

## Written evidence from International Alert (CAU0005)

### Introduction

1. International Alert welcomes the FAC inquiry into the South Caucasus as it provides a way to improve understanding of conflict dynamics in the region and to reflect on peacebuilding approaches and ways in which the UK Government can contribute.
2. International Alert, a peacebuilding organisation, has been working in the Caucasus since 1993 with people affected by conflict to challenge attitudes and foster peace. We work with local civil society organisations, journalists, business people and cultural figures to promote shared identities, social change and economic cooperation across the region. This includes working on the [Georgian–Abkhaz](#), [Georgian–South Ossetian](#) and [Nagorny Karabakh](#) conflict contexts, as well as on regional [dialogue](#) and [economy](#). Our work is important because conflict in the South Caucasus has led to fragmented territories, closed borders and little interaction between peoples.

### Recommendations for peacebuilding

3. Each of the conflicts in the South Caucasus is different and they should not be viewed in the same way. It is not necessarily helpful to view them primarily as ‘on the frontline against Russia’. Whilst Moscow is obviously a player in this region, **Russian interest and influence in each conflict fluctuates**. People living in both the recognised and unrecognised entities can and do, to varying extents, influence the course of political events through civil society mobilisation locally, with the most recent example of the [Armenian ‘velvet revolution’ in 2018 that was largely driven by civil society](#). Recognising the important role that it plays in facilitating the conditions necessary for peace and stability, it is vital to **provide continued support to civil society, particularly in unrecognised territories and in Azerbaijan**.
4. With conflict resolution a distant prospect, this remains a region of closed borders and small, isolated societies. Peacebuilding therefore requires a **long-term conflict transformation approach** which takes into account [grassroots hopes and fears](#) for the future and opens space for bridging divides. We need a focus on ways in which ordinary people can meet regularly, interact and work together on practical issues across (and in spite of) conflict divides. Entry points for such interventions already exist, like the **business for peace** approach bringing together local business leaders to address socio-economic and legal issues of mutual interest. Examples of this range from the [legal aspects of trade facilitation](#) across conflict divides or the [promotion of regional brands](#) (both projects part-funded by the UK Government).
5. It is essential to **include people from all sides of the conflict divides** in face-to-face meetings – this means the inclusion of those who live in unrecognised areas, but also people displaced from those areas. There should be a special focus on including **young people** who, due to these closed borders, have grown up since the wars of the 1990s having never met their peers on the ‘other side’. As such meetings have to take place in third countries and often in the UK and Europe in order to widen young people’s horizons, we would welcome the **simplification of visa requirements** for participants in peacebuilding projects.
6. **Inclusive peace needs to look at the different factors affecting people living in conflict** – be it gender, age, disability, socioeconomic background, location, religion etc. Historically, approaches to gender relational issues have been somewhat conservative as it is widely perceived in the region as a Western construct or an imposition of feminist views. Current discourse in the region overlooks the **different roles that gender plays** - women already have power to positively or negatively affect the discourse (and are not "naturally peaceful") and men have vulnerabilities and are also victims of the conflict. However, our experience shows that it is possible to discuss and research issues related to masculinities and

alternative views of power relations in society, for example, if the terminology used is sensitive to the local context.

7. Peacebuilding work should not be only across conflict lines. It is important to **work on internal dialogue within societies** too to [understand other people's perceptions of oft-used terms](#) like 'peace' and 'compromise' which can have very different meanings. There needs to be a deeper understanding on all sides of the notion of compromise based on mutual concessions as a necessary foundation for peace. Each side accepts compromise, but only from the opposite party. There is little reflection on what concessions the societies and individuals are prepared to make themselves.
8. **Alternatives to the discourses and narratives** which can be found in the mainstream media are important, so the UK Government should continue to fund responsible [media outfits and platforms](#) which give analytical and nuanced perspectives on issues and help build human connections across conflict divides. At the same time, whilst the rise of social media can help facilitate communications across conflict divides, our experience shows that such interaction cannot replace face-to-face meetings but should complement in-person and on-the-ground work.
9. A **common language** (or lack of it) is becoming increasingly important at cross-conflict dialogue meetings in this part of the world. Russian is slowly losing its status as the regional lingua franca with English-language learning not making much headway beyond the capitals. So the UK Government should keep or increase **funding for English-language teaching**, particularly in remote, conflict-affected areas, and ensure that it is done in a conflict-sensitive way.
10. **Access to higher education opportunities abroad** for those living in unrecognised areas is an issue, especially for the Abkhaz and Ossetians. The government's Chevening scholarships and the fact that they are accessible to those in unrecognised areas is a very valuable conflict-sensitive tool. It could be widened for graduates to participate in job placement schemes, for example.
11. The **UK's experience of conflict management and transformation** should be [shared more widely](#) in the region as it provides a rich background for reflection, learning and inspiration among politicians, civil society, security sector and other stakeholders dealing with conflicts in the South Caucasus.

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