celebrated the chance to finally return, while Armenians who had been living in the region for decades became refugees overnight.

The ceasefire agreement recognizes the territorial gains made by Azerbaijan, but the deal is seen as "capitulation" by the Armenian side and thus cannot provide a sustainable path to peace (International Crisis Group 2020b). Armenian protesters resumed demonstrations over the agreement in spring 2021 that had begun in the fall, temporarily halted during the winter months. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian announced in March 2021 that he would resign, as called for by

demonstrators and opposing politicians, allowing the next general elections to happen in June rather than December 2023 (Synovitz and Musayelyan, 2021). Both countries have accused the other of war crimes and filed cases at the European Court of Human Rights, while neither side has taken accountability for its own actions (International Crisis Group 2020c). Nagorno-Karabakh's final status, the most contentious aspect of negotiations, is not mentioned in the ceasefire deal, guaranteeing future obstacles in any reinvigorated mediation process. The deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces marks the first time in almost three decades that Russian troops are present in all three states in the Caucasus – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – fulfilling Russia's long-running goal and allowing greater influence in the region (Cutler 2021).

The new dynamics and chaotic circumstances evident in the aftermath of the 2020 war create enormous obstacles for peaceful resolution. Respective experiences of military success and defeat make it unlikely that mediators will be able to convince either side that their aims can be achieved through negotiation, especially given the stalled process of international negotiation and the “corresponding rise in angry rhetoric” (International Crisis Group 2020a). Yet the unresolved nature of the conflict remains incredibly dangerous. Although the most recent outbreak of fighting has ended, the November ceasefire falls far short of addressing the key issues underlying the conflict, while the suffering caused by the war will continue to push people on the opposing sides apart.

The September escalation into war highlighted the misleading label of “frozen conflict” often assigned to Nagorno-Karabakh and similar post-Soviet separatist conflicts in Transdniestria (Moldova), South Ossetia (Georgia), and Abkhazia (Georgia). Even before the outbreak of large-scale fighting, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was marked by decades of ceasefire violations, including the “Four-Day War” in April 2016, with simultaneous lack of progress at the

international negotiating table. While the negotiating process over some of these conflicts, most notably South Ossetia, may be frozen, the conflicts themselves are certainly not. As the Nagorno-Karabakh escalation demonstrates, the unresolved nature of these conflicts remains a major threat to the safety and well-being of their residents, the security of the region, and the relations between countries involved. With each passing year, heightened rhetoric and increasing isolation diminishes prospects for reconciliation and negotiation between the sides, further limiting the potential of peacefully resolving these four conflicts.

The potential for violent escalation in each of these regions, emphasized by the recent eruption of Nagorno-Karabakh, demonstrates the urgent need for resolution. After three decades of stalled negotiations and growing divides between each conflict's respective sides, fostering even the smallest of efforts towards improving relations is a necessary step in preventing future violence. Cooperative measures between sides, whether encouraging mechanisms for communication between military leaders or promoting cross-border dialogue over common issues, is essential to negotiating a lasting peace agreement. The harsh rhetoric and nationalist narratives propped by leaders across the conflict regions have led to widespread acceptance of "us vs. them" perceptions and disincentivized compromise on all levels. Even if a peace deal were negotiated in any of the four cases, the lack of existing initiatives to prepare the populations for peace would likely lead to the agreement's failure. The multitude of conflict resolution strategies attempted, without long-lasting success, in the region over the past thirty years have shown the futility of working only at the highest diplomatic levels while overlooking realities on the ground. For any future agreement to be encouraged, negotiated, and implemented, relations between opposing sides must be improved on all levels.



### *Confidence-Building Measures*

Policymakers have a wide range of tools available to try to bring about peace in difficult conflicts like these. While the success of such tools may depend on the political will and interests of national leaders, efforts at the international and community levels can encourage progress towards resolution even when leaders remain unwilling. Existing strategies often focus on power-sharing agreements and third-party support to end civil wars peacefully, as these approaches seek to address existential security concerns and encourage negotiation. Negotiated power-sharing agreements can help to address inequalities and minimize problems of information and commitment, although security concerns often remain and are best alleviated by international security support. International mediation is widely used to manage conflicts across the world, often successfully, as the participation of third-party actors who often hold regional or global power can promote discussion and incentivize cooperation. Third-party actors can also deploy peacekeeping missions to monitor or enforce agreements. These and other strategies frequently occur at the highest levels, with negotiation and implementation procedures agreed upon by leaders on each side and international mediators. As there is frequently a disconnect between these formal negotiations and the general public, it is critical to also implement initiatives to foster reconciliation between affected communities.

To encourage the negotiation process and prepare societies for peace, confidence-building measures can be used to promote low-stakes cooperation and dialogue on common issues between both sides of the conflict at all levels. Confidence-building measures can thus complement high-level initiatives in two main ways. First, by encouraging reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts between civil society and individuals, which then work in parallel to the negotiation process.

Second, confidence-building measures can fill the gap left by high-level talks by directly addressing the needs of affected communities.

Confidence-building measures can “be broadly defined as a set of unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral initiatives, undertaken by states to reduce hostilities before, during, or after a conflict” (Khalil 2014, 81). Simply put, confidence-building measures are small cooperative steps taken between opposing sides designed to increase trust on incremental measures that can then be applied to negotiations over more controversial and existential issues. Confidence-building measures tend to focus on Track II and III diplomacy, defined as diplomatic and relationship-building efforts between civil society actors and individuals, respectively.

The existing literature on commitment problems and other factors preventing peaceful resolution demonstrate that lack of confidence in the other party to uphold agreements often leads to stalled negotiations or the resumption of violence, so confidence-building measures are designed to alleviate this issue by promoting cooperation on lower levels and lower-stakes issues to build trust. Confidence-building measures can also occur simultaneously with formal negotiations, as they seek to build better relationships between societies affected by conflict. Some scholars have argued that the implementation of confidence-building measures has “stabilized, but arguably also entrenched, an existing status quo,” but such stalemates exist at the top levels of negotiation, rather than between divided communities (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 305). While individuals or even civil society may not have a direct influence on the negotiation process, as is the case in the former Soviet Union, populations must also be prepared for reconciliation in the event of an eventual peace agreement. By encouraging trust and cooperation between conflicting populations, confidence-building measures can lay the foundation for peaceful coexistence.

Within the existing academic literature, confidence-building measures are defined more specifically as “a spectrum of activities aimed at changing the contemporary character of two or more interacting inimical societies in a certain positive way. In an ideal case, under the influence of CBMs, adversaries should increasingly start to undertake more mutual exchanges and gradually become more trustful towards each other” (Kudláčová 2014, 37). Confidence-building measures have been implemented in a range of conflicts across the world to promote mutual understanding and cooperation on shared issues. In South Asia, “meaningful Track-II dialogues and discussions” have been successfully implemented between people in India and Pakistan, while parallel Track I efforts have developed hotlines for urgent communication between the two sides (Badrul Alam 2010, 49). Multiple trade routes were also negotiated and opened across the Line of Contact between India and Pakistan in the late 2000s, allowing greater connections between cities and residents (Badrul Alam 2010, 58). Despite major structural barriers and difficulty measuring success, civil society organizations in South Korea have developed “people-to-people contacts” in North Korea, allowing for “informal dialogue and information sharing between both sides” (Kudláčová 2014, 42-43).

In the four conflicts I have selected, examples of confidence-building measures range from environmental cooperation to collaborative historical projects. With the support of the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), initiatives in Transdnistria seek to bring students from both sides of the conflict together to learn about ecosystem health and protecting their shared environment, which simultaneously encourages relationships between the upcoming generation of leaders. On a larger level, Moldova has allowed Transdnistrian businesses to take advantage of Moldova’s Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area if businesses register in Chişinău. This step has encouraged economic cooperation between

leaders, allowed informal connections between people, and established protocols and procedures for the two sides to share information.

In the South Caucasus, collaborative projects between Abkhaz and Georgians have tackled competing historical narratives by creating a system to exchange archival materials, as well as cooperating on the sensitive and essential process of locating and identifying missing people from the war in the 1990s. Cross-boundary communication and cooperation was common in South Ossetia in the decade following the 1992 war, leading to the common perception of this region as the most integrated with its parent state and, thus, the easiest conflict to resolve. Georgian President Saakashvili's 2004 decision to close the popular Ergneti Market, a bustling market fostering trade, dialogue, and relationships across the boundary line, provides an example of government action taken against a confidence-building measure. After the resulting violence and the August war in 2008, South Ossetia is now almost fully closed, and confidence-building measures are very difficult to implement across the boundary line. The Ergneti Market example demonstrates the benefits of stability and coexistence that can be encouraged by confidence-building measures promoting dialogue and informal relationships, as well as the dangerous repercussions of undoing or failing to implement such initiatives.

Despite the potential of confidence-building measures to contribute to successful conflict resolution, existing literature focused on the region lacks continuity, recent information, and evidence of successful outcomes. Confidence-building measures attracted attention in the initial stages of the negotiation process over each of these four conflicts, but interest and analysis has significantly waned in the subsequent decades. As the conflicting sides across the region remain divided by harsh rhetoric and growing isolation, it is time to revisit the potential for confidence-building measures to contribute to improved relations between conflict parties at all levels. By

examining the dynamics of the four chosen cases and speaking directly with individuals carrying out such initiatives, I seek to refresh the understanding and analysis of confidence-building measures in the former Soviet Union and as a global tool for conflict resolution.

### *Case Selection and Methodology*

The four case studies of Transdniestria (Moldova), Abkhazia (Georgia), South Ossetia (Georgia), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan) were chosen as representative examples of differing post-Soviet conflict dynamics and opportunities for confidence-building measures to be implemented. All four cases have sufficiently similar circumstances to be comparable, as post-Soviet separatist regions with a history of violence, but each region features different levels of confidence-building measures to allow for comparative analysis. The four chosen case studies feature separatist regions in states of the former Soviet Union that remain unrecognized by the vast majority of the international community. All have experienced active fighting and remain unresolved due to a variety of internal and external factors. Most notably for the purposes of this study, the four cases represent different steps towards, involvement in, and commitment to confidence-building measures.

To best compare the successes, challenges, and opportunities in each conflict, I use a categorization system considering the time range of major violence, the level of communication between sides, and the capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures. I measure time range by decade, with historical conflicts in the 1990s, recent conflicts in the 2000s, and contemporary conflicts in the 2010s and 2020s. Communication levels consider dialogue and degree of isolation, while capacity for implementation includes strength of civil society, international and national support, politicization of the conflict, and social and political interest in

resolution. The case study chapters are then organized from the greatest potential for confidence-building measures to the least, based on the combination of the three categories.

Transdnistria is a historical conflict with moderate levels of communication and high capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures. Large-scale fighting last occurred in 1992 and the region has experienced a significantly higher degree of integration with its parent state than the other conflicts. Due to Transdnistria's economic aspirations, Moldova and the EU have successfully encouraged increased economic ties with Moldova to allow access to EU markets and Moldova's preferential trade regime. The resolution process is characterized by a high degree of international support for incremental measures but remains challenged by moderately politicized issues and low overall interest in resolution. The OSCE-led 5+2 group (Moldova, Transdnistria, the OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, the EU, and the US) have discussed confidence-building measures for years but most recently committed to a package of eight measures in Berlin in 2016. Success has been reported on several aspects, such as allowing vehicles with previously insufficient Transdnistrian licensing in international traffic and supporting controversial Latin-script schools in Transdnistria, measures which are discussed in greater detail in the subsequent case study chapter. Other goals, such as increasing freedom of movement and enhancing cross-river cooperation on criminal cases, remain incomplete with little to no reported progress.

Abkhazia is a recent conflict characterized by low levels of communication and moderate capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures. Violence most recently occurred in 2008, when fighting in South Ossetia affected a small portion of Abkhazia. Dialogue initiatives have seen success in Abkhazia, more so before 2008, but the international isolation of the region following Russia's recognition of its independence has decreased options for communication and collaborative efforts. Abkhazia is distinguished from the other conflicts in its high level of interest

among civil society groups in resolution and similarly high level of international support, although these efforts struggle to reach the larger society. One successful confidence-building measure in Abkhazia has been the long-running civil society dialogue project sponsored by the University of California, Irvine, which brought representatives from Abkhazia and Georgia together for discussions beginning in 1997. Participants built sufficient trust to discuss seemingly irreconcilable issues and viewed the dialogues as helpful to understand the other side's perspective, but the limited capacity of these civil society groups prevented the benefits from expanding to the wider community.

South Ossetia is also a recent conflict, affected by the same 2008 war as Abkhazia, but has essentially no communication between the sides and very low capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures. The majority of the violence in 2008 occurred in South Ossetia, leading to displacement and destruction of property and infrastructure. With increasingly militarized boundaries and restricted freedom of movement, South Ossetia is isolated from the international community and Georgia. Civil society is weak and denied support from outside organizations, while conflict-related issues are highly politicized and the region's near-complete dependence on Russia limits its options. South Ossetia's isolation is a relatively new phenomenon: from the 1992 ceasefire to 2004, South Ossetia remained closely integrated with Georgia. The border remained open and trade between the sides flourished at the Ergneti Market, the "largest wholesale market in the South Caucasus," providing a venue for frequent communication and informal relationships (De Waal 2019a, 3-4). The election of Mikhail Saakashvili in 2004 effectively reversed all confidence-building success, as he began an anti-corruption initiative that shut down the market and subsequently inflamed tensions. Today, South Ossetia remains a virtually closed region with minimal support of domestic civil society and prohibited entry for all

but one international organization, thus drastically limiting options for cooperative measures across the conflict divide.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a contemporary conflict, with ceasefire violations a regular occurrence since 1994, a four-day outbreak of fighting in 2016, and the most recent war in 2020. The level of communications between the two sides is classified as very low, especially in the aftermath of the 2020 violence and subsequent deteriorating relations. The capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures is also low, due to the highly politicized nature of all conflict-related issues, the lack of interest in peaceful resolution, and the minimal national or international support. The idea of confidence-building measures is often brought up by international leaders and experts, but no concrete plan has been made under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group. The suspicion towards international NGOs and general lack of civil society in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan further limits grassroots-level efforts which, if they exist, are not widely publicized outside the region. Security-based confidence-building measures, such as communications mechanisms between the sides, have been suggested as a potential method for deescalating tensions along the Line of Contact, but the major territorial changes and militarized rhetoric after the last conflict will further complicate efforts to implement such mechanisms.

The case of Crimea and the Donbass (Ukraine) is not included in the general study, as the conflict is much more recent (it began in 2014, compared to the others in the 1990s), did not emerge from the collapsing Soviet Union, and still sees frequent ceasefire violations. The case of Tajikistan, notably the only post-Soviet civil war to end with a full peace settlement, has been excluded as it was clearly not an intractable conflict.



The contrasts in the three categories affecting confidence-building measures across these four cases can thus demonstrate larger implications about the conditions required for successful confidence-building measures. Table 1 below summarizes the categorization of each case.

**Table 1: Categorization of Case Studies**

<b>Case</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Level of Communications</b>	<b>Capacity for Implementation</b>
<b>Transdnistria</b>	Historical	Moderate	High
<b>Abkhazia</b>	Recent	Low	Moderate
<b>South Ossetia</b>	Recent	None	Very Low
<b>Nagorno-Karabakh</b>	Contemporary	Very Low	Low

To analyze the previous success and future potential for confidence-building measures, I develop case studies supported by semi-structured interviews with individuals and organizations planning and implementing confidence-building measures. I use primary and secondary source materials, including media sources, government statements, organization websites, and academic literature to create detailed case studies of each conflict. Through my research, I also identified and contacted individuals and organizations involved in implementing confidence-building measures, as well as general representatives of civil society in each region. Semi-structured

interviews with seven civil society groups provided insight into the challenges faced by these efforts, as well as successes and ideas for further improvement.

### *Research Implications*

Nagorno-Karabakh's violent descent into war in September 2020 shows the dangerous situation of so-called frozen conflicts today. It is clear that the unresolved nature of these conflicts poses a threat to the security of their residents, as well as their neighbors and the region as a whole. In the aftermath of this devastating conflict, reflection on the past successes and failures of negotiating processes demonstrates the need for an updated assessment of conflict resolution strategies. After thirty years of frequently stalled negotiations and no major progress on the international level, focused study on confidence-building measures may provide information on future strategies to develop a larger "refreshing" of the conflict resolution process. By understanding how and where confidence-building measures have succeeded or failed, policymakers can design strategies to best mitigate or resolve the ongoing instability and violence across these four conflict regions. Analysis of previously attempted conflict resolution tools across these conflicts can also contribute to the development of strategies for other conflicts around the world by deepening the theory of confidence-building measures and applying it to other cases.

In the four chosen cases specifically, there is a sense of humanitarian urgency in continuing to examine possible paths to peace, as local populations have lived in a state of no war, but no peace, for decades without any hope for change. Local initiatives in particular often focus on unmet humanitarian needs, especially in the immediate aftermath of conflict, but lack support for or understanding of these efforts. While security and economic confidence-building measures are often prioritized in research, serious efforts to alleviate human suffering on both sides of a conflict

can create common, moral, and pragmatic incentives for cooperation. Given that confidence-building measures are widely understood to at the very least promote dialogue and encourage negotiation, the option should be discussed, studied, and implemented in the hopes that it can affect positive change.

The examination of confidence-building measures in unresolved conflicts can also prove useful for the larger study of their effectiveness internationally and potential for application to other cases. While confidence-building measures will inevitably be specific to individual conflicts, the classification of these four conflicts as civil wars demonstrates larger applicability to the study of armed conflict and strategies of conflict resolution. Evidence of success in long-running, seemingly impossible conflicts may predict even greater success in newer, less entrenched conflicts. As the increasing divides between the conflicting parties in the four chosen cases is a major barrier to reconciliation and resolution, it follows that success in building cooperation across these divides could then encourage similar initiatives in conflicts elsewhere, whether recent or seemingly frozen. Overall, deeper understanding of the theory regarding confidence-building measures can promote their targeted use across the world and refine specific strategies for implementation.

Reexamining past experiences with and opportunities for confidence-building measures also seeks to refresh discussion of these measures as conflict resolution tools in the former Soviet states and across the world. The conflict resolution mechanisms established in the early 1990s are lacking relevance thirty years later, as the conflict dynamics, international political scene, and resolution theory has drastically changed in the decades since. Existing research on conflicts in the former Soviet Union tends to focus on the causes and continuation of conflict itself, rather than the opportunities for areas of cooperation through confidence-building measures. The existing

literature on the overall theory and use of confidence-building measures is quickly becoming outdated, as the majority of work is from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Given the rapidly evolving nature of technology as it relates to warfare and public perceptions, as well as the dynamic nature of the conflicts in question, it is crucial to update this literature to include temporally and regionally relevant work

### *Thesis Plan*

In Chapter 2, I introduce confidence-building measures in the context of the larger conflict resolution literature. As the four conflicts chosen are examples of internationalized intra-state wars, I begin with a discussion of civil wars, including factors affecting onset, duration, and termination, as well as the specific nature of ethnic conflicts. I then discuss a range of existing strategies for conflict resolution before introducing the theory of confidence-building measures as a potential strategy.

Chapter 3 specifically explores the opportunities for confidence-building measures in the former Soviet Union. I examine the success of confidence-building measures in various conflicts around the world as well as common challenges. I then move to a discussion of the role of Russia as the primary regional power, considering trends in foreign policy, Russian interests in the so-called “Near Abroad,” and Russian conflict resolution strategies. Finally, I examine the specifics of unresolved conflicts and barriers to their resolution. Overall, I show that confidence-building measures, while understudied, could prove effective at building local capacity for resolution and encouraging cooperation even as negotiations remain stalled.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 apply the previously discussed theories to case studies of the four chosen conflicts: Transdnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. These chapters

each provide a brief explanation of the conflict's causes and previous attempts at resolution before closely examining previous confidence-building measures and future opportunities. The case study chapters also introduce the results of my original research: interviews with a number of individuals working on local initiatives and information on confidence-building measures in each conflict and their respective levels of success.

I conclude the study in Chapter 8 with the combined results of the case study chapters and original research. Overall, I present the common challenges across the four cases, as well as successes and subsequent recommendations for best practices. Finally, I discuss the implications of my work for future confidence-building measures based on the needs expressed by local practitioners and international experts, within the confines of each conflict region's respective challenges and specificities.

## Chapter 2

# Opportunities for Confidence-Building Measures in Civil War Resolution

Confidence-building measures have proven to be an effective tool of conflict resolution around the world, working within the larger framework of resolution strategies to promote opportunities for cooperation and dialogue parallel to established formal negotiations. As seen in examples from the following case studies, the effectiveness of confidence-building measures is aided by the flexibility to focus on specific areas of common interest or concern. To that end, confidence-building measures used in the former Soviet Union and globally range from mechanisms supporting communications between opposing militaries to support for education initiatives for students in isolated, unrecognized regions. Given the broad definition of confidence-building measures as any cooperative steps aimed at increasing trust between conflicting parties, their use as a resolution tool must be tailored to the specific dynamics of a conflict.

To best allow for comparison across the cases and application to existing theory, I discuss the four chosen cases within the broader framework of civil wars and strategies for their resolution. I define all four conflicts as civil wars, as each is located within the territory of a single internationally recognized state and, while the conflicts have become increasingly internationalized, there is not direct interstate conflict.<sup>1</sup> The civil war framework, as opposed to an

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<sup>1</sup> The brief 2008 war in South Ossetia must be noted as a possible exception to this conception. The majority of fighting took place between Russian and Georgian troops, which could then define the conflict as an interstate war. I argue that as the causes and history of the conflict remain firmly in the intrastate category, applying interstate conflict theory to a six-day war does not reflect the conflict as a whole. Instead, South Ossetia has become an internationalized civil war, as have the other three cases, due to extensive Russian influence.

interstate conflict framework, also pays greater attention to dynamics between previously coexisting communities and focuses on status questions for the conflicting sides. To better understand the opportunities for success, I discuss the larger framework of civil wars, dynamics of ethnic conflict, and strategies for resolution. I begin the chapter by considering definitions and patterns of civil wars, then analyzing the factors that contribute to onset and influence duration to better understand the development of long-running conflicts. I then survey existing strategies for conflict resolution and the underlying causes they address, showing the necessity of finding additional creative solutions to bring these conflicts to an end.

### **Civil Wars: Definitions and Patterns**

The most widely used definition of civil war comes from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which defines state-based armed conflict as “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year” (Pettersson 2020, 1). In intrastate conflicts, or civil wars, the non-governmental party is at least one opposition group (Pettersson 2020, 2). As conflicts over territory fought between an opposition group (the separatist region) and the government of a state, all four cases fit this definition, with at least one year of each resulting in over 25 battle deaths.

Some scholars have contested common definitions of civil wars, arguing that they are often marred by “ad hoc” coding rules and the difficulty of gathering accurate data on civil war deaths (Sambanis 2004, 825). Most broad definitions use the same key elements as requirements for civil war: number of deaths, organization of the opposition, geographic proximity, and government involvement. Previously suggested definitions centered on conditions of sovereignty, levels of

resistance, local support, and conflict termination (Licklider 1995, 682; Sambanis 2004, 829-30). Following the general consensus, I use the UCDP definition of civil wars as a conflict between a state government and at least one opposition group, fought over territory and resulting in at least 25 battle deaths per year.

Civil wars often include significant external influence (Cunningham 2010), and it is thus important to move beyond a two-party conception of civil war (Cunningham 2006). The UCDP definition includes a provision for “internationalized” conflicts, where a state-based armed conflict is complicated by military intervention from external states, and notes that nearly 25% of modern armed conflicts are internationalized (Gleditsch, Melander, and Urdal 2016). As discussed later in more depth, external influence has been a major complicating factor in all four cases. Within the former Soviet Union, Russia has played an outsized role in each conflict, often propping up the conflict regions through economic aid and military support. Despite an overall decrease in the number of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War, evidence shows an upward trend in the past ten years, along with the increasing number of internationalized conflicts (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015). Wars have thus become more complex: while it is now less likely for a state to experience conflict in its territory, states are now more likely to participate in conflicts beyond their borders (Gleditsch, Melander, and Urdal 2016). The new occurrence of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 demonstrated the growing internationalization of that conflict in particular, as the situation was complicated by the involvement of Russia and Turkey, as well as ongoing support for Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia and the Armenian diaspora.

Other patterns of civil wars demonstrate the changing conditions following World War II, especially the different trends after the end of the Cold War. For the purpose of dating a major change in regional dynamics, I define the end of the Cold War as the collapse of the Soviet Union



in 1991 and the subsequent altering of power status within the region and the larger international community. Since 1946, civil wars are the most common form of armed conflict and, since the 1970s, civil wars have led to more deaths than interstate wars (Gleditsch, Melander, and Urdal 2016). In the period from 1946 to 2019, UCDP found 639 dyads, or pairs of combatant parties, in 290 conflicts in 158 locations (Pettersson and Öberg 2020). At the same time, evidence shows that following the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rate of war termination is outpacing the rate of war onset, and there has been an increasing trend in the number of peace agreements signed since 2011 (Gleditsch, Melander, and Urdal 2016; Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015). The four cases present an interesting contrast: all began in the years immediately before or after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but remain unresolved without a peace agreement despite generally low levels of fighting over the past three decades. These evolving patterns of internationalization, as well as the contrast between higher levels of agreements and simultaneously high numbers of civil war deaths, demonstrate the complexity of civil wars and the potential difficulties of resolution.

### **Civil War Onset and Duration**

The factors leading to civil war onset are often closely linked to those prolonging its duration. In the existing literature, civil wars are shown to occur and continue based on four key factors: information problems, leaders' political decisions, existing political/economic inequality, and the involvement of external actors. The duration of civil wars is also dependent on the difficulty of finding a settlement amenable to all sides, as the two sides cannot be separated after the end of fighting and at least one side is generally expected to fully disarm to ensure peace. In addition, very rarely can civil wars be considered true two-party conflicts, which further complicates the

duration of fighting and the ability to reach a deal. Ethnicity and national identity influence all these factors and frequently plays a major role in determining onset and duration, which is discussed later in greater detail.

### *Information Problems*

The causal factor of information problems focuses on two ideas: one, that leaders have access to private information and make subsequent choices based on it and two, that leaders may have to make decisions without relevant information. According to international relations theory, even rational leaders may end up starting a war if they cannot find an acceptable agreement due to the private information they possess and their incentives to “misrepresent such information” (Fearon 1995, 381-82). Access to private information on one side can also create information asymmetries, as a particular side may have more information about the other’s capabilities.

Information asymmetries can influence the decision to fight and, despite the high risk and cost of a civil war, information problems including uncertainty about the resolve and capabilities of each side may prolong fighting (Walter 2009a, 248-52). Due to the frequency of newly formed military movements fighting in civil wars, the opposing side must often decide whether to fight without information on military capabilities. Similarly, civil wars may recur when the initial war did not yield sufficient information about each side’s capabilities to prevent a new outbreak of fighting (Walter 2009a). This information can also change, leading one side to revisit the military option if it perceives a new advantage. Changes in available information affected Azerbaijan’s decision to begin fighting in 2016 and 2020, as it understood that high levels of military spending had created a military advantage over Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, far beyond the previously gained information about military capabilities. At the same time, the information each side gains

from fighting the war prevents them from trusting the other side when asked to disarm for a peace deal (Downes 2004, 233). If one side understands the other's extensive military capabilities, it will be unwilling to sign an agreement that creates a vulnerable situation without significant security guarantees and trust in place.

