

Abkhazia: Between the Past and the Future

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Georgia responded to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state following the August 2008 war by severing diplomatic relations with Moscow, which have not yet been re-established. Abkhazia has become in greater extent dependent on Russia, both financially and as the sole guarantor of its security. There is, however, no broad consensus within Abkhaz society, and assessments of the past, present and future vary widely.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kirill Shevchenko

The Struggle for the Nation-State: Abkhazia in the context of post-Soviet nation-building processes

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the swift and spontaneous transformation of the 15 former union republics into independent states, an event unprecedented in 20th century history. Earlier similar upheavals, such as the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 after the First World War and disintegration of Russian Empire in 1917, resulted in a smaller number of independent successor states.

The newly-born states in the post-Soviet space differed greatly from each other in terms of the overall maturity of their “high cultures” (defined by Ernest Gellner as "standardized,

formalized, codified and literacy-carried")¹ and of the intensity of their aspirations to secede from the USSR and to gain political independence. While the Baltic republics, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova were absolutely and unequivocally committed to break away and create their own independent states, most Belarusians, Russians, Ukrainians and the population of the Central Asian republics remained more or less loyal towards Soviet Union. This tendency was clearly manifested during the now almost forgotten All-Union referendum held on 17 March 1991 on preserving the USSR, in which the overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens (76%), mostly Russians, Belarusians and the population of the Central Asian republics voted in favor of preserving a reformed Soviet Union. It is worth of noting that the percentage of Belarusians (82,7%), Uzbeks (93,7%), Azerbaijanis (93,3%), Kazakhs (94,1%), Kyrgyz (96,4%) and Tajiks (96,2%) who voted in favor of preserving the USSR was even higher than the percentage of residents of the Russian Federation who did so (71,3%).

That March 1991 referendum revealed the diametrically opposite attitudes of Georgians and Abkhazians towards the USSR and their respective diverging visions of their political future. While Georgia, like the Baltic republics, refused to take part in the referendum, Abkhazia not only participated, but also demonstrated one of the highest percentages of pro-USSR voters (98,6%) of all the Soviet republics. This was a clear indication of the incompatibility of the Georgian and Abkhazian nation-state projects. It should be noted that from the very beginning, the Russian liberal intelligentsia openly sided with Georgia and branded Abkhazia a "reactionary post-Communist Vendee"², while pro-Communist and conservative political forces in Russia supported the Abkhazian national movement.

¹ Ernest Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford 1983, p. 76.

² See for example: Chervonnaya S.M. *Abkhazia-1992: postkommunisticheskaya Vandeya*. Moscow 1993.

The newly-born post-Soviet states started implementing their ambitious nation-building projects following Western “Nation-State” model, albeit with different levels of enthusiasm and considerable differences in their state-building legacy and general historical experience. In a number of cases, there emerged the quite curious problem of an already existing state that lacked virtually any “High Culture,” of which it was supposedly the repository. The process of nation- and state-building in the post-Soviet space frequently revealed discrepancies, at times very profound ones, between the highly ambitious projects of the nation-building designers and the post-Soviet cultural and political realities which were a direct legacy of the Soviet past.

In general, the consequences of Soviet ethnic and nationality policy turned out to be a sort of time-bomb that tended to explode exactly at the moment when ambitious nation-state-designers crossed, or were about to cross, specific red lines.

In the words of Roman Szporluk, one of the characteristic features of the Soviet theory and practice in the field of “the nationality question” was that “it virtually created nations and nationalities following criteria and purposes that were its own, and in conformity with these it charted out ‘national’ or ‘republic’ borders. The Soviets thus created a host of ethnic problems that they proved to be incapable of dealing with in the final years of the USSR and left as their legacy to their successors. One of the fundamental aspects of the entire Soviet experience with ethnicity was to connect nationality and the right of nationalities to the territory. The Soviets did not invent the concept of ethnic homeland, but they did much to make it even more central to the idea of nationality than it had been earlier... All those ethnic homelands enjoyed under the Soviets the status of political entities, and even the smallest, and thus ranking

lowest in the hierarchy of autonomous regions and republics, formally enjoyed at least rudiments of ‘statehood’”.³

Those initially formal rudiments of statehood bestowed by Moscow on even the smallest Soviet nationalities acquired political importance and started playing an increasingly significant role during the final years of the USSR with the democratization processes unleashed by Gorbachev’s “perestroika”. At the same time, individual Union republics demonstrated widely differing policies towards their autonomies. During the early years of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency, Russia’s liberal intelligentsia espoused the early Bolshevik vision of Russia as a “prison of nationalities” and promoted and supported the national aspirations of ethnic elites in Russia’s autonomous republics. This approach was manifested in Yeltsin’s famous exhortation to the leaders of those autonomies to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow”. As a result of this policy, numerous Russian autonomies abolished the distasteful adjective “autonomous” and became just “republics” within the Russian Federation with substantially increased rights. That decision was reflected in the Russian Constitution adopted in 1993. In the other Union republics, however, relations between them and their autonomies were developing in a quite different direction. Unlike Yeltsin, the political leadership of the other union republics during the later Soviet period tended to perceive their autonomies as totally artificial and unnatural phenomena imposed by Communist Moscow, and consequently as a danger to the sovereignty and independence of their republics.

But their persistent attempts to eliminate the autonomous formations within their republics and establish a unitary, rather than a federal state model collided with the totally opposite aspirations of the leaders of those autonomous formations, who were striving to improve and strengthen the political status of their semi-state entities. The time-bomb laid by Soviet

³ National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the new States of Eurasia. Editor: Roman Szporluk. M.E.Sharpe, New York, 1994. P. 5.

nationalities policy started to explode, and it was Georgia, with its autonomous formations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, that suffered the heaviest losses as a result of this fatal explosion.

* * *

It seems symbolic that the Caucasus region of the former USSR gave rise to the largest number of former Soviet republics that met the criteria of a “failed state”. This group of countries includes not only Georgia with its breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Azerbaijan with its Nagorno-Karabakh problem, but also the Russian Federation, whose numerous North Caucasus republics enjoyed a special format of relations with the federal center which some experts describe as a modernized semi-feudal model of vassalage characterized by political loyalty of local elites to Moscow in exchange for *carte blanche* in their internal and socio-economic policy. At the same time, the Caucasus also has the most “de facto states” of any region of the former USSR, including not only Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Russia formally recognized in the wake of the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war, but to a certain extent also Russia’s North Caucasus republics, particularly Chechnya.

From the very beginning, experiments in “history-making” were of paramount importance to the state and nation-building processes in the post-Soviet space. Different interpretations of the historical past were tailored to the current needs of political elites and were aimed at legitimizing the newly-born nation-states. In the process of history-making, with its selective approach to the historical past, the whole range of historical events was readdressed and reinterpreted and new myths were created if needed, including “a myth of the Golden Age”, “a myth of decline”, and “a myth of rebirth”⁴ with a strong ethnocentric flavor.

⁴ Anthony D. Smith. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford 1986. P. 192.

The implementation of state and nation-building projects in the post-Soviet space thus went hand in hand with substantial changes in existing national identities that resulted from the vigorous efforts of history-makers to reinterpret key historical events, making them significant legitimizing factors for nation-state-building and tailoring them to the current ideological needs of the political elites. The consequences of this process were at times unpredictable for the architects of nation-building themselves. Thus, with the final collapse of the USSR and the emergence of an independent Ukraine and Belarus when the ethnic self-identification imposed by the state ceased to be the only option, some Ukrainians and Belarusians rejected what was supposed to be their “own” traditional ethnic niche and opted for an alternative self-identification. For instance, more than 50% of Ukrainians living in eastern Slovakia started identifying themselves as *Rusyns (Ruthenians)*, reviving their traditional ethnic name and set of values. To a lesser extent, the process of Rusyn “revival” also impacted on Transcarpathian region of Ukraine. A similar process was going on in the Belarusian *Palesse* region (that is, the south-western part of present-day Belarus), where, according to local ethnic activists, in the early 1990s a significant part of local indigenous population rejected their generally accepted Belarusian or Ukrainian identity and declared themselves members of a separate *Poleshuk* nationality.⁵ In the words of Ernest Gellner, there is a vast number of “potential nations” in the world, and before the event, we can only identify countless cultural differences, without any reliable basis for predicting which of them are going to turn into “nations”.⁶ The results of Soviet ethnic and nationalities policy created particularly fertile soil for accelerating the process of shaping new nationalities and potential nation-states.

⁵ See: Kirill Shevchenko. Reinterpretation of History as the Identity-Building Tool. Case of Poleshuks in Belarus // Český lid. Ethnological Journal. 97/2010. # 4.

⁶ See: Ernest Gellner. Nations and Nationalism. Oxford 1990.

Those factors seem to be much more pronounced in the Caucasus region, where, in the words of Professor Vladimir Degoev, politics had been always closely interconnected with history, since people in this multiethnic and multi-confessional region are particularly sensitive to their past.⁷ The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia has a particularly long and complicated history going back to the pre-Soviet and early Soviet period. As a result of Caucasian war waged by Tsarist Russia in the first half and in mid- 19th century, a large proportion of the indigenous Abkhaz population had to leave their homeland in the northern-western part of the South Caucasus and to emigrate. To quote Abkhazian historian Stanislav Lakoba, “The Caucasian war resulted in ethnic catastrophe for Abkhazian people. More than 50% of the population had to leave their homeland and became refugees in Turkey”.⁸ The influx of ethnic Georgians into Abkhazian lands after the Caucasian war initially was supported by the Russian imperial authorities, which considered the Christian Georgians as one of their most important allies in the Transcaucasus. While in 1886 ethnic Abkhazians made up 85,7% of population of Abkhazia, in 1897 their percentage had dropped to just 55,3%.⁹

One of the most important aspects of the conflict between Abkhazians and Georgians was the ongoing interethnic rivalry that stemmed from totally different and often mutually exclusive interpretations of the history of that region from the Classical period and Middle Ages up to the imposition of Soviet power. While the Georgians consider the entire Soviet period as a dark era of Soviet-Russian occupation which had only negative consequences for Georgia, the Abkhazian approach to the Soviet past is more nuanced, multi-faceted and at times even positive. In

⁷ Kavkazskii vector rossiiskoi politiki. Sbornik dokumentov. Tom I. Moscow 2011. P. 3.

⁸ Stanislav Lakoba. Abkhazia posle dvukh imperii XX-XXI vv. Moscow 2004. P. 12.

⁹ Ibid. P. 13.

the words of Stanislav Lakoba, “until the death of the head of Abkhazian government, Nestor Lakoba, in 1936, Abkhazia enjoyed a period of stability, interethnic harmony, economic and cultural achievements. After that, in 1937-1953, Abkhazia experienced a dark period of Georgian expansion and repressions towards Abkhazians as a nationality. Nikita Khrushchev’s policy led to the rehabilitation of the Abkhazians and to a revival of their culture and education...”¹⁰

Many Caucasus observers and experts believe that making Abkhazia a part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR reflected the predominantly pro-Georgian position of Moscow, especially under Stalin. The experience of being part of the Georgian SSR had far-reaching consequences for Abkhazia and contributed greatly to increasing mutual alienation. As Doctor Sergey Markedonov argues elsewhere in this book, “During the Stalin period, Georgia pursued a policy of discrimination against its Abkhazian population. In 1937-1938, the Abkhaz alphabet was replaced by one based on Georgian; in 1945-1946, Georgian became the primary language of instruction in Abkhazian schools...”

During the last years of the USSR, when a national revival of all Soviet nationalities blossomed forth as a result of Gorbachev’s policy of “perestroika”, the escalation of conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians seemed inevitable. The Georgian national movement headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia aspired to a homogeneous and unitary Georgian state and perceived the existence within Georgia of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian autonomies as a mere political anomaly and a sad consequence of Moscow’s anti-Georgian policy that needed to be rectified as soon as possible. In April 1989, in one of his public speeches, Gamskhurdia even denied the existence of Abkhazians as a separate nationality. In their turn, Abkhazian politicians viewed the mere fact of Abkhazian autonomous status within Georgia as a fatal injustice and tragic error of Soviet nationality

¹⁰ Ibid. P. 7.

policy, or even as a sacrifice made by Communist Moscow under the influence of the Georgian lobby. As a result, Abkhazian leaders did their best to secede from Georgia, or at least to upgrade the political status of their republic within Georgia following the attractive example of the autonomous republics in the Russian Federation, which managed to improve their position by abolishing the term “autonomous” and securing substantially more rights and privileges thanks to Moscow’s benevolence in the early 1990s.

Totally different expectations, conflicting vectors of political development, barely compatible nation-building projects, political ambitions, and increasingly obvious mental incompatibility based on absolutely different perceptions of the historical past resulted in a war in 1992-1993 which, many experts believe, had a clear ethnic dimension. Ethnicity played the role of a “principal mobilizing resource”¹¹ during the war between Abkhazia and Georgia in early 1990s. This explains the numerous atrocities and ethnic cleansing committed by both sides. During the initial stage of the war, the use by the Georgian army of tanks, heavy artillery and military helicopters resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians. Georgian armed forces commander-in-chief General Gia Karkarashvili warned on 24 August 1992 that the Georgian army would not take any prisoners of war, and that all 97,000 Abkhazians would die in the event they supported Ardzinba and Abkhazian leadership.¹²

The tragic humanitarian consequences of that war -- reprisals by Georgian troops against non-Georgian civilians in Abkhazia and counter-reprisals against Abkhazia’s ethnic Georgian population by the Abkhazian army-- resulted in a mass exodus of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia, which changed the ethnic profile of Abkhazia in favor of titular nationality and complicated drastically the possibilities of mutual reconciliation.

¹¹ Artur Tsutsiev. Atlas etnopoliticheskoi istorii Kavkaza. Moscow 2006. P. 94.

¹² Gruzino-abkhazskii konflikt 1917-1992. Moscow 2007. P. 89.

Abkhazia's status as a self-proclaimed non-recognized state lasted until shortly after the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, when Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (Some Latin American states also did so at a later date.) As a result, Abkhazia's status changed from "non-recognized" to "partially recognized". Discussing the role of Russian factor in the evolution of the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict, Dr. Sergey Markedonov notes elsewhere in this book that "while the huge role played by Moscow in the transformation of the Georgia-Abkhazian conflict needs to be recognized,, the 'hand of the Kremlin' was not the core prerequisite for it. The most important reason for it was the desire of the Abkhaz elite to determine the status of the former Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic outside the framework of the Georgian state".

* * *

Much has been said and written about the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict, particularly in connection with the August 2008 war and Russia's subsequent decision to recognize Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence, which produced new significant challenges for the whole Caucasus region.

One of the most important consequences of those events is that the idea of Abkhazian independence is becoming increasingly popular within Abkhazian society. Thus, successive public opinion polls in Abkhazia conducted by the Prague-based Medium Orient information agency indicated that while in August 2006, 68% of those polled favored joining Russian Federation and only 25% preferred an independent Abkhazian state, in September 2011, the situation had changed drastically, with 73% of respondents favoring Abkhazian independence while only 24,6% were in favor of joining Russia.

There seems nonetheless to be a certain lack of balance in analyzing the Abkhazian case, as most attention is being paid to

the current political dimension, while the historical and cultural context, which are so crucially important for an adequate understanding of the roots and perspectives of Abkhazian-Georgian conflict, is frequently being overlooked and underestimated.

The primary objective of this book is to present the “Abkhazian case” in its entire complicated and contradictory context. The editors believe that this could be instrumental and helpful in promoting a deeper understanding of the complicated processes underway in that part of the western Caucasus.

2. ABKHAZIA: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sergey Markedonov

The ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia: origins, dynamics and implications for regional security

The dissolution of the USSR at the end of the Cold War brought new challenges to the Caucasus. The former republics of Soviet Transcaucasia immediately became international actors which identified their own national interests and foreign policy priorities. The formation of independent states in the South Caucasus has been accompanied by a search for new mechanisms to ensure regional security and enshrine new formats of international cooperation. The newly independent post-Soviet states are, however, not the only product of the collapse of the USST. One of the major consequences of this

process was the appearance of entities that have also declared their independence and sovereignty but not obtained UN membership and full-fledged international recognition even though they were able to defend themselves through armed confrontation as well as bloody conflicts¹³.

Abkhazia has become one of the most interesting cases of de facto statehood building in Eurasia. More than twenty years ago, in August, 1992, it was drawn into an almost 14-month-long conflict with the Georgian government and local paramilitary forces. Since 1993, September 30 has traditionally been celebrated in Abkhazia as Victory Day. On that day, the Abkhaz armed forces and volunteers from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus drove the Georgian troops and militias out of most of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. For Tbilisi, that meant the loss of jurisdiction over part of its territory recognized de jure as formally belonging to it. For Sukhumi, in contrast, it marked the beginning of its campaign to secure international recognition. For the whole intervening period, Abkhazia's leaders pursued that objective in the face of controversial inter-action with the "mother state" and adverse external influences. In August 2008, Abkhazia obtained the first recognition of its independence. While the huge role played by Moscow in the transformation of the Georgia-Abkhazian conflict needs to be recognized, the "hand of the Kremlin" was not the core prerequisite for it. The most important reason for it was the desire of the Abkhaz elite to determine the status of the former Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic outside the framework of the Georgian independent state.

¹³ For more detailed observation see: Sergey Markedonov, "The Unrecognized States of Eurasia as a Phenomenon of the USSR's Dissolution" //Demokratizatsiya. The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization. 2012. Vol. 20 # 2.

Political geography

Abkhazia is located in the north-western part of the southern slope of the Greater Caucasus and on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea. Its capital, Sukhum (Sukhumi) serves as the administrative center of this 8,700 square kilometer territory. In the north-east, Abkhazia shares a border with Russia (the Black Sea coast of the Krasnodar region) and in the south-west it borders on Georgia (Samegrelo region). Most members of the UN regard the Abkhaz-Georgia border purely as an administrative one, rather than a true inter-state one.

The size and composition of the population of Abkhazia is difficult to ascertain and has often been disputed; the methods for estimating it are extremely sensitive and controversial. According to the last Soviet census (1989), held on the eve of the collapse of the USSR and the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict (1992-1993), the total population of the territory of the Abkhaz ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) was 525,061 people (9.7% of the entire population of the Soviet Georgia), of whom 239,872 were ethnic Georgians (45.7% of the population), 93,267 were Abkhazians (17.8%), 76,541 were Armenians (14.6%), 74,913 were Russians (14.3%) and 14,700 were Greeks (2.8%). At various times, however, some of those ethnic groups were identified by different names. In the Soviet census of 1926, the three Kartvelian ethnic groups (Georgians, Megrelians and Svans) were listed separately (there were 41,000 Megrelians, 19,900 Georgians and 6,600 Svans). In subsequent censuses, the generic term "Georgians" was introduced and used to identify all three Kartvelian ethnic groups. As a result of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict of 1992-1993, Abkhazia's population declined by almost a factor of three. According to the census data (collected from 21 to 28 February 2011), the population of Abkhazia is currently 240,705 people¹⁴. The country is home to

¹⁴ As a result of the armed conflict of 1992-1993 about 8,000 people were killed and 18,000 were injured. Approximately 200,000 people left the

91 separate ethnic groups. The most numerous are the Abkhazians, of whom there are 122, 069 (50.71%); Russians, with 22,077 people (9.17%); Armenians, with 41,864 people (17.39%); and Georgians, with 43,166 people (17.93%). Only 3,201 people (1.33%) were identified as Megrelians¹⁵. The data provided by Abkhaz statisticians raises many questions, however. It is questionable how, given the number of Abkhazians who left the republic between 1989 and 2011, the number of the ethnic Abkhazians has increased from 93,267 to 122,069. According to Georgian statistics, the total population of Abkhazia stood at about 179,000 people in 2003 and 178,000 in 2005¹⁶.

The Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia (Apsny) describes it as “a sovereign, democratic State, historically established by the right of the people to self-determination.”¹⁷ As of July 2013, Abkhazia has been recognized as independent by five UN-member states (Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru and Tuvalu)¹⁸. On September 17, 2008 Russia and Abkhazia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance which provides for a Russian military and political presence in the Republic.

territory of Abkhazia. See more detailed observation: Abkhazia Today. Europe Report N°176 – 15 September 2006. Brussels. Pp.1,13.

¹⁵ V Abkhazii podvedeny itogi pervoi perepisi [The results of the first census are summed up in Abkhazia]//<http://abkhasia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/198470/>, 28.12.2011

¹⁶ Statistical Yearbook of Georgia 2005: Population, Table 2.1, p. 33, Department for Statistics, Tbilisi (2005).

¹⁷ The Republic of Abkhazia: The Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia (in Russian) // <http://dpashka.narod.ru/konstitut.html>

¹⁸ On 23 May 2011 Vanuatu recognized Abkhazia's independence and established diplomatic relations and a visa-free regime with Abkhazia. However on July 12, 2013 Georgia and Vanuatu signed an agreement on establishing diplomatic and consular relations in which the Republic of Vanuatu recognized territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders. See detailed information (in English): Georgia, Vanuatu Establish Diplomatic Ties //<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26273>.

From the point of view of Georgian legislation, Abkhazia is considered an "autonomous republic" within the State of Georgia and an integral part of the Georgian state. Article 1, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution of Georgia emphasizes that "Georgia is an independent, unitary and indivisible state, as confirmed by the referendum held on March 31, 1991 across the country, including the Abkhaz ASSR and the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region, and the Act on the Restoration of the State Independence of Georgia on April 9, 1991." Article 8 declares Abkhazian the official language in Abkhazia, and Article 5 establishes representation for Abkhazia in the upper chamber (Senate) of the Parliament of Georgia "after creating the territorial integrity of Georgia and proper conditions for the formation of local self-government."¹⁹

Under Georgian Law, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered "the result of the military aggression of the Russian Federation"²⁰. Georgia currently hosts a "government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia", which acts on Georgian territory and is recognized by Tbilisi as the only legitimate authority of Abkhazia²¹.

The origins of ethno-political conflict

There is no consensus on the question of the origins of the ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia either in scholarly literature or in the numerous policy-oriented reports devoted to its aftermath. According to Leila Tania, research director of the "Civil Initiative and the Man of the Future" Foundation, "unofficially the notion is circulated that the confrontation between the Abkhazians and Georgians is not as acute as, say,

¹⁹ The Constitution of Georgia (in English) // <http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/details.jsp?id=7523>

²⁰ See the full text of The Law of Georgia "On Occupied Territories" (in English): [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL\(2009\)004-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL(2009)004-e.asp)

²¹ On the activity of this Government see: <http://abkhazia.gov.ge>

that between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and the enmity arose only in the course of the armed conflict and after it. Unfortunately, such a cursory look at the history and reality of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has become entrenched within a number of international organizations ... An idealized picture of the pre-war phase of the conflict is more common among Abkhaz and Georgian participants in the informal dialogue, which only reinforces this stereotype among the international actors engaged in the conflict resolution process.”²²

The Abkhaz (self-identification “Apsua”) have long populated the Western Caucasus. They speak one of the languages of the Abkhazo-Adygeyan (West Caucasian) language group. Together with peoples of the western Caucasus to whom they are closely related (for example: the Abazins, Adygeyans and Kabardians [or Circassians]), they play an important role in the ethno-cultural development of the Caucasus. By the beginning of 19th century, the Principality of Abkhazia (the ruling dynasty Chachba/ Shervashidze) was a formal protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. Its incorporation into the Russian Empire began in 1810, and until 1864 it enjoyed de facto autonomy. The abolition of this autonomy gave rise to widespread dissatisfaction among the Abkhaz population. Consequently, as a result of the Lykhny uprising of 1866 and the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, many ethnic Abkhaz were expelled from the Russian Empire. According to some estimates, 60% of the region’s population in the mid-1860s were forced to leave²³. At the same time, serfdom was abolished in the Caucasus, making it possible for landless peasants from Georgia to emigrate and explore the empty and often abandoned

²² Leila Taniya, “ Varianty strategii uregulirovaniya gruzino-abkhazskogo konflikta” [The variants of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution strategies] //Central Asia and the Caucasus. 2003. # 5. P. 51.

