

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Abkhazia Briefing: Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell Urge the West to Change Its Policy

“The United States needs to change its policy toward Abkhazia,” stated Professor Alexander Cooley at the Harriman Institute on Monday April 26, 2010. “While we should continue to make it clear that we will not recognize its statehood, we must also engage the region. Otherwise it will just drift further into Russia.” Cooley, along with Professor Lincoln Mitchell, has just returned from Abkhazia—the two scholars are working on a Harriman-sponsored project about U.S.-Georgia relations. In April, they published an “Action Memorandum” in *The American Interest* addressed to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, urging the officials to change the current U.S. policy of isolation to one of “engagement without recognition.”

Four states recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia—Nicaragua, Venezuela, Russia and Nauru. Mitchell acknowledged that this number is unlikely to rise significantly; however, with each new country that recognizes Abkhazia, it will become more difficult to reverse the region’s identification as a sovereign state. “Right now there is no discussion in Abkhazia, or in Moscow, about its statehood, it’s a given. That could change, but it’s going to get harder and harder to change every year, every month that goes by and with every country that signs on to that proposition,” asserted Mitchell.

Cooley and Mitchell also visited Abkhazia two years ago, right before the war with Russia. “The absence of population remains striking,” conveyed Mitchell. He showed a slide show of deserted roads and abandoned buildings. There was only one slide depicting a car, people were pushing it. He described Abkhazia as a “strange, parallel universe.” Not only because of its emptiness, but because of the difference in perception and rhetoric between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia—the Georgians are constantly talking about Abkhazia, while in Abkhazia, Georgia is a virtually neglected topic.

“Two years ago when we were in Abkhazia, the Abkhazian leadership left us with a sense that Georgians were at the gate, that Saakashvili was

there with a machete in his hand, ready to storm into Abkhazia—this was of course the image they were trying to spin out for foreign consumption. Today they don’t talk much about Georgia.” Mitchell recalled that after his second meeting with Abkhaz leaders he started to refer to his watch, noting when, if at all, Georgia was mentioned. “Usually it was by us, and not until about 20-25 minutes into the discussion.” In Georgia, “You couldn’t turn around without hearing about Abkhazia.”

When the Abkhaz did mention Georgia, Mitchell noticed a difference in their manner. “Many Abkhaz were able to speak in thoughtful, sophisticated, moderate ways—they did not feel the need to constantly use inflammatory rhetoric.” In contrast, the discussion in Georgia is intense. “It’s heated; it’s focused on territorial integrity. There is pretty much an asymmetry in the dialogue.” Cooley opined that Abkhazia seemed to be on a different plane from the rest of Georgia—the two groups are not communicating.

Mitchell noted that most of his findings in Abkhazia merely supported his existing convictions; however, he did learn something surprising—Abkhazia no longer fears Georgian invasion. “Instead, the region is most afraid of a reconciliation between Georgia and Russia.” According to Mitchell, the Abkhaz have not always been certain of Russian support—now that they have it, a resolution of the conflict between Georgia and Russia could result in a policy shift.

“The bottom line as I see it is that Georgia and Abkhazia are both racing against the clock for different reasons. Georgia is racing against the clock because Russia’s grip on Abkhazia will get stronger, and Georgia’s territorial integrity will become more remote. Abkhazia is racing against the clock because the more they can build their state, then the stronger they will be if a rapprochement between Georgia and Russia does occur,” Mitchell concluded, adding that the West has not been in tune with these Abkhazian sentiments. “In the Western view Russia has always been behind Abkhazia, and that’s certainly

been the line from Tbilisi. Too many people in Abkhazia have said something different for me to ignore it, and what they've said, is that until the war, they didn't really know where Russia stood."

Cooley emphasized that the atmosphere in Abkhazia has changed significantly since the war. "Whereas they felt insecure before, the Abkhaz feel the newly gained Russian security. They are very grateful for it." He described the checkpoint at the Abkhaz "border," where there is a group of Abkhaz guards standing next to a Russian military base with a prominently displayed Russian flag. "That sense of insecurity is gone, while it might be delusional, and perhaps fleeting, I did not get the sense that this was a show—now the Abkhaz are very much seeking to build a state."

According to Mitchell, the Abkhaz leadership has, for the most part, come to terms with Russia's heavy hand in the process of their state building. "They seemed to, almost out of necessity, push back about Russia running the show, but they didn't push back too hard, and appear to be fine with the fact that this is the best deal they are going to get. Outside of the leadership there is some concern—among opposition members of parliament, civil society, journalists. But at the leadership level they have accepted it." Now they are focusing primarily on creating a state.

Mitchell and Cooley urge the West not to ignore this Abkhazian thrust towards statehood—the E.U. and U.S. should engage Abkhazia if they want any chance to halt it. "The United States doesn't recognize Abkhazia, no country in the European Union recognizes Abkhazia, but in order to engage in dialogue they have to recognize where they are coming from," insisted Mitchell.

In late January 2010, Georgia released its "Strategy on Occupied Territories," a document outlining Georgia's plan for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (Temur Yakobashvili, Minister of State for the Reintegration of Georgia, and an orchestrator

of the report, came to the Harriman Institute to elaborate on Georgia's approach this February, to read about his talk please follow the link: <http://www.harrimaninstitute.org/MEDIA/01652.pdf>). "It's true that Georgia's strategy is a result of a lot of thought and internal debate," elucidated Cooley, "but I'll be honest, it is like they are on different planets." In the strategy, the Georgian government requires all of Abkhazia's contact with the West to be mediated by the Georgian Ministry on reintegration. "This is a deal-breaker for Abkhazia," explained Cooley. "The Abkhaz do not consider this a viable strategy and they don't take it seriously. One person told me that this is something they might have considered ten years ago. Now they are in a very different place."

Cooley elaborated that there are a few individual projects outlined in the report that the Abkhaz like, such as a north-south railway, but these projects do not have a viable form of implementation. "The central sticking point is that they don't want to be mediated by Yakobashvili's ministry. If you just look at the goals of the strategy, the Abkhaz would sign off on some of these measures, but the problem is that the Georgian Ministry wants to mediate Abkhazia's relations with the outside world." He recounted that in 2005, the Abkhaz would not even accept a humanitarian package on these conditions. "We have to offer some sort of third-party alternative for Abkhazia," encouraged Cooley. "The fear is that the minute we open contact, we are encouraging their statehood. That is not necessarily true." He stressed that engagement is vital, and must occur promptly; otherwise Abkhazia will be lost to Russia forever.

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner