

## **Armenians and Abkhaz Ethnic Democracy – Current Trends, Future Prospects**

“The Armenians in Abkhazia have only three members of parliament and no church”<sup>1</sup> these are the words of Diana Kerselyan, ethnic Armenian and member of the Sukhumi City Council. The aim of this dissertation is to ascertain why the Armenians, which by most measures are the second largest ethnic group in Abkhazia,<sup>2</sup> are less involved in political processes and institutions in the territory than their numbers should suggest, as well as try to determine which factors hinder or facilitate their participation in Abkhazian politics. This work will look at current political reality in Abkhazia regarding the Armenians chiefly through the framework of Abkhazia as an ethnic democracy, and will rely on empirical data from field work, as well other relevant theories of democracy and political participation to provide an answer. This work will be divided in three parts. The first part will discuss the theoretical framework of ethnic democracy, and determine how it can be relevantly applied to the situation in Abkhazia. The second part will look at the present day situation of the Armenian minority as situated within Abkhaz ethnic democracy, with specific reference to specific factors that affect their ability to play a role in Abkhazian society, be these legal, organisational, socio-economic factors etc. An attempt will also be made to determine to which degree the lack of Armenian participation in Abkhazian politics can be put down causes related directly or indirectly to the structure and practice of ethnic democracy. In the third part, the perspectives for the Armenian minority in Abkhazia in the future will be looked at, including which paths could be chosen, both by the Armenian community itself

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<sup>1</sup> “Armenians of Abkhazia have three parliament members but not one church”, by Emil Sanamyan, Armenian Reporter, Paramus, NJ: Apr 28, 2007, Issue. 9

<sup>2</sup> The number of Armenians living in Abkhazia is a subject of some dispute, and is highly politically laden, something which will be discussed in further detail below.

and the de facto authorities in Abkhazia, in order to increase Armenian participation in Abkhazian politics in the future, should this be a desirable goal.<sup>3</sup>

### **Epistemological and methodological assumptions:**

This study of Abkhazian politics will be first and foremost concerned about politics in the republic of Abkhazia as such exists de facto, both socially and institutionally. This means for example that the de jure institutions and social processes that do not function on the territory of Abkhazia itself will not be considered. De facto politics in Abkhazia is also assumed to function similarly to politics in the other former Soviet territories, given the shared historical, social and political practices which have been inherited by these territories from Soviet times. In cases where the political behaviour in Abkhazia is deemed to differ significantly from behaviour in other post-Soviet territories, this will be made clear. This study will primarily be based on interviews and observations made during fieldwork in Abkhazia between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>rd</sup> of April 2010.<sup>4</sup> Secondary sources, including quantitative material such as surveys and statistics pertaining to Abkhazia, will be consulted where appropriate. Throughout this study, the term “de facto” will, for the sake of simplicity, be used to describe current government structures and institutions on the territory of Abkhazia, as opposed to the “de jure” government in Tbilisi. The term “Abkhaz” will refer to members of the Abkhaz ethnic group, as opposed to the term “Abkhazians/Abkhazian,” which will be used to denote all current

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<sup>3</sup> To which extent the Armenian minority in Abkhazia itself wishes to be involved in politics, as well as to which extent the Abkhazian society, including the ethnic Abkhaz political elite wishes them to take part in political life of the republic, will also be considered in this study.

<sup>4</sup> At the time when field work was conducted, the work *Under Siege: Intern-ethnic relations in Abkhazia*, was not yet available (mid-August 2010). Much of the data from the author’s own fieldwork therefore corresponds with the data gathered by Trier, Lohm and Szakonyi, but the author will make use of own research data whenever appropriate. The author’s field work is also of considerable newer date than that of the former, and might indicate somewhat later developments than what could be included in *Under Siege...*

inhabitants on the territory of Abkhazia, regardless of ethnic origin. Ethnonyms, toponyms and proper names will, also for the sake of simplicity, be rendered as they are commonly found in English language literature on the subject of Abkhazia, and any preference for one spelling, wording or phrasing over another is not indicative of any ulterior motives by the author.<sup>5</sup> When discussing Georgians currently or previously living on the territory of Abkhazia, a distinction will not be made between Mingrelians and Georgians, as any differentiation between the two is of little relevance to this study.<sup>6</sup> The legality or legitimacy of Abkhazia as an entity in relation to international law or the international community of states is also not a topic of this work, and issues related to these questions will not be discussed.

It is also important to discuss why it makes sense to study Abkhazia as an ethnic democracy and the situation of the Armenians in particular. Firstly, Abkhazia has attracted considerable attention among the international community, especially in relation to geopolitics, which has further intensified after the 2008 August war. At the same time, little is known about the internal political dynamics of Abkhazia, and a gap of relevant knowledge about therefore exists among said international community.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, there is a growing realisation in the international community that forces inside Abkhazia, including the de facto authorities there, have to be engaged with,<sup>8</sup> and that the political processes there do matter for the long term

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, to denote the de facto capital of Abkhazia the term “Sukhumi” will be used, as this is most often encountered in the literature, and not the Georgian “Sokhumi” or the Abkhaz “Sukhum/Aqwa,” including other names/spellings.

<sup>6</sup> The Mingrelians and what they might be classified as ethnically and linguistically is a highly disputed and politically charged issue. For a broad overview of these issues, see: Laurence, B: “Who are the Mingrelians? Language, Identity and Politics in Western Georgia,” Draft Paper, Sixth Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, 2001

<sup>7</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell L, Cooley A; “Toolbox: Georgia’s territorial integrity,” Action memorandum to secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, American National Interest, May – June Issue, 2010

interests of said international community, as well as the stability and prosperity of the Caucasus region as a whole. Thirdly, there is also growing focus in international academic circles on the study of democracy, minority rights, and the situation of minorities in the region generally.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the Georgians in the Gali region and refugees/IDPs from Abkhazia, which have been given a fair amount of attention by international human rights organisations and scholars alike,<sup>10</sup> the Armenians and other ethnic groups of the territory have been given scant attention by scholars and policy makers outside the region, and the dynamics of this community are largely unknown to the outside world. An appreciation of the role the Armenian minority plays in Abkhazian politics is therefore long overdue, especially because they are widely reported to be the second largest ethnic group Abkhazia, and might be the second most influential ethnic group in the territory, besides the ethnic Abkhaz themselves.<sup>11</sup> Finally, studies of politics in Abkhazia might be of interest to the de facto authorities in Sukhumi, as well as the de jure authorities in Tbilisi, as an accurate and factual understanding of the realities on the ground in Abkhazia is crucial to addressing the many pressing issues regarding the territory, both political, social and economic today.

