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ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT RECOGNITION: ASSESSING GEORGIA'S ENGAGEMENT  
STRATEGIES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS IN ABKHAZIA

MA thesis

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***Authorship Declaration***

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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## *Abstract*

*This thesis focuses on counter-secession strategies employed by Georgia in relation to its breakaway region, Abkhazia. The study focuses on Georgia's engagement without recognition policy. The research analyzes the effectiveness of this policy by employing qualitative research methods, including interviews, document analysis, and process-tracing. The study considers the period from 2008 to 2020, with the 2008 August war serving as a crucial event that reshaped the conflict dynamics between Georgia and its breakaway territories.*

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# 1. Introduction

The end of the cold war and the following dissolution of the Soviet Union gave birth to many new conflicts and secessionist entities. While the secessionist entities have demonstrated longevity and resilience enough to be categorized as de facto states and the conflicts surrounding them have turned frozen, a new area of study became prominent in International Relations. That is the study of secessionist entities and of the policies employed by the interested states to oppose the efforts of these secessionist entities. Specifically the study of counter-secession strategies, which puts the focus on the parent states and their policies instead of the secessionists.

This thesis focuses on the counter-session policies utilized by one country, specifically Georgia in relation to one of its breakaway regions - Abkhazia. The research falls within the broader theoretical framework of parent state strategies, focusing on the state's response to secessionist movements by utilizing strategies that run against the secessionist power's efforts to gain international recognition as a sovereign state. In order for a secessionist movement to achieve its goal it must convince either their parent state or the international community to recognize its independence. Since states are usually reluctant to allow such aspirations to succeed a combination of different strategies are usually initiated in response. The broader goal of the parent state strategies is to prevent the secessionist power from achieving international recognition on the one hand, and from falling irrecoverably under the patron state's<sup>1</sup> influence, on the other hand.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the isolationist non-recognition policy utilized by Georgia the state has been trying to integrate engagement strategies in its policies. In 2010 it adopted the "Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation" and the "Action plan for the Engagement strategy" which aimed to promote citizen diplomacy, economic and healthcare opportunities for the people

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<sup>1</sup> The term "patron state" within this thesis refers to a country or state that provides significant support, protection, or assistance to a secessionist entity.

<sup>2</sup> Griffiths, R. D., & Muro, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-secession*. Rowman & Littlefield International. P.1-4

from the occupied territories. The action plan also introduced new types of neutral travel documents for the Abkhazians and South Ossetians, which would make it easier for them to travel and receive social services. In 2018 Georgia also introduced a new initiative “A Step to a Better Future”, which focused specifically on the matters of trade and education between the divided territories. While the representatives of Abkhazia’s de-facto government refused the initiative publicly it did entice the part of the Abkhazian population that is business oriented and reluctant about the rise of Russian control over the territory.<sup>3</sup> Enticement of the secessionist power with better economic opportunities is a sound parent state strategy which is followed by other states with secessionist territories. A good example of this is the Moldova-Transnistria case, where despite being a secessionist entity, Transnistria still has access to EU market possibilities due to Moldova’s non-exclusionary policies.<sup>4</sup>

Economic incentives have been used by many parent states since the end of the second world war to impede secessionist movements. Economic influence of the parent states over the secessionist territories can be applied in two ways. Either through negative policies that seek to isolate the secessionist territory from the global market, or through positive ones that present the parent state as the preferred and convenient economic partner. Georgia has been using a mixture of the two in terms of its economic dealings with Abkhazia, as Georgian counter-secession policies limit Abkhazia’s options in choosing their economic partners and investors, while on the other hand it tries to incentivize Abkhazian businesses to operate in the Georgian market through different programs that promote the overall reach of the Georgian market compared to the main alternative that is Russia. This type of incentive-based economic approach can also be extrapolated to the supranational level and be compared to the economic pressure felt by any secessionist territories within the EU countries, as seceding from an EU member country would mean they lost their EU privileges. Potential loss of access to the market, along with all of the protections and

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<sup>3</sup> Gaprindashvili, Tsitsikashvili, Zoidze (2019). *One Step Closer – Georgia, EU Integration and the Conflict Settlement?* P.20-21. Link: <https://grass.org.ge/ka/publikaciebi/kvleva/1450-erti-nabijit-axlos-saqartvelo-evrokavshirtan-integracia-da-konphliqtis-daregulireba>

<sup>4</sup> Griffiths, R. D., & Muro, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-secession*. Rowman & Littlefield International. P.54-56

conveniences of being a member of the European Union was considerable enough loss to act as a deterrent for secession.<sup>5</sup>

The Abkhazian economy, being largely isolated from the rest of the world, relies heavily on financial support from its patron state Russia (whether it is direct or indirect in the form of access to the Russian market and tourists). While Russian support has shown a downwards trend in recent years without substantial institutional and structural changes, as well as dealing with the issue of corruption in Abkhazia, it is highly unlikely that Abkhazia's economic situation will improve anytime soon. In 2020, in a TV interview the then presidential candidate of the de-facto Abkhazia Aslan Bzhania also noted that the belligerent sides still have economic ties and those ties are one of the topics worthy of discussing and regulating with each other.<sup>6</sup> Despite the potential interest present on both sides, there is a somewhat puzzling outcome: Georgia's promoted engagement course appears to fall short of meeting its predefined goals, whether it is the promotion of trade or the use of Georgian social services by Abkhazians, which has shown unimpressive numbers. There seems to be a contradiction between Georgia's harsh non-recognition stand and enticing engagement moves that face difficulties to co-exist side-by-side.

The parent state strategies can differ from case to case and range from open to tentative engagement, or from isolation with active sanctions to isolation with minimal ability to enforce it.<sup>7</sup> Different strategies of the home state determine the nature of the relationship between it and the secessionist entity as well as a multitude of other variables. This research in particular will be focusing on the engagement without recognition policy approach practiced in Georgia since 2010.

The objective of this research is to analyze engagement without recognition policy formula as implemented in parallel to Georgia's counter-secessionist strategies using qualitative research methods, such as interviews, document analysis and process-tracing to gain an understanding of

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<sup>5</sup> Woertz, E. (2017). Economic aspects of counter-secession strategies. *Secession and Counter-Secession: An International Relations Perspective*. Barcelona, Spain: Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 99-106.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Aslan Bzhania, 27/01/20. Apsua TV/Абхазское ТВ, "Тет-аТет: Аслан Бжания 27-01-20", link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IUqqOby3y0>

<sup>7</sup> Berg, E., & Pegg, S. (2020). Do Parent State Strategies Matter in Resolving Secessionist Conflicts with De Facto States?. In *Strategies of secession and counter-secession* (pp. 52-68). ECPR Press.

## **why Georgian engagement without recognition policy appears to have fallen short of accomplishing its goal?**

The tentative hypothesis being that Georgia's counter-secessionist strategies and engagement strategies work counter-productively with one another, therefore reducing the effectiveness of the engagement strategies employed by Georgia.

While Georgian-Abkhazian relations have had a lot of scholarly work dedicated to them, the thesis aims to examine engagement without recognition policy formula in the context of Georgia's broader parent state strategy with possible contradicting outcomes and policy flaws. The timeframe that the research will focus on will be 2008-2021. The decision to begin observation of Georgia's policies from 2008 stems from the fact that the 2008 August war drastically altered the landscape of Georgia's conflict with its two breakaway territories, mostly due to the increased involvement of Russia and its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. As post-soviet space stays caught up in different conflicts involving Russia, especially due to the recent developments in Ukraine, it is all the more so relevant to further examine the unresolved conflicts which play an important role for the security situation of the region. Moreover, looking into the engagement strategies of Georgia and their effectiveness are important to the future identification of the better approaches in dealing with its breakaway territories, especially since these frozen conflicts seem stay frozen for a longer period of time. Furthermore, studying the Georgian case can prove to be useful for engaging with the other similar cases worldwide, as it can show the strengths and weaknesses of the concrete strategies for dealing with the de-facto states on their own territory.

The thesis will be divided in two main sections, which will be split further into chapters. The first section will be dedicated to the overview of the **Secessionist and Counter-Secessionist theoretical accounts** with chapters dedicated to the **Conceptualization of engagement without recognition policy formula and its likely conflict with counter-secessionist strategies**, followed by the chapters discussing the issues of **Abkhazian agency and Economic side-effects of secession**. The second section will focus on empirical analysis with chapters about **Georgia's**

**policy documents, Engagement and status-neutral passports, Decision-making structure and Reasoning behind Georgia's counter-secession strategies.**

## 2. The Dynamics of Secession: Actors, Strategies, and Challenges

The act of secession can be defined as the process through which a territory of a sovereign state declares their independence as a new state and proceeds to seek international recognition as an independent entity, separate from the state it seceded from.<sup>8</sup> Due to the fact that breaking away from one's parent state and becoming an internationally recognized separate entity is riddled with complexities, a complete and successful secession is a rarity and most secessions remain incomplete.

Although this definition may be quite general it successfully encompasses the multitudes of strategies that a seceding territory may use in order to follow the path towards independence. The variety in strategies used by the seceding territory is dependent on a multitude of factors such as the motivation for said secession (such as self-determination or freeing oneself from a colonial power) as well as the parent state. Rivka Weill, for example outlines three types of secession: first where a certain territory breaks away from a parent state to become independent, second where the seceding territory then opts to become a part of a state different from their parent state and the third where an existing state breaks apart and new states are formed in its place.<sup>9</sup> Following this type of categorization, Abkhazia falls under the first category as the primary goal of its secession has always been independent statehood.

In keeping with categorizing aspects of the secession process, Griffith and Muro outline two key actors upon whom the entire nature of the process and its direction is dependent upon. First actor is the independent state whose sovereignty is recognized by the UN and cemented by a permanent

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<sup>8</sup> Griffiths, R. D., Pavković, A., & Radan, P. (Eds.). (2023). *The Routledge Handbook of Self-Determination and Secession*. Taylor & Francis. P.30

<sup>9</sup> Weill, R. (2019). Global Constitutional Strategies to Counter-Secession. *Strategies of Secession and Counter-Secession*, P.84-97.

seat in the United Nations General Assembly. Internationally recognised sovereignty grants a state a variety of privileges, such as the ability to join international organizations, or to request financial aid. The second actor is the secessionist territory that is attempting to achieve independence from the first actor.<sup>10</sup> It must be noted however that while the two key actors outlined by Griffith and Muro are essential for the very existence of the secession process, there is another actor that can have a tremendous amount of influence and involvement in the entire affair. This “third key actor” would be a patron state that often encourages, assists and protects the secessionist territory as it vies for independence.

According to Elizabeth Nelson, in order for a secession to be successful, a combination of factors must be taken into account. While international law and domestic factors play an important role, the relationships between powerful regional actors must also be considered. She argues that when the secession is contested by the parent state it can be more prudent for a secessionist movement to look for a regional power for support, rather than to the international community. This is due to the fact that powerful states often hold higher interest in their own regions.<sup>11</sup>

Regional powerful states are therefore more likely to get involved in secession based conflicts as an effective third actor.

In order for a secessionist movement to achieve its goal it must either convince their parent state or the international community to recognize its independence. Since the accession to the membership in the United Nations General Assembly is an indication of a state’s internationally recognized sovereignty, it remains to be the ultimate goal of the secessionist movements. To achieve that goal a secessionist movement must either convince the state they are seceding from to grant them independence, or to bypass the wishes of their parent state and appeal to the international community directly. Since states are usually reluctant to allow the seceding territory’s aspirations to succeed, counter-secessionist measures are usually initiated in response. The broader goal of this counter-secession is to prevent the secessionist power from achieving its goals and to prevent it from receiving international support. Counter-secession can therefore be defined as a

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<sup>10</sup> Griffiths, R. D., & Muro, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-secession*. Rowman & Littlefield International. P.1-4

<sup>11</sup> Nelson, E. (2021). A successful secession: what does it take to secede?. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 1-18.

process that tries to counteract all aspirations and actions of the secessionist movement that mirrors their desire for independence. To achieve this the parent state adopts strategies that allow them to halt the secessionist movement's gain of support from the international community, while at the same time trying to maximize their own domestic power. Whether or not the secession process is contested by the parent state, the seceding territory will aim to become recognized as a sovereign entity by different world powers, through varying methods of persuasion. Counter-secession strategies are put into place when the parent state wishes to undermine and disrupt such efforts.<sup>12</sup>

States can even have counter-secessionist policies baked into their constitutions, such as a ban on secessionist political parties and definitions of inviolability of their territories. Using various tools to suppress secessionist movements that would otherwise be seen as undemocratic, with the justification of protecting the unity of the state.<sup>13</sup> Halting secessionist movements, while they are still under the political umbrella of their parent state and before they achieve a certain level of self-sufficiency does not always succeed. This can be due to the involvement of a third party such as a patron state, which accelerates and empowers the secessionist movement, as it happened in Georgia.