²³ Willis Brooks, “Russia’s conquest and pacification of the Caucasus: relocation becomes a pogrom in the post-Crimean period” // Nationalities Papers. 1995. № 23(4): pp. 675-86.

neighboring territories. In 1877, the famous Georgian public figure and teacher Jacob Gogebashvili (1840-1912) described this process as follows: "Resettlement is, without a doubt, not temporary, but permanent. Abkhazia will never again see its sons". Gogebashvili nonetheless stressed that "... the anguish and the lack of land in Samegrelo ... make it highly desirable for many Megrelians to resettle in Abkhazia."²⁴ Meanwhile, the Russian imperial administration encouraged the resettlement of Christian peoples in Abkhazia (mainly Armenians, Greeks, Russians and Estonians). As a result, the early 20th century was a period of radical ethno-demographic transition in the region.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Sukhum district (created as a result of the conversion of the Sukhumi Military Department in 1883) was part of the Kutaisi province and thus subordinated to the Russian Caucasian administration in Tbilisi. From 1904-1917, Gagra and the adjacent areas were included in the Sochi district of the Black Sea province (the smallest province of the Russian Empire). Following the collapse of the Russian Empire and the creation of the newly independent states on its former territory, the "Abkhaz issue" was a focal point in the clash of interests between the Bolsheviks, the Armed Forces of South Russia (the "White Movement" led by General Anton Denikin) and the Democratic Republic of Georgia. In the summer of 1918, Abkhazia was incorporated into the new Georgian state. This process was accompanied by repressive actions against the Abkhaz national movement and ordinary Abkhazians by the central authorities of Georgia and the Georgian armed forces (both the Army and the Georgian National Guard were under the command of General George Mazniev [Mazniashvili]). In March 1919, the People's Council of Abkhazia, the formation of which was decisively influenced by the central government of Georgia, adopted the Act on the Entry

²⁴ Jacob Gogebashvili, "Kem zaselit' Abkhaziyu?" [With whom should Abkhazia be settled?] //Tifliskii Vestnik [The Tiflis Messenger]. 1877. - № 209.- September, 27.

of Abkhazia into Georgia as an Autonomous Region. This act was then approved by the Constituent Assembly of Georgia. According to the 1921 Constitution of Georgia (Chapter 11, "Independent control", Article 107) Abkhazia (Sukhumi region), Muslim Georgia (Batumi region) and Zagatala (Zakatal'skaya area) were recognized as "inseparable parts of the Georgian republic" and granted "autonomous government in local affairs."²⁵

The strict and sometimes repressive policies of Georgia's Menshevik government vis-à-vis ethnic minorities created sympathy for the Abkhaz people in Soviet Russia and within the Bolshevik movement. In March 1921, Abkhazia was proclaimed a Soviet Socialist Republic. In December of the same year, an agreement was signed between Georgia (which by that time had become Soviet), and the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic. According to that document, Abkhazia became part of Georgia. Since then, Abkhazia has been considered a contractual republic. The Constitution of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic adopted by the First Congress of the Soviets of Georgia in 1922 said that, based on self-determination, it included: the Adjara Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region (Oblast) and the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Constitution of the USSR (1924) stated that "the autonomous Republics of Adjara and Abkhazia and the autonomous regions of South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan are represented in the Council of Nationalities by one representative."²⁶ In 1925, the Third Congress of the Soviets

²⁵ The Constitution of Georgia (adopted in February, 21, 1921 by the Georgian Constituent Assembly) (in Russian)

http://www.200.org.ge/documents/1918docs/rus/21_02_21.pdf

On March, 1922 four districts of the former Zagatala area became parts of Azerbaijan.

²⁶ "Bor'ba za uprocheniye Sovetskoi vlasti v Gruzii. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov. 1921-1925" [The struggle for the Soviet power strengthening in Georgia. Collection of documents and materials]. Tbilisi. Тбилиси. 1959. P. 80

of Abkhazia adopted a constitutional plan involving a contractual relationship between Sukhumi and Tbilisi, but this document was rejected by the Transcaucasian Territorial Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Subsequently, the leaders of the Abkhaz national movement would call it “the first Abkhaz Constitution.” During the period of “perestroika” and the dissolution of the USSR, it became an important tool in the political and legal struggle for Abkhazia’s secession from Georgia²⁷.

In 1931, the Abkhazian ASSR was created within the Georgian SSR. Under Stalin, the Georgian leadership pursued a strict policy of discrimination against the Abkhazian population. In 1937-1938, the Abkhaz alphabet was replaced by one based on the Georgian schedule and in 1945-1946, Georgian became the basic language of instruction in Abkhazian schools. Many Abkhaz toponyms were replaced by Georgian ones. “The policy of repression of the Abkhaz language and culture implemented by very specific persons of Georgian nationality (not only policymakers, but also ordinary people) promoted among the Abkhaz people the image of an enemy in relation to the mass of Georgian immigrants who possessed the same social privileges,” says Gia Nodia, a contemporary Georgian scholar and social activist²⁸. The mass migration of the rural population from the inner regions of Georgia to the Abkhaz ASSR became state policy after the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) passed a Resolution “On Measures to Protect the

²⁷ On July, 23, 1992 the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia abolished the Constitution of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Georgia and proclaimed the “restoration” of the Constitutional draft of 1925. See more detailed observation: Stanislav Lakoba, “History: 1917-1989” //The Abkhazians (Hewitt G., ed.). Richmond, Survey: Curzon Press, 1999. P.93.

²⁸ Gia Nodia, “Konflikt v Abkhazii: natsionalnye proekty I politicheskie obyazatel'stva” [The conflict in Abkhazia: national projects and political obligations] // Gruziny I Abkhazy: puti k primipeniyu [The Georgians and Abkhazians: ways for reconciliation]. Moscow. 1998. P.30.

Public Land of the Collective Farms from Being Left to go to Waste?" (1939). In an explanatory note on the situation in the Georgian SSR, it was emphasized that "collective farmers and individual farmers could use large areas of vacant lands which were not cultivated by the local population due to the lack of manpower."²⁹

Subsequently the discriminatory measures against the Abkhazian population were substantially mitigated, and education in Abkhaz and the Abkhaz media were revived. In 1978, during the process of adopting the Abkhaz ASSR Constitution, a compromise was reached: the Abkhaz language became, along with Georgian and Russian, a state language in the autonomous territory. In addition, special quotas to fill vacant positions in Party, government, administrative and economic bodies were also introduced. At the 11th Plenum of the Communist Party of Georgia (June 27, 1978), then First Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze publicly criticized the "excesses" of the Georgian Communists with regard to the "Abkhaz issue"³⁰. The policy of ethnic discrimination had an extremely negative impact, creating among Abkhazian politicians and scientists the perception that even in the 1960s-1980s, the social and economic policies of the Georgian SSR were geared to ensuring the large scale resettlement of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia with the aim of changing the ethno-demographic balance to the detriment of the Abkhaz people. Whereas in 1959, there were already 158,221 Georgians in Abkhazia compared with 61,193 Abkhaz, by 1970 the number of Georgians had risen to 199,955 while the number of Abkhaz was 77,276). In 1979, Georgians already constituted 43.9% of the

²⁹ "Abkhazia: documenty svidetelstvuyut. Sbornik materialov. 1937-1953" [Abkhazia: documents testify. Collection of materials.1937-1953. (E.Sagaria, T.Achugba, ed.). Sukhum/Sukhumi. Alashara Publishing House. 1992. P.p. 6-7.

³⁰ Gruzino-abkhazskii konflikt. 1917-1992 [The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. 1917-1992] (K.Kazenin, ed.) Moscow. Europe Publishing House, 2007. P. 27.

population of the autonomous region (213,322)³¹. In this case, as it was rightly noted by the authors of an International Crisis Group report entitled "Abkhazia Today" (September, 2006), "the Georgian portion of the population of Abkhazia and society at large within the Georgian SSR perceived a number of 'liberal measures' enacted by the Brezhnev leadership directed at the Abkhazians as 'discriminatory' against the Georgians themselves. Abkhazians, being an autonomous ethnic minority, occupied about 67% of the administrative positions in the Abkhaz ASSR."³²

Since the creation of the autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR, the Abkhazian population has periodically tried to ask for reconsideration of its status. In 1931, 1957, 1967, and 1977 the Abkhaz national intelligentsia prepared appeals to the leadership of the USSR in favor of secession from the Georgian SSR in order either to join the RSFSR or to form a separate Abkhaz Union Republic. The so-called "Letter of 130" (December 1977) was the last address to this effect directed towards the Kremlin before Gorbachev's "perestroika" and the subsequent political liberalization that culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union. However this initiative was rejected and its organizers were criticized by the Abkhaz Party Committee Bureau (on February 22, 1978) for promoting "erroneous nationalist views and calumny"³³.

³¹ Naselenie Abkhazii [The population of Abkhazia] //http://www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rnabkhazia.html See also: Georgii Lezhava, "Izmenenie klassovo-sotsialnoi struktury naseleniya Abkhazii [The changes in the social structure of Abkhazia's population]. Sukhumi/Sukhum. Alashara Publishing House. 1989.

³² Abkhazia today... P. 6.

³³ Sergey Markedonov. "Sovetskii Kavkaz v 1970-e: predchuvstviye grazhdaskoi voyny" [The Soviet Caucasus in 1970s: Premonition of civil war]/Neprikosnovennyi zapas [Emergency Reserve]] 2007.- №2(52).- P.54.

Abkhazia: from Soviet autonomy to a de facto state

Thus on the eve of “Perestroika”, the Georgian and Abkhaz communities inside Abkhazia, as well as Georgian society as a whole, were ready to seize the opening provided by the weakening of the Kremlin’s administrative control and the subsequent political liberalization in order to move ahead with their nationalist aspirations. “The Abkhaz problem” became the main “political trauma” for post-Soviet Georgia. The struggle of the Georgian National Democrats for Georgian independence during the final years of the USSR coincided with, and proceeded in tandem with, the Abkhaz movement for ethno-political self-determination. The events of the late 1980s and early 1990s are considered, in post-Soviet Georgian historiography and political science, a period of national liberation for the Georgian people. During that period, the most important slogans, requirements and programs that became the basis for the political, legal and ideological development of post-Soviet Georgia were proclaimed. The ethno-nationalist slogans and appeals for the restoration of the political and legal continuity of the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921), a state with extremely complicated and rather ambiguous relations with Abkhazia, was in sharp contrast to the rhetoric of the Georgian and Abkhaz national movements of the late 1980s. As a result, the start of Georgia’s national liberation expedited the self-determination of the Abkhaz people. The escalation of tensions was facilitated by the particularities of Abkhazia’s “political demography. In contrast to the Ossetians, whose ethnic homeland was not confined to South Ossetia (most of the Ossetian population of the Georgian SSR had lived outside of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region), the homeland of the Abkhaz was virtually identical with the territory of the Abkhaz ASSR (a further 2,000 Abkhazians live in Georgia’s autonomous region of Adjara). Unlike South Ossetia, in Abkhazia the “titular” ethnic group did not constitute a numerical majority. This created many difficulties for Abkhazia’s secession from

Georgia even during the Soviet period. The Abkhaz national movement could not appeal to the “will of the majority”. As a result, **its main task was to control “its own territory,” providing full political, social, economic and ideological domination inside of that area.** However, in a situation where the largest community in Abkhazia (Georgians) supported the preservation of the territorial integrity of Georgia within the Georgian SSR, the Abkhaz movement needed an ally in order to implement its policy. In Moscow (initially the central administration of the USSR, then, following its dissolution, the Russian government), they found such an ally. For nearly six decades, the Abkhaz representatives had addressed their demands to Moscow but a new appeal to Kremlin, adopted on March 18, 1989 (when 30.000 people gathered for a rally in the village of Lykhny in the Gudauta district, the former residence of the Abkhazian princes), demanded a radically different approach from all previous ones. On the one hand, it echoed traditional pro-Soviet slogans such as the “Leninist principles of national policy.” On the other hand, the protesters discussed the “political, economic and cultural sovereignty” of Abkhazia. Moreover, this new appeal to Moscow fostered consensus between the Abkhaz oblast committee of the CPSU and representatives of the Abkhaz intelligentsia, who had been recently accused of “bourgeois nationalism” and “slandorous fabrications.” The creation of the “Aydgylara” (Popular Forum) movement on December, 13, 1988 was the practical manifestation of that consensus. Nationalist discourse replaced all other **causes** in the public sphere and began to play a mobilizing and unifying role. Within the context of conditions conducive to political liberalization, the growing public activity in Abkhazia attracted unprecedented attention throughout Georgia. It accelerated the crystallization of the Georgian national movement, in that it significantly **simplified its ideological development search for it.** The “enemy image” fell into the hands of its leaders. In the space of a few months, the

“communist-dissident” controversy in Georgia was replaced by the discourse of “national unity”³⁴. It was then that the “Abkhazian separatism” movement became linked in the Georgian perception (both national leaders and public opinion as a whole) with Russian intrigues. This discourse did not make any serious distinction between the USSR and the Russian Empire, i.e. the various political forms or incarnations of Russian power. The tragic events of April 9, 1989 (the deployment of Soviet Army troops to disperse a peaceful demonstration on Tbilisi’s Rustaveli Avenue) and the Georgian-Abkhaz clashes in Sukhumi and other parts of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic in July 1989 ensured **the development of blood lines between Georgians and Abkhazians**³⁵. Attempts to preserve Georgian-Abkhaz “unity” within the existing Soviet political framework failed. A landmark event was the split of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR in 1990 into the Abkhaz and Georgian factions. On August 25, 1990 the Abkhaz members of the Supreme Council adopted a “Declaration of State Sovereignty” and a resolution “On the legal guarantees of protection of statehood of Abkhazia.” Those documents were voided in turn

³⁴ The Congress of People’s Deputies Commission (known as the Anatoliy Sobchak Commission) that investigated the Tbilisi violence of April 1989 brilliantly demonstrated this trend: “In those conditions the state and party leadership of Georgia faced the necessity to confirm its role of political and ideological vanguard and to follow the “Perestroika” principles in order to influence the public opinion preventing the gap between its status and realities on the ground. However, Georgia’s Communist Party leaders failed to provide a dialogue and effectively cooperate with society”. See: <http://sobchak.org/rus/docs/zakluchenie.htm>

Subsequent developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia show the Communist leadership’s willingness to exploit nationalist rhetoric to preserve its positions.

³⁵ During the violence in Tbilisi, 19 people were killed and 200 people were injured. During two weeks of riots in Abkhazia, 14 people were killed. See for detailed observations: *Gruziya: Problemy I perspektivy razvutiya* [Georgia: problems and perspectives of development]. Moscow: Russian Institute for Strategic Studies. 2002. Vol. 1-2.

by the Supreme Council's Georgian members. The mass political split between the two ethnic communities was reinforced by referendums carried out by the Soviet authorities (on voting for a "renewed Union"), and by Georgia's attempt to secede from the USSR by means of a referendum on the restoration of the national independence. The first referendum took place on March 17, 1991, and the second on March 31, 1991. The ethnic Abkhaz supported Moscow and Soviet policy almost unconditionally. For this reason, they participated in the first referendum and boycotted the second. Georgians living in Abkhazia, as well as their compatriots in the rest of Georgia, refused to take part in the vote on the future of the Soviet Union and instead participated in the referendum on the restoration of Georgian statehood. Those two referendums demonstrated to the Abkhaz leadership the need to maintain strong relations with allies other than Moscow, and for that reason they sought to secure the support of Abkhazia's ethnic Russians, Greeks and Armenians³⁶. Abkhazia's leaders cannot claim all the credit for the referendum outcome, however, as it was primarily the result of Georgian politicians' collective failure to create a dialogue with their Abkhaz counterparts because of their commitment to radical ethnic nationalism, which included strong anti-Russian and anti-Armenian elements. This greatly strengthened the Abkhazian national movement in its desire to secede from Georgia. Facing Georgia and the largest community inside the Abkhaz ASSR – the Georgians – the Abkhazians in those circumstances could not count on ultimate success without the

³⁶ Thus in Abkhazia among 318,300 enlisted voters on March, 17, 1991 166,500 people (52,3%) participated in the referendum on the "renewed USSR". At that juncture, ethnic Abkhazians constituted 17, 8% of the total population, including both voters and people with to right to vote. 98, 6% of all Abkhaz voters who participated in the referendum (51, 6% of the total figure) supported the integrity of the USSR.

Representatives of the Russian and Armenian communities (Yuri Voronov, Albert Topolyan, Galust Trapizonyan, and Sergey Matosyan) played a significant role in the Abkhazia's de facto state-building.

support of the region's other ethnic minorities. Representatives of the Russian and Armenian communities of Abkhazia later played a significant role in the formation of this breakaway state.

In the last two years of the USSR (1989-1991), the Abkhazian movement could not be clearly classified as separatist, although it had been identified as such in Tbilisi since the early stages of political activity in the Autonomous republic. On the one hand, the Abkhazian ASSR, along with the other autonomous communities of the Soviet Union, took part in the process of trying to obtain "sovereignty." On the other hand, however, in 1989-1991 most Georgians were opposed to the Union state and wanted to destroy it, while the Abkhaz movement supported the territorial integrity of the USSR and was prepared to protect it. Vladislav Ardzinba (1945-2010), the leader of the Abkhaz national movement and since 1990 the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR, was a member of the parliamentary group "Union that Opposed the Secession of the National-State Formations." Preserving the unity of the Soviet Union was seen in Sukhumi as a guarantor against ethno-political conflict and as a potential opportunity through which loyalty to Moscow could be parlayed into support for a higher status for Abkhazia. In this regard it is important to pay attention to the common argument among the Abkhaz leaders. To them, voting in favor of preserving the USSR gave them the right to secede from the newly independent Georgia after the dissolution of the Soviet state in December 1991³⁷.

At the same time, it would be incorrect to treat the Abkhaz movement as a blind adherent to and champion of the Soviet political system, as Georgian observers and political scientists sympathetic to Georgia both from Russia and the West did later³⁸. As current Abkhazian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs

³⁷ Abkhazia today... P. 7.

³⁸ The most prominent example of that approach was the book by Svetlana Chervonnaya. See: Svetlana Chervonnaya, "Abkhazia-1992.

and political analyst Irakli Khintba rightly stated, voting in favor of the USSR “was not a values’ choice for the Abkhaz people.” It was “a tactical move which then made it possible to appeal to the relevant procedure of self-determination of the autonomous republics according to the existing Soviet legislation ’On the procedure for solving problems related to the secession of a Union Republic from the USSR.”³⁹

However, some attempts to use new non-Soviet approaches (ethnic quotas instead of majority rule principles) to halt the escalation of ethnic tensions were not so successful. In summer 1991, the Georgian and Abkhaz sides agreed on a draft electoral draft law which determined the distribution of parliamentary seats among the various ethnic communities for the election of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia. Twenty-eight seats were reserved for the Abkhazians, 26 for the Georgians, and 11 seats for all other ethnic groups. Elections under this scheme were held in October and December 1991. This practice was later criticized and blamed for promoting apartheid and discrimination. When trying to oppose his predecessor, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia’s second President Eduard Shevardnadze reproached him for colluding with the Abkhaz nationalists. Be that as it may, the compromise in 1991 strengthened the Abkhaz side, as it confirmed if not privileged, then special status, as well as providing the Abkhaz with greater administrative capacity to influence the situation in the region.

Postkommunisticheskaya Vendee. [Abkhazia-1992. The Post-Communist Vendee. Moscow, Mosgorpechat’ Publishing House. 1993.

³⁹ Cited in: Irakli Khintba: Razvzal SSSR stal triggerpm ethopoliticheskikh konfliktov na ego okrainah [The USSR collapse triggered ethno-political conflicts in its border regions] // <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/182478> 2011. – March, 18.

The Law mentioned here was ratified on April, 3, 1990. Article 3 of this Law gave the autonomous entities the right to determine their status within the Union Republic and the USSR as whole when the Union Republic seceded. For the full text of the Law (in Russian) see: // <http://pravo.levonevsky.org/baza/soviet/sssr0973.htm>

However, the compromise was shortlived, and the ethno-political split reemerged in stark fashion just after the opening of the new Supreme Council. This was because the parties had by then become the hostages of their maximalist demands. According to Bruno Coppieters, “both sides in practice were not ready to give up the dream of establishing their own exclusive control over the territory of Abkhazia.”⁴⁰ At the end of 1991 and the beginning of 1992, new contradictions were added to the age-old inter-ethnic confrontations. On January 6, 1992, the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1939-1993), was overthrown and power was transferred to the so-called War Council that was replaced in March of the same year by a ruling State Council. A cleavage developed within Georgian society between the supporters of the elected Head of State and the new leadership that initiated the return to Tbilisi of Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Communist Party of Georgia first secretary. This new division in one sense helped the Abkhaz leaders weaken the political potential of Tbilisi. It made it clear to them that it would be possible to implement a new agenda focused on the secession from Georgia after the dissolution of the USSR in December, 1991. On the other hand, it turned Abkhazia into a hostage of Georgia’s domestic political confrontation. Consolidating the champions of Gamsakhurdia (Zviadists) and the supporters of Shevardnadze, who had no legitimacy, became possible by invoking the common enemy of “Abkhaz separatism.” It is no accident that on July 24, 1992, 19 ethnic Georgian political parties and movements in Abkhazia were united in the “Council of National Unity of Georgia” which included in its platform a requirement to preserve the territorial integrity of the country. In August 1992, the State Council of Georgia issued a special “Manifesto of Great Reconciliation” addressed to the supporters of the overthrown president.

⁴⁰ Bruno Coppieters, “Federalizm i konflikt na Kavkaze” [Federalism and the Conflict in the Caucasus] (in Russian). Moscow. Moscow Carnegie Center. 2002. P.24.

Against the background of the two political fractures in the first half of 1992, the Abkhaz leaders took a number of crucial steps towards creating the foundation for their own statehood. They unilaterally provided for the transfer of Abkhazia's militia (law enforcement forces), military units, enterprises, administrative structures and their staff to their own political jurisdiction. At the same time, they secured the preponderance of ethnic Abkhazians (Abkhaz Interior Minister Givi Lominadze, an ethnic Georgian, was dismissed and replaced by an ethnic Abkhaz, Alexander Ankvab). The Regiment of Internal troops of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia was created. In response to these steps, the leaders and activists of the Georgian community in Abkhazia formed their own militias, such as the local units of "Mkhedrioni" ("Horsemen") and others. In this period, paradoxically, the Georgian authorities helped the Abkhaz side. As Abkhaz historian Timur Achugba correctly observed, "radical views on the political status of Abkhazia were aggravated after the Military Council of Georgia annulled on February 21, 1992 all Soviet-era legislation enacted since February 25, 1921, including the Constitution of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1978." Instead the Constitution of 1921 was restored, which contained a paragraph about the "autonomous government" in Abkhazia in local affairs but did not consider it an entity with any special political and legal status similar to that which the Abkhaz ASSR had been accorded in the 1978 Constitution. According to Achugba, "the act of the Georgian political elite was perceived as the actual abolition of Abkhazia's statehood."⁴¹ On July 23, 1992, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia put forward a decision to abolish the Constitution of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic within the Georgian SSR

⁴¹ Timur Achugba, "Etnopoliticheskaya situatsiya v predvoennoi Abkhazii (Konets 80-h-nachalo 90-h gg. XX veka)" [The ethno-political situation in pre-war Abkhazia (late 80s-early 90-s of the XX-th century)] Available at: <http://kvkz.ru/history/2439-yetnopoliticheskaya-situatsiya-v-predvoennoj-abxazii-konec-80-x-nachalo-90-x-gg-xx-veka.html> 2010.- June, 27.

and replace it with the constitutional project of 1925. This decision spurred Tbilisi to use force, and on August 14, 1992 the troops of the State Council of Georgia entered the territory of Abkhazia. This ethnic conflict developed into an armed conflict between the Georgian state (and Georgian community in Abkhazia) on the one hand, and the breakaway territory on the other.

The Georgian-Abkhazian Armed Conflict

A detailed analysis of the Georgian-Abkhaz military confrontation (1992-1993) is not among the objectives of this report. The war will be discussed only in the context of the evolution of the ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia. The Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict has been interpreted differently by both sides. From Georgia's point of view, it was a struggle with a criminal separatist regime. According to Eduard Shevardnadze, who was personally responsible for the military solution of the "Abkhaz issue," an ethno-cratic dictatorship had been formed in Abkhazia by the summer of 1992 and this development necessitated urgent military engagement. In contrast, the widely-held Abkhaz viewpoint sees the events of 1992-1993 as the "Great Patriotic War of the Abkhaz people."⁴²

In the course of the armed conflict, the Abkhazian elite solved several important problems. First, it desired to preserve and protect an area which could constitute the core of an effective administration and military headquarters outside Georgian control. Second, it sought allies both within the republic (among other ethnic communities) and outside. Third, it tried to create and promote internationally the legitimacy of the Abkhaz secession.

⁴² "Belaya kniga Abkhazii: Dokumenty, materialy, svidetelstva" [The Abkhazia's White book: Documents. Materials and testimonies]. Moscow. 1993.

In contrast, the Georgian authorities were interested in swiftly suppressing the separatist challenge in order to focus first on strengthening the domestic legitimacy of the new power structure that had replaced Gamsakhurdia, and then on consolidating the fragmented society on a "patriotic basis." Apart from Abkhazia, Tbilisi faced a similar standoff with the other breakaway region, South Ossetia. Shortly before the outbreak of the armed conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, with the help of Russia, negotiated and signed a ceasefire agreement in South Ossetia, the autonomous status of which Gamsakhurdia had abolished. But Tbilisi failed to induce the Ossetian leaders to accept Georgia's jurisdiction. In addition to the cease-fire, Georgia ceded part of its sovereign control over South Ossetia to the Joint Control Commission and the Joint peacekeeping forces, which consisted of Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian troops. In this regard, a successful operation in Abkhazia was meant to send a "clear message" to the other "rebellious autonomy." It allowed for the creation of a policy platform meant to politically and psychologically pressure the leaders of the South Ossetian national movement.