The main theoretical framework to be used is that of ethnic democracy as outlined by Sammy Smooha.<sup>12</sup> Ethnic democracy is defined as a regime governing a multi-ethnic society which extends democratic rights to members of all ethnic groups, but combines this with the institutional domination of the state by one particular ethnic group. The prime example of ethnic democracy, in Smooha's opinion, is Israel, which his theory was initially intended to describe. Lately, the model has increasingly been applied to the newly independent states in

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance: Kymlicka, W "Universal Minority Rights?" *Ethnicities* 1, 2001, 1, pp. 21–23.

<sup>10</sup> "OSCE Commissioner on National Minorities visits Abkhazia", <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21943>

<sup>11</sup> See relevant discussion on Armenian influence in Abkhazian politics below.

<sup>12</sup> Smooha, S: "The model of Ethnic Democracy," in: *The fate of Ethnic Democracy in Post Communist Europe*, p. 7

Eastern Europe, first and foremost the Baltic states,<sup>13</sup> but increasingly also to the states in the Caucasus.<sup>14</sup> Ethnic democracy is distinguished from other types of regimes based on ethnic domination, first and foremost ethnocracies, where democratic rights are conferred unequally depending on ethnic descent,<sup>15</sup> and a “Herrenvolk” democracy, or Apartheid regime where some ethnic groups are denied democratic rights outright.<sup>16</sup> Ethnic democracy also differs from so called “control regimes” which might offer some democratic rights, but seek to control troublesome minorities through strategies such as isolation, economic dependence and co-optation.<sup>17</sup>

Ethnic democracies might appear where one ethnic group in a multi-ethnic territory sees itself under existential threat, and where control of a state or particular territory is contested by more than one ethnic group, or the potential for such competition is perceived by the dominant ethnic group in said state or territory. As a means of safeguarding its ethnic identity, or perhaps even physical survival, the dominant ethnic group then takes control of the state, and enacts measures to ensure its continued dominance of the political playing field.<sup>18</sup> Institutions and state structures will usually be the preserve of the dominant ethnic group, but since the ruling ethnic political elite has a strong commitment to democratic ideals, franchise and basic citizenship rights will be available to all. However, the state will put limits to the entry of citizens from the non-dominant nationality to critical positions in society, which might include high level government offices, service in the military, the right to own property etc. Ethnic democracy is often likely to emerge where the formation of an

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance: Smith, G: “The Ethnic Democracy Thesis and the Citizenship Question in Latvia,” Nationality Papers, p. 200

<sup>14</sup> Sabanadze, N; “Georgia’s Ethnic Democracy: Source of Instability,” in: *The fate of Ethnic Democracy in Post Communist Europe*, p. 115

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 16

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 30

ethnic nation and the institutionalised political dominance of one ethnic group predates the introduction democratic politics.

The dynamics of an ethnic democracy seriously limits the space for participation by minorities, due to the restrictions placed on them by the dominant ethnic group. Usually, extra-legal barriers to minority participation exist as well, including hidden and indirect discrimination, the existence of exclusive ethnic and kinship groups, as well as other forms of informal allocation of resources in favour of the dominant ethnic group. Minorities are therefore less likely to participate in politics of the society even if they are given the legal opportunity to do so, seeing as the playing field is slanted against them. Minorities might fear that their participation in politics might not bring about desired improvements, or would aggravate the feeling of the dominant ethnic group against them, worsening their standing in society overall. As such, they may adopt a measure of self-censorship. Securitisation of discourses applies to minority relations as well,<sup>19</sup> and this may lead the dominant ethnic group in society into taking a sceptical, or even hostile, view of minority political participation, even if the political issues put forward by said minorities are relatively harmless.

Ethnic democracy is problematic for several reasons. Theoretically, it is criticised by many scholars, who operate with a liberal definition of democracy according to which all citizens of a state have equal rights, so is therefore not truly democratic.<sup>20</sup> Ethnic democracies tend to institutionalise ethnic differences, and social and economic inequalities, which ethnic

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<sup>19</sup> Mole, R.C.M: "Talking Security? The Discourse of European Identity in the Baltic States" in his *Discursive Constructions of Identity in European Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 157

<sup>20</sup> Oren Yiftachel, "Israeli Society and Jewish-Palestinian Reconciliation: Ethnocracy and Its Territorial Contradictions", *Middle East Journal*, 51, 4, 1997, pp. 1–16.

democracies tend to reinforce or sustain, might also prove destabilising for the state in the long run. Society in an ethnic democracy also tends to engage in excessive securitisation of the discourse regarding political issues,<sup>21</sup> and cultivates narratives of existential threat that limit the ability of society to apply self criticism, as well as leading it to adopt other features characteristic of a closed society. Perhaps due to the morally questionable character of this particular regime, ethnic democracies are also often conceived of as temporary impositions, born out of extreme or exceptional circumstances, which should eventually have to be abolished at some time in the future.<sup>22</sup> However, ethnic democracies currently in existence have quickly become consolidated, and have seen few signs of changing despite intense international pressure.<sup>23</sup> This can again be put down to the inherent securitisation of political relations in such regimes, as well as their narratives of existential threat, which leave very little room for change. Ethnic democracies also base themselves on strong nationalist ideologies which act as the foundation of the regime, as well as provide the justification for their continued existence.<sup>24</sup>

The author will in this study argue for the description of Abkhazia as an ethnic democracy,<sup>25</sup> since the regime in place there furthers the institutionalised domination of the state by the ethnic Abkhaz, while extending democratic rights to all its citizens.<sup>26</sup> Abkhaz ethnic democracy was born out of the 1992-1993 war when Abkhazia, formerly an autonomous

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<sup>21</sup> Mole, R.C.M; "Talking Security? The Discourse of European Identity in the Baltic States" in his *Discursive Constructions of Identity in European Politics*, p. 157

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 41

<sup>23</sup> Israel is the prime example here, but changes in the ethnic-democratic character of the Baltic states have come only belatedly as a result a EU conditionality.

<sup>24</sup> An obvious example in the case of Israel is Zionism, although all ethnic-democratic regimes have strong ethno-nationalist even if they are not explicitly named.