### *Leaders and Organization*

The political choices of state government leaders and opposition leaders, as well as the organization and structure of the parties, can also contribute to the causes of civil war. Events in the early days of fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrate this idea: the conflict could have been prevented with a nearly negotiated full peace agreement after major capitulation from Nagorno-Karabakh, but more radical leaders assassinated the main negotiator and thus spoiled the deal. State governments must also make careful choices about which groups to engage with, as past actions may influence the decisions of future movements with grievances against the government. For example, governments that fought short wars or ended wars through partition were more likely to see future challenges from other groups, as these movements often believed they could achieve similar success (Walter 2004, 385). On the opposite side, self-determination movements with greater levels of internal fractionalization were found more likely to end up engaged in civil war (Cunningham 2013, 669). The four cases demonstrate varying levels of internal debate over future policy: the path forward is generally agreed upon in the nearly ethnically homogenous South Ossetia, while internal divisions in the early days of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict halted or disrupted multiple options for resolution.

### *Opportunism*

Civil wars can begin from grievances or from greed, with scholars identifying specific structural factors that can allow for opportunism. Economic inequality and general poverty can influence the outbreak of civil war, as these conditions may be indicative of larger problems within the state. Impoverished states are especially vulnerable to civil war: low GDP per capita acts as a predictor of civil war because it demonstrates a lack of state capacity (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Groups experiencing economic inequality, those disproportionately well-off or those struggling, are seen more frequently in civil wars (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011, 492). More generally, scholars note linkages between inequality and the onset of civil war, considering economic and political inequality (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011, 478, 492). Grievances stemming from various types of inequality can spark conflict when specific groups feel discriminated against, especially after repeated instances or power imbalances. In all four cases, power imbalances from the Soviet era led to accusations of preferential treatment, often from both parties. For example, Abkhazians believe they were forced into the Soviet Union and then discriminated against, while Georgians consider Abkhazia the most privileged part of the former Soviet republic (International Crisis Group 2006, 3).

One of the most pressing issues in civil wars is the shared territory, as it means that the two sides cannot retreat to geographically divided regions after the conflict. Similarly, one of the critical differences between interstate and intrastate wars is that “adversaries in a civil war cannot retain separate, independent armed forces if they agree to settle their differences” (Walter 1997, 337). Resolution efforts must then include plans for military forces post-conflict, a difficult task in all civil wars, but particularly complex after decades of rhetoric painting the other side as an existential threat, as seen in Nagorno-Karabakh especially. Compared to interstate wars, civil wars

tend to feature greater intensity, the frequent necessity of sharing land after conflict, and more than two parties, sometimes including splits within parties (Hosli and Hoekstra 2013, 127). Ethnic civil wars add another level of difficulty, as the existing issues of information and commitment problems are compounded by issue indivisibility (Denny and Walter 2014).

### *Third Party Intervention*

A commonly explored factor in civil war duration is the role played by third parties, whether actively intervening or becoming involved in negotiations. Scholars broadly agree that military intervention that does not include strong encouragement to negotiate tends to lengthen the duration of a conflict, while diplomatic intervention can decrease duration (e.g. Regan and Aydin 2006). The four cases in the former Soviet Union are all characterized by high levels of Russian intervention, military and diplomatic. As of November 2020, the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh places Russian troops in all four regions. Simultaneously, Russia, the U.S., the OSCE, and the EU remain the primary negotiators working on Track I negotiation efforts in all four conflicts, although Russia is frequently accused of being a biased mediator and thus prolonging duration.

In the existing literature thus far, evidence has indeed indicated that military and economic intervention lessen the chances of ending conflict and instead contribute to prolonging conflict (Regan and Aydin 2006, 736). In contrast, another argument finds that military intervention supporting rebels contributes to shortening conflict (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom 2004, 268). Intervention that affects “only the structural balance of capabilities,” or drastically changing one side’s capacity in relation to the other, increases the duration, as it enables one side to continue fighting without incentives to negotiate (Regan and Aydin 2006, 740).

Third party intervention, military and diplomatic, inherently complicates the conditions of a civil war, as it includes a new actor with independent interests and agendas. Negotiators from multiple countries and international organizations have been accused of bias and individual interests during the four peace processes, although these accusations are often politically motivated themselves. Once another actor is added, the ability to seek a military victory or find a resolution becomes more limited (Cunningham 2010, 117). Due to these complications, third party involvement as a broad trend contributes to the relationship between military intervention and increased civil war duration (Cunningham 2010, 125). The more parties involved in a conflict, the more difficult the conflict is to resolve, thus increasing the duration of the conflict. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the outbreak of war in 2008, increased Russian military presence, and Russian recognition of independence all contributed to more complicated dynamics that stalled or halted negotiation processes. The involvement of additional parties creates four additional barriers to resolution: 1) a smaller bargaining range, 2) increased information asymmetries, 3) an incentive to sign last, and 4) shifting alliances (Cunningham 2006, 875-76).

### **How and Why Civil Wars End**

Scholars have developed two main theories proposing why civil wars are difficult to end: the rationalist argument believes that civil wars suffer the same barriers to resolution as interstate wars in addition to specific complicating factors, while the ideational argument says that civil wars are uniquely opposed to compromise (Walter 1997, 341). A major complicating factor in civil wars, building off the problems prolonging civil wars as discussed above, is the near impossibility of achieving credible commitment in civil conflicts (Walter 1997, 335). As the vast majority of civil wars do not end in complete geographic separation, credible commitment problems refer to the

inherent inability for either side to commit to a peace agreement that requires disarmament of one side, as there is no future ability to enforce such promises (Walter 1997). Confidence-building measures are often designed to minimize credible commitment concerns, as enhancing trust between sides on all diplomatic tracks can increase support for such seemingly risky agreements.

Recent data show an increase in the number of peace agreements signed since 2011, demonstrating the ability for wars to end with a negotiated settlement rather than a military victory (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015). In contrast to interstate wars, however, it is rare for civil wars to end in peace agreements (Walter 1997, 335). Instead, civil wars tend to end in military-led “extermination, expulsion, or capitulation of the losing side,” unless third party enforcement of the peace process is guaranteed (Walter 1997, 335). In the former Soviet Union, the unresolved conflicts remain ongoing, as neither an agreement nor a decisive military end has been reached. Parties will only negotiate if that options wins out in a cost- benefit analysis based on each side’s understanding of the battlefield and options under an agreement (Hosli and Hoekstra 2013, 128).

Another issue facing resolution is that peace settlements requiring disarmament inherently remove the capability to enforce the agreement (Walter 1997, 338). More often, stalemates seem preferable to negotiation, but do not represent a pragmatic long-term solution (Licklider 1995, 683). Instead of resolution, a condition of stalemate and some degree of peace may turn into a withdrawal of the government from a specific region and the development of rebel-managed structures there (Licklider 1995, 683). Separatist conflicts in the former Soviet Union demonstrate the possible results of an ongoing stalemate, as the unresolved nature of each conflict has allowed for the creation of de facto government institutions after the parent state withdrew from the region.

## **Ethnic Conflicts**

In ethnic conflicts specifically, credible commitment and information problems are exacerbated by long-standing or cemented ethnic divisions and the geographic proximity of the groups. The lack of credible commitments is made worse in ethnic civil wars, as the risk to the group disarming and trusting its safety to the group it previously fought is exacerbated by existing ethnic-based hostilities, leading to real security threats (Downes 2004). Identity conflicts centering ethnicity are in general inherently durable, as the very existence of a group may be at stake, thus providing a key motivating factor to continue fighting (Zartman 2006). Entrenched narratives presenting the other side as an existential threat have been seen in all four conflicts, although to varying degrees: initial language-based concerns in Transdnistria are no longer among the main factors preventing peace, in contrast to the extreme ethnic-based rhetoric of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Many scholars focusing on the role of ethnicity argue that the diversity of a society or existence of strong ethnic grievances cannot accurately predict the likelihood of a civil war breaking out (e.g. Fearon and Laitin 2003). Others argue that civil wars can be driven by “ethnonationalist” concerns, specifically over access to state power, as seen in all four cases of unresolved conflicts (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010, 88). Ethnic groups, in general, are much more likely to launch a civil war against the state than non-ethnic groups, due to the higher rate of grievances, greater ability to gain support, and larger number of bargaining problems (Denny and Walter 2014, 199).

Political inequality and exclusion have similarly strong effects. Conflict between a group and the government is most likely when: 1) the ethnic group is excluded from governmental power, 2) the group has large “mobilizational capacity,” and 3) when there is a greater prior experience of conflict (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010, 88). Recent loss of power or recent previous



conflict also increases the likelihood of conflict (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010, 114). Finally, the level of ethnic groups' access to central power, and the resulting political inequality, can influence the onset of civil war (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011, 492). Institutionally created power imbalances between ethnic groups in the former Soviet republics frequently fostered resentment as particular groups were perceived as receiving special treatment, thus ripening the opportunities for conflict.

The rationale of governments to become involved in ethnic wars is often based on the “vulnerability theory,” which argues that states at risk for secessionist movements will not support secessionist movements in other countries. This claim has been criticized over the past twenty years, with scholars arguing instead for the critical role of domestic ethnic politics (Saideman 1997). Similarly, in deciding whether to negotiate or fight with secessionist groups, negotiating may be seen as an invitation for future challenges, while war may intimidate potential secessionist movements into compliance (Walter 2009b). Some scholars conclude that these complicating factors only allow resolution through partition and full ethnic separation (Kaufmann 1996), while others caution that endorsing partition without international standards could incentivize violent secessionism and undermine state sovereignty (Fearon 2004). Across the former Soviet Union, these factors have led to unresolved conflict as domestic and international actors struggle to address the causes and duration of ethnic-based conflicts, particularly due to historically rooted power imbalances between groups and geographic proximity.

### **Conflict Resolution Strategies**

Given the complexities of civil wars, and ethnic conflicts more specifically, strategies for resolution are designed to address the factors leading to initial violence and ongoing duration. Civil

wars can end in one of two ways: through a decisive military victory by one side, or through a peace agreement. Wars that end in military victory rarely recur, but ending wars through peace agreements prevents the level of violence that generally prefaces a military conclusion. Scholars agree on two broad types of strategies to peacefully end civil wars: power-sharing agreements and third party support. Due to the security fears inherent in civil wars, these strategies have the best chance at ensuring negotiations occur and succeed without being derailed by concerns of continued fighting. While both strategies can prove effective in ending civil wars, it is important to note the specific dynamics of separatist conflicts when examining opportunities for resolution. One of the central factors preventing peaceful resolution in all four cases is the existence of de facto state institutions in each region and absolute opposition to the levels of integration required for power-sharing. In the Georgian conflicts specifically, Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence has legitimized their unwillingness to negotiate on status beyond complete independence, seemingly dashing hopes for strategies requiring re-integration.

Power-sharing seeks to include all parties in the management of political and security issues, with the more codified the agreement the better the chances for success (Hartzell and Hoddie 2003, 330). Third party support mechanisms focus on mediation and peacekeeping, which seek to incentivize peace negotiations and provide outside monitoring and security. These strategies seek to address the underlying causes of civil war and continued fighting, including information problems, commitment problems, and post-conflict security fears, all of which are exacerbated by the necessity of sharing territory and a government after the conflict.

### *Mediation*

The involvement of third parties have been found to successfully incentivize negotiations from the beginning of the peace process (Findley 2013, 922; Hosli and Hoekstra 2013, 146). The two recent outbreaks of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, have been ended by strong mediation efforts from Russia, as the only negotiator with sufficient regional power to bring both parties to an agreement. Third party mediation allows for the transfer of information, which leads to less asymmetry and more objectivity in the decision-making process (Regan and Aydin 2006, 740). Especially given the frequency of multilateral mediation, peace processes are best considered large, dynamic structures that include bilateral relationships, rather than a solely triadic relationship between one mediator and the opposing parties (Sisk 2009). In contrast, negotiations can also be a multilateral process, which often differs from bilateral negotiations: mediators can be part of the negotiations, rather than being an external actor, and building consensus depends on delineating participants' interests (Touval 1989, 169). Within these relationships, mediators have a wide range of duties and options for encouraging negotiation.

Three main characteristics of mediators are considered essential for success: (im)partiality, leverage, and status (Kleiboer 1996, 364). Frequent accusations of biased mediators in the former Soviet cases center on the perceived lack of impartiality; Russia in particular is often considered heavily biased due to its direct participation in the conflicts. The commitment of a third party to involvement in the conflict largely depends on another three related factors: its interests, the barriers to entry, and the prospects for peace (Melin 2014, 245). The idea of (im)partiality connects to the greater commitment of third parties facing barriers to entry, as they take on the burden of involvement without personal incentive (Melin 2014, 223). Barriers to entry in the former Soviet Union (FSU) have frequently been high for international powers other than Russia, as they have

minimal direct interests in the region and see few prospects for peace. The organizations that do become involved, however, are widely considered the most impartial negotiators. Main negotiating powers include the UN, OSCE, and the EU, although the separatist regions tend to consider the EU, along with the U.S., less impartial than the others due to their Western status and tensions with Russia.

### *Power-Sharing Agreements*

Mediators frequently focus on power-sharing agreements, which are designed to assuage information and commitment problems by addressing the political inequalities that may have contributed to the conflict (Findley 2013; Hartzell and Hoddie 2003). The case of Northern Ireland remains the classic example of such an agreement, implementing a power-sharing government in Belfast under the Good Friday Agreement. These agreements also tend to strengthen government and its competencies, which then minimizes the factors allowing for insurgency (Fearon and Laitin 2003, 88). Power-sharing agreements tend to propose solutions for military concerns as well as political, as the two are often intertwined. To address lingering security fears, agreements with power-sharing often include the deployment of peacekeepers to the conflict region, as these international forces are generally considered unbiased.

### *Peacekeeping*

Peacekeeping can be understood as a part of the larger international involvement process, which generally includes mediation as well. Studies of peacekeeping effectiveness, when factors influencing selection bias and difficulty are controlled for, find that international intervention contributes to the likeliness and durability of peace (Fortna 2004a, 288). These studies, however,

tend to focus on international peacekeeping operations with internationally approved mandates, which differ greatly from the majority-Russian peacekeeping forces deployed in all four cases, often without the consent of the parent state. Strong and specific agreements contribute positively to the durability of peace, especially those including mechanisms that “help combatants alter the incentives to break the cease-fire, reduce uncertainty about each other’s actions and intentions, and help prevent or manage accidents that could lead back to war” (Fortna 2004b, 211-13). Such strategies consist of demilitarization, mechanisms to resolve minor disputes, and other confidence-building measures. In contrast, peace is less likely to last in situations between parties with a history of conflict or between neighbors (Fortna 2004b, 211).

Peacekeeping efforts spearheaded by the United Nations (UN) can be traced back to the end of the Cold War, which allowed intervention to move beyond strictly neutral observation missions and become a main focus of the UN (McNeill 1997, 96). International intervention efforts faced a conundrum in the FSU, as the UN could not formally endorse Russian peacekeeping actions in the region, but its lack of strong opposition or a peacekeeping alternative inadvertently legitimized Russian initiatives and allowed troop deployment (McNeill 1997). The lack of consensus in the West over how best to incorporate Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into the international community without validating Russian great power status has led to disorganized policy and allowed Russia to wield greater power over peacekeeping operations run by the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, later the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (Lucas 1994). Russian peacekeeping operations are central to all four conflicts: while the deployment of peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh in November 2020 marked the first time in decades that Russian troops have been present on the territory of all four countries,

negotiations over their proposed deployment have dominated discussions of peacekeeping since the conflict began.

Existing strategies for ending civil wars have frequently proven successful around the world, but the common ideas of power-sharing agreements, mediation, and peacekeeping have failed to resolve the conflicts in the FSU. The long duration and geographic, political, and economic isolation that characterize these conflicts has complicated the already complex process of conflict resolution, and the lack of trust between conflicting parties has further heightened tensions. The concluding section of this chapter offers an overview of confidence-building measures, which may offer options for transforming views of conflict into ones allowing for eventual peace. While these measures have previously been used in the former Soviet Union, discussion of them as an effective strategy has largely disappeared from negotiations, thus demonstrating the need for a refreshed analysis of opportunities for confidence-building measures.

### **Confidence-Building Measures**

Confidence-building measures can promote cooperation, encourage dialogue, and build trust between the conflicting parties, which is crucial when larger concessions are required in the peace process. While the majority of existing research on confidence-building measures focuses on military measures, such as military links across ceasefire lines or arms control agreements, political, economic, environmental, societal, and cultural initiatives can also prove effective at building trust on all sides. Confidence-building measures are unique among conflict resolution strategies for their implementation on all tracks of diplomacy, including individual-level initiatives seeking to increase cross-border informal relationships and mechanisms between military leaders and international observers to deescalate military incidents. In the four unresolved conflicts in the

FSU, confidence-building measures have focused on tangible goals that aid both sides and are usually beneficial to their populations. Some examples of these include joint ecological projects between Moldova and Transnistria, proposed communication lines between militaries in Nagorno-Karabakh, and efforts to allow civil society interaction between professionals in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and their peers in Georgia.

In specific types of conflict such as ethnic conflicts, where identity and group existence are at stake, methods of resolution are inherently risky as they require coordination and high levels of trust (Zartman 2006). The use of confidence-building measures, if carried out and supervised by negotiators, can help create the necessary trust between parties, but distrust may increase if the measures are not accomplished (Zartman 2006, 262). While measuring success of confidence-building measures can be difficult, due to the inherent challenge of measuring trust, the representatives of civil society groups I interviewed working on such initiatives reported success in changing opinions and shifting perspectives towards acceptance of peace. When considering large-scale peacebuilding plans, scholars point out that providing easy and tangible “wins” can bolster public support for more difficult policies, while simultaneous work towards reconciliation can encourage durable peace (Doyle and Sambanis 2006). The use of confidence-building measures in ethnic conflict is discussed in more depth below, and the next chapter goes into greater detail regarding obstacles to implementation, best practices, and opportunities for their use in the FSU.

Looking specifically at ethnic conflicts in post-imperial regions, the presence of security dilemmas complicated by manipulated historical information and ethnically charged rhetoric hints at an opportunity for confidence-building measures to prevent fighting (Posen 1993). To prevent conflict, third parties should work to understand the strategic perspectives of each individual group

and then seek to lessen the threats felt by each group and reduce the windows of opportunity for violence by reconciling competing narratives and examining discriminatory policies (Posen 1993). In other conflicts, decades of harsh rhetoric have already led to outbreaks of violence: in Nagorno-Karabakh, the time has long since passed to prevent conflict with preemptive confidence-building. Instead, measures must focus on slowly rebuilding cross-border connections after the devastation of war. In one case study on confidence-building measures in the specific post-Soviet context, Mykola Kapitonenko agrees that the most important factors in post-Soviet internal conflicts are structural and political, as a weak state and strong local leaders can create a security dilemma focused on ethnic concerns, exacerbated by the state's inability to prevent violence (Kapitonenko 2009, 38). Kapitonenko argues that strategic liberalization (transforming societal structures to limit discrimination and create equality in power) seemed like the best method of conflict resolution, but failed partly due to a lack of decisive confidence-building measures (Kapitonenko 2009, 39). Long-term views such as these often focus solely on domestic development, rather than considering the immediate threats to confidence building and resolution. Other circumstances discussed in the next chapter, including dynamics specific to the former Soviet region and the complicating role of Russia, further challenge conflict resolution.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Opportunities for Confidence-Building Measures in the Former Soviet States**

The academic literature on the resolution of civil wars and available strategies demonstrates the need for additional creative solutions, including confidence-building measures. While confidence-building measures have been previously attempted in the former Soviet space, discussion of the strategy has stalled along with the negotiation process. Given the drastically changed conflict dynamics, as compared to unchanged resolution mechanisms developed 30 years ago, the existing analysis of confidence-building measures in the region should be refreshed and reconsidered for future use. These measures may be particularly useful in the former Soviet Union, where the unresolved conflicts are ethnic- and secessionist-based civil wars, complicated by factors such as internal benefits and external actors, which increase duration and hinder resolution.

To analyze the opportunities for confidence-building measures in the former Soviet Union, I continue the explanation of this strategy from the last chapter, going into more depth on negotiation and implementation, obstacles faced, and requirements for success. I then discuss the specific dynamics of unresolved conflicts in the former Soviet Union by examining theories of Russia's foreign policy, intervention, and conflict resolution, as well as internal factors preventing resolution and theories of intractable conflicts in the region. Overall, I demonstrate that while the use of confidence-building measures has not been widely studied in the FSU, particularly recently, refreshing this discussion for future implementation could prove useful at disrupting the cycles of fruitless negotiation over seemingly indivisible issues.

### **Success of Confidence-Building Measures**

Literature on the broad theories of confidence-building measures, including their use and success in other regions, demonstrates the potential progress these measures can support in the former Soviet Union, as well as noting best practices and obstacles on the global level. Confidence-building measures can be categorized as military or non-military, the latter which can be further broken down into political, economic, environmental, societal, and cultural (Kudláčová 2014). Two broad groups of actors oversee each category of measures: military/government and civil society/grassroots organizers, respectively (Kudláčová 2014). Within secessionist states, controversy over power and legitimacy of authorities can complicate oversight of confidence-building measures, but such measures can also encourage increased levels of communication. Confidence-building measures can be particularly useful in a phased approach to negotiation, in which the next steps are contingent on successful completion of prior steps, especially as they can lay the groundwork for difficult concessions (Phillips 1996, 830).

In addition to their role in encouraging closer ties between parties to a conflict, confidence-building measures can also support “regional security and stability” (Yuan 1998, 71). With the fear of spillover from the South Caucasus to the North Caucasus frequently cited as a justification for Russian intervention, promoting greater regional stability is vital for all parties involved. The overall sense of security can be aided by the primary goals of creating “confidence and gradual trust between two antagonists so that mutual suspicions and anxiety are reduced,” simultaneously encouraging predictable behavior and de-escalation techniques (Mazari 2005, 2998). Given the idea of ongoing “managed instability” in the former Soviet Union, seen as a region ripe for secessionist conflicts, arguments for balancing regional security could prove enticing for local leaders concerned about their own state’s safety and sovereignty.

Agreement between parties on confidence-building measures tends to reflect each side's perceptions of threat (Yuan 1998). When these perceptions align, as often seen with a common enemy, agreements may be more forthcoming. In the former Soviet Union, the ethnic divides and support (for one side or both) from Russia often prevents the casting of a common enemy. Confidence-building measures can then be critical in building the relationships needed for future negotiations: "among the most critical of factors involved in strengthening the linkages among elites is the promotion of pragmatic perceptions regarding each other's intentions and a willingness to play by the rules" (Rothchild 1995, 10). Despite this rationale, confidence-building measures in the former Soviet states focus heavily on Track II and III efforts, as official negotiations may be considered the best or only option for Track I.

International organizations can play an important role in the implementation of confidence-building measures, as they often serve as objective monitors of verification regimes and contribute to fact-finding work. The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia was deployed following the 2008 war with a mandate for observation and promoting trust. Unfortunately, these efforts have faced major challenges, namely the refusal of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to allow the mission into the respective regions. More effective influence of international organizations is often seen in conflicts in which one or more parties seeks to join the organization in question (Phillips 1996). In contrast to the EUMM, the EU Border Assistance Mission and a variety of EU-funded projects in Transnistria have succeeded in promoting cooperation on common interests, largely due to interest from Moldova and Transnistria in gaining access to the EU market. In the former Soviet Union, Moldova and Georgia have expressed interest in eventual EU membership, and Georgia also aspires to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), so participation of one or both of these groups in overseeing the process of confidence-building measure

implementation could potentially encourage compliance from the government. Involvement of these organizations is much less likely to succeed in the regions themselves; Abkhazia and South Ossetia are known for resistance to the EU and NATO. This tendency is further exacerbated by the preferences of Russia, as their main financial backer, which sees Western institutions as a threat to its regional power.

The success of confidence-building measures relies on the existence of some common interests and high-level, Track I support, but can also face significant obstacles in the face of local-level disapproval or apathy (Yuan 1998). State-level leaders must therefore work closely with local leaders and maintain respect for local cultures (Rothchild 1995). Locally based initiatives can also gain greater support from affected communities, as civil society groups are frequently trusted far more than international organizations, many of which are unknown in the conflict regions. Scholars note that “confidence building measures are socially embedded, communicatively constituted and culturally empowered,” which then requires implementation that acknowledges cultural specifics (Hong 2009, 77).

Specific challenges to implementation include insufficient leverage from mediators, changing government positions, and too many security fears, exacerbated in the former Soviet Union by the deep societal divides between groups (Rothchild 1995). Negotiators face issues when one side is not united: for example, if the military does not agree with the measures suggested, it may refuse to demobilize, or when measures are “declarations of intent rather than concrete measures to promote bilateral peace” (Kahlil 2014, 86). The best practices for negotiation and implementation consider several key factors: the mediator, the content of the agreement, third parties, and the parties to the conflict. To have the best chance at success, precise goals should be clarified under a strong mediator, the parties should have competent leadership that seeks to

implement the agreements, a strong third party/parties should aid in implementation, and actors at all levels should coordinate the processes (Rothchild 1995, 31-33).

Confidence-building measures are not without their flaws. In South Asia, for example, conflict remains ongoing despite long-running confidence-building measure regimes, and in some cases these measures can disproportionately focus on personal-level issues, thus shifting focus away from critical issues preventing peace (Mazari 2005). When neither government has the will or incentive to act more decisively, “the low-key, risk-averse quality of incremental CBMs makes them an apparently viable option,” leading to managed instability rather than settlement (Kahlil 2014, 84). The trend of confidence-building measures being used to stall negotiation progress may have contributed to the gradual decline in Track I discussions about them – if parallel to increasingly belabored negotiations, measures may have been seen as ineffective at resolution. Scholars caution that “both undue scepticism and excessive reliance on CBMs are to be avoided,” in this case discussing only military measures (Bowker and Williams 1985, 616). In the former Soviet Union, the implementation of confidence-building measures has opportunities and barriers based on several key factors, including Russian conflict resolution techniques, the internal politics of the states and regions in question, and the nature of unresolved conflicts in the region.

### **Russian Foreign Policy**

As the common regional power across all four cases, Russia plays a critical role in the resolution process. Since Russia often acts as a source of support to one or more parties and as an arbitrator of the conflict, understanding Russian foreign policy is critical to understanding the feasibility of negotiating and implementing confidence-building measures in existing peace processes. A wide range of factors drive Russian foreign policy, but most analyses can be grouped into three broad

categories: relations with the West, identity and nationalism, and status as a great power. Within the Russian foreign policy sphere, no single factor leads to the entirety of policy decisions. Instead, concerns regarding great power status are inextricably linked to relations with the West, which are then impacted by nationalism, and so on. To fully understand foreign policy decisions, the range of factors and their linkages must be considered.

### *Relations with the West*

A major factor driving Russian foreign policy decisions is Russia's relationship with the West, generally defined as the United States, the European Union, and their allies, as well as Russia's exclusion from this perceived bloc. These tensions have frequently manifested in the territory of the former Soviet Union, where Russian concerns of NATO expansion and competition over influence are particularly heightened. International mediation efforts to resolve the four conflicts all include Russia and various Western powers, which has led to internal power struggles within mediation teams. The simultaneous need for cooperation and inherent tensions between Russia and the West in regard to these unresolved conflicts thus demonstrates the importance of considering these relations as a major factor in Russian foreign policy, which in turn is essential to understanding opportunities for conflict resolution.

Russian policy and strategy since the end of the Soviet Union has frequently been impacted by Russia's perceived exclusion from the West. Two specific sources of tension in the United States – Russia relationship have been competition for influence in the former Soviet Union and general European security (Stent 2014). The existing European political and security structure, enlarged after the end of the Cold War, is based on the European Union and NATO, neither of which include Russia (Menon and Rumer 2015). The ongoing involvement of the EU in the

negotiation process of the unresolved conflicts has been a source of tension for the Russian-backed separatist regions and Russia itself, particularly in states with EU aspirations of their own.

Scholars have frequently explained Russian security policy as a response to Western actions, either seeking to maintain a “buffer zone” around the country (Lukyanov 2016), showcase geopolitical strength (Astrov and Morozova 2012), or rebuild its borders to Soviet era markers (Studzińska 2015). With the increasingly Westward focus of many of these states, the separatist regions embedded within their borders now serve as a buffer zone for Russia and a guarantee against their membership in Western institutions.

### *Great Power Status*

Another central explanation for Russia’s foreign policy decisions is its ongoing aspiration to return to great power status. Since the end of the Cold War bipolar world order, Russian policymakers have focused on restoring Russian power on the world stage. This explanation proves especially relevant in the former Soviet states, as Russia sees its hegemony in this region as critical to regaining international status. Status aspirations also influence Russian decisions over its involvement in peace processes, as acting as a central negotiating power along with major Western powers creates international legitimacy for Russia.

Under Putin, Russian perceptions of great power status have coalesced into three goals: regional dominance, status as one of the leading global actors, and equal treatment in the international system as a great power (Trenin 2011). All three goals stand to be accomplished through the international negotiation process over each of the unresolved conflicts. With the deployment of peacekeeping troops around Nagorno-Karabakh in November 2020, Russia has troops in Moldova and the South Caucasus, while its role as a primary negotiator and veto player

demands some degree of status and respect among other mediators. Russian perceptions of great power status have directly affected Russian relations with the former Soviet state, seen in policy decisions ranging from recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to unilateral mediation efforts.

### *Identity and Nationalism*

Identity and nationalism are often connected to aspirations of great power status and relations with the West. Scholars examining the role of identity and nationalism tend to focus on two aspects: the role of nationalist beliefs in development of foreign policy and the tension over values and identity between the West and Russia. Many scholars argue that nationalism is not the central driving factor behind foreign policy decisions, but is instead used to legitimize actions (Laruelle 2015) and create consensus (Jackson 2003). The clearest influence of nationalism on foreign policy is found in policy towards the former Soviet states, as these countries are seen as critical to the security and regional hegemony of Russia (Laruelle 2015). Russian rhetoric supports the idea of a Russian identity beyond Russian borders, a concept used to legitimize the Russian annexation of Crimea as protecting ethnic Russians in the region (Biersack and O’Lear 2014). Any actions in the Near Abroad perceived as threatening to Russian culture, identity, or values are inherently seen as dangerous to Russia and in turn requiring a response (Tsygankov 2014).

### **The Territory of the Former Soviet Union**

The former Soviet states are frequently referred to collectively by Russia as the “Near Abroad,” a term reflecting the importance of the region to Russia’s identity and security, and disliked by many of the countries it is applied to. The region remains closely connected to Russia due to lingering Soviet era economic interdependence, military presence, and common cultural ties. While similar



in its Soviet history, the region is a diverse range of countries that have responded to Russian and Western influence in distinct ways, with some leaning towards the West, others maintaining close relationships with Russia, and some stuck between Russia and the West.

Key concepts in explaining the intricacies of conflicts in the former Soviet Union include the complicated role of national and ethnic identity and Russian interests, particularly the desire for greater influence. Identity as a cause of conflict is discussed in depth in the section on intractable conflicts, but it is also important in understanding the dynamics of the Near Abroad. Current political issues trace back to the Soviet era, when policies placing titular nationalities in charge of republics led to demands for more independence for ethnic minorities (Suny 1994). Russia's policy and actions in the region center on leveraging its interests, including the Russian diaspora, military assets, regional tensions, and domestic politics, to establish and increase influence (Porter and Saivetz 1994). Many scholars discuss the idea of "managed instability" in the Near Abroad, which allows Russia to maintain influence in the region, whether as a mediator of an unresolved conflict or as an economic lifeline (Tolstrup 2009). From a security perspective, managed instability justifies an ongoing Russian military presence in former Soviet states, while border disputes or active conflicts prevent membership in NATO (Abushov 2009).

### **Russian Conflict Resolution**

Russia's unique role in unresolved conflicts can create a potential barrier to resolution, as its interests may be best served by the ongoing instability of a conflict in a state of no war, no peace. In South Ossetia, for example, Russia has acted as a mediator, supplied peacekeepers, and benefited from continued instability (Hoch, Souleimanov, and Baranec 2014). Examples across

the region demonstrate that Russia has frequently been the only player able and willing to become the main mediator and the only power willing to provide peacekeeping forces (Welt 2005).

To justify its intervention for influence, Russia frequently cites discrimination against ethnic Russians as a minority group, or more recent revanchist ideas that specific regions are historically or culturally Russian. Russian interventionism in the former Soviet states is often viewed as a strategy of maintaining its regional power (De Waal 2010) and hegemony (Macfarlane and Schnabel 1994). Russian security concerns increased after the independence of former Soviet states, due to the perception that politics or incidents in the Near Abroad would have a direct effect on Russia's own domestic situation (Shashenkov 1994). The development of Russian interventionist policy after 1991 thus centered on a general consensus that Russia had the right to protect and control the former Soviet states, leading to a military policy of "armed suasion" that can be either supportive or coercive (Lynch 2000). Although Russian peacekeeping operations are often criticized for their perceived bias and lack of objectivity, the West has been neither willing nor able to supply its own peacekeeping forces for conflicts in the former Soviet Union. For Russia, gaining international recognition of its peacekeeping operations remains a goal (Crow 1992) and policymakers argue that Russian and CIS peacekeeping missions deserve trust as legitimate operations (Lavrov 1996). Analysis of Russian foreign policy decisions in each conflict shows the importance of these factors as Russia strives to maintain influence in the region and, through involvement in these internationalized conflicts, on the global stage.

### **Unresolved Conflicts in the Former Soviet Union**

The very descriptor of "frozen" conflict has faced criticism from a number of scholars, as the term mistakenly assumes stability and does not account for the lingering threat of violence breaking

out. Unresolved conflicts remain at risk of “thawing out” into war, as seen in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war (Aphrasidze and Siroky 2010). Labeling these conflicts as “frozen” can be dangerous and misleading, as it tends to diminish their significance, oversimplify the conditions, and disempower societies (Broers 2015). As separatist regions often depend heavily on Russia for support, Russia can leverage this dependence for increased influence, lessening its incentives to apply pressure as a mediator. Opportunities for peace processes have thus failed due to a combination of Russian support for separatist regions and a lack of decisive action from states on power-sharing and confidence-building measures (Kapitonenko 2009). Although existing theories on the efficacy of confidence-building measures and the specifics of Russian foreign policy explain general options for conflict resolution strategies in the region, the unresolved nature of the conflicts demonstrates the need for a refreshed examination of the literature. In the following chapters, I apply these theories to the four case studies of Transdniestria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh for a better understanding of the specific opportunities for confidence-building measures in the resolution processes, given the specific dynamics of each conflict region.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Confidence-Building Measures in Transdniestria: Successful Implementation in a Politically Motivated Conflict**

Transdniestria has long been considered the most resolvable of the unresolved conflicts in the former Soviet Union, despite the absence of negotiation progress towards a final peace agreement. Unlike the other breakaway regions, the conflict remains far more politically based than ethnic, thus experiencing far less of the hostile rhetoric seen particularly in Nagorno-Karabakh (De Waal 2018, 35). The armed conflict between Transdniestria and Moldova lasted only two months in 1992 after decisive intervention by the Soviet 14<sup>th</sup> Army, leaving roughly 1,000 dead (De Waal 2018, 39). With Russian support, Transdniestria today is a de facto state, comprised of territory on the left bank of the Dniester River and lacking only international recognition (Rojansky 2011, 2). As a historical conflict, people on opposing sides have experienced relative peace and stability for nearly 30 years as the status quo continues. Transdniestria differs from the other unresolved conflicts due to its high capacity for implementing confidence-building measures. Economic ties with Moldova and the EU have developed channels of communication between the sides, supplemented by international support for confidence-building measures and a relative lack of priority placed on the conflict domestically, which removes the constant hostility seen in other conflicts.

Transdniestria can be distinguished from other unresolved conflicts by its relative openness and cooperation with its parent state of Moldova. As Moldova begins to work more closely with the EU, Transdniestria has benefited from the subsequent economic ties, allowing Transdniestria

to take advantage of the Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) between Moldova and the EU (De Waal 2016). Russia's role remains central as a potential spoiler state to negotiations and the main backer of Transdniestria, but has pushed only for special status for Transdniestria, which is widely accepted by all sides as a necessary step toward resolution. Despite the multitude of factors seemingly pointing to resolvability, the conflict remains unchanged. The status quo is beneficial to leaders and tolerable to the public and, without strong external incentives, more risk is perceived in changing the current status than leaving it be.

A variety of confidence-building measures have been introduced by local and international actors, including plans for cooperation over telecommunications systems and the 2017 reopening of a previously closed bridge across the river. While information regarding specific outcomes of confidence-building measures is often minimal, opportunities abound for increasing trust between populations. Moldova's December 2020 election of pro-Western President Maia Sandu offers additional hope for renewed efforts at conflict resolution at the Track I level, which can then be supplemented by specific confidence-building measures. Considering the outcomes of previous initiatives, the measures likely to have the most success and impact would focus on boosting economic cooperation, increasing societal understanding of mediation, and promoting reconciliation through shifting historical narratives and engaging with young people.

### **Conflict History and Causes**

Modern Moldova was created in 1940 from central Bessarabia, annexed by the Soviet Union, and the western Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (Neukirch 2001, 122). Industrialization and the subsequent migration of Russian workers "Russified" the region in the 1960s and 1970s, making Transdniestria the center of industry in Moldova (Tudoroiu 2012, 140). Language became a central

political issue in 1989, when the Moldovan Supreme Soviet made Moldovan the official language, catalyzing thoughts of Transdniestrian autonomy due to concerns of Moldova integrating with Romania (Neukirch 2001, 123; Tudoroiu 2012, 140). The 1989 law required Moldovan language for most aspects of public and professional life, thus having a disproportionate effect on Russian speakers, the majority group in Transdnistria: while almost everyone in the republic spoke Russian, only Moldovans spoke Moldovan.

In September 1990, Transdnistria declared itself separate from Moldova and began to expel Moldovan authorities from the region, supported by Soviet army troops (Tudoroiu 2012, 140). In September 1991, Transdnistria created its own constitution and military after Moldova declared independence from the Soviet Union, and in December 1991 the region declared independence in a referendum. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1991, backing from the existing Soviet military forces in the region left Transdniestrian authorities feeling more powerful than before and still supported by Russia (Neukirch 2001, 125).

Violent conflict erupted in spring of 1992 when Transdniestrian forces attacked the only remaining Moldovan-controlled police station in the region and Moldova authorized a counterattack (Tudoroiu 2012, 141). With the support of the Soviet 14<sup>th</sup> Army, the Transdniestrian forces defeated the Moldovan military and occupied the town (Neukirch 2001, 124). On July 21, 1992, the presidents of Moldova and Russia signed a ceasefire in Moscow after roughly 1,000 people were killed and 4,500 wounded in total (Klimenko 2018, 12). The ceasefire, under Russian terms, included a security zone between the two sides, special status for Transdnistria, and a peacekeeping force comprised of Russian, Moldovan, and Transdniestrian troops (Secrieru 2011, 243). In 1994, a long-term peace process known as the 5+2 group began between Moldova, Transdnistria, Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE. Russia pledged in 1999 to remove the entirety of

its troops and weapons from Moldova by the end of 2002, but failed to do so: soldiers and munitions remain in the region today.

Negotiation efforts in the early 2000s offered a number of positions favored by Transdnistria, but no meaningful progress occurred. The failure of the Russian-backed Kozak Memorandum in 2003 ended negotiations for several years and led to a stronger Moldovan focus on improving relations with the U.S. and the EU (Quinlan 2008, 133). The EU became involved after 2004, when it developed the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which focused on resolving the conflict as a top priority for Moldova.

In 2005, the EU sent a Border Assistance Mission to Moldova while the EU and the U.S. became observers to the negotiation process, giving Moldova more leverage against the Russian-backed Transdnistria. Moldova also outlined three prerequisites for a settlement: “demilitarization, decriminalization, and democracy,” all of which limited the options for a settlement as Transdnistria was able to ignore the preconditions with its strong Russian backing (Beyer 2010, 173). Transdnistria held an independence referendum in 2006, condemned by the international community as illegal, and reported a 97.1% vote for independence (Quinlan 2008, 149).

The conflict has remained stable, if unresolved, with changes in dynamics mainly occurring between the international actors involved in negotiations rather than on the ground. The 2014 crisis in Ukraine remained distinct from internal Transdnistrian politics, but the resumption of negotiations in 2016 reflected the resulting complex international dynamics. Meetings of the 5+2 in 2016 focused on confidence-building measures, developing the Berlin-plus Package of eight initiatives discussed in depth below, as an initial step to a continuation of Track I negotiation on critical issues (Hill 2018).

While language issues are often touted as the main cause of the conflict, the ethnic and linguistic diversity on both banks of the river disputes that claim. The more nuanced causes include “reactive nationalism” from Russians and Russian speakers in response to anti-Russian sentiments and discussion of Romanian integration in the final years of the Soviet Union, as well as political disagreements stemming from the Soviet era (De Waal 2018; Neukirch 2001, 123). The territory of modern Moldova has gone through numerous changes, leading to a lack of an established Moldovan identity.<sup>1</sup> Differing treatment of the two banks in the Soviet period made for a “republic with two competing elites on each side of the river, even as the wider population still had much in common,” a common phenomenon under Soviet nationality policy (De Waal 2018, 37).

### **Previous Attempts at Resolution**

Negotiations over a final settlement on the Transdnistrian conflict have resulted in a multitude of peace agreements proposed and written, but never signed. The settlement process faces the same challenges as others negotiated by opposing sides and external mediators: the eventual deal must be unanimously agreed to, follow international standards, and find broad support in the international community (Neukirch 2003, 342). Formal negotiations under the OSCE 5+2 group have focused on Track I diplomacy with minimal progress. While the OSCE has been criticized for its lack of success, the odds were stacked against it from the beginning, due to the impossibility of resolving a conflict that both parties are content to continue. Other external actors, especially Russia, pose challenges to finding a settlement, but the major obstacles to a peaceful resolution are domestic in nature.

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<sup>1</sup> Territorial changes have occurred “mainly between Romania and Russia—in 1812, 1856, 1878, 1918, 1940, 1941, 1944, and 1991” (Tudoroiu 2012, 138).



As the sides continue to develop in parallel, a carefully managed partnership has created a status quo beneficial to leaders and regional powers and comfortable for the respective populations. This status quo is pragmatic due to the political, rather than ethnic, nature of the conflict – without long-standing tensions and constant reminders of the causes of conflict, the sides lack incentives to prioritize resolution. The election of President Sandu may alter the conflict dynamics by transitioning Moldova's stance to one of more proactive resolution efforts and greater cooperation with European initiatives for formal and informal confidence-building measures.

Previously proposed settlements have suggested a range of solutions, generally focused on the final status of Transdniestria as the moving piece. In 2002, the Moldovan side agreed to consider a federation agreement for the first time, but encountered difficulties when Transdniestria demanded equal status, despite Russian, Ukrainian, and OSCE support for the document (Neukirch 2003, 335-36). The 2003 Kozak Memorandum, giving Transdniestria veto power over Moldovan foreign and security policies in exchange for federated status, failed due to opposition from the West and the Moldovan public (Secieru 2011, 244). In 2005, the Yushchenko Plan proposed democratic elections in Transdniestria and an international civil and military peacekeeping operation under the auspices of the OSCE, but Transdniestria and Russia rejected it after Moldova made significant changes (Quinlan 2008, 141-42).

The OSCE has provided a framework for mediation and seeks to uphold Moldova's independence and sovereignty (Neukirch 2003, 336). While the EU has expressed interest in greater involvement, its formal participation has been limited to observer status along with the U.S. Although not a major player in the negotiation process, the EU has become a key international organization in the region. The rapid pace of Moldovan integration with the EU stands in contrast to the slow nature of OSCE negotiations, adding to the appeal of leaning westward.

As seen across the region, Russia is by far the most important regional and international actor in Transdniestria. Russia benefits from the status quo, as the unresolved nature of the conflict precludes Moldovan membership in Western institutions and allows Russia to indirectly block aspirations of NATO expansion. The ongoing Russian military presence in Transdniestria adds an additional guarantee of continued involvement. With its ability to act as a spoiler state, Russia maintains strong influence over the conflict and negotiation process, increased further by Transdniestria's dependence on Russian aid. The outsized role of Russia has ultimately worsened the level of trust between sides, while also complicating the regional security dynamics (Secieru 2011, 244).

Fears of discrimination based on language have always been a part of the conflict over Transdniestria and have frequently been cited in negotiations to explain lack of trust. Transdniestrian leaders rely on overexaggerating the existential threat posed by Moldova and the West and continues to inflate any statements hinting at irredentist tendencies. The de-prioritization of the conflict has minimized the risks of violence and allowed for some degree of coexistence, but also contributes to the prolonged duration of the conflict. Unlike in other conflicts, Transdniestria and Moldova currently cooperate broadly on economic decisions and trade, have implemented some confidence-building measures, and generally allow freedom of movement. The lack of confidence between parties is thus less of an inhibiting factor than in other conflicts, but still contributes to preventing peace.

### **Previous Confidence-Building Measures and Levels of Success**

Confidence-building measures in Transdniestria have experienced mixed levels of success. While a main focus of many international organizations operating in the region, the long-standing

unresolved nature of the conflict seems to indicate a lack of effectiveness. The OSCE, for example, has supported workshops and conferences aimed at promoting cooperation and encouraging more trust in the relationships between people and officials (Neukirch 2001, 129, 133). Individuals and civil society remain limited by the understanding that their influence is very minimal, especially given the common perspective that the conflict is political, rather than ethnic or linguistic. As in other former Soviet states, civil society in Moldova faces structural barriers to existence and the development of meaningful projects.

I conducted interviews with two civil society groups in the region – one in Moldova and one in Transdnistria – to add firsthand knowledge and experience to the discussion of previously attempted measures and opportunities for future work. In Moldova, Ion Manole is the Executive Director of Promo-LEX, which seeks to “contribute to the democratisation of the county, through strategic litigation, consolidation of the civil society, and the monitoring of the democratic process.” The organization began working on legal cases in Transdnistria in 2004, when it contributed to efforts to “defend rights of the parents and teachers of the Moldovan schools,” and has continued to “defend, protect and promote human rights for people” from the region. In Transdnistria, Evgenii Dunaev, chairman of the Informational and Legal Center Apriori, explained that the organization focuses on “supporting and protecting the rights of assembly and association and the rights associated with the freedom of information.”<sup>2</sup> While this work is not directly related to conflict resolution, he noted that “the consequences of the conflict [have] become a set of local specifics which we constantly encounter in our work as context.”

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes from interviews not conducted in English were translated by the author.

*European Integration and Economic Measures*

Economic confidence-building measures have been successful in promoting cooperation between the sides and requiring some reforms in Transdniestria. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Moldova has pursued closer ties with the European Union, a process that Transdniestria has reluctantly participated in. The EU's goals in closer ties for Moldova centered on two main goals: resolving the conflict in Transdniestria, thought to be the easiest conflict to settle, and encouraging Moldova towards the EU and the West (Tudoroiu 2012, 153). Plans for resolving the conflict involved pressure on Tiraspol through customs requirements and travel bans on officials, financial assistance for Moldova and extended to Transdniestria under certain conditions, and involvement in the negotiation process. The EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM), which began in 2005, has supported economic integration between the two sides, as it requires export companies to register in Chişinău to be eligible for the preferential trade agreement between Moldova and the EU (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 319). In 2014, the EU provided 28 million Euros for confidence-building measures focusing on “projects in the fields of education, healthcare, migration, trade and small and medium sized businesses” (Secrieru 2017).

Moldova signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, which fully entered into force in 2016, simultaneously creating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). After training and outreach from the EU focused on the negative impacts of rejecting closer economic ties, Transdniestria agreed to the terms required for its inclusion into the DCFTA and Moldova allowed it entry in 2015 (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 320). Despite the seeming success of Transdniestrian economic ties with Moldova and the EU by extension, this is not likely an indicator of progress towards full reintegration. Transdniestrian leaders must carefully balance between the EU in the west and the EEU, Russia, and the CIS in the east. Accepting the terms of

Moldova's DCFTA in order to gain EU market access thus demonstrates Transdnistria's economic pragmatism, rather than true interest in developing closer ties with Moldova and Europe (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 320). While the DCFTA and closer European ties have improved Transdnistria's economic and international standing, the Transdnistrian authorities have made minimal effort to implement promised reforms, notably failing to remove customs duties on EU imports or implement a value-added tax (De Waal 2018, 46). The lack of implementation of other measures that do not directly benefit Transdnistria economically shows that Transdnistria remains more interested in "unconditional access to the EU market" than good-faith confidence-building engagement (Secrieru 2017). Overall, the effectiveness of EU involvement remains inconclusive.

### *Socio-Cultural and Political Measures*

While economic measures have seen success due to the attractiveness of closer EU ties, political and socio-cultural measures face cultural barriers to implementation. Within all levels of society on both sides, there is no "widespread understanding...that conflicts can be solved through mediation" (Kappmeier, Fütterer, and Redlich 2014, 90). The concept of mediation, whether applied to international or interpersonal conflicts, remains foreign, as a majority of society is most familiar with authoritarian regimes that demand top-down decisions only. Without trust in the mediation process or substantial infrastructure to support it, measures based on encouraging international mediation efforts or participating in interpersonal mediation are unlikely to succeed. There is also "no expectation that political leaders engage in egalitarian, non-violent engagements in order to solve the separation conflict," and a subsequent expectation that the most powerful international actors or organizations will dictate the terms of any future agreement (Kappmeier,

Fütterer, and Redlich 2014, 90). These understandings have frequently discouraged local and societal level confidence-building measures, as there is no widespread belief that these actions can have any influence on national or international policy decisions.

Cultural specificities have also been found to limit the effectiveness of dialogue-based initiatives: a study of practitioners selected to receive mediation training noted that language created difficulties even in trainings, as Moldovans immediately felt like they were making concessions by speaking Russian (many Moldovans speak Russian but the Transdnistrians present did not speak Moldovan) (Kappmeier, Fütterer, and Redlich 2014, 92). Participants also noted that many widely held beliefs about promoting dialogue may face barriers in former Soviet states, where directly addressing conflict of any kind is often considered unacceptable and excessively confrontational. Dunaev, the chairman of Apriori, noted the related challenge of “the exhaustion of the [Transdnistrian] population, which occurs both due to natural migration processes and forced by the repressive policy of our government,” and has created a brain drain situation disproportionately affecting civil society groups.

Yet, international organizations have continued to promote dialogue, small-scale cooperation, and the strengthening of civil society, despite widespread questions of their efficacy. The OSCE has encouraged resolution efforts beyond Track I diplomacy, organizing workshops to support productive discussion of new ideas and build trust between sides to alter perspectives on the conflict (Neukirch 2001, 130, 133). The OSCE focused explicitly on grassroots level initiatives in 1995 and 1996, creating discussion-based events for local government and business leaders, and encouraged links between NGOs in 1999 and 2000 (Neukirch 2001, 133). Concerns over lack of clarity and direction from the OSCE remain, however: Mandole of Promo-LEX noted the “incoherent attitude and lack of principality” of the OSCE as a challenge for his organization’s

work. The EU has also taken a role in supporting civil society, especially promoting independent media, but is limited by the “politically sensitive” nature of the topic and prefers to focus on projects only indirectly related to the conflict (Scheffers 2010, 296). From his experience leading Apriori, Dunaev mentioned the “significant support...from the embassies of European states at the diplomatic level.” Dunaev also repeated, however, that his organization does not work directly on conflict-related issues, as “no one is working purposefully with the conflict.” This concern is seen in the other cases as well: international organizations and donors are often reluctant to fund projects on controversial issues, which tends to include any subject tangentially related to the conflict. While shifting organizational cultures among NGOs is beyond the scope of conflict resolution strategies, there are opportunities for confidence-building measures, discussed in greater depth below, to strengthen societal trust in the mediation and discussion processes.

Civil society groups face challenges to their work, particularly on conflict-related issues. Dunaev and Manole, from Transdniestrian and Moldovan organizations respectively, noted persecution from Transdniestrian authorities and lack of interest from the Moldovan government as specific structural barriers to their work, as well as lack of access to Transdniestria for NGOs outside the humanitarian sphere. In Transdniestria, Dunaev explained that, due to these challenges, “in recent years [Apriori] has been trying to preserve what we have, rather than succeed in achieving something [new].” In addition to the “lack of real interest from the national authorities” in Moldova, Manole mentioned the challenge of ongoing “persecutions and intimidations from the de facto authorities” in Transdniestria. Civil society has experienced some successes, however, in developing and implementing confidence-building or larger peacebuilding measures. Although Apriori must combat government repression and “brain drain,” it held a “traveling documentary film festival about human rights” for three years and facilitates “public discussions with experts

from Moldova,” which “contributes to improving mutual understanding and mutual information between societies from different banks of the Dniester river, which can be considered a positive prerequisite for any resolution.”

Civil society is generally stronger in the fields of advocacy and infrastructure, but finds less success in financial sustainability and establishing public trust in its work (Venturi 2011, 13). In Moldova, Promo-LEX focused on strategic litigation of human rights cases in Transdnistria, seeing the protection and promotion of human rights as a necessary step towards resolution. The organization has “made enormous efforts to identify problems, to document them and to represent the cases in the national and international institutions and courts,” and has won 54 cases for roughly 2200 people from Transdnistria. For Mandole, “the success is that we [are] at the moment [a] unique organisation (with unique experience and results) which litigated and continue to litigate and make advocacy regarding the Human Rights abuses in the conflict areas.”

Most NGOs focus on many themes and topics, a necessary step to ensure continued financial support from donors, but thus are limited in the depth of work on each issue. Due to this constraint, there are very few organizations focusing explicitly on peace and conflict, or on Transdnistria itself. While looking for interview sources, I found 15 organizations in Moldova and Transdnistria through online searches, recommendations from other groups, and lists from international organizations of groups they had worked with previously. Of those 15, only one organization focused on specific conflict-related issues, but in reference to building trust between the sides rather than direct resolution work, and two organizations responded to my interview request. The organization Apriori does not consider its mission directly connected to the conflict, but did note that the consequences of the conflict directly affect its work. Similarly, the Moldovan organization Promo-LEX considers democratization and the consolidation of civil society among



its main goals, but works on human rights cases for people in Transdniestria in the course of these efforts. Thus, while neither organization's mission explicitly addresses conflict resolution, the widespread effects of the long-running conflict have directly impacted the work of both and, in the case of Promo-LEX, led to an additional focus on Transdniestria.

At the international level, the 5+2 group developed a strategy in 2016 for eight main confidence-building measures, known as the Berlin-plus Package, focusing on cooperation between the two banks of the river over less politically charged issues. Two initiatives are currently outstanding: telecommunications cooperation (under discussion) and work on criminal cases and the freedom of movement (OSCE 2018; OSCE 2021). The other six are in various stages of implementation. In November 2017, the 5+2 group reported progress on five issues: the sides signed agreements 1) allowing apostilization of Transdniestrian educational documents, 2) beginning to organize telecommunications cooperation, 3) “ensuring the functioning” of Latin-script schools in Transdniestria, 4) allowing Moldovan farmers access to farmland in the Dubasari region, and 5) reopening the bridge between Guri Biculiu and Bychok (OSCE 2016; OSCE 2017). In May 2018, the 5+2 group reported successful conclusion of an agreement on the sixth measures, allowing Transdniestrian vehicles to legally operate in international traffic (OSCE 2018).

### **Opportunities for Confidence-Building Measures**

Despite challenges, the low intensity of the conflict in Transdniestria and the existing channels of cooperation create high capacity for implementing confidence-building measures. Local efforts are strongly supported by international organizations, and will likely see greater support from Moldova under the new president, while conflict-related issues remain far less politicized than in other cases. Following the success of closer ties with the EU, additional economic and trade-based

measures can be developed. This field is particularly important in Transdniestria, as people on both sides frequently rank economic strength far ahead of conflict resolution for national priorities. By strengthening the weak economies of Moldova and Transdniestria, communities may be more willing, and have greater capacity, to participate in conflict-related initiatives and pressure their respective authorities for resolution. To further encourage transformation of narratives, a range of socio-cultural and political measures can be implemented. For example, creating opportunities for dialogue between young people on both banks can work to overcome remaining cases of isolation, while cooperating on apolitical issues can create the framework for political collaboration.

### *Economic and Trade-Related Measures*

As trade relations continue to be strengthened between Moldova and Transdniestria, some degree of trade regulation can encourage continued stability and prevention of violence (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 325). Critics of this theory argue that support for Transdniestria only props up a failing economy and helps Russia, but the model remains useful in promoting “a partial social re-integration of the breakaway region, without actually facilitating political reconciliation with Chişinău” (Milakovsky 2020). Efforts to increase economic ties may then lay the necessary framework of trust and protocols needed to encourage political reconciliation and progress on resolution. As politicians and business elites alike currently benefit from the status quo, increased access to the EU market and a strengthened economy in Moldova can make closer integration a more appealing option. These closer ties can also be conditioned on specific agreements, such as the existing requirement for Transdniestrian businesses to register in Chişinău to access the DCFTA, or fully implemented anti-corruption reforms. As the EU is an observer to the 5+2 talks, specific reforms could include progress on the Berlin-plus package of confidence-building

measures designed by that group. Outstanding areas include criminal cases and freedom of movement, providing an opportunity to encourage cooperation on a more contentious issue, with the understanding that signing and implementing relevant agreements is a prerequisite to additional EU access.

In my interviews with the two civil society organizations in the region, both mentioned corruption as a main factor in the continued conflict duration and a barrier to resolution. Dunaev, of Apriori, noted that corruption allows the conflict to continue, as all relevant leaders profit off the status quo, and Manole of Promo-LEX argued that the unresolved situation is “a problem and not a conflict...after the war in 1992 we have some groups in Russia and Moldova, including in [Transdniestria], who are interested to keep the status quo and benefit from different illegal schemes.” Additionally, Manole mentioned that “some political forces use the situation for their political goals,” which further complicates resolution efforts by removing incentives to negotiate, and that ending corruption in Moldova is critical to ending the conflict. Often considered the player ablest to resolve the conflict in recent years, the EU can encourage anti-corruption measures across the river. The EU maintains economic incentives for both sides: specific reforms for Moldova can be suggested and supported with closer EU integration, while reforms for Transdniestria can act as preconditions for continued or expanded access to the EU market.

The new Moldovan government under President Maia Sandu, elected in December 2020, has clear plans to work more closely with the EU and refocus official work on resolution. Strong support from Moldova for EU-sponsored confidence-building measures will increase participation from that side and encourage immediate implementation. The EU has prioritized reconstructing “economic and societal links disrupted by the conflict,” such as rebuilding a bridge in 2000 that reopened in 2017 for the first time since 1992 (Secieru 2017). Tangible measures like these

demonstrate the EU's commitment, which can then be built on with other low-risk cooperative measures to build trust and relations between the sides. Additional EU-sponsored initiatives could move beyond the economic sphere to address societal issues, such as developing programs for Transdnistrian youth to study in Europe, and supporting more direct socio-cultural measures, as discussed below.

### *Cultural Measures*

As trade-related measures continue to encourage pragmatic cooperation, confidence-building measures focusing on cultural aspects of the conflict can increase societal understanding of mediation and encourage greater transparency around the negotiation process. The understanding that conflict resolution requires mediation and reconciliation efforts on all levels is stronger in Moldova than in other frozen conflicts, leading to hope for the success of confidence-building measures (Chirila 2013). This is only a comparative measure, however, and more recent research demonstrates that a societal understanding of mediation as a process remains lacking (Kappmeier, Fütterer, and Redlich 2014). With the support of the OSCE and the EU, as established organizations in the region, local civil society organizations can take the lead on specific initiatives to address the common lack of trust in mediation and the conflict resolution process.

Developing new societal understandings of mediation as a process, whether at the interpersonal or international level, can begin with two main initiatives. With the successful implementation of the Berlin-plus Package measure removing barriers for Latin-script schools in Transdnistria, cooperation on educational measures can be continued. The OSCE can assemble an international team of experts to aid the sides in creating culturally specific basic curriculum for schools, designed to introduce the ideas of mediation and negotiation as a feasible method for

resolving conflict at an age-appropriate level for schoolchildren. Beyond school-age children, local civil society organizations focused on education and civic engagement can spread greater awareness of these concepts using outreach strategies developed by the EU in its educational campaigns for the DCFTA agreement. While very few local organizations focus directly on the conflict, many in the area promote access to education, civil society strengthening, and freedom of information, and thus have the skills and experience to lead outreach initiatives.

The ongoing lack of transparency around the international negotiation process has contributed to the deprioritization of the conflict by the public. In addition, individuals and civil society on both sides believe they have no influence over the political process, due to the corrupt political process in Transnistria and lingering memory of the non-democratic Soviet regime. Confidence-building measures cannot change types of government, but increased understanding of the international negotiation process could lead to more interest in resolving the conflict and more willingness to participate in peacebuilding efforts at the ground level.

As the central international organization working on the conflict, the OSCE can fund informational materials in Moldovan and Russian tailored for specific groups to address concerns and promote greater awareness of the conflict resolution process. Local civil society groups will likely have the capacity and interest to distribute information and contribute to a more informed society. Apriori focuses on freedom of information and Promo-LEX aims to consolidate civil society and monitor democratic processes; representatives of both mentioned the need for greater access for information. Civil society organizations like these, which operate on issues related to the conflict, can thus have an important role in confidence-building measures: even if they do not address the conflict directly, contributing to increased awareness of mediation or the international negotiation process is feasible and extremely beneficial.

Two similar cultural concerns facing dialogue initiatives, which seek to find common ground between people on each side, are the choice of language and the norm that directly addressing conflict is excessively confrontational. To ensure that all participants in dialogue efforts can participate in their preferred language, translation can be provided at such events – most likely by members of the local community, as many in the region speak both Moldovan and Russian. Understanding and working with the cultural norm of avoiding direct discussion of conflict will ultimately fall to community-based groups. Without personal knowledge or experience of cultural specificities, suggested policies from researchers or international actors are unlikely to fully encompass all concerns and create acceptable methods of dialogue. Larger civil society organizations and international actors can, however, support these efforts by funding workshops for local leaders and international experts to develop specific strategies and conduct additional public opinion research to provide a more recent picture of attitudes surrounding conflict resolution. Manole, of Promo-LEX, affirmed that society as a whole is largely interested in discussing problems related to the conflict, but remains challenged by the lack of consistency from the governments and the OSCE.

### *Socio-Political Measures*

Initiatives to increase understanding of mediation and the conflict resolution process can occur along with measures to address social and political concerns in the region. The long duration of the conflict has led to new generations with no memory or experience of the conflict, or of living in an integrated Moldova. The underlying environment for improving dialogue between young people also remains far more promising than in the other conflicts, as the existing cooperation

mechanisms and lack of ethnic-based hostility remove much of the risk associated with such activities in other regions.

Reconciliation work between young people across the river can begin with common areas of interest, such as environmental protection, and build trust with these specific cooperative measures before adding discussions of conflict-related issues. A large number of civil society organizations in Moldova and Transdnistria focus on environmental concerns, often over the shared river, and could work with groups familiar with dialogue and engagement work to develop cooperative initiatives. Although recent generations have no memory of the pre-war years, older generations remain divided by differing historical narratives of the conflict and broader regional history. The OSCE can take on a larger role in handling this issue of historical reconciliation by leading efforts to create electronic historical archives for the sides to contribute to and assemble an international expert group available to all (Rojansky 2011, 10). Moldova can also proactively demonstrate the invalidity of Transdnistrian concerns by implementing policies to “win the war for hearts and minds,” namely improving the cultural and political status of the Russian language and honoring the special rights of Gagauzia, a separate autonomous region (Beyer 2010, 176).

Moldova can restructure its framing of the conflict area to focus on the communities affected on both sides, rather than the de facto leadership, to allow for engagement “without crossing the red line of territorial-integrity” (Grono 2016). Some options to support the Transdnistrian and Moldovan publics include allowing international exchanges so Transdnistrian students can study in Europe, working on cooperative professional development for apolitical fields, and working with Transdnistria on shared apolitical issues such as environmental protection (Grono 2016). Acceptance of EU support by Transdnistrian leaders can help bridge the gap left by Russia, which tends to offer economic and military aid but not human

development aid (Grono 2016). Both sides can take initiative to offer exchanges and travel, as well as supporting the work of international and local NGOs undertaking these activities. The EU can support work on these shared issues: moving from trade cooperation, the EU can expand its presence in Transdniestria to include work on environmental and educational issues, as well as healthcare in light of the pandemic. International organizations can also support the work and development of existing civil society groups through funding, education, and sharing information. In Transdniestria, Dunaev noted the need for “constructive initiatives” for “the development of the civil culture of society,” while Manole in Moldova included the need for international experts to monitor human rights in the region. These measures promote societal links and encourage cooperation on a range of issues, while serving humanitarian purposes and building a foundation of trust for future measures.

## **Conclusion**

The conflict in Transdniestria remains an interesting case due to its seeming resolvability and simultaneous lack of action, caused mainly by a lack of political will for resolution. Past implementation of confidence-building measures, while encouraged by international actors and organizations, has been lackluster on both banks of the river. The success of economic cooperation between Transdniestria and Moldova, as well as with the EU through Moldovan trade regimes, offers hope for additional confidence-building measures given the right incentives for negotiation and implementation. Similarly, the lack of strong ethnic-based hostility removes a major barrier to reconciliation-focused initiatives. With the high capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures in Transdniestria, future initiatives can focus on economic, cultural, and socio-political measures to maintain existing ties with Moldova, create a more transparent and inclusive



discussion around the mediation process, and focus on youth to begin shifting historical narratives perpetuating mistrust.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Confidence-Building Measures in Abkhazia: Civil Society Success Without Broader Reach**

One of two unresolved conflicts in Georgia, the roots of the conflict in Abkhazia can be traced back to concerns over ethnic identity and political control even before the Soviet era. Abkhazia, which makes up one eighth of Georgia's territory, succeeded militarily with Russian support in a war against Georgia from 1992-1993 and has developed de facto state institutions in the following decades (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 9). The conflict in Abkhazia is ethnic-based, but stems from modern-era politics rather than ancient ethnic hatreds. Politics leading up to war in the 1990s were defined by three factors: the "patriotic-nationalist platform" of Georgia's first president that isolated non-ethnic Georgians, the complete breakdown of Georgian politics and society, and the presence of independent armed groups (Human Rights Watch 1995, 10). Ending with a ceasefire in 1994, the war left roughly 8,000 people dead and 240,000 displaced; refugee return and resettlement has subsequently been one of the most important and controversial topics discussed in the peace process (Hoch, Kopeček, and Baar 2017, 332).

Most international negotiation efforts can be characterized by their lack of progress and tendency to ignore the agency of Abkhazia in discussions. This tendency is connected to several of the main factors preventing peace in Abkhazia, namely the ongoing isolation of the region and its dependence on Russian support. Although the 2008 conflict greatly disrupted ongoing resolution work, civil society organizations in Abkhazia and Georgia have been relatively successful at organizing dialogue between their representatives. Some dialogue projects have also

been attempted between individuals on either side, but the failure of these initiatives demonstrates that progress made by civil society groups may not translate directly to larger societal benefits. Confidence-building measures in Abkhazia, while constrained by isolation and the minimal influence of civil society, can still promote paths towards peace. Public opinion data from 2020 show that a majority of respondents in Georgia are interested in dialogue, offering hope for the implementation of related initiatives. Similarly, projects focused on specific common issues, such as providing access to education for Abkhaz students abroad and ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia, can counter isolation and work towards reconciliation.

### **Conflict History and Causes**

The modern territory of Abkhazia has a mixed history, consisting of periods under Russian and Soviet rule and periods of brief independence. Abkhazia began the Soviet era in 1921 with a special relationship with Georgia, then developed its own constitution in 1925 as a federated part of Georgia (Human Rights Watch 1995, 16). The introduction of glasnost policies in the late 1980s allowed for the formation of nationalist movements in Abkhazia and Georgia: Abkhaz nationalists pushed for a return to independent republic status, while some Georgian nationalists called for ending Abkhazia's autonomous status or even expelling ethnic minorities entirely (Kaufman 1998, 1).<sup>3</sup>

Georgia announced a return to its 1921 constitution in February 1992, removing Abkhazia's federated status. In response, Abkhazia reverted to the 1925 constitution and declared sovereignty in July 1992. Decades of perceived "Georgianization" policies on the Abkhaz side and

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<sup>3</sup> Nationalism grew alongside newly forming political freedoms: in 1990, the Abkhazian assembly created an ethnic quota system ensuring the largest portion of seats would remain Abkhazian, with a minimum of 28 seats for Abkhaz, 26 for Georgians, and 11 for Russians (Human Rights Watch 1995, 16).

concerns over pro-Abkhaz affirmative action on the Georgian side combined, leading to “irreconcilable political demands” from nationalists on both sides and eventual fighting (International Crisis Group 2006, 5).

The escalating tensions grew violent when Georgian military forces attacked Abkhaz government buildings in Sukhumi, taking over the city on August 14, 1992. Fighting intensified quickly and the rapid spread of violence across the region caught civilians with no time to evacuate, leading to frequent targeting of vulnerable civilian populations (Human Rights Watch 1995, 26). The first half of 1993 saw a stalemate between the two sides before a ceasefire deal was signed in July 1993 that lasted almost two months. By the end of 1993, Abkhaz forces had taken control of most of its territory and expelled the majority of Georgians from the region, due in large part to support from Russia and the North Caucasus. The UN-led Geneva peace process, which included Abkhazia as a full party began in 1993, supplemented by UN military observers.

The official ceasefire was signed in May 1994 after Russian mediation under UN auspices, and “provided for a ceasefire, separation of forces and the deployment of the [CIS peacekeeping force]” as well as UN monitors (International Crisis Group 2006, 6). From December 1993 to 2009, roughly 136 UN military observers have monitored the ceasefire, with approximately 1,600 Russian peacekeepers deployed since June 1994 (Human Rights Watch 1995, 6). The war had a major demographic and psychological impact, leaving roughly 8,000 people dead and 240,000 mostly ethnic Georgians displaced (Hoch, Kopeček, and Baar 2017, 332). Negotiations initially stalled as each side rejected any proposal from the other, creating a new focus on opportunities for confidence-building measures in order to encourage conflict transformation. The Geneva process under the UN resumed in 1997 and focus turned to potential confidence-building measures,

particularly local cooperation, information exchange, and specific cooperative actions between law enforcement and intelligence (Akaba and Khintba 2011, 24).

Abkhazia held a successful referendum on independence in 1999, essentially halting the negotiation progress as it then refused to negotiate on status. Frequent minor armed incidents also showed the seeming preference in Georgia for military options and discussion of confidence-building measures was subsequently ended (Akaba and Khintba 2011, 25). Tensions in the region grew between 2006 and 2008, compounded by the lack of negotiation process. Two years (2006-2008) of no formal talks led to a greater divide between Georgia and Abkhazia, “resulting in fundamentally different and mutually exclusive visions of future relations” (Garb 2009, 235). The election of President Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia in 2004 and subsequent radical rhetoric regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia further inflamed the situation. Concerns of a potential outbreak of war increased in the spring of 2008.

The specifics of the events of August 7, 2008 that led to war between Georgian and Russian forces remain hotly debated. Fighting continued until the EU mediated a ceasefire on August 12. In the aftermath of the 2008 war, Russia stationed 3,700 troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia respectively, which were welcomed in Abkhazia and considered a security guarantee (Bardakçı 2010, 217; Garb 2009, 241). Although Abkhazia saw minimal fighting in the war, the presence of Russian troops allowed Abkhaz forces to retake the Upper Kodori Gorge region and acquire new territory along the Inguri River, while Russia’s recognition of Abkhaz independence was a major political accomplishment.

The 2008 war also resulted in a deterioration of the negotiation process. Abkhazia has become increasingly isolated with the withdrawal of international organizations from the region and Georgia responded to the conflict with harsher policies. In October 2008, Georgia passed the

Law on Occupied Territories, restricting freedom of movement and economic activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Following the conflict, “all existing negotiations and conflict resolution mechanisms collapsed” (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 12). In the decade following the 2008 ceasefire, little to no progress was made on either formal negotiations or informal work. Although the Geneva discussions continue, Georgia remains unwilling to recognize South Ossetia or Abkhazia as parties, so the group cannot create binding resolutions.

Russian recognition has entirely changed the conflict and negotiation dynamics, as Abkhazia now sees itself as a legitimate equal party and has no intention of negotiating on status. The Russian presence in Abkhazia following 2008 remains significantly larger than it was before the war, especially along the boundary line. Russia vetoed the extension of the OSCE Mission in Georgia in 2008 and the UNOMIG mandate in 2009, thus drastically reducing the presence of international organizations and removing the roughly 120 UN monitors who had been observing the ceasefire for 16 years (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 1).

The conflict in Abkhazia can be traced back to ethnic and political roots in the pre-Soviet era, particularly the ongoing arguments over identity and autonomy in Georgian and Abkhaz societies. Views on history are divided, as can be expected: Abkhaz narratives maintain that they were forced into Georgia by the Soviet Union and faced discrimination, while Georgians consider Abkhazia the most privileged part of Soviet Georgia (International Crisis Group 2006, 3). These problems have now been reinforced by leaders and narratives for nearly three decades, complicating negotiations and peace efforts in the process.

## **Previous Attempts at Resolution**

The international negotiation process over Abkhazia has been led by a variety of international actors from the Russian-mediated ceasefire in 1994 to current discussions led by the OSCE, EU, and UN. Track I efforts have experienced little progress towards resolution, often due to the politicization of the conflict in the larger context of tensions between Russia and the West. International mediators, widely distrusted in the region, have struggled to implement coherent policies and resolution strategies. Locally, resolution efforts have also been challenged by a lack of political will and Abkhazia's ongoing dependence on Russia.

### *International Mediators*

International mediation of the conflict in Abkhazia has primarily been overseen by the UN and Russia at various points over the past thirty years. Multiple actors have attempted mediation work, including the OSCE and individual countries, but none have made breakthroughs in the peace process. The parties to the conflict often disagree over the intentions of mediators, further complicating the situation: Russia and the UN have been the primary negotiators, but Georgia maintains that Russia is a participant in the conflict rather than an objective mediator, and Abkhazia argues that the UN is not impartial (International Crisis Group 2007a, 3).

Russia's role in the mediation process was largest in the 1990s, when it led ceasefire negotiations during the 1992-1993 war, mediating the 1994 ceasefire and maintaining peace talks afterwards. The relatively stalled nature of negotiations since the 2000s, and Russia's direct involvement in the 2008 war, has somewhat diminished Russia's role as a mediator, although it remains the only credible actor with power over both sides. Russian influence over the peace process has led to a complicated situation: with the support and eventual recognition from Russia,

Abkhazia views itself as an equal member of the negotiation process, but the ongoing Russian control over Abkhazia also means that relations between Russia and Georgia must improve for any positive steps to occur. Russia has several main interests in the region that explain its ongoing involvement and Abkhazia's continued dependence on it: protecting ethnic Russians, its shared border with Abkhazia, and broader regional stability.

Georgia has frequently called on the West, particularly the EU and the U.S., to increase its involvement in the mediation process. Western involvement would provide multiple benefits for Georgia, as it would increase the number of pro-Georgia actors and decrease Russia's influence. The EU and the U.S. remain determined to support Georgian territorial integrity, but this phrasing is often interpreted in Abkhazia to indicate a lack of interest in reconciliation or cooperation (Cooley and Mitchell 2010, 63). Abkhazia considers the U.S. the most biased of the international mediators, given its stance of non-recognition and additional pressure on other countries to follow suit.

The EU is a relatively new actor in the mediation process, having taken on a major role only during and after the 2008 war. Following the Rose Revolution, the EU added Georgia to its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, leading to a large increase in financial and technical aid to Georgia (Bardakçı 2010, 216). While the EU seems dedicated to conflict resolution efforts, it has struggled to overcome several obstacles preventing more meaningful contributions: a lack of hard power, varying cohesion among members, a lack of a clear peace plan, the presence of Russia, and minimal work with local NGOs (Harpaz 2018, 243-44). Existing EU engagement in Abkhazia centers around EU-funded "humanitarian, development and infrastructure projects" (International Crisis Group 2010a, 11). The EU has indicated interest in supporting cooperative work and dialogue between Abkhazia and Georgia but faces the challenge of minimal trust from



the Abkhaz, who consider EU member states to be strongly pro-Georgian and dislike the EU Monitoring Mission for its continued requests for access to Abkhazia despite refusals from local authorities (International Crisis Group 2010a, 12). The EU has its own interests in the region as well: the status quo of unresolved conflicts is a threat to the larger Caucasus region and European security, and resolving the conflicts in Georgia could help encourage and support Georgian democracy.

Following the 2008 ceasefire, the UN now co-chairs the Geneva talks with the EU and OSCE and manages the meetings of the Incident Prevention and Reporting Mechanism (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 60). The UN Security Council has also weighed in, passing 32 resolutions between 1993 and 2011 “reiterating the right of all displaced people to return to Abkhazia” (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 14). Although UN-led work has been able to maintain communications between the sides for security-related issues, it has made no attempts to pressure either side to negotiations or taken on an arbitration role itself (International Crisis Group 2007a, 3). Overall, the UN has not been able to encourage negotiations or improve humanitarian conditions within Abkhazia.

Beginning in 2008, the Geneva International Discussions meet four times per year with the parties to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The meetings are co-chaired by three diplomats from the EU, OSCE, and UN, with the U.S. as an observer and officials from Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Georgia, and Russia. To avoid questions of status and legitimacy, representatives of each party to the conflicts participate as experts, rather than delegates (International Crisis Group 2013, 13). The discussions include two working groups: one to handle security issues and one for humanitarian concerns.

Procedural issues, refusal to discuss controversial topics, and a limited mandate have resulted in a lack of progress in international talks. While there has been minimal progress in the Geneva discussions, it is the only remaining international forum after the departure of the UN in 2009. The heavily politicized environment of the conflict and the discussions as whole prevents progress on meaningful issues or even small steps of agreement. For example, the Geneva discussions have frequently discussed agreements on non-use of force, but arguments over wording specificities and classifications of conflict parties have prevented final decisions (De Waal 2019b, 3). Despite these constant obstacles, however, the talks are still valuable as the last remaining forum for exchanging views from all sides. Some decisions have been successfully finalized, albeit ones without significant risk or potential for change. In 2009, participants agreed to create two Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM) in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to include local actors working on security (International Crisis Group 2010a, 14). With minimal use of the IPRM, much smaller-scale initiatives, such as joint pest control efforts across the boundary line, are widely celebrated (De Waal 2019b, 3).

### *Procedural Obstacles to Resolution*

The international mediation process faces a number of difficulties in its work, especially irreconcilable issues and the status of the parties, and has not experienced wide success beyond a few small initiatives. Broad problems in the negotiation process include inequality between parties, biased mediators seeking particular outcomes, a lack of trust between parties, and the constructed understanding of the conflict by each side (Akaba and Khintba 2011, 29). Negotiations have largely stalled since the 2000s, with no Georgian-Abkhaz talks since 2006 and the withdrawal of the UN in 2008.

Negotiations have struggled to overcome or work around the central issues of the conflict. Status for Abkhazia seems to be an irreconcilable issue, as neither side is willing to compromise or even discuss options beyond their preferred outcomes. With public opinion on both sides opposing compromise, it is unlikely that either would make concessions on status demands. Constant focus on irreconcilable issues has frequently stalled progress, leading to calls to instead focus on concrete confidence-building measures, specifically engagement with Abkhazia. Some issues demonstrate the discrepancy between topics important to international negotiators and topics prioritized by people on the ground: although the issue of refugee return is one of the central issues in international talks, it is much less common in domestic politics (Akaba and Khintba 2011, 12). Conflict in 2008 has further diminished the scope of negotiations, which now focus only on technical issues rather than core political questions.

The choice of including or excluding Abkhazia as an official party to peace talks has directly affected Abkhazia's positions and willingness to negotiate. Georgia encourages the idea that Abkhazia is not an independent actor but instead merely a puppet of Russia, a narrative that has remained largely constant across Georgian administrations (Akaba and Khintba 2011, 12). Similarly, the general lack of agency afforded to Abkhazia within the larger conflict resolution framework has presented major obstacles in the peace process. Abkhazia has grown increasingly isolated from Georgia and the international community since the 2008 war, which led to the withdrawal of NGOs, international organizations, and UN agencies.

Security issues are generally relegated to the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM). Designed to hold meetings on the boundary lines of each conflict to focus on security and detentions at crossing points, the mechanism tends to only operate "in fits and starts" (De Waal 2019b, 3). Russia drastically increased its military presence in Abkhazia following the 2008 war,

stationing large numbers of troops there and planning construction of military bases. Although Russia argues that these actions are justified due to Georgia acting similarly and planning military activities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the EU Monitoring Mission rejects allegations of Georgian military buildup (International Crisis Group 2010a, 5). The security aftermath of the 2008 war also restricted the movement of people across the boundary line, as Russian and Abkhaz military forces patrol the boundary and frequently shut crossing points (Vartanyan 2019). The status and composition of the peacekeeping force remains an often-discussed issue, with a variety of participants expressing interest in changing or internationalizing the mission, but no adequate replacement has been identified. Besides Russia, no other countries or international organizations are willing to spend the money, time, and human resources required, and there is little chance of Abkhazia accepting other forces.

### *Internal Obstacles to Resolution*

Decades of international mediation efforts have frequently been challenged by Abkhazia's dependence on Russia as well as other domestic barriers. The war in 1992-1993 displaced over 200,000 people, mostly ethnic Georgians, with the 2008 war displacing even more (Williamson 2011). Finding solutions for the return of these displaced people has been a major issue in international negotiations, where a lack of progress translates to unclear, challenging, and often dangerous circumstances for returnees. While many people returned with the help of the UN's program in 1994 or the Abkhaz government's 1999 initiative, Abkhazia has denied return for Georgians outside of the region of Gali, and discrimination has forced others to leave Abkhazia for Georgia again (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 2; International Crisis Group 2007a, 22). Passports and documentation in Abkhazia remain contentious problems. Although Abkhazia

provides its own passports and a large portion of the population has Russian passports, Georgia and many other countries consider these documents illegal and refuse visas to their holders (Grono 2016).

Education also remains a concern: despite Abkhaz policies guaranteeing ethnic groups the right to use their language, access to Georgian-language schools is minimal and dwindling (Human Rights Watch 2011a). Georgian children in Abkhazia also suffer consequences of learning in the Georgian-language schools that remain available, as the subsequent lack of proficiency in Russian and Abkhazian serves to widen the divide between ethnic communities and prevent ties with Abkhaz children (Conciliation Resources 2015, 10). This lack of Russian language skills also creates difficulties for students pursuing higher education in Abkhazia, causing many to seek study in Georgia, which also deepens the ethnic divide and increases the isolation of Abkhazia.

Rhetoric and carefully constructed narratives of the conflict have created a disconnect between understandings, as well as dangerous perceptions of the other side as an existential threat. Younger generations of Georgians and Abkhaz live in complete isolation from each other, with the exception of those who live near the boundary line. As a result, knowledge of the other side is extremely limited, and biased when it does exist. Abkhaz (and South Ossetian) society also remains frustrated over the Georgian argument that the 2008 war was between Russia and Georgia, as this view means that Georgia still refuses to understand the perspective and needs of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and ignores the consequences of its actions over the last century (Garb 2009, 239). As the majority of current grievances are directed at the authorities of the other side, interpersonal and community-level initiatives to share perspectives and build better understanding may be successful.

### **Previous Confidence-Building Measures and Levels of Success**

Existing confidence-building measures in Abkhazia seek to promote dialogue across the boundary line, increase cooperation on common concerns, strengthen civil society, and encourage international engagement. Some successes have been seen from these efforts, especially in dialogues between civil society representatives on both sides, but challenges abound. Any collaborative activities require sufficient common interest to overcome the highly politicized environment of cooperation, which is often difficult to achieve. Civil society organizations face a lack of power within society and over the larger political process, thus limiting the larger effect of their actions, and restrictions on activities with the other side disincentivize cooperation. For a better understanding of the regional environment, I interviewed Ema Kamkia of the Georgian organization Fund Sukhumi, which has worked since 1997 to build peace and prevent further conflict in Abkhazia with a simultaneous focus on gender equality. The following sections provide details of previously tried confidence-building measures encouraging dialogue, collaboration on common issues, civil society initiatives, and international engagement, including details and concrete examples from Fund Sukhumi's experience on the ground.

#### *Dialogue*

Dialogue between people on both sides has been ongoing in various formats since the 1990s. These informal meetings allow for the creation of new ideas and narratives, which contribute to building trust between participants with the goal of transferring benefits to the larger community (Rieser 2021). Projects organized by multiple international organizations seek to create a space for participants to “discuss and analyse opportunities and obstacles in the peace process in an environment that encourages creative thinking, realism and mutual respect” (Cohen 2003). The

main challenge facing dialogues is the persistent dedication to irreconcilable goals for a final solution. Due to these conflicting goals, participants see dialogues differently: for Georgian participants, dialogue is a path to reintegration, while Abkhaz participants view it as a path to recognition (Garb 2012, 97-98). To promote progress in dialogue, Fund Sukhumi has focused on affected communities, namely women, IDPs, and youth, when implementing discussion-based work. Kamkia noted that the organization uses “trainings, informal meetings, and discussions...to re-evaluate the past, eliminate the image of the enemy created by the conflict, reduce tension and spread a culture of peace.” These measures then work to encourage “the process of restoring trust between societies divided by conflict, building peace and positively transforming the conflict.”

International organizations have organized and managed dialogues between people, mainly civil society leaders, since the initial ceasefire in 1994. One major effort is the ongoing dialogue project run by the University of California, Irvine (UCI), which began in 1997 with slow but positive results (Garb 2012, 90-91). While participants were at first hesitant to discuss political or controversial topics, they slowly built confidence in each other and eventually began to encourage peaceful conflict resolution that would satisfy the needs of both sides. After multiple years of dialogue, the participants were independently motivated to continue meeting due to an understanding that sharing information, ideas for resolution, and perspectives was essential to preventing violence and ending the conflict.

The UCI dialogue project occurred in parallel to other initiatives, such as the Schlaining process organized by Conciliation Resources. These projects form a complementary process: the UCI dialogues focused on open and transparent meetings between civil society actors, while the Schlaining process consisted of confidential meetings between political leaders (Garb 2012, 93). Conciliation Resources has been sponsoring meetings between people on both sides for over

twenty years and, although official talks have frequently stalled, “this dialogue is successfully building trust, identifying areas of common interest and creating an environment more conducive to peace” (Conciliation Resources 2017). By focusing on less controversial issues, tangible steps have been taken, such as allowing exchange programs and increasing learning standards to improve access to education for Abkhaz students. Representatives of civil society tend to see Track II efforts as a success, as the dialogues allow space to understand the other side’s perspectives and the rationale behind their goals (Hoch, Kopeček, and Baar 2017, 333). Informal cross-conflict dialogue creates a platform for sharing objective facts and information, allows for a constructive space to discuss difficult questions, and encourages the building of contacts and networks across peers. The projects also internationalize the conflict resolution process by sharing information more broadly and introducing international experts.

### *Collaboration on Common Issues*

Collaborative and unilateral efforts to alleviate humanitarian needs and increase access to services have experienced varying levels of success, largely due to the politicization of all conflict-related topics in Abkhazia and Georgia. Some important efforts in the field of education have been well-received, as local initiatives have been supported by international organizations in developing educational links to other countries (Conciliation Resources 2016, 4). Although a relatively small number of people are affected by these activities, those involved have significant changes in their perspectives (Conciliation Resources 2016, 4). Abkhazia has also worked to increase enrollment of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia State University by allowing entrance interviews in place of an exam and implementing a bus route between Gali and Sukhumi (Conciliation Resources 2015, 11). Two other notable collaborative projects include work on exchanging archival materials across the



boundary line and cooperating on identifying missing people buried in unmarked graves during the conflict (De Waal 2019b, 14). An often-cited common interest between Abkhazia and Georgia is the Inguri hydroelectric station, the largest such station in the South Caucasus, with its reservoir in Georgia but generators in Abkhazia (De Waal 2019b, 12). Under a 1996 agreement, 60% of the power produced goes to Georgia, accounting for roughly 50% of Georgia's overall energy usage, and 40% goes to Abkhazia, which covers Abkhazia's entire energy usage. This agreement thus creates a situation where Georgia "is effectively funding Abkhazia with free electricity in order to keep the station running" (De Waal 2019b, 13).

Unilaterally, Georgia has sought to increase access to Georgian services for people living in Abkhazia since 2012, but this outreach requires travel across the boundary line. A 2018 initiative from Georgia to provide trading opportunities for Abkhazia and access to healthcare and education failed, as Abkhazia viewed the project as a thinly veiled reintegration attempt (De Waal 2019b, 14). Georgia developed a legislative package in 2018 to create options for trade across the boundary line, but the tendency from Abkhazia to reject all Georgian proposals challenged implementation (International Crisis Group 2018, 27-28). The 2018 initiative was the first attempt at using cross-boundary trade as a confidence-building measure after the 2008 war and also sought to increase access to education and essential services for people living in Abkhazia (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 313). An ongoing concern is the status of refugees and IDPs, as these groups often lack security and long-term plans for sustainable futures. Fund Sukhumi has made the IDP community a priority for its work: from day one, the organization "works for the promotion of integration of IDPs into Georgian society, advocates for issues of their decent living conditions...the process of IDP settlements, which continue to today, does not always respect the

principle of social justice.” In these efforts, Fund Sukhumi has successfully worked to identify the needs of IDPs and advocate for them at the local and national level.

### *Civil Society Initiatives*

Abkhazia has a relatively small number of civil society organizations. Abkhaz civil society during and after the 1992-1993 war focused primarily on humanitarian activities; modern civil society thus developed around this need, rather than being constructed by outside donors (Hoch, Kopeček, and Baar 2017, 332). Civil society organizations have contributed to the effective spread of information and encouragement of dialogue between people, which is especially important with the minimal presence of independent media in Abkhazia. Following the 1994 ceasefire, civil society organizations successfully cooperated and networked with each other, although these efforts did not usually translate into collaboration or positive relations in their larger communities (Hoch, Kopeček, and Baar 2017, 337). Cooperation slowed down in the mid-2000s, however, hampered by a stronger Abkhaz focus on internal issues and the harsher stance on Abkhazia taken by Saakashvili’s government (Hoch, Kopeček, and Baar 2017, 337). Today, Kamkia reports that Fund Sukhumi, now one of the strongest civil society organizations in the region has continued its long-term cooperation with organizations in Abkhazia, working on multiple partnership projects seeking to increase the role of women in the negotiation process and build trust in the process itself.

Before the 2008 war, cooperative efforts from local groups on both sides experienced numerous successes. Local leaders developed a “strong coordination network” of people working on conflict transformation and civil society continued to function effectively during times of halted formal negotiations, publishing reports and proposals with otherwise unavailable information

about resolution options (Garb 2012, 94). Efforts across the boundary line quickly rebounded after the 2008 war and lost little momentum, although some animosity remained. Projects across the Abkhaz-Georgian boundary line continue despite lack of funding. In 2019, a new exhibition opened in Tbilisi illustrating Georgian-Abkhaz relations before and after the war, based on materials from both sides of the conflict gathered by volunteers from Georgian civil society (Clogg 2020). The exhibit was based on the Memory Project, an initiative supporting groups from Abkhazia and Georgia in gathering oral histories and existing historical materials. With high interest in the exhibit, and a large number of young people in attendance, this success demonstrated the curiosity and willingness to learn more about the conflict and reflect on the past.

On the Georgian side, Fund Sukhumi has worked on cooperative projects across the boundary line of Abkhazia and Georgia for years, seeking to minimize the dangerous effects of “alienation of societies.” Kamkia explained that Fund Sukhumi “from the beginning of our activities, with the help of popular diplomacy, contributed to decreasing aggressiveness in society and building trust between sides. The main beneficiaries were women and young people...work was carried out with a partner organization from Abkhazia. Joint meetings were held and the history of conflict resolution (in Cyprus, the Balkans, etc) was studied.” Such projects, however, have become increasingly difficult for the organization to implement after the 2008 war, “due to the pressure of the official structures of de facto Abkhazia.” Currently, the Georgian government is “implementing projects that promote cooperation at the horizontal level,” including joint efforts between entrepreneurs. Kamkia noted several previous successes from the organization’s previous work: “long-term cooperation with partner organizations operating in Abkhazia and the study of the peacekeeping experience of various countries has laid the foundation for more than one partnership project aimed at increasing the role of women and restoring trust in the process of

building peace and transforming the conflict. Many studies have been carried out in the framework of joint projects, and many policy documents, analytical works, methodological guides on peace and security issues and innovative views on the transformation of conflicts have been published and widely distributed.”

Fund Sukhumi has also centered young people in its work. Kamkia explained that these activities are part of a larger initiative to develop a culture of peace: “in the adolescent period, young people form archetypes of behavior that can directly affect their lives and society. Therefore, the Sukhumi Foundation attaches great importance to working with them, especially with boys, to promote the formation of non-violent self-awareness.” Utilizing “direct partnerships with educational institutions,” the organization seeks to provide training in specific skills and competencies, namely “a culture of tolerance, conflict management, and the science of violence prevention skills.” In addition to work with schools, Fund Sukhumi supports youth centers and conflict management groups in 12 municipalities of Western Georgia. These centers are designed to “promote the development of young people, the realization of their leadership and creative potential.”

### *International Engagement*

Most countries and international actors will not work directly with Abkhaz authorities, to avoid implying legitimacy of recognition, so instead form partnerships only with local NGOs. While these connections support the work of local organizations, it also limits the ability of international organizations to influence the peace process more directly. International organizations seeking to mediate the conflict or engage with Abkhazia are often not trusted, as most offers of aid and development require a peace deal, thus also requiring concessions (Clogg 2001). One positive

example of international engagement is the activities of EU and UN police liaisons, stationed on the Georgian side of the boundary line, who frequently travel to Abkhazia to hold meetings, share knowledge, and train law enforcement personnel there (International Crisis Group 2013, 25).

The EU has contributed financially to projects in the region, spending roughly 25 million Euros from 1997 to 2007 and funding “rehabilitation and confidence-building projects” (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 4; International Crisis Group 2007a, 24). The Abkhaz view of the EU is complex: there is an overall positive view of the EU, given its support for human rights and civil society, but diminishing EU aid has led to a subsequent decrease in public support (Hoch, Kopeček, and Baar 2017, 336). The extremely minimal presence of the EU in Abkhazia also limits awareness of its operations, and attempts to develop and support confidence-building measures are often restricted by the lack of access to Abkhazia (Harpaz 2018, 259).

The EU began a new policy on Abkhazia in 2009 known as the Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP), meant to maintain legal non-recognition while encouraging greater international engagement (Sabou 2017, 127, 133). While the NREP was designed to end the previous policy encouraging isolation of Abkhazia, it has largely failed to increase engagement. The NREP’s three main goals of “de-isolation, conflict transformation and bridging communities through joint projects” have experienced some success, but the lack of EU visibility and difficulty of countering Russian influence has limited implementation (Sabou 2017, 134). There is no comprehensive EU policy aimed at conflict resolution in the region, and the lack of clarity has led to minimal trust or confidence in local authorities working with EU support.

There is very minimal economic support for development in Abkhazia, with most international organizations preferring to provide humanitarian aid rather than working directly on development issues (International Crisis Group 2007a, 25). Abkhazia thus has no access to support

for economic development, as it cannot access international financial institutions or banks as a non-recognized economy. Humanitarian programs have provided necessary aid, but largely failed to build confidence between communities.

### **Opportunities for Confidence-Building Measures**

In a 2020 survey of 1,351 Georgian adults regarding the conflict in Abkhazia, 67% of respondents believed direct dialogue with Abkhaz leaders would be the best next step towards resolution, while the second most popular step was “to identify common interests and ways to resolve them together” (Conciliation Resources 2020). As the negotiation process remains inconclusive, these responses are important as they contradict the popular narrative in Georgia that the conflict is between Georgia and Russia, giving no agency to Abkhazia. Other possible steps approved of by more than 30% of respondents included supporting development in Abkhazia for healthcare, education, and trade. As some of the major factors preventing peace included lack of trust between parties, irreconcilable issues, isolation, and national narratives, confidence-building measures such as the ones approved of by Georgians can be the best method of moving the peace process forward. Other important small decisions that could create capacity for larger decisions include stabilizing freedom of movement across the boundary line, developing mechanisms for mutual recognition of Georgian and Abkhaz documents, improving cooperation between civil society groups, and promoting dialogue between Georgians and Abkhaz (International Crisis Group 2010a, 15). Overall, the greatest potential for successful implementation is in confidence-building measures focused on expanding previous dialogue initiatives to the broader society, cooperation on common issues, and encouraging international engagement to counter increasing isolation.

### *Specific Common Issues*

Given the importance of freedom of movement across the boundary line, especially as Georgia continues to provide access to services and resources on its side, both sides should continue to support new ways of increasing freedom of movement for those living on the Abkhaz side. As people living in Abkhazia often have difficulty accessing education and healthcare specifically, allowing travel over the boundary line and/or supporting the improvement of these systems in Abkhazia would be greatly beneficial (Grono 2016). Although Georgia has tried to make services accessible to those living on the Abkhaz side by locating them near the boundary, Abkhaz authorities see these efforts as “undermining their own efforts to integrate ethnic Georgians and solidify Abkhazia’s independence” (Vartanyan 2019). Georgia has previously been willing to make compromises on humanitarian concerns, including easing limitations on visas for Abkhaz, which Abkhazia can encourage by, for example, providing more access to Georgian-language schooling (International Crisis Group 2013, ii). For Fund Sukhumi’s Kamkia, the work of an existing organization providing healthcare programs in Georgia for people from Abkhazia is an example of future options. In just a few years of operation, “the number of beneficiaries of the program exceeded several thousand and a large part of them changed their outlook of the image of the enemy in the form of Georgians.” Providing access to much-needed social services can thus be successful, despite objections from the Abkhaz authorities, and serve to shift negative perceptions of the other side.

### *Education Measures*

Education for young people is an important part of the peace process. Abkhaz and Georgians in Abkhazia share two main education-related concerns: access to education in general and “perceived

inequalities in terms of access and opportunity” (Conciliation Resources 2016, 3). To improve the shared situation of education, Georgia, Abkhazia, and international partners can take specific steps to increase access to quality educational opportunities for all. The current state of the conflict has created near total isolation of entire generations, which means youth in Abkhazia may not be aware of the other side, fully understand integration opportunities, or trust international mediators. International exchange programs and more diverse opportunities for education, such as internships, volunteering abroad, and online education, can help counter isolation and lack of knowledge (Conciliation Resources 2016, 6).

International exchange programs are very important for promoting global citizenship and greater understanding of the world, but a lack of internal capacity limits the options for students in Abkhazia (Conciliation Resources 2016, 7). To counter the lack of information and necessary skills, international partners can support the Abkhaz authorities in sharing information within the region, allow students to take English tests in Armenia, encourage civil society actors to continue calls for easier visa regimes, and create new opportunities for Abkhaz students to study abroad. Within Abkhazia, the education system needs modernization and diversification after three decades with no significant reforms. Although overcoming the politicization of issues such as history and geography will prove difficult, internal discussion in Abkhazia, support from international resources and input, dialogue on international best practices, and increased access to modern technology will help to improve the quality of education in Abkhazia and allow students to take advantage of expanded higher education opportunities (Conciliation Resources 2016, 10).



### *International Engagement*

Greater international engagement with Abkhazia through the expanded presence of international organizations, connections to larger networks, and cooperative projects with external actors can help build essential trust and allow for long-lasting peace in the future. To recover from years of wartime destruction and economic isolation, Georgia and Western countries can increase engagement at all levels of society, focused on humanitarian concerns and improving standards of living. Increasing engagement with Abkhazia is also in Georgia's interest, as the best way to prevent closer Abkhaz integration with Russia is to offer other options (International Crisis Group 2008).

International actors can support the work of civil society by strengthening partnerships, assisting in coordination, and providing opportunities to make connections. To counter the isolation of Abkhazia, international organizations and networks can connect with its NGOs on common issues. A critical challenge for local civil society organizations, as expressed by Fund Sukhumi, is the shortage of financial resources – as donors have left Georgia or chosen to fund projects not related to the conflict, options for funding have drastically decreased. Greater access to funding, whether from countries themselves or in the form of connections to larger funding networks, can thus provide essential support to local organizations. International actors can and should maintain connections with NGOs and civil society groups in Abkhazia without inadvertently implying legitimacy for the region; for example, the EU and U.S. can contribute to the creation of networks and connections irrespective of progress made on talks (Cooley and Mitchell 2010, 69). International organizations can maintain confidence- and democracy-building work and provide funding for projects promoting dialogue between the two sides (International Crisis Group 2010a, ii).

The EU, as a relatively new actor seeking to expand further into the former Soviet states, can take on specific measures to increase engagement. The EU could help with training and educational exchanges, which would help the community regardless of an eventual settlement, specifically offering education opportunities in Europe, training for essential and apolitical professions, cooperation on environmental issues, and support for small and medium businesses (Grono 2016). To effectively share information, the EU can encourage Abkhazia to allow it to open an office in Sukhumi to “provide information on Brussels policies, manage small grants and facilitate links between Abkhazia and EU civil society, such as universities” (International Crisis Group 2013, 25).

### *Cross-Boundary Dialogue*

Given the ongoing isolation and political stalemate over negotiations, the only way to improve the situation is to focus on human-level initiatives seeking to improve the lives of people on the ground directly affected by the conflict. From her experience on the ground, Ema Kamkia cited two main factors for the lack of resolution: “the absence of dialogue and ignoring each other’s needs.” Additionally, “horizontal dialogue cannot be stopped either in parallel with political negotiations or in its complete absence. Ordinary people should talk, communicate, learn to accept each other, see the needs of the other side – real reconciliation business is very difficult and fueled by common interests, searches for contact points, building trust and contacts.” By creating and implementing dialogue programs between local communities, people on both sides of the conflict could begin to understand conflicting narratives and collaborate on shared goals for the future.

Dialogue between sides can serve as a way to understand motivations and opinions, rather than trying to prove the other side wrong. Coordination between leaders of local initiatives can

keep communities engaged and maintain communication to ensure commitment and continued operation (Garb 2012, 91). These measures can begin with current points of contact – including the ongoing discussion projects organized by Fund Sukhumi and other local groups – and expand outward to other affected communities by inviting those impacted by the conflict on each side to share experiences and perspectives. The success of Fund Sukhumi in creating partnerships and dialogue-based efforts around the shared goal of understanding conflict resolution strategies and increasing the role of women demonstrates the usefulness of organizing meetings around specific topics of mutual interest.

### *Economic Measures*

While economic support and trade are frequently cited as powerful confidence-building measures, especially for isolated regions such as Abkhazia, economic-related measures have little chance at success in Abkhazia. Two factors – the lack of trade linkages with Europe and the economic dependence on Russia – limit the options for trade-based incentives for Abkhazia (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 322). Increasing trade with the West is rarely considered an attractive option in Abkhazia, due to the politicized nature of handling status questions and product origins (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 322). Following the model of Transdniestria, some suggest strengthening economic integration by including Abkhazia in Georgia's DCFTA with the EU. This option is not promising, as the situation in Transdniestria is very different from Abkhazia, which has no existing links to the EU and no easily marketable goods for EU markets (De Waal 2019b, 11).

## Conclusion

The conflict over Abkhazia is unlikely to see resolution soon. After nearly three decades since the initial ceasefire, Abkhazia has developed de facto institutions and been recognized as an independent state by six countries (Russia, Venezuela, Syria, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Vanuatu), decreasing its willingness to negotiate on status and thus drastically limiting the bargaining range available. As the sides of the conflict continue to live in near complete isolation from each other, with the only exception of informal trade and travel among those close to the boundary, dangerous narratives will continue to spread, and the issues will remain irreconcilable. Existing dialogue projects, however, show the potential for cross-boundary cooperation and understanding, albeit without significant spread to the wider community. With international support for engagement and dialogue, resolution efforts may be able to shift from conflict management to conflict transformation. In her final interview remarks, Ema Kamkia of Fund Sukhumi noted that “the resolution of the conflict is in complete stagnation – there is no political dialogue and, accordingly, organizations cannot really influence the conflict resolution. But the work carried out in society to reduce aggression, promote a peaceful solution to the conflict, and the upbringing of youth in the spirit of tolerance has brought results.” Looking forward, Kamkia concluded that “peaceful conflict resolution does not have an alternative.” For the implementation of a future peace settlement to succeed, divided societies must be ready to build a common future.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Confidence-Building Measures in South Ossetia: Barriers to Implementation in an Isolated Region**

As one of two conflicts with the parent state of Georgia, South Ossetia is frequently grouped with Abkhazia as examples of post-Soviet breakaway regions demanding the right to self-determination. While South Ossetia and Abkhazia share a sense of victimization by Georgia, the conflict dynamics are far from the same and must be treated as fully separate cases. South Ossetia has often expressed interest in joining other ethnic Ossetians in North Ossetia, a republic in Russia, rather than seeking full independence. Following the initial war in the 1990s, South Ossetia remained relatively integrated with Georgia for more than a decade, maintaining close economic ties and strong cross-boundary trade. Once considered the simplest and most resolvable conflict in the region, the years after 2004 witnessed a drastic decline in relations, turning South Ossetia into a nearly closed region dependent on Russian aid for its continued existence.

Russia recognized South Ossetia as an independent state after the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, but the region remains unsustainable, with minimal potential to become a feasible state. South Ossetia's economy today is weak, even by regional standards, and it has no clear path towards economic stability, given the lack of development, resources, or port access (Ambrosius and Lange 2016, 678). The region has suffered population loss due to conflict decreasing economic opportunities, further decreasing the already small population and mainly leaving behind those who cannot seek opportunities elsewhere. Due to the politicization of the conflict environment and dependence on Russia, civic and humanitarian aid to South Ossetia is

severely lacking and the stalled nature of the negotiation process is directly impacting the populations most in need (International Crisis Group 2010b, 23).

Despite the bleak picture of modern South Ossetia, some success has been seen in previous confidence-building measures. South Ossetia is nearly an ethnically homogenous state, thus removing the interethnic conflict seen in Abkhazia. While unlikely to lead directly to resolution, confidence-building measures in South Ossetia have the potential to rebuild trust and improve standards of living across the conflict divides. For the best chance of success, confidence-building measures in South Ossetia can focus on economic aid, people-to-people connections across the boundary line, and international engagement. Combining these priorities can counter isolation, bridge societal divides, and improve the standard of living on both sides of South Ossetia's increasingly restricted boundary line, thus contributing to a more stable environment for resolution work.

### **Conflict History and Causes**

South Ossetia became an autonomous region of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922 and remained closely integrated with Georgia in the Soviet era, with much less independent regional identity than Abkhazia (De Waal 2019a, 2). Tensions arose in 1989 when Georgian nationalist activist Zviad Gamsakhurdia began spreading inflammatory rhetoric about national minorities in Georgia, labeling them as “guests” and “disloyal to Georgia” (De Waal 2019a, 3). Political tensions turned violent in 1990 as South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia and reaffirmed its loyalty to the Soviet Union, leading to Georgia's parliament removing South Ossetia's autonomous status and sending military forces to attack the region (De Waal 2019a, 3; Human Rights Watch 2008). The subsequent two years were characterized by “intermittent

fighting” between the two sides (De Waal 2019a, 3). While minimal international attention was paid to the conflict, it caused much larger shockwaves throughout Georgian politics and society.

Escalating violence in the spring of 1992 inspired threats of Russian intervention, culminating in a June 1992 ceasefire signed between the presidents of Georgia and Russia (Welt 2005, 1). The ceasefire included a Joint Control Commission (JCC) comprised of Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, and the Republic of North Ossetia, as well as a Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPF) of 2,000 troops from Russia, South Ossetia, and Georgia (De Waal 2019a, 3). Following the ceasefire, South Ossetia “became de facto politically separate from Georgia, but remained integrated with it in practical respects” (De Waal 2019a, 3). The open border allowed for easy access to cross-boundary line trade and many ethnic Georgians remained in the region, thus maintaining interethnic coexistence. From the 1992 ceasefire to 2004, South Ossetia more closely resembled Transdnistria than Abkhazia – rather than an intense and ethnically-driven conflict, fighting in South Ossetia had only escalated following political tensions and populations continued living in relative harmony following a ceasefire deal.

Political decisions from the newly elected Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili in 2004 derailed the existing stability in South Ossetia and catalyzed the return to violence that created the modern “frozen” nature of the conflict. Trade had long been flourishing across the boundary line between South Ossetia and Georgia, particularly at the Ergneti Market located between South Ossetia and the Georgian town of Gori. As the “largest wholesale market in the South Caucasus,” the largely unmonitored trade from the Ergneti Market was the primary economic opportunity for South Ossetia (De Waal 2019a, 3-4). The market was targeted as part of Saakashvili’s 2004 anti-smuggling initiative and permanently closed, drastically undermining South Ossetia’s trust in Georgia (De Waal 2019a, 4). Authorities in South Ossetia were able to “convincingly portray...

Georgian actions as evidence of new aggression” and, following the closure, a sudden increase in violence risked war (International Crisis Group 2007b, 1; Welt 2005, 6).

The events of 2004 marked the beginning of an uneasy period of rising tensions along the boundary line that ultimately turned into war. Ceasefire violations occurred in parallel to continued, but unsuccessful, international negotiations (Oliker 2008). Numerous other factors contributed to instability and the risk of greater violence, including limited and outdated international conflict resolution tools and political decisions in Georgia and South Ossetia. Tensions escalated into war between Georgian and Russian forces on August 7, 2008, with the origins of violence still disputed. The Russian military pushed the Georgian offense back into Georgia and further towards Tbilisi, taking control of additional territory (Amnesty International 2018, 11; De Waal 2019a, 4). After five days of fighting, the EU mediated a ceasefire on August 12. The war left approximately 1,000 people dead and 60,000 displaced (Amnesty International 2018, 11; De Waal 2019a, 4). Following the ceasefire, Russia shocked the international community, and the regions themselves, by recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent.

Russian recognition of South Ossetia’s independence complicated the war’s aftermath by greatly altering international and regional dynamics. After negotiating the ceasefire, the EU deployed a 200-person monitoring mission (EUMM) to “monitor, analyse and report on the security situation in the disputed regions” (International Crisis Group 2010b, 21). The EU then adopted a Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) for Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2009, meant to allow engagement with the regions while maintaining support for Georgia’s territorial integrity (De Waal 2019b, 17). Despite some efforts at engagement, South Ossetia has become increasingly isolated, far more so than Abkhazia, in the years following the conflict.



Georgia passed the Law on Occupied Territories in October 2008, restricting freedom of movement across the boundary lines of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and greatly limiting economic activities in the regions (Human Rights Watch 2011b, 64).

Beginning in 2009, the process known as “borderization” has seen Russian-led efforts to make the boundary line an international border following Russian recognition of South Ossetian independence (Amnesty International 2018, 5). South Ossetia is now a nearly closed society, with an increasingly restricted border, lack of access provided to the EUMM, and no international organizations in the region except the International Committee of the Red Cross (De Waal 2019a, 1). Demographic shifts caused by years of conflict and isolation have left South Ossetia disproportionately populated by elderly people with minimal support, as residents have left in large numbers due to the lack of economic opportunities, especially for young people (Amnesty International 2018, 34). Besides the enormous economic, social, and personal consequences of borderization, restrictions on freedom of movement and cross-boundary links contributes to “entrenching discriminatory attitudes and measures,” further limiting prospects for rebuilding confidence (Amnesty International 2018, 19)

### **Previous Attempts at Resolution**

The international negotiation process over South Ossetia has witnessed minimal progress over the three decades of its work, hampered by a lack of domestic and international political will and a highly politicized environment. While international efforts continue, the few important agreements have been brokered by specific parties, namely Russia in 1992 and the EU in 2008. Leaders on both sides of the conflict have unilaterally proposed a number of peace plans over the course of negotiations, often including reconciliation efforts and proposed confidence-building measures.

However, as these suggestions are included in one-sided plans with no meaningful concessions, no discussion or implementation of potentially useful measures occurs (International Crisis Group 2007b, 11). Similarly, initiatives from various international organizations have struggled to gain traction in the region. The UNHCR supported refugee resettlement processes from 1992 to 2004, but very few were interested in returning and the program eventually ended (International Crisis Group 2005). Neither the UN nor the OSCE has succeeded in encouraging negotiations or improving humanitarian conditions within South Ossetia, and only the EU has managed to mediate any major agreement.

### *International Mediation*

The international negotiation process began after the Russian-negotiated ceasefire that ended fighting in 1992. Included in the ceasefire agreement were provisions for a Joint Control Commission (JCC) and Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPF). Georgia frequently criticized the resulting negotiation format, which included Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia, and the Republic of North Ossetia, for bias against it as Russia and the North Ossetian negotiators supported South Ossetia (Human Rights Watch 2008). After the outbreak of violence in 2004, negotiations stalled with neither side trusting the other or the process itself (International Crisis Group 2007b, 1). The resulting breakdown in the scope of the talks signaled the end of discussions on substantive issues.

Following the 2008 war, the negotiation process became more internationalized with the launch of the Geneva International Discussions. Three diplomats from the EU, UN, and OSCE co-chair the quarterly talks, with officials from Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Russia, and Georgia participating and the U.S. acting as an observer (De Waal 2019b, 3). The representatives of the conflicting parties participate without official status, which is meant to allow for discussion of

sensitive issues but also prohibits work on final status negotiations (De Waal 2019b, 3). Due to the highly politicized nature of the conflict environment and a mandate focused away from the core issues, the Geneva participants frequently fail to even discuss political issues. Without political will, the Geneva talks create a platform for dialogue but fail to make meaningful progress: for example, although an Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism was established in 2009, its meetings have frequently been canceled over procedural issues or perceived slights (International Crisis Group 2010b, 19-20).

### *Russian-Led Efforts*

Russia took on the main mediation role in 1992, brokering the ceasefire deal that ended fighting and deploying the majority of peacekeeping troops. With the quadripartite format of initial negotiations, including Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, and the Republic of North Ossetia, Russia held a significantly larger role than the other negotiators and allowed South Ossetia to assume it held equal status to Georgia (Welt 2005, 2). Russia's recognition of South Ossetia's independence following the 2008 war has cemented the strong stance among authorities and the public against reintegration with Georgia in any form. Russia continues to heavily support South Ossetia, which is far less sustainable as a stand-alone region than Abkhazia, and many in South Ossetia seek integration with Russia rather than independence. Today, the Russian presence on the ground in South Ossetia remains strong, particularly on the boundary line, as does the provision of economic, military, and political support. Through a number of bilateral treaties, South Ossetia's finances, military, foreign policy, and boundary line security are guaranteed or heavily supported by Russia (Amnesty International 2018, 15; De Waal 2015).

### *The European Union*

The EU is a relatively new actor in the international negotiation process, having increased its role after mediating the 2008 ceasefire deal. In 2008, the EU deployed a civilian EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to Georgia to observe the ceasefire, marking the first major conflict resolution initiative from the organization (Hill 2011). The EUMM also sought to fill the vacancy left by the withdrawal of OSCE and UN missions after Russia declined to extend their respective mandates (Amnesty International 2018, 12). With approximately 200 civilian monitors, the EUMM is tasked with acting as an “impartial player to observe and monitor,” uniquely situated to work directly with local populations and pass on their concerns and needs to the international community (Lewington 2013, 56). The EUMM has the potential to play an important role in confidence-building between the sides, but its options are severely limited as monitors are denied access to South Ossetia. Rather than freely moving across the boundary line, the EUMM is restricted to the Georgian side, despite the 2008 agreement calling for open access to all regions (Amnesty International 2018, 12). Beyond the EUMM, overall EU engagement in the region has been limited by the significantly stronger Russian presence and influence, as well as the lack of trust from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the EU and other Western institutions.

### **Previous Confidence-Building Measures and Levels of Success**

Confidence-building measures have not been widely used in South Ossetia – before the 2004 escalation, relations remained relatively normal, and the aftermath of the 2008 war and subsequent Russian recognition of independence closed off many avenues of potential measures. Examples of previous confidence-building measures are mostly restricted to initiatives from international organizations, such as the EUMM. With few civil society groups existing in South Ossetia, and

minimal funding for those that do maintain a presence, local suggestions for confidence-building measures rarely gain traction (International Crisis Group 2010b, 11; Jasutis 2013, 27). Civil society groups also face government pressure and those working on conflict resolution and reconciliation are often branded as traitors. Despite extensive searches, I was unable to contact organizations working directly on South Ossetia – given the lack of access to the region, it is likely that local groups are largely cut off from regional networks, while the government pressure on such organizations may prevent wide publicization of their work. As in other post-Soviet societies, residents feel disconnected from the political process and acknowledge their lack of ability to influence the peace process. Public opinion polling found that only 4.2% of respondents in South Ossetia “believe that they can influence political or economic affairs in the region” (Toal and O’Loughlin 2013, 151).

While not specifically designed for building confidence, the presence of the Ergneti Market until 2004 must be acknowledged as a major facilitator of cross-boundary connections, and has often been considered an example for suggested projects. Given the stable and peaceful nature of relations between populations on each side from 1992 to 2004, the possibility of restoring such relations if the border was more open remains, even after the 2008 war (De Waal 2019a, 10). Without any meaningful progress on other confidence-building measures, however, the restrictions on freedom of movement and isolation of South Ossetia presents major challenges to implementing cross-boundary trade links.

### *Economic and Trade-Based Measures*

Before the closure of the Ergneti Market in 2004, the cross-boundary line trade opportunities made available by its location allowed for a large degree of unplanned cooperation and informal

interpersonal relationships. Its closure led to major income sources cut off for both sides and also removed sources of contact and relationships for people on either side of the boundary line (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 315). Although some similar opportunities have been suggested by Georgia, the restrictions on freedom of movement caused by borderization prohibit similar organized measures. The example of the Ergneti Market deserves recognition, despite not being designed as a confidence-building measure, as it enabled cross-boundary communication and cooperation on levels not seen elsewhere in Georgia. Before the 2004 closure, South Ossetia maintained close ties with Georgia through economic links facilitated in part by the market, making its end and the subsequent dramatic shift to economic dependence on Russia even starker.

### *International Mechanisms and Support*

International efforts to support confidence-building measures and overall resolution prospects have produced mixed results, as initiatives have frequently stalled or faced major obstacles after the 2008 war. Concerns of inadvertently legitimizing South Ossetia's proclaimed independence have prevented engagement and led to isolationist policies from many international organizations, while the distrust of these organizations within South Ossetia and the lack of access provided to them often prohibit any engagement that is suggested (International Crisis Group 2010b, 20). The EUMM offers an example of an international effort to restore some amount of confidence by observing the ceasefire agreement and, while it has been denied access to South Ossetia, it has succeeded in expanding the EU presence and working on regional stabilization, normalization, and confidence-building (Lewington 2013, 67).

The EUMM aided in the establishment of an Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) in 2009, meant to facilitate cooperation on common minor security issues, and distributed

phones for hotlines, so authorities on each side can contact the EUMM to help resolve minor issues without escalation (Lewington 2013, 68). These initiatives have the potential to act as security-focused confidence-building measures and restore much needed communication channels between authorities on either side of the boundary line, but frequent procedural arguments or refusals to use the mechanisms have minimized their effectiveness. While the EUMM has the capacity to take on a larger role than it currently inhabits, the continued lack of access to South Ossetia means it can only work on the Georgian side of the boundary line and is drastically limited in the scope of its efforts.

In addition to the EUMM, the EU has sought to implement a number of confidence-building measures, but has faced challenges including the lack of trust in Western institutions and a lack of clarity regarding EU policy on the region. In the years following the 2008 war, the EU's Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) was rarely mentioned and virtually unknown in the region – while this allowed for greater flexibility in EU policies, it also diminished local trust in the EU (Sabou 2017, 134). Unlike in Transdniestria, greater integration with the EU holds no appeal for South Ossetia. With restricted borders and a lack of products to export, neither visa regimes nor economic integration would provide incentives for South Ossetia (Sabou 2017, 136). Finally, an internal challenge for the EU is the inherently slow and inflexible nature of EU funding mechanisms, which is not well-suited to conflict prevention or management (Sasse 2009, 382).

The EU has emerged as the main international actor in recent years, due to the enduring presence of the EUMM, but other organizations have suggested and implemented initiatives as well. Due to the politicized environment around the conflict, aid has become a zero-sum game between Russia and Georgia, with each competing for influence with conflicting offers and plans. In contrast, the OSCE managed to establish an Economic Rehabilitation Program (ERP) in 2005

to rebuild infrastructure, develop economic opportunities, build trust, and improve standards of living (International Crisis Group 2007b, 21). As one of the only major successes of the Joint Control Commission, the ERP was relatively successful in promoting “practical, inter-ethnic cooperation,” but the limits of economic cooperation alone were demonstrated by the outbreak of war in 2008 (International Crisis Group 2007b, 22). Following the 2008 war, South Ossetia did not receive reconstruction aid (Georgia received a large international aid package) as it denied access to international assessment experts, and thus did not have access to support for post-war rebuilding, whether physical or societal (International Crisis Group 2010b, 19). In the years since, the growing isolation of South Ossetia has continued to prevent meaningful international engagement.

### **Opportunities for Confidence-Building Measures**

The multiple factors preventing peace in South Ossetia also tend to limit the options for implementation of confidence-building measures, as reconciliation and cooperation efforts face the effects of borderization and isolation. Despite these challenges, however, confidence-building measures remain essential to improving the situation in South Ossetia and supporting an eventual peaceful resolution. Work on engagement and cooperation is also a humanitarian imperative – the aftermath of two wars has left South Ossetia cut off from all sources of income except Russian aid, and reconstruction support has been minimal (Sabou 2017, 135). Rather than focusing solely on final status, the sides should work on gradual confidence-building measures addressing the immediate needs of both communities. International actors can support efforts by strengthening the work of existing mechanisms, as well as encouraging economic and trade-based measures to increase cooperation and economic stability.



### *Economic Measures*

Confidence-building measures aimed at increasing economic opportunities in South Ossetia offer a number of potential benefits: promoting greater economic stability, countering strong Russian influence, and creating positive experiences of cooperation with Georgia and international organizations. The 2008 war destroyed previously existing sources of income and depleted economic opportunities, causing large numbers of people to leave and seek options elsewhere (Mendelson 2008). Before the Ergneti Market closed in 2004, trade across the boundary line flourished as the main source of revenue for local economies on both sides (Amnesty International 2018, 38). Introducing measures to facilitate cross-boundary line trade would “instantly provide an incentive for the two communities to collaborate” and support economic stability in South Ossetia (De Waal 2019a, 10). The implementation of such measures would face an uphill battle, as borderization has drastically reduced the number of legal crossing points and complicated the crossing process, but the case of Transdniestria shows the potential for trade-based measures to help stabilize the region. Informal trade links can help reduce risks of violence and encourage stability and cooperation. It is also important to note that sudden removal of such links can immediately end any existing stability without sustainable alternatives, as seen in 2004 (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2020, 325).

In addition to promoting cross-boundary line trade opportunities, international actors and Georgia itself can provide funding and support for rebuilding and restructuring South Ossetia’s damaged economy. Trade links and international aid remain important for South Ossetia, especially since aid from Russia has diminished following low oil prices and Western sanctions after the annexation of Crimea (International Crisis Group 2018, i). As the poorest region of Georgia, the Georgian side of the boundary line has also been affected by borderization, with many

residents suddenly unable to access previously owned land and other agricultural resources (Amnesty International 2018, 34). Most villages in the region depend on livestock and farming, so losing access to land means losing access to all sources of income. Georgia provides only minimal financial assistance to residents near the boundary line, while those on the South Ossetia side also suffer from seemingly arbitrary placement of the line and restrictions on movement (Amnesty International 2018, 35). While discussion of opening trade opportunities across the boundary line remains essential, international donors can work with local organizations to fund initiatives providing financial support to struggling communities.

A recent proposal for formalizing trade relations between South Ossetia and Georgia comes from a 2011 Russia-Georgia agreement laying the framework for eventual trade corridors through Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively (International Crisis Group 2018, 12). Initial discussion of the plan stalled, but negotiations began again after a 2016 landslide blocked the existing pass and triggered demands from local companies for new solutions. While the corridor would be a safer and more profitable option, and directly benefit South Ossetia, authorities there dislike the proposal as it does not consider South Ossetia as an equal partner in the process (De Waal 2019a, 10-11). Politicization of the overall conflict region threatens potential implementation of the deal, with neither side willing to offer concessions on any conflict-related topics. Negotiation over the corridor proposal is further complicated by the difficult relationship between Georgia and Russia: Georgia considers the deal a political strategy, but Russia's interests center on transporting Armenian cargo (International Crisis Group 2018, 15).

Despite the complications over the trade corridor proposal, some progress has been made in negotiations and it could still prove a successful method of formalizing trade relations and increasing cooperation across the conflict divides. In 2017 and 2018 respectively, Russia and

Georgia signed contracts with a Swiss company to monitor the proposed corridor in South Ossetia, which eliminates a previous point of contention over international monitoring jurisdiction over Georgia-South Ossetia trade, which is considered domestic trade by Georgia (International Crisis Group 2018, 15-16). The Swiss deal, however, does not address lingering questions of authority over customs and passport control on the South Ossetia-Russia border, a major issue that would need to be addressed before the plan could move forward. Neither Russia nor Georgia wants the other side to have complete control over monitoring customs; Russia in particular considers proposed Georgian control to undermine its recognition of South Ossetia's independence (International Crisis Group 2018, 15). Two options remain that could catalyze action on the proposal, especially with greater international support for progress. Russia and Georgia could work with a private company to manage customs fees and security, which would then provide the economic benefits to South Ossetia without giving it control over the aspects of trade traditionally handled by independent states (International Crisis Group 2018, 24). The other option would allow Russia to take control of customs management – while Georgia discourages this suggestion, the overall benefits of the corridor may eventually outweigh its preference to assert control over the South Ossetia-Russia border.

### *Countering Isolation and Hostility*

Ongoing isolation of South Ossetia from the international community and the Georgian side of the boundary line deepens divides between societies and prevents opportunities for peaceful cooperation that could contribute to resolution efforts. Supporting engagement to break down barriers between all levels of society and negotiations would positively affect relations and could help encourage the resumption of productive negotiations (Harpaz 2018, 258-59). International

actors, specifically the West, and Georgia should recognize the negative repercussions of continuing to focus on economic and political isolation policies and instead seek opportunities for engagement. Commitment to engagement and support of South Ossetia would also increase the trust in Georgia and international organizations, which is critical to continued negotiations. Pressure from international actors on South Ossetian and Russian authorities to remove restrictions on freedom of movement across the boundary line is a necessary precondition for such engagement.

To encourage reconciliation between communities across the boundary line, confidence-building measures can seek to increase communication, encourage acceptance of others, and develop methods to protect the rights of all people. In the conflict region, these steps first require the strengthening of civil society on both sides, particularly in South Ossetia, which currently lacks the capacity to handle such issues (Jasutis 2013, 38). As confidence-building must happen jointly to be effective, stronger civil society can then pursue dialogues and joint efforts between the two communities to promote better understanding. Dialogue projects seeking to share experiences and perspectives of the conflict across the boundary line can be modeled after successful Abkhaz civil society initiatives and build on the previous years of close ties with Georgia to understand shared histories. Such efforts seek to deepen understandings of people on the other side and challenge negative or even hostile views, and would likely see some success in building relationships due to the years of cross-boundary line travel only recently halted by increased borderization. Given the previously mentioned close ties between the two societies, as well as the large number of families and friendships across the boundary line, removing barriers to freedom of movement and encouraging connections on the Track III level could result in greater acceptance of the need for mutually acceptable resolution.

Confidence-building measures targeted at young people and aiming to overcome hostile rhetoric and opinions about the other side are essential to building better relations. With the closed nature of South Ossetia in recent years, young people are growing up with an understanding of the other side based only on propaganda, as there are no chances for informal interactions with people on the Georgian side of the boundary line (International Crisis Group 2004, 24). The ongoing economic crisis on both sides of the boundary line has severely impacted young people, causing many to leave the region due to the lack of future educational and economic opportunities. In conjunction with international economic aid, young people can be employed for reconstruction efforts to rebuild and update infrastructure in the region. The borderization process has placed the boundary line indiscriminately through villages on both sides, disrupting access to agricultural lands for South Ossetians and Georgians alike. Due to this geographic proximity, young people from both communities can be brought together for paid work on cooperative projects – in addition to reconstruction, common interests include environmental protection, safe access to land for crops and livestock, and protected movement across the boundary line for education and social services.

Over the past three decades, formal talks at the Track I level have made little to no progress in working toward a peaceful resolution. Given these circumstances, initiatives on all levels of negotiations and society should instead focus on “incremental, practical measures that would address humanitarian needs” (International Crisis Group 2010b, i). Cooperation on common issues shared across the boundary line would serve two essential purposes: providing critical humanitarian support to address basic needs, and establishing positive foundations of collaborative activities and trust. For example, as both sides still struggle to adequately address the needs of refugees and IDPs from the wars, collaborating on this issue would support vulnerable populations while simultaneously building confidence between the sides.

### *Strengthening International Mechanisms and Support*

While international organizations and actors are constrained in their options for promoting reconciliation and resolution, opportunities remain for encouraging greater communication and monitoring human rights conditions. Given its existing presence in the region, the EUMM can focus on operating and maintaining lines of communication across the boundary line and strongly encouraging the use of the hotline and IPRM mechanisms. The EUMM itself is not designed to provide humanitarian aid or fund peacebuilding initiatives, but its mandate of observing and building confidence situates it to liaise directly with local communities affected by violence and borderization and pass those opinions along to international actors (Lewington 2013, 56). The fact-finding potential of the EUMM can then contribute to more specific and targeted policies to address the needs and concerns of affected communities. With its immediate connection to the EUMM, the EU itself can promote efforts aimed at “creating dialogue, supporting social initiatives, mainstreaming human rights, and boosting regional cooperation” (Jasutis 2013, 45). Overall, the international community can take on a larger and more proactive role in creating effective methods to monitor the state of human rights protections, as oversight mechanisms and a general focus on humanitarian assessment and assistance are lacking (Amnesty International 2018, 47).

International negotiation over South Ossetia often centers on geopolitical competition, overlooking human rights concerns and the needs of its population. As in the other post-Soviet conflicts, increasing international engagement in the region would be greatly beneficial in countering isolation. Yet common issues for engagement, including training for apolitical professions, discussion of environmental concerns, and support for small and medium businesses, are more difficult to address in South Ossetia than the other three regions (Grono 2016). Rather

than focusing directly on controversial issues in a nearly closed society, a basic step would be establishing “economic and humanitarian links without status preconditions” (International Crisis Group 2010b, i). Some specific opportunities for cooperation include law enforcement, which all sides agree on the practical need for, and trade in the Akhalkalaki region. With a Georgian majority, the region of Akhalkalaki has remained more open to travel than any other part of South Ossetia, and residents there are highly interested in cross-boundary trade opportunities and cooperation (De Waal 2019a, 10). Increasing options for cross-boundary trade in this region could fulfill the interests of both sides: South Ossetia would benefit from increased revenue, while Georgia would support greater freedom of movement for ethnic Georgians.

## **Conclusion**

The South Ossetian case offers an interesting contrast to Abkhazia: although both have declared their independence from Georgia and largely rely on Russian support, South Ossetia now has less options for resolution given a tumultuous recent history of war and isolation. Between the early 2000s and today, the dynamics of South Ossetia have changed drastically. International negotiation, led in turn by the EU and Russia, has largely failed to bring the parties together and has seen minimal progress towards resolution. Similarly, previous confidence-building measures have faced major challenges to implementation, with very few examples showing success at promoting cooperation and dialogue.

Resolution attempts and confidence-building measures are complicated by the same set of factors preventing peace, with isolation, Russia’s recognition of independence, and the lack of dialogue as the most challenging. To make any progress on a conflict now located in a nearly closed-off, isolated region, measures focused on countering the negative effects of borderization,

creating economic opportunities, and promoting cross-boundary line interactions are essential. International actors can strengthen their own mechanisms for providing support and focus on increasing economic stability, which can also promote cooperation on common issues in the region. Confidence-building measures are unlikely to drastically alter the conflict environment in South Ossetia after years of war, displacement, and economic hardships, but they provide an opportunity to engage with a population currently receiving minimal support, despite being in the center of a geopolitical struggle. If nothing else, confidence-building measures focused on cooperation to meet basic needs will serve humanitarian purposes and alleviate poor conditions, which will be essential to a future peace agreement.



## **Chapter 7**

### **Confidence-Building Measures in Nagorno-Karabakh: Urgent Needs and Increased Hostility in the Aftermath of War**

The first conflict to erupt in the last days of the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh today remains the most recent, violent, and entrenched conflict in the region. Fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh first broke out in 1988, devolving into war between Armenian-backed Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan until a Russian-brokered ceasefire in 1994 paused the fighting without reaching a settlement. In subsequent years, militarization along the Line of Contact and frequent minor incidents created a worrying potential for escalation, realized in the outbreaks of large-scale fighting in 2016 and, most recently, the war in 2020. Besides these two outbreaks of fighting, which tipped the balance of power towards Azerbaijan, the status quo has remained for decades.

For the majority of the conflict duration, the primary conflict resolution mechanism has been the OSCE's Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the U.S. With a lack of political will for resolution, the competing interests of external actors, and intense hostile rhetoric from both sides, the conflict remains dangerously poised to escalate again. Opportunities for a peaceful settlement are bleak: confidence-building measures likely have the least chance for success in this conflict, as the level of communications between sides is very low and the degree of separation between the populations increases after every incident. Capacity for implementation is low, due to the little to no influence held by civil society actors over the resolution process. Changes on the grassroots level, already an unlikely prospect after decades of ethnic-based hostility and the recent

memory of war, will have minimal impact in a non-democratic system with government pressure blocking confidence-building measures.

Despite the many barriers to implementation, incremental changes and assistance from international and local organizations can play an important role in alleviating suffering caused by decades of conflict, most notably the damage from 2020, and support the coexistence of both populations. In addition to more proactive and engaged international mediation, confidence-building measures on Tracks II and III can help create conditions for coexistence and begin to build the requisite interpersonal trust for any future peace agreements. Due to the drastic change in conflict dynamics caused by the 2020 war, it is critical to consider resolution attempts and previous confidence-building measures as separate processes before and after the war. Opportunities for future confidence-building measures can then be based on the new and evolving environment post-2020, focusing on the need to improve security guarantees, address hostile narratives, and support reconstruction following the war.

### **Conflict History and Causes**

Ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in both countries and Nagorno-Karabakh coexisted for centuries before tensions over control of the region arose in the early 1900s.<sup>1</sup> Following the creation of the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh was allocated to Azerbaijan in 1921, leading to decades of relative calm. Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh was led and largely populated by ethnic Armenians and promoted Armenian language and culture, but the population remained relatively diverse. Ethnic-based tensions were still evident, though: “if the Karabakh Armenians felt

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed history of the region before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see De Waal 2013.

culturally and politically disadvantaged within Azerbaijan, the Karabakh Azerbaijanis felt disadvantaged inside Nagorny Karabakh” (De Waal 2013, 155).

In February 1988, Moscow denied a request from the Nagorno-Karabakh local soviet that the region be transferred to Armenia. The years 1988 to 1991 saw widespread ethnic cleansing as Armenia expelled most of the 200,000 Azerbaijanis and Muslim Kurds in Armenia, and Azerbaijan forced Karabakh Armenians to leave the region (De Waal 2013, 64). In an effort to prevent further hostilities, the Karabakh Armenian Party nearly capitulated fully in 1991 negotiations with Azerbaijan, even withdrawing their demands for Nagorno-Karabakh’s status, but the radical Armenian movement spoiled these negotiations by murdering a key participant in the negotiation process (Melander 2001, 70-71). The ensuing war could have been prevented had these negotiations succeeded, but the radical movement chose to continue fighting (Melander 2001, 48-50).

In an unrecognized decision, Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence from the Soviet Union on September 2, 1991, removing Armenia from the direct conflict. A subsequent Russia-brokered framework peace agreement, known as the Zheleznovodsk Declaration, failed due to escalating violence in Nagorno-Karabakh and lack of military control on both sides (De Waal 2013, 175). In January 1992, one of the war’s major tragedies occurred in Khojaly when Armenian forces massacred roughly 485 Azerbaijanis, mostly fleeing civilians (De Waal 2013, 183-84). Khojaly marked a major escalation in the severity of the conflict, especially as Russian troops could not prevent the mass violence. By the spring of 1993, Armenia held control of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas comprising 20% of Azerbaijani’s territory (Council on Foreign Relations 2020).

The Russian-brokered Bishkek Protocol ceasefire ended the fighting in May 1994. Russia was unable to secure agreement to deploy its own peacekeepers, leaving the 160-mile Line of Contact unregulated (Baev 1994, 248). The years following the ceasefire saw no active fighting, but the lack of a peace agreement proved negative for both sides: Azerbaijan lost large amounts of territory and experienced a refugee crisis, while Nagorno-Karabakh essentially became an Armenian province due to lack of international recognition (De Waal 2013, 251, 257, 264).

The ensuing negotiation efforts to broker a final peace agreement have seen little progress. Negotiations remain unproductive, distinguished only by changing preconditions from the parties. While each country has built up their military presence along the Line of Contact, Azerbaijan has become disproportionately militarized: a massive increase in GDP due to oil and gas profits has largely been channeled into the military budget (De Waal 2013, 292; Schmidt 2017, 115).

Four days of fighting in April 2016 disrupted the relative stability along the Line of Contact. Frustrated with the lack of negotiation progress and bolstered by its military build-up, Azerbaijan tested the military option, leading to a conflict of much greater scale than previous ceasefire violations (Broers 2016, 2). Moscow quickly brokered a ceasefire that cemented minor territorial gains for Azerbaijan, having taken Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh by surprise. Negotiations for a peace settlement continued after the 2016 fighting but made minimal progress, especially as the populations of both sides increasingly saw fighting as the way to solve the conflict in the absence of diplomatic Track II or III efforts (International Crisis Group 2016, i).

Following an Azerbaijani offensive in September 2020, aggressive military action sparked six weeks of large-scale fighting. Azerbaijan won a clear military victory, regaining control of four of the seven occupied territories and part of Nagorno-Karabakh (Rahimov 2020). Both sides were strongly condemned for their attacks on civilian targets: over half of the population in Nagorno-

Karabakh fled and cluster bombs were used in violation of international law (De Waal 2020b). The 2020 violence was characterized by three new developments: explicit support of Azerbaijan from Turkey, lack of U.S. engagement, and violence centered on the Line of Contact, far from the actual region of Nagorno-Karabakh (De Waal 2020a). The Minsk Group did not take decisive action and the U.S. was noticeably late in condemning the violence (Baev 2020). Russia mediated a ceasefire on November 10 that recognized Azerbaijan's territorial gains (Figure 1) in a nine-point statement but did not mention the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The statement allowed for the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping operation, currently composed of 1,960 troops and a large number of civilian staff (International Crisis Group 2020c).

**Figure 1: Map of Nagorno-Karabakh and Surrounding Regions Following the 2020 War<sup>2</sup>**



Leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan have continued to frame the conflict as a “correction of historical mistakes,” despite the lack of ancient hatreds as a cause of war (Abushov 2015, 198). The weaponization of ethnicity for political gain, still seen in today’s rhetoric, belies the long history of coexistence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (Özkan 2008, 578). Hostile rhetoric,

<sup>2</sup> Source: Chick 2021.

exacerbated by perceived slights and incidents on the Line of Contact, have created a dangerous situation for all. Leaders have labeled the other an existential threat, inflaming existing tensions and threatening the feasibility of implementing an eventual peace deal requiring any level of reconciliation. Although the 1994 ceasefire held relatively strong for decades, “there was never a truce in the aggressive rhetoric the two sides employed against each other,” concurrent with a lack of peacekeepers and heavy militarization (De Waal 2020a).

### **Pre-2020 Attempts at Resolution**

Mediation efforts from 1994 to 2020 experienced little success in creating long-lasting and feasible solutions. The OSCE’s Minsk Group has been leading negotiation efforts since 1997 without progress in reaching consensus, as ongoing issues with settlement proposals, international mediation, and the negotiation process itself highlight the difficulties of reaching and agreeing to a peaceful settlement. Led by powerful international actors with often competing interests, the Minsk Group has routinely been blamed by the conflicting parties when it does not side with that country’s specific interests. For three decades, the Minsk Group met sporadically and failed to agree on even procedural issues, while leaders on both sides simultaneously promoted hostile narratives and fears of the other. Additional factors of other external actors and a range of domestic obstacles to resolution have further complicated the fraught negotiation process. The Minsk Group’s inability to take decisive action demonstrates a lack of trust between the conflicting parties as well as between the mediators, while outbreaks of fighting in the past five years underline the need for adding confidence-building measures and communications mechanisms to the peace process.

### *The Minsk Group Process*

To settle concerns over competition between Russian-led and OSCE-led mediation, the OSCE created the Minsk Group in 1997, co-chaired by Russia, the United States, and France, to manage the conflict resolution process. The Minsk Group was designed to focus on three main objectives: serving as a framework for negotiation, finding a permanent peace agreement, and monitoring the situation with OSCE peacekeepers (Abilov 2018, 146). Since its creation, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan have blamed the Minsk Group for lack of progress, while the Minsk co-chairs point to the leaders for their lack of domestic progress (Ismailzade 2005, 107). Russia has been accused of deliberately blocking Minsk Group progress, while others argue that Russia is simply unable to single-handedly create a sustainable peace agreement (Abushov 2019, 75). At the same time, the only progress toward resolution has occurred through the unilateral Russian efforts leading to the three ceasefire agreements. The Minsk Group remains a largely passive framework for negotiations, rather than a strong mediator, especially without peacekeepers or its own vision for peace (Bláhová 2019, 77-78). The OSCE has a very limited role in the Nagorno-Karabakh resolution process, with only six monitors mandated to observe the Line of Contact. The work of these observers is currently paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the future of the OSCE mission remains uncertain given the new Line of Contact through Nagorno-Karabakh itself.

Discussions of a final peace agreement in the 1990s and 2000s focused on two main options: a package deal or a step-by-step (or phased) deal. A package deal would include the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, arguably the most controversial issue, as a first step, while a phased deal addresses the status as a final step after complete peace agreements handling all other conflict aspects (Zourabian 2006, 253). Commonly cited aspects of a phased deal are security guarantees for Nagorno-Karabakh, removal of Armenian forces from the occupied territories, and return of

IDPs (Zourabian 2006, 253). Rejection of each type of deal by the conflicting parties led to the launch of the Prague Process in 2004, which focused on a phased deal (Zourabian 2006, 254). This process centered on the addition of an agreement on how Nagorno-Karabakh's status would eventually be decided, rather than deciding the status as a final step. The Minsk Group has been criticized more broadly for its focus on a full peace agreement, which precludes implementation of smaller, more tangible measures.

The process of negotiation has faced questions of inclusion and procedure in its efforts to find consensus. While conflicts over self-determination and territorial integrity inevitably require external mediation, third party mediators have their own national interests as well, which can lead to questions of bias. The inclusion, or exclusion, of Nagorno-Karabakh as a direct negotiating party has also been highly contentious. Negotiation directly between Armenia and Azerbaijan can be helpful, as having both parties be internationally recognized countries allows for greater external influence from partners and allies, but excluding Nagorno-Karabakh also removes representation of all levels of its society (Kopecek, Hoch, and Baar 2016, 443).

The Madrid Principles, first drafted in 2006 and later updated in 2009, previously served as the basic guidelines for an eventual final settlement. The later draft listed six solutions to central issues: the return of Azerbaijani territories, an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh, a corridor linking Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, a future legally binding "expression of will" on Nagorno-Karabakh's status, the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and international security guarantees (Abilov 2018, 155). Success of these solutions would depend on the willingness of each side's leaders to begin preparing their populations for peace, rather than continuing to frame the conflict as an existential issue. While neither side has explicitly rejected the principles, both offered very different understandings and willful interpretations of how the



proposed measures fit their own demands (International Crisis Group 2019). The proposed status referendum for Nagorno-Karabakh faced a number of challenges in the negotiation process alone. If only the current residents of Nagorno-Karabakh voted, the almost entirely Armenian population would certainly vote for independence. Proposals seeking to include other groups, such as Azerbaijani IDPs, have been complicated by difficulties in defining who would be eligible as the years pass since former residents fled the area (International Crisis Group 2019).

### *Domestic Obstacles to Resolution*

Domestic political considerations have frequently disrupted resolution efforts: the centrality of Nagorno-Karabakh to each side's political identity prohibits either leader from making concessions, while the shared propensity for promoting hostile rhetoric prevents any foundations for peace among their populations. Lack of political will for peaceful resolution has remained a major obstacle, as the ongoing nature of the conflict allows both leaders to maintain personal power and benefit from the status quo. The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan frequently face issues of legitimacy, currently seen in Armenia after its military defeat and subsequent concessions, and would likely struggle to develop and implement an unpopular deal (Zourabian 2006, 263). Their own actions have also complicated future implementation options: neither side has made an effort to prepare its population for peace, while the lack of transparency around the mediation process has left the majority of citizens unaware of any options.

Lack of meaningful progress in negotiations can also be attributed to the perceived indivisibility of the major issues under consideration. The status of Nagorno-Karabakh has become hugely important for each side's domestic politics and sense of identity. "Losing" the region would betray a sense of nationhood for either Armenia or Azerbaijan and, therefore, neither leader is

willing to risk bargaining with it (Schumacher 2016, 2). Within both countries, hostile rhetoric and nationalist narratives have endangered prospects for reconciliation and contributed to the perception of issue indivisibility. Across the affected regions, reconciliation is made difficult by the duration of the conflict, hostile narratives, religious differences, and successes/failures in armed conflict (Ghaplanyan 2009, 47).

### *Other Mediators*

Having brokered all three ceasefire deals (1994, 2016, and 2020), Russia remains the only international actor to successfully mediate negotiations. While it has the power to be a major motivating factor in pressuring both parties to find and maintain a solution, Russia has instead divided mediation efforts, sought to aid both sides, and worked to maintain its own influence in the region. Russia has supplied both sides with weapons, thus escalating information problems of judging military capability and the question of Russian peacekeepers has played a major role in preventing a peace deal. The usual justifications for Russian interventionism in the former Soviet Union, such as the presence of ethnic Russians and/or Russian speakers or country membership in the CIS, are nonexistent in Nagorno-Karabakh, leading Russia to develop its own role (Mihalka 1996, 28). Neither side has previously wanted Russian peacekeepers: for Armenia, their presence would constitute a sign of weakness and, for Azerbaijan, peacekeepers would signal a dragging-out of the conflict and dependence on Russia (Schmidt 2017, 114).

The question of international peacekeepers and observers has remained a contentious issue since the beginning of the conflict. When the Minsk Group began negotiations in 1992, military experts from each participating party discussed plans for observers, focusing on a monitoring mission with 300-700 military observers (Vilén 1996, 91). At this early stage of the conflict, the

implementation of military-focused observation and communication mechanisms could have prevented, or at least deescalated, the multitude of minor incidents occurring across the Line of Contact each year. This plan was never implemented, however, and the OSCE avoided deploying peacekeepers itself due to Russian opposition, a move seen as a failure to follow through on its commitment to the parties (Andrei 2019, 25). Rather than the original suggestion of hundreds of observers, the Line of Contact is monitored by only six OSCE observers that inspect it twice a month (De Waal 2013, 294).

External influence in Nagorno-Karabakh beyond Russia has been mostly limited to the actions of the Minsk Group co-chairs and the secondary role of Western countries. Work by the OSCE beyond the Minsk Group process has received mixed reviews. While the OSCE's mediation work on Nagorno-Karabakh has included unprecedented involvement by top officials from the mediating countries, it has also been criticized for its structural limitations, unclear mandate, and tendency to capitulate to lower standards for human rights (Andrei 2019, 24; Cavanaugh 2016, 423-24). Rapprochement with the West from Armenia and Azerbaijan has so far only served to internally legitimize each country's view of the conflict, as relations with Western countries are seen domestically as implicit endorsement of each leader's stance (Schumacher 2016, 5).

### **Previous Confidence-Building Measures and Levels of Success**

Civil society remains weak in the majority of the post-Soviet states, especially so in the four regions of conflict. In Azerbaijan in particular, civil society faces challenges in maintaining a presence and has little to no power, as it lacks skills, experience, and influence in terms of the conflict (Conciliation Resources 2019, 5). The situation is better for civil society in Armenia, where it played a role in the 2018 transition of power (Conciliation Resources 2019, 5). Within

Nagorno-Karabakh, civil society faces inherent restrictions due to the isolation of the region and “its prevailing subordination to one prevailing goal, its slow and painful democratisation, its limited size and its limited financial resources” (Kopecek, Hoch, and Baar 2016, 447). Confidence-building measures have thus been minimal on all sides: “due to widespread criticism, political pressure, and on the whole unpopularity of these actions by the NGO community in both countries, the reconciliation activities were short-lived and hardly ever occur today” (Ghaplanyan 2009, 47).

Civil society in the conflict areas can also differ from commonly held definitions. Researchers studying NGOs and civil society in Nagorno-Karabakh, in the only study on the topic, defined it “as a set of distinct and often divergent interests which can not only help to transform the conflict, but which may also oppose its peaceful solution” (Kopecek, Hoch, and Baar 2016, 455). Among Armenian and Azerbaijani NGOs working on common values of “nonviolence and democracy,” goals for Nagorno-Karabakh vary drastically, in line with wider stated policies (Ghaplanyan 2009, 54). NGOs focusing on reconciliation or peacebuilding are rare in both countries and, as they often depend on foreign funding, tend to focus on projects preferred by their donors (Ghaplanyan 2009, 55). The highly politicized nature of the conflict makes peacebuilding a controversial topic in the local community as well, causing organizations to focus on non-conflict related priorities supported by international donors and community members.

Projects begun by various international and local groups have seen varying levels of success, but most have shared the common experience of lack of government support due to a preference for the status quo. The OSCE and the Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly, for example, launched confidence-building programs including “release of hostages, exchange of prisoners, and mutual visits of journalists, students, and civil-society leaders, visits and meetings, electronic networks... youth summer camps for children and youth from the affected areas,” but political

leaders in both countries have discouraged these initiatives (Ghaplanyan 2009, 44). In general, NGOs have little to no influence over politicians or the political process, including the conflict resolution process. International organizations have a limited presence as well: besides the six monitors currently on pause, the OSCE has no presence in the Caucasus after closing the Armenian office in 2017, which has diminished the role of the OSCE and the Minsk Group in the peace process and allowed Russia to increase its regional power (Gevorg and Li 2018, 2).

Extremely limited information exists on confidence-building measures in the conflict region. Civil society groups in Nagorno-Karabakh are widely understudied as a whole, particularly those dealing with peacebuilding issues. The one study examining these groups found that some “support conflict transformation (as far as possible), [but] there are also those that work in the opposite direction” (Kopecek, Hoch, and Baar 2016, 442). In their study, the researchers surveyed NGOs operating in Nagorno-Karabakh and found a variety of opinions on the conflict, ranging from interest in creating peace through changing perceptions to no interest in working with similar Azerbaijani organizations across the Line of Contact. The Nagorno-Karabakh Committee of the Helsinki Initiative-92 works on conflict transformation initiatives and has cooperated with Azerbaijani civil society, but noted problems with exchange programs due to protests and restrictions on Azerbaijani NGOs. A group working with refugees took a different approach, noting the difficulty of defining refugees vs. IDPs but seeing no point in cooperating with similar Azerbaijani organizations. Finally, informal discussion groups mainly composed of students did not want Azerbaijani refugees to return but supported ongoing negotiations with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh’s independence. It is also important to note that this study occurred before the 2020 war and the circumstances are now dramatically changed.

To better understand the environment for confidence-building work over Nagorno-Karabakh, I conducted interviews with representatives of three civil society groups, all based in Armenia with work directly related to the conflict. Edgar Khachatryan, founder and president of Peace Dialogue, began his organization in 2009 in response to the conflict to promote peacebuilding and protect human rights. Active in the South Caucasus, Russia, and Ukraine, the organization focuses on “activities connected to people and societies divided by conflict.” Khachatryan noted many of the challenges often cited in existing literature – lack of funding, difficulty of countering government propaganda and pressure, and the seeming impossibility of altering one’s own environment – but took a more optimistic note regarding successes. As the vast majority of confidence-building work carried out by Peace Dialogue involved shifting perspectives, sharing information, and promoting peaceful solutions, quantitatively measuring the effectiveness of such strategies is nearly impossible. Instead, Khachatryan argues that “even if one person changes, that’s a success.” Larger-scale achievements have also been noted: with successful recommendations and policy papers, Peace Dialogue has “influence at a policy level on human rights.” The idea of quality over quantity is seen in the larger paradigm shift of people beginning to think about peace, and what that might look like, for the first time.

For more details on the information space around the conflict, I interviewed Naira Hayrumyan of the Open Society NGO, a group seeking to provide “objective, comprehensive, analytical, and other analytical information about the South Caucasus region, Armenian interests, and global trends.” The organization has had success in sharing analytical information, which is then used for “the preparation of political assessments,” and “helps people be more informed...to better understand the motivations and sources of geopolitical developments.” A private

organization, Open Society has previously received grants from democratic funds but has no relations with the government.

Other civil society organizations work selectively with the government, such as the SHAMS NGO in Armenia, which seeks to protect humanitarian and cultural rights with a focus on the Yazidi national minority. While noting the necessity of working with the government as a challenge, the group also mentioned the success of cooperation with a Yazidi member of the Armenian parliament. SHAMS responded to the 2020 war by focusing on humanitarian needs and argued that the provision of humanitarian aid was itself a success as “no party can succeed in war because both sides are losing.” To support its work, leaders of the organization have worked with international funding networks and the large Armenian diaspora to provide aid. The organization also noted the specific challenge of gender discrimination in its work, which restricted opportunities for women to be involved in the conflict resolution process. Although women “have a major role in humanitarian activities because they understand other women,” this inclusion is made difficult when women “can’t support initiatives” due to discrimination.

All three civil society representatives noted challenges similar to common trends across the other cases. Scarcity of reliable sources of funding was a major barrier to the activities of the organizations, as the majority of funding came from international donors hesitant to support most conflict-related activities. The reliance on international funding presented a new challenge after 2020, Khachatryan said, as confidence in international organizations dropped drastically after the war. All three Armenian groups cited challenges from the government, including propaganda pushing hostile rhetoric, a lack of official information, and legal barriers to the provision of humanitarian aid. Beyond issues of funding, the outbreak of war in 2020 uprooted the conflict

resolution process at all levels of society and forced all involved, from international mediators to the civil society organizations I interviewed, to adapt to a new conflict environment.

### **Effects of the 2020 War**

The six weeks of fighting beginning in September 2020 drastically altered all aspects of conflict dynamics, from territorial control to external involvement. These changes have in turn affected the resolution process and the opportunities for future confidence-building measures. The outcome of the war in Azerbaijan's favor has also altered options for negotiation: Azerbaijan declared that the Madrid Principles no longer apply to the situation, "as they do not reflect the new reality on the ground" (Rahimov 2020). Major changes in international dynamics include the newly expanded role of Turkey and the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces, a long sought-after goal for Russia.

Turkey has taken on a significantly larger role following the fighting in 2016, leading to explicit support for Azerbaijan in 2020. This support made confrontation less risky for Azerbaijan, likely contributing to the decision to take military action. The introduction of a larger role for Turkey has effectively altered the geopolitical landscape as it is now one of the major actors in the region, second to Russia, rather than the US or EU. Turkey will also be part of a joint peacekeeping center with Russia based in Azerbaijan (Rahimov 2020). Despite this increased role, Turkey does not seem poised to take on a major part in negotiation efforts.

Russia's role in the 2020 conflict maintained a similar position to its past interventions. It remains the most powerful actor in the region and the only mediator with leverage over the conflicting parties. While Russia could encourage a full peace settlement, the status quo remains beneficial: the current peacekeeping operation is a long-desired outcome and allows Russia to



maintain its influence over the conflict. The introduction of 1,960 Russian troops and a large contingent of civilian support staff following the Russian-led ceasefire in November has led to questions about the mission's mandate (International Crisis Group 2020c). Both countries agreed to the peacekeeping mission, despite previous concerns, leading to Russian troops in all three states of the South Caucasus for the first time in nearly three decades (Cutler 2021). The deployment of peacekeeping troops further increased Russia's role on the ground which, as seen in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, may complicate international monitoring or confidence-building efforts.

On the ground, militarization along the Line of Contact presents an ongoing security dilemma that allowed for large-scale fighting. Both parties have built up their militaries over the years, with Azerbaijan's outsized military spending allowing military successes in 2016 and 2020. The shift toward militarization was prominent in the war, with an evident Azerbaijani goal of retaking much more territory than was managed in 2016 (Broers 2020). The Russian-brokered ceasefire ending the fighting legitimized Azerbaijan's gains, allowing it to keep the territory it reclaimed – four of the seven districts around Nagorno-Karabakh. A broader culture of militarization also exists in both countries, which prevents any sort of meaningful progress toward a peaceful resolution.

In the aftermath of the 2020 fighting, details on the ground have vastly changed but the Track I negotiation process remains relatively unchanged. Domestic concerns have emerged, such as Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan's planned resignation following months of protests over his signing of the ceasefire deal, widely viewed in Armenia as capitulation. The war caused immense physical and psychological damage to communities on both sides and elevated the conflict to an even higher priority, entrenching it still more deeply in the national identity of each side. Civil society organizations reported major changes to their operations after the war to make

their work applicable to the new dynamics. Khachatryan's Peace Dialogue called a "full physical staff meeting" four days after the ceasefire and revised the organization's entire strategy to reflect the changed environment and continue its increasingly relevant outreach work to conflict-affected communities. Looking forward, the organization seeks to "work on a strategic basis" with a vision of the future to strive for, while "listening to and hearing the voices of all" and taking into consideration "the needs of people across society – refugees, ex-combatants, as many diverse groups as possible." As the sides come to terms with the new balance of power, need for reconstruction, and emerging refugee and IDP concerns, measures to regulate interaction and encourage cooperation could prove essential to preparing for peace.

### **Opportunities for Confidence-Building Measures**

Analysis of previous attempts at resolution and the aftermath of the recent war shows that the same factors over the past three decades have routinely disrupted or overturned the peace process, leading to uneasy long-term ceasefires at best and large-scale violence at worst. As the longest-running conflict in the region, a wide variety of strategies and tools for ending the conflict have been tried, from changing negotiation formats to resorting to war. The ongoing militarization, demographic separation, and hardening of rhetoric in both countries creates an increasingly complicated situation for negotiation. The six weeks of fighting in late 2020 further contributed to the instability, as the power imbalance in the status quo flipped without peacefully resolving the key issues. Within this environment, confidence-building measures can serve to alleviate some suffering and begin to create incremental change in the direction of peace. In the aftermath of the 2020 war, the best use for confidence-building measures is in three fields: security, narratives, and reconstruction. Practical measures aimed at increasing security guarantees and rebuilding

infrastructure can be implemented simultaneously with initiatives focused on challenging deeply entrenched hostile narratives on promoting local-level cooperation on shared humanitarian needs.

### *Security-Based Confidence-Building Measures*

Following the violence in 2016, frequently suggested confidence-building measures focused on promoting communication between the sides and monitoring of the Line of Contact. These security-based measures, including increasing the distance between armies and creating communications mechanisms, were meant to reduce the risk of violence once again escalating (Cavanaugh 2017). Leaders agreed to two measures – increasing the number of OSCE monitors to 15 and creating a mechanism to investigate incidents along the Line of Contact – but neither was implemented (Cavanaugh 2017). Frequent minor incidents are common along the Line of Contact – since 2015, roughly 300 such clashes have occurred with over 250 military and civilian casualties (International Crisis Group 2020a). Given these incidents and the descent into large-scale fighting in 2020, it is clear that security-focused measures are still needed. While a controversial presence, Russian peacekeeping forces were approved by the conflicting parties and have the mandate to monitor the ceasefire agreement. Working in cooperation with the OSCE monitors, the two missions can implement communication mechanisms for monitors stationed on both sides of the Line of Contact and available for officials from each military. Such mechanisms can include information accessible to all parties on minor incidents and any movement or changes in troops, verified by peacekeepers and/or OSCE monitors, and development of incident response strategies to increase transparency and prevent escalation. Upon resumption of fact-finding work from the OSCE monitors, all relevant information can be shared across the Line of Contact as well as with the Minsk Group, ensuring symmetrical access for the parties. Information should also be made

more widely accessible: Khachatryan of the Peace Dialogue organization in Armenia stressed the importance of increased transparency around the Russian peacekeeping operation, especially as these forces are not considered a guarantee of security for many in the region.

### *Changing Narratives*

Decades of hostile rhetoric on both sides, compounded by recent narratives of military victory/defeat, must be countered among their populations for a peace deal to be accepted. The lack of support from the governments of the conflicting parties has disincentivized or threatened initiatives seeking to build rapport between people on opposing sides. Despite the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers announcing in 2019 that they would take “concrete measures to prepare the populations for peace,” hindsight shows that this official rhetoric can change quickly, and such statements may be ignored easily (Andrei 2019, 21). To find an acceptable settlement, leaders would have to end their hostile rhetoric and commit to preparing populations for reconciliation and peace. As any proposed deal will be controversial and unpopular for at least one side, both societies will need to understand that the other side also has a legitimate position. As decades pass, coexistence has become a distant memory, but the planned return of Azerbaijanis to parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories now under Azerbaijan’s control will mean the two populations will once again live side-by-side.

In my interviews with civil society leaders, specific suggestions for beginning to shift long-held narratives centered around the development of civil society, societal reflection on history and identity, and maintaining bridges between divided communities. The SHAMS NGO pointed to instances of “students raising their voices” in demonstrations for peace during the 2020 war as an example of the need for “every person to take action,” as “when people become civic activists,

every voice matters and can start movements to help solve the conflict.” Tapping into the skills of young people, the organization also suggested “initiatives from well-educated students” to discuss policy and peace on social media platforms. The need for accessible, factual information remains the priority for Open Society: Hayrumyan suggested the development of “a grant system to support an unbiased, objective press” in the region. With previous experience promoting peacebuilding initiatives, Peace Dialogue’s Khachatryan offered a range of suggestions for decreasing hostile narratives. As part of encouraging cultural peace across the wider South Caucasus region, specific projects can focus on challenging “us vs. them” ideas through “introspective initiatives within communities to critically revise narratives.” For civil society organizations, reflection on the causes of widespread support for militarism and nationalism is needed to help develop initiatives to counter these. Finally, Khachatryan noted the necessity of centering affected communities in the peacebuilding process. To maintain connections between divided societies and give agency to those impacted by the conflict, local communities can be invited to recommend their own solutions and ideas for cooperative work.

### *Reconstructing After 2020*

Following the six weeks of large-scale fighting in 2020, there is an immediate need for specific confidence-building measures aimed at rebuilding societies – both damage to relationships and physical infrastructure. Urgent humanitarian needs will require cooperation on the interpersonal level, especially as control of Shusha has shifted to Azerbaijan, meaning the Armenian residents of Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh’s capital, will suddenly be in close physical proximity to Azerbaijanis in Shusha (De Waal 2020b). This coexistence creates an opportunity for developing new ties, which can be aided by “small humanitarian steps” (International Crisis Group 2020c).

The current ceasefire appears to be holding successfully, but it cannot be a final solution: the stability will remain precarious as long as one side is humiliated and views it as capitulation. Focusing on humanitarian needs and encouraging local-level cooperation between communities now in geographic proximity has a better chance of promoting a lasting ceasefire than additional fruitless high-level negotiations. Khachatryan of Peace Dialogue stressed the need to create feasible solutions for IDPs and refugees on both sides before a settlement can be reached.

International donors can play an important role in rebuilding the two economies and physical infrastructure after the damage caused in 2020. By assessing the needs of both populations and considering the effects of the recent fighting, donors can cooperate with the assistance of the conflicting parties to offer aid and develop projects in conjunction with negotiation of a final settlement. International support can also help fund the work of regional organizations struggling to finance their operations. SHAMS mentioned the need for international donors to fund newer or smaller groups in addition to established ones, as “small NGOs struggle to be recognized for funding,” as well as connecting organizations and creating cooperation networks. Similar to conditioning EU market access on reforms in Transdnistria, offers of aid from international donors can be preconditioned on support from leaders on all sides for cooperative reconstruction efforts. Specific initiatives can address the urgent shared concern of unexploded ordnance in the region of fighting, access to critical supplies and transit routes for villages under new territorial control, and cooperation under the auspices of the UNHCR on essential questions of safe refugee return.

Looking forward to the reconstruction of the international negotiation process, civil society leaders in the region offered a number of suggestions to increase trust in the proceedings and increase the representation of affected communities. SHAMS argued that NGOs can have a more

constructive role in conflict resolution than governments, as they “put people first, not territory,” and called for governments to acknowledge the harm caused by unresolved conflict. The international peace process must itself be updated, according to Khachatryan, as resolution and management mechanisms “should be applicable in real life, not just on paper.” Encouraging greater transparency of the negotiation process, Khachatryan also called for the inclusion of civil society within Track I discussions and, more broadly, increased understanding between the government and civil society through safe and secure spaces to discuss experiences. Overall, Khachatryan stressed that measures at all levels of society must be developed with the understanding that the conflict is still a fresh and traumatic memory, while maintaining the need for open communications between sides and connections between divided societies.

## **Conclusion**

As the conflicting parties, mediators, and international community look to the future following the 2020 descent into large-scale fighting, several steps are necessary to restart progress towards eventual peace. While the environment for confidence-building measures remains difficult to overcome, the realities of the recent violence and its aftermath demonstrate the urgent need for such measures. Interviews with civil society organizations focusing on several conflict-related issues show that targeted measures are clearly needed to improve the sense of security for inhabitants of the region, begin to challenge dangerous narratives, and improve the immediate situation of affected communities. Looking ahead to the ongoing resolution process, specific efforts to increase transparency and encourage representation are essential to building societal trust in negotiations and providing a voice to those impacted by the unresolved nature of the conflict. Given the recent war, very low level of communications, and low capacity for implementation of

confidence-building measures in Nagorno-Karabakh, such initiatives will face a range of obstacles, including resistance at all levels of society. As the devastation of the 2020 war and firsthand accounts from local experts show, however, such measures offer the best opportunity to begin reconstructing the region and the connections between divided societies.



## Chapter 8

### Cross-Case Analysis and Conclusion

The September 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh may have shocked world leaders, but it only built on the existing uncertainty and small-scale violence that has come to define the lives of people across the Line of Contact. The 2020 war demonstrates the danger of labeling these conflicts as “frozen” and the ineffectiveness of existing conflict resolution mechanisms. Without clear strategies, mediators, and mechanisms that address current dynamics and can influence the sides, Nagorno-Karabakh remains far from frozen and highly unlikely to be resolved. The other three cases present similar circumstances: while levels of integration and dialogue vary, the lack of political will from all sides and outdated methods of resolution will continue to prevent progress towards peace. Meanwhile, the recent war in Ukraine, characterized recently by increased ceasefire violations, risks joining the ranks of these long-running unresolved conflicts.

Against this backdrop of international political concerns, the communities most affected by violence and instability frequently remain overlooked. In the aftermath of territorial changes following the Nagorno-Karabakh war, people on either side of the conflict will live in geographic proximity for the first time since the first war in the 1990s. This situation demonstrates the urgent need to develop sufficient conditions for coexistence, including reconstruction following the devastation of the war. As described in chapter 7, the opportunity is ripe for confidence-building measures focused on common humanitarian needs, which can serve multiple purposes: beginning to rebuild cooperative ties, alleviating suffering, and developing trust in civil society and international organizations. As one of the main factors leading to fighting in 2020 was public frustration over the lack of negotiation progress, it is clear that outdated and unsupported conflict

resolution mechanisms are insufficient to resolve or even manage the conflict. With populations increasingly preferring a military solution after decades of hostile rhetoric, the situation cannot improve without shifting narratives regarding the other.

This existing opportunity for confidence-building measures is also seen in the other three conflicts. Although trends across the cases demonstrate common challenges for confidence-building measures in the former Soviet Union, including weak civil society and a lack of political will, successes in specific regions also show opportunities for others. For example, the success of dialogue projects between representatives of civil society groups in Abkhazia created strategies and knowledge that were then used to begin similar discussions in South Ossetia before the initiative ended due to the 2008 war. Analysis of commonalities between the four cases also finds similar needs for confidence-building measures, which can help inform resolution strategy across the region and globally.

### **Common Trends**

As seen in the case study chapters, all four conflicts have sufficiently common characteristics to allow comparison, but the specific dynamics vary greatly. The classification of the cases based on time range of conflict, level of communications, and capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures summarizes these differences. Table 2, first introduced in chapter 1, summarizes these categories across the cases. Interviews with representatives of civil society groups carrying out such measures provides additional insight on the ground.

**Table 2: Categorization of Case Studies**

<b>Case</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Level of Communications</b>	<b>Capacity for Implementation</b>
<b>Transdnistria</b>	Historical	Moderate	High
<b>Abkhazia</b>	Recent	Low	Moderate
<b>South Ossetia</b>	Recent	None	Very Low
<b>Nagorno-Karabakh</b>	Contemporary	Very Low	Low

Beginning with the greatest capacity, Transdnistria is a historical conflict with a moderate level of communications, given the freedom of movement across the boundary line and existing mechanisms for economic cooperation. With the additional helpful factor of low intensity over the conflict, Transdnistria is thus distinguished by its high capacity for implementing confidence-building measures. Despite this capacity, civil society representatives working on Transdnistria discussed the difficulty of influencing the conflict resolution process. While the public supports efforts to resolve the conflict, promote human rights and establish civil liberties, relevant authorities in Moldova, Transdnistria, and Russia have benefitted from the status quo since the 1992 conflict and remain uninterested in altering conflict dynamics. In Transdnistria specifically, efforts to protect human rights are subject to persecution and intimidation from the de facto authorities.

Abkhazia, a recent conflict, follows with moderate capacity. Communications between civil society groups on either side are quite high, but this effect does not necessarily extend to the rest of the population. Tensions also exist over restricted freedom of movement across the boundary line and ethnic-based animosity in the Gali region. While relatively broad public support for resolution has allowed civil society dialogue over the boundary line, the aftermath of the 2008 war and restrictions from the Abkhazian side have now greatly restricted partnership options. The lack of funding due to donors leaving the area or focusing on other projects following 2008 has further limited options for new initiatives.

South Ossetia has a very low capacity for confidence-building measures. Despite previously good relations between sides, demonstrated by the success of the Ergneti Market and the close ties between sides before the mid-2000s, South Ossetia is now characterized by the closed nature of its society due to borderization efforts. Besides the informal close connections from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, confidence-building has been tried only minimally in the region. With the strict limitations on the boundary line, South Ossetia remains isolated from Georgia and the rest of the world, including international organizations and monitors.

Following the 2020 violence, which marked it as a contemporary conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh currently sees very low levels of communications in the aftermath of war. Extreme hostility on both sides drastically reduces options for confidence-building, while simultaneously demonstrating the urgent need for such measures. Given the new reality of coexistence between sides following the 2020 war, as well as the high level of international attention paid to resolution (as compared to the other three cases), Nagorno-Karabakh has a low capacity for implementation of confidence-building measures. In interviews with three organizations working on Nagorno-Karabakh, representatives named the difficulty of working in a highly politicized and emotionally

fraught environment as a major challenge to any conflict-related work. Future options thus focus on strengthening civil society, beginning to build bridges between extremely divided societies, and involving local populations in discussions of confidence-building and larger negotiation efforts.

### *Commonly Tried Confidence-Building Measures*

Relatively similar confidence-building measures have been tried in all four cases, allowing for better comparison. I group these measures into the following categories: security, economic, socio-cultural, international, and humanitarian. Specific instances of success, failure, or unknown outcomes for each category can also provide better understanding of their possible application to other conflicts around the world, as the outcome of a particular measure can frequently be explained by the specific conflict dynamics.

The only significant attempts at security-based confidence-building measures have been in Nagorno-Karabakh. As the most constantly volatile conflict, it stands to follow that implementing de-escalation and communications mechanisms was a main priority. Although a number of measures were suggested and even agreed to, the only security-related policy in place is the extremely limited OSCE monitoring mission, currently suspended during the pandemic. Before the 2020 war, officials on both sides agreed to increase the number of OSCE monitors from six to fifteen and develop incident response mechanisms, but neither initiative was implemented and the situation eventually devolved into war. The lack of security-focused measures in the other regions may suggest relatively less concern about escalation into conflict. Given these cases, security-based measures appear to be in much higher demand in unstable conflicts, due to inherent concerns of eruption into violence, but the volatility of such conflicts is equally likely to prevent implementation.

Economic-based measures have been successful mainly in Transdniestria, with the potential to succeed in other arenas in South Ossetia. Transdniestria is the only region actively seeking access to the EU market, as it is highly industrialized and has products to export. The success of closer ties with the EU, which has the benefit of creating protocols to handle cooperation between Transdniestria and Moldova, is thus due to this incentive. Even if Georgia were to seek EU membership, neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia would be willing or able to take advantage of EU market access, given their lack of export commodities. Instead, economic measures in South Ossetia should focus on financial support to create opportunities for people in the region and on the immediate Georgian side of the boundary line, as both have experienced major disruptions to their livelihoods from borderization. Economic aid is necessary to create some degree of economic stability and could have the additional benefit of improving perceptions of Georgia and the West. The dire economic situation also affects people on both sides of the boundary line, offering a chance to increase economic opportunities while simultaneously promoting cross-border cooperation.

Socio-cultural measures in the former Soviet Union depend largely on the specifics of each conflict, but tend to focus on improving dialogue and shifting hostile narratives to more understanding perspectives. Dialogue projects differ by region according to public willingness: very successful dialogue initiatives between civil society representatives have occurred in Abkhazia, albeit without significant impact on the larger societies, but both sides in Nagorno-Karabakh are now opposed to any discussion with the other. In all four cases, even individual participants were often unwilling to consider discussion of seemingly irreconcilable issues. Similarly, cultural norms discourage direct confrontation and post-Soviet countries often lack a societal-level understanding of mediation tactics, instead remembering decades of top-down

solutions imposed by the most powerful actors. While challenging to overcome, these perceptions also offer opportunities to increase transparency and involvement in the negotiation process, which could then build trust in diplomacy at all levels.

The role for international actors in implementing confidence-building measures is largely confined to financial support. Due to international actors' fears of legitimizing the *de facto* states, as well as the lack of trust in international institutions within the regions, engagement remains a difficult topic. The lack of trust remains a concern with funding, however, as foreign funding often causes local NGOs to be viewed as suspicious. Donors simultaneously avoid funding work on controversial or politically sensitive issues, an especially difficult trend given the inherent tensions between Russia and the West in this region. Levels of involvement vary across the conflicts, often pursuant with levels of isolation. In Transdnistria, despite EU concerns of increasing tensions with Russia, the EU has become a central player due to its economic leverage. In contrast, the International Committee of the Red Cross is the only international organization allowed in South Ossetia.

Finally, humanitarian needs can and should be addressed with confidence-building measures. The common focus on Track I and II efforts frequently overlooks the immediate needs of the affected communities, who suffer the vast majority of consequences from the conflict. Initiatives at the international, local, and even individual level can seek to alleviate poor conditions in and around the conflict zones, while also encouraging cooperation and informal relationships that benefit all. In Nagorno-Karabakh, people from both sides are struggling with the immediate aftermath of war, as the territorial changes have led to geographic proximity for the first time since the early 1990s. Leaving aside the contentious issue of status, immediate measures to support refugees, rebuild critical infrastructure, and help ensure peaceful coexistence along newly changed

boundary lines can fulfill the dual purpose of addressing urgent needs and beginning to build trust. South Ossetia, while not as recently affected by war, is still struggling to rebuild from its own conflicts and provide critical social services to its population. With the decrease in Russian aid over the past six years and the simultaneous restrictions on freedom of movement, South Ossetia is increasingly cut off from sources of assistance. Successes in Abkhazia and Transdniestria over areas of common humanitarian development provide hope for similar initiatives: education-focused programs in Abkhazia saw overall support, while freedom of movement in Transdniestria has allowed for a higher degree of connection across the boundary line. More basic measures in Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, designed to support struggling communities, could prove even more beneficial.

### *Common Challenges*

Across the four cases, a major factor preventing peace is the lack of political will for resolution. With leaders that actively benefit or are content with the status quo, improving relations at the Track II and III levels cannot influence the conflict as a whole. This lack of political will is seen at the international level as well: with the possible exception of Nagorno-Karabakh, the international negotiation process has stalled or otherwise lost momentum, thus allowing the status quo to remain. As the major regional actor across all four conflicts, Russia holds the most leverage over the opposing parties, but the ongoing unresolved status allows Russia to maintain influence and prevent Moldova and Georgia from joining Western institutions. Along with the lack of political will, the little to no influence wielded by civil society and the general public in each conflict prohibits direct impact on the negotiation process. Without representation of affected communities in the resolution process, and without greater transparency over negotiations,



individuals and civil society organizations are often uninterested in participating in measures that are perceived as having no real effect on the larger process.

A survey of all four cases also finds that virtually no confidence-building measures have been implemented at the Track I level. While some measures have been discussed or even agreed on by top officials, such as allowing more OSCE monitors in Nagorno-Karabakh (before the 2020 war), they have not been implemented. It is likely that the lack of progress on negotiations is due to the lack of political will, as discussed previously, rather than strong distrust of the other side; top-level confidence-building measures would then become an additional source of disagreement rather than a helpful strategy.

Some measures have been successful across multiple conflicts, lending hope to the possibility of implementing similar strategies elsewhere. These successes are most frequently seen at the individual or local community level: one person or a small group is affected and then shares information or opinions with their own circle of acquaintances. This trend is demonstrated by the success of educational exchange programs in Abkhazia. Only a small number of students benefit directly, but they then return home with greatly altered perspectives and more positive feelings towards the West. In a conflict where nearly all international organizations are perceived as biased, any increase in positive associations can greatly improve the opportunities for international support. While it is impossible to measure the spread of information on such an informal, individual level, the sharing of broader perspectives can be incredibly valuable in beginning to shift entrenched societal beliefs, particularly in communities with limited access to information.

*Need for Confidence-Building Measures*

Comparison of the four cases demonstrates the urgent need for confidence-building measures across the region. Three main situations are particularly concerning: restrictions on freedom of movement, increasing isolation, and negative perspectives of young people. With the exception of Nagorno-Karabakh, still recovering from the immediate effects of recent war, freedom of movement across the boundary lines remains a major concern in the other cases. In South Ossetia and Abkhazia, restrictions on border crossings prevent people from seeing their families, pursuing economic opportunities, and accessing social services unavailable in their own regions. Transnistria presents an example of relatively unrestricted border crossings, albeit more limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a more integrated region with higher levels of cooperation. For humanitarian and political purposes, freedom of movement is an essential area for confidence-building measures, which can seek to remove restrictions, improve communications between officials on the boundary lines, and prevent arbitrary detentions.

Restricted freedom of movement is also directly connected to the ongoing isolation of the conflict regions. The lack of recognition from the international community frequently prevents international engagement in the four conflict regions, as countries seek to avoid actions that may appear to confer legitimacy on the de facto states. This isolation has an adverse effect on the communities across the boundary lines, as well as on the peace process itself. Without connections to the other side, neither side can envision or strive for a peaceful future. In South Ossetia, the nearly closed boundary line has destroyed livelihoods by cutting off all economic opportunities, as well as causing large number of young people to leave for Russia, citing the lack of a future in South Ossetia. Engagement from international organizations and efforts to increase opportunities

for dialogue and cooperation would greatly benefit the affected communities and begin to lay the framework for acceptance of a future peace agreement.

Young people are a particularly important demographic to include in confidence-building measures. Due to the long duration of all four conflicts, an entire generation has grown up with no experience of the original conflict or coexistence beforehand. The discrepancy between cases is evident here: youth in Nagorno-Karabakh have experienced instability and two cases of conflict in the past two decades, while those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia witnessed the brief war in 2008. In contrast, cooperative efforts between young people in Transdniestria and Moldova have been successful in building informal relationships, likely because the conflict happened so long ago, and tensions today are relatively low. Developing connections between young people is a time-sensitive issue. The longer the conflicts drag on, the more young people will have no memory of living with the other side, and thus have little interest in returning to such a state. Efforts to engage youth in dialogue, allow exchange visits, and study multiple historical perspectives are critical, as they can seek to normalize the informal connections that young people today have not had.

### **Future Application**

In all four conflicts, the resolution process remains stalled largely due to a lack of political will at the Track I level. These obstacles are internal, such as Transdniestrian leaders personally benefiting from the status quo, and external, such as Russia's ability to maintain influence over unresolved conflicts. The lack of influence held by civil society and people themselves limits the options for Track II and III initiatives to contribute to the peace process itself, but these efforts can still have a critical role in transforming societal narratives, assisting affected communities, and

cooperating on common issues – work frequently ignored on Track I. Confidence-building measures carried out on the Track II and III level have seen success in all four conflicts, even when facing enormous obstacles to implementation. Creating opportunities for dialogue over Nagorno-Karabakh using every method available, from performing arts to policy-level recommendations, the “Peace Dialogue” organization in Armenia has measured its success in the gradual paradigm shift of people beginning to think about the prospect of peace for the first time. In Transdniestria, the OSCE-supported Package of Eight plan for confidence-building measures has seen success in allowing Latin-script schools to remain open in Transdniestria, thus lessening tensions in the region over language. Dialogue initiatives in Abkhazia have experienced great success in building links between similar groups on both sides, allowing for independent meetings to continue after external sponsorship ended. While systemic challenges in South Ossetia have prevented widespread implementation of confidence-building measures, efforts to open dialogue projects similar to those in Abkhazia before and during 2008 were able to build on the Abkhazia experience to develop successful dialogue. Across the four cases, these confidence-building measures do not directly influence the negotiation process or change the political will of leaders. Such measures do, however, work to alter perceptions of the conflict in a way that seeks to prepare populations for peace. The conflicts are likely to remain unresolved indefinitely, barring significant changes to domestic and international political will, but confidence-building measures on the Track II and III levels remain an essential method of improving the lives of people on both sides of the conflict lines.

As explained in-depth in each case study chapter, I suggest three main areas of focus for confidence-building measures in each conflict region based on my research and discussion with local civil society groups. These suggestions are summarized below in Table 3. Given the high

capacity for implementation and low-intensity stability of Transdniestria, future measures can focus on continuing economic cooperation, supporting culturally specific understandings of conflict resolution, and encouraging specific reconciliation efforts. In Abkhazia, existing Track II confidence-building measures can be reexamined and broadened to include Track III work, while international engagement and cooperation on common issues can help minimize ethnic tensions within the region and offer greater opportunities to its inhabitants. To counter the increasing isolation of South Ossetia, economic-based measures to improve standards of living and enhance cross-boundary cooperation can be implemented, as well as creating opportunities for person-to-person connections with the precedent of earlier good relations and fostering international support for humanitarian needs and strengthened monitoring mechanisms. Finally, the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh has created a sense of urgency for measures addressing regional security, challenging dangerous narratives, and supporting reconstruction in the aftermath of large-scale violence.

### **Future Research**

My research seeks to refresh the discussion of confidence-building measures as a conflict resolution strategy in the former Soviet Union. Existing resolution mechanisms, developed in the early 1990s, have failed to resolve or manage the four conflicts due to changing dynamics in the region and beyond. By examining the specifics of each case and conducting interviews with local civil society representatives, I provide a more complete picture of the current conflict environment and opportunities for future measures. As this research is limited by regional focus, future study could expand the discussion of confidence-building measures to other conflict zones around the world. To inform the general theory of this strategy, additional research on confidence-building

measures in newer, less-entrenched conflicts would provide an enhanced understanding of the best timing for implementation. As the majority of existing literature on confidence-building measures, including this study, centers on specific case studies, broader surveys would contribute to the theoretical discussion and serve as a point of comparison between regional work.

Future research on confidence-building measures across civil wars, and ethnic conflicts more specifically, would provide nuance to discussion of implementation in such conflicts globally. Other specific questions remain: do confidence-building measures risk entrenching the status quo of unresolved conflicts, rather than encouraging resolution? If so, is the stability provided from such measures still beneficial to the resolution process? Such research would require long-term study over the course of negotiations, but would serve to develop a greater understanding of the potential tradeoffs of such measures. Considering the benefits, how do confidence-building measures fill the gaps left by Track I inaction in addressing the needs of affected communities? While the ability of confidence-building measures to alleviate humanitarian concerns is established, the influence such actions have on the peace process remains unknown. Similarly, future research could investigate the use of confidence-building measures to increase transparency and inclusion in the negotiation process by narrowing the disconnect between the public and Track I diplomacy.

The options for confidence-building measures in the former Soviet Union to aid in transforming conflict-related narratives and improving relations across boundary lines provide positive examples for future implementation in other conflicts. For other regions around the world plagued by long-running unresolved conflict, the relative success of confidence-building measures in the so-called “frozen” conflicts at beginning to develop mechanisms for cooperation and dialogue provide hope for similar success globally.

**Table 3: Proposed Confidence-Building Measures**

Case	Proposed Confidence-Building Measures		
<b>Transdnistria</b>	<b>Economic:</b> continue economic ties that establish cooperation protocols	<b>Cultural:</b> support understanding of mediation and transparency of negotiation process	<b>Socio-Political:</b> conflict reframing, reconciliation aimed at young people and historical narratives
<b>Abkhazia</b>	<b>Dialogue:</b> expand success of civil society dialogues to all	<b>Common Issues:</b> freedom of movement, education, and returnees	<b>Engagement:</b> international support to counter isolation
<b>South Ossetia</b>	<b>Economic:</b> increase economic opportunities, including cross-boundary line trade	<b>Track III:</b> encourage opportunities for informal connections across the boundary line	<b>Engagement:</b> greater international support for humanitarian needs and strengthened mechanisms
<b>Nagorno-Karabakh</b>	<b>Security:</b> urgent need for security guarantees and communication mechanisms	<b>Narratives:</b> begin challenging hostile rhetoric and deeply entrenched narratives	<b>Reconstruction:</b> address urgent humanitarian needs and lay foundations for coexistence

## Conclusion

Existing literature and case studies of the four conflicts demonstrate that confidence-building measures on Tracks II and III have minimal influence over the peace process, as civil society and the public have correspondingly minimal influence over their governments. By conducting interviews with local organizations, however, I find that confidence-building measures focused on addressing humanitarian needs and improving living standards are extremely important to laying

the foundations for peace at an individual and community level. These measures are essential to alleviating current situations and slowly developing societies more capable of reaffirming less dangerous narratives, working toward a shared future, and, eventually, accepting the prospect of peace. My discussions with civil society representatives also showed the importance of refreshing the theoretical and practical discussion of confidence-building measures: given the outdated and underprioritized nature of existing resolution mechanisms, the potential of confidence-building measures to help bridge divides while simultaneously supporting humanitarian needs has often been overlooked. Within the former Soviet Union and abroad, confidence-building measures remain a critical, if overlooked, conflict resolution tool to simultaneously address societal-level factors preventing peace and alleviating the suffering caused by ongoing war and instability.



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