

The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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Summary:¹

The EU is currently building its new European External Action Service under the Lisbon Treaty. At the same time, the European Commission and the European External Action Service are jointly conducting a comprehensive strategic review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) aspiring, among other things, to strengthen the Union's role in conflict resolution in its neighbourhood.

The Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, endorsed in December 2009, has the potential to combine a variety of political and economic tools and policy instruments (ENP, Eastern Partnership, European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, Instrument for Stability) into one approach to conflict resolution and confidence building. If adapted to other conflict situations it could become a model for the EU's conflict resolution policy in the neighbourhood.

EU Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia aims at opening a political and legal space in which the EU can interact with the separatist regions without compromising its adherence to Georgia's territorial integrity.

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Conditions on the ground have worsened in the past three years. Georgian policy towards the conflict regions is torn between isolation and engagement and remains essentially restrictive. South Ossetia has become practically inaccessible for international actors except Russia. Windows of opportunity exist in Abkhazia, but they are closing fast. Therefore, time is of the essence for the success of the NREP.

Existing instruments and elements of the NREP have a very limited time horizon. It remains unclear how engagement will evolve in the future. This note, therefore, suggests that the EU needs to develop a more systematic and reinforced NREP that focuses on **de-isolation and transformation**.

De-isolation implies more systematic contacts with civil society and the population(s) at large. For this the EU needs a smart policy on granting visas to inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moreover contacts with the *de facto* authorities should be stepped up to a structured dialogue in order to create an environment that enables more civil society exchange. (p. 6)

The EU needs to find imaginative ways for using existing instruments if it wants to be able to engage with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. More funds should be allocated to support private entrepreneurship and **economic interaction** across conflict lines. While the EU will not be able to match Russian economic involvement in the two entities, it has a lot on offer in terms of modernisation strategies – and this is being noticed, particularly in Abkhazia. (p. 7)

More measures in the areas of information, education, health care and training would help increase interaction with **civil society**, build trust in society at large and contribute to conflict transformation. In the long run, the EU should consider how to involve the two entities in the EU **approximation process**. (p. 7)

NREP is also about linking the EU's various activities strategically so as to make its involvement visible to the populations and to increase its leverage. (p. 8) Given the situation in the two entities NREP should continue to focus on Abkhazia and turn it into a showcase for South Ossetia and other breakaway territories in the Eastern neighbourhood.

The EU has to carefully calibrate its policy in a difficult and tense political environment. Its goals and priorities do not fully coincide with those of any of the parties to the conflicts. Clarity on Georgia's territorial integrity and on non-recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence is of the essence. Georgian fears of 'creeping recognition' need to be taken seriously. However, the EU needs to influence the Georgian mindset in the direction of shifting the main focus to engagement rather than isolation. It has to make it clear to Tbilisi that political and economic engagement with the two entities are in Georgia's medium and long term interest. At the same time it has to apply operational impartiality in relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia to open the door for engagement with the two entities. (p. 9)

Two years after the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, the conflicts involving the separatist territories have 'refrozen'. EU stabilisation efforts, particularly through the EUMM's monitoring activities, are of crucial importance to provide stability along the ceasefire lines and prevent the resumption of hostilities. The Geneva Talks, in which the EU plays a key role, are the only international format in which the parties to the conflicts interact. The talks, however, have been difficult and limited in scope. On the ground, Russia is consolidating its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia while Georgia is pushing for the isolation of the entities.

This new *status quo* appears to be stable but is in fact fragile and liable to move the sides further away from each other rather than bring them closer together. The EU, as the primary peacemaker in Georgia, has a **strong interest in strengthening and intensifying the engagement component of its policy** in order to increase its influence in the entities and inject a new and constructive dynamic into the conflict-resolution processes.

In December 2009 the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union endorsed a policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia which is based on two pillars: **non-recognition** and **engagement**. One year later the EUISS and the EUSR for the South Caucasus, with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, organised a seminar in Brussels to take stock of the implementation of this Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) and to discuss ideas for its further refinement.

The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy

The European Union's policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia rests on two pillars: the non-recognition of their self-proclaimed independence on the one hand, and engagement with the entities, on the other. This twin-pillar policy opens a political and legal space in which the EU can interact with the separatist regions without compromising its adherence to Georgia's territorial integrity. While being firm on principle, the EU is pragmatic in practice.