<sup>25</sup> A minimal and procedural definition of will be used with regarding democracy in Abkhazia This is to indicate that although democratic institutions in Abkhazia do admittedly have many shortcomings, they do have real political significance (i.e. they are not just for show), and the Abkhazian society experiences a significant amount of pluralism. Freedom House also rated Abkhazia as a "partly free" territory in 2010, alongside Georgia. See: [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org) and: Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 10

<sup>26</sup> The specifics of Abkhaz ethnic democracy will be discussed more in depth in the section below.

republic within Soviet Georgia, gained de facto independence from the newly independent Georgian state in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Ideologically, the *raison de entre* for the Abkhaz state was the need to safeguard the identity and physical survival of the Abkhaz ethnic group, as seen from the perspective of the Abkhaz political elite.<sup>27</sup> This approach is justified in the view of the ethnic Abkhaz due to the “Georgian aggression” during the 1992-1993 war and the precarious social and political situation that followed, as well as with reference to periods during Tsarist and Soviet times when the Abkhaz ethnic group had become the target of political and cultural repression. Due to being the titular nationality of the republic of Abkhazia from Soviet times,<sup>28</sup> having it as their only ethnic “homeland”, as well as winning the above mentioned war of independence against Georgia, the Abkhaz currently feel entitled to both dominate political life, as well as to control the political destiny of the republic.<sup>29</sup> In Abkhazia therefore, the relationship between the nation and state is conceived of in explicit ethno-nationalistic terms, with national symbols tailored towards expressing the ethnic character of the Abkhaz state, historical narratives are Abkhaz centric, and the state itself is built in the image of the Abkhaz.<sup>30</sup>

The political dominance of ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia is ensured first and foremost by legal means, through the constitution of Abkhazia, which reserves the right of being elected to the post of president exclusively to individuals of Abkhaz nationality, ensuring their control of

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<sup>27</sup> “Abkhazia is Abkhazia” by Lakoba, S; Central Asian Survey, vol. 14, no. 1, 1995, pp. 97–105

<sup>28</sup> The impact of Soviet institutions and practices on post-Soviet nation building should not be underestimated. See: Brubaker, R “Nationhood and the national question in the Soviet Union and the successor states” in his *Nationalism Reframed*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, p. 24

<sup>29</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 94

<sup>30</sup> For instance, the Abkhazian national flag displays the Abaza symbol (white hand on red background encrusted with stars), which is an old symbol of the Abkhazian kingdom, and the white and green stripes indicate the division between Christianity and Islam evident in Abkhaz society. The national insignia also depicts a scene from the Nart epic, an important cultural reference for the North West-Caucasian peoples, to which the Abkhaz have a close affinity both linguistically and culturally.

the highest office of the state.<sup>31</sup> Although not explicitly sanctioned by law, the Abkhaz, who make up just under half of the current population of Abkhazia, occupy nearly 3/4 of the seats in parliament, account for the majority of ministers and other functionaries in higher positions, and generally occupy the most important positions in local government and the majority of the seats in local assemblies. This is also often regardless of the ethnic composition of the electorate in the relevant regions.<sup>32</sup> Also, while the de facto language of government and public administration in Abkhazia has so far been Russian, a draft law on the state language of Abkhazia which was adopted by parliament on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2007 envisages the introduction of Abkhaz language proficiency as a requirement for holding high positions in government and public administration within the year 2015.<sup>33</sup> If carried out in practice, this law could potentially make it drastically more difficult for non-ethnic Abkhaz to enter politics.<sup>34</sup> Abkhazian law also contains few provisions for the protection of minority rights, apart from the clause in the constitution which guarantees the right to members of all ethnic groups on the territory of the republic to use their own language.<sup>35</sup> Schools for minority language speakers operate freely, and minorities are free to organise politically, which most have done.<sup>36</sup> Most minorities, except the Georgian minority, report very low levels of discrimination, and do not believe there is institutional discrimination towards them by the Abkhazian state.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See: Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia, Article 49.

<sup>32</sup> However, in regions where non-Abkhaz ethnic groups live compactly, they often have a greater share of seats in local assemblies, and more often occupy high positions in local government. See: Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 89

<sup>33</sup> “Abkhaz Worried by language Law”, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/abkhaz-worried-language-law>

<sup>34</sup> As a legacy of the Soviet era, the non-titular ethnic groups were not expected to learn the titular language or the republic in which they were residing, and hence, most non-Abkhaz in present day Abkhazia have little or no knowledge of the Abkhaz language.

<sup>35</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 77

<sup>36</sup> Among Armenians, the main ethnic interest organisation is currently the Organisation of the Armenian Community in Abkhazia, which has branches in several major towns where Armenians are resident, including Sukhumi, Gagra and Gulripsh.

<sup>37</sup> “Contemporary Attitudes and Beliefs in Transdnestria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” Survey by Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Quasi-State Project 2010

Minorities are also given preferred entrance into organs of the state, especially in regional politics, where a system of ethnic quotas operates. This system, which has its roots in the practices of the Soviet era, is informal in nature and is not explicitly embedded in law. When it comes to the issue of citizenship, which is a precondition for receiving the franchise, as well as acquiring real estate in the republic, this is in theory open to all. However, the Abkhazian state gives preference to ethnic Abkhaz and closely related peoples such as the Abaza, which can apply for citizenship regardless of their current place of residence, as well as their period of stay in Abkhazia. Members of all other ethnic groups have to present proof of continuous residence in Abkhazia for 5 years or more since the 1999 declaration of independence in order to be eligible for Abkhazian citizenship.<sup>38</sup> This arrangement has created problems for the large numbers of displaced persons, especially those who fled or emigrated during and after the 1991-1992 war. Abkhazian law also does not allow dual or multiple forms of citizenship, except Abkhazian-Russian citizenship, a practice which has proven troublesome for some of the non-Abkhaz inhabitants of the territory. In particular, this concerns the Georgian population in the Gali region of Abkhazia, who have been reluctant to give up their Georgian citizenship, as well as the Georgian refugees/IDPs which remain outside Abkhazia. The main consequence of this is to effectively exclude the vast majority of Georgians currently and formerly living in Abkhazia from political processes in the republic. The ability to own real estate on the territory of Abkhazia is also contingent on acquiring Abkhazian citizenship, and this has created problems for displaced people wishing to reclaim property that they left during the war, as well as non-Abkhazians who wish to buy real estate in the republic.<sup>39</sup> Thus with regard to the Georgian minority, and specifically the Georgians living in the Gali region, the Abkhazian regime therefore comes closer to the typology of a

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<sup>38</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 76

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96

control regime/ethnocracy. However, this is exceptional, and does not apply to any of the other minorities on the territory of Abkhazia.

In Abkhazia there is also a strong element of securitisation of discourses relating to minority relations by the ethnic Abkhaz political elite, which have to be seen in the light of their long-standing ethno-political conflict with Georgia. Elements of this narrative especially focuses on the Tsarist and Soviet policies that were instrumental in reducing the ethnic Abkhaz to a minority in the territory before 1989,<sup>40</sup> as well as presenting other threats to their cultural and physical survival, including the process of “georgification” and mass resettlement of Georgians and other ethnic groups to the territory during the Soviet era.<sup>41</sup> The demographic composition of Abkhazia, especially concerning current number of ethnic Abkhaz, as well as their number relative to other groups living in the territory is therefore an extremely sensitive issue. From an Abkhaz point of view, the ethnic Georgian minority is the most troubling, since Georgians are conceived of in nationalist discourse as the main enemy, and the Georgian population living in the southern Abkhazian district of Gali in particular is seen as being a potential “fifth column,” threatening to directly undermine the Abkhazian state.<sup>42</sup> The potential return of Georgian refugees/IDPs to districts other than Gali is also looked upon negatively for much the same reasons, but also because of the prospect of mass return of ethnic Georgians risks radically upsetting the ethnic balance, thus threatening the ethnic Abkhaz hold on power. Other minorities are seen as more reliable, but they are also looked on with considerable suspicion, and any change in their demographic, social or political situation is being closely watched.