Initially, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict resulted in a military success for the Georgian side. Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, was captured. Even though Tbilisi controlled most of Abkhazia's territory, including Sukhumi, from the summer of 1992 until the summer of 1993, the Abkhaz leadership managed to create an effective political and military center for their breakaway republic in the small town of Gudauta, which stands at the center of the district of the same name⁴³. In 1992-1993 Abkhazia had no clear support from Russia, which itself was being wracked by separatist conflict (primarily in Chechnya), and was therefore not ready to defend the position of the Abkhaz

⁴³ During the first months of the conflict, the Abkhaz leadership controlled only a small tract of territory around Gudauta, Tkvarcheli and several villages in the Ochamchira district. On October, 1992, it retook control over the Gagra district (north-east of Abkhazia).

side. Political analyst Oksana Antonenko characterized Russia's policy toward Georgia and Abkhazia during this period as "multi-polar."⁴⁴ In this case, the Russian military establishment in particular was sympathetic to the Abkhaz side due to its negative attitude to Georgian leader Shevardnadze. They attributed the forced withdrawal of Soviet Army troops from Germany, the change of the official political position of the USSR in Central and Eastern Europe, and eventually the collapse of the Soviet Union to Shevardnadze's actions and policies while Soviet Foreign Minister.

The Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (CMPC) was active in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, as were the armed formations of the ethno-national movements in the North Caucasus. The CMPC was created on November 1-2, 1991 on the basis of the Assembly of Mountain Peoples established in August 1989. The CMPC was led by Musa (Yuri) Shanibov and Yusuf Soslambekov, who had been one of the main figures in the "Chechen revolution" of 1991. The ideology of the Assembly and subsequently the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus evolved along similar lines to those of other nationalist movements in the former Soviet Union. In the first phase, national and cultural goals and objectives (the revival of traditions, religion, etc.) dominated. Later, they were replaced by more pressing requirements for the recognition of the political status of a particular ethnic group or territory. The CMPC called for the revival of the single Mountainous Republic within the Russian Confederation. Later, the CMPC espoused separatist principles and it included in its membership people who had participated in the fighting in South Ossetia before 1992. It is thus hard to overestimate the role of volunteers from the North Caucasus in Abkhazia. During the 14 months of the armed conflict in Abkhazia 2,500 Circassian volunteers took part in the

⁴⁴ Oksana Antonenko, "Uncertainty: Russia and the Conflict over Abkhazia /Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution" /Coppeters B. and Legvold R. (eds). Cambridge, MA, 2005. Pp. 208-217.

fighting. Sultan Sosnaliyev, a ethnic Kabardian, was Chief of Staff and then Defense Minister of Abkhazia during the conflict, and again from 2005-2007. Kabardian groups led by Muayed Shorov attacked the building of the Council of Ministers of Abkhazia, where the pro-Georgian administration had its headquarters. The Abkhaz separatists were supported by the Chechen separatists. On August 17, 1992, the CMPC held a parliamentary session in Grozny, the Chechen capital, during which delegates put forward the political slogan "Hands off Abkhazia." Shamil Basayev, later to become a prominent Chechen field commander, first gained notoriety during the Abkhaz conflict in which he commanded a battalion of about 5,000 fighters. In addition to this military aid from the North Caucasus, the Abkhaz side was also supported by most representatives of the republic's other ethnic minorities. Ethnic Russians fought on the Abkhaz side, and the Marshal Baghramyan battalion consisted of ethnic Armenians. On the other hand, a small number of Armenians fought on the side of Georgia. However, most of them were from other regions of Georgia and their engagement was both less structured and less well known in terms of propaganda. Thus, the ethno-military composition of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict was far more varied in comparison with the Georgian-Ossetian or Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts⁴⁵.

The significant involvement of ethno-nationalist movements from the North Caucasus in the Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict spurred Moscow to take more decisive action to end the confrontation. In September 1992, a meeting of the leaders of Georgia, Abkhazia and the North Caucasus republics, with the active participation of the Russian Federation, was held and a commission for restoring security in the region was created. However, this peace initiative did not achieve any concrete results due to the lack of a clear and precise procedure for

⁴⁵ Vicken Cheterian, "The Face of the Caucasus," Armenian International Magazine. 2000. Vol.5. № 3.

implementing the decisions it adopted. October 1992 saw a turning point in the armed conflict, as the Abkhaz side seized the military initiative and began to extend its control over the north-west of the republic. Abkhaz forces captured Gagra on October 6 and reached the border with Russia on the river Psou shortly afterwards. On July 27, 1993, Russia mediated the signing between the two sides in Sochi of an agreement on a cease-fire and the mechanisms for its implementation. In fact, the implementation of the Sochi agreement would return the region to the situation in summer 1992, i.e. before the military confrontation started. The Sochi agreement did not contain any proposals on the future political and legal status of Abkhazia, which was the issue that triggered the Tbilisi-Sukhumi disagreements in the first place. The Abkhaz side was not satisfied with these conditions and attacked the Georgian positions in September 1993, inflicting a definitive defeat on the Georgian armed forces. The Abkhaz offensive coincided with a rebellion by supporters of ousted President Gamsakhurdia in West Georgia (Samegrelo). Not having a reliable rear flank in Samegrelo, the Georgian armed forces were unable to effectively counter the Abkhaz attack. As a result of the Abkhaz offensive and the virtually unilateral violation of the Sochi agreement, Georgia lost control over Abkhazia with the exception of a small area in the upper reaches of the Kodori Gorge (the Dal Gorge, sometimes called the Abkhazian Svaneti)⁴⁶. Abkhaz forces secured control of that district of the gorge only in August 2008. The active military confrontation ended in the fall of 1993, although sporadic clashes took place in 1994 in both the Gali region and the Kodori Gorge. In April 1994, the Russian-mediated “Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict” was signed, and in May of that year the Georgian and Abkhazian leaders appealed to CIS

⁴⁶ Although the Abkhaz side was responsible for violating this agreement, the Georgian side too failed to implement its conditions, in particular concerning the full withdrawal of military forces).

(Commonwealth of Independent States) Council of Heads of States asking for peacekeeping forces to be deployed in the conflict zone. In July 1994, a Russian peacekeeping operation got underway in Abkhazia. Although many thought that other CIS member states would make troops available, in fact the operation, which lasted until August 2008, was exclusively Russian. Peacekeepers were deployed in a 12-kilometer territory known as the “security zone” on both sides of the river Inguri that marks the boundary between the Gali district of Abkhazia and the Zugdidi district of Georgia.

Abkhazia’s leaders failed during the armed conflict to convince the international community of the legality of Abkhazia’s secession from Georgia. Indeed, they still have not done so today. Georgia’s territorial integrity is recognized by an absolute majority of the UN member states. Nevertheless, the UN has followed the conflict closely since it began in 1992 and from the outset it recognized Abkhazia as a party to the conflict. That was the approach subsequently followed by the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG)⁴⁷.

The armed conflict had disastrous consequences. Four thousand Georgians were killed and 1,000 disappeared. More than 3,000 Abkhazians lost their lives. The economic losses from the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict amounted to US\$10.7 billion. In the years immediately following the end of hostilities, 700 people were killed by landmines. Nearly 250,000 Georgians (nearly half the pre-war population) were forced to flee Abkhazia, of whom some 40,000-50,000 later returned to the south-eastern Gali district, which prior to conflict had been predominantly Georgian-populated.⁴⁸ There was no mass return of refugees (or internally displaced persons, according to the

⁴⁷ On July 21, 1994 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution № 937 on the definition of the format of its Mission. The mandate of UNOMIG (121 observer) was based on the Moscow agreement on ceasefire on May 14, 1994. See more detailed information on UNOMIG activity: <http://www.unomig.org>

⁴⁸ Abkhazia Today...

viewpoint of the international community) to other parts of Abkhazia.

The peace process from 1993-2004: Failures and Successes

By October 1993, Georgia had lost its de facto sovereignty over most of the former Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. The Russian-mediated Moscow ceasefire agreement signed in May 1994 also legally withdrew aspects of Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia by placing the peacekeeping forces under the jurisdiction of the CIS Council of Heads of States. However, while the end of the military confrontation closed the book on one set of problems, it opened up a host of others. The two parties had different perceptions of the transitions that they had to make. The Abkhaz leaders had to make the transition from a military-political regime to normal civilian rule, insofar as this was possible under conditions of destruction and blockade. Following the euphoria of victory, it was also critical that they establish elementary order to prevent the total criminalization of society and domination by warlords. In their pursuit of political independence from Georgia, Abkhazia's leaders began, from the first day after the end of the armed confrontation, building a legal framework upon which the formation of statehood could be based (this included the Constitution and the law on citizenship). The harmonization of interethnic relations within the country and the prevention of new ethno-political crises topped the post-war agenda. Additionally, negotiations on the future status of Abkhazia and the development of international contacts became priority directions for policy.

The Georgian side held the opposite view. With no money or resources for a quick military revenge, Tbilisi focused its energies on securing, at the international level, agreement on the “temporary” (suspended) status of Abkhazia and recognition of it

as part of the united Georgian state. In addition, the Georgian authorities focused on pressuring Abkhazia economically to force it to make concessions.

The peace process developed on several levels. The first was within the framework of the UN, under whose auspices the first round of negotiations between the parties was held in Geneva, Switzerland from November 28 to December 1, 1993. The first round of that "Geneva process" (not to be confused with the "Geneva talks" on security and stability in the Caucasus launched in October, 2008 after the Russo-Georgian war) led to the signing in December 1993 by the Georgian and Abkhaz representatives of a "Memorandum of Understanding," in which they agreed "not to use force or threaten the use of force against each other for the period of ongoing negotiations to achieve a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict." In 1994, the UN Secretary General's Group of Friends for Georgia (which originally included the United States, Germany, Britain, Russia, and France) was founded. In 1997, a Special Representative of the UN Secretary General was appointed to coordinate the work of the Geneva process, and the UNOMIG opened an office in Tbilisi. The Coordination Council and three working groups, focusing respectively on non-violence, the return of displaced persons, and economic issues, operated within the framework of the "Geneva process." The last meeting of the Coordination Council was held in May 2006 after a nearly five-year break caused by the aggravation of the ethno-political situation in the Kodori Gorge in the fall of 2001. However, the violation in 2006 of the 1994 Moscow Agreement by Georgian military units that entered the upper part of the Kodori Gorge (a demilitarized zone under the terms of the 1994 agreement) ended the work of the Coordination Council. In 2001, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, German diplomat Dieter Boden, presented an eight-point peace project known as "Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competencies between Tbilisi and Sukhumi" (also commonly known as the "Boden Plan").

This initiative was supported by the UN Security Council (Resolution № 1393, January 31, 2002). The Plan was based on the principle of the territorial integrity of Georgia and it defined Abkhazia as “a sovereign entity based on the rule of law within the State of Georgia.” According to the Boden Plan, the borders of the State of Georgia as of December 21, 1991 could not be modified other than in accordance with the Georgian Constitution. The distribution of competences was based in accordance with a federal agreement between Tbilisi and Sukhumi having the force of the Constitutional Law. Boden himself insisted that his initiative “was not intended to offer ready-made solutions for the Abkhaz conflict. Rather, its objective was to invite the two sides to the conflict to sit down at the negotiating table and agree on modalities for a peaceful settlement”⁴⁹. The responsibility for the further implementation of the document clearly lay with the Georgian and Abkhaz leadership, while the UN would potentially be involved as a moderator and the UN Secretary General’s Group of Friends for Georgia would facilitate the process. However, at that time neither the Abkhaz side nor the Georgian side was ready to make use of this opportunity due to a lack of political will and unwillingness to compromise from both sides. The Abkhaz side was adamant in its rejection of any decision that placed them “in the state of Georgia,” while the Georgians were too sure of themselves to accept anything that hinted at the “sovereignty” of Abkhazia within Georgia, with each side convinced that time was in their favor and a drawn out process would allow them to achieve a solution with more favorable conditions. As a result, neither party embraced the peace plan.

The second set of peace efforts consisted of independent attempts by Russia to resolve the conflict. Faced with the Chechen separatist challenge, Moscow initially supported Tbilisi’s goal of restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity. In

⁴⁹ Dieter Boden on the peace-keeping difficulties in the South Caucasus // <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20989>

February 1994, Russia and Georgia signed a series of agreements that provided for assistance from Russia in the development of the Georgian army, the deployment of Russian border guards, and, most importantly, continued basing rights for Russia in Georgia. In 1994, Georgia joined the Collective Security Treaty (CST, which was signed on May 15, 1992) and entered the CIS. On November 26, 1994, Abkhazia's Supreme Council (parliament) adopted a new Constitution, despite Moscow's open opposition. Boris Pastukhov, Personal Envoy of the President of Russia on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, repeatedly contacted Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba to insist that the Abkhaz side not go through with such a "hasty decision."⁵⁰ After the outbreak of anti-separatist campaign in Chechnya on December 19, 1994, the border with Abkhazia on the Psou River was closed. From 1995-1997, Russia also operated a naval blockade of the breakaway republic and disconnected its telecommunications lines with the outside world. Meanwhile, Russia mediated a Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz settlement initialled on July 25, 1995 by Georgian Ambassador to Moscow Vazha Lordkipanidze and Republic of Abkhazia Attorney General Anri Jergenia in his capacity as Ardzinba's personal envoy. The second point of this agreement suggested the following proposal on the issue of Abkhazia's status: "The parties declare consent to live in a single federal state within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Their relationship will be based on Constitutional law."⁵¹ But the Abkhaz side rescinded its

⁵⁰ Stanislav Lakoba, "Abkhazia de-facto ili Gruziiya de jure?" (O politike Rossii v Abkhazii v postsovetskii period. 1991-2003.) [Abkhazia de-facto or Georgia de-jure?" (On Russia's policy in Abkhazia in the post-Soviet period. 1991-2003)]. Sapporo. Slavic Research Center. In Russian. 2001. P. 56.

⁵¹ Abessalom Lepsaya, "Situatsiya v Abkhazii kak model zamknutogo obshchestva pri nalichii vneshnego faktora; faktor, vliyayushchie na uregulirovaniye" [The situation in Abkhazia as model of an isolated society influenced by the external factor: factors influencing the resolution process] //In: Aspecty Gruzino-Abkhazskogo konflikta [Aspect of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict]. Irvine, California. 2004. In Russian. Vol. 4..

approval almost immediately, and on August 22, 1995, the Parliament of Abkhazia branded the document unacceptable for an independent state.

On January 19, 1996, the CIS Council of the Heads of State, in which Russia and Georgia played decisive roles, adopted a resolution "On measures to settle the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia." It declared the termination of relations with the self-proclaimed republic in trade, economics, transportation, finance and a host of other areas. After Tbilisi announced the introduction of customs and border control on the territory of Abkhazia, Moscow blocked entry and exit for all foreign vessels at the port of Sukhumi. In 1997, the Russian Foreign Ministry proposed a formulation in which Abkhazia would exist as a "Common state" within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. This was registered in the new draft of the "Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz settlement." Thanks to intensive "shuttle diplomacy," then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov convened a private meeting between Eduard Shevardnadze and Vladislav Ardzinba. But it proved impossible to reach a compromise, as Georgian officials in Tbilisi rejected any agreement based on the "common state" principle.

Russia's position underwent a significant evolution after 1998. This was facilitated by the Georgian government attempts to alter the status quo and "unfreeze the conflict" unilaterally without considering the interests of the Russian Federation, including one such attempt in May 1998 in the Gali district of Abkhazia. After the defeat of Russia in the first Chechen anti-separatist campaign, the official position of Tbilisi towards the leadership of the breakaway Chechen Republic Ichkeria, changed. Georgian leaders overestimated "the weakness of Russia," considering Russia's military defeat in Chechnya in 1996 to be the beginning of a great geopolitical retreat from the Caucasus. In August 1997, then Chechen Republic Ichkeria President Aslan Maskhadov visited Tbilisi where he met with Zurab Zhvania, then Chairman of the Georgian parliament. Soon

after this meeting, an Office of the Representative of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria opened in Georgia. When Russia launched the second anti-separatist operation in Chechnya in 1999, Georgia opened its borders to Chechen refugees. About 7,000 people moved into the Pankisi Gorge⁵². In addition to refugees, numerous combatant Chechen separatist groups and a number of influential field commanders (such as Ruslan Gelayev) found a “safe haven” on Georgian territory⁵³. Tbilisi sought to restore its control over Abkhazia with the aid of those Chechen groups. Thus on September 25, 2001, Chechen rebels alongside Georgian units (a total of 450 people) tried to seize the Gulripsh district of Abkhazia after travelling 400 km across Georgia. However by mid-October this attack was repulsed.

The second consequence of Tbilisi’s reassessment of Russia and the perception of Russian “weakness” that it created was the intensification of Georgia’s contacts with NATO. In 1998, for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a man with a Western military education (David Tevzadze) was named Georgia’s defence minister.⁵⁴ One of Eduard Shevardnadze’s main foreign policy slogans during his presidential election campaign in 2000 was his promise to “knock on NATO's door” by 2005⁵⁵. In April 2002, the United States and Georgia signed

⁵² Sergey Markedonov, “Severokavkazskaya karta Gruzii” [Georgia’s Card of the North Caucasus] //Svobodnaya Mysl’ (Free Thought) Journal. 2010. # 12. Pp. 49-64.

⁵³ Commenting on this action for the “Rustavi-2” TV channel, Eduard Shevardnadze said: “According to some residents of the villages in Kakheti, Gelayev is a normally thoughtful, educated man, well disposed towards Georgia” //See: Shevardnadze ne schitaet Gelayeva banditom [Shevardnadze doesn’t consider Gelayev a bandit] //http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2001/11/08/shevardnadze/ 2001. – November, 8.

⁵⁴ David Tevzadze was trained in the NATO Defense College in Rome (1994), the Marshall Center in Garmisch-Partenkirchen (1995) and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Kansas, USA (1996).

⁵⁵ Alan Kasayev, “Shevardnadze postuchitsya v dver’ NATO lichno” [Shevardnadze will knock on NATO’s door personally] / Nezavisimaya gazeta [Independent newspaper], 11 April 2000.

the “Train and Equip” agreement on military cooperation, which was intended to cover the preparation of 2,000 Georgian commandos. The official purpose of the agreement was to prepare Georgian troops for an operation against Chechen “terrorists” encamped in the Pankisi Gorge. Russia, however, saw it as a move to “internationalize” resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, and as a threat to Russia’s exclusive, preeminent position in the Greater Caucasus.

All these factors contributed to a significant transformation of the Russian position on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. By 1999-2000, Moscow had relaxed the sanctions against Abkhazia, although they were finally lifted only in 2008. The distribution of Russian passports (a foreign model different from the domestic IDs) to the residents of Abkhazia drew the ire of Tbilisi and the West and was regarded by many as a component of the “creeping annexation” of Georgian territory by Russia. In the early 2000s, Russo-Georgian relations deteriorated sharply. In December 2000 Russia introduced visas for Georgian citizens, and in March 2001 the so-called “period of adjustment” for the new rules ended and the visa regime came into force. Bilateral relations were seriously poisoned by the unconstructive public rhetoric of both sides. At a meeting in Sochi in March 2003, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Georgian counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze attempted to return to a more constructive bilateral relationship. Following this meeting, an agreement was signed that established three working groups: the first on the return of refugees/IDPs (originally in the Gali district); the second on the rehabilitation of the railway line between Sochi and Tbilisi via Abkhazia; and the third on the renovation of the Inguri hydropower plant. However, the subsequent deterioration of Russo-Georgian relations rendered implementation of those proposals impossible.

When discussing the failure of the peace process, it is necessary to stress that since 1993, the Abkhaz leadership had taken a number of steps to strengthen and institutionalize its de

facto state institutions and independent political identity separate from the Georgian political and legal framework. It managed to survive the blockade by Russia and Georgia and to adopt a package of laws that defined the functioning of the government and administration, law enforcement, the security forces and the army. In 1993, the Abkhaz Parliament adopted a Law on Citizenship (it was amended in 1995, and in 2005 a new version of the law was adopted). In 1994, the Constitution of the Abkhaz Republic was adopted, and in 1999 the “Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia” proclaimed the fundamental principles of the de facto state. Article 49 of the Constitution of Abkhazia stipulated that it was the exclusive prerogative of ethnic Abkhazian citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia between the ages of 35 and 65 to occupy the post of Head of the Republic,⁵⁶ meaning the foundations of this de facto state included strong elements of ethnocracy⁵⁷. Later this model evolved into an ethno-democracy, a model in which democratic procedures are complemented by restrictions on the basis of ethnicity. Prior to the "five-day war" of 2008, presidential elections had been held in Abkhazia in 1994, 1999, and 2004/2005, and parliamentary elections in 2002 and 2007. In 1994, the head of state was elected by the parliament, while in 1999 there was only one presidential candidate. In 2004/2005, however, the Republic experienced a truly competitive and unpredictable presidential election race, in which the then leadership failed to secure the victory of its preferred candidate. The first peaceful transfer of presidential power took place in 2005. In contrast, in post-Soviet Georgia there has never yet been a peaceful transfer of presidential power.

⁵⁶ The Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia...

⁵⁷ There are minor exclusions from this general rule. So the Vice-Chairman of Parliament is held by the ethnic Armenian. In the Gali/Gal District, where there the Georgian (Megrelian) ethnic dominance has kept even after 1993, the education in Georgian is provided and the newspaper “Gal” is published in three languages (Abkhazian, Georgian and Russian).

Thus during the years of negotiations, the original positions of Georgia (focused on Georgia's territorial integrity and the return of all refugees/IDPs to the entire territory of Abkhazia) and Abkhazia (focused on the independence of the breakaway republic and the return only of those who did not take part in military operations against the Abkhaz forces) did not change significantly. As such, a formula for political compromise was not found. The conflicting parties were nonetheless able to establish a constructive partnership to exploit the Inguri hydropower plant. This large energy facility that services the whole Caucasus region was built in 1977; 60% of the electricity it generates goes to Georgia, with 40% going to Abkhazia.

Unfreezing the Conflict: 2004-2008

New possible avenues for the resolution of the conflict opened between 2003 -- 2005. As a result of the "Rose Revolution," Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been associated with the armed conflict with Abkhazia and subsequent lesser confrontations in 1998 and 2001, resigned and a new generation of politicians came to power in Georgia. These new political figures were not burdened by the experience and political pressures of past years. During the 2004-2005 election cycle, Sergey Bagapsh (1949-2011), who had a reputation as "a moderate" leader, was elected to the presidency of Abkhazia. While the image of him as the "dove of peace" had little basis in reality, Bagapsh, unlike his predecessor Vladislav Ardzinba, was not perceived as aggressive by Georgian society. He was not suspected of having participated in or supported the escalation of the military confrontation in the early 1990s. Additionally, some had hoped for a more positive role for Russia in the resolution of the conflict. Moscow's position on the political crisis in Adjara in winter and spring of 2004, where they were constructive and cooperative in their approach, strengthened the confidence of all involved. The armed conflict in that autonomous region of

Georgia was averted through negotiations between Russia and Georgia. Russian authorities promised not to oppose the restoration of Tbilisi's control over Adjara in exchange for guarantees of the personal immunity of Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze, who finally was taken to Moscow⁵⁸. During the first months of his term, newly elected Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili repeatedly expressed in public his admiration for Vladimir Putin and emphasized his role in bringing about positive changes in Russia. He also repeatedly stressed the necessity of starting bilateral relations anew from a "clean slate".

The initial steps of the new Georgian government vis-à-vis Abkhazia engendered cautious hopes for the development of new approaches to the peace process. Tbilisi took steps to reform the so-called "Abkhazian government in exile," which together with the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, which played the role of "parliament in exile," had operated in Georgia since 1995. For many years those two bodies had focused on the domestic Georgian audience. Their bureaucracy was prohibitively bloated, even by post-Soviet standards, and they were incredibly inefficient. By the early 2000s, the "government in exile" consisted of no fewer than 5,000 functionaries⁵⁹. Their members were Georgian refugees and IDPs from Abkhazia who were far less willing to compromise with the breakaway republic than were the government officials in Tbilisi involved in the negotiation process with Sukhumi. After coming to power, Saakashvili significantly reduced the size of the bureaucracy of the "government-in-exile" and dismissed Tamaz Nadareishvili, who had been considered in Abkhazia in the 1990s as the leader of a "Fifth column.". The participation of the "Abkhazian representatives" in the Georgian parliament was suspended, as they had received their mandates in 1992 and had not been

⁵⁸ Aslan Abashidze was leader of Adjara for 13 years, first as Chairman of the Supreme Council (1991-2001) and then as the Head of the Autonomous region (2001-2004).