The NREP foresees the following elements:

- The EU's firm commitment to the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty provides

the political framework for all measures of EU engagement with the two entities.

- The EU has an interest in contacts with the *de facto* authorities from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These contacts should be developed in order to promote confidence building, conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance.
- Contacts with the civil societies and populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are essential in order to overcome the international isolation of the populations of the two entities.
- Contacts should unfold through confidence-building measures, particularly in the spheres of civil society, human rights and economic integration. It is important to avoid the politicisation of confidence-building measures by the parties; unconditional access for humanitarian aid needs to be assured.
- Contacts with the Tbilisi-backed authorities for Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be undertaken when necessary. Support for the IDP population remains a key priority for the EU.
- Contacts with Russian forces in the entities may be necessary given their responsibilities under International Humanitarian Law and Russia's role in the resolution of the conflicts. Contacts with Russian diplomats should be avoided and should be limited to the conflict resolution framework, i.e. the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).

With this policy the EU pursues several goals:

- It increases the EU's leverage and footprint in the two entities. Without interaction and engagement, the EU will lack both carrots and sticks with which to influence the entities. Non-engagement will only push the entities further into Russia's embrace.
- It can work to support alternative political narratives and perspectives to counteract the currently very one-sided discourses in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
- De-isolation and diversification of narratives are a precondition for the long-term goal of conflict resolution.

The NREP represents one component of the EU's comprehensive conflict resolution strategy in Georgia.

The component complements and reinforces efforts by EUMM, the Geneva Talks, the IPRMs, political and economic reform processes in Georgia within the ENP/EaP framework and Commission projects in the realms of confidence building, humanitarian and post-conflict reconstruction assistance in the two entities.

The NREP towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia is based on the EU's strategic interest in sustainable conflict resolution in Georgia and stability in the South Caucasus region. The South Caucasus is an important part of the Union's Eastern Neighbourhood with which the EU has developed close political, societal and economic interdependence. It is an important transit route for energy exports to the EU. In the past few years the EU and the South Caucasus countries have worked to deepen their relationships. In 2010 negotiations on Association Agreements in the framework of the Eastern Partnership programme have been opened with all three states.

The unresolved conflicts, however, threaten the region's peaceful and sustainable development. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh, are essentially 'white spots' on the map of the Eastern Neighbourhood that fall outside the region's approximation agenda. The EU therefore has a vital interest to engage pro-actively with these entities.

The Georgian policy process

Despite the stabilisation after the August 2008 war, the situation in Georgia remains tense. In light of the war, the Government of Georgia (GoG) has elaborated its own policy towards the two entities which is torn between elements of isolation and of engagement.

This policy rests on four legal and political documents: the **Law on Occupied Territories** (LoOT, adopted in October 2009), the **Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation**, published by the Georgian State Ministry for Reintegration in January 2010 (henceforth referred to as: the Strategy), the **Action Plan for Engagement** on the implementation of the Strategy (henceforth AP, adopted in July 2010), and the **Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories** (henceforth: Modalities, adopted in October 2010).

These documents reflect a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, the GoG has acknowledged that engagement with the two entities is an inevitable component of conflict resolution and, ultimately, the restoration of Georgian territorial integrity. Particularly the AP contains numerous innovative ideas on how to engage. On the other hand, the GoG fears that engagement by international state and non-state actors could lead to 'creeping recognition'. As a consequence, the LoOT, even after its revision in reaction to comments from the Venice Commission, remains very restrictive with regard to activities of international organisations and NGOs in the entities. The Strategy, too, applies a restrictive approach particularly by its wording (occupied territories) and its refusal to interact with the *de facto* authorities in Tskhinvali and Sukhumi.

Since August 2008 Georgia's policy has evolved in dialectic interaction with the international community. Tbilisi has sought and been open to comments and advice from Western partners and international organisations. For instance, following the first discussions among EU member states on the NREP in June and July 2009, informal discussions were held between the EU and the GoG on the EU's NREP, which resulted in the Georgian government adopting a more flexible attitude when elaborating its own policy. Moreover, the GoG has accepted the involvement of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe on various occasions. The body of documents that forms the basis for its policy is, therefore, partly the outcome of a learning process that has slightly softened the Georgian approach. Nevertheless it retains many restrictive elements. Critics argue that the Georgian Strategy aims to impress the international community rather than genuinely engage with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It remains to be seen in the forthcoming implementation of the AP to what extent this policy will be efficient.