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<sup>40</sup> According to the 1989 Soviet census, the Georgians constituted 45.7% of the population of Abkhazia, with the Abkhaz accounting for only 17.8%.

<sup>41</sup> Clogg, R; “The politics of Identity in Post-Soviet Abkhazia: Managing Diversity and Unresolved Conflict” p. 321

<sup>42</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia* , p. 43

In real terms, the Armenian minority in Abkhazia should be better placed to participate in Abkhaz ethnic democracy than the other minorities. The majority of the Armenian population of Abkhazia today are descendent from *Hamshen*<sup>43</sup> Armenians who came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the area around Trabzon and Erzurum in present day Turkey, escaping poverty and ethnic discord.<sup>44</sup> Another wave of Armenian settlers also came as refugees from Turkey during the events of the Armenian Genocide in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> The Soviet era saw an influx of Armenians from Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union to Abkhazia, which led the Armenian intelligentsia and middle class on the territory to grow substantially.<sup>46</sup> Today, the Armenians are concentrated mainly around the city of Gagra in the north, Gulripsh in the South, as well as in a number of villages around Sukhumi, and the capital itself. However, unlike their Georgian counterparts, the Armenians are neither seen as recent arrivals in Abkhazia, nor as a colonial imposition, in the view of the ethnic Abkhaz. During the 1992-1993 war, Armenians were unique among the non-Abkhaz ethnic groups in Abkhazia in participating in large numbers on the Abkhaz side of the war against Georgian forces, both in detachments with the Abkhaz and their allies, and also as part of the exclusively ethnically Armenian “Bagramyan Battalion.”<sup>47</sup> That the Armenians participated on the Abkhaz side in the war undoubtedly gave them a stake in an independent Abkhazia, and strengthened their relationship with the Abkhaz, as well as their identification with and loyalty to the Abkhaz political elite and its goals. As recent studies have concluded, the Armenians are by far the most supportive of the Abkhaz national project among the non-Abkhaz minorities in

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<sup>43</sup> Various spellings exist, including *Hamshen/Hemshin* and *Amshen*. The *Hamshen* dialects of Armenian differ significantly from other dialects of Armenian. See: Chirikba, V.A: “Armenians and their Dialects in Abkhazia. in: *Evidence and Counter-Evidence, Festschrift Frederik Kortlandt*, Volume 2, SSGL 33, Amsterdam, New York

<sup>44</sup> Topchyan, M: “Armyane v Abkhazii,” in: ”Dialog Kultur,” Journal of the Association of Women of Abkhazia, Sukhumi, 2007

<sup>45</sup> Simonian, H.H: *The Hemshin: History, society and identity in the Highlands of North East Turkey*, p. 298

<sup>46</sup> A large portion of these left Abkhazia during and after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the 1992-1993 war. See section below on demographics.

<sup>47</sup> Iskhanyan, V; “Abkhazia Armenians: Holding a home in an unstable territory” AGBU news, 2005

Abkhazia, and the most hostile towards reintegration in Georgia.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, although ethnic forms of identification are still strong among all the ethnic groups in Abkhazia, including the Armenians, an emerging civic form of identity is notable among some.<sup>49</sup> However, for the time being at least, official Abkhazian politics is construed through the prism of the needs and imperatives of Abkhaz ethnic nationalism, rather than a civic conception of national identity, and the Armenians overwhelmingly accept this.

The true number of Armenians currently residing in Abkhazia is a matter of some dispute. According to the last census by the de facto Abkhazian authorities, the Armenians constituted 44 780 in all of Abkhazia in 2006 compared to 94 567 for the Abkhaz.<sup>50</sup> However, there is general agreement that the number of Armenians has been understated according to this census, and that the number of Abkhazians has probably been inflated. Most reliable sources suggests the figures between 60 000-70 000 Armenians as a reasonable estimate, and the figure of Abkhazians as around 70-80 000.<sup>51</sup> This would make the Armenians the second most populous ethnic group in Abkhazia, after the Abkhazians. However, according to some reports, the Armenian population in Abkhazia is on the increase due to immigration from southern Russia, resettlement from Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as due to higher birth rates among Armenians living in the territory.<sup>52</sup> This has led some to argue that the Armenians will soon be the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia, if they are not already. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence which suggests the Armenian population has in fact been steadily decreasing, and might decrease even further in the future.<sup>53</sup> Large numbers of Armenians,

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<sup>48</sup> “Contemporary Attitudes and Beliefs in Transdnestria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” Survey by Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Quasi-State Project 2010

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Sergei Matosyan, Sukhumi, 13.04.10

<sup>50</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p.30

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Clogg, R; “The politics of Identity in Post-Soviet Abkhazia: Managing Diversity and Unresolved Conflict” p. 321 , also: Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p.34

<sup>53</sup> Due to this, even the estimate of 60 000 Armenians permanently resident in Abkhazia might even be overly optimistic.

especially those that were not indigenous to the territory, left for good as a result of the war in 1992-1993, and many are currently leaving for the relatively greater economic prosperity, social and educational opportunities offered in neighbouring Russia.<sup>54</sup> There is considerable overlap between the Armenian population in the Sochi region and Gagra, with many Armenians permanently residing in Russia while making their living Abkhazia.<sup>55</sup> This also makes it hard to quantify how many Armenians are in fact permanently resident on the territory of Abkhazia, but it could mean that many Armenians in the Gagra region, which is the part of Abkhazia which arguably has seen the greatest influx of Armenians, are only temporary residents there.<sup>56</sup> If these figures and trends are true, the prospect of an Armenian population explosion in Abkhazia is most probably an exaggeration, which again should assuage worries among the Abkhaz of the Armenians supplanting them as the largest ethnic group in the territory.