⁵⁹ Abkhazia Today... P. 29.

reconfirmed through elections at any point since the armed conflict. Tbilisi also stopped cooperating with insurgent groups such as the Forest Brothers and the White Legion operating in Abkhazia's Gali district. A young and enterprising politician, Irakli Alasania, was appointed presidential envoy for conflict resolution.

However, this promising start did not lead to irreversible progress. The parties to the conflict agreed only on the text of the Protocol on the Non-resumption of Hostilities (in December 2005). All the positive steps that had been taken by Tbilisi were almost immediately undercut by the irresponsible political rhetoric of the Georgian leadership. Georgia's new president made the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia the *idée fixe* of both his domestic and foreign policies, seeing this as a way to overcome the legacy of Shevardnadze. In May 2004, the new Georgian president stated that: "We will return Abkhazia within my presidential term."⁶⁰ A number of other factors also had a significant influence on the ethno-political conflict. In May 2004, the process of destroying the existing political, legal, social, economic, military and political status quo in South Ossetia began. For the first time since cease-fire agreement of 1992, the breakaway republic experienced renewed military clashes and bloodshed. Hopes that a new generation of Georgian politicians could build on the other peaceful approaches to the settlement of these protracted conflicts were quickly dashed. This affected not only South Ossetia, but the entire course of the peace process in Abkhazia, reinforcing the already pervasive distrust between the two sides.

In addition to the deterioration of the situation in South Ossetia, which directly affected Russia's position in the North Caucasus (taking into account the strong political ties between the breakaway republic and the Russian constituency in North Ossetia, as well as the unresolved Ossetian-Ingush conflict), the

⁶⁰ M.Saakashvili: my vernem Abkhaziyu [M.Saakashvili: We will return Abkhazia] // <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/26/05/2004/52202.shtml>

Georgian authorities moved two other contentious issues to the top of their policy agenda. First, they accelerated Georgia's cooperation and integration with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which served to create immense tension in their bilateral relations with Russia as Russia was rather skeptical of and sensitive to NATO enlargement in the former USSR. Second, the new government implemented a full-scale program to modernize the armed forces. The U.S. became the most consistent lobbyist in favor of Georgia-NATO integration. In March 2007, a bill called the "NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007" was supported by members of the House of Representatives by a simple majority of votes. Earlier (November 2006), this document had been approved by the U.S. Senate. In April 2007, the Law was signed by the president of the United States (at that time George W. Bush), and on April 3, 2008 at the NATO summit in Bucharest, a Declaration supporting Georgia's NATO aspirations was adopted. It should be noted that this declaration did not provide for a "Membership Action Plan" for Georgia (the penultimate stage in the process of attaining full NATO membership)⁶¹. Thus, Washington provided not only military and political support, but also served as a powerful advocate for Georgia internationally, representing the former Soviet Caucasus republic as a "beacon of democracy." Even the tough actions of Georgian law enforcement agencies against the opposition in November 2007, in addition to the short-term implementation of a state of emergency and the postponement of national and local elections, did not induce the United States to modify its approaches to the Georgian administration. All these activities strengthened expectations in Tbilisi that any and all of Georgia's policies on Abkhazia, up to and including military actions, would be supported by the United States and its allies. As such, the budget for defense and security in Georgia expanded rapidly between

⁶¹ See the full text of the Declaration:

//http://www.summitbucharest.ro/en/doc_201.html

2004 and 2008. On September 14, 2007, the Georgian parliament adopted a resolution to increase the troop level of the armed forces to 32,000 people and then on July 15, 2008 to 37,000 troops. In 2008, a fateful year for Georgia, defense expenditures exceeded a quarter of the total budget, amounting to 8% of GDP⁶². John Colarusso, a well-known Canadian expert on the Caucasus (he served as a back channel diplomat between Washington and Moscow and an advisor on the Caucasus during the Clinton administration), rightly noted that “President Saakashvili listened to some imprudent voices in Washington, and that he himself had based too much of his domestic image on wielding military might and on reintegrating South Ossetia and Abkhazia by force instead of by a realistic process of dialogue.”⁶³

As for Georgia’s policy with regard to Abkhazia, the most important method of “unfreezing” the conflict was the creation of new structures not covered by the legal framework enshrined in the cease-fire agreement. A revitalization of the Abkhaz “authorities-in-exile” began during this period. In July 2006, the Georgian government deployed law-enforcement troops to the upper part of the Kodori Gorge, a part of Abkhazia that had been designated as a “demilitarized zone” and that, since 1993, had not controlled by Sukhumi⁶⁴. This territory was subsequently

⁶² The tanks of August (R.Pukhov, ed.). Moscow. Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies. 2010. Pp. 11-42.

⁶³ It is time for the West to look for the new discourse for Georgia: John Colarusso // <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20404>

⁶⁴ From 1993 to 2006, the Kodori Gorge was actually “no man’s land”. It was not controlled by Sukhumi, but Tbilisi’s authority there was also nominal. In reality, the territory was dominated by Svan warlords. The Georgian authorities tried to bring those units under their formal control. In 1998, the “Monadire” (“Hunter”) formation was incorporated into the armed forces of Georgia, and in 1999 its commander, Emzar Kvitsiani, was appointed a Special Envoy of President Eduard Shevardnadze in the region. In July 2006, Kvitsiani’s formation was disbanded and the Gorge itself came under the control of Tbilisi. More on the situation in the Kodori Gorge in the post-Soviet period, see: Kimberly Marten, “Warlords, Sovereignty and State

proclaimed the residence of the “Abkhaz government-in-exile.” According to Saakashvili this step signified the return of the legitimate authorities to Abkhazian territory. Tbilisi thus violated the 1994 Moscow agreement in two ways: first by establishing the “government-in-exile” in Kodori (renamed “Upper Abkhazia”), and second by deploying military or police units in the region. These steps were followed by comments from Georgian representatives on the strategic importance of the Kodori Gorge, with Saakashvili even going so far as to refer to it as the metaphorical “Heart of Abkhazia.”⁶⁵ Givi Targamadze, then chairman of the Defense and Security Parliamentary Committee of Georgia, said during that period: “It is a strategic area from which the helicopter flight time to Sukhumi is only five minutes.”⁶⁶ These actions fundamentally changed the tenor of relations between Georgia and the breakaway republic of Abkhazia. The “government-in-exile” that had previously been a secondary structure became the sole source of legitimacy in Abkhazia in the eyes of the Saakashvili government. The Georgian president decreed that all foreign diplomats engaged in the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict should travel to the village of Chkhalta, which had become the residence of the “Government of Abkhazia.” In this sense, Tbilisi demonstrated that its priority was not the harmonization of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, but rather the imposition of exclusive Georgian political and military control over Abkhazia. The operation in the Kodori Gorge became very important symbolically and served as an unambiguous message to the de facto leadership of the Republic. Tbilisi’s determination to position the representatives of the former Georgian community of Abkhazia as the only

Failure”. Chapter Three: Lessons from Post-Soviet Georgia / / Saltzman Working Paper. 2009 - № 12. - November. Pp. 42-67

⁶⁵ Saakashvili: V abkhaziyu vozvrashchaetsya legetimnoye pravitel'stvo [Saakashvili: the legitimate government returns to Abkhazia] //http://regnum.ru/news/680582.html

⁶⁶ Cited in: Abkhazia: Ways Forward. International Crisis Group. Europe Report N°179 – 18 January 2007. P.20.

legitimate spokesmen for the interests of the disputed area destroyed the old status quo that had been in favor of Georgia and could potentially have put an end to the de-facto statehood status of Abkhazia. In this case, the issue of recognition did not play a primary role. Until 2006, Sukhumi and Tbilisi negotiated, albeit in fits and starts. After the operation in the Kodori Gorge, the negotiation process ceased. Each side prepared for further changes to the status quo that had prevailed since 1993-1994.

At the same time that it violated the status quo, Tbilisi appealed to Sukhumi through populist initiatives. On March 28, 2008, at a meeting with political analysts from the Tbilisi Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, President Saakashvili offered Abkhazia “unlimited autonomous status” within Georgia, as well as “federalism and security guarantees of peaceful development.”⁶⁷ But Georgian leaders’ proposals contained fundamental contradictions (for example, autonomous status and federalism cannot be identified as identical political and legal principles). The last conflict resolution proposal prior to the “five-day war” was made by then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in July 2008. The first stage of Steinmeier’s three-step peace plan envisaged that Georgia would abjure the use of force and Abkhazia would agree to the return of Georgian refugees. At the second stage, the conflict parties would start to elaborate and implement joint projects, and at the third, the status of Abkhazia would finally be determined. The Steinmeier project was supported by Russia (especially on the issue of an agreement on the non-use of force), and partially supported by Georgia (which was especially concerned with the steps included in the third stage), but was almost unilaterally rejected by Abkhazia, whose representatives voiced many comments, objections and complaints.

⁶⁷ Saakashvili predlozhil Abkhazii shirokii federalism i post vitse-prem’era [Saakashvili offered Abkhazia broad federalism and the post of deputy prime-minister] // <http://www.m.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/134226>

Russia too contributed to the “unfreezing” of the conflict in the spring and summer of 2008. On March 21, 2008 the Russian State Duma considered revising the conditions of the Russian approach to the recognition of the territorial integrity of Georgia. The lower chamber of the Russian parliament identified two conditions for possible recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the first being Georgia's accession to NATO and the second being the use of military force against the two breakaway republics. In April 2008, Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the federal government to render assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, stressing primarily economic and humanitarian issues. On May 30, 2008 Russia's Railway Troops (400 in all) were deployed to Abkhazia to restore the delapidated railway infrastructure. That deployment was not envisaged under the conditions of the 1994 Moscow ceasefire and separation of forces agreement.

The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 affected Abkhazia to a much lesser degree than South Ossetia, where Russia was directly engaged. However, the leadership of the Republic of Abkhazia exploited the situation to their benefit. On August 9, 2008, Abkhaz armed forces opened a “second front” and took control of the Kodori Gorge, without encountering serious opposition from the Georgian military and police units deployed there, who ceded the territory and retreated together with the “government of Abkhazia-in-exile.” For the first time since 1993, the de facto government established complete control over the entire territory of the former Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. On August 26, 2008 Russia became the first country to recognize the independence of Abkhazia. On August 30, 2008, Georgia withdrew from the 1994 Moscow Agreement.

After Recognition: New Realities and New Challenges

The recognition of Abkhazian independence opened up a new page in the history of the conflict. For the first time since the

dissolution of the Soviet Union, a precedent for the recognition of a former Soviet autonomous entity as an independent state was created. The formation of an Abkhazian state received little international recognition and minimal support outside the Eurasian region. Only five other countries have recognized Abkhazian independence. Indirectly, however, the new realities in the region have nonetheless been recognized by the West. Abkhazia gained access to the "Geneva discussions" on security and stability in the South Caucasus (which began on October 15, 2008), although the Abkhaz representatives have not yet obtained official diplomatic status but participate as "experts." Even so, their very participation in multilateral discussion on humanitarian issues and the prevention of further incidents has partially served to confirm the recognition of Abkhazia's status as a separate political entity. Interest in "engagement with Abkhazia" without it having received explicit recognition from the European Union also demonstrates this point. The EU sponsors projects to rehabilitate and support the non-governmental sector in Abkhazia, as do other international agencies and NGOs.

Meanwhile, the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia by Russia has contributed to an increase in Russian military, economic and political influence in Abkhazia. After the "five-day war," international engagement in Abkhazia was scaled back. The UNOMIG (consisting of approximately 150 observers) ceased its activities after Russia used its veto power in June 2009 to block a routine vote in the UN Security Council on extending UNOMIG's mandate. The Russian side, in agreeing to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, formulated the following approach: the territorial integrity of Georgia that had been recognized by the countries of the West and the Russian Federation prior the August 26, 2008 had ceased to exist. Assuming the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a legally accomplished fact, the Kremlin initiated the reformulation of the UN mission. According to this approach, no

international mission which operated on the de jure territory of the Georgian state through August 2008 should ignore the new realities and consider their activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of their activities in Georgia. On February 13, 2009 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution № 1866, which extended the UNOMIG mandate for four months. Both Moscow and Tbilisi expressed satisfaction with that decision. However, the February resolution did not resolve the political and legal deadlock in which all of the interested parties were engaged. The primary issue was not only the Russian desire to expel the international observers, but also the fact that the UNOMIG mandate was not suited to the post-2008 realities, as it had been defined and adopted prior to the 2008 war. The mandate was based on the Moscow Agreement of May 14, 1994, which, after August 2008, lost its judicial power. Georgia's decision to withdraw from the Agreement was guided by a Parliament resolution on "Peacekeeping Forces Located on the Territory of Georgia," adopted on July 18, 2006 and "The Law on the Occupied Territories of Georgia" adopted on August 28, 2008, as well as emergency orders of the Georgian government from August 27, 2008. With its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia, Russia abandoned its peacekeeping status and became the patron of the ethno-political self-determination of the two breakaway republics. The realities established in 2008 were radically different from those of the early 1990s, when Moscow had recognized the territorial integrity of Georgia, and Tbilisi had supported the involvement of the Russian Federation as a mediator. However none of these new factors were taken into account in the drafting of the extension for the missions' mandate. In fact, the proposals were limited to a so-called "Technical Extension" (i.e. the extension of the mission for the sake of its activities). Moscow refused to support such a scenario.

The character of Russian-Abkhaz relations has changed during the formation of the new status quo. The peacekeepers

were replaced by military troops and border guards meant to directly support the ethno-political self-determination of Abkhazia, rather than to maintain the ceasefire between Abkhazia and Georgia. On April 30, 2009, Moscow and Sukhumi signed an agreement establishing joint efforts for the protection of the state border of Abkhazia, as a result of which a special Office for the Protection of the Border of the Republic of Abkhazia was created within Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). The first outpost of this office was opened on December 8, 2010 in the village Pichora in Abkhazia's Gali district. On February 17, 2010, Moscow and Sukhumi agreed to establish a joint military base with Russian troops on the territory of Abkhazia. In 2010, Russia allocated 1.8 billion rubles in grants for Abkhazia and the carry-over for 2011 amounted to 1.2 billion rubles. These facts pointing to Russian patronage have caused some authors to conclude that Abkhazia was not transformed into a partially recognized Republic, but rather into a "Russian protectorate."⁶⁸ Today it is probably too early draw any final conclusion about the evolution of Abkhazia into a full protectorate. After August 2008, the issue of "the Georgian threat" in Abkhaz politics was rapidly marginalized. It is significant that for the first time since the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict of 1992-1993, none of the candidates in the December 2009 Abkhaz presidential election was labeled "pro-Georgian." Two new issues came to dominate the Abkhazian agenda: first, the quality of Abkhazia's independence and statehood; and second, the "cost" of Russian patronage (primarily focused on the military-political and socio-economic penetration of Russia into the Republic). These issues became a major subject of discussion between the candidates for the December 2009

⁶⁸ David Petrosyan, "Nepriznannyye gosudarstva Yuzhnogo Kavkaza v 2009 godu. K novomy status-quo v regione [Unrecognized states of the South Caucasus in 2009: Towards a new status quo in the region] // Kavkaz-2009. Ezhegodnik Kavkazskogo Instituta [Caucasus-2009. Yearbook of Caucasus Institute]. Yerevan. 2011 (in Russian). P.83.

presidential election, the first following the recognition of national independence. As in 2004-2005, the campaign between five registered candidates was highly competitive. Incumbent Sergey Bagapsh won in the first round with 61.16% of the vote. Two of his opponents, former Vice-President Raul Khajimba and former parliament deputy Beslan Butba, criticized the government for yielding to Russia's interests and neglecting Abkhazia's national interests. (Of particular concern was the transfer of strategic assets like resorts and the railway to Russian control). However, criticism of the authorities did not violate the political consensus on the political and legal status of Abkhazia established in the early 1990s. An important feature of the 2009 campaign was the restraint shown by the Kremlin. Unlike in 2004-2005, the Russian authorities tried to not intervene in the election and Vladimir Putin, then the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, even met with opposition candidate Raul Khajimba during the campaign. This was a typical practice for Russian diplomacy in Eurasia. Thus that election cycle saw Russia replace Georgia as the primary issue on Abkhazia's domestic and foreign policy agenda.

Today we can register several contradictions within the asymmetric Russian-Abkhaz partnership. The first is the scale and volume of Russian business penetration into the Abkhaz economy, which had been devastated during the armed conflict of 1992-1993 and had not undergone full-scale privatization and integration into the regional and international economy). The second is the prospect of an increased Russian military presence in Abkhazia. The third is the wide range of property issues in Abkhazia, as the extended ethno-political conflict prevented the full development of the norms, regulations, and legal institutions that ensure a functioning market and respect for private property, offsetting the prioritized rights of the "titular" ethnic group to its "primordial land." The fourth concerns the prospects for broad international recognition of Abkhazia, which is in the interests of

Sukhumi and at the same time constitutes a "headache" for Moscow, as it challenges its exclusive presence in the region.

The sudden death of the second President of Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, on May 29, 2011, occurred in a partially recognized republic facing this new set of complex problems. Bagapsh died half way through his second presidential term. He did not manage to name a potential successor, and yet this problem was little discussed. In Abkhazia, his death occasioned both pain and regret due to the fact that during the six years of his presidency he had demonstrated the ability to negotiate and reach a compromise even in the most difficult of situations. His name will be inextricably linked with two historic events for Abkhazia: the recognition of the republic's independence and the civilized and peaceful transfer of the presidency. Three candidates participated in the pre-term election for Bagapsh's successor, all of them well-known political figures: acting Vice-President Aleksandr Ankvab, Prime Minister Sergey Shamba (previously a long-serving minister of foreign affairs), and Raul Khajimba, who placed second after Bagapsh in the presidential elections of 2004 and 2009. The campaign in 2011 was not as heated as the elections in 2004. It was rather like the first presidential elections following the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia in December 2009. Fears that Bagapsh's death would provoke domestic political splits with serious geopolitical consequences contributed to this muted electoral atmosphere. All three candidates signed a "Charter for Fair Elections," which nonetheless failed to prevent a major scandal caused by an interview in which former Georgian Defense Minister Tengiz Kitovani claimed Ankvab had ties to the Georgian intelligence services. However, the "black" PR-technology that had proven effective in 1990s did not work in 2011, and Ankvab ultimately emerged victorious. As Irakli Khintba (a political analyst and the current deputy foreign minister) rightly noted, "people are tired of this topic. We have a whole generation that grew up after the war. Besides, there is

public demand for fair elections and when someone openly violates [the charter], it can only annoy people.”⁶⁹

The military and political defeat of Georgia in August 2008 strengthened and provided momentum for the pro-American and North Atlantic vector of Georgian foreign policy. Georgia signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership with the United States in January 2009. This document designated Georgia a special partner of Washington outside NATO. The steps by the Kremlin to recognize the independence of the two former autonomous regions of the Georgian SSR were perceived in the West not as support for two de facto states that had existed outside of Georgian control for years, but as Russian territorial expansion. In this regard, Strobe Talbott, an iconic figures in Russian-American relations who served as the Deputy Secretary of State on CIS issues from 1994 to 2001, spoke for many when he affirmed that: “It may be that officially Russia considers Abkhazia and South Ossetia independent states, but in the West it is perceived as an extension of the Russian territory. It happened for the first time since the end of the Soviet era and I think this is a dangerous phenomenon.”⁷⁰ The United States and its allies have followed this line since 2008 in spite of the change of heads of state, foreign ministers and the heads of the legislative bodies. The United States and Georgia began talks on the American military bases in Poti and Marneuli (this step is considered a counterweight to the creation of Russian military infrastructure on the territory of Abkhazia in Ochamchira and Gudauta). There is a paradoxical situation in which the strengthening of the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and the U.S. (and NATO) presence in Georgia can only reinforce the

⁶⁹ Olga Allenova, “V Abkhazskuyu kompaniyu dobavili Gruzii” [Georgia was added to the Abkhaz electoral campaign] //Kommersant- Daily (in Russian). - 2011. – August, 25.- №157 (4698).

⁷⁰ “Nadeys’, chto leduyushchaya administratsiya SSHA vernetsya k idéé Dogovora po protivoraketnoy oborone” [I hope that the next U.S. administration will return to the idea of the ABM Treaty] // Vremya novostey,. - 2008. - November 1.- № 204.

new post-August 2008 status quo. The military capability of the United States will not be used against Russia, and vice versa. The presence of the military "fists" of Moscow in Abkhazia and an American military presence in Georgia would serve to deter Tbilisi on the one hand and Sukhumi on the other from any "reckless actions." All these factors would objectively work to preserve the status quo that emerged in the aftermath of the war of August 2008. Meanwhile, the Russian military buildup in Abkhazia creates difficulties for Moscow itself. Deployment of bases on one side would improve the internal infrastructure in Abkhazia (where today tourism is actually limited to the space between the Russian border and Sukhumi, though to the east of the capital it has been underdeveloped). New security guarantees from Moscow will also help guarantee the revival of Abkhazia. At the same time, however, the arrival and presence of troops from large neighboring countries does not contribute to the development of national statehood over the long term. On the contrary, it creates new collisions.

According to the American scholar Gerard Toal, "Abkhazia's biggest challenges today are not about recognition, but about creating stable foundations for its internal legitimacy"⁷¹. Indeed, after an armed conflict and in the conditions of suspended sovereignty, it is impossible to create a liberal open society. But it is necessary to find the optimum nation-building model. Abkhazia is not the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, or even South Ossetia, where "the titular ethnic groups" enjoy clear numerical superiority. Indeed, it is unlikely that the Armenian, Russian and Georgian (Megrelian) population of the republic will accept the constitutional provision (Article 49 of the Constitution of Abkhazia) restricting to ethnic Abkhaz the exclusive right to occupy the post of president. It is necessary to take into account the growing economic role of the Armenian community, which is almost equal numerically to the Abkhaz.

⁷¹ Gerard Toal: "'Standards for status' is more realistic than 'territorial integrity'" <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?language=2&id=20292>

Hence new approaches to nation-building will be called for sooner or later. And last (but not least) is the need to uphold law and order. A state which is based on the ideas and practices of expediency (because without them it could not survive in the conflict) should make the shift to the dominance of formal procedures. By taking that path, the partially recognized Abkhaz state could achieve real independence, not just independence from Georgian sovereignty.

3. INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS’ VIEWS OF ABKHAZIA

Sergey Markedonov

“The Caucasian Chalk Circle”: Abkhazia in the changing regional and world politics through the prism of experts’ evaluations

The attention paid to the Caucasus region today by scholars, diplomats, and policymakers is growing rapidly. While the countries of the region have successfully completed their second decade as independent states, the overall situation in the region can by no means be described as predictable. Rather, the regional situation is complicated by protracted conflicts, ethnic tensions and interstate hostilities. These turbulent conditions have attracted the interest and engagement of both regional and global actors, leading to what can be called the return of the Caucasus

to the “Major League” of international politics, to a place of prominence in discussions of geopolitical strategy.

Understanding this growing interest in the region, the Caucasus Times website together with the Medium-Orient Information Agency launched a series of expert interviews to promote accurate professional discussion on the wide range of hot topics that impact the region. Sergey Markedonov, a visiting fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a specialist on the Caucasus and Black Sea region, discussed the most pressing issues affecting the development of the Caucasus with an illustrious group of distinguished scholars, analysts, and diplomats. The interviews were conducted between September 2010 and December 2011 and published on the Caucasus Times website. The project was entitled “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” after the well-known play of the same name by Berthold Brecht.

The interviews did not follow the traditional format of a discussion between a journalist and an expert, but rather an expert dialogue representing a variety of viewpoints. The readers could be presented with an impassioned argument in favor of Abkhaz independence alongside strong criticism of the Russian occupation of Georgian territory and of Moscow’s foreign policy as a whole. The interviews and their publication were entirely free of censorship or selectivity on the basis of political preferences. There were only two criteria – professionalism and knowledge of the facts. Every distinguished person involved in the project was given the opportunity to put forward their original and unique position.

Those interviews that focused on Abkhazia and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, as well as larger geopolitical trends in the Caucasus region, were selected for this book. Here we present the analytical observations of the most important theses, discussed as part of the expert dialogues. All quotes are verbatim.

The 'Hot August' of 2008: shared responsibility

It is no surprise that the events of the “five-day war” became one of the central issues of the expert dialogues. The dissolution of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) led to clashes over both borders and identities, inevitable consequences of this very complicated process, within the newly independent states of the South Caucasus. The war of August 2008 between the Russian Federation and Georgia marked a new phase in the ongoing process of decomposition of the post-Soviet construct. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, when the borders between the republics were defined and established as interstate boundaries, the principles of the so-called “Belovezh’e nationalism” (derived from the Belovezh’e Agreement) were not applied in the South Caucasus. Thus, the first precedent for a revision of borders between the former republics of the USSR has been established and, for the first time in Eurasia, and particularly in the Caucasus region, partially-recognized states have emerged. They are not recognized as independent by the United Nations (UN), but they are by the Russian Federation, a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

After the “five day war” in South Ossetia in August 2008, Moscow demonstrated for the first time since 1991 its willingness to play the role of a revisionist state. Until then, the foreign policy of Russia had been driven by the desire, prioritized above all else, to defend the status quo. Moscow’s attempt to alter its approach, not to mention the status quo itself, led to a worsening in its relations with the West (the United States, NATO and European Union). Though Russian “revisionism” has in fact become “selective” and has not spread beyond Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and although relations between Russia and the West have normalized to a considerable degree since 2008, Moscow, Washington and Brussels continue to operate under very different perceptions of the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian territorial integrity, and

Russian-Western engagement in the development of the Caucasus. Thus, the South Caucasus has become the stage for the development of a new status quo, not just for the region alone, but for the entire post-Soviet space. As a result, the events of 2008 have attracted a great deal of expert attention.