The dismissive attitude of the *de facto* authorities and populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia certainly represents a major obstacle to the success of the Georgian policy of engagement. Sukhumi and Tskhinvali deny Georgian claims that direct consultations were held in the course of the elaboration of the Strategy and Action Plan. They categorically rule out engagement on the basis of the AP as long as the Strategy on Occupied Territories remains the political framework of the GoG's approach. Official Abkhaz and South Ossetian rhetoric dismisses the EU as pro-Georgian because of its close relations with Tbilisi and its insistence on Georgian territorial integrity.

The situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

In Abkhazia, much less attention is paid to the conflict with Georgia since the August 2008 war and the subsequent recognition by Russia. The Abkhaz leadership, with tacit support from the Armenian and Russian minorities, focuses its attention on the completion of the Abkhaz state-building project. Sukhumi relies on massive political and economic support from the Russian Federation. As a consequence, Moscow's political and economic influence has grown exponentially in the past two years. The forthcoming Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in 2014 will further increase the speed of Abkhazia's drift into Russia. Abkhazian politics is mainly about access to resources coming from Russia and corruption increases with the amount of money that flows into the entity.

On the other hand there is growing wariness of Moscow's impact and real intentions. A certain number of actors in the political institutions, including among the *de facto* leadership, and civil society fear that this will ultimately have negative repercussions on Abkhazia's 'sovereignty' and the Abkhaz nation. These groups have an interest in closer interaction with external actors other than Russia, particularly with the EU. Their room for manoeuvre, however, is shrinking. The window of opportunity for the EU's NREP towards Abkhazia is, therefore, closing fast.

The political and economic dependence of South Ossetia on Russia is even higher. Unlike Abkhazia South Ossetia lacks any economic basis for an independent existence. The South Ossetian leadership refuses constructive exchange with international players other than Moscow. Civil society in South Ossetia remains very weak. Under such circumstances there are very few footholds for NREP in South Ossetia.

The NREP: substance and measures

The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia has manifested itself primarily through maintaining **contacts** with the entities and implementing **projects**. But these efforts have been limited in scope.

The **European Commission** was and remains the largest donor supporting the needs of conflict-affected persons in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The projects funded and conducted by the Commission encompass

humanitarian aid and support for IDPs, support for the populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and confidence and dialogue projects. After the August 2008 war the Commission's space for manoeuvre in South Ossetia was reduced to almost zero. Projects in Abkhazia, however, are ongoing. The Commission faces problems and obstacles on both sides of the conflict line. The restrictive approach of the GoG on the one hand, and the refusal of Abkhaz partners to cooperate under programmes assigned to Georgia undermine its activities. For the first three years after the 2008 war, the implementation of projects was facilitated by a reliance on the Instrument for Stability and EIDHR, which are not tied to the consent of a partner government. In May 2010 UNDP started a 'Commission-funded Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism' (COBERM) for confidence-building and dialogue projects. These are essential elements of the NREP. However, the funding will expire in the near future. The Instrument for Stability is designed for short-term post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation – protracted conflict situations are not envisaged in this framework. As a consequence, funds for the abovementioned projects will dry up by the end of 2011.

Up until February 2011, the **EUSR for the South Caucasus** and his staff travelled to Abkhazia on a regular basis and maintained contacts with the *de facto* authorities, civil society and the population (EUSR visits every 4 months, EUSR Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) about 50 visits since early 2008, plus monthly visits by the EUSR POLAD from Tbilisi). Unlike EU and Member States diplomats accredited in Tbilisi, the EUSR's regional mandate provided him with easy access to interlocutors in Sukhumi, which has publicly refused entry of Tbilisi-based Ambassadors. Therefore, the EUSR and staff helped preserve an important channel of communication and provide Brussels institutions and Member States with valuable reporting on developments in Abkhazia. The PLOs had contacts with the *de facto* law enforcement authorities in Abkhazia and closely follow policing issues on the ground on both sides of the boundary line.

Similar contacts were held with South Ossetia before the August 2008 war but have since been stopped because of resistance from the *de facto* authorities. Since the war, engagement with South Ossetia has become much more difficult.

The EUSR and the EUISS have been organising a series of small roundtable events on EU-related topics in Sukhumi since early 2009. The aim of this series is to

bring more information about the EU to Abkhazia. With the mandate of the EUSR in question it is unclear if this kind of engagement can be continued in the future.