Economically, the Armenians in Abkhazia share with the territory's other ethnic groups the difficult times created by war, sanctions and international isolation. Most are resident in rural areas and villages where they are engaged in subsistence farming, as well as towns, where they are engaged in street trade and other small businesses.<sup>57</sup> There is a small middle class, especially in the capital Sukhumi and in Abkhazia's other major town, Gagra mostly connected with tourism and agriculture. Fieldwork in Abkhazia has uncovered that economic reasons are a major obstacle to participation in political structures by the Armenian population. Wages for politicians and government functionaries are low, and many prefer to

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<sup>54</sup> One sign of this is the rapidly diminishing numbers of Armenian schools in Abkhazia, with the remaining usually having very few pupils. For example, the No. 9 "Tumanyan" secondary school in the centre of Sukhumi currently has approximately 150 pupils out of pre-war capacity of over 800.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Hachik Minasyan, head of Gagra branch of the Organisation of the Armenian Community in Abkhazia, former deputy mayor of city of Gagra, 09.04.10

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

work in the private sector of the economy where the income is higher.<sup>58</sup> This has led to a shortage of educated and motivated political cadres. Also, the majority of Armenians who are resident in rural areas are generally not politically active. Indeed, the lack of a well heeled middle class is probably one of the factors accounting for the low level of political participation among the Armenians.<sup>59</sup> Although Armenians are often well established in small and medium size enterprises, the strength of Abkhaz informal networks mean that they have difficulty penetrating into the commanding heights of the economy.<sup>60</sup> This is likely to have a negative impact on the economic situation of the Armenians as well, although this is hard to quantify. Regarding the activities of the Organisation of the Armenian Community in Abkhazia, which is the main interest group of the Armenians in Abkhazia, the lack of funds has been a great hindrance to the organisation's work.<sup>61</sup> The influence of the Armenian business community, which was until recently headed by the notable businessman and millionaire Tigran Tsaturyan has also diminished somewhat after the latter's death in 2004.<sup>62</sup>

Although Abkhazia prides itself on developing a degree of democracy since gaining de facto independence from Georgia, in reality institutions are weak and the rule of law questionable.<sup>63</sup> Few exact figures exist about corruption in Abkhazia, but its prevalence is thought to be extensive.<sup>64</sup> Anecdotal evidence points to informal practices being widespread in all spheres of society. These informal practices are often based on various kinship ties, and

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Raul Khonelia, professor of politics and international relations, Abkhazian State University, Sukhumi, 16.04.10

<sup>59</sup> The correlation between a strong middle class or bourgeoisie, and democratic development is well established. See for example. Moore, B: "The Social origins of Democracy and Dictatorship", and Pzeworski, A; et al: *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>60</sup> The Abkhaz economy is thought to be dominated by just a handful of influential Abkhaz families, who for the most part have built up their wealth in Russia. See: Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 109

<sup>61</sup> "Armenians of Abkhazia have three parliament members but not one church", by Emil Sanamyan, Armenian Reporter, Paramus, NJ: Apr 28, 2007, Issue. 9

<sup>62</sup> International Crisis Group, "Abkhazia's deepening dependence" 2009, p. 10

<sup>63</sup> Abkhazia was in 2010 as a "partly free" according to Freedom House. [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

although not ethnically conditioned per se, these informal practices have the effect of reinforcing ethnic cleavages. For example, it is often the case that officials give preferential treatment to their relatives and close acquaintances, which more often than not coincide with members of the same ethnic group.<sup>65</sup> Allocation of some seats in local assemblies and organs are also based on informal ethnic criteria. Although this arrangement is not embedded in law, it effectively guarantees non-Abkhaz minorities some measure of political participation in local government, although reserves the majority of important posts for the Abkhaz.

In the Gagra and Gulripsh region local assemblies, where large numbers of Armenians are resident, a commonly accepted “gentleman’s agreement” exists according to which approximately 1/4<sup>th</sup> of all delegates in the local assembly should be of Armenian ethnicity, and that the deputy mayor should also be Armenian. Candidates from other ethnicities, including ethnic Abkhaz, usually choose not to run or withdraw their candidacies in constituencies where a given position is customarily occupied by one particular ethnicity, and for this reason there is little proportionality according to the ethnic distribution of a particular region. For instance, in the city of Gagra, where approximately 90% of the population is Armenian, the Armenians still only occupy approximately 6-7 out of 27 of the seats in the local assembly.<sup>66</sup> Although some Abkhaz officials have expressed a willingness to change this system in favour of a one where representatives are elected more freely, and thus the degree of proportional representation will be higher, there has been little support for this from the Armenian community itself.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Armenians have especially reported problems dealing with the ethnic Abkhaz traffic police, while Armenians themselves are reported to dominate certain sections of the judiciary. Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 78

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Hachik Minasyan, Gagra, 09.04.10

The influence of informal practices is evident when it comes to parliamentary elections as well. During the March 2007 parliamentary elections for example, members of non-Abkhaz ethnic groups again took 26% of the seats in parliament.<sup>68</sup> It must be noted that the non-Abkhaz members of parliament tend not to concern themselves with ethnic politics or represent their particular ethnic groups in explicitly.<sup>69</sup> Some observers have also in fact argued that non-Abkhaz in important positions are mere figure heads with little real power, but this is generally not true for the Armenian community, which have several representatives in high positions with direct access to important figures among the Abkhaz leadership.<sup>70</sup> However, this means that the influence of the community is highly dependent on the personal characteristics of such representatives, which makes it vulnerable should these individuals be removed. For example, this concerns the decision of Albert Hovsepyan, who has held the post of vice speaker of the Abkhazian parliament for more than a decade, to retire from active politics as of May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010.<sup>71</sup> Although it is possible that Hovsepyan can continue to play an important political role even in retirement, his departure has probably resulted in the single greatest loss of Armenian influence within political institutions in Abkhazia in recent times.<sup>72</sup>

As mentioned above, the Abkhazian constitution permits only ethnic Abkhaz to occupy the post of president. Although this is a theoretical obstacle to Armenian political participation in Abkhazia, it is generally accepted as unlikely that an ethnic Armenian candidate would win a presidential election in Abkhazia, let alone be nominated.<sup>73</sup> When it comes to the issue of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 88

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Sergei Matosyan, Sukhumi, 13.04.10

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Hachik Minasyan, Gagra, 09.04.10

<sup>71</sup> "Albert Hovsepyan retires as head of the Abkhaz People's Assembly"

<http://taklama.wordpress.com/2010/05/19/albert-hovsepyan-retires-as-vice-speaker-of-abkhazias-peoples-assembly/>

<sup>72</sup> (As of 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2010 Sergei Matosyan was elected vice speaker of parliament, reaffirming Armenian influence in the Abkhazian parliament)

<sup>73</sup> Sergei Matosyan, an ethnic Armenian MP who have previously stated his intention to run for president should the constitution be amended, admits that a non-Abkhaz president would be not be electable under the current social and political conditions in Abkhazia: "Abkhaz society is not ready for it"

citizenship, the Armenian minority has overwhelmingly elected to acquire dual Russian-Abkhazian citizenship and therefore largely retained the franchise, unlike the Georgian population in Abkhazia.<sup>74</sup> Although Armenian citizenship is in theory available to the Armenian minority in Abkhazia as well, this is usually not a viable option for most, due to the distance, cost and difficulty of communication with Armenia from Abkhazia. The *Hamshen* Armenians in Abkhazia also often lack relatives and connections in Armenia, which makes staying there for longer periods of time a non-issue.<sup>75</sup> Russia is also much closer, and provides better opportunities for trade, education and business. However, recent data, as well as anecdotal evidence suggests that dual citizenship, or even triple or quadruple citizenship, is prevalent in Abkhazia to a certain extent.<sup>76</sup> This means that the Armenians of Abkhazia should have little trouble exercising their democratic rights conferred by Abkhazian citizenship, as well as acquiring Armenian citizenship, if they wish to do.