Depending on the types of secessionist movements and their parent states, the focus of the movement may vary. If the parent state is willing to compromise, negotiate and even permit the secessionist territory to hold a referendum, the need for the secessionists to gather international support becomes less of a priority, while if the parent state is trying to suppress the secessionists domestically the importance of the international community increases. It has to be noted however that referendums can be held by the secessionist movement even without the parent state's approval while trying to justify the act using arguments, such as a right to self-determination. Secessionists utilize referendums as a democratic mechanism to attain independence, allowing them to mobilize voters and directly determine the outcome. They strategically present their movements and referendums in the context of democracy and self-determination, both at the

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<sup>12</sup> Griffiths, R. D., & Muro, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-secession*. Rowman & Littlefield International. P.7

<sup>13</sup> Weill, R. (2019). Global Constitutional Strategies to Counter-Secession. *Strategies of Secession and Counter-Secession*, P.84-97.

domestic and international levels, in order to gain recognition. Due to the strategic advantages afforded to the secessionist movements in case of a successful mobilization by their side of the relevant region's population, parent states need to be wary of referendums being used as a political tool.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar manner to the secessionist movements, there are a variety of different strategies and approaches that the parent state can adopt depending on the circumstances. One such strategy outlined by Griffiths and Muro (2020) is the rhetorical and discursive approach, wherein the counter-secessionists argue in favor of restoring the previously existing status quo. They emphasize the importance of maintaining legality, stability, as well as the international and domestic order. They argue that the secessionist movement will lead to a fragmented society with divided groups, who are politically polarized and that the right to self-determination should be reserved for more extreme cases, such as colonization, invasion or cases in which gross violation of human rights have occurred. In the absence of such extenuating circumstances the right to self-determination as the primary reason for secession is argued to be a destabilizing factor for the international system as a whole, with the ability to spread to neighboring countries and disturb the global status quo.<sup>15</sup>

Parent state strategies in dealing with secessionist movements may grow additionally complicated if the target of these strategies is a de facto state. The de facto states are secessionist entities, who have a great deal of control over their territory and internal politics, without being recognized as a sovereign state by the International community. De facto states are particularly long lasting, partially due to the existence of patron states, which support their secession from the home state.<sup>16</sup> De facto states are common within the post-soviet space as many of them came into existence after the fall of the Soviet Union. One such state with unresolved frozen conflicts is Georgia, who currently has two breakaway de-facto states to contend with.

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<sup>14</sup> Cortes Rivera, J. J. (2023). Creating new states: the strategic use of referendums in secession movements. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 11(1), 140-157.

<sup>15</sup> Griffiths, R. D., & Muro, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-secession*. Rowman & Littlefield International. P.4-7.

<sup>16</sup> Berg, E., & Pegg, S. (2020). Do Parent State Strategies Matter in Resolving Secessionist Conflicts with De Facto States?. In *Strategies of secession and counter-secession* . P.52-53

The resilience of the de-facto states and the difficulty for the parent states to deal with them is caused by several factors. One of the most notable characteristics of a de-facto state is their military capabilities, which allow them to resist and defy the parent state, contesting with them one of the necessary elements of sovereignty- monopoly over violence. This military capability can be further enhanced by the aid of their patron state, which makes the potential militaristic resolution of the conflict much more damaging for the parent state. Another characteristic of the de-facto state's endurance is the ability of the ruling elites to establish a political and social order that is more suited for maintaining control and enhancing the secession process by normalizing the status quo.<sup>17</sup> Since de-facto states lack recognition by the majority of the international community and at the same time they may be considered as a puppet of a much more powerful patron state, one of their goals on their path to becoming a sovereign state is to prove their own external and internal legitimacy. Gaining external legitimacy is challenging, even with the aid of a patron state ( as it can be seen with Russia's recognition of Abkhazia), however if the de-facto state is not completely isolated and has access to international systems, such as diasporas or commercial networks they may slowly reinforce and build upon their legitimacy. This can present its own share of problems, as unrecognized de-facto states often do not have the luxury of choosing the type of external support available and making the wrong choice can alienate not only external but also domestic actors. While building and maintaining internal legitimacy may appear easier, due to the military capabilities and ability to control political and social order, as already mentioned above, de-facto states require tools to maintain that legitimacy by ensuring benefits for their population. Since the issues of internal and external legitimacy are interconnected and can affect one another in both directions, it becomes difficult for a de-facto state to make consistent progress. Tension caused by this lack of progress forces an emergence of certain types of governance which stalls reforms and increases dependence on Patron states.<sup>18</sup>

The struggle for earning legitimacy and affirming sovereignty for the de-facto state of Abkhazia in particular has been explored by Mölder and Berg. According to their study Abkhazia struggles with certain aspects of internal legitimacy, as the foundation of the political community, which is

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<sup>17</sup> Dembinska, M., & Campana, A. (2017). Frozen conflicts and internal dynamics of de facto states: Perspectives and directions for research. *International Studies Review*, 19(2), 254-278

<sup>18</sup> Caspersen, N. (2015). Degrees of legitimacy: Ensuring internal and external support in the absence of recognition. *Geoforum*, 66, 184-192.

based on the Abkhaz ethnicity, is flawed due to there not being a direct match between the territory and its people. As Abkhazia is divided between ethnic groups living there, the ethnic Abkhazians, who don't represent a strong majority, are trying to focus their attention on the matters of ethnic survival, culture and language. Due to their strong reliance on their patron state Russia, the Abkhazians find themselves being increasingly dependent on Russian financial support, influenced by the increased linguistic pressure and having to share the control of their territory with a significant Russian military presence. All of the factors mentioned above do not make a strong case for the Abkhazian de-facto state's internal and external legitimacy, however despite that the Abkhazian people maintain a positive outlook towards their security and independence in the future.<sup>19</sup>

Secessionist conflicts involving de facto states carry with them specific challenges for the parent states. Due to the unique nature of each secessionist movement and de facto state, the parent state strategies employed to suppress and neutralize them can vary significantly. Berg and Pegg outline some of the most direct ways in which parent states can seek to resolve their disputes with de facto states, these are: eradication through the use of force and the acceptance of the secessionist's demands. Despite these two options being the simplest ways in which to resolve the conflict, most states are not willing to let the secessionists leave and at the same time, do not possess the capacity to hold them back. Instead pursuing different strategies that better reflect their own set of calculations in particular circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

Berg and Pegg present four archetypes of parent state strategies, namely: "open engagement", "tentative engagement", "isolation/rejection with limited capacity to enforce it" and "isolation/active sanctions". The parent states are not limited to only pursuing the strategies of exclusively one of these archetypes and have been known to alternate between different ones. An example of this is Georgia, which has pursued a mix of both isolationist and integrative policies

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<sup>19</sup> Berg, E., & Mölder, M. (2012). Who is entitled to 'earn sovereignty'? Legitimacy and regime support in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. *Nations and Nationalism*, 18(3), 527-545.

<sup>20</sup> Berg, E., & Pegg, S. (2020). Do Parent State Strategies Matter in Resolving Secessionist Conflicts with De Facto States?. In *Strategies of secession and counter-secession* . P.52-53

towards its breakaway regions. Therefore, Georgia is described by Berg and Pegg as undertaking the “tentative engagement” model in a variety of parent state strategies.<sup>21</sup>

Open engagement strategy (presented by Berg and Pegg via the example of Moldova and its relationship with its breakaway territory of Transnistria) can be characterized by the willingness of the parent state to allow the continuous formation of ties between the seceding territory and the international community, as well as between the parent state and the de facto state. The focus on discrediting all possible methods of conflict resolution that do not stem from open dialogue and negotiations makes the issue of forming and nurturing trust between the parent state and the secessionist territory much more impactful in the long term. This need to nurture trust between the conflicting sides implies the rejection of economic sanctions that may cause significant cleavage between the economic development levels of the two sides. Forging strong economic ties, allowing for free movement of people and goods, while incentivising the pursuit of parent state citizenship through perks (such as EU visa liberalization in case of Moldova and Transnistria) are examples of open engagement strategies, which are employed in order to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict through diplomacy. These strategies are not without their fair share of criticism however, and their effectiveness has yet to be proven.<sup>22</sup>

Parent state strategies that focus on isolation aim to separate the secessionist territories from the international community by way of sanctions, denial of claimed independence and blocking access to international organizations, among other restrictions. Even the language used while discussing the de facto states can be closely monitored in order to avoid any and all reference or admittance to the secessionist territory’s statehood or legitimacy.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike the relatively straightforward “open engagement” or “isolation/sanction” strategies, the “tentative engagement” model attributed to Georgia’s approach does not limit the parent state strategy to purely exclusive or inclusive policies. “Tentative engagement” implies that sanctions and isolation may be used in sequence or in combination with engagement policies. The

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Berg, E., & Pegg, S. (2020). Do Parent State Strategies Matter in Resolving Secessionist Conflicts with De Facto States?. In *Strategies of secession and counter-secession* . P. 54-56

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. P. 58-62

application of this strategy has not borne fruit for Georgia as of yet. Its breakaway regions are still hesitant to engage in any meaningful dialogue and the long term effects of counteracting trust building effects of engagement policies through stern isolation and non-recognition policies leaves the conflicting sides with little to no progress towards conflict resolution.

## 2.1. Counter-Secessionism and Georgia

Georgia's counter-secessionism became increasingly more proactive after the Rose Revolution in 2003, as the topic of Georgian territorial integrity dominated the public interest. At the time the UNM (United National Movement) government aimed to strengthen Georgia's position in relation to its breakaway territories by increasing its military capabilities to create leverage and to strengthen Georgia economically, as this would attract secessionists with more promising economic opportunities. Georgia also made an effort to further discredit the de facto secessionist authorities by setting up more "official" structures within the disputed territories.<sup>24</sup>

This initial strategy was incoherent and counterintuitive as it combined policies devised through competing ideologies. On the one hand the Georgian government led by Saakashvili focused on creating a strong military force to be used as a show of strength, capable enough to retake the breakaway territories by force if necessary. This displayed the willingness to engage in hard power based solutions to resolving the conflict, further increasing the distance between Abkhazia and Georgia and aiding in the deterioration of trust between the two. On the other hand, Saakashvili's government aimed to create incentives for Abkhazians to consider their future as being more prosperous if reunited with Georgia. Using isolation and tentative engagement simultaneously, while aiming to increase both the soft and hard power of Georgia to be used as tools for counter-secession strategies, decreased the effectiveness of either one. The optimism and hope in promoting engagement, humanitarian and economic aid and long term business incentives as a basis for conflict resolution was counterbalanced by the short-term focused and isolationist impulses to resolve the conflict as soon as possible<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Berg, E., & Pegg, S. (2020). Do Parent State Strategies Matter in Resolving Secessionist Conflicts with De Facto States?. In *Strategies of secession and counter-secession* . P. 56

<sup>25</sup> Toal, G. (2017). *Near abroad: Putin, the West and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. Oxford University Press. PP.145-146

The application of contradictory ideas and approaches in counter-secession strategies did not cease after the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. This war significantly weakened Georgia as it completely lost control over the breakaway territories, which were now occupied by Russian troops. This increased presence of Russia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia reinforces the pre-existing Georgian narrative of Russia being the single greatest obstacle to the peaceful resolution of Georgia's territorial disputes. It also reignited the memory of the past conflict among the population, further serving to decrease the already low amount of trust. The results of the war forced Georgia to come up with a more concrete policy aimed towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This new strategy was based on the policy formula of "engagement without recognition" and incorporated elements of both: isolation and engagement.<sup>26</sup>

The continued existence of the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia along with a lack of progress in resolving it makes it clear that the interests of the conflicting sides are completely incompatible, as they possess different perspectives and goals. After multiple decades of de facto statehood and isolation the majority of Abkhazians are "contentedly irreconcilable" with the Georgian state and consider the idea of reintegration with Georgia or the return of displaced Georgians to Abkhazia as non-negotiable.<sup>27</sup> The Georgian attitude towards the conflict has also been having an effect on the prospects of conflict resolution. The official Georgian narrative places Russia as the main instigator of the conflict and as the primary reason for the continued existence of the dispute. Even within the framework of Geneva International Discussions which had the representatives of Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia gather together to discuss the aftermaths of the war in 2008, the substantial discussions regarding the conflict were done between Russia as Georgia, since Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not seen as possessing any agency.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore the weight of potential success of conflict resolution strategies is placed upon the deteriorated Georgian-Russian relations. This type of approach presented Abkhazia as a passive

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<sup>26</sup> Berg, E., & Pegg, S. (2020). Do Parent State Strategies Matter in Resolving Secessionist Conflicts with De Facto States?. In *Strategies of secession and counter-secession* . P. 56

<sup>27</sup> O'loughlin, J., Kolossov, V., Toal, G., & Tuathail, G. (2011). Inside Abkhazia: survey of attitudes in a de facto state. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 27(1), P.34

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Former Minister of Reintegration (2022, April 15).

actor with limited/no agency over its own fate. The initial counter-secession strategies of Georgia were therefore aimed towards the resolution of the conflict via increasing international support and regaining territorial integrity through dealing with Russia as the primary threat.<sup>29</sup>

Abkhazia's presumed lack of agency in the Georgian narrative was counterproductive to the efforts to have a meaningful discussion between the conflicting sides. The 2008 Georgia-Russian war reinforced these simplified narratives despite the decades long continuous divergence of the de facto Abkhazia from Georgia and their de facto government's internal legitimacy contributing to the Abkhazian ability to focus on gaining international recognition of their statehood, which they considered as a non-negotiable reality. In 2013 the newly elected Georgian Dream government decided to address the topic of Abkhazian agency in a speech given by then PM Bidzina Ivanishvili, who called for "Direct dialogue with our Abkhazian and South Ossetian brothers", underlining the importance of admittance of mistakes and forgiveness for both sides. This new readiness for direct talks with Abkhazia did not affect the existing dominant narratives, nor did it yield any significant breakthroughs in resolving the conflict. The reluctance to Recognize Abkhazia's agency in Georgian narratives and counter-secession policies can be partially attributed to the Georgian fear of creeping recognition. This is reflected in the belief that interacting with Abkhazia as an actor with agency may be taken as a degree of legitimization of their self-proclaimed independence by the international community. Therefore the counter-secessionist strategies devised by Georgia are carefully constructed to eliminate the chances of creeping recognition, even at the cost of denying agency of Abkhazia, further isolating it and making the prospect of conflict resolution through direct negotiations more difficult.<sup>30</sup>

The economic development level of the de facto state can have a significant influence on its secession efforts. To achieve their goal of independence the secessionists can employ a variety of methods to try and gather international support. One of those methods, mostly relevant in highly

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<sup>29</sup> Fischer Sabine (2010), "The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia" P.8

<sup>30</sup> Chankvetadze, N., & Murusidze, K. (2021). Re-examining the Radicalizing Narratives of Georgia's Conflicts. Carnegie Europe. link:<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/12/re-examining-radicalizing-narratives-of-georgia-s-conflicts-pub-84508>

democratic societies, is for the secessionist movement to convince the parent state and the international community that its independence is not only moral, but also economically viable.<sup>31</sup> After secession, depending on the parent state's counter secession strategies and the level of support from the patron state, a seceding movement may find it difficult to keep up with the economic development of internationally recognized sovereign states. If the parent state is utilizing isolationist strategy to cut off the seceding territory from the international community, then the said territory can become increasingly dependent on the patron state's support due to a lack of viable trade partners, economic opportunities, etc.

Just like the secessionist movements can invoke economic hardships as the reason for secession, the parent state can also use the economic hardships that come with secession to argue against it. Counter-secessionists can use the potential outbreak of violence, economic downfall and high costs of transition to convince the international society and the seceding movement that secession is better to be avoided.<sup>32</sup>

After secession the parent state can have varying degrees of effect on the seceding territory's economy. If the parent state favors isolationist counter-secession strategies as mentioned above, then the seceding territory is at risk of falling behind the parent state in terms of economic development. With time this cleavage in economic development can become a major hurdle for conflict resolution, as economic isolation will damage the already precarious levels of trust between the parent state and the seceding movement, while also increasing the costs of reintegration in case of a positive conflict resolution outcome for the parent state. An alternative for avoiding this is for the parent state to allow some level of engagement with the secessionists. With engagement policies economic prosperity may be utilized as an incentive for the seceding territory (as exemplified by Moldova and its Open engagement strategy towards Transnistria).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Griffiths, R. D., & Muro, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-secession*. Rowman & Littlefield International. P.4

<sup>32</sup> Griffiths, R. D., & Muro, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Strategies of Secession and Counter-secession*. Rowman & Littlefield International. P5

<sup>33</sup> Berg, E., & Pegg, S. (2020). Do Parent State Strategies Matter in Resolving Secessionist Conflicts with De Facto States?. In *Strategies of secession and counter-secession* . P. 55

## 2.2. Engagement without recognition and Georgia

The term “engagement without recognition” started to gain traction among international relations scholars after the Georgia-Russian war of 2008.<sup>34</sup> The term is used to describe a type of engagement policy that allows sovereign states to have some manner of interactions with de facto states without the endorsement of their self-proclaimed independence. This type of policy becomes especially important as the longevity and resilience of de facto states cannot be ignored indefinitely. Since the emergence of new de facto states and their desire for internationally recognized sovereignty is greeted by rejection in the modern international system, these de facto states continue to exist and strive for gaining sovereignty. As a result, the conflicts around these de facto states become frozen. In order for the conflicts around their existence and legal status to be resolved, there needs to exist some manner of policy of engagement that will allow the parent state, as well as the other members of the international community to have a system through which they can have controlled levels of engagement with the de facto state. The principal idea behind promoting methods of engagement is to encourage positive change through the use of incentives, instead of punishment and pure isolation.<sup>35</sup>

A sovereign state engaging in diplomatic activity with a de facto state, especially without the utilization of non-recognition policy, may be construed as grounds for recognition of legitimacy. Sovereign states are wary of such acts as the recognition of a de facto state can lead to worsening relations with its parent state or other issues such as the rise of domestic secessionist movements.<sup>36</sup> The concept of engagement without recognition can therefore be used as a tool for conflict resolution by sovereign states. Different engagement strategies can be devised through its application and with the parent state’s approval. This can allow for political and economic incentives (such as trade, humanitarian and developmental aid) to be applied in relation to the de facto state. Devising methods of engagement through which the populations of the de facto state and the parent state it is trying to secede from can interact can also aid in rebuilding trust between

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<sup>34</sup> Ker-Lindsay, J., & Berg, E. (2018). Introduction: A conceptual framework for engagement with de facto states. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(4), PP. 335-337.

<sup>35</sup> Ker-Lindsay, J., & Berg, E. (2018). Introduction: A conceptual framework for engagement with de facto states. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(4), PP. 335-337.

<sup>36</sup> Ker-Lindsay, J. (2015). Engagement without recognition: The limits of diplomatic interaction with contested states. *International Affairs*, 91(2), 267-285. P. 269

the two sides. An argument for introducing methods of interaction with de facto states, instead of simply pursuing policies of non-recognition and isolation, is that without ways to meaningfully interact with the outer world the de facto state may be forced to become increasingly dependent on its patron state.<sup>37</sup>

Engagement without recognition as a policy formula has its fair share of shortcomings and criticisms. For one, engagement without recognition is not a surefire tool that brings the involved parties any closer to conflict resolution. According to George Kyris the failure of engagement without recognition to empower peace-making efforts can be seen in the application of the policy by international organizations in Cyprus. In its engagement without recognition approach with Cyprus the UN opted to minimize any inferred recognition of Turkish Cyprus by referring to both sides of the Cyprus conflict in status neutral terms, which undermined the reconciliation efforts. On the other hand the EU initiated the engagement without recognition in Cyprus not with the intent of conflict resolution but in order to create a basis for reconciliation in the future.<sup>38</sup> This reason for utilizing engagement without recognition is similar in nature to the Georgian government's vision for the policy towards Abkhazia as the engagement is used to maintain contacts and build trust between the populations on both sides of the de-facto border, in order to make any possible future negotiations worthwhile.

After the Georgia-Russian war the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union approved the “non-recognition and engagement” policy towards Georgia’s secessionist territories. With this policy the EU reaffirmed its support for Georgia’s territorial integrity and underlined its willingness to participate in the conflict resolution process by the means of involving the population of the de facto states into confidence-building projects.<sup>39</sup>

The EU as the “primary peacemaker in Georgia” had underlined some of the policy’s goals, meant to focus on de-isolation and transformation. These goals included: the promotion of economic interactions between conflicting sides, the strengthening of civil society, strengthening of EU’s

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<sup>37</sup> Ker-Lindsay, J., & Berg, E. (2018). Introduction: A conceptual framework for engagement with de facto states. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(4), PP. 337-338

<sup>38</sup> Kyris, G. (2018). Sovereignty and engagement without recognition: Explaining the failure of conflict resolution in Cyprus. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(4), PP. 426-442.

<sup>39</sup> Coppieters, B. (2019). Engagement without recognition. In *Routledge Handbook of State Recognition*. Taylor & Francis. P.241

contacts with de facto states in order strengthen confidence building, increasing EU's "leverage and footprint" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, de-isolation and diversification of political narratives.<sup>40</sup>

The 2008 August war made Georgia reevaluate some aspects of their policies towards its secessionist territories. The policy was torn between incorporating elements of isolation and engagement strategies. While the Georgian government recognized the need for engagement as a vital part of achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict, their hesitancy was caused by the fear of "creeping recognition" due to continued engagement of international state and non-state actors with the de facto states. The "Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation" devised by the Georgian government was created within the "engagement without recognition" framework. Georgia's approach to the secessionist territories was carefully crafted to avoid any type of recognition of Abkhazia's or South Ossetia's legitimacy. This careful approach was exhibited in policies such as the restriction of the language used while discussing the secessionist territories and the refusal of the Georgian government to interact with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The decision to neglect such interactions with the secessionist "authorities" and populations can negatively impact the chances of future Georgian engagement strategies.<sup>41</sup>

The usage of specific language when referring to de secessionist territories in order to avoid implications of recognition are discussed in more detail by Bruno Coppieeters (2018). According to his article, while using the term "de facto" when speaking about the secessionist territories or their authorities is meant to discredit any proclamations of statehood it does not inherently deny the fact that these authorities have control over the territory. Lacking a legal status due to carefully crafted non-recognition policies does not completely disqualify de facto states from being a part of treaties and agreements. Usage of "de facto" as a prefix to ensure that the subject of conversation is not recognized is not always necessary and the term may be used interchangeably with other

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<sup>40</sup> Fischer Sabine (2010), "The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia". Link: [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/NREP\\_report.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/NREP_report.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. P.4

status neutral terms.<sup>42</sup> Despite this Georgia has created a policy of referring to Abkhazia and its authorities with prefixes such as “de facto” and “so called”, refusing to allow for Abkhazia to have equal status to a sovereign state under any circumstances, even in speech. This in itself is also an example of counter-secessionism.

The policy of “non-recognition and engagement” proposed by the EU as a strategy and aimed towards Georgia’s conflict regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was turned into a more general policy formula of “engagement without recognition” due to a lack of clarity regarding the limitations of the initial policy. Although Georgia holds final authority over their counter-secession policies and decisions regarding the de facto states, it permits the EU to have a presence in conflict resolution efforts and to act as a peacemaker. Georgia monitors the EU activities and policies in order to make sure they do not contradict its own counter secession strategies. Engagement without recognition supported by the EU differs from the practices of pure non-recognition. They are used according to the variables of the conflict, such as the position of the EU towards the de facto territories and the parent state’s strategies. non-recognition is promoted when the counter-secession policies of the states who face secessionist movements align with the EU's stance on the issue. This policy generally excludes provision of any support to the secessionists in terms of state-building efforts. If there exists a consensus within the EU member states about the status of the secessionist movement (about the level of recognition given to such entities), then the choice between favoring non-recognition or open engagement strategies rests with the final decision agreed upon by the conflicting sides. Engagement without recognition on the other hand is promoted by the EU as a strategy when there exists a difference of opinion between the member states on whether or not the statehood of secessionist territories should be recognized before a decision has been reached on that matter between the conflicting sides.<sup>43</sup>

While Georgia has been reluctant in the past to increase engagement with Abkhazia due to the fear of “creeping recognition”, it has not been without reason. James Ker Lindsey (2018) does explore

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<sup>42</sup> Coppieters, B. (2018). ‘Statehood’, ‘de facto Authorities’ and ‘Occupation’: Contested Concepts and the EU’s Engagement in its European Neighbourhood. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(4), PP. 349-351

<sup>43</sup> Coppieters, B. (2019). Engagement without recognition. In *Routledge Handbook of State Recognition*. Taylor & Francis. PP.249-252

the idea of the multiplier effect, where engagement with and acceptance of a de facto state by the international community makes it more likely to receive more acceptance and increased engagement. This concept of the multiplier effect as a potential side-effect of engagement without recognition gives some credibility to the potential dangers of “creeping recognition” for the parent state. It is quite easy, however, to alter the specifics of engagement without recognition strategies if the parent state perceives a threat with engagement. Policies created under Engagement without recognition can vary a great deal based on the policy goals of the state that created them. It is also possible for the policies to be altered at any given time, meaning that states have all the means needed to control the way in which they engage with de facto states and de facto states who have been isolated in the past can begin interacting with other states with more freedom than ever.<sup>44</sup> This notion of engagement without recognition policies being adjustable based on the expectations of the parent state is reflected in the case of Georgia-Abkhazia relations, as the engagement plan focusing on “de-isolation and transformation” which was initially suggested by the EU was considered by Georgia as being against their best interests. Therefore the engagement without recognition policy of Georgia focused entirely on people to people communications.

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<sup>44</sup> James Ker-Lindsay (2018): The Stigmatisation of de facto States: Disapproval and ‘Engagement Without Recognition’, *Ethnopolitics*, P.362-372

### 3. Methodology

The research will utilize qualitative research methods along with quantitative data present in official documents, and will focus on a single case study of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Georgia has two separate de-facto states within its internationally recognized borders and applies its counter-secession and engagement policies to both of them, however, the conflicts and the particularities of the relationship between secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia towards Georgia differ significantly enough to warrant focus on solely one of them. Abkhazia and South Ossetia may both be breakaway regions in Georgia, but these de-facto states have different historic backgrounds, different ethnic populations and different aspirations.