Despite a clear range of different opinions, most of participants in the expert dialogues agreed that Russia, Georgia, the U.S. government and the de facto states themselves all share responsibility for the “five day war”.

Thomas de Waal, a Senior Associate in the Russia and Eurasia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, thinks that “this was a conflict that could have been avoided, and no one comes out of it looking well.” In his view, “the Russian government was stirring up trouble and building up a military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That is not to say that they were planning the full-scale incursion into Georgia that they actually carried out in August, but they were certainly provoking the government in Tbilisi.” At the same time, his criticism of the West centered on what he called its “‘easy rhetoric’ about the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Clearly, these two territories have moved even further away from Georgia, and just reaffirming support for Georgian territorial integrity does not advance a solution of the problems.”⁷²

John Colarusso, a Professor at McMaster University in Canada, stated that “the facts indicate that Georgian forces initiated hostilities. Much is made of the waiting Russian forces on the far side of the Caucasus and of their swift response to Georgia’s actions against Tskhinval. To put matters simply, Russia anticipated Georgia’s actions and was prepared to counter them. In this she reacted prudently as any regional power

⁷² The interview was published on September, 14, 2010. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?language=2&id=20328>
For a fuller assessment of the August war by Thomas de Waal, see his book “The Caucasus: An Introduction” (Oxford University Press, 2010).

would.” In his views, “since Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia has been seen by Russia as a trouble-maker in the South Caucasus, but the war of two years ago has shown that Russia can contain any such trouble. It is time, therefore, for Russia to take the initiative and to alter this view of Georgia as an enemy, a sort of Cuba on its doorstep.”⁷³

German expert Uwe Halbach pays special attention to the public impact of the so-called “Tagliavini report” into the background and circumstances of the war⁷⁴. “How far did the report trigger changes in public opinion? Maybe the media reports on the report contributed to public opinion changes in a certain way. I doubt that many people read the whole 1400 page text of the report. At first all sides, Russia as well as Georgia, said that the report was in their favor. Then some negative reactions followed, especially in Georgian media, because the report said that it was the Georgian offensive against Tskhinvali that triggered the war. However, the Russian side too was not happy with all the statements in the report. There are very critical assessments of the Russian conflict-policy against Georgia, of its policy of “passportizaciya” (passportization) in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and other issues.”

Only Romanian expert Iulian Chifu placed unilateral responsibility for the war on Russia. He identified Abkhazia and South Ossetia as two “separatist territories invaded by Russia.”

⁷³ The interview was published on October, 8, 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20404>

During the Clinton administration, John Colarusso was a back channel diplomat between Washington and Moscow and an advisor on the Caucasus.

⁷⁴ The interview was published on October, 21, 2010. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20447>

As an expert, Uwe Halbach participated in the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (well-known as Tagliavini Mission) work. On 2 December 2008, the Council of the European Union appointed Swiss Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini Head of the Mission. On 30 September 2009, The Mission formally presented the results of its investigation in the form of a Report (named by the media the “Tagliavini report”). The full text of this report is available at: <http://www.ceiig.ch>

Dr. Chifu concluded: “Now, after the Russian – Georgian War, we have seen the first European country signatory of OSCE Treaties invading another country, a neighbor, occupying its territory and installing its own border guards, its troops and weaponry threatening Georgia’s territory under the control of the legitimate authorities in Tbilisi.”⁷⁵

According to Danish analyst Hans Mouritzen, the war of 2008 undermined the reputation of the U.S. and frightened the states of the post-Soviet space: “The Russian demonstration of military capability and, notably, of willingness to use it in a ‘Bismarckian’ way – a limited war serving strictly political purposes – created respect and fear in the whole post-Soviet space. Correspondingly, the credibility of the US as an ally sank dramatically. In spite of strong words and financial support, the US had politically and militarily let down its most loyal friend and the most eager NATO applicant. This was clearly a lesson to other would-be allies.”⁷⁶

The Roots of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: a totally overlooked topic

It is worth noting that the historical prerequisites of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict were peripheral to the whole discussion, with pride of place given to the topical issues of the day and the prospects for the future. This does not appear to be a coincidence. Among Western analysts, the primary foci are usually contemporary trends and forecasting, while history is

⁷⁵ The interview was published on July, 18, 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20925>

In 2006-2011, Iulian Chifu was the Counsellor for foreign affairs, defense, public order and national security at the Vice-President of the Romanian Senate. He is currently an Advisor to the President of Romania.

⁷⁶ The interview was published on November, 17, 2011. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?language=2&id=21009>

Dr. Hans Mouritzen is Senior Researcher, head of FSE project, the research unit on Foreign policy and EU studies.

considered a mobilizing instrument for the nationalist movement and the conflict. However the historical roots of the conflict are often overlooked, and this trend is reflected in our expert dialogues.

In the opinion of John Colarusso, “when Russia recognized Abkhazia, she recognized the unique homeland of an ethnic group that had been under extreme pressure since the 19th century.” However he did not give a more detailed explanation of what he meant when speaking about “pressure.”

A substantial portion of the expert dialogue with George Hewitt, a professor of Caucasian languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, was devoted to the history of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. It should be noted that some Western scholars sometimes interpret Professor Hewitt’s assessments as politically motivated or engaged. It is well-known that Professor Hewitt is the honorary consul for Abkhazia (a semi-recognized entity with no UN-membership) to the United Kingdom. Hewitt is nonetheless is an expert in Georgian and Abkhaz languages, and his professionalism is widely recognized and indisputable. He also contributes to the contemporary political discourse in publications such as “The Guardian.” In his own words, his wealth of knowledge of Georgian enabled him “to read with increasing alarm what leading members of the Georgian intelligentsia were writing about the republic’s minorities from late in 1988, as Moscow’s controls on publications began to be relaxed. Though I was still supportive of the Georgians’ desire to free themselves from Moscow’s control, I could see the dangers that such nationalist sentiments threatened to create.” Hewitt said that the radical nationalism and megalomania of the first Georgian president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in parallel with the mistakes of the international community, triggered the military clash between the Georgians and Abkhazians in 1992. In his view, the West was over hasty in recognizing Georgia and its territorial integrity with no special pre-conditions: “After a surge in the war in South Ossetia, it is

true that, with President Boris Yeltsin's help, Shevardnadze brought the war in South Ossetia to an end with the Daghomys Agreement on 24 June. But Shevardnadze had absolutely no mandate from the Georgian people, as elections were only held in October 1992, and the war in Mingrelia was still in progress. The West should have laid down conditions, telling the Military Council: 'Stop the wars in South Ossetia and Mingrelia; show us that you can settle your differences with the Abkhazians (and, indeed, the republic's other ethnic minorities) peacefully; and get yourselves democratic legitimacy by conducting elections in the autumn. Only if you can satisfy us on all these points, will Georgia be recognized by the EU and be able to establish diplomatic relations with both the EU states and the USA; only then will you win admittance to the IMF, World Bank and the UN.' None of these sensible steps were taken...''⁷⁷

Abkhazia and other de facto states: commonalities and differences

Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on August 26, 2008, just a few months after the United States and its allies had expressed support for the self-determination of Kosovo, a former Serbian autonomous region. With the recognition of Kosovo and Russia's response in the form of the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the current model of international law ceased to exist as a legitimate and universally recognized set of norms. The recognition of Kosovo's independence at the beginning of 2008 served as a demonstration of power in a unipolar world. The US unilaterally declared the former Serbian autonomous region "a unique case of ethno-political self-determination" and initiated its formal and legal legitimization. However, in response to the challenge posed by Washington and its allies, Moscow broke the "monopoly of

⁷⁷ Interview was published on November, 16, 2010. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=2051>

recognition.” The individual centers of power, short of a common approach or common criteria, have gone on to recognize (or not) any entity they want. At the same time, Russia conspicuously refuses to recognize Kosovo, while even after August 2008, the US and the EU member states are not willing to yield on the principle of Georgia’s “territorial integrity.” Many observers considered the Russian decision of 2008 to be a geopolitical response to the unilateral actions of the United States, and the challenge posed by unilateralism to the predictability of international affairs has been widely discussed. This discourse has promoted comparative analysis of Abkhazia and the many other de facto (non-recognized as well as semi-recognized) entities of Europe and Eurasia.

In our expert dialogues, this topic was one of the most popular and most heavily contested by a variety of different opinions. The viewpoints of the participants registered certainly similarities as well as many differences, noting the common denominator of non-recognition (or only partial recognition) by the international community. First and foremost, however, the experts tended to differentiate between Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two former autonomous entities of Soviet Georgia which became breakaway republics after the dissolution of the USSR. Practically all of them, while they do recognize the controversial dynamics in Abkhazia, believe it to have better prospects than South Ossetia. They also see Abkhazia’s resources for the pursuit of national independence (not claiming it as a final goal) as more substantial than those of South Ossetia, which they see as having very little chance of becoming a separate, sustainable state.

Thomas de Waal concludes that “the first difference [...] is that South Ossetia is much smaller...South Ossetia is also of little or no strategic importance to Russia in itself—only as a weapon to be used against Georgia. All this leads me to say that, although at the moment it seems much more hostile to Tbilisi, South Ossetia will eventually do a deal with Georgia. Abkhazia

has travelled much further away from Georgia and there is far less recent memory of co-existence. The Abkhaz and the Armenians and Russians of Abkhazia are much closer to the North Caucasus. Abkhazia has functioning institutions, including a parliament, independent newspapers, and a lively political culture. And of course, Abkhazia with its Black Sea coastline is much dearer to the Russian elite. For these reasons, I can see the two territories having very different futures.”

In the opinion of Svante Cornell, the Research Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program and a co-founder of the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Stockholm, “the main difference is the viability of each as a political community. South Ossetia, a territory of 100,000 people before 1991, is now essentially a Russian military outpost, with a total population of 20,000-25,000 people, implying that the ratio of soldiers to civilians is about one in six...As for Abkhazia, it is a much more viable entity in social, political, and economic terms.”⁷⁸

Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell stressed that the determination of the final status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia must be de-linked. “Each territory has its own distinct institutional features, geographic advantages and challenges, and institutional capacity. In addition, the proximity of South Ossetia to Tbilisi makes it a much more direct security threat to Georgia. That may make South Ossetia more susceptible to a ‘grand bargain’ between the Georgia, the West and Russia, where other issues are brought into play. So we need to find different sovereign formulas to address the future status of each of these territories.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ The interview was published on September, 18, 2011. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20968>

⁷⁹ The interview was published on November, 20, 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20549>

Alexander Cooley is the Associate Professor of Political Science at Barnard College (New York). Lincoln Mitchell is an Associate at Columbia University's Harriman Institute (New York).

While criticizing the Abkhaz *de facto* state as an ethnocracy, Gerard Toal sees at the same time some theoretical opportunities for it to overcome this circumstance “if it is to establish long-term stability and restore its prosperity.” When considering South Ossetia, however, he speaks of the difficult future it will face because it will be “one that will require it to develop robust domestic institutions that provide legitimacy for its rulers.”⁸⁰

Russia’s role is perceived to be the most important factor that will determine the differentiated future development trajectories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Dependence on Russia, its military resources and financial assistance is examined as a serious obstacle for the development of South Ossetia. Eiki Berg, an Estonian specialist on *de facto* statehood, says that “one may easily distinguish Abkhazia’s aspirations to independent statehood from those self-determination practices in South Ossetia, where the claim to independent statehood is only a decoration of Russia’s military activities in the occupied land of Georgia.”⁸¹

Laurence Broers, a British expert, insists that each of the post-Soviet *de facto* states in the Caucasus has its own unique character. In his view, “they consolidated over time, their institutions developed to the point where what was going on could not be ignored, even if it could not be recognized as legitimate. In terms of explaining different outcomes, each of the *de facto* states in the South Caucasus had its own strengths and weaknesses in terms of capacities to consolidate a stable political regime capable of subsequent democratization. We can identify

⁸⁰ The interview was published on September, 4, 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?language=2&id=20292>

Dr. Gerard Toal (in Gaelic Gearóid Ó Tuathail) is Director and Professor of Government and International Affairs at Virginia Tech’s National Capital Region campus in Alexandria (Virginia, USA).

⁸¹ The interview was published on January, 30, 2011. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20743>

Eiki Berg is a Professor of International Relations in University of Tartu (Estonia).

variables such as the prominence of warlord armies and militarized political culture, the extent of multi-ethnicity, the extent and type of external support, and the political trajectory in the metropolitan state.”⁸²

Professor Charles King is rather skeptical about attempts to compare the cases of Kosovo and the breakaway republics of the South Caucasus. He concludes that “there are many ways in which Kosovo is simply not comparable to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Sheer size is one difference; the presence of a UN-mandated peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction mission is another. The Kosovar government’s commitment to the return of refugees is a third. And a fourth is the broad international support that Kosovar independence has achieved—nearly seventy countries have recognized it as a sovereign state.” However, unlike U.S politicians, he questions the wisdom of the American tactic of denying that the Kosovo case represented the setting of a precedent. He thinks “that is unfortunate and...represents a terrible error in the way that Kosovar independence was handled.”⁸³

This skepticism is partially shared by Eiki Berg. On the one hand, he agrees that “Abkhazia and South Ossetia could be similar to Kosovo in many ways.” However, on the other hand, they contrast “in diametrically oppositional ways of achieving recognition from the rest of the world.” In his view, the Abkhaz case can also not be compared to the experience of North Cyprus, because “for a long time (2003-2009), the major

⁸² The interview was published on December, 8, 2011. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=21016>

Dr. Laurence Broers is Caucasus Projects Manager at “Conciliation Resources” (CR), an independent non-governmental organization working to prevent violence, promote justice and transform conflict into opportunities for development

⁸³ The interview was published on September, 20, 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?language=2&id=20347>

Charles King is Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University.

discourse appeared to be reunification with the parent country, which again seems to be out of the question in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”

Abkhazia: political perspectives

The recognition of Abkhazia in 2008 changed everything and nothing at the same time. On the one hand, this was the first time since 1991 that Abkhazia's national independence was supported, though it was by a rather limited number of states. On the other hand, Abkhazia had seceded from Georgia in a de facto sense after the military conflict of 1992-1993 and it has been strengthening its institutions of power, as well as its political identity, ever since. The Georgian authorities, law-enforcement agencies and educational institutions have no access to Abkhazian territory, and unsuccessful negotiations and ethno-political tensions have promoted bilateral hostility. Since 2008, Abkhazia has survived through the growing political, military, security and business presence of Russia, and its new status, supported by Moscow, has not been recognized by the vast majority of UN-member states. All those circumstances raise a wide range of questions concerning the future of Georgian-Abkhaz, Abkhaz-Russian and Russian-Georgian relations, as well as the final judicial and political status of Abkhazia. Our dialogues represent a diversity of opinions on these topical issues, though practically all experts are rather skeptical about the possibility of an accelerated process of international recognition for Abkhazia. However, they view the domestic and international developments related to Abkhazia with a high degree of nuance and subtlety.

German diplomat Dieter Boden thinks that “despite Russia's unilateral act of recognition, the Abkhaz conflict can by no means be considered solved. Very visibly the region continues to be infested by instability which may at any time escalate again into tension, and even military action. This is illustrated by the

powerful military build-up along the administrative borders in Georgia, which gives rise to much legitimate concern. Therefore the challenge stands unchanged to this day: to work for a comprehensive negotiated settlement in which all sides to the conflict participate, including also the principal regional players.”⁸⁴

Thomas de Waal pays special attention to the changes in how Georgia is perceived in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He considers that there “Georgia has faded into the background. Now, if residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have economic or political problems, they will not blame Tbilisi, but their own governments and the patrons of their own governments in Russia. They are becoming part of the North Caucasus, with all the negative associations that that transition entails.”

In light of current conditions, our experts offered a variety of different “recipes” for how the international community can deal with Abkhazia. Sabine Fischer, a well-known German expert, believes that it is necessary to engage the breakaway republic. “Of course Abkhazia has ever closer contact with Russia, but it remains almost completely isolated internationally. Moreover, even though the Abkhaz do not consider Georgia as a major threat anymore because they feel protected by Russian military presence, Georgia, and the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, will persist. Over time there needs to be some kind of interaction and work towards the solution of the conflict if people in the region are to live in peace in the future.” In her view, “the EU’s political long-term goal remains the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity. In the medium term, however, a policy of engagement aspires to break through isolation – of Abkhazia, but also of the Georgian and Abkhaz societies from each other – and to work

⁸⁴ The interview was published on October, 24, 2011. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20989>

Ambassador Dieter Boden from 1995 to 1996 was a Head of the OSCE mission in Georgia. In 1999-2002 he served as the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General in Georgia.

for conflict transformation, i.e. the creation of conditions which favour the reconciliation of the parties.”⁸⁵

This approach is shared by Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell, though they emphasize the necessity of correcting current U.S. tactics. “Our view that continuing the isolation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was a counterproductive policy dates back to well before the war... We believe that Western policy towards Abkhazia in particular should reflect this changing context, while keeping in mind that twenty years of isolating Abkhazia has served neither the interests of Georgia nor the West.” At the same time, they consider an isolated Abkhazia an instrument of the Russian military and a political presence for Moscow in the Caucasus region. They doubt that Abkhazia (as well as South Ossetia) is now a *de facto* state, because it is “too dependent on Russia and enjoy[s] too little recognition by the rest of the world to be considered a *de facto* state.” Cooley and Mitchell see the best way out of the current deadlock as a process focused on future status which “will have to integrate several of the following elements: shared sovereign functions, split sovereign functions, time-scaled transfers of sovereignty, an internationalization component (UN, EU or 3rd party guarantor) and a wider regional component... Finally, we would note that even in current Georgia-Abkhaz relations, there are elements of sovereign sharing already in place, most notably the governance of the Inguri hydroelectric power plant. This hybrid sovereignty formula could serve as a guide for governing other assets and functions.”

Gerard Toal believes that “Abkhazia’s biggest challenges today are not about recognition, but about creating stable

⁸⁵ The interview was published on October, 18, 2011. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=2098>

Dr. Sabine Fischer is an expert of German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) in Berlin. From 2007 to 2012 she was Senior Research Fellow am European Union Institute for Security Studies in Paris.

foundations for its internal legitimacy”. He also considers that Abkhazia “must tackle the difficult question of reconciliation with its former Georgian residents who were violently displaced by conflict. If it doesn’t do that, it will never have true stability and peace; the conflict will fester and be reproduced from generation to generation.” Dr. Toal proposes a “‘standards for status’ approach” which seems to him “more realistic and more likely to advance human security, than rote repetition of ‘territorial integrity’ discourse... Shared sovereignty, perhaps the (re)constitution of Georgia as a confederation made up of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia proper, may be a possible model to consider. Before this, however, there needs to be a meaningful returns and reconciliation/accountability process. This will be extremely difficult.”

Tom Trier, a distinguished expert on ethnic minorities, pays special attention to the multi-ethnicity of Abkhaz society and the contradiction that it creates when placed within the context of an ethnocratic de facto state. He concludes that “clearly, Abkhazia will have to make serious reform in the area of human rights and governance in relation to its multi-ethnic diversity if Abkhazia wants to cultivate an image of being a developing democracy. There can be little doubt that a democratization of Abkhazia will benefit society at large, including the non-titular ethnicities. To this end, Abkhazia needs the support of the international community, and not only the Russian Federation, to develop into a more inclusive society, where the legitimate interests and needs of minority groups are also taken into account.”⁸⁶

Abkhazia has been recognized by some countries in Latin American and Oceania, in addition to Russia. What reserves of support will Abkhazia be able to count on in the so-called “third

⁸⁶ The interview was published on October, 30, 2011. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?language=2&id=20997>

Tom Trier is a Senior Research Associate for the Danish-German research foundation, the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), and the Centre’s regional director in the Caucasus since 2005.

world”? These issues were discussed in the course of the expert dialogue with Alejandro Sanchez. He says that “the decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia has less to do with a real in-depth knowledge of the region and those specific conflicts, and more to do with the fact that Caracas and Managua want to please Moscow.” However, he agrees that “Latin Americans may well feel a degree of sympathy for the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as they place a high value on the right of autonomy, sovereignty and the free determination of people (perhaps, in part, due to Latin America’s own colonial past).” At the same time, recognition or non-recognition, in his view, does not relate to the strategic interest of the Latin American countries in the Caucasus itself.⁸⁷

Abkhazia is interested in diversifying its international ties and foreign policy. Mitat Çelikpala, Associate Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University in İstanbul, was asked: “The Turkish government officially supports the territorial integrity of all the Caucasus neighbors of this country. But at the same time, numerous business, cultural and political ties between Abkhazia and Turkey are well-known. How can you explain this contradiction?” In response, Dr. Çelikpala noted that “it is not a contradiction in fact. This is one of the end results of historical developments. All the Turkish governments running for votes and Diaspora groups are very organized and influential in domestic politics. All those ties are very humanly and did not create any political/geopolitical change in the region. Additionally trade and economy are the main pillars of Turkey in regional politics. On the other hand, when the issues concern international politics and the status quo, Turkish decision-makers are so traditional. They rejected any change of borders, support

⁸⁷ The interview was published on November, 21, 2010. Available in Russian at: <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20522>

W. Alejandro “Alex” Sanchez Nieto is a Research Fellow at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) where he focuses on geopolitics, military and cyber security issues.

territorial integrity and are not eager to take any step [to change the existing balance...It is beyond Turkey's capacity to come to terms with any radical changes in the Caucasus]"⁸⁸.

The two expert approaches in our dialogues concerning the Abkhazian perspectives seem to represent opposite extremes.

Iulian Chifu doesn't see any proper Abkhaz aspirations or strategic goals. In his view, "neither the Tkhsinvali Region, nor the Sukhumi district on the shores of the Black Sea are anything else than separatist parts of Georgia that are to come back inside the territory of Georgia, no matter what form of relations between the region and the central government are negotiated and achieved." Russia should withdraw from those occupied Georgian territories and let Georgia and the two regions' elected leaders, in democratic conditions, establish the framework and form of decentralization that will divide the attributes of the capital and central power in Tbilisi and the regional administration in the two regions that are not even: Abkhazia can claim the autonomy status it already had, similarly to Adjara, but South Ossetia is just a district of Georgia."

George Hewitt, on the contrary, believes that the Western countries that identify themselves as Georgian partners and friends should encourage Georgia and its government to federalize and recognize both of the former autonomous regions of the Georgian SSR. "There can be no stable peace in this part of Transcaucasia until recognition is achieved. After recognition, Western influence, expertise and investment will flow in. Whilst this would counterbalance Russian influence, which Moscow may not entirely like, Western recognition would indicate acceptance that Russia's decision of 26 August 2008 was correct, something that Moscow would probably welcome, and might lead to Russo-Occidental cooperation in the region, which would be beneficial for all concerned. Without such steps, the status quo will naturally continue."

⁸⁸ The interview was published On September, 22, 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20353>

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The expert dialogues summarized here raised a wide range of topical issues, including the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, Russian-Georgian relations, the internal dynamics of Abkhazia and its perspective on the current situation, and the comparison between it and South Ossetia. The dialogue cycle as a whole contained a variety of positions, suggestions and practical recommendations. Discussion of these issues should be continued. Potentially, field studies designed to better understand underlying motives of the people on the ground should be added to this policy-centric exchange of views. Such a continuation of the dialogue could facilitate the search for a more sustainable path towards the resolution of the conflict.

4. ABKHAZIA: THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

Islam Tekushev

Abkhazian Georgians in the new system of political and cultural coordinates

In the wake of the war with Georgia in August 2008, and after Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence, the issue of Abkhazia's international status remains important. This is primarily due to the fact that the independence of Abkhazia has not been widely recognized internationally for various reasons.

Today, the issue of the Georgian refugees who fled the territory of the breakaway region during the 1992-1993 conflict remains one of the most nagging problems in the conflict zone. The issue of the return of refugees to Abkhazia is a major

obstacle to the international settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.

The Gali district is one of the most densely populated areas of Abkhazia. Most of its predominantly Georgian pre-war population fled during the fighting, fearing reprisals and ethnic cleansing, as did Georgians living in other parts of Abkhazia.

It is estimated that about 40,000 - 60,000 refugees have returned to Gali and surrounding villages since the ill-fated Georgian incursion of 1998. According to the official 2003 census, 29,287 ethnic Georgians live in Gali. However, international observers have questioned the official figures and claim that 45,000 Georgians⁸⁹ lived in the area in 2006.

The socio-economic situation in Gali has remained dire since the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. At present, since Abkhazia's armed groups occupied the whole territory of the Kodori gorge in August 2010 together with Russian army troops, the Abkhazian authorities are making an effort to reduce crime in the area. Crime in Gali is caused by extreme destitution, unemployment, and ethnic tensions between Mingrelians (Georgians) and Abkhazians.

Today, although the situation on the border between Georgia and Abkhazia has improved, the villages of Gali district remain hotbeds of tension.

For example, on 8 April 2012, an armed group attacked Russian Border Guards, killing one of them and wounding a second. Two Georgians also died in the shootout.

On 28 May 2012, unknown men shot two policemen and one local resident in the center of the town of Gal⁹⁰.

The Abkhazian security authorities claim that the two Georgians killed in the shootout were former Gali residents wanted for subversive and terrorist activities.

⁸⁹ Mingrelians of Gali district. The New Times, #38, 22 September 2008

⁹⁰ Shooting in Gali district, 28 May 2012

Tension in Gali region increased after Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence in 2008. The New Times noted that few Georgians) want to live in independent Abkhazia.

The local Georgian population is irritated by the Russian border guards deployed in Gali after the August war because they prevent free movement and thus make it difficult for Georgians in Gali to communicate with relatives on the Georgian side of the internal border. In addition, the presence of border guards restricts the cross-border trade on which the local Georgian population relied heavily for its livelihood. Discrimination against Georgians seeking employment in Abkhazia also contributes to making the lives of the Georgian community unbearable.

Georgians, Armenians and other ethnic groups have three seats in the country's parliament, but this is not enough to create a democratic civil state, which Abkhazia claims to be.

Abkhazia's leadership remembers the problems of Georgians in Gali region only during election campaigns. Meanwhile, the well-being of the Georgians depends on a number of very important issues, the outcome of which will determine Abkhazia's future, in the first instance, the return of refugees.

In this regard, the new political and socio-economic realities in which Georgian refugees will have to live are more significant than the actual logistics of repatriation. The most significant conditions are security and respect for their civil rights. The plight of those Georgians who have returned to Abkhazia testifies to serious problems in integrating refugees into post-conflict Abkhaz society.

Also problematic and painful is the construction of a new Georgian identity in conditions divorced from the traditional ethno-cultural habitat by virtue of the new borders and restrictions on crossing them.

The main challenge facing Georgians in Abkhazia today is to preserve their culture and language and become a valuable

part of the Abkhazian state. It is these issues that the Prague-based Medium Orient Agency researched in June-July 2012 through the prism of the social well-being of the Georgian population in Abkhazia. The opinion poll was commissioned by the Caucasus Times information-analytical agency.

It is worth noting that although the poll of residents of Gali district was anonymous, local people were very wary while answering questions, particularly those which in the opinion of interviewers contradicted official Abkhaz government policy. Consequently, many respondents selected the answer “I do not know/I find it difficult to answer.”

A comparative analysis of the findings of the 2012 poll and those of a previous survey conducted throughout Abkhazia in September 2011 reveals significantly diverging views on the part of the Georgian and Abkhaz population on such issues as Abkhazia’s status.

The findings of the survey conducted in Gali in June-July 2012 show that the Georgian population of the region as a whole positively evaluates the changes that have taken place in Abkhazia since the recognition of independence in 2008. However, the attitude of the “Abkhazian Georgians” towards the future status of Abkhazia is more varied than that of Abkhazian citizens as a whole.

Additionally, a significant part of the Georgian population of Gali district is not satisfied with observation of the rights and freedoms of the Georgian population in Abkhazia.

The 2012 poll involved 100 Georgians (Mingrelians) from seven villages in Gali district, both men and women, of varying age and occupation. Respondents were selected randomly.

Thus, asked “How do you think the situation has changed with regard to the rights and freedoms of the Georgian population in Abkhazia since the recognition of independence in 2008?” 27 percent of respondents said the situation has improved, and 48 percent said it has improved somewhat. However, 7 percent of respondents stated that it has deteriorated

somewhat, and 4 percent stated that it has deteriorated, while 14 percent could not answer the question. Thus, the combined total of those who were pessimistic about the level of the human rights and freedoms of the Georgian population in Abkhazia or who found it difficult to answer the given question was 25 percent.

Respondents answered similarly when asked “How do you assess the activity of the Abkhaz leadership with regard to the Georgian population since the recognition of Abkhazia’s independence?” Twenty-three percent of respondents said they assessed it positively and 49 percent -- rather positively. However, 10 percent of respondents assessed it negatively and 8 percent rather negatively, and 10 percent found it difficult to answer the question. Thus, 28 percent of respondents either found it difficult to assess the activities of the Abkhaz leadership with regard to the Georgian population of Abkhazia, or gave a negative assessment.

Meanwhile, the findings of the previous Abkhazia-wide survey revealed some differences between the attitude of Georgians in Abkhazia to the future status of the republic and that of the rest of society. Specifically, Georgians in Abkhazia were afraid to openly answer questions relating to Abkhaz statehood for a number of reasons.

So, asked “What is the most optimal solution of the status of Abkhazia?” the vast majority of respondents in Gali (50 percent) supported total independence, and only 26 percent of the population supported the idea of joining the Russian Federation as a separate region. Five percent of respondents clearly stated that they would like to see Abkhazia within Georgia as a separate autonomous region, and 19 percent of respondents could not answer this question. Meanwhile, those respondents who preferred Russia said they would like to live in a united Georgia, but they are not against living with Russia. Those who confidently asserted that they would like to see Abkhazia within Georgia explained their choice by saying that they would like to

live together with their relatives who remain on the other side of the border.

According to the nationwide survey, less than 1 percent of respondents (0.6 percent), mostly ethnic Georgians, supported joining Georgia. Only 1.7 percent found it difficult to answer the question, which indicates that the overwhelming majority of the population has clearly formed their position on this issue, in contrast to ethnic Georgians in Gali district.

The assessment by Abkhazia's Georgians of the development of relations between Abkhazia and Russia was less positive compared with the nationwide survey results. According to the September 2011 opinion poll, 77.4 percent of respondents positively assessed the development of relations with Russia and 14.2 percent rather positively, whereas only 28 percent of ethnic Georgians in Gali district of Abkhazia positively assessed the development of relations with Russia, and 30 percent of them -- rather positively.

Thus, 18 percent of surveyed Georgians assessed Abkhaz-Russian relations negatively or rather negatively, while the corresponding figures for the national survey were 2 percent and 1.2 percent respectively. However, a significant number of Georgians (24 percent) found it difficult to assess Abkhaz-Russian relations. Comments made by interviewees indicate that those respondents who found it difficult to answer the questions in the first and second cases were to a large extent afraid to openly reveal their preferences, which clearly contradicted the aspirations prevalent in the country.

They gave similar answers when asked with which countries Abkhazia should develop relations in the future. A rather high percentage of respondents (22 percent) could not answer the question; 55 percent believe Abkhazia should develop relations with Russia, which is 42 percent less compared with the findings of the nationwide survey - 97 percent.

The survey in Gali region showed that the Georgian population, like the population of Abkhazia as a whole, has a

positive attitude towards EU countries. Thus, 49 percent of Georgians in Gali district and 58.7 percent of the total Abkhaz population believe that Abkhazia should develop relations with European countries.

The population of Abkhazia and of Gali (41 percent) also rated Turkey highly in terms of international relations. Over one third of respondents (34 percent) said relations should be developed with former Soviet republics. Only a few respondents in Gali region named the United States (5 percent) and Georgia (7 percent) as possible partners. That low rating is to be attributed to local Georgians' fear of openly showing sympathies for Georgia and the US, since the Abkhaz leadership has formally stated that it is impossible to resume relations with Georgia after its military action in South Ossetia in 2008, and the US is too far away.

The overall concern of the Gali population with the status quo was indirectly reflected in responses to the following question: "What problems do you consider the most pressing today?"

The vast majority of respondents (29 percent) named socio-economic problems (unemployment, low living standards); 26 percent could not answer the question; 22 percent named security issues (crime, terrorism); and 9 percent -- interethnic relations. Only 6 percent perceived Georgia as a threat.

Thus, the population of Gali district believes that security and socio-economic issues remain the most acute problems in the region, despite the improvement in the overall security situation in Abkhazia and the presence of Russian border guards in the conflict zone.

Abkhazia's Georgians are in effect second-class citizens due to the low living standards in Gali district, high unemployment, obstacles to crossing the border into Georgia, and restrictions on their civil rights (the right to work, to publicly display their ethnic origin). This, in turn, fuels tensions in the conflict zone and complicates the return of refugees.

Abkhazia's Georgians, cut off from their natural ethno-cultural habitat, have been forced to participate in the process of creating a viable Abkhazian state. Meanwhile, they are deprived of protection and ways to integrate into the new Abkhaz society. Often political realities are at odds with their ethno-cultural preferences.

All this leads to the estrangement of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia, and compounds the degree of tension in the zone of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Islam Tekushev

Independent Abkhazia: One Year after the August 2008 War

Abandoned dilapidated houses bearing holes from artillery shelling, half-burnt-out Soviet administrative buildings that still retain a certain imperialist grandeur, new hotels in the modern Russian style, and breathtaking landscapes. This is the picture greets you as soon as you cross the Russian-Georgian border into the territory of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia.

Abkhazian territory starts immediately after the resort town of Adler. The border is hard to cross even after the peak tourist season is over. The only way to enter Abkhazia legally from Russia is through a border post on the Psou river. This is how Abkhazian tangerine vendors infiltrate the Russian market. Tangerine sales are the only source of income for the Abkhazians during the winter months.

During the “tangerine season” which starts in September, the throughput capacity at the small border post is reduced to one fruit cart per hour. The yells and screams of the locals, cursing by Russian border patrol guards, fruit carts, the distinct smell of citrus, and the miserable expression on the faces of the Abkhazian vendors after crossing the border – all this dissonance accompanies my journey into the heavenly land of Abkhazia. As soon as I get into the taxi, I strike up a conversation with the driver. “All these ‘independent’ years we lived on the revenue from tangerines and humanitarian aid. Thank God, we have tourists during summer now. Otherwise, we would be in trouble,” the driver confides to me.

On the way to Sukhumi, my driver, Georgiy Ashba, told me how the Abkhaz people are preparing to share with Russia the

burden of hosting the Sochi Olympic Games. “You see, Sochi doesn’t have the capacity to host all the visitors. Moreover, it would make sense to use some of the Abkhazian sites for certain competitions as you won’t find a more magnificent landscape on the Black Sea coast. And our roads are so much better than Sochi’s serpentine with its traffic jams and holdups. You would only waste your time and money there, while we are closer to the game sites,” Georgiy ponders. The road to Sukhumi along the coast was indeed smooth and easy. As we approached Gagry, I started seeing palm trees, mountain ashes, and other exotic greenery. The town itself bore no trace of the war.

My guide changed the subject when we drove into the town: “All the real estate in Gagry belongs to rich Moscow businessmen. Moscow Mayor Luzhkov bought the famous Ukraine resort hotel here, renovated it, and now it’s called ‘Moscow’”. It took us a little over an hour to reach the Abkhazian capital, Sukhum. As we drove into the city, I noticed two charred, smoke-darkened apartment buildings with large holes in them. “Sixteen years ago, these streets saw deadly fights,” Georgiy Ashba commented.

But even despite the ghastly scenery left after the war, the dysfunctional railway station and the Parliament building with gaping holes in place of windows, the siege of which basically ended the Georgian-Abkhazian war, Sukhum is a beautiful and welcoming town.

Life here is not as bustling and flashy as you would expect in a capital city, but rather slow and steady, led by people who have seen a lot in life. Everything is much simpler here than in any Russian provincial town. For example, you can meet the prime minister of this unrecognized republic walking in the park.

However, despite the seeming unity and harmony between the government and the public, some Abkhazians often complain about bureaucracy and the inaccessibility of local officials. “It is easier to get a meeting with the president than to deal with a problem through the local council,” Nugzar Avidzba complained

after spending months trying to register his property on the outskirts of Gagry.

Despite numerous socio-economic problems resulting from Abkhazia's isolation from the rest of the world, people here are very open-hearted. The average monthly salary in Abkhazia is 1,800 rubles (US\$54.96). Only one third of the industrial plants built prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union are functional, but even they work only sporadically. However, market sales are booming. Groceries mostly come from Russia and are more expensive than in the neighboring Krasnodar Kray. Everything that's grown in Abkhazia is cheap – tangerines cost 15 rubles per kilo, pomegranates – 40 rubles, oranges and guava – 20 rubles, and an entire smoked cheese is only 120 rubles. Meat is scarce and very expensive. Nevertheless, the people are cheerful and optimistic about the future, even though the number of tourists visiting Abkhazia fell significantly in 2009 (to 400,000 Russian and NIS citizens, compared with 1 million visitors in 2008.)

At the same time, the global economic crisis has dampened the real estate boom in Abkhazia. According to a Sukhum-based realtor, the demand for housing which skyrocketed after Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence is currently in recess. The reason is not so much Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's threats to cancel all real estate deals in Abkhazia, because nobody here takes his threats seriously, but rather the aftermath of the global economic crisis. After the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict of 1992-1993, around 280,000 Georgians had to flee the country. Their homes were plundered and abandoned. Today, these houses are up for sale.

Up until now, foreigners de-jure were not allowed to buy houses and apartments in Abkhazia. A decree issued by President Sergey Bagapsh prohibited real estate sales until all property was accounted for. At the same time, a real estate agency informed me that according to local legislation, if Georgians do not return to their houses in 10 years, they are automatically stripped of

their property rights. Former owners receive no compensation, and the property is transferred to the government.

The same agent also told me that the Abkhazian government is preparing a draft law which will allow Russian citizens to buy property in Abkhazia. The objective is to make the process of privatizing property more transparent and set out clear rules for the formal transfer of property rights.

But even if the Abkhaz parliament passes this law, it is still unclear how credible these legal procedures will be, and whether they'll be able to protect property owners in a republic whose independence is not recognized by international community.

Meanwhile, Abkhazian independence has neither solved the republic's problems nor provided for a safer, more stable tomorrow. The country's economic and social well-being remains solely dependent on Russia.

Anton Kriveniyuk

Abkhazia and Russia: The Celebration of ‘Friendship and Brotherhood’ Did Not Turn out Well

On September 27, 2010, when Sukhum was celebrating the 17th anniversary of the city’s liberation from Georgian troops, a conference “Abkhazia’s Historic Choice: 200 Years of Abkhazia’s Accession to Russia” was held in the famous Atrium-Victoria hotel. It was an invitation-only event that didn’t include many politicians or experts who had a lot to say on the subject of Russian-Abkhazian relations. But the conference was memorable nonetheless. Its organizers invited two controversial figures – Marina Perevozkina, a correspondent for the Russian newspaper “Moskovskiy komsomolets,” and publicist Andrei Epifantsev. Marina Perevozkina has authored several articles about how real estate is confiscated from ethnic Russians in Abkhazia, while Epifantsev has accused the Abkhaz of ethnocracy.

The year 2010 marked the 200th anniversary of the incorporation of the principality of Abkhazia into the Russian Empire. The organizer of the conference, the Moscow Institute of Newly Independent States, was trying hard to spin the anniversary as worthy of celebration. It was in fact the third forum in Sukhum to commemorate the event, and like the previous two, it was arranged by Russian organizations and government structures. The Russian experts’ frequent visits to Sukhum suggest they are trying to impose their views.

Modern Abkhazia is a new and unknown subject for the Russian expert community. Russian politicians and experts are surprised and disappointed that the Abkhaz perceive that union with Russia simply as a political arrangement along the lines of

“safety in return for loyalty”. Moscow was expecting a “spiritual union” with vows of ever-lasting friendship. Hence the astonishment that Abkhazia does not plan to become a part of Russia, not now or ever.

Moscow politicians are more satisfied with the direction relations with South Ossetia have taken. Prior to recognizing Abkhazia’s independence, nobody really looked into Abkhazian perceptions of Russia. Russian experts thought recognizing Abkhazia’s sovereignty would be the first step towards its incorporation into Russia. The fact of the matter is that during the years of not being recognized as independent, the ideology of Abkhazian society changed. There are no plans to integrate with either southern or northern neighbors. After recognition, Abkhazia became economically and politically closer to Russia, but drifted further apart socially and culturally.

Institute of Newly Independent States head Konstantin Zatulin has always been among the organizers of such conferences. But his debate with Abkhaz historian and politician Stanislav Lakoba during the September 2012 conference turned into an argument. The assumption of the “voluntary” accession into the Russian empire in 1810 is not shared by Abkhazian scholars. The actual integration was preceded by almost half a century of war and the deportation of tens of thousands of Abkhazians to Turkey.

The Abkhaz do not bear a historic grievance towards Russia, but Lakoba, the author of the standard Abkhazian history textbook, advocated calling things by their proper names. He accused Russian experts of deliberately reassessing history to suit the current political context, an approach he said is unacceptable for Abkhazia.

Russian Ambassador to Abkhazia Semyon Grigoriev finally had to intervene to end the heated argument that ensued between Lakoba and Zatulin. Abkhaz scholars, who are not always politically correct, did not consider the conference a sensation. For the expert community, the pressing practical issues of today

dominate the agenda. At this point, Russian experts have few issues with Abkhazia, primarily concerns related to the confiscation of real estate. Even that would have gone unnoticed if almost all the people affected had not been ethnic Russians.

Marina Perevozkina from “Moskovskiy komsomolets” gained notoriety in Abkhazia after publishing a series of articles on the property problem. Inspired by her articles, a group of people who had been dispossessed brought a lawsuit against the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which according to the plaintiffs hadn’t done enough to protect Russian citizens in Abkhazia.

Another controversial issue is Moscow’s cooperation with Sukhum in defense and law enforcement. This is not public knowledge; the details are known only to a small circle of experts with contacts in the relevant ministries.

Russia’s claims against Abkhazia are legitimate. Little can be done, however, as long as the republic suffers from inefficient governance, endemic corruption, and a clan system. The years of isolation gave birth to a new ideology, but perpetuated the system and culture of governance at the level of 1990. Moreover, the local authorities got out of the habit of communicating with the outside world and didn’t anticipate that with independence and recognition comes transparency. In that respect, Marina Perevozkina and “Moskovskiy komsomolets” have a point. By contrast, the “revealing” articles about Abkhazia by Epifantsev are blatantly nationalistic.

To this category of experts and journalists, Abkhazia’s “axis of evil” is its unwillingness to become part of the Russian Federation. Otherwise they would forgive the embezzlement of Russian funds, the infringement of ethnic Russians’ rights, et.c. Russian experts and journalists are not shy in publicly expressing their demands on Abkhazia. Some of them may even express the views of the Russian authorities. Abkhazia retaliates with counter-claims, but as experts in Sukhumi are too modest to

engage in polemics, the exchange is confined to the local media. Not for long, though.

What is Russia's price for recognizing Abkhazia and protecting it from Georgia? Will it be limited to guarantees of a pro-Russian orientation, or also include economic privileges? Such as, for example, the expansion into Abkhazia of the Rosneft company, or plans to hand over Abkhazian's rail network to the Russian Railroad Company, et.c.?

The arrival in Abkhazia of large Russian companies unmistakably means that national businesses' development prospects are shrinking, while flawed agreements on defense complicate the functioning of Abkhazia's own defense system. Presumably, the top leadership in Sukhum knows the real price for independence and recognition, even if they are not willing to share it with the public at large. If Abkhazian political experts cannot get answers locally, they will direct their questions at Moscow.

Abkhazia will not choose either of the two evils – Russian government officials and experts must not be allowed to participate in “putting Abkhazia's house in order,” because the Russian tradition of governance and public engagement is far removed from the significantly more democratic rules of the game in Abkhazia. At the same time, it is dangerously unsafe to respond to Russia's claims with an increase in anti-Russian sentiment.

Therefore, Abkhazia is left with just one choice – genuine, dynamic reforms based on local traditions. The country has positive experience of reform and change which has been totally forgotten since the influx of Russian money.

Anton Kriveniyuk

Gali District: Between Two Poles

The border between Abkhazia and Georgia has been in existence for 17 years, since the end of the war in 1993. However, for the population of the Georgian-Abkhazian war zone, this border was once a mere formality. People used to walk across from one village to the other, even though the villages were on opposite sides of the border. Only now are they realizing what it means to live on a border between hostile polities. Their land will soon be fenced by barbed wire, while dispassionate border patrol officials are already turning away those without proper documentation.

Vakhtang (Vakho) Buliskeria from the village of Nabakevi in Abkhazia's Gali district and I are taking a stroll in his hazelnut orchard. It has 200 hazelnut trees that feed Vakho's large family. He shows me: "Here, look, this row of trees is on Abkhaz territory, while this one is already in Georgia. But this is all my land. Does it mean that the border will be drawn right through my plot?" Vakhtang looks at me as though I have all the answers. There are dozens of families like Vakho's in Gali. Border posts, including barbed wire, watch towers and other appurtenances, will be erected right on farmers' land.

Nabakevi is one of the villages where the border runs across arable land, not along the Inguri river. For 17 post-war years people have been used to living along the border, and even benefit from it. However, in the last month, the Russian border patrol guards who have been here since 2008 actively started building border infrastructure.

Abkhazia is enforcing the factual border with Georgia after signing an agreement with Russia on border security which gave Russian border guards significant privileges. In exchange,

Sukhum is counting on the Russian troops to build a fortified border line. The fear of Georgian invasion is still widespread in Abkhazia, which explains the desire to fortify the country's defense "just in case."

Life in Gali will be bisected by the new fortified border. People are at a loss, as the perimeter can separate them not just from their plots of land, but from their friends and jobs. Many people from Gali study and work in the neighboring Georgian district of Zugdidi.

Gali is a unique Abkhazian region. After Abkhazia's first President Vladislav Ardzinba took the decision in 1999 to allow Georgian refugees to return there, the pendulum of international public opinion tilted for the first time in favor of the unrecognized republic. Never before – not in Nagorny Karabakh, Kosovo or any other conflict region – had opposing parties undertaken to repatriate tens of thousands of refugees without international security guarantees. Ever since then, Gali has been the only region in Abkhazia where ethnic Georgians live. People have suffered enough over the past eleven years – they lived in cowsheds, gradually built their houses, and lived through a crime wave, among other things. And finally, when things were looking up, Gali once again faces an unknown future.

Our friend Vakho is one of those people who adjusted to life in a conflict zone. He has a simple but pleasant house, a big farm and a lot of relatives on the other side of the border. "I've seen it all – I was robbed four times, we had no electricity for months, and I had to send the kids to school hungry. Things are different now. Whatever I grow on the farm I sell in Abkhazia, because the prices are higher here. My wife buys groceries in Zugdidi because it's cheaper there. My kids go to school in Khurcha [the closest Georgian village], but my relatives who live there work here. We have work and the pay is good," Vakho says.

I could see things for myself when we traveled from the district's central town to Vakho's village – the roads were terrible, but the houses along the road were new and ornate.

People in Gali have definitely learned to use the border location to their advantage – trade boomed and industry production began. Abkhazia's resorts desperately needed the fruit, vegetables and other products that Gali could supply.

Vakhtang and the rest of Gali's population have not received any instructions on how they are supposed to cross the border after it closes. First then President Sergey Bagapsh, then, in December, Abkhazian Minister of Foreign Affairs Maksim Gvindzhiya announced that enough border posts would be opened to cope with local traffic in both directions. In reality, however, the only remaining legal border crossing is on the main highway across the Inguri river. Residents of the town of Gali and more distant villages use that crossing to enter Georgia. They are unlikely to encounter problems in the future, but thousands of people in border villages need assurances their freedom of movement will not be restricted.

Currently, several kilometers of barbed wire extend through the upper part of Gali district. Here the border runs along the Inguri river, which leaves no opportunity to cross. But when the barbed wire is extended into the lower part of the district, inhabitants of several large villages will be in trouble.

Nabakevi village is 12 kilometers away from the main border post, which is fairly close. Other villages are 15-20 kilometers away, and Pichori village on the Black Sea coast is 30 kilometers away. For the time being, the villagers walk across the border and use river bridges. But once these are closed, people will be forced to use the main Inguri bridge, which would turn the nearest Georgian hills into an inaccessible foreign country.

On January 10th, 2010, villagers from several communities in Chuburkhindzhi electoral district, including border villages, voted in a by-election following the death of Yuriy Kereselidze, who had been named parliament deputy several years earlier. For the first time since the war, the residents of Gali had the opportunity to vote in a direct parliamentary ballot. There were

two candidates: Ruslan Kishmaria, the Abkhaz president's plenipotentiary envoy to Gali district, and businessman Gocha Dzhalagonia.