The way ahead for NREP: de-isolation and transformation

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are isolated from the rest of the world with the exception of the Russian presence in the entities and easy access to Russia. As Georgia moves forward on its EU approximation trajectory, Abkhazia and South Ossetia move further away.

The situation is becoming increasingly difficult and urgent given the limited time horizon of the existing elements of the NREP together with the lack of pragmatism demonstrated by Georgia. The EU needs to develop a more systematic and reinforced NREP towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to counter the negative tendency. Based on the discussions during the seminar we suggest that the NREP should focus primarily on **de-isolation and transformation**. The immediate objective of the NREP should be to counter the isolation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the international community. This should be accompanied by transformation efforts aimed at opening up Abkhazia and South Ossetia through slowly increasing societal and economic interaction with the EU and Georgia. Only transformation addresses the root causes of the conflicts and can set the stage for reconciliation between the societies and, ultimately, conflict resolution.

The EU has yet to start a systematic policy of de-isolation. Given the time pressure with respect to both the situation on the ground and quickly vanishing EU funds, there is a risk that further progress in the direction of medium-term transformation and long-term reconciliation and resolution will not be possible.

At this early stage, de-isolation should focus on two main issues.

The EU should aim at **developing more systematic contacts** with civil society and the population(s) at large. It is counterproductive to prevent representatives of these groups from travelling to the EU since this increases antipathy towards the EU, limits exposure to the EU, and prevents contacts between peo-

ples. Member States should agree to pursue a smart policy on granting visas to inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Such a policy should in essence be generous and non-restrictive in order to encourage mobility while at the same time extract a political price from the leadership of the entities for travel to the EU.

Most residents have Russian passports, which have been issued arguably in violation of international law, in disregard of clear GoG protests and with the effect of exacerbating the conflict. It is unlikely that this will change in the near future. It is equally unlikely that Abkhazians and South Ossetians will accept status-neutral travel documents issued in Georgia (for political reasons or for fear of pressure from *de facto* authorities). A pragmatic approach therefore seems necessary.

An intermediate solution to this problem could be visas issued in Russian passports by consular officials from EU Embassies regularly travelling from Tbilisi to the entities. A similar practice to enable travel has been established in other status-related conflicts. Such an approach would require concessions from both sides: Georgia would have to acquiesce to Abkhaz and South Ossetians travelling on Russian passports. Abkhaz and South Ossetians, for their part, would need to acquiesce to their visas being issued by officials accredited in Tbilisi. Acceptance of such a mechanism would require strong backing by Member States. In the past, individual Member States put forward similar ideas but lacked strong and united EU support. While applying such a temporary pragmatic solution, the EU should encourage the development of status neutral documents.

Contacts should be maintained with the *de facto* authorities of the entities. If the EU intends to advance on the path of NREP it is necessary to maintain regular contacts with the *de facto* authorities in the framework of non-recognition. They are crucial for the creation of a political environment in which civil society representatives can engage with the EU without having to fear pressure from the *de facto* authorities and hence for increasing societal and economic interaction at later stages of the NREP. In the framework of the NREP the EU should therefore step up its contacts and aim to initiate a structured dialogue with the *de facto* authorities in order to provide for a regular exchange of opinions and discuss possibilities of further engagement. Efforts should be made to increase the EU's presence and visibility in the entities by more regular visits of EU and Member States representatives travelling from Tbilisi.

It is evident from other status-related issues beyond the borders of the EU that the extent of contacts with the *de facto* authorities of unrecognised states is fundamentally a political question. The legal constraints on contacts, in order to avoid legitimisation or recognition, flow from political considerations, in particular *vis-à-vis* the mother state. Hence it is up to the EU to determine politically to what extent it wants to have contacts with the *de facto* authorities in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali.

A less restrictive policy on visas would require a very high degree of pragmatism and greater coordination on the part of the EU and the GoG. One of the most difficult tasks of the NREP consists, therefore, in convincing the GoG that this pragmatic approach is in Georgia's long-term interest. Again, a strong common position of EU Member States would be of crucial importance.

Steps towards a clearer policy on travel and visa regulation and contacts with the societies and *de facto* authorities of the entities must be flanked by continuing and increasing efforts in the sphere of confidence building. It is of the utmost importance in this respect not to discontinue funding and political instruments which allow for engagement in this complex environment. To assure continuity the EU should revisit the application rules for the Stability Instrument or find imaginative ways of using funds from the ENPI.