The 2008 Russia-Georgian war and the following recognition of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian statehood by Russia changed the landscape of the conflict that had been frozen for years and created more challenges for Georgia to deal with. After the war both of Georgia's secessionist territories became even more out of reach from Georgian sovereignty and with the increase of more direct Russian influence in the de-facto states any previously open pathways for negotiation and peacemaking had to be re-evaluated.<sup>45</sup>

Since the thesis will be focusing on the policy aspects of Georgia's "engagement without recognition" approach, the primary subjects of analysis will consist of policy documents and state strategies. In particular those documents published by the Government of Georgia that depict the implementation of engagement strategies in terms of its approach with Abkhazia as the country's set policy goal. The policy documents discussed within this thesis consist of: the "Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories", which was created in 2008 and laid the basis for post war relationships of Georgia and its secessionist territories; followed by the "Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation" first introduced in 2010, being the first document in which the

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<sup>45</sup> Cooley, A., & Mitchell, L. A. (2010). Engagement without recognition: A new strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's unrecognized states. *The Washington Quarterly*, 33(4), 59-73.

Government of Georgia first affirmed the utilization engagement strategies in relation to the Abkhazian population as a state policy priority. The mechanisms of the said strategy were further expanded within documents “Action Plan for Engagement” and “On Approval of Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia”. The final official government policy document discussed within this thesis is “A Step to a Better Future”, which in 2018 reaffirmed the government’s priorities in terms of implementing improved engagement mechanisms for populations across the de-facto borders.

Besides the official documents the thesis will include the statistical data depicting the implementation and effectiveness of the engagement policies published by the Governmental bodies in Georgia, such as the Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality, as well as non-governmental organizations. This data can be analyzed to see how certain areas of engagement, which have been outlined in the policy documents as being of high priority, have been implemented and supported over the years by the Government. Lack of access for Abkhazians to benefits available to Georgians in areas such as education, healthcare and business have all been noted as being important humanitarian reasons for maintaining the engagement policies as a state strategy, therefore the amount of beneficiaries for those initiatives, the consistent growth in interest from participants, the amount of resources dedicated to their thorough implementation and other related activities conducted by the relevant government institutions and ministries can be used as a gauge for the level of success for State’s engagement strategies.

The information contained within the state documents and the statistical data will be supplemented with a number of interviews. The respondents of the interviews have been selected due to their leading roles in the Georgian ministry of Reintegration during the period that this study focuses on (2008-2020), such as ex-ministers, deputy ministers and others who were directly involved in policy formation. Other respondents include experts and scholars who have been observing the development of the Georgian policies towards Abkhazia closely and members of non-governmental organizations that work around the peacemaking process and the humanitarian aid in Abkhazia.

The method of analysis used in the thesis will be process-tracing, as it allows for a deeper analysis of the subject matter, while establishing a causal link between two events. Process tracing as a method of inquiry in social sciences is used as a tool for conducting single-case research, such as the one presented in this thesis. The goal of the process tracing method is to observe causal mechanisms and sequence of events within a specific time frame of a single phenomena, in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics that culminated in the particular outcome of the selected case. These causal mechanisms can be described as processes that link certain initial conditions to an observed outcome. While using process tracing the researcher follows the process as it unfolded within the determined time-frame of the observation period ,seeing to what extent the process falls in line with the previously held theoretical expectations. Since the process tracing falls under the category of qualitative research methods, the data used for the analysis can be varied in nature. This data can come from sources such as historical documents, expert opinions, interviews, press accounts, government documents, etc.<sup>46</sup>

The process tracing method can be utilized for theory-building, as well as theory-testing purposes and can be separated into several core components. These components include the steps of theorization for causal mechanisms that link transformative events of significance (causes) to the results that stem from them (outcomes), as well as the analysis of the available empirical data of the above-mentioned theorized causal mechanisms.<sup>47</sup> In certain cases generalization of studies conducted via the utilization of process tracing methods is possible, however since the method focuses on the analysis of individual cases the conclusions reached by the researcher may be too specific to the case to warrant serving as a generalized examples that would be relevant to a general phenomena that it had been an instance of.<sup>48</sup>

One of the goals this thesis wishes to achieve through the utilization of the process tracing method is to document the extent to which the processes of Georgian engagement without recognition policies fit the initial theoretical explanation, by which the Georgian counter-secession and non-recognition policy works in contrast to its engagement strategies. The process tracing method will

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<sup>46</sup> Checkel, J. T. (2008). Process tracing. *Qualitative methods in international relations: A pluralist guide*, 114-127.

<sup>47</sup> Beach, D. (2017). Process-tracing methods in social science. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*.

<sup>48</sup> Bennett, A. (2008). Process tracing: A Bayesian perspective. In Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*

be employed to better analyze the changes that took place within the Georgian engagement strategy after the Russia-Georgian war in 2008 and the effects it had on the current state of the state strategy and its implementation. As outlined by James Mahoney (2012) process tracing method can be used to evaluate the hypothesis about a specific outcome in a particular case, by establishing that two events occurred one after the other with one being the cause for the latter, or in other words by establishing a cause and a result.<sup>49</sup> Following this reasoning the cause of the strategy changes in Georgia would be the 2008 Georgia-Russian war, while the modern engagement policy would be the result. After analyzing the data through process tracing this thesis hopes to answer the primary research question and ascertain the causes for the seemingly counterintuitive simultaneous implementation of engagement strategies along with non-recognition by Georgia in Abkhazia.

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<sup>49</sup> Mahoney, J. (2012). The logic of process tracing tests in the social sciences. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 41(4), 570-597.

## 4. Historical background of the Conflict - 1992-2008

The tensions between the Abkhazians and Georgians had existed long before the outbreak of the armed conflict. While under Soviet rule, Abkhazia existed as an autonomous republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. While the Georgian elites worried about the Soviet attempts of russification, in Abkhazia the local leaders were more concerned about the political inequality between Georgia and Abkhazia within the Soviet union. While during the 1970s the Abkhazians maintained a greater share of administrative positions as well as autonomy within their territory, they still feared that if given the opportunity they would be subjected to Georgianization. Contrary to the fears of the Abkhazians the Georgians did not consider the autonomous region as the main source of their hardships or potential danger to their statehood, but rather as a tool in the hands of soviet authorities. The over-representation of Abkhazians in state institutions was seen as a typical Russian/Soviet tactic of seeding division by the use of minorities.<sup>50</sup> This type of mindset would be quite persistent within the Georgian political elites for decades to come, namely they were not assigning much agency to Abkhazia and did not see in themselves the threat that the Abkhazians feared. In the end the opposing fears of Abkhazians and Georgians to be left helpless against the influence of a larger entity started to fuel diametrically opposed and radical views of one another.

In the 1980s the Soviet policy under Gorbachev was pushing for democratization of governing institutions, which had a direct effect on Georgia-Abkhazian relations. At the time the ethnic Abkhazians represented only 1.7% of the total population in Georgia<sup>51</sup> and even in Abkhazia they were technically a minority despite holding a majority of the governing positions in the governing institutions of the Abkhazian ASSR. This meant that the application of more democratic principles based on the demographic representation of Abkhazia would put more Georgians in positions of power, which raised the fears of the Abkhazian elites. In the meantime there was a debate in Georgia about whether or not the Abkhazians should have been granted a higher status, despite

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<sup>50</sup> Coppieters, B. (2004). The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict. *JEMIE*, link: [https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE\\_Datens%C3%A4tze/Jemie\\_datens%C3%A4tze\\_2004/1-2004Chapter5.pdf](https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE_Datens%C3%A4tze/Jemie_datens%C3%A4tze_2004/1-2004Chapter5.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> ჯონსი, ს. (2013). საქართველო. პოლიტიკური ისტორია დამოუკიდებლობის გამოცხადების შემდეგ [*Jones, S. (2013). Georgia. Political history since independence*]. P. 59

being a minority, however this opinion was opposed by those who argued that historically the Abkhazian people had only migrated to the region a few centuries ago and therefore did not hold any special “allowances” in relation to connection to the region, that would put them higher than Georgians. Near the end of the 1980s the Abkhazians argued that self-determination of the Abkhaz people and forming of a state republic was the natural progression for an autonomous region that had existed for centuries without reliance on the Georgian political framework. This notion was denied and opposed by Georgians who claimed that Abkhazia had always been a part of Georgia.

With the rise of the national movement and Zviad Gamsakhurdia becoming president in 1991 a new wave of mobilization swept across the country. Now independent Georgia set out to correct the injustices that it had endured under Soviet rule. Some of those perceived injustices were based on ethnic discrimination against Georgians in the autonomous regions. The political turmoil of the newly independent Georgia saw several wars in the early 1990s, one of them being the Georgian-Abkhazian war that broke out in 1992.

With the background of civil unrest in Georgia, Abkhazia declared independence and the Georgian troops entered Sukhumi to re-establish control of the region. The conflict turned unfavorable to the Georgians when Russia intervened with its military and Georgian troops were defeated in 1993. Russia has remained on the territory of the de-facto state as a peacekeeping force ever since.<sup>52</sup> During the Abkhazian conflict in 1992-1993, it is estimated that at least 4,000 individuals on the Georgian side, including both civilians and combatants, were killed. Another 10,000 individuals were wounded. On the Abkhazian side, approximately 4,040 people died, including 2,220 combatants and 1,820 civilians. Additionally, around 8,000 individuals were wounded and more than 200,000 people were forced to flee their homes in Abkhazia.<sup>53</sup>

Before the Rose revolution, during Eduard Shevardnadze’s presidency, Georgian policy was drastically different from what it became after Saakashvili came into power, as pre-revolution

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<sup>52</sup> Coppieters, B. (2004). The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict. *JEMIE*, link: [https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE\\_Datens%C3%A4tze/Jemie\\_datens%C3%A4tze\\_2004/1-2004Chapter5.pdf](https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE_Datens%C3%A4tze/Jemie_datens%C3%A4tze_2004/1-2004Chapter5.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Lott, A. (2020). The Abkhazian Conflict: A Study on Self-Determination and International Intervention. *Juridica Int'l*, 29, 133.

Georgia held a policy of appeasement towards Russia. One of the subjects of an interview conducted for this thesis, who acted as a minister of Reintegration after 2008 recalls that during Yeltsin's presidency Russia was not utilizing an active policy of interference with the Abkhazia-Georgian relationship. Before 2008 Georgia did not have a set strategy towards its conflict regions and Russia.<sup>54</sup> There was however an existing desire from the Georgian side to establish a more direct dialogue with Abkhazia in order to restore trust between the split communities. Though this may not have been expressed in an official form to political entities, the Georgian Ministry of Reintegration was pursuing a policy of attempting trust building between Abkhazians and Georgians. This desire for open dialogue was planting the seeds for the future official engagement strategies for the state, as the mechanisms used were tied to culture, healthcare and education. Unfortunately the method of negotiations leftover from the Georgia-Abkhazian war involved the Russian Federation as a supposed neutral broker, which presented a huge challenge for Georgia since from the Georgian perspective instead of directing the talks and creating opportunities for trust building between the conflicting sides Russia was directing the conflict into the opposite direction. Instead of trust building and integration it was intensifying the conflict and encouraged secession.<sup>55</sup>

After the UNM (United National Movement) came to power during the Rose Revolution in 2003 Georgian politics towards Abkhazia became more proactive. It was decided that Russia was the main obstacle to conflict resolution and it was necessary to create distance between Russia and Georgia. Georgian politics became more rigid, openly pro-western and negatively predisposed towards Russia. This had an effect on Russian policies in the region. These policies were employed readily from 2004 all the way up to the 2008 war and had the goal of alienating the Georgian side of the conflict from the de-facto states and to more actively block methods of cooperation between Georgia and Abkhazia. Thus the de-facto states were less inclined to negotiate with a western Georgia which ignored Russian interests.<sup>56</sup> The situation became even more strained after the Russia-Georgian war. Every aspect of the conflict had now fallen under the overarching umbrella of Georgia-Russian relations.

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with a former State Minister for Reintegration. Interview conducted on 15/04/2020

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a former Deputy State Minister for Reintegration. Interview conducted on 27/04/2020

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a former State Minister for Reintegration. Interview conducted on 15/04/2020

After the war in 2008 Georgia began the formation of a comprehensive strategy which culminated in the 2010 document, the “Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation”. The work on the strategy began in 2008 on a national level, with the involvement of multiple state institutions along with consultations with the EU and even with the de-facto authorities in Sokhumi through unofficial channels. Engagement strategies with fundamental instruments were created for the de-facto states. The final 2010 document was being worked on for at least a year as Georgia’s main political priority, while being shared with partners to garner their support. Post 2008 Georgia had adopted two distinctly different strategies of engagement and non-recognition.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with a former Deputy State Minister for Reintegration. Interview conducted on 27/04/2020

## 5. Phases and Strategies: Analyzing Georgia's Engagement Policy towards Abkhazia

For the sake of clarity in process tracing, the Georgian implementation period of “engagement through cooperation” towards Abkhazia can be divided into several phases, based on the: 2008-2012, 2012-2016 and 2016-present. These periods have been chosen in order to break up the observed time frame into 4 year segments and focus on noteworthy developments.

The nature of the statistics and data concerning the implementation of the Georgian state strategy “engagement through cooperation” can be found through the annual reports published by the Georgian Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality, as well as in interviews with people who held suitable positions in the relevant ministries.

### 5.1. 2008-2012

After the Russia-Georgian war in 2008 and the recognition of Abkhazia’s independence by Russia the Georgian government headed by the United National Movement underwent a significant change in its attitude towards the conflicts. The Government recognized that discussion of hostilities publicly was no longer prudent and verbally affirmed that resolving the conflicts by force was not an option. This stance was later reinforced as a legal norm in the Georgian Strategy on Occupied Territories document.

In 2008 The Office of State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration was founded, officially replacing the previously existing Ministry of Conflict Resolution Issues, which was responsible for the development and presentation of strategic opinions on conflict resolution and cooperating with national security authorities and state structures to prevent and resolve conflicts.<sup>58</sup> The newly

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<sup>58</sup> Government of Georgia „კონფლიქტების მოგვარების საკითხებში საქართველოს სახელმწიფო მინისტრის აპარატის დებულების დამტკიცების შესახებ” [“On the approval of the regulations of the Office of the State Minister of Georgia in issues of conflict resolution”]. Link: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/12382?publication=0>

founded State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration had a more expanded list of responsibilities and functions that included among other things: proposing of peacekeeping initiatives, the facilitation of safe return of displaced persons and coordination of social-economic activities for reintegration. This new ministry was later renamed in 2014 to the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. The main reason behind the name change was that the fact that the term “Reintegration” was seen by de-facto authorities as problematic due to it referring to a specific dimension of conflict resolution, which for them was different from resolving existing conflicts.<sup>59</sup>

Overall the specific period of 2008-2012 saw a lot of changes in the Georgian policies towards its occupied territories along with very notable state strategies and approaches being cemented into documents. After the 2008 war and Russia’s occupation of Georgian territories (along with the recognition of the de-facto states’ independence by Russia), Georgia had to adapt its policies and develop new strategies towards Russia, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In October of 2008 Georgia adopted the “Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories” which would become a crucial guiding document with a great deal of influence over Georgia’s future policies towards Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The law defined Abkhazia and South Ossetia as territories that were occupied due to the military aggression of the Russian Federation and as such there was a need to create a special legal regime on those territories. According to the law this legal regime included restrictions on activities such as migration, economic activities, real estate transactions, etc. With this law Georgia established a legal avenue for maintaining control over interactions of third parties with the de-facto states by deeming non Georgian approved contact to be illegal. In case of violations to this law Georgia would act according to its own and to international laws to protect its national interests. Since the law had a clause not only about prohibition of unapproved migration and economic activities but also about the status of any de-facto authorities that might be present in the territories, this law was one of the first documents post war to isolate the de-facto states from the international community in order to disrupt their secessionist practices and attempts to gain international recognition. According to the law of Georgia on Occupied Territories any government or official that is formed/elected on the occupied territories outside of the Georgian

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<sup>59</sup> Zakareishvili, P. (2021). *Vision: Conflicts in Georgia 2012-2016*. PP. 16-18

legislation is deemed as illegal and any and all acts issued by such authorities is to be considered null and void.<sup>60</sup>

Another one of the cornerstone documents for the Georgian “engagement without recognition” policy is the Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation (27 January 2010) published by the Georgian State ministry for Reintegration. The document states the main objective of the engagement through cooperation strategy to be the extension of Georgia’s progress in national reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration to the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Claiming that European integration is the superior choice for the collective peace, prosperity and security for all those involved. Some of the goals outlined in the document were the de-occupation of the secessionist territories from Russian military control, peaceful reintegration of secessionist territories and the determination to only use peaceful diplomatic means to achieve the policy’s goals, rejecting the use of military power.

The cornerstone of this strategy is stated to be the desire to “counter the isolation and division resulting from occupation by creating frameworks, incentives, and mechanisms for engagement”<sup>61</sup> through policies that encourage: 1) interactions between populations of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 2) promoting economic cooperation and increasing life conditions between de-facto borders, 3) Developing transport infrastructure, 4) Increasing support for basic human rights, 5) Improving healthcare and its accessibility, 6) Promoting freedom of movement, 7) Promoting free flow of information and 8) Preserving cultural heritage and identity. All of the policies mentioned above were focused on the population and not on the de-facto government.

The Strategy on Occupied Territories sets its primary goals to be countering isolation and promotion of engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however it underlines first and foremost that all the goals of the strategy must be accomplished under the non-recognition policy. Therefore this engagement plan devised by Georgia does not necessarily share the vision of the

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<sup>60</sup> Parliament of Georgia (2008), The law of Georgia On Occupied Territories. Link: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/19132?publication=6>

<sup>61</sup> Government of Georgia (2010), “State Strategy on Occupied Territories:Engagement Through Cooperation”, Link: [https://www.gov.ge/files/225\\_31228\\_851158\\_15.07.20-StateStrategyonOccupiedTerritories-EngagementThroughCooperation\(Final\).pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/225_31228_851158_15.07.20-StateStrategyonOccupiedTerritories-EngagementThroughCooperation(Final).pdf)

“engagement without recognition” policy that was proposed by the EU<sup>62</sup> as the Georgian plan strictly prohibits the engagement of third parties with Abkhazia outside of the Georgian umbrella. De-isolation of Abkhazia or allowing the de-facto states some agency through engagement is not the same as the desire to “counter the isolation and division” outlined in the strategy, as the primary reason for the said isolation and division is presented to be the Russian occupation of the territories. In the state strategy document the nature of the conflicts between Georgia and its secessionist territories is seen through the lens of the more prominent Georgia-Russian conflict. Russia is described as the primary actor who fueled the conflicts in Georgia with their direct involvement and also as the power that prevents the resolution of said conflicts.

The importance of the strategy document as the guiding principle of the Georgian policies towards Abkhazia was reinforced in the interviews conducted with high level government officials who held positions at the State Ministry for Reintegration between the years 2008 and 2012 when Mikheil Saakashvili was president and the governmental power was held by the UNM party. During this time the Ministry of Reintegration collaborated with multiple other government institutions in order to plan and execute their policies. The war of 2008 and the following aftermath allowed for the world to finally see Russia as an occupying force rather than as a peacekeeper it tried to present itself as before. Which meant that Georgia now had to focus on raising awareness of the Russian occupation, as well as establishing and maintaining a strong non-recognition policy as a counter to Russia.<sup>63</sup>

The strategy document recognizes the existence of differing views on the conflict within the populations of the de facto states and acknowledges the need to increase engagement with those populations for successfully carrying out the goals set within the strategy. It notes however that de-occupation of the territories from Russian control is the only way towards conflict resolution and peaceful reconciliation. Before that paramount goal of de-occupation is achieved the focus of the Georgian state strategy is a more human-centric engagement policy that focuses on the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this manner the de-isolation mentioned in the

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<sup>62</sup> Fischer Sabine (2010), “The EU’s non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia”. Link: [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/NREP\\_report.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/NREP_report.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> Interviews with a former Deputy State Ministers for Reintegration. Interviews conducted on 27/04/22 and 20/04/22

document is referring only to the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and their increased engagement through economic opportunities, healthcare and person to person interactions with Georgians.

The state strategy was further elaborated in documents such as the “Action Plan for Engagement” and “On Approval of Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia”. The “Action Plan for Engagement ” (3rd of July, 2010) once again underlined Georgia’s commitment to de-isolate the populations of the de-facto states through increasing engagement in between the divided communities and through making all the benefits available to citizens of Georgia be available for the population of said territories. The legal basis under which this action plan is devised refers back to the Georgian law on occupied territories and reiterates the need for the approval by the Georgian government of any humanitarian or other type of engagement initiated with the de-facto states. The action plan specifically mentions that the new Georgian state strategy is a long-term commitment and goes on to display that commitment through describing a variety of initiatives that will accomplish the strategy’s goals. These goals were divided into four: the humanitarian, human, social and economic dimensions of engagement.<sup>64</sup>

Due to the nature of the engagement strategy, which focuses on more human level interactions, the action plan utilizes a bottom-up grassroots approach and creates a framework in cooperation with major stakeholders like civil-society organizations, NGOs and other third party interest groups. The designated primary implementer of the action plan was the State Ministry for Reintegration, which acted as an overseer and coordinator of the action plan. According to the interviewees the reason why the de-isolation was meant only for the general population was because of the obvious negative implications such approach would have for Georgia’s non-recognition policy if the de-facto authorities were allowed such benefits. The engagement strategy was described as a long term plan to win the hearts of the Abkhazian people and to present Georgia as a responsible state in case the possibility for actual conflict resolution arises in the future. The encouragement of relations between populations and the encouragement of different opportunities

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<sup>64</sup> Government of Georgia (2010), *Action Plan for Engagement* . Link: [https://www.gov.ge/files/225\\_31228\\_757599\\_15.07.18-ActionPlanforEngagement\(Final\).pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/225_31228_757599_15.07.18-ActionPlanforEngagement(Final).pdf)

would also be addressing the generational changes, cultural and political differences, and the alienation that may arise over time.<sup>65</sup>

Main avenues for implementing the state strategy of engagement included programmes that promoted: Youth activities, Preservation of cultural heritage and identity, human to human relations between populations, Human rights, as well as cooperation in the spheres of education, healthcare, trade, etc.<sup>66</sup> The modalities of how these programmes would be implemented in Abkhazia are present in the document “On Approval of Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia”. The “modality” that the document seeks to elaborate is the way in which engagement activities can be coordinated through set mechanisms. These mechanisms would then be utilized by different organizations who operate in the area to ensure dialogue and agreement between the Government of Georgia and the said organizations about the activities undertaken on the de-facto state’s territories. The government agency in charge of coordinating the process of conducting activities in the occupied territories with the approval of the Georgian government and legislation was the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reintegration.<sup>67</sup> According to the document the Ministry of Reintegration would be conducting regular meetings with different interest groups and organizations to guarantee coordination of activities and all of the activities and projects had to be in line with the processes and rules outlined in the previous documents of “State Strategy on Occupied Territories”, “Action Plan for Engagement” and the Georgian law on Occupied Territories.

The document “On Approval of Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia” contained within it certain special regulations that among other things specified the fact that the project documents concerning activities in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had to use the specific language approved by Georgia with the objective of eliminating the possibilities of portraying the de-facto states as sovereign actors. While the Georgian State strategy on occupied territories and its associated documents focus mostly on human level engagement and

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<sup>65</sup> Interviews with a former Deputy State Ministers for Reintegration. Interviews conducted on 27/04/22 and 20/04/22

<sup>66</sup> Government of Georgia (2010), *Action Plan for Engagement*. Link: [https://www.gov.ge/files/225\\_31228\\_757599\\_15.07.18-ActionPlanforEngagement\(Final\).pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/225_31228_757599_15.07.18-ActionPlanforEngagement(Final).pdf)

<sup>67</sup> “On Approval of Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia”

interaction, the Georgian government's precautions and non-recognition policy towards the secessionist territories can be seen as a constant priority throughout the said documents. One other example of above mentioned policy is the emphasis placed on the matter of legality for the travel documents distributed by the de-facto authorities. The Action Plan and the document on modalities underline the importance of incorporating the usage of status-neutral travel documents for persons from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who wish to participate in engagement programs abroad. The only legal alternative according to the Government of Georgia, to the usage of these neutral travel documents is the Georgian passport.

Within the timeframe of 2008-2012 the interviewees also underlined some of the the weak points of Georgia's neutral travel document initiative. Due to the neutral travel document requiring being granted recognition by states for it to be useful as a valid document, it requires a lot of diplomatic effort from the Georgian side. One of the interviewees who worked at the ministry from 2010 to 2012 mentioned that the focus on the status neutral travel document had diminished greatly after the change in government (when Georgian Dream came into power). Another concern expressed was that while the citizens from the Gali region of Abkhazia had little trouble or hang ups in crossing the de-facto border to access healthcare, as they are ethnically Georgian and already hold Georgian passports, the Abkhazians from places like Sukhumi did not hold the same luxury to express free will and/or participate openly in opportunities presented by Georgia. Due to the history of the conflict in combination with the Russian propaganda there is often quite a bit of animosity towards Georgia and Abkhazians may face repercussions (such as social shunning) if they use health care services in Georgia.

Lastly it is worth mentioning that the quantitative data representing the involvement of the Abkhazian population in Georgia's engagement policies during the years 2008-2012 is not available to the public as the information was not advertised publicly due to fears of retaliation by the Abkhazian de-facto government towards those that used the neutral documents or health care services.<sup>68</sup> This type of numerical data is more readily available from 2013 onwards.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with a former Deputy State Minister for Reintegration. Interviews conducted on 27/04/22

## 5.2. 2012-2016

In 2012-2014 Mikheil Saakashvili remained as the president of Georgia, however the parliamentary majority was held by the “Georgian Dream”. This is the period in which the name of the Ministry of Reintegration was changed to the Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality. One of the ministry functions outlined on their website is the “advancing consideration of humanitarian, social-economic and confidence-building projects to be implemented in the occupied territories, as defined by the Law of Georgia On Occupied Territories”<sup>69</sup>, which directly outlines engagement with the population living in Abkhazia as one of the core responsibilities of the Ministry. Within this timeframe the ministry also started publishing annual reports that included qualitative data regarding some of the engagement policies and their number of users.

According to the annual report, in the year 2013 the State Ministry of Reintegration actively pursued the implementation of the “Engagement through Cooperation” strategy and the “Action Plan for Engagement”. Within these strategies special attention was devoted towards the areas of healthcare, education, person to person contacts across the de-facto borders and to the support of organizations local to the Abkhazian territories. In terms of healthcare the report notes the Georgian state provided “Referral service” program as being of the highest priority. The “Referral Service” program was designed in line with the “Engagement through Cooperation” strategy and the accompanying “Action Plan for Engagement”. It represents a mechanism through which the citizens of Abkhazia who do not possess Georgian identification documents can apply for healthcare services through the Georgian Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality. The application forms, which among other things consists of information about the health state of the patient coupled with a calculation of the expected medical expenses is then delivered to the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia. After the special commission discusses the referral request the proper support is provided to the patient. The number of such applications received to the Ministry from Abkhazia that year is reported at 639 with the amount of related expenses financed being over 500,000 GEL. The total cost of financing healthcare services for the

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<sup>69</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. SMR OFFICE FUNCTIONS Link: <https://smr.gov.ge/en/page/5/aparatis-funqciebi-da-amocanebi>

population of the breakaway regions (including South Ossetia) was estimated at two million Georgian Laris.

The “Referral service” program was especially important for those Abkhazians who do not possess Georgian Passports unlike the ethnically Georgian population of the Gali region, since without such documents they are not covered by the Georgian Universal Healthcare Programme. Therefore in 2013 the Government extended the coverage of the national Healthcare Programme to those individuals from the breakaway regions who possessed the status neutral identification documents, which in the same year received recognition from two additional countries, totaling twelve. The status neutral documents available for citizens of the breakaway regions were recognized by Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Czech Republic, Poland , Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, The USA, Japan and Israel. The total number of such documents received in the year 2013 numbered 235 for the status neutral IDs and 29 for the status neutral travel document.

The 2013 Ministry report notes that the liaison mechanism created under the “Action Plan for Engagement” in cooperation with the UN is the sole facilitator of legal contact between both sides of the de-facto border. The liaison mechanism supported international organizations that operated on the Abkhazian territory for the purposes of trust building. These people to people trust building programs took place abroad in a neutral territory with a limited number of participants. Throughout the 2013-2015 time period several trust building projects were introduced, focusing on meetings between representatives of varying professions from both sides of the de-facto border, such as artists, teachers, human rights activists, etc.<sup>70</sup>

Although the Ministry of Reintegration sites the “Engagement through Cooperation” strategy and the “Action Plan for Engagement”, which became state strategies in 2010 as the basis for the implementation of the engagement programs, the report also acknowledges the Government change in Georgia, which took place in 2012 when Georgian Dream party came into power. The new government’s approach towards the Abkhazia-Georgian conflict is described within the report as “pragmatic, flexible and constructive” with renewed focus on the engagement policies which

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<sup>70</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2014-2015 annual report P.15  
Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/merged\\_doc\\_1b4900cc.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/merged_doc_1b4900cc.pdf)

will lay the groundwork for future conflict resolution. The importance of engagement policies was recognized by the new government, as it presented a peaceful and crucial method for trust building between conflicting sides that had been alienated from one another for decades.

This change in attitude within the government is reiterated in a book titled “Vision: Conflicts in Georgia” by Paata Zakareishvili, who served as the State minister for Reintegration (later Reconciliation and Civic Equality) from 2012 to 2016. In his book he recalls the state of the Ministry when he took office, as well as the state of Georgia’s relations with the breakaway territories. According to him between 2012 and 2016 the opportunities for advancement of the conflict resolution process present within Abkhazia and Georgia were not fully utilized by either side. As he took office Zakareishvili decided to communicate their desire to advance mutual interests and direct contacts between the two sides, however the Abkhazian side did not show as much enthusiasm for the idea. Zakareishvili believed that a more organized and clearly expressed Georgian position would have a better chance of building trust and increasing the willingness to communicate from the Abkhazian side<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, some interviewees expressed their thought that in the end the existing relationship between Russia and Abkhazia makes any hope for a significant direct cooperation very slim, as such a connection would be interfered with by any means necessary by the patron state of Abkhazia.<sup>72</sup>

In the years 2014 and 2015 healthcare and education remained as some of the most important areas for engagement and cooperation with Abkhazia. The official Government report notes a significant increase in Abkhazians crossing the de-facto border to receive medical services on Georgia controlled territories within the span of 2014-2015. While the document of the Georgian Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality places the number of beneficiaries who used the “Referral service” program for healthcare services in the thousands, it does not provide the exact numbers within the document. Despite this many news organizations use the same numbers for depicting the number of Abkhazians that used health services within Georgia. The source of this data is the Georgian media outlet “Netgazeti”, which requested information from the Ministry of Health about the number of beneficiaries from Abkhazia that received healthcare from 2012 to 2015. This data

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<sup>71</sup> Zakareishvili, P. (2021). Vision: Conflicts in Georgia 2012-2016. PP. 44-48

<sup>72</sup> Interview with State Minister of Reconciliation. Conducted on 15/04/22

is divided between the number of people that utilized the “Referral service” program for healthcare services and those who received healthcare through other “vertical state programs” that finance programs that facilitate services, such as early detection of diseases and treatments for those suffering from tuberculosis and HIV. The number of people that received treatment through these “vertical state programs” on Georgian controlled territories at the time the data was received (up to May 12th 2015) was 922 and 226 for the years of 2014 and 2015 respectively.<sup>73</sup> By the same data the number of beneficiaries through the “Referral service” was estimated at 450 and 550 ethnic Abkhazians for the years of 2014 and 2015.<sup>74</sup> In total the Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality sets the amount of money spent on providing healthcare services to the people in both de-facto states to 11 million GEL.<sup>75</sup>

In terms of education opportunities for Abkhazians the 2014-2015 period saw the simplification of mechanisms that allow for study and research opportunities abroad, as well as the simplification of procedures required for people from the breakaway regions to attend higher learning institutions in Georgia. As a result the government provided funding for the education costs of 93 students from Abkhazia’s Gali and Kodori Ridge regions within the 2015-2016 time period and for 91 students for the 2016-2017 time period. This period also saw minimal progress in terms of developing economic ties and cooperation with the finished construction of a trade complex close to Zugdidi, where people from Abkhazia could come for trade purposes. Similarly the status neutral document program was given comparatively less attention compared to previous reports, partially due to lack of increase in the number of states that recognized the document.

A somewhat more direct event in terms of people to people engagement without the implications of political recognition were the non-formal meetings of representatives from Georgia and Abkhazia in London, Bern and Berlin. These meetings held in 2015 and in 2016 facilitated discussions among politicians, experts and representatives of international organizations on the

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<sup>73</sup> სამედიცინო დახმარება გაუმჯობესების დათქმით აფხაზი პაციენტებისთვის [Medical assistance with reservation of anonymity for Abkhazian patients] Link: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/41297/>

<sup>74</sup> რუსული სამედიცინო პოლისები აფხაზებისთვის, საქართველოში მკურნალობის სანაცვლოდ, [Russian medical policies for Abkhazians in exchange for treatment in Georgia] Link: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/183401/>

<sup>75</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2014-2015 annual report P.15 Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/merged\\_doc\\_1b4900cc.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/merged_doc_1b4900cc.pdf) P.10

topics of current issues and challenges, humanitarian needs and dangers.<sup>76</sup> Another similar type of non-official meeting was held in July of 2017 in Berlin with 13 other meetings being held in Georgia and abroad, facilitating dialogue between societies that have drifted apart due to conflict.<sup>77</sup> In an interview with a high ranking official who held their position at the Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality in 2012-2016 they noted that direct contacts with the Abkhazian de-facto government never occurred outside of official talks, such as at the Geneva international discussions. While some exchange of information may have been occurring it never transitioned into anything formal<sup>78</sup> and while the above mentioned Geneva talks were held regularly multiple interviewees shared the same thoughts about their effectiveness. Citing the fact that every meeting was held with Russia attending, which meant that the de-facto governments were never perceived by the Georgian side as having any sort of agency.<sup>79</sup>

### 5.3. 2016-Present

Annual account of the Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality for the activities conducted in 2016 reiterated once again the government's dedication in continuing the support for engagement projects, while reducing the bureaucratic obstacles present for the beneficiaries of engagement programs. Matters of reconciliation and trust building are underlined as the priorities of Georgia, however, the efforts of the government in establishing direct dialogue with the Abkhazian society is presented within the official report as being unreciprocated and one-sided. This dedication to the peaceful resolution of the Georgian conflicts and the utilization of engagement strategies was further emphasized after noting that the continuous presence and influence of the Russian Federation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was undermining Georgian policies, while reinforcing its own de-facto annexation of the Georgian territories.<sup>80</sup> In particular

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<sup>76</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2014-2015 annual report P.15  
Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/merged\\_doc\\_1b4900cc.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/merged_doc_1b4900cc.pdf) P.16

<sup>77</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2017 annual report P.15 Link:  
[https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/2017\\_over\\_16bf3023.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/2017_over_16bf3023.pdf)

<sup>78</sup> Interview with the former State Minister of Reconciliation. Conducted on 15/04/22

<sup>79</sup> From Several interviews

<sup>80</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2016 annual report P.3.  
Link:[https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Untitled\\_f9cbac80.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Untitled_f9cbac80.pdf)

the signing of the agreement on “Alliance and Strategic Partnership” between Abkhazia and Russia in 2014 was noted as one of the primary hurdles for Georgian efforts in the region. Additionally the elimination of several border crossing points in Abkhazia was attributed to the occupying regime and perceived by Georgia as a crude violation of human rights, as the closure of those crossing points inhibit people’s freedom of movement, person to person relationships, as well as access to other services provided by Georgia for Abkhazians.

Within the prioritized areas for engagement the 2016 account by the ministry reported a notable rise in the number of patients from Abkhazia that participated in the “Referral service” program, placing the estimated number of recent beneficiaries of healthcare programs in the thousands (500 by May of 2016 according to official data received by Netgazeti<sup>81</sup>). Further work was underway at the Ministry of Health for simplifying the procedures for people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who wish to receive healthcare on Georgian controlled territories. To make the offer more attractive and easily accessible the construction of a modern multi-profile clinic was undertaken close to the Abkhazian de-facto border. The total expenses of the Georgian government in providing healthcare to the citizens of the breakaway regions was 5,782,504 GEL.<sup>82</sup>

Within this time period the field of engagement through education saw an increase in new initiatives as well. A notable example in 2016 was the initiative being worked on in cooperation with the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science, which would permit recognizing the validity of education certificates acquired from within the occupied territories. This initiative was proposed for the purposes of reducing obstacles for the citizens of the breakaway territories in continuing their education in Georgia or abroad, as the previous requirements for Abkhazian and South Ossetian populace receiving proof of legality for their proof of education documents included a need for presenting one’s Georgian identification card.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> რუსული სამედიცინო პოლისები აფხაზებისთვის, საქართველოში მკურნალობის სანაცვლოდ, [Russian medical policies for Abkhazians in exchange for treatment in Georgia] Link:<https://netgazeti.ge/news/183401/>

<sup>82</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2016 annual report Link:[https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Untitled\\_f9cbac80.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Untitled_f9cbac80.pdf)

<sup>83</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2017 annual report P.15 Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/2017\\_over\\_16bf3023.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/2017_over_16bf3023.pdf)

As reported by the Georgian government the number of beneficiaries involved in the engagement program for healthcare services continued its rise in 2017 with around four million GEL spent by the government on providing these services. The expenses included the opening of a healthcare facility in Zugdidi dedicated to the treatment of hepatitis C, to be utilized by the Abkhazian population.

2017 also saw multiple trust building projects being carried out by the European Council through the utilization of the existing coordination mechanism. Similar to the trust building projects having been carried out in the previous years these projects included meetings between representatives of the same professions from across the de-facto border, being held in various European countries. The meetings held specifically in 2017 included representatives from professions such as: archivists, doctors, ombudsmen, specialists in Georgian and Abkhazian languages, education experts, etc.<sup>84</sup> It is worth noting that the 2017 report of the Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality does not include a sub-chapter dedicated to the status-neutral documents and their importance to the Georgian engagement strategies, which indicates that this particular field of engagement was either not effective enough to be mentioned or was no longer considered as an area of focus.

A significant amount of changes occurred in the Georgian policies towards its breakaway regions in the year 2018. Perhaps the most notable of these changes was the introduction of the new “A Step to a Better Future” peace initiative, which was created by the Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality in cooperation with other government institutions.

In 2018 the government of Georgia introduced the above-mentioned new strategy that was meant to reiterate Georgia’s dedication to peaceful engagement with secessionist territories, with the reconciliation and engagement policy being at the center of the new initiative. With “A Step to a Better Future” The Government of Georgia focused on two fields of possible cooperation, those being education and trade with the underlying intent to foster confidence-building between the conflicting sides and improving the access of Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations to

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<sup>84</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2017 annual report Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/2017\\_overera\\_16bf3023.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/2017_overera_16bf3023.pdf)

humanitarian and economic benefits. “A Step to a Better Future” is described in its concept documents as an initiative with a framework that can “carve out a possibility for engagement, cooperation and dialogue between the relevant stakeholders”<sup>85</sup> with its full implementation. The documents also distances the 2018 initiative from the politicization of the issues it aims to resolve by distinctly noting that the nature of this initiative is purely humanitarian and it is put into action through the utilization of non-political and neutral formats.