The first free elections were carried out local-style: one day before the elections an explosion almost killed Dzhalagonia. It was a miracle he survived. Kishmaria's land-slide victory surprised nobody, as he has numerous relatives in the village of Chuburkhindzhi. In addition, Kishmaria is popular locally, having headed the district council for many years and supported the population during difficult times when the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia escalated.

Nevertheless, the explosion looks perplexing, to say the least. Gali law enforcement officials launched an investigation into "vandalism", and vague comments from the general procurator's office indicate that they suspect Dzhalagonia of orchestrating the explosion himself. Journalists have not been able to reach him for comments, but his immediate response was that the assassination attempt was connected to the election. The by-election was nonetheless the first truly competitive one. Voters could choose between an influential government official who was an ethnic Abkhaz, and a Georgian businessman. Both candidates willingly met with voters whose primary concern was the border. Kishmaria promises that the reinforcement of border controls will not affect the villagers' daily lives. Generally speaking, the people of Gali district should already be lobbying in defense of their own interests. So far, nothing has changed.

On our way from Nabakevi, we stopped at the Gali district administration to visit old friends. Ten years have brought little change to this government office – staffers still use typewriters because there are not enough computers for everyone; officials and deputies wander from office to office as though sleepwalking. We run into Fridon Abakelia, a talented man who translated the Bible into the Mingrelian language. He has been a local deputy all his life. He inquires about the events in the "big

world”, but when we point out that local roads need repairing, he shrugs his shoulders as though to say they cannot do anything.

There are still many people in Gali who out of the old military habit are afraid of the Abkhazians, but have even stronger dislike of the Russian border patrol guards because “*we can negotiate with the Abkhazians, but not with this lot*”. They are already afraid of entering Georgia because Georgians are sometimes antagonistic towards those who “collaborate with the Abkhazians.”

People still cannot decide which country they live in. Certainly, there were some who hoped for a long time that somehow, even if Abkhazia became independent, Gali district would be returned to Georgia. Some still believe in ephemeral negotiations about “territory in exchange for independence” as a result of which Tbilisi will recognize Abkhazia’s independence and Sukhum will give Gali district back to Georgia. However, the construction of watch towers and new border posts on the Inguri river makes such negotiations a distant and uncertain prospect.

Meanwhile, Sukhum is not ready to recognize people in Gali region as full-fledged citizens. The authorities, in line with their more liberal public policies, were almost ready to provide the population of Gali district with Abkhazian passports, but the opposition spoke harshly against it, arguing that residents of Gali should first give up their Georgian citizenship. Therefore, currently only 10-15% of the Gali population are Abkhazian citizens. Today the citizenship issue has moved to the back burner – the more crucial issue for the public is their fear of being cut off from Georgia in whose orbit they still live.

Islam Tekushev

Sergey Bagapsh's Controversial Legacy

On May 29, 2011 the de facto president of the self-proclaimed Republic of Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, died in Moscow after a serious illness. He had been elected president of the autonomous region, which seceded from Georgia in early 1990s after a bloody war. It was during his presidency that Abkhazia, together with South Ossetia, was officially recognized by the Russian Federation, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and the Republic of Nauru in the South Pacific. Sergey Bagapsh was born and lived most of his life in Sukhumi. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union he worked as an agrarian technician and a collector in a bank, and after his military service he made his career within the Communist Party.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the declaration of Abkhazia's independence, Sergey Bagapsh became head of the Ochamchira district council, and in 1997 – prime minister. During the 2004 presidential election Sergey Bagapsh was the main opposition candidate and despite fierce competition managed to gather more votes than his opponent Raul Khadzhimba, who was openly supported by Moscow. The authorities didn't recognize Bagapsh's victory and tried to annul the election results. This led to public uproar, demonstrations, and clashes between the two candidates' supporters. Unrest erupted in Sukhum and Gagry.

Simultaneously, Russia closed its border post with Abkhazia and banned tangerine imports on the pretext that the fruit did not meet health and sanitary standards. Railway communication with Sukhum was also cut. The Abkhazian population found itself in an economic blockade which was regarded by many as political pressure.

After a prolonged standoff, Raul Khadzhimba withdrew his candidacy and Bagapsh as a gesture of goodwill offered him the vice-presidency. Moscow lifted its blockade and opened the border to allow the Abkhaz and their produce to enter the Russian Federation. The second round of the election in 2005 resulted in a resounding victory for Bagapsh.

The Abkhazian leader repeatedly stated that he was ready to build neighborly relations with Tbilisi, provided Georgia recognized Abkhazian independence. It was under his presidency that Sukhum turned down a Georgian official offer to settle the disputes on the condition that Abkhazia becomes an autonomous part of Georgia. In June 2008, Russia deployed additional troops to Abkhazia, exceeding the UN-mandated threshold for Russian peace-keeping forces in the republic. When Tbilisi protested, Sukhum responded that they were engineering troops to repair the railroad.

Two months after Georgian troops attempted to storm the capital of South Ossetia, a military conflict flared up between Georgia and Russia. Abkhazia wasn't directly involved in military activities, but the country's president repeatedly expressed his views on the conflict, stressing that Abkhazia also suffered from Georgian expansion.

One of the consequences of the August war was the formal recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced his country's official recognition of Abkhazian independence on August 26, 2008. The international community, however, has still not followed suit.

Sergey Bagapsh was reelected president in 2009 and started his second term. European Union observers concluded that the elections didn't meet European standards. Nevertheless, Russian experts started talking about Abkhazia's foreign policy the moment Sergey Bagapsh took office.

During regular meetings and negotiations with the Russian ruling tandem, Bagapsh signed agreements to open a new

Russian military base in Abkhazia. In 2010, then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin promised to extend to Sukhum a 10 billion-ruble (US\$306.3 million) credit. Under Bagapsh, Abkhazia achieved a significant economic breakthrough which was possible due to the Russian-Abkhazian economic integration. Post-war Sukhum is bustling with construction, and there are new roads and new cars. All these attributes of peace and prosperity are in stark contrast to the years of blockade and devastation, when people were afraid to leave their houses at night, there were no street lights, houses had leaking roofs, roads were run-down, and the only way to make money was to sell fruit at the Russian-Abkhazian border.

The opposition tends to attribute these successes not to Bagapsh's presidency, but rather to the auspicious external environment. However, even the opposition recognizes that Bagapsh managed to create healthy competitive political and economic climate in Abkhazia. Bagapsh also succeeded in dismantling the clan system which flourished under his predecessor, Vladislav Ardzinba. Having provided elites with access to public funds and economic resources, he appointed everybody who could be considered "influential" to a position of power.

However, despite Abkhazia's significant successes under Bagapsh, his popularity dwindled in his final years due to his openly pro-Moscow foreign policy direction and unacceptable disregard for public opinion on specific crucial government issues.

For example, on January 31, 2011 during his meeting with the Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyenin, Bagapsh announced: "Nobody will force me to disregard Moscow as my capital. Moscow is our capital." His eloquent message was met with appropriate outrage in Abkhazia – not everybody agreed that the Abkhazian capital is in Russia. This statement was preceded by a series of decisions and agreements that some oppositionists regarded as counter to the national interest. Another politically

destabilizing move was the advent of the Russian oil company “Rosneft” to the Abkhaz market. “Rosneft” had a monopoly on the development of the republic’s oil reserves and the construction of gas stations across Abkhazia. Currently three out of twelve planned “Rosneft” stations are fully functional. Simple math demonstrates that twelve gas stations serving 100,000 cars covers most of the gasoline retail market, which means that smaller companies are edged out, a situation that is not to the liking of many Abkhazian businessmen. Foreign companies may bring a new level of service to the Abkhazian market, but they jeopardize the survival of local businesses.

By overstating the role of Russia in internal political processes, Bagapsh lost touch with society and, most importantly, forgot some nuances of Abkhazian democracy, the most significant of which is based on Abkhazian respect for land and property. For Abkhazians, the core of national identity lies in their absolute right and ownership of their land and resources. It’s vitally important for them to know exactly how Russian investments will benefit local people, and where foreign capital will end up.

Moreover, in this small country, every citizen who considers himself an Abkhaz aspires to participate in political and social life. Therefore, people don’t limit their political participation to formal state institutions like the parliament and public chamber. These institutions are overly dependent on those in power and cannot boast the most effective representation of their constituents. In a country like Abkhazia with a population of 300,000, the government can afford direct dialogue with its citizens.

With the passing years, Sergey Bagapsh paid less and less attention to such nuances of governance. Thus, without consulting with the public, he gave away several large-scale infrastructure facilities to Russia, signed contracts with major Russian banks, and considerably increased the presence of the

Russian military in Abkhazia. Abkhazian civil society lashed out in response.

The ambiguity of his policies not only undermined Bagapsh's authority and physical health in his last years, but provided the opposition with valid arguments against him.

Abkhazian society has still not made a definitive assessment of his historic contribution to the country's development.

Beslan Kmuzov

Georgia – Abkhazia: Hopes for Integration Dashed

On August 26, 2011 Aleksandr Ankvab was elected Abkhazia's third president in the first round with 54.86% of the vote following the sudden death of incumbent Sergey Bagapsh. Ankvab had served first as prime minister under Bagapsh and then, after Bagapsh's reelection in 2009 for a second term, as vice president.

From a Georgian perspective, Ankvab is the most unpredictable Abkhaz leader. He is in fact the first Abkhazian leader whom neither Georgia nor the Abkhazian population pin their hopes on. It may sound strange, but the Georgians held the highest expectations of unification with Abkhazia during Vladislav Ardzinba's presidency. Former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze and his team hoped the economic blockade and post-war destruction would force the government of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia to make concessions.

Although Ardzinba's stance was uncompromising, he didn't sever contacts with the non-government sector. Georgian NGOs at that time were working on potential economic and political integration projects, and frequent visits by relatives across the Georgian-Abkhazian border were not unheard of.

The Georgian population similarly invested certain hopes in Sergey Bagapsh, who was elected Abkhaz president in 2005.

During the first round of the presidential election in 2004 Bagapsh received the backing of the republic's intellectual and official elites, the United Abkhazia movement, the influential Amsakhara (Ancestral Flame) movement that united veterans of the 1992-1993 war, and of Aleksander Ankvab, who later succeeded him as president.

Sergey Bagapsh's election slogan was the need to change the authoritarian style of government that had existed in the republic for the previous eleven years. Bagapsh stressed that he saw Abkhazia as an independent country "with its economy integrated into the Russian economy to the mutual benefit of both countries."

The October 2004 vote resulted in a sweeping victory for Bagapsh that caused tensions within the republic that could have potentially escalated into an internal armed conflict as the incumbent President Vladislav Ardzinba refused to hand over power to Bagapsh, wrongly accusing him of close connections with Georgia. Negotiations facilitated by Russian emissaries with Raul Khadjimba, who placed second to Bagapsh, yielded a compromise to annul the election result and hold a repeat ballot on 12 January 2005. Bagapsh and Khadjimba ran as a team in that ballot and received the overwhelming majority of votes. According to the Abkhazian Central Election Committee, a total of 75,719 people voted out of 129,127 registered voters. Bagapsh received 69,728 votes while his opponent Yakub Lakoba got 3,549 votes.

On February 12, 2005, Sergey Bagapsh was officially sworn into office.

Georgian optimism rested on Bagapsh's long-forgotten ties with Georgia. As a student, Sergey Bagapsh had lived in Tbilisi, he was married to a Georgian, and most importantly, until 1989 he was head of the Ochamchira district of Abkhazia which was populated mostly by Georgian-Mingrelians.

Those who knew Bagapsh from that time remember him as a tolerant leader with no national prejudices. Moreover, from 1999—2004, Bagapsh chaired the state company "Chernomorenergo". The nature of the energy sector in Abkhazia necessitated Bagapsh's close cooperation with the Georgians: the Ingur hydroelectric power station's dam is on the territory of Georgia's Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti district, while the

generators, which are serviced by Georgian engineers, are on Abkhaz land. Thus, the “Chernomorenergo” chairman had not only to deal with Georgian officials during scheduled meetings, but also with Georgian workers on daily basis.

Georgia thus expected to have an insider in power in Abkhazia as of 2004. Admittedly, the mastermind of the Georgian economy, de facto Minister of Economic Development Kakha Bendukidze, warned one month after Bagapsh’s inauguration that not a single Abkhazian president would be a friend of Georgia. Just to prove his point, Bagapsh immediately intensified the border crossing regime between Georgia and Abkhazia via the Inguri river bridge. Moreover, Bagapsh sanctioned the purchase of warships for the Abkhazian navy, strengthened the army, and created an anti-terrorist center that imposed relative order in Gali district on the Georgian border. Finally, it was during Bagapsh’s presidency that Abkhazia received recognition from the Russian Federation. Taking all this into consideration, one can safely conclude that Bagapsh did all in his power to disprove his loyalty to Georgia.

Abkhazia has elected a new leader. This time, no one in Georgia is under any illusion about the potential shift in Abkhazian policies. This time, the Georgians don’t attach any importance to the fact that Ankvab worked as Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1980 until the 1990s.

The Georgian authorities understand that the new Abkhazian leader will not need Georgian connections. The influx of billions of rubles in Russian cash helped ease social tensions that, according to Georgian politicians, could have pushed the Abkhazian authorities towards certain concessions. The political climate that took root in Abkhazia following Russia’s recognition of its independence removed security considerations from the agenda.

Georgia has come to understand that it ranks at the bottom of Abkhazia’s list of diplomatic priorities, after maintaining good

relations with Russia and promoting its recognition among smaller countries. The only thing Georgia could do to grab Abkhazia's attention is to recognize its sovereignty, because that would mean legitimization of the Abkhaz economy on a global scale through the creation of free economic zones. Georgia has run out of creative ideas for rapprochement with Abkhazia. It came closest in 2005, when Irakli Alasania, formerly Chairman of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia in exile, assumed the position of Presidential Representative for negotiations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and suggested opening a free economic zone in Abkhazia's Ochamchira district. This project had a lot of potential: Abkhazian manufacturers would have been able to export their goods to any markets as the quality certification was conducted by the European, and not the Georgian Chamber of Commerce. Banks registered in Ochamchira would also have gained access to wider business activities. In reality, this looked like an offshore venture. But Georgia's security forces nipped these plans in the bud. In August 2006, Georgian forces occupied Abkhazia's Kodori Gorge which is populated by the Svans. The Svans recognize Georgian authority, but they refused to disband the "Monadire" military unit suspected of kidnappings and robbery. After this show of military force, the Abkhaz authorities turned a cold shoulder to economic propositions from Tbilisi. In 2008, immediately before the war in South Ossetia, then Abkhazian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Shamba openly confronted Alasania and announced that all prior negotiations were null and void and Abkhazia would participate in any joint projects. Alasania quit his post as Georgia's ambassador to the UN after 2009.

Reintegration Minister Timur Yakobashvili remained the sole proponent of integration projects with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Mr. Yakobashvili made harsh comments towards Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities while simultaneously

sending signals that Georgia was ready for secret talks with Bagapsh and Kokoity on a wide range of issues.

The pinnacle of his inconsistency was Georgia's reintegration framework. Yakobashvili brought leading political scholars and conflict experts in Georgia to work on the project. It resulted in a rather interesting program that didn't require any loyalty to Georgia from Abkhazians and South Ossetians while giving them such incentives as medical care, education, travel abroad, and opportunities for economic activities. However, the document was rejected by both rebellious republics because of its title. Abkhazian officials refused even to look at the project entitled "Georgian Reintegration" because they pursued a diametrically opposing agenda of independence. Nevertheless, the project received wide attention, and Yakobashvili was promoted to Georgia's Ambassador in the US.

With Alasania's switch to the opposition and Yakobashvili's promotion there was nobody left in the Georgian government who could develop new approaches towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Today, Georgian policies towards the breakaway regions amount to two strategies: demands that the international community recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia as territories occupied by Russia, and propaganda of Georgian achievements (eradication of corruption, tourist development, etc.) among the Abkhazians.

On the day of Ankvab's inauguration as Abkhazian president one thing was clear – neither the Georgian nor the Abkhazian authorities are predisposed to cooperation. Consequently, the "reset" is postponed until better times.

5. ABKHAZIA IN PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

Kirill Shevchenko, Islam Tekushev

Abkhazia in August 2006: 68% of those polled are in favor of joining Russia; almost 25% support the idea of an independent state

The information agency Caucasus Times conducted a public opinion poll in the cities of Sukhumi and Gagra in the breakaway Republic of Abkhazia on 25 – 31 August 2006 among 400 members of the Abkhazian adult population aged between 20-65 and from a wide range of occupations and professions, including students, employees, workers, pensioners, entrepreneurs, and unemployed. The intention was to obtain information about the attitudes of the local population towards Abkhazia's status and the activities of the current Abkhazian leadership, as well as

local residents' opinions about changes in the social, economic and security situation.

The poll findings indicated that the overwhelming majority of those polled (68%) considered joining the Russian Federation the optimal solution of the question of Abkhazia's status. Only 5% of respondents were in favor of preserving the status quo, arguing that a possible change in Abkhazia's current status could result in unclear or unfavorable consequences. 3% of those polled, most of them unemployed, found it hard to answer this question. It is worth noting that nobody wanted to see Abkhazia as part of Georgia. Moreover, the mere inclusion of that option in the questionnaire evoked a very negative reaction from a number of respondents. Some of them even erased this option from the questionnaire.

At the same time, 24% of respondents were quite certain about the viability of an independent Abkhazian state. The majority of those who supported the idea of an independent Abkhazia, were young people aged 20-35 years old and business people engaged in tourism, trade, consumer services, or public catering. All of them were confident about the possibility of independent economic development, in particular the local tourism industry.

54% of respondents assessed the activities of the current Abkhazian leadership "rather positively" and 29% as "positive". In particular, respondents participants were positive about the "active and resolute" stance taken by Abkhazian leaders in relations with neighboring Georgia, as well as about measures aimed at improving social and economic conditions. Only 5% of respondents assessed the Abkhazian leadership as "negative" or "rather negative". Those critically-minded respondents thought that Abkhazian leaders did not pay sufficient attention to economic and social issues and instead focussed excessively on the issue of status. In their view, President Sergey Bagapsh should at the same time pay adequate attention to major social and economic issues. In addition, some

of the critically-minded respondents considered the Abkhazian authorities corrupt. Quite a large number of those polled (12%) reported difficulties in answering this question.

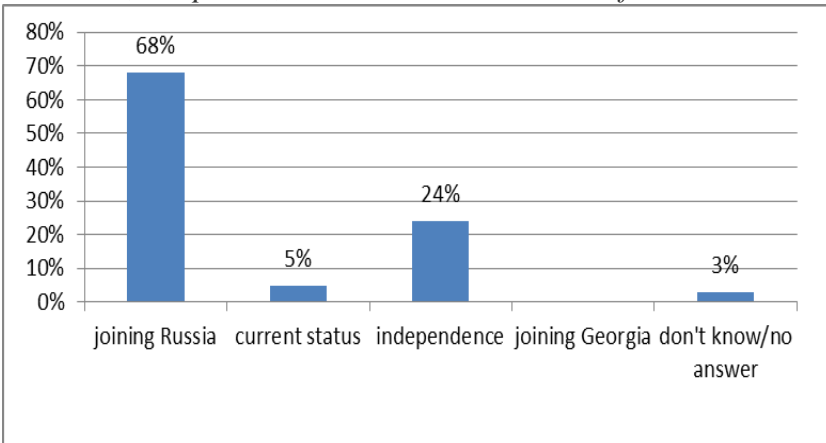
Respondents gave rather mixed opinions when assessing changes in social and economic sphere in Abkhazia in the first half of 2006. 33% of respondents felt that the situation had “improved somewhat,” while 12% said the situation had “improved”. A positive or “quite positive” evaluation of changes in social and economic sphere was given by representatives of all demographic and professional groups. The majority of them said the situation improved due to the activities of ordinary people.

Up to one third of the population evaluates changes in this sphere negatively. Specifically, 21% of respondents indicated that situation “deteriorated somewhat” and 10% that it “deteriorated”. In the view of 18% of respondents, there were no changes in social and economic conditions in Abkhazia during previous six months. 6% found it hard to answer to this question.

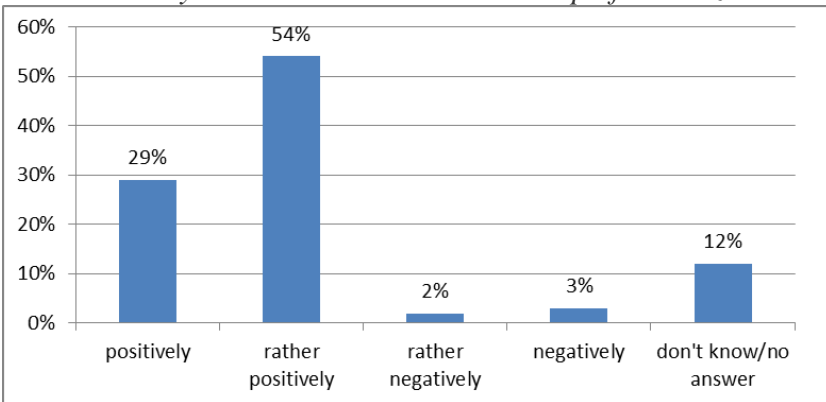
Reviewing changes in the security situation in Abkhazia for the first half of 2006, the overwhelming majority of respondents (74%) gave a negative assessment. Among those critically-minded respondents, 43% felt that the situation “deteriorated somewhat” and 31% that it had “deteriorated”. Women and older people dominated among those respondents who were negative about the changes in the security situation. Only 11% of respondents gave a positive assessment of the security situation, of whom 4% said it had “improved” and 7% that it “improved somewhat”. 11% felt that there were no major changes in the security sphere, and 4% of respondents could not answer this question.

AUGUST 2006 PUBLIC OPINION POLL IN ABKHAZIA

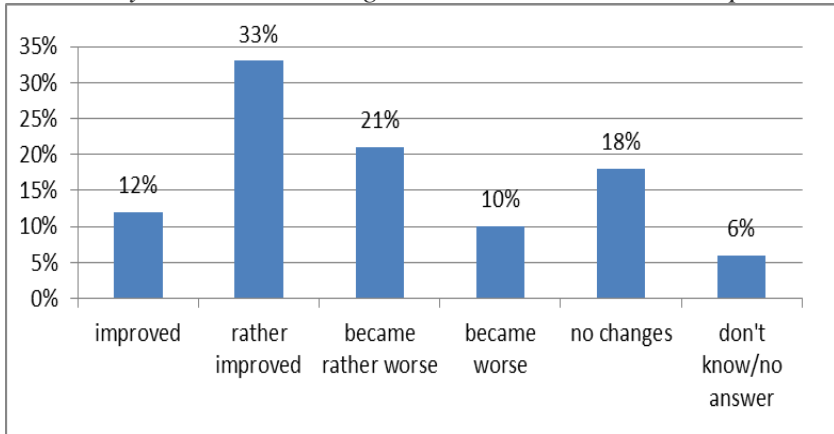
What, in opinion, would be the best status of Abkhazia?



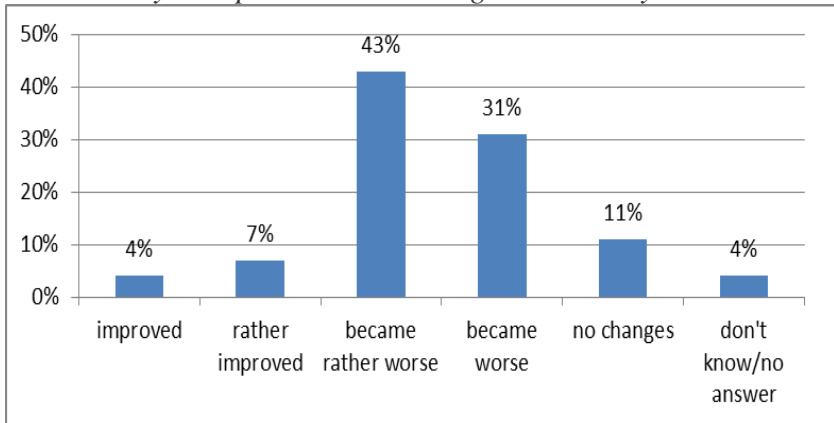
How do you evaluate current leadership of Abkhazia?



How do you evaluate changes in social and economic sphere?



What is your opinion about changes in security situation?



Kirill Shevchenko, Islam Tekushev

Most Abkhazians prefer full independence: 73% of Abkhazians support full independence; 24.6% support joining Russia. Results of a September 2011 public opinion poll in Abkhazia

Several years have passed since Abkhazia's war with Georgia in August 2008 and Russia's subsequent recognition of the breakaway republic's independence. Today, the Caucasian republic seems relatively stable, while the population seems fairly optimistic about the changes that have taken place in recent years. However, the citizens of Abkhazia are somewhat divided when it comes to the future political status of their republic.

These are among the findings of a public opinion survey Medium Orient carried out in September 2011 at the request of the Caucasus Times information agency. In the course of the survey, researchers interviewed 345 citizens of Abkhazia from different professions and ethnic groups (Abkhazians, Armenians, Georgians, Greeks, and others). The research sample also took account of the current ethnic, gender, and age balance in the country.