Another important factor which have had an impact on Armenian political participation in Abkhazia, but which can be said to have little to do with the ethnic-democratic structure of Abkhaz democracy as such, is the divided nature of the Armenian community in Abkhazia itself. In the 1990s, two different organisations of the Armenian community in Abkhazia were established, the *Krunk* and the *Mashtots*, which were eventually merged in the Organisation of the Armenian Community in Abkhazia.<sup>77</sup> However, this has arguably done little to ease tension within the community. Generally, there have been serious disagreements between those who want the community to play a greater role in Abkhazian society,

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<sup>74</sup> “Contemporary Attitudes and Beliefs in Transdnestria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” Survey by Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Quasi-State Project 2010

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Soren Kerselyan, Sukhumi, 06.04.10

<sup>76</sup> During fieldwork the author encountered an Armenian in Sukhumi who claimed to simultaneously possess both Abkhazian, Armenian, Georgian and Russian citizenship, but such cases may be rare.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Andranik Kondakchyan, Gulripsh, 14.04.10

including politics, and those who want a more relaxed approach.<sup>78</sup> Among the former group there is a strong sense of entitlement to political influence in the republic, borne out of the centuries of Armenian residence on Abkhazian territory, Armenian participation in the war against Georgia alongside the Abkhaz, as well as the realisation that the Armenians are disproportionately represented in politics despite being the second largest ethnic group in Abkhazia, nearly rivalling the Abkhaz numerically.<sup>79</sup> However, those belonging to the latter group consider that Armenians have more to gain in the end by deferring to Abkhaz sensibilities, and therefore should not take an active part in guiding politics in the republic, at least not as an ethnically defined entity.

This line of reasoning is chiefly based on the fear that anti-Armenian feeling in society at large might be strengthened if the Armenian community in Abkhazia takes on a larger political role. These anxieties especially came to the fore in the aftermath of the 2008 presidential elections, where Armenians allegedly played a decisive role in handing victory to incumbent Sergei Bagapsh, something which was seen as worrying and potentially destabilising by certain sections of Abkhaz society.<sup>80</sup> Many Armenians in both camps however emphasise that the Armenians in Abkhazia have in fact “two homelands”, both a “historical homeland;” Armenia, as well as one “homeland of birth;” Abkhazia.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the Armenians tend to recognize that the Abkhaz have their “historic homeland” only in Abkhazia, and this remains an important argument among many for continued caution in political matters. At the present moment, it seems that the inclination of the latter group has prevailed, since the organisation rarely involves itself in political affairs, and restricts its activities to cultural and social issues.

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Soren Kerselyan, Sukhumi, 06.04.10

<sup>79</sup> The above mentioned Albert Hovsepyan was until recently a vocal proponent of this faction.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Diana Kerselyan, Sukhumi, 06.04.10

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Sergei Matosyan, Sukhumi, 13.04.10

Another important issue which impacts political participation is the issue of schooling. In Abkhazia, all ethnic minority groups are entitled by the constitution to freely learn and use their own language, and a system of schools exists since Soviet times based on this principle.<sup>82</sup> In Armenian schools, the language of tuition is Armenian, but Abkhaz language is taught from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and the Russian from the 5<sup>th</sup>.<sup>83</sup> In addition, students learn at least one other foreign language, often English. Armenian minority schools are in a sense lucky, as they receive textbooks and other materials regularly from Armenia,<sup>84</sup> in addition to Abkhaz and Russian materials. The quality of the education still leaves a lot to be desired, as problems stemming from the economic destitution and isolation of Abkhazia are rife. Salaries for teachers are very low, and schools have limited means with which to buy adequate teaching material, especially in the Abkhaz language. Teaching methods are often very conservative, and students have a huge workload when it comes to languages, having to simultaneously study Armenian, Russian, English, and the quite complex Abkhaz language.<sup>85</sup> This leads some to suggest that students graduate without sufficient knowledge of Abkhaz, and that this, combined with the focus on Armenian as a language of tuition in schools, is inhibiting the ability and integration and participation of Armenians into Abkhazian society, including in politics.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia, Article 6

<sup>83</sup> Interview with officials at School no. 9, Sukhumi, 08.04.10

<sup>84</sup> This is not perceived as a problem for the de facto Abkhaz authorities, unlike the introduction of Georgian language textbooks from in the Gali region, which has been quite controversial.

<sup>85</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 10

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Diana Kerselyan, Sukhumi, 06.04.10

## **Future trends and predictions:**

Future trends in Abkhazia regarding the Armenian minority remain uncertain. However, for the situation with relation to the political participation of the Armenian minority to markedly improve, it is important to address some, if not all of the issues that have already been discussed above, such as the institutional and legal obstacles to participation, organisational problems, informal practices including corruption and nepotism, lack of economic development, etc. Some of these issues, such as those related to the economy and informal practices, are issues which concern not only to the Armenian minority, but also the Abkhazian society as a whole.<sup>87</sup> As such, it should not only be of interest to the Armenian community of Abkhazia, but the wider society as well. The actors that will be in a position to address these issues would first and foremost be the de facto Abkhazian government, Abkhazian civil society and NGOs in particular, as well as the Organisation of the Armenians in Abkhazia itself. The de jure government of Abkhazia (in Georgia) as well as the international community except Russia has little or no writ in Abkhazia, and Russia, which is Abkhazia's biggest benefactor, is unlikely to take much interest in minority relations in Abkhazia or other internal issues not concerning it directly. The government in Yerevan as well as the Armenian Diaspora has also taken scant interest in the situation in Abkhazia,<sup>88</sup> and is not likely to do so in the future. However, the international community might take on a greater role in working with minority rights issues and political participation, which due to

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<sup>87</sup> This provided that the Abkhaz political elite is sincere in its stated desire to approximate political and economic practices in Abkhazia to international standards and norms; Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 10

<sup>88</sup> An exception is the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, which ply regular contacts with the Armenian community in Abkhazia. "NKR President meets representatives of the Armenian community of Abkhazia" <http://www.nkr.am/en/news/2010-02-15/234/>

the democratising and modernising outlook of the current Abkhazian government probably would be welcomed.<sup>89</sup>