De-isolation goes hand in hand with increased economic and societal interaction. Economic engagement should be initiated at different levels. Mechanisms to encourage interaction should be considered. The arrangement used for Transnistria could serve as an inspiration: since 2006 Transnistrian companies who register in Moldova can benefit from EU trade preferences and export to EU countries.

At the micro-level the EU already funds projects that support private entrepreneurs on different sides of the conflict lines. For instance, the London-based NGO International Alert runs a partly EU-funded Caucasus Business and Development Network that links producer and business communities in the three South Caucasian republics, the three unrecognised entities, and Turkey. Activities of this kind should be expanded.

Special attention should be given to the active involvement of the Georgian population in the Gali district. A

regional approach opens more avenues for people in the entities to take part in projects focusing on production, trade and livelihood. More systematic support for the private sectors in the entities can also have a political dimension. An increasing number of economically independent people cooperating across conflict lines can help to diversify related discourses within the societies. With time other areas, such as tourism, could be considered for linking the business communities along the coastal strip.

On a larger scale, the EU should reconsider promoting and supporting the reconstruction of the railway link between Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan which runs through Abkhazia. This is an ambitious and complex project, but it would be a strategically significant one which would also impact beyond the region of the South Caucasus. From a Russian perspective it would improve the infrastructure along its Black Sea coast and would be a valuable asset in the preparation of the Sochi Olympics. There is strong interest in the railway in Armenia, which needs it as an additional axis of communication with Russia. The rehabilitation of the railway is also important for Tbilisi in order to increase cross-boundary interaction. Cooperation on the railway could open the way for the normalisation of Georgian-Russian relations which the EU should strongly encourage. It would considerably reduce tensions in the regional environment and help to increase interaction between Georgia and Abkhazia.

It is impossible for the EU to match Russia's increasing economic involvement and financial support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, even though the EU's proposals in this regard may look meagre in terms of quantity, it has a lot more on offer (than Russia) in terms of quality. Economic involvement from the EU also has a strong political appeal in Abkhazia. The modernisation discourse, broadly discussed in the Russian media, has spilled over into Abkhazia as well – and people in Sukhumi understand that Russia may not be the most promising partner in this area. The prospect of access to European technologies and know-how could be a strong incentive for local entrepreneurs. Economic cooperation could also provide space for non-political engagement.

As for interaction between civil societies and people-to-people contacts, there are numerous possibilities for the EU to explore. Many of them are in the fields of information, education (including exchanges), health care and training in various areas.

There are other areas of mutual interest between the communities which can be explored by the EU and in which the *de facto* authorities in Sukhumi have expressed a clear interest. These include cooperation in the fields of combating organised crime and efforts to combat trafficking in human beings and drugs.

The proposal to set up an EU information office in Sukhumi, which was close to realisation when the war broke out in August 2008, should be revisited. The envisaged status-neutral Liaison Mechanism between Sukhumi and Tbilisi could possibly facilitate the office. An information office would be an excellent means to increase the knowledge and understanding of the EU among the local population. It could organise events (similar to the EUISS Abkhazia roundtables) that would spark a debate between officials, experts, civil society representatives from the EU and an Abkhaz audience.

The EU should also consider increasing the number of scholarships for Abkhaz, South Ossetian and Georgian students. Currently three Georgian and three Abkhaz students study together at the Free University in Brussels. Projects like this one should be expanded. In a society as small as Abkhazia, 80 or 100 scholarships could make a significant difference. More could be done in the fields of language and tuition, internships, cultural exchanges etc. Again, special attention should be paid to the involvement of the Georgian population in Gali as well as the IDP population in all of Georgia. This links back to the immediate task of de-isolation: for scholarship programmes to be successful, however, they must be accompanied by flexible travel and visa arrangements.

While de-isolating and engaging Abkhazia and South Ossetia the EU should consider how to involve the two entities in the EU approximation process. As mentioned earlier, it is unacceptable and dangerous that these territories are excluded from this process. During the early phases of engagement this may prove difficult because of the state-centred approach of the European Neighbourhood Policy/Eastern Partnership. As it stands, the approximation between Georgia and the EU *per se* is no incentive for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to open up. Flexible involvement of Abkhaz and South Ossetian NGOs in the Civil Society Forum of the EaP could be a start. Later on, and with the consent of the GoG, a simple action plan – an ‘ENP light’ could be developed for the entities. Such an approach could introduce useful incentives for the *de facto* authorities, increasing the EU’s leverage.