The population's opinion of the socioeconomic situation in Abkhazia after the country's independence was recognized by Russia in 2008

The survey results show that citizens of Abkhazia have a generally positive view of the changes that have taken place in the economic sphere over the last three years. Thus, in responding to the question about economic changes in Abkhazia since 2008, the majority of respondents answered that the

situation has “improved” (59.4%) or “improved somewhat” (11.3%). Only 2% said the situation had “deteriorated somewhat” and 0.6% said the situation had “deteriorated”. Just over a quarter of respondents said they were divided, answering “neither better nor worse.” 1% had difficulty answering the question.

Respondents’ answers about changes in the social sphere followed a similar pattern, with 48.4% of respondents saying that the situation in the social sphere has “improved,” while 17.4% said it had “improved somewhat.” Only 2% of respondents said that the situation had deteriorated and 2.9% said it had “somewhat deteriorated”. Nearly a third of respondents had difficulty answering this question.

The political situation in Abkhazia since the recognition of independence in 2008

Respondents were no less optimistic and positive about changes in the political sphere since August 2008. Over half (54.5%) said that the political situation has “improved.” 14.8% stated the political situation has “improved somewhat.” Only 2.6% said the situation had “deteriorated”, and 2.3% that it had “deteriorated somewhat.” 22.6% did not have a clear position on the issue. 3.2% had difficulty answering the question.

The security situation since the recognition of independence by Russia in 2008

The Abkhazians polled were even more positive about changes in the security sphere. Thus, 67% of them believe that the security situation has “improved,” while 11.3% believe that the situation has “improved somewhat.” Only 3.5% believe that the situation has “deteriorated somewhat,” and 3.2% that it has “deteriorated.” It is worth noting that 11.3% of respondents did not have a clear answer to this question, which is a much lower

percentage compared to how many people did not have a clear position on other issues. This testifies to the fact that one of the consequences of the military conflict with Georgia has been that military and political ties with Russia are now increasingly being seen by the majority of the population as a factor contributing to better security in the republic.

The financial status of families

However, answers to the question how the financial situation of respondents' families had changed since 2008 reveal that more people believe that the general economic situation is improving than that their own family's standard of living had risen. Thus, 35.4% of respondents said their families' financial situation had "improved," compared to the 59.4% of respondents who said the overall economic situation in the republic had improved. 11.6% stated that their family's financial situation had "improved somewhat." Only 4.6% said that their financial situation had "deteriorated" while 3.5% said it had "deteriorated somewhat." A considerable number of respondents (43.5%) said "neither the one, nor the other," thus demonstrating their inability – or, more likely, unwillingness – to give a clear answer.

Evaluating the work of the government

In their evaluation of the work of Abkhazia's government since August 2008, the overwhelming majority of those surveyed demonstrated a positive attitude towards their republic's leadership. Thus, 62% of respondents said they rated the government's work as "positive." 10.7% said they rated it "rather positively." Only 6.1% said their attitude "was negative," while 3.8% said their attitude was "rather negative." 14.2% of respondents could not give a clear evaluation of the government's work.

Relations with Russia

Respondents' answers regarding the development of relations with Russia were overwhelmingly positive. 77.4% said the course the relationship was taking was "positive," while 14.2% said it was "rather positive." Only 2% said the development was "negative," while 1.2% said it was "rather negative." 4.3% answered "neither the one, nor the other." It would seem such answers are the consequence of Russia's significant efforts to help Abkhazia during the war with Georgia in August 2008, and the subsequently strengthened military, political and economic ties between the two countries.

* * *

Regarding the status of the republic: full independence vs. becoming a part of Russia

Since the war with Georgia in August 2008, and the subsequent recognition of its independence by Russia, Abkhazia has been trying to resolve the question of its international status. For various reasons, even Russia's closest allies within the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kazakhstan and Belarus, have not followed suit in recognizing Abkhazia's independence.

In the meantime, data from the survey summarized above unambiguously shows resistance from the overwhelming majority of the population towards Abkhazia becoming a part of Georgia once again. However, in answering the question regarding the status of their republic, 73% of respondents said they supported full independence, while approximately a quarter (24.6%) thought it would be better if Abkhazia joined Russia as a separate republic. Less than 1 percent (0.6%, mostly ethnic Georgians) said they would prefer to be a part of Georgia again. Only 1.7% hesitated to answer the question, which illustrates

how clearly most Abkhazians have formed their opinion on the subject.

However, respondents' preferences with regard to Abkhazia's status varied among the different ethnic groups. Thus, 89 % of the Abkhazians said they supported full independence, compared with 73% of the total sample. Only 10.4% of the Abkhazians polled said they would prefer to become a part of Russia, compared with 24.6% of the total sample. It is notable that among the Russians and Georgians living in Abkhazia, the number of those supporting Abkhazia's full independence is considerably lower (56%) than among ethnic Abkhazians. The percentage of those who support becoming a part of Russia was 40.2% among ethnic Russians and 36% among ethnic Georgians. Among the Armenian population of Abkhazia, the number of those favoring full independence was 60%, while the number of those who favored Abkhazia becoming a part of Russia was 37.8%. It is curious that in all the ethnic groups, the majority prefers full independence to joining Russia. However, the desire for full independence is represented most strongly among ethnic Abkhazians and is conspicuously lower among other ethnic groups.

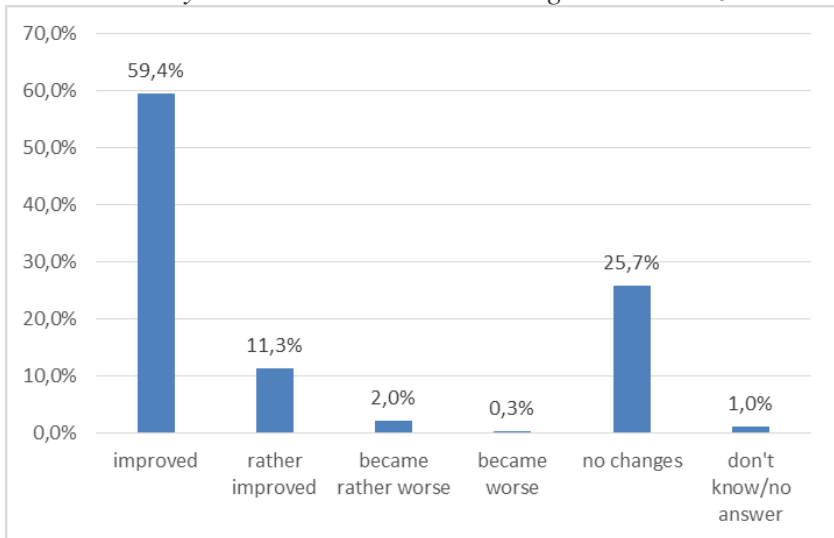
It is also of great interest that among the Georgians residing in Abkhazia, only a small percentage (8%) said they supported becoming a part of Georgia again. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of Georgians declared that they supported either full independence (56%) or joining Russia (36%). On the one hand, one might infer that such attitudes are the result of the ethnic Georgian population being completely integrated into the socioeconomic and political system in Abkhazia. On the other hand, however, this could potentially be the result of the Georgian population's unwillingness to publicly espouse attitudes that are clearly at odds with what appears to be the dominant tendency in the rest of the country.

Interesting results also emerged from the respondents' answers to the question which countries Abkhazia ought to focus

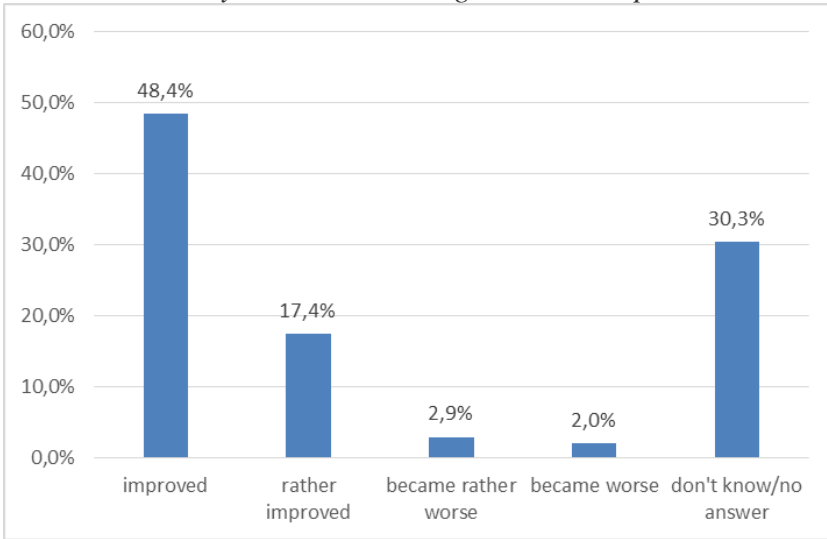
on developing relations with. Nearly all respondents (97%) mentioned Russia. In second place were EU countries (58.7%) and former Soviet republics (58.1%). Over a third of the respondents (38%) mentioned Turkey, which has longstanding economic ties in the region. Only 4.1% of respondents mentioned the US, and 2.3% listed Georgia. The negative experience of dealing with Georgia during the past decade has found its expression in the fact that Abkhazia’s population currently deems it unwise to develop relations between the two countries, despite the historically close economic and cultural links between them.

SEPTEMBER 2011 PUBLIC OPINION POLL IN ABKHAZIA

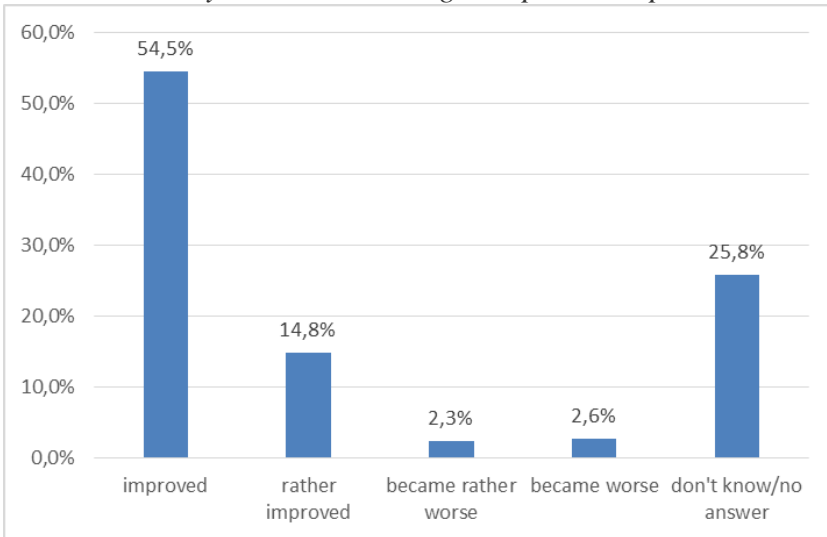
How do you evaluate economic changes in Abkhazia?



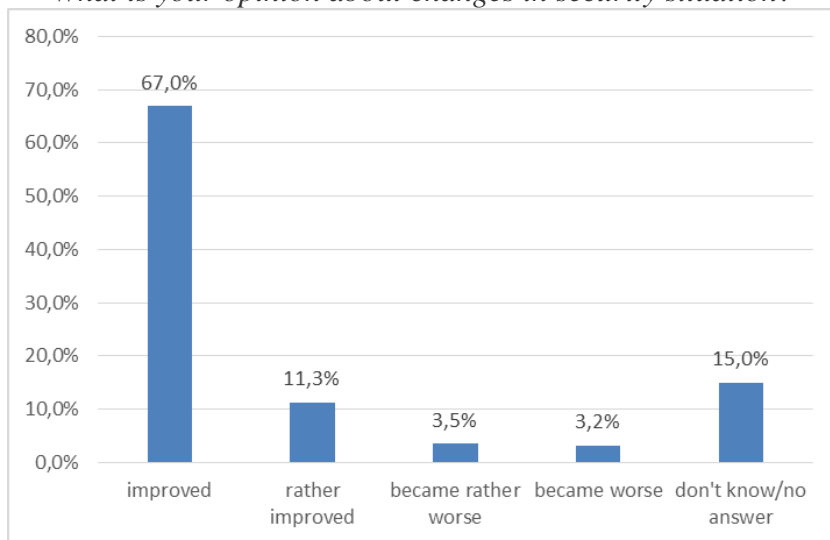
How do you evaluate changes in social sphere?



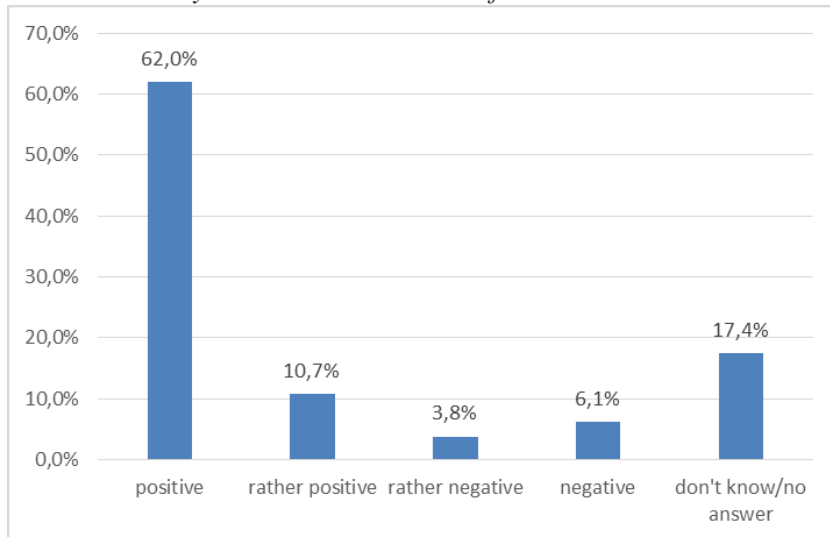
How do you evaluate changes in political sphere?



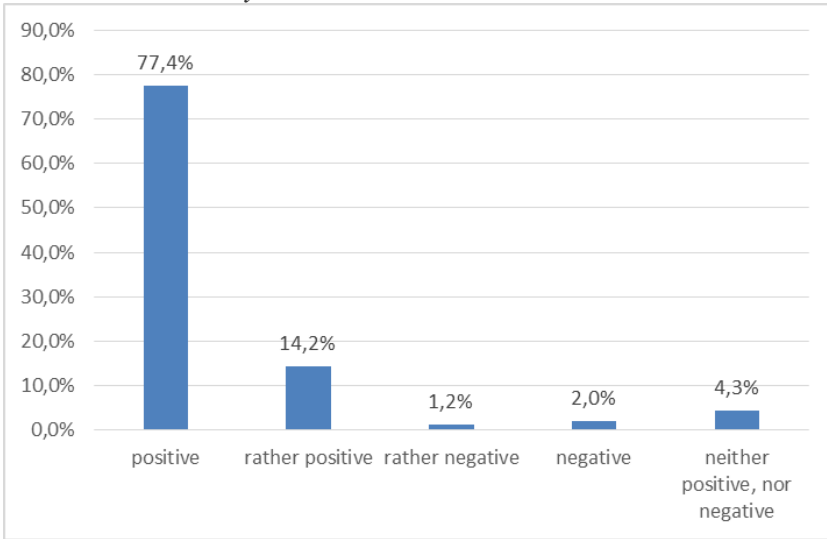
What is your opinion about changes in security situation?



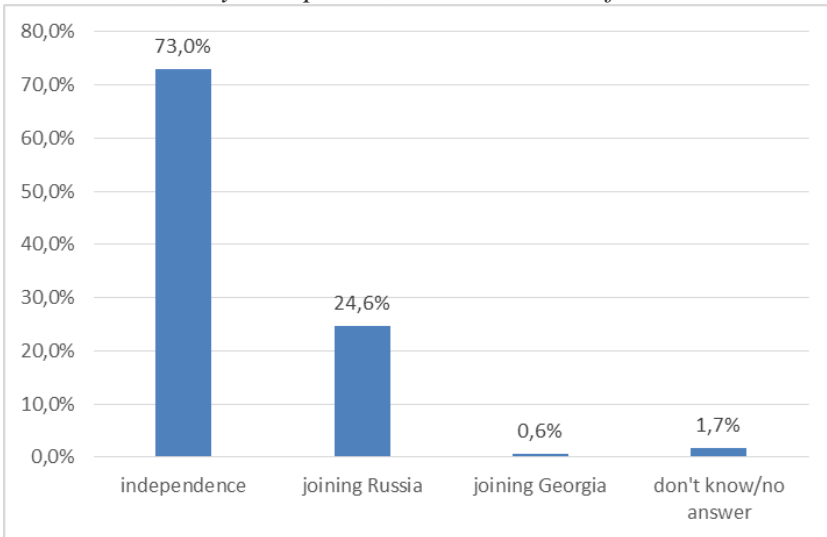
How do you evaluate the work of the administration?



How do you evaluate relations with Russia?



What is, in your opinion, the best status of Abkhazia?



6. CONCLUSION

Kirill Shevchenko

Abkhazia: passing political tests and exams

Georgian writer and public figure Ivane Gomarteli, discussing the Abkhazian issue and general prospects for Abkhazians after the 1917 Russian Revolution, wrote in the Tbilisi-based Georgian weekly newspaper “Alioni” in November 1917 that “Abkhazians could not create a culture or a system of writing. They lack the necessary cultural resources for that... Abkhazians are not involved in any trade or in business since they prefer just to enjoy their life and amuse themselves. They don’t like to work... Taking into account that the process of absorbing the Abkhazians seems to be inevitable, it does not make much difference who exactly is going to swallow

Abkhazians...”⁹¹ In April 1989 another prominent Georgian intellectual and politician, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, went even further, questioning in his speech during a public rally in Tbilisi the mere existence of Abkhazians as a separate nationality. Those thoughts reflect the somewhat arrogant *Kulturträger* approach of a certain section of the Georgian intelligentsia towards Abkhazians, which often was characteristic for Georgian-Abkhazian relations and contributed greatly to mutual misunderstanding and growing animosity.

Almost one hundred years later, Gomarteli’s observation appears inappropriate and erroneous. Due to the specificities of Soviet nationality policy, Moscow’s ethnic engineering and a combination of various other factors, by balancing and exploiting Russian-Georgian contradictions in the Caucasus Abkhazia managed not only to survive as a separate de facto state unit in a long-lasting conflict with much more powerful Georgia, but also to substantially improve its status by securing political recognition from Russia and some Latin American countries following the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008.

Advancing from a non-recognized de facto state to partially-recognized state status had serious and far-reaching consequences for Abkhazia, both internally and on international arena. It seems that the most significant change in Abkhazian domestic political situation is that the idea of state independence finally gained full legitimacy in the eyes of the local population and became the dominating factor in Abkhazian society after August 2008. While in March 1991, most Abkhazians (98.6%) demonstrated their pro-Soviet loyalty voting for the preservation of the USSR, and in 2006 most Abkhazians (68%) thought that the best solution to the question of Abkhazia’s status was joining Russia, in 2011 the situation changed radically, with 73% supporting the political independence of Abkhazia and just 24.6% in favor of joining Russia. In the words of Sergey Markedonov, after August 2008 the issue of “the Georgian

⁹¹ Gruzino-abkhazskii konflikt 1917-1992. Moscow 2007. P. 9.

threat” in Abkhazian politics was marginalized and the most central issue became “the quality of Abkhazian independence and statehood”.

	What is, in Your opinion, the best solution of the question of Abkhazia's status?	
	August 2006 (public opinion poll conducted by Medium Orient in Abkhazia, n = 400)	September 2011 (public opinion poll conducted by Medium Orient in Abkhazia, n = 345)
Joining Russia	68%	24.6%
Joining Georgia	0%	0.6%
Independent Abkhazia	24%	73%
Don't know / no answer	3%	1.7%

A clear indication of the relatively high level of political stability in Abkhazia was provided by reactions to sudden death of Abkhazia’s second president, Sergey Bagapsh, in May 2011 and the subsequent presidential election. During that election campaign, former Georgian Defense Minister Tengiz Kitovani implied in an interview that then acting Vice-President of Abkhazia and leading presidential candidate Aleksandr Ankvab had connections with Georgian special services. However, this PR-technique proved incapable of destabilizing the internal political situation in Abkhazia during the run-up to the election and Ankvab duly became the third President of Abkhazia.

Although Abkhaz statehood successfully withstood that attempt at destabilization, such questions as building an effective and functioning market economy, the domination of clan system, respect for private property, equal status and political rights for the “titular” nationality and national minorities, in the first place

Georgian minority in Gali district, remain mostly unresolved and continue to pose serious challenges and call into question the political maturity of the newly independent polity. Thus, some experts point out that the political construct of current Abkhazian statehood has a certain ethnocentric flavor, which favors the “titular” nationality at the expense of national minorities. Isolated indications that at present the population of Abkhazia is to some extent divided on ethnic lines with regard to preferences concerning Abkhazia’s status are worth noting. Thus, while the overall number of those who supported an independent Abkhazia was 73% in September 2011, among ethnic Abkhazians this number was substantially higher, reaching 89%. At the same time, support for Abkhazian independence among ethnic Russians and Georgians residing in Abkhazia proved to be significantly lower (56%).

While the Georgian factor and the perceived “Georgian threat” receded after August 2008, the Russian factor and Abkhazian-Russian relations increased in importance to become the central issue for Abkhazia in the international arena. The Russian military presence in Abkhazia and the Russian border troops deployed to protect the Abkhaz state border under the terms of an agreement between Moscow and Sukhumi signed in April 2009 became a key-stone for preserving Abkhazian independence. Taking into consideration the huge Russian military and financial support for Abkhazia (in 2010 alone the Russian Federation allocated almost 2 billion rubles [US\$61.26 million] for Abkhazia), many experts believe that Abkhazia has in fact turned into a sort of “Russian protectorate”.

However, Abkhazia’s total dependence on Russia in the military and economic spheres did not fully translate into same degree of dependence in the political and humanitarian field. Rather, both countries follow their own interests in this area which are frequently not identical. Thus, the international academic conference “Abkhazia’s Historical Choice: 200 Years of Abkhazia’s Accession to Russia” held in September 2010 in

Sukhumi demonstrated the differing approaches of the Russian and Abkhazian academic and political elites towards their shared history and inter-relations. While the Russian side, represented by Moscow-based Institute of CIS States, stressed the “voluntary” accession of Abkhazia into the Russian Empire in 1810 and the “spiritual unity” and ever-lasting friendship of Russians and Abkhazians, the Abkhazian side emphasized that actual integration of Abkhazia into Russia went hand in hand with a fierce war and the mass deportation of thousands of Abkhazians to Turkey.

In the words of Abkhazia-based journalist A. Kriveniyuk, during this conference the Russian side was also disappointed by the fact that the Abkhazian elite perceived union with Russia in a mere practical format as “safety in return for loyalty”, without any far-reaching goals of becoming a part of Russia in future, as some groups within the Russian elite would like. The Russian media criticize Abkhazia at times, especially concerning the confiscation of property from ethnic Russians and because of Abkhazian “ethnocracy”. In their turn, the Abkhazian political elite and local businessmen are not very optimistic about the influx of Russian money and the arrival of big Russian companies in Abkhazia, since this can undermine the economic positions of the Abkhazian business community. Former President Sergey Bagapsh was often criticized in Abkhazia for numerous concessions to Russia and for what his political opponents described as excessively pro-Moscow sentiments.

* * *

Asked in which direction Abkhazia will develop, representatives of Abkhazian political and intellectual elite tend to emphasize the importance of the external factor, indicating that the evolution of Abkhazia will to a large extent be contingent on the policy and interrelations of the Great Powers in the South Caucasus region. Abkhazian politicians also feel that

the Great Powers consider the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict as a merely practical issue, a sort of addition to the problem of transit oil and gas pipelines.⁹² In their view, alongside traditional key international players in South Caucasus represented by Russian Federation and USA, an increasingly important role in this region belongs to China, which is trying to extend its influence in South Caucasus through Central Asia.⁹³ As far as internal factors are concerned, it seems that the ethnic principle will most likely remain the keystone of the Abkhazian nation-state building project in the near future.⁹⁴

In a broader international context, the Abkhazian question is destined to remain one of the most crucial issues on the Georgian political agenda and the most important obstacle to normalizing Russian-Georgian relations in the long-term. In addition, in spite of Georgia's official recognition of the "Circassian genocide" by Tsarist Russia during the Caucasus war, the Abkhazian question places substantial limitations on the successful development of relations between Georgia and the Russian North Caucasus, especially the Circassian Western Caucasus.

⁹² Stanislav Lakoba. *Abkhazia posle dvukh imperii XX-XXI vv.* Moscow 2004. P. 141.

⁹³ *Ibidem.* P. 8.

⁹⁴ Artur Tsutsiev. *Atlas etnopoliticheskoi istorii Kavkaza.* Moscow 2006. P. 98.

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