The economic factors behind the lack of participation would have to be addressed first and foremost. Despite anticipation of change in Abkhazia's economic fortunes following the Russian recognition of the territory as an independent state and ever closer, the territory is still mired in poverty as a result of years of warfare, international isolation and neglect. Major infrastructure upgrades as well as extensive economic reforms, as well as increased openness to the outside world would be needed for Abkhazia to develop the strong middle class that would favour political participation, not only amongst Armenians, but amongst all its inhabitants. While Abkhazia's economic development for the foreseeable future will continue to be somewhat limited by the disputed status of the territory, Russia has stepped in as Abkhazia's biggest benefactor, taking lease of Abkhazia's railways, airports and other infrastructure.<sup>90</sup> Investments here, if managed prudently, are likely to provide the potential for steady growth of the Abkhazian economy for decades to come. Also, much attention is currently focused on developments in Gagra, which is currently experiencing a boom, due to Russian interest in real estate and the preparation for the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

However, more serious economic development in this area would also have to be premised on reforming restrictive Abkhazian laws, such as the law on ownership of property. Opening up the real estate market to non-citizens for instance, would undoubtedly contribute to the

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<sup>89</sup> Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 80

<sup>90</sup> While investments here are likely to be crucial to Abkhazia's future economic development under present conditions, there has been considerable debate about this in Abkhazia internally. See: "Russian Newspaper in Row over Abkhaz Property rights" <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22622>

development of the middle class in Abkhazia, and especially among the Armenians, who have considerable experience in engaging in private business. It is possible that liberalisation would attract more Armenians to Abkhazia from nearby Krasnodarsky Krai in Russia or even further afield, which would help revitalise the economy of the area. However, although the Abkhazian authorities have made repeated promises of economic reform in this area, it has been slow to follow up on its commitments. Here, the securitisation of politics in Abkhazia, and not only minority relations as such, put obstacles in the way of further liberalisation. The ethnic Abkhaz are weary of ethnic Russians acquiring a greater part of Abkhazian prime real estate, and also of Armenians gaining a strong foothold in more strategic enterprises.

This fear is understandable given the continued precarious international political situation of Abkhazia, and conditions are not likely to change significantly in the near to medium term. The current regime in Abkhazia under Sergei Bagapsh has continued to act extremely risk averse, and have in several controversial cases been more than willing to cave to forces that are concerned with protecting the status quo.<sup>91</sup> However, unless the economic fortunes of Abkhazia improve drastically, the present demographic trends are also likely to continue. Especially, the young and educated section of the Armenian populace will increasingly migrate to Russia, where the opportunities for economic, educational and social advancement are greater, and in the long run, this will mean that the Armenian community will be deprived of educated and resourceful people who can participate in the politics in the republic. There is also the danger of the Armenian population becoming increasingly “russified” due to developing ever closer ties with Russia, and thereby taking less of an interest in politics in the

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<sup>91</sup> For instance, government plans to extend citizenship to the Georgians living in the Gali district of Abkhazia was vigorously opposed by sections of the Abkhaz society, and consequently dropped. See: “Furore over the Gal Georgians’ status” IWRP, August 2009 <http://iwpr.net/report-news/abkhazia-furore-over-gal-georgians%E2%80%99-status-0>

republic.<sup>92</sup> Although a decrease of the Armenian population in Abkhazia might assuage some among the ethnic Abkhaz population who fear an Armenian demographic takeover, the reality is that “brain drain”, demographic collapse and “russification” are dangers that concern Abkhazian society a whole, including the Abkhaz, and which might have serious consequences in the long term.

In the near future the official ideological outlook of the Abkhaz state will remain Abkhaz nationalism. The de facto authorities will no doubt continue to further the Abkhaz nation building project as the imperative of the state. However, there are several dangers associated with this project. First off, as the society and economy in Abkhazia develops further, the Abkhaz nation building project might increasingly alienate the other ethnic groups in the territory due to its exclusionary nature. While all ethnic groups, excepting the localised Georgian minority in the Gali region accept the Abkhaz claim to the Abkhazian state, and there is currently no danger of serious ethnic discord, this might not be taken for granted in the future. Due to the multi-ethnic nature of Abkhazian society and the contradictions this represents, Abkhazia seems like an ideal candidate for the introduction of a civic form on national identity. As mentioned before, such a civic identity might be starting to emerge in Abkhazia, although the de facto authorities have so far done little to encourage this. However, some within the Abkhaz intelligentsia have put forward the possibility of an Abkhazian civic national identity with Abkhaz as the lingua franca, but this seems impractical for several reasons.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with Sergei Matosyan, Sukhumi, 13.04.10

<sup>93</sup> This is first and foremost because Russian is already the de facto lingua franca, and also because of the apparent difficulty of learning the highly complex Abkhaz language. Such a civic identity would also probably have too many similarities to an ethnic Abkhaz national identity.

The most important factor in the emergence of a civic identity in Abkhazia seems to be the ever present threat of conflict, as well as international isolation, which has created a nascent national community across ethnic dividing where none existed before.<sup>94</sup> While the state is arguably still seen as the preserve of the ethnic Abkhaz, this new civic identity is strongest among the Armenians, especially those who played an important role in the 1992-1993 war on the Abkhaz side, as well as those who have served in the Abkhazian army the years after.<sup>95</sup> Mixed marriages between Armenians and Abkhazians are reportedly also on the rise, which might be taken as a sign that ethnic barriers between these two ethnic groups is increasingly breaking down. If the Abkhazian authorities were to focus specifically on a common civic identity, this would encourage greater loyalty to the Abkhaz states among other non-Abkhaz too, not only Armenians, and would remove some of the tensions we see today among its different ethnic groups. In other words, the long term stability of Abkhazia could be better assured if such an approach is adopted. However, given how the Abkhazian state is currently structured, a switch to a civic identity as basis this would have to go to some extent on accord with the very foundation of Abkhaz ethnic democracy as it currently stands, including the whole ideological superstructure of the state. It would also involve a serious conflict of interest with some of its most ardent supporters.<sup>96</sup> For this reason, the switch to a civic national identity in the short-medium term is unlikely.

When it comes to the legal framework of Abkhazia, as well as the current informal system of regulating minority relations, this is likely to remain the same in the short to medium term.