Currently, the atmosphere in relations between the EU and Georgia on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other, is tense and polarised. In this process it is crucial for the EU to link its projects and activities strategically, and to make its involvement visible to the populations in the two entities and Georgia. Indeed the EU is already funding projects that benefit the population in Abkhazia – however, few people know about it. An EU information centre and other PR measures could further promote the NREP as an opportunity (rather than a threat) for local populations and enhance the EU’s attractiveness. Moreover, strategically significant projects, such as the rehabilitation of the railway, would bring the EU’s role to the forefront.

Conclusion

Clearly, Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian goals, interests and perceptions are as far apart as ever. The Georgian narrative places the main conflict on the level of Georgian-Russian relations. From this perspective Abkhazia and South Ossetia appear to be Russian pawns with no independent role to play. Georgian policy therefore prioritises the restoration of territorial integrity and international support *vis-à-vis* Russia. Engagement of international actors, including the EU, with the two entities is met with suspicion for fear of ‘creeping recognition’. Abkhazia and South Ossetia read the conflicts as the history of their resistance against Georgian nationalism and imperialism. Backed by Russia, they have as their primary goal the preservation of their independence and the completion of their state-building projects. The EU and other Western international actors are perceived as pro-Georgian.

Against this tense and contradictory background the EU has to carefully calibrate its policy of non-recognition and engagement. Differences in policy priorities remain between the EU and Georgia – even though they concern emphasis rather than substance. The EU supports Georgian territorial integrity but beyond that stresses long-lasting peace and stability in the region as its foremost strategic goal. The Georgian ranking of priorities is the opposite. The EU shares neither the interpretation nor the goals of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. Nevertheless, it will have to find a way to interact with them to make engagement possible.

Clarity on the Union's commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity is of the essence. Reassuring Georgia that the NREP is not a slippery slope towards recognition is the only way for the EU to create an enabling environment for its policy of engagement. On the other hand, however, Tbilisi has to accept that the EU needs space for manoeuvre for this policy, and that Georgian attempts to restrict and fully control access of international state and non-state actors to the entities are counterproductive. If the GoG's call for international engagement in conflict resolution is genuine it needs to be more open and forthcoming with respect to activities of international partners. To this end the EU needs to influence the Georgian approach and mindset in the direction of shifting the main focus to engagement rather than isolation.

Achieving clarity on the Union's stance with regard to Georgian territorial integrity is also important in its relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, more is needed to fully implement the NREP. The Union has to use its instruments in a much more flexible way so as to create incentives for people in the entities to overcome the political and psychological barriers which currently prevent more engagement. It has to interact with the *de facto* authorities so as to create an environment which makes societal interaction possible. Therefore, while being firm on the normative principles of its policy, the EU to some extent should apply operational impartiality in relations with the entities to make engagement possible.

Finally, the EU has to take into account Russia's role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow is not interested in more engagement of external actors in the

entities. At the same time, however, renewed Russian interest in cooperation with the EU makes it easier for the Union to be firm on its engagement policy. NREP has to unfold under the assumption that Russia is and will remain a crucial actor in the conflicts. The EU should suggest cooperation where possible.

Conditions for engagement with the conflict regions in Georgia have worsened over the past three years. Considerable footholds for NREP still exist in Abkhazia. On the other hand, South Ossetia has become practically inaccessible for the EU and other actors. While the door should be kept open for engagement with South Ossetia, the Union should continue to focus its activities on Abkhazia. Turning Abkhazia into a showcase of NREP could increase incentives for South Ossetia to engage. The same goes for Nagorno-Karabakh, where NREP could provide a useful tool for the EU to address the most dangerous unresolved conflict in its Eastern Neighbourhood.

The unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, but also Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria create 'white spots' which can easily turn into black holes and become sources of instability and insecurity. The EU cannot afford to let this happen (again). As a key regional player and soft power it is well equipped to address the conflicts. The creation of the European External Action Service and the strategic review of the European Neighbourhood Policy provide an excellent opportunity to review the EU's toolkit and devise instruments and strategies. Conflict resolution should become one of the most important strategic goals of the EU in its Eastern Neighbourhood.