



Breaking the Ice: The EU's Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy for the Georgian Breakaway Region of Abkhazia

Elisabeth Rouvier (FR) – Prof. DELCOUR

Abstract

The Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy (NREP) is a unique policy designed by the European Union (EU) to break the isolation of the Georgian breakaway region of Abkhazia. It rests on two pillars: a firm commitment to not recognising the independence of Abkhazia, but also engagement with the breakaway region through contacts with the de facto authorities and the funding of projects. The NREP is a Structural Foreign Policy (SFP) of the EU: it intends to influence structurally and sustainably the rules of the game of the conflict. It aims at generating conflict transformation, meaning breaking the ice between Abkhaz and Georgians, creating positive perceptions and opening channels for dialogue, in order to contribute in the long-term to reconciliation between the two communities.

This thesis studies the EU's capacity to generate conflict transformation between Abkhazia and Georgia with the NREP, a new, unique and still under-researched policy. As a SFP, this capacity depends on its comprehensiveness and its internalisation by the targets, namely Abkhazia and Georgia, but also on the internal coherence of EU actors when implementing and designing the policy. The thesis identified several factors influencing the capacity of the EU to generate conflict transformation with the NREP: the Georgian wariness of 'creeping recognition', the Georgian internalisation of the EU's NREP, the Abkhaz internalisation of the EU's NREP and of the Georgian policy of engagement, as well as the internal coherence of the EU – both at the inter-institutional and the member states' level.

The thesis argues that the EU's capacity to generate conflict transformation between Abkhazia and Georgia is limited. Its comprehensiveness is constrained by the Georgian wariness of 'creeping recognition'. Abkhazia accepts the NREP but has not internalised it: the NREP has no visibility within Abkhazia and the EU is perceived as a 'Trojan horse' from Georgia. Abkhazia also strictly rejects the Georgian policy of engagement, perceived as a strategy for the peaceful reintegration of Abkhazia within Georgia. The Georgian policy of engagement towards Abkhazia stems itself in part from the internalisation by Georgia of the EU's NREP. Finally, internally, the EU lacks unity and coherence: on the one hand, the EU Special Representative is the main person in charge of the NREP, yet he is disconnected from other institutions. On the other hand, the NREP divides the member states because of the politically sensitive question of Russia. All these factors thus contribute to constraining the EU's capacity to generate conflict transformation. Yet, the NREP is a very creative framework, and more could be done.