The Abkhaz political elite have little incentive to change the constitution to allow for citizens

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<sup>94</sup> Older forms of civic identity in Abkhazia, such as the Soviet identity, and the “Sukhumian” identity prevalent in the capital of Sukhumi, were largely wiped out as result of the war and resulting nationalist mobilisation.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Sergei Matosyan, Armenian MP, Sukhumi, 13.04.10

<sup>96</sup> This includes first and foremost the Abkhaz veterans from the 1992-1993 war, which through their special interest organisations still have considerable influence on Abkhazian politics, as well as the current opposition under Raul Khadjimba, which includes radical nationalist groups: Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 12

not of Abkhaz ethnicity to occupy the highest office of the state, barring any serious protests.<sup>97</sup> Since the Abkhazian state is still in a highly precarious situation in relation to international law, and an external threat from the state is still perceived, this also means that securitisation of minority relations will continue, to the detriment of a more open debate about these issues. However, some protest and discussion is taking place, especially with regard to the controversial law on introducing an Abkhaz language requirement, which impracticality is obvious even for many Abkhaz. That this law now seems to have come under greater scrutiny is a positive development for minority relations in Abkhazia.<sup>98</sup> With regards to the informal system of minority participation in politics, there is also little chance that this system will be amended in the foreseeable future. Stakeholders here are deeply entrenched, and show little willingness to change the system.

On the whole it is difficult to imagine a state built upon extensive ethnic and informal networks to willingly adjust to radical change, and the continued support for this system in reality points to deeper problems in Abkhazian society, like the weakness of institutions and lack of rule of law which, will also have to be addressed, should minority politics in Abkhazia become more genuinely democratic. In this regard, Abkhazian society could decidedly benefit more from more contact with scholars and civil society outside the region, as well as with current European practice when it comes to minority relations and political participation. This is especially so because the only major external institutional influence on the territory is Russia, which is itself somewhat lacking in the field of minority rights and participation according to international standards.

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<sup>97</sup> However, some high ranking Abkhaz leaders, most notably (current) Prime Minister Sergei Shamba, have acknowledged the unfairness of this practice, and have suggested it could be changed in the future: Trier, T, Lohm, H and Szakonyi, D; *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*, p. 76

<sup>98</sup> Anahid Gogorian, "Abkhaz Worried by Language Law", IWPR, CRS, No. 424, December 2007 <http://iwpr.net/report-news/abkhaz-worried-language-law>

**Conclusion:**

Abkhazia can reasonably be considered an ethnic democracy since it combines the institutionalised domination of the Abkhaz ethnic group with democratic rights for all citizens. Abkhazian citizenship is in theory open to all inhabitants of the territory which have been living there for 5 years or more from the date of the facto declaration of independence, but these restrictions do not apply to the Abkhaz and members of the closely related Abaza ethnic group. However, all citizens are equally entitled to vote in elections for parliament, president and local elections, as well as own real estate in the republic but the office of president is reserved according to constitution only for the Abkhaz. Although few provisions for minority rights are contained in the legal framework of the Abkhazian state, an informal system is in place which guarantees at least ¼ minority representation in local assemblies, as well as the parliament.

The Abkhaz still take the majority of seats in most local assemblies, and minorities rarely rise past the deputy level, although a few non-Abkhaz officials in higher positions do exist. Minorities are guaranteed the free use of their language according to the constitution, but a law on state language purporting to increase the use of the Abkhaz language in government institutions at the expense of the lingua franca Russian has been met with considerable criticism. Abkhazian ethnic democracy is however somewhat lacking when it comes to the Georgian minority in the territory, which to an extent is effectively barred from voting and owning real estate due to restrictions on period of residence for acquiring citizenship and lack of support for dual citizenship status. In this particular respect, the Abkhazian regime resembles more a control regime or ethnocracy than an ethnic democracy.

The ethnic Armenian minority, although occupying a fairly strong position in Abkhaz ethnic democracy and society superficially, faces multiple challenges that will have to be addressed if its clout and influence in the short to medium term should not be eroded substantially.

True, the Armenian minority is still the second largest ethnic group in Abkhazia, and it enjoys unprecedented levels of trust and influence among the Abkhaz political elite. Its semi-privileged status contrasts markedly with the pariah-caste like status accorded to the Georgian minority, and the Armenian minority is also considerably more resourceful than the other minorities also resident in the territory. This unique situation has come about mainly due to Armenian participation in 1992-1993 war on the Abkhaz side of the conflict, as well as widespread participation in the de facto government structures and institutions of Abkhazia since the war.

The Armenian minority is also the only minority, except the Russian minority, to have a large and coherent organisation to further its goals. Armenians as a group have overwhelmingly accepted de facto Abkhazian citizenship, and benefit substantially from both informal arrangements and direct contacts with the Abkhaz leadership on a high level. Armenians are to be found in high positions at both the regional government as well as the central level, and the Armenian community has provided an important swing vote in recent presidential elections. A nascent “civic” like identity has emerged among some Armenians, whose loyalty to Abkhazia has largely superseded the loyalty to their ethnic group, as well as their “historic” homeland Armenia. This “civic” like identity is strongest among those who participated in the 1992-1993 war for independence, as well in the structures and institutions of the Abkhazian state, in particular through service in the armed forces.

On the other hand, there are plenty of problems confronting the Armenian minority which impact negatively on their ability to participate in Abkhazian politics. First off, the number of Armenians living in Abkhazia has steadily decreased since the territory gained de facto independence. More importantly, this exodus has happened, and is still happening, among the most resourceful section of the Armenian populace, the intelligentsia and middle class. Long term demographic trends are uncertain, but unless the economic and social conditions in Abkhazia markedly improve, especially in relation to Russia, the territory might see a net decrease in the numbers of Armenians living in Abkhazia. This will no doubt have strong repercussions for the long term ability of the Armenian community to play an active role in Abkhazian politics, but might also open new opportunities, as the ethnic Abkhaz elite will not feel as threatened by the prospect of an increase in the number of Armenians relative to their own.

Several legal and institutional constraints contribute to limiting Armenian participation in Abkhazian politics. First and foremost, these are represented by informal practices partly inherited from the Soviet era, and reinforced by the ethnic-democratic character of the Abkhazian state. These include an informal cap on the number of Armenians that can serve in local assemblies, limited scope for advancement beyond secondary leadership positions, as well as being barred from the most powerful office of the state, the presidency. However, factors that are not limited to Abkhaz ethnic democracy also pose a challenge to Armenian participation on Abkhazian politics. These first and foremost include a divided and Armenians community, which also lacks the financial resources for furthering its goals. The Armenian schools in Abkhazia, although instrumental in preserving Armenian culture and language in Abkhazia, might also prove incapable of providing students with sufficient knowledge Abkhaz in order to foster increased integration in society, including participation

in politics. The Organisation of the Armenian community in Abkhazia could also play a greater role in politics, but not doing so has been a conscious decision by its leadership. In the end, these organisational factors might turn out to be just as important as for hindering Armenian participation in Abkhazian politics, as any factors stemming from the ethnic democratic character of the Abkhazian state, including the restrictive legislation and informal practices which hinder Armenians from taking more fully part in the political life of the republic.

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