As noted above, “A Step to a Better Future” presents trade across the conflicting sides as one of the areas of focus for the initiative. While the previous “Engagement through Cooperation” (2010) similarly underlined the importance of economic cooperation and availability of business opportunities for the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, “A Step to a Better Future” set the goal of making the process more accessible through the reduction of regulations and obstacles that made the trade and movement across de-facto borders for the population of the de-facto states. The initiative documents themselves mention the fact that the existing levels of travel and trade, while significant enough to be notable, had been burdened with physical and other obstacles, such as taxes, limits on certain goods and restrictions prior to the goals set by the new initiative. In order to remedy that the Government of Georgia deemed it necessary to simplify trade and create new economic opportunities for people on both sides of the de-facto border. The existence of restrictions on movement and transportation of goods had meant that a significant amount of trade done to and from Abkhazia would be done with an attempt to bypass those obstacles through less legal means, so in order to counteract that outcome the new initiative would create a more simplified method for Abkhazian goods to gain access to Georgia’s domestic market, as well as to international markets through the utilization of the multitude of benefits available to Georgia, such as its free trade agreement with the EU.

In order to carry out the set goal “A Step to a Better Future” aimed to create new instruments and mechanisms to guarantee peaceful and non-politicized implementation of the initiative. These new instruments were divided into five areas of focus: services, infrastructure, tax preferences, trade

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<sup>85</sup> “A Step to a Better Future” Peace Initiative. Facilitation of Trade Across Dividing Lines P.3. Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Concept\\_EN\\_0eaac2e.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Concept_EN_0eaac2e.pdf)

operations and financial/legislative instruments. The developments in these areas would serve as improvements to the pre-existing mechanisms. For example the improvement in services would involve the simplification of identification related issues for the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the simplification of registration processes for businesses.<sup>86</sup> The simplified identification method would include the assignment of personal numbers to those Abkhazians (and by extension South Ossetians) who wish to make use of different services and take part in business activities on Georgia controlled territories, without requiring forms of identification, such as an ID or passport that affirm Georgian citizenship status, or even a status-neutral document. At the moment of the initiative's initial deployment the usage of the personal number system as a method of identification would grant its user access mostly to services that dealt with education and with finances (such as banking, entrepreneurship, etc), with the potential to access other services in the future being noted as a future development for the new identification system. While this decision to ease movement does not invalidate the previously existing mechanism of status neutral documents, it does seem like a step taken away from the previously existing system, which had been unpopular with the Abkhazian population<sup>87</sup>.

Within the scope of the new initiative a creation of suitable infrastructure was set as another priority. This would be accomplished via the establishment of special economic spaces in specific areas located close to the de-facto border. The special economic space would serve as a collection of infrastructure and services necessary to ensure the uninterrupted and convenient conduction of trade and economic activities for people crossing the de-facto border. This would be achieved through concentrating service buildings such as banks, the post office, the notary and other similar services along with the branches of government institutions necessary for conducting business activities. Along with concentrating all of the essential services into one place and creating designated zones for different types of markets (agrarian, automobile) the basic idea behind the special economic space is to make things convenient for Abkhazians and South Ossetians. Another example of this goal for simplification of pre-existing mechanisms present in "A Step to a Better Future" is the creation of the uniform service center, which would undertake the task of being a

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<sup>86</sup> "A Step to a Better Future" Peace Initiative. Facilitation of Trade Across Dividing Lines. Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Concept\\_EN\\_0eaaac2e.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Concept_EN_0eaaac2e.pdf)

<sup>87</sup> Interview with the former State Minister of Reconciliation. Conducted on 15/04/22

one stop destination for obtaining the identification number and registering as a trader or entrepreneur , as well as laboratory services for goods originating from Abkhazia. The laboratories would be necessary for those goods that seek to access the EU market.

Other benefits of the special economic space described in the documents include the Business Incubator, which would aid interested parties in finding business partners across the de-facto borders; The Agrarian market that would allow the Abkhazian small scale traders to sell their produce; The Automobile market that would allow for the trade of vehicles, as well as spare parts and the Free Industrial Zone. The Free Industrial Zone would provide certifications, tax benefits and would allow its users to produce finished goods from raw materials originating from Abkhazia, which would then be ready for export to the international market. The easily available access to all of the services coupled with tax benefits that would free those participating in the new initiative from income tax was envisioned by the Government of Georgia as an opportunity to facilitate the development of the type of engagement that could be seen as mutually beneficial for both sides. It is noted multiple times throughout the initiative documents that the new approach is tailored specifically to accommodate the interests and needs of the Abkhazian<sup>88</sup> population. While the focus on human centric strategies for engagement is not new for Georgia, “A Step to a Better Future” initiative took a step towards simplifying the process, while at the same time attempting to achieve a degree of separation for this initiative from the politics of the conflict.

The second area of focus for the 2018 initiative was increasing the engagement of Abkhazian and South Ossetian population in Education programs. Similarly to the matters of economic engagement, the initiative's renewed focus on education was aimed at simplifying the process through which people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia can gain access to education opportunities on Georgian controlled territories and abroad. The policy goals for “A Step to a Better Future” initiative present the importance of cooperation in the field of education as one of the precursors to the future peacebuilding process. It underlines the importance of youth on both sides of the de-facto borders engaging and coexisting with one another. Due to the internationally unrecognized nature of the authorities currently in control of Abkhazia, the educational institutions are also excluded from international cooperation agreements and therefore do not maintain international

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<sup>88</sup> And South Ossetian

standards of education, which causes the proof of education documents given out by these institutions to be considered as illegitimate. In order to simplify the mechanisms through which the Abkhazian population who do not possess Georgian citizenship documents can make use of the education opportunities, the Government will utilize the same new individual number identification system as described in the “Facilitation of Trade Across Dividing Lines” document of “A Step to a Better Future” initiative. It is worth mentioning that a majority of Gali region’s residents, due to being ethnically Georgian are more inclined towards utilizing the benefits available for Georgian citizens across the Georgian controlled territories (However, it should be noted that the ethnically Georgian residents of the Gali region are more likely to already possess a Georgian passport or ID document), while or due to social stigma many Abkhazians do not possess Georgian documents, therefore the introduction of the status neutral identification method is the mechanism by which the Government of Georgia seeks to increase engagement with that section of the Abkhazian population. Similarly the lack of Georgian passports also presents a problem for the Abkhazians who wish to travel abroad for study purposes or otherwise. For this reason the new initiative offers the already existing status neutral travel documents for those who wish to travel abroad. The 2018 document that presents the new initiative states that the status neutral travel document has recognition in 12 countries, but for those who wish to participate in specific education programs internationally a new and creative status neutral solutions for travel may be created to accommodate their needs.

The lack of access to the variety of quality education options available internationally can have negative effect on the above mentioned future peace process, therefore the Government of Georgia decided to develop a special approach that would offer people from across the de-facto borders new conditions and opportunities for increasing their reach in terms of receiving quality education of all stages. This program would include education opportunities in Georgia, as well as abroad. The initiative documents mention the population of the Gali region in Abkhazia and the difficulties they face in receiving education in their native Georgian language. Supporting the people of Gali by “ any available political, diplomatic, practical and legal mechanisms”<sup>89</sup> to make sure they are

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<sup>89</sup> “A Step to a Better Future” Peace Initiative. Facilitation of Trade Across Dividing Lines. Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Concept\\_EN\\_0eaaac2e.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Concept_EN_0eaaac2e.pdf)  
“A Step to a Better Future”. Enhancing Educational Opportunities for the residents

allowed to receive education in Georgian is set as one of the highest priorities of the initiative, since there has been a significant movement to reduce education in Georgian language in schools across the Gali region and replacing the instruction language with Russian.

In parallel to prioritizing the right of ethnic Georgians to have access to receiving education in their preferred language, the new initiative also includes goals such as the protection of the Abkhazian language as Georgia's second state language, as well as the Abkhazian culture. The Government of Georgia recognizes its inability to have a direct effect on the education system in Abkhazia and therefore presents the plan to increase the availability of Abkhazian language classes on Georgia controlled territories.

The 2018 report by the ministry goes as far as to describe the efforts of the government in terms of peacebuilding and reconciliation as unprecedented in nature, praising the new initiative for its flexibility and pragmatic approach. While this new initiative was given a high degree of priority, it has not yet borne much fruit its development seems to have stalled as of 2022.

Besides the establishment of the new initiative, Georgia continued the implementation of its engagement strategy in the usual areas as it has been doing since 2008. In the field of healthcare the "Referral service" program was operating effectively and had served 1162 people from Abkhazia in 2018. On top of that, similarly to the previous years Georgia periodically provided the Abkhazian region with modern healthcare equipment and medication with costs totaling one million GEL. The sum of all healthcare based expenses that year reached seven million GEL.

When it comes to the trust building projects that previously served as one particular avenue of the general engagement strategy being carried out in cooperation with international support, now the same trust building projects fell under the umbrella of "A Step To A Better Future" initiative. The process of finding new avenues of direct dialogue and trust building was undertaken not only by the Georgian government, but by interested international organizations who had received Georgia's support in operating within Abkhazia for the purposes of undertaking trust building projects. The representatives of Georgian state apparatus took part in 14 Georgia-Abkhazian

meetings in the year 2018<sup>90</sup> while in the period of 2018-2020 Georgian representatives attended approximately 40 trust building meetings in Georgia as well as abroad.<sup>91</sup>

The changes that began in 2018 started to show results in 2019, as the Ministry of Reintegration continued its intensive support of the new human centric initiatives and programs. The legal process of implementing the changes proposed by “A Step To A Better Future” initiative into the existing framework of Georgia’s engagement strategies was finalized in 2019 with eight legal acts being amended and five more being implemented. Within the framework of a new initiative a grant program was approved by the government to promote entrepreneurship and economic cooperation between the de-facto borders. The “Produce For A Better Future” program would provide grants (7000 to 35000 GEL) in order to support individual and joint production projects on both sides of the de-facto border. The grant contest which opened in March of 2019 saw 368 entrants, 274 of which were from the breakaway regions. Particularly notable was the engagement of Abkhazians outside of the ethnic-Georgian dominated regions.<sup>92</sup> Due to the success of the project a new financial instrument - “Peace Fund For A Better Future” was created. The fund became fully operational in September of 2020 and went on to finance 14 business projects from Abkhazia and South Ossetia with up to 350 thousand GEL.<sup>93</sup>

Regarding the educational aspect of “A Step To A Better Future” initiative’s main focus areas - a new support program was implemented for students that specialized in post-school preparation courses and involved monthly stipends and university quotas in Georgia for students living in breakaway regions. According to the government data 142 students participated in the program. These types of programs focusing on education can be very effective in terms of engagement, however while they are useful for ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia the participation of Abkhazians in such education programs would be a definitely way to increase the people to people trust building between Georgians and Abkhazians.

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<sup>90</sup>Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2018 annual report Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Report\\_201\\_81155c2d.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Report_201_81155c2d.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2020 annual report Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2020\\_wlis\\_angarishi.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2020_wlis_angarishi.pdf)

<sup>92</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2019 annual report Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2020\\_wlis\\_angarishi.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2020_wlis_angarishi.pdf)

<sup>93</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2019 [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2019\\_wlis\\_angarishi.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2019_wlis_angarishi.pdf)

In terms of the “Action plan for engagement” , within the year 2019, the healthcare providing “Referral service” program supported by the government provided aid to 1481 beneficiaries (1,155 from Abkhazia)<sup>94</sup> with a total of seven million GEL being spent on healthcare. Another expenditure was devoted to the support of the agricultural field in the breakaway regions with 600 thousand GEL worth of necessary chemicals and equipment being delivered in 2019 and 2020.

The outbreak of the global pandemic in 2020 had a significant effect on the Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality’s operations. The ministry set the support of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian population as a high priority, with constant sharing of information, medical experiences, medical equipment and supplies, as well as treatment of people affected by covid on Georgian controlled territories.<sup>95</sup> The “Referral service” was utilized by 780 beneficiaries from Abkhazia, with a total amount of healthcare related support totaling five million GEL. A successful example of engagement through non-formal dialogue presented in the 2020 government report from the Ministry of Reconciliation was the relaxation of the strict regulations on freedom of movement instituted by the de-facto authorities for the sake of more than a thousand students that crossed the de-facto border to continue their studies on Georgia controlled territories. Which

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<sup>94</sup> “Assistance to the conflict-affected population during the pandemic” ; Ministry For Reconciliation and Civic Equality

<sup>95</sup> Office of the State Minister of Georgia For Reconciliation and Civic Equality. 2020 annual report Link: [https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2020\\_wlis\\_angarishi.pdf](https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2020_wlis_angarishi.pdf)

## 6. Conclusion

The government website for the Ministry for reconciliation and civil equality does not hold further relevant documents and annual reports past 2020. While there are some media sources<sup>96</sup> that have requested and published information regarding the usage of the “Referral service” by those from the breakaway territories during the years 2021-2022, the information present is not detailed enough to warrant further consideration. If one were to attempt to answer the working question of this thesis as defined in the introductory section of the paper by using all of the data gathered above, it would be prudent to reiterate once again what the policy goal of Georgia’s engagement without recognition has been since its inception. The document of the action plan for engagement specifically underlines that the new Georgian state strategy is a long-term commitment with goals centered around: the humanitarian, human, social and economic dimensions of engagement.<sup>97</sup> In other words the engagement strategy is a long term plan with the goal of winning the hearts of the Abkhazian people and encouraging the communication between Abkhaz and Georgian peoples, while at the same time portraying Georgia as a responsible state that takes care of its citizens.

Since the goal of the policy is the encouragement of people to people relations the level of its success can be hard to measure without looking at the individual programs, such as the status neutral document or the “referral service” program. Measuring the success or failure of those programs may not be an easy task, however there are a few ways to get an understanding of the weight of the impact these programs have had. Firstly on the chart 1 and chart 2 present below one can see the overall number of people from Abkhazia that have received healthcare in Georgia, as well as the total amount of money spent by the government on this particular healthcare program.

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<sup>96</sup> 2020 წლიდან 2022 წლის მარტამდე, „რეფერალური მომსახურების სახელმწიფო პროგრამის“ ფარგლებში დახმარება ოკუპირებულ ტერიტორიებზე მცხოვრებ 2440 მოქალაქეს გაეწია. [From 2020 to March 2022, assistance was provided to 2440 citizens living in the occupied territories within the framework of the "State Program of Referral Services"]  
Link:<https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/703360-2020-clidan-2022-clis-martamde-reperaluri-momsaxurebis-saxelmcipo-programis-parglebshi-daxmareba-okupirebul-teritoriebze-mcxovre-2440-mokalakes-gaacia/>

<sup>97</sup> Government of Georgia (2010), *Action Plan for Engagement*. Link:  
[https://www.gov.ge/files/225\\_31228\\_757599\\_15.07.18-ActionPlanforEngagement\(Final\).pdf](https://www.gov.ge/files/225_31228_757599_15.07.18-ActionPlanforEngagement(Final).pdf)

Both of the charts look relatively even throughout the years and neither displays a relevant upwards trend that would indicate a surge in popularity. Another thing to consider is that the data provided by the government lists the number of people that have used or have participated in these engagement programs, however it does not specify their ethnicity, when in actuality while these programs can be useful for anyone residing within the breakaway territories, they are only useful for accomplishing their goal<sup>98</sup> if they are used by ethnic Abkhazians. Sadly, as discussed previously there exist certain prejudices within the ethnic Abkhazians that may influence their willingness to participate in a Georgian government program. Despite the difficulties, the Georgian engagement strategy as a policy that focused on cooperation and peaceful conflict solutions had a very positive reception internationally. With different forces working against the increased effectiveness of Georgian engagement policies, the effect it had on trust building between the separated communities was not easily apparent. This was coupled with the fact that due to the potential danger that it might have brought to those engaged in Georgian state programs the statistics of engagement and especially the identities of people involved were not advertised.<sup>99</sup>

It is also worth repeating that Georgia has pursued a mix of isolationist and engagement policies, simultaneously trying to keep the de-facto government of Abkhazia isolated from the international community through its active non-recognition policy<sup>100</sup>, while undertaking engagement without recognition policies. Along with the “Engagement through Cooperation” strategy Georgia was prioritizing the non-recognition policy towards Abkhazia on every possible level. The complete political isolation of Abkhazia was therefore somewhat juxtaposed by the Georgian attempts to de-isolate the population. According to the interviews with those who previously occupied positions at the Ministry of Reintegration the isolation of Abkhazians was never the intended purpose of the non-recognition policy and in actuality there were no limits for Abkhazians to enter the Georgian controlled territories. The non-recognition policy was in turn directed against the Russian legitimization of its occupation. Not pursuing the non-recognition policy as the primary counter-secession strategy would have meant the eventual de-jure disruption of Georgia’s

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<sup>98</sup> As stated within the Action plan for Engagement

<sup>99</sup> Interview with a former Deputy State Minister for Reintegration. Interview conducted on 27/04/2020

<sup>100</sup> Government of Georgia, Foreign Policy Strategy, Link: <https://mfa.gov.ge/ka/Foreign-Policy-Strategy>

territorial integrity with the added threat of a similar thing happening to a different region within its control.

The engagement strategy devised in 2010 became more productive over time than the approach which had been in place since 2008. The primary change that increased engagement was the reduction of restrictions necessary for populations of de-facto states to participate in the engagement programs. Before the changes Abkhazians would need Georgian passports to travel, engage in business activities and utilize the benefits of Georgian healthcare, however this requirement was slowly retired with the Ministry for Reintegration (afterwards the Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality) priorities of removing bureaucratic obstacles from engagement programs. The introduction of status neutral identification documents somewhat alleviated the problem and allowed some Abkhazians to avoid accepting Georgian citizenship, which would have been unacceptable for them. The effectiveness of the neutral passports program has its own share of criticism. Only 12 countries recognized these documents and even with that recognition additional procedures were introduced by the recognizing countries to deal with them and the people who traveled using those documents. Even without the lack of widespread recognition of these documents there was another problem. Namely the fact that despite a different, more acceptable look they were effectively still Georgian documents for several reasons: Firstly, if the person bearing a neutral passport were to become incapacitated abroad and were in need of assistance from the consular services, it would be the Georgian Government that would step in to care for them; Secondly, for an Abkhazian, attaining a neutral document would be synonymous to participating in a Georgian program, risking social status (being branded as a traitor) due to the present negative disposition present in Abkhazia towards Georgians; Thirdly, for people who were willing to go through obtaining a status neutral document despite potential backlash from their own community, it would be more beneficial and logical for them to simply obtain a full Georgian Passport, as the benefits were significantly higher. For example, one could travel to any country in the world as well as be able to blend in easily into the Georgian population.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with a former State Minister for Reintegration. Interview conducted on 15/04/2020

The flaws of the status neutral document program described above as well as the diplomatic maintenance required to improve upon it must have been noticeably inefficient, as information regarding the program appeared less and less

Georgian politics relating to Georgia's conflicts post 2008 focused entirely on the Georgia-Russian problem. The general view in the government, as reinforced by the conducted interviews, was that Abkhazia had no agency as a conflict side and any discussions with them were of a lower priority than simply dealing with Russia. The Georgian government viewed the Abkhazian population as being under occupation without having the luxury of expressing their free will. With a significant anti-Georgian sentiment present in the breakaway region, being further exacerbated by the inclusion of Russian propaganda, the government did not perceive Abkhazia's readiness or openness to deepening relations. As mentioned above, simply participating in Georgian state programs could have been enough for a person to be shunned or even punished.<sup>102</sup>

According to the government records displayed within this thesis, Georgia has been consistently carrying out its engagement policies with Abkhazia, since they were put into motion after 2008, however it is hard to measure the effectiveness of these policies at first glance, when they have goals as broad as the ones defined in Georgia's Action Plan for Engagement and Engagement Through Cooperation document. The lack of predefined goals and targets combined with a lack of tangible and foreseeable methods of full conflict resolution make it so the government of Georgia is allowed to be complacent and static with their engagement without recognition policies. The engagement strategies utilized by Georgia are meant as long term plans that simply ensure the relations between Abkhazians and Georgians have not deteriorated to unsustainable levels upon the possibility of real conflict resolution possibilities presenting itself. Without the presence of tangible political will the ruling party in Georgia is able to leverage the risk of potential government engagement policy's failure by not defining any concrete short term engagement goals and simply viewing the engagement policies as "maintenance" work required to keep the two populations on different sides of the de-facto border in a state that would not make the full resolution of the conflict impossible.

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with a former Deputy State Minister for Reintegration. Interview conducted on 27/04/2020

Healthcare users over time

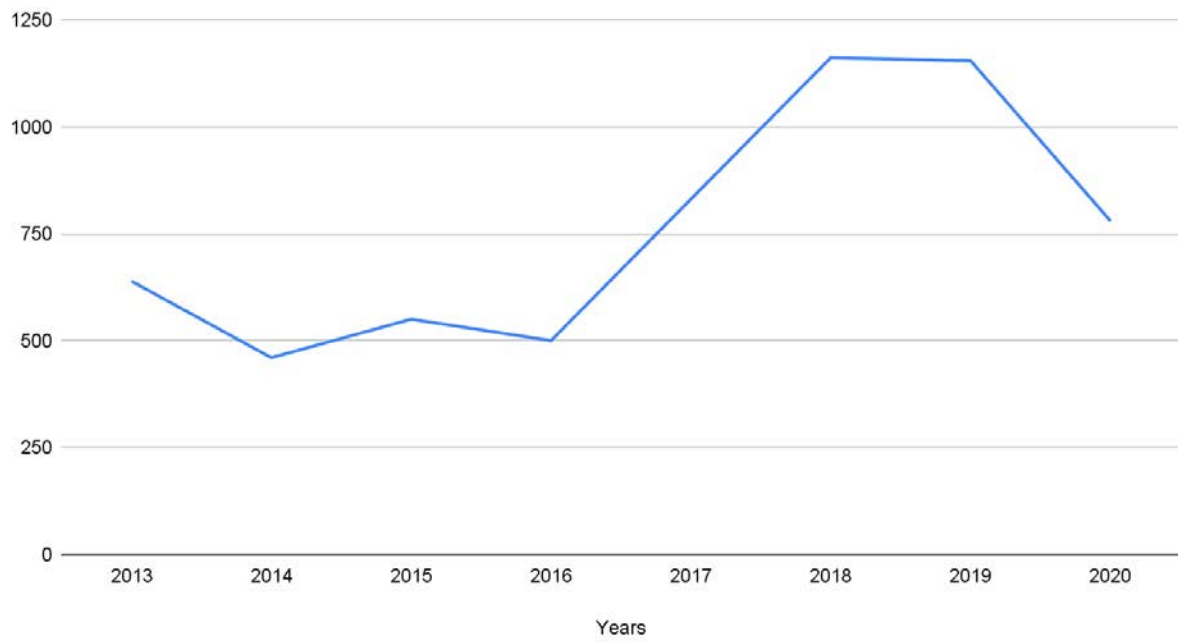


Chart 1.

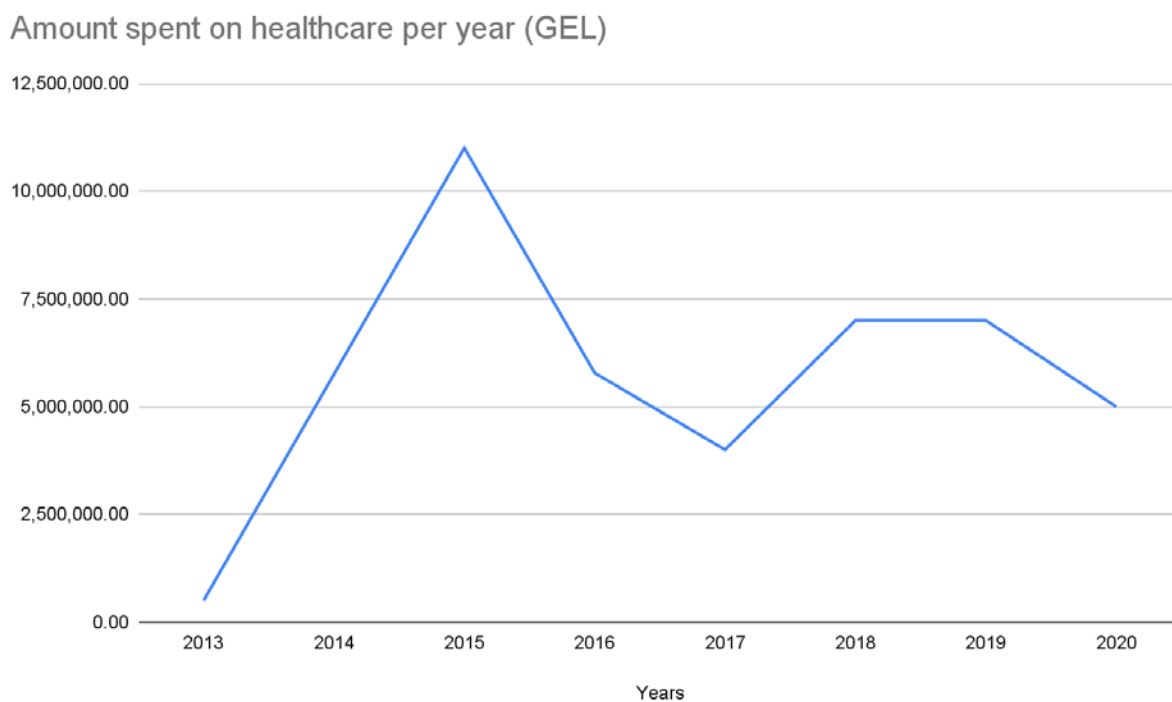


Chart 2.

With more people from across the de-facto border using the opportunities provided to them by the Georgian initiatives and policies in proportion to the amount of resources spent by the Government, it appears prudent to say that they have not been completely without merit. However the thesis set out to find out why the Georgian engagement without recognition policy had fallen short of accomplishing its goal. While it was theorized that the strict counter-secession policy of non-recognition was working counter-productively with “Engagement without recognition” it is important to keep in mind that the Georgian engagement strategies have always focused on the connections between the peoples. The level of importance assigned to each strategy by outside observers needs to be reconsidered. The non-recognition policy is not only the sole option available to Georgia, but it is also of paramount importance to the very core of the Georgian state strategies as the continued presence and involvement of the primary source of their conflicts (Russia) makes attempts at conflict resolution nigh impossible.

Engagement through Cooperation was never envisioned as a method of eventual conflict resolution, but rather as an indefinitely long term effort to make sure the societies on both sides of the conflict have not been completely estranged and alienated from one another when the roadblock for conflict resolution is finally removed and the peacebuilding process can begin